



Open and distance learning to support youth and adult learning

Introduction

Since the Covid-19 outbreak and the worldwide school closures thereafter, ministries of education have endeavoured to ensure continuity of learning and encourage schools and educational institutions to explore and utilize online and distance modes of learning. Unfortunately, learners outside of the formal school system who are already in need of urgent learning support, such as low-skilled adults, women, out-of-school youth, migrants and refugees, and persons with disabilities, have suffered disproportionately from the [suspension](#) of face-to-face learning at the majority of adult learning centres and non-formal educational institutions.

The current pandemic calls for people from all walks of life to develop new knowledge and skills in order to cope with the uncertainty that this crisis imposes. These emerging learning needs include basic health literacy, media literacy, parenting for home-learning children and professional development to counteract job losses brought on by the pandemic. Correspondingly, enrolment in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is soaring, with some courses receiving as much as a [607 per cent increase in enrolment](#) between March and April compared to the same period last year, with the highest increase in public health, arts and personal development courses. As such, there have been positive and

demand-driven trends in exploring alternative options, such as open and distance learning (ODL), to ensure the continuity and expansion of non-formal education and adult learning.

This issue note therefore takes stock of opportunities and challenges in using ODL, both online and offline as defined in the [UNESCO issue note on distance learning strategies](#), for youth¹ and adult learners outside of the formal education system. After examining key issues and illustrating promising cases from public and private sectors, it will provide key messages for policy interventions to support inclusive lifelong learning for youth and adults during and after the current pandemic.

Defining the topic and related key issues

Open and distance education can play an instrumental role in ensuring the learning continuity of youth and adults outside of formal education systems as well as in meeting the diverse learning needs that have emerged because of the current pandemic. More importantly, continuous learning opportunities may help those outside of the formal education system to improve their livelihoods post-pandemic. However, a number of key issues need to be addressed in order to mainstream open and distance education in youth and adult learning, including the following:

Limited access to the internet and digital devices persists. A high proportion of the world's population, [46.4 per cent, did not have access](#) to the internet in 2019, with [most of the offline populations residing in least-developed countries](#) (LDCs). In all regions of the world, more men than women are using the internet. In addition, [gender gaps](#) in accessing the internet are growing in many regions, particularly in developing countries. For example, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports that, in 2019, the proportion of [women using the internet globally was 48 per cent](#), compared to 58 per cent of men. The current pandemic and its ensuing home confinement have made online learning for youth and adults outside of the formal education system less of a priority than that of schoolchildren, particularly in households with a limited number of devices. It has been also reported that the hasty rollout of remote learning in response to the pandemic resulted in a [lack of accessibility features](#) for persons with disabilities. For these reasons and many others, uneven access to the internet and digital media is a fundamental challenge to providing ODL, especially for vulnerable youth and adult learners with low skills and low income.

Low-literate and low-skilled youth and adults are less likely to seek further learning opportunities. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills ([PIAAC data](#)), adults with low skills are less likely to recognize their learning needs than those with higher skills, and are therefore less likely to look for learning opportunities (11.6 per cent compared to 35.5 per cent). There is a prevalent gender gap as well, since [two-thirds of adults lacking basic literacy skills are women](#), a figure that has remained unchanged for the last 10 years. In addition to low participation in adult learning and education (ALE) programmes, adults with low literacy may find it challenging to keep up with ODL learning materials intended for self-directed learning. This is consistent with OECD Programme for International Student Assessment ([PISA findings in 2018](#)): while they were more receptive to digitization, youth with low basic skills found it difficult to process digital information in multiple presentation formats. The paucity of open and distance learning is more debatable when it comes to teaching basic literacy for youth and adults as it requires close communication, personalized feedback and face-to-face mentoring with teachers.

