

EDUCATION ... THE NEW NORMAL

The crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic has stunned and shaken the foundations of traditional education and training and its impact has spread beyond the educational decision-making, learning concepts and systems and strategies adopted whether in learning situations or in building the capacities of training and preparing teachers to address the uncertainties of the future.

In addressing this exceptional crisis, varying capabilities and flexibility of education and training systems around the world have been demonstrated, but every coin has two sides. Despite the challenges that have accompanied the pandemic, it has played a significant role in accelerating transitions in the educational and training process. There is no longer a taboo or forbidden issue to debate, and the voices urging development and shaking loose the familiar patterns that we have relied on in the past and had an impact on education have become the most resonant.

In view of the fact that the future begins today, the BQA in this Report, documents the highlights of expectations and aspirations for the development of the various education and training sectors within the scope of the new normal imposed by the pandemic, whether it is within the scope of school education, tertiary education, vocational training, qualifications or examinations and assessment.

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School Education

The pandemic has reinforced the saying that "the strengths of an educational system are based on the strengths and knowledge of its teachers." A system that recruits a teacher who is capable of adapting and coping immediately is a system that enables innovation and creation. This is not limited to a group of distinguished teachers in the system, but rather includes a vast majority of teachers who protect the aspects of education system and reinforce it with appropriate responses to every emergency. However, this is not coming out of nothing, but rather from a sound system for building and developing teachers' skills; the most important of which are the capacity for self-development, cooperation and creativity.

Through self-development, a teacher ensures that one remains linked to the circle of professionals around them. For instance, the intensive use of technology in education at this stage, coupled with the ability of teachers to adapt rapidly and employ self-learning resources and a trial-and-error process, lead to development. In collaboration with each other, teachers have the ability to increase the chances of success by learning from one another in a way that enables them to overcome all types of challenges. This increases the effectiveness of professional learning societies and speeds up the development of teachers' development practices in critical times.

The emphasis on creativity also stands out as a basic requirement for handling future education. A single virtual learning situation includes many considerations, which are difficult for a traditional-style teacher to handle, including the skills of engaging students in activities, increasing their interaction and participation and implementing the principles of learning situation management.

Although difficult times come with the temptation to consolidate patterns and

responses, as it is more secure, safer and faster to provide standard templates for response, education during the COVID-19 pandemic has provided a solid ground to renew the debate on the importance of further reconsideration of teacher liberalization and furtherance of their independence to come up with genuine solutions to all the challenges they encounter. This debate is based on earlier discussions about the need to select the most competent and gualified teacher and effectively develop them, thus, having confidence in the level of the teacher's professional development and enabling them to handle learning situations as they deem appropriate for their students, while at the same time holding them accountable through Key Performance Indicator (KPIs) to ensure students' achievement of the expected and established levels.

The exceptional circumstances experienced by education during the pandemic have provided an opportunity to question the effectiveness of the current classroom arrangements, the school day and the school building. The expectations are that blended education will be the best option with its requirements for out-ofschool learning, or even changing the nature of in-school learning periods and activities.

The new normal requires greater integration of areas where students learn skills and grow personally and academically together. During the pandemic, students' self-learning skills have been heavily relied on in many educational situations, while many education systems depended on teachers in normal settings. The design of the school day should; therefore, be reconsidered, so that it includes basic and recurrent periods to enable students to develop inquiry and self-learning skills. To this end, the prescribed curricula and performance standards must be reviewed, so that they are revised in a manner that gives space to teachers and learning time.

Tertiary Education

It is not expected to return to the university campus in the traditional way, as higher education institutions worldwide responded to the pandemic faster than other education and training sectors, and the level of learners' maturity and independent learning skills may have contributed to a more effective response. The use of technological tools and virtual learning environments - which were not entirely new to universities - are not expected to decrease even if the pandemic subsides. These tools maintained the academic and operational continuity of universities, provided flexibility in accessing learning resources and virtual alternatives to the educational experience.

However, when universities began to use technological tools prior to the pandemic, their main purpose was not to develop alternatives to traditional education, but rather to lay the foundation for the digital transformation in tertiary education with a view to achieve globalization and spread. This was in contrast with the COVID-19 circumstances, as universities were devoid of students and academic staff alike, in an unprecedented event.

In higher education, there is much talk of a greater activation of technological tools in teaching, since blended learning is expected to be the preferred form, but there are concerns regarding adopting these tools as an extension of the old lecture model, whereas technology must be used to bring about a radical change in the learning environment for students and academic staff. The pandemic has contributed to raising the value of online learning, ensuring that higher education will increase the digital component in its future programmes.