Adult learners often lack the digital skills needed to learn online. In Europe, [43 per cent of adults lack basic digital literacy](#). This lack of digital skills is identified as [a barrier to participation in ODL](#). In the current pandemic, when many essential services including education, social and healthcare have moved

¹ The UN Secretariat uses the terms 'youth' and 'young people' interchangeable to mean those aged 15 to 24, with the understanding that Member States and other entities use different definitions. For the purposes of this document, however, the UN Secretariat definition will be used. For more information, please see <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>.

online, the impact of low digital skills appears to be [more acute among the elderly](#) and among [women](#). [Closing the digital literacy gap is urgently called for](#), not only to enable adults to access critical information on health and government measures, but also to counter disinformation and ‘fake news’.

Digital content for non-formal education and adult learning is limited. There are several issues underlying the limited availability of digital content for youth and adult learners. First and foremost, there is a lack of policy attention and poor coordination mechanisms between stakeholders in the non-formal youth and adult education sub-sector, making it a challenge to respond to learners’ immediate or emerging needs and difficult to allocate resources to support the development of relevant digital content. Secondly, some skills development requires hands-on training and supervised practise with tools and equipment, which is incompatible with distance learning. Thirdly, most of the existing digital resources are produced in a few international languages and in developed country contexts, which are not always linguistically accessible, culturally responsive and technologically realistic to the needs of learners in developing countries.

Open and distance learning credentials are not always recognized or certified. Recognition of knowledge or skills that have been acquired through ODL is not always available. This is often due to poorly developed recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) systems in many countries. Moreover, many MOOCs charge a fee for credentials and, for that reason, are sometimes described as another imperfect edtech hype that widens the gap between the poor and the rich.

Some educators lack the capacity to take on new modalities of learning. In the rush to switch to new learning approaches, especially those that involve digital solutions, the importance of supporting adult educators is often overlooked. The flexibility, adaptability and other benefits of digital solutions or blended learning solutions can only be fully realized when adult educators or facilitators are properly trained in distance teaching. In the case of online classes, for example, facilitators need to make several informed decisions regarding pedagogical approaches, digital content, remote assessment, lesson planning, and combining low- and high-tech solutions based on needs mapping, among others.

[Lessons from past practices and the current crisis](#)

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is a new challenge, responding to it has placed attention on structural and capacity issues that have long been in existence. Indeed, there have been lessons and promising practices from the past, as well as those newly emerged from the current crisis, that have informed current ODL strategies. This section illustrates some notable distance learning initiatives.

Outreach and mentoring through diverse channels have proven effective in supporting adult learners with low literacy skills and especially those in disadvantaged situations.

- In the [case of Togo](#), the facilitators of adult education centres were engaged in a door-to-door awareness campaign on COVID-19 in national languages.
- In [Namwon](#), a southern city in the Republic of Korea, the city’s lifelong learning centre ensured the continuity of its second-chance education programme for dropouts by making personal calls to each learner and encouraging them to enrol in online courses while waiting for the centre to reopen.
- Similarly, the European Electronic Platform for Adult Learning (EPALE) set up [free phone tuition services](#) in Ireland to support adults with everyday needs such as filling out government forms and helping children with schoolwork.

Mobile technology has great potential in reaching marginalized youth and adults learners.

- Although access to the internet is uneven, basic mobile phones (mobile cellular) are widely available, with a world penetration rate of 108 per cent (74.9 per cent in LDCs) in 2019. [UNESCO'S Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning](#) lists 13 unique benefits of using mobile technology, including to address disruption of learning.
- Another [UNESCO study](#) shows the effectiveness of mobile learning in promoting reading and literacy for women in developing countries. It is also [a lifeline for refugees](#), who value their [mobile phones almost as much as access to food and clothes](#).
- In Bangladesh, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning and Microsoft joined efforts for the [Advancing Mobile Literacy Learning](#) project, which ran from 2015–2018. As part of the project, a repository of existing literacy materials and vocational training content in the national languages was created and lessons were uploaded onto SD cards for learners and educators, which then operated on personal devices for centre-based instruction and learning at home.
- Starting in the USA before being rolled out in Chile, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria, [Cell-Ed](#) is an award-winning mobile learning programme designed to teach adults essential skills – reading, writing, oral communication, numeracy, work and social skills – via any type of mobile phone (basic models or smartphones), tablet or computer, even without an internet connection or expensive data plan.

Low-tech or no-tech solutions can minimize the impact of digital divides in learning.