It is believed that university leadership and governance will also need to change to address the expected financial challenges, taking into account the retention and development of human resources, adoption of more accurate and rigorous risk policies, increased pressure to decide on the priorities between teaching and research and making progressive improvements and remedies, in addition to handing short-term operational issues and revising medium and long-term objectives. This requires flexible, proactive leadership and effective governance councils that are representative of stakeholders to ensure the design of future universities is developed, and their purpose is re-evaluated, while ensuring that they serve their communities.

The issue of international students in higher education takes an important part in the debate. On one hand, many universities have suffered from their inability to attract students from other countries for distance education. However, the expected acceptance of different systems and the labour market for distance education graduates create an opportunity to benefit from them.

Cooperation between universities in the research field is also expected to take a part of the discussion, as considerable opportunities for collaboration between universities are expected to increase, and there may be a greater tendency to build partnerships with industries and professionals in a relationship that provides universities with the required financial resources, while at the same time, providing realistic and effective training opportunities for students; thereby, obtaining the talent they seek early and expanding the scope of their research.

Higher education institutions have to address several challenges, on top of which is the possibility of imposing social distancing policies whose ending date is not clear to anybody. This may entail a flexible and secure redesign and furnishing of classrooms. It may also reduce reliance on large group lectures, replacing them with virtual applications, in addition to activating student meetings through smaller learning groups and imposing more rigorous policies that support and encourage independent learning.

Vocational Training

The education and vocational training sectors have been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially practical courses/ programmes that require direct practices to ensure that learners acquire the skills they aim to

master. On-the-job and hands-on skills training tasks were severely hampered during the pandemic as distance education systems in this sector were not designed to accommodate the size and cost of this sudden change. However, the responses of the various components of this sector have varied in dealing with changing data, with some studies in some training areas proving that technology has played a significant role in this aspect by providing an appropriate alternative, such as simulation programmes. Virtual and augmented reality technologies are expected to play an important role in developing learners and providing them with the skills and competencies required by the labour market.

To cope with the effects of digitization on jobs and occupations in the training sector, there must be a radical shift in the skills required of trainers, who must have modern digital competencies, so they can understand the applications of digital technologies, such as artificial intelligence, robotics and 3D technologies, and use them in the training field. The same applies to the leadership of education and training institutions, which will require them to deal with the future in terms of a higher level of preparedness and development of more practical, robust and accurate contingency plans.

Special attention must be paid to partnership and cooperation between the public and private sectors in the areas of vocational and technical training. This may take several forms including: contributing to the provision of digital equipment and tools to those who do not have access to them, coordinating and developing training curricula in accordance with common needs and providing technical services to facilitate remote access to training courses.

Governments and other partners recognize that the restructuring and improvement of individual skills will contribute directly to economic recovery and reconstruction. Therefore, the investment of education and training institutions in infrastructure has become inevitable, as the availability of electronic educational resources, devices, tools and platforms and Internet connectivity must be ensured. It is expected that surveys of local labour market needs will become more important, provided that they are accurate and conducted on a continuous basis, in addition to highlighting credible indicators to guide the training sector. It should be noted that it is increasingly important to review the structure of education and training systems in a way that enhances their flexibility and orientation in order to reduce the gap between trainees and labour market requirements.

Flexible Learning and Qualifications

Projections suggest that there is an opportunity for the income gap between individuals to grow globally. This means that many of them will be unable to continue their higher education studies, which may undermine the principle of "learning is a right for all" at all ages, without discrimination. Therefore, it is important to provide multiple pathways in the education system that ensure the availability of approved flexible learning opportunities, so that individuals can develop themselves in a way that allows social mobility to take its course with justice and equality.

The current debate is about the difficulty of maintaining a learning certificate based on common, standardised and age-based tests. The shift to different age groups and similar abilities-based learning may take place, with the growing role of informal learning in developing the abilities and skills of individuals. It is more likely that learning will be driven by students themselves. This is in accordance with many of the options currently available, which are constantly increasing, and future learning does not need to be built on a full-time basis.

Under these changes, the public education sectors are expected to be challenged by the growing strength of the private education market, as trends for the development of legislation and regulations are increasing. This allows the private sector to provide competitive and more flexible content in line with prescribed standards. However, this may involve some risks associated with the right of access to information and equality. The public sector is also expected to come under increasing pressure to change faster than

used to be. This thought is led by persistent calls for rethinking education, its meaning and objectives, where the speed of technological change coupled with the Fourth Industrial Revolution create the need to learn new skills quickly. Accordingly, flexible learning meets the rapidly changing needs in the labour market more than traditional learning systems, and promotes a lifelong learning culture throughout an individual's career life, where employers generally believe that academic qualifications alone do not qualify the learner and graduate for future jobs as they need more market-friendly skills, especially with respect to problem-solving skills, creativity, flexibility, leadership and respect for others.