- Evidence shows that offline distance learning using a combination of printed materials, [TV](#) and [radio](#) improves learning outcomes for basic literacy and numeracy for youth and adults on a large scale.
- The [Alternate Learning System](#) in the Philippines aims to ensure a combination of multiple modes of learning for marginalized youth. For example, the Basic Literacy Programme targets people with low literacy skills and has modalities such as radio- and computer-based instruction, independent learning, and TV instruction. Course materials include printed matter, digital modules, radio and TV content.
- In some regions of Afghanistan, literacy classes are produced in collaboration with local TV stations and then broadcast nationally as part of the country's [Alternative Education Plan](#).

Micro-learning can address immediate needs, such as Covid-19 responses.

- In Thailand, [CCDKM](#), a development research centre based in Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University, develops and provides on-demand micro online learning for the marginalized, such as ethnic minorities, farmers and rural women. In the context of the pandemic, the CCDKM has volunteered to deliver a short video course for taxi drivers to be able to communicate with foreigners who often refuse to wear masks.
- The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) launched a series of [micro-learning activities](#) on non-pharmaceutical countermeasures in relation to COVID-19. The primary objective of the activities is to reduce the impact of the outbreak and is open for all.
- In Benin, [Doctor COVID TV](#) is a series of short television episodes that have been developed to help stop the spread of the virus.

Public-private partnerships help to ensure no one left behind.

- In [the Republic of Korea](#), the Ministry of Education, Ministry of IT, and the major telecom and private sector joined efforts to provide free data and devices to low-income families so that they could access ODL opportunities.
- In Germany, the adult learning programmes by [Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband \(DVV\)](#), which suspended class instruction in March 2020, experienced a skyrocketing increase of [150,000 new learners](#) in April 2020 after the Federal Office for Migrants and Refugees announced its support for online tutoring for refugee/migrant integration and professional

language courses. The higher number of learners are also attributed to new free courses shared by nationwide colleges on the DVV learning portal.

Recognition and certification of non-formal learning can be realized through innovative methods.

- While recognition and certification of non-traditional learning requires a major policy reform, advocates of lifelong learning together with software engineers have begun to realize it through blockchain technologies, which can provide encrypted validation of course and credit transactions embedded in some online open learning.
- With a multi-partnership programme with accredited providers and a secured digital learning identity, [Learning Beyond Borders](#) set up trusted credentials for learners in refugee camps in Uganda and helps them track and accumulate their online learning records.

Key messages and practical tips for designing policy interventions

Drawing on the current and past crises and lessons learned, the following advice is provided to support governments and educational providers who plan to use open and distance learning to ensure the continuity and expand the outreach of non-formal adult learning.

For immediate responses under the current pandemic:

Explore and use various channels of learning media to ensure maximum outreach.

- Phones, printed materials, text messages, radio, TV, low-bandwidth social media and short bite-sized micro-learning can be used to boost outreach to marginalized learners with low skills and limited access to the internet.
- [Research](#) shows that graphic-rich and audio-based interfaces are the most effective for youth and adults with low literacy skills.
- Learners can also empower themselves to make the most of the existing bandwidth, either 2G or 3G, by using [bandwidth-optimizing tools](#). A free web-based service such as [Loband](#) is also available to reformat any web page into a text-only form, thereby radically reducing its size.
- [A catalogue of interactive radio instruction programmes](#) by the [Education Development Center](#) and UNESCO's [list of online and offline learning resources](#) can be useful tools.

Leverage and create an inventory of existing resources to accelerate timely responses.

- Instead of creating new materials, reviewing and compiling available resources can save significant time and costs, facilitating rapid responses to learning disruption. Radio and TV programmes can be also repurposed and reused for urgent need. Local authorities can seek partnership with local universities and higher education institutions to tap into existing online courses.
- A curated collection of short audio and video clips (less than five minutes) are easily adapted and can be used by teachers for their own contexts.

Lift the requirement of physical presence to obtain financial aids.

- Funding support for adult learners and providers still prevails in the traditional face-to-face classes over other alternative modes of learning. In the case of major mobility restrictions and economy disruption caused by events like the Covid-19 outbreak, governments and employees should ease the regulations to move the courses to distance modes and take measures to extend financial support for self-regulated online learning.

Provide immediate support for adult educators for new modes of teaching.

- Adult educators are often neglected in continuous professional development compared to school teachers, resulting in inadequate digital and teaching skills. Capacity-building

interventions for using online tools and designing learning activities for distance teaching are urgently needed.

- Open access resources for professional development tools and kits are available for adult learning facilitators; these include [Guidelines for Online Assessment for Educators](#) and [Designing and Implementing Micro-Credentials: A Guide for Practitioners](#) by the Commonwealth of Learning, and [Micro-Learning for Trainers and Teachers in VET Systems](#) by the European Union.

For mid- and long-term responses for the post-pandemic period:

Place non-formal education and adult learning as an integral part of national education plans.

- Non-formal education and adult learning should be integrated into national education plans or ICT in education masterplans. Only with a special policy focus and dedicated funding can the sub-sector move forward to a crisis-resilient system. Different technologies and necessary digital skills can be integrated into national plans for target groups; this includes equipping adult and community learning centres with internet connectivity, digitizing learning materials, developing new courses for emerging needs, and professional development of adult educators, supported by a comprehensive policy framework for recognizing flexible and alternative learning.

Ensure equity and inclusiveness for all.

- In addition to measures to prevent digital divides and digital skills gaps (see [the UNESCO Education Sector issue note on distance learning strategies](#)), special attention should be given to ODL for adult learners with low-literacy skills. This is especially relevant for the future of adult learning in the post-pandemic context.
- A [landscape review of digital inclusion for low-skilled and low-literate people](#) found that, before a digital solution can be identified, various functions, delivery channels, access devices, user interface options, content types, support options and affordability must be taken into consideration.
- The ITU, UN Women, United Nations University (UNU) and the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSMA) launched a multi-stakeholder initiative, [EQUALS](#), in 2016, to address the gender digital gap. Last year, the EQUALS Access Coalition released an easy-to-use reference report, [10 Lessons Learnt: Closing the Gender Gap in Internet Access And Use](#), which can be referred to when designing ODL programmes.

Contextualize, adapt and develop learning materials to respond to local needs and conditions.

- Compiling and curating existing resources can address immediate demands, but may not be a long-term solution. Local needs, infrastructure readiness, and linguistic and cultural contexts should be taken into consideration when developing a long-term solution to build a crisis-resilient lifelong learning society.
- [UIL's publication highlighting the potential of](#) information and communication technologies (ICTs) to support the development of literacy, numeracy and language skills features programmes from Cabo Verde, Panama, the Solomon Islands and Somalia that effectively harnessed the potential of radio and TV to reach remote populations.

Build strategic partnerships and strengthen coordination mechanisms.

- Multi-faceted private-public partnerships should be explored. It has been already observed that local universities partner with adult learning authorities and share their online content for free.
- Provision of [zero-rating internet access](#) and free SIM cards for educational purposes through partnerships with telecom companies is emerging as a way to facilitate online learning for all.

Continuous monitoring and evaluation processes must be established.

- Monitoring and evaluation of alternative education such as open and distance learning is vital to turn crises such as COVID-19 into an opportunity to transform non-formal adult learning. Data can be collected through simple surveys from practitioners and learners periodically in addition to data on access and completion behaviours, engagement rates, participation rates over time, and learning outcomes. Such information will be essential in planning and revising future iterations of digital solutions, especially during the pandemic recovery phase.

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About the UNESCO Education Sector issue notes

The UNESCO Education Sector issue notes cover key topics related to the COVID-19 education response. They provide evidence of good practice, practical tips and links to important references for each topic in an effort to mitigate the impact of school closures.

The issue notes cover several topics under nine thematic areas, namely health and well-being; continuity of learning and teaching; gender equity and equality; teaching and learning; higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET); education and culture; education policy and planning; vulnerable populations; and Global Citizenship Education and Education for Sustainable Development

They are prepared collectively by UNESCO education colleagues across the world. The present note was developed by the **UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL)**.

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