The pandemic has forced a renewed debate on the most appropriate model for awarding qualifications, especially in the absence of examinations in some sectors, while maintaining the integrity and credibility of the accredited qualifications and ensuring that standards are maintained over time. This issue is problematic for several reasons, on top of which is the fact that when the qualification is accredited without undergoing the traditional examinations, the chances of unconscious bias may increase. This underscores the importance of developing structured policies and standards of accountability to avoid such practices.

Assessment and Examinations

Educational assessment and examination application mechanisms are among the most affected aspects due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be erroneous to believe that assessments and examinations only measure the level of learners' performance, as they aim to achieve multiple purposes. In addition to measuring the level of learners' performance in acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies, the results of the educational assessment also contribute to helping stakeholders make appropriate decisions relating to teachers and their needs, in addition to reviewing the curricula and courses, and drafting and allocating budgets, it is clear that no single examination can measure all of this. Accordingly, assessment concepts that serve

different purposes have emerged, including: learning assessment, assessment for learning and assessment as learning. It has become clear that some countries - especially those that rely on high-profile examinations as a major source of measurement of student's progress - have found themselves in a difficult position when they were unable to set up examinations in the traditional way. Technological solutions have provided suitable alternatives, but the most striking challenge is to reduce measurement errors and increase the validity and reliability of the findings-based assessment itself, and sometimes justice will not be achieved, especially in the absence of equal access for all learners. In general, assessments can help mitigate the effects of COVID-19 in the years to come if they are implemented properly, but in the case of leniency, they may provide misleading data on learners' performance and the education system leading to a waste of investment in resources and, sometimes, reinforce inequality.

When reviewing the new normal, attention is drawn to the development of educational assessment mechanisms in line with future directions and reconsideration of the balance in the education system between the goals of education, competencies, approved standards and prescribed curriculum. The results of students' performance must be combined with the development of appropriate policies and strategies to bridge the achievement gap witnessed in the world. Given the repercussions of the pandemic, the focus should be on making up for the lack of skill mastery and competencies, not just on grades. It would not hurt to lower expectations at the current stage, but this must be accompanied by remedies and action plans in the near future to compensate for the loss.

Although the pandemic has shown that formative assessments may tend to exaggerate achievement, especially when linked to students' grades, future trends emphasize the importance of combining formative and summative assessments while giving priority to formative assessments and linking this to the call for a division of curriculum experiences into shorter-than-normal experiences, so that the teacher has the opportunity to implement and measure them. This will provide continuous information on the learner's performance.

The need to accelerate the development of teachers' perceptions of assessments and their appropriate mechanisms, together with digital competencies in this area, should not be overlooked in order to meet the requirements of the next phase, and provide teachers with appropriate support, training and guidance. This may also extend to parents, especially parents of younger learners.

Conclusion

The pandemic has unleashed a new future in which education and training will undergo major changes over the next five to ten years. These changes will include what the learner will learn, how the teacher will teach them, which organisational format will be used, where they will learn and how their learning experience will be accredited. In fact, blended education and greater technology employment are essential in the coming years. The focus will also be on the quality of skills required by the learner, with more emphasis on flexible competencybased learning and a focus on capacitybuilding. This will be linked to the teachers' career development and training processes to ensure having more independence, while reorganising the accountability mechanisms in a way that ensures increased opportunities for self-learning, creativity and collaboration among teachers. Education and training systems and institutions will also have the opportunity to take advantage of the pandemic period to provide various learning opportunities that are not limited by traditional organisations and resources, which will provide chances for positive and proactive change.

With the full conviction that the opening of educational and training institutions will inevitably occur, the mechanism of return remains uncertain. This will affect the assessment mechanisms in place, and teachers may need to focus more on formative assessment, with ongoing planning for remedial and compensatory programmes in response to any potential loss. Despite expectations of increased virtual learning, which may become a regular part of the daily routine of many institutions, the digital gap remains an obstacle to many systems around the world. The variables involved in achieving the equity equation in technology-based education are still many, including the access of all students to technological devices and the extent of digital efficiency in their operation and utilisation.

Governments and other partners are also aware that the restructuring and improvement of individual skills will contribute directly to economic recovery and reconstruction. This reinforces the importance of adopting flexible and more diverse learning patterns and reconsidering mechanisms for accrediting traditional qualifications.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic may be the catalyst for change, but such change can occur only if visions are consolidated and efforts are directed towards it, as private interests, fear of the new and the unknown and fear of losing control may impede the desired change. Therefore, each nation should determine whether it views the pandemic as an accident to deal with and waits for its end to re-implement the earlier practices, or take advantage of the opportunity to develop, renew and advance.



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