



Organized as part of the project – ‘Strengthening the Responsiveness, Agility and Resilience of TVET Institutions for the Post-COVID-19 Era’

Synthesis report

Introduction

As a response to COVID-19, TVET learning has shifted heavily to distance and online implementation. This has put a massive burden on both teachers and students. According to recent surveys conducted in Finland, TVET teachers and students alike feel stressed about the lack of social interaction. Teachers are concerned as they have not been able to reach some students for lengthy periods of time. On the other hand, teachers themselves need support as the digital leap has put a strain on all and the new reality demands new skills.

This webinar focused on the social aspects of digital learning: how to design engaging learning paths, acknowledging and supporting students with special needs, harnessing the power of peer support, and decreasing the level of stress and anxiety among teachers and students.

The webinar also provided insight regarding TVET students: how students have coped during remote learning, what arrangements have actually enhanced learning, and the kind of extra support special needs students might benefit from when engaging in online activities.

Many approaches require commitment at the TVET provider level to be effective. This webinar might serve as one catalyst for acknowledging the growing need for social interaction during the ongoing crisis. School alone cannot be responsible for solving all challenges, but with thoughtful design, digital solutions can be harnessed to bring much needed support for both TVET teachers and students during this period of disruption.

Aims

This webinar was the second in a three-part series looking at the challenges digitalization poses for TVET as part of UNESCO-UNEVOC's COVID-19 response project. It has been organized in conjunction with a three-month intensive training programme to equip teachers and managers in Jamaica, Kenya, the Maldives, Nigeria and Peru with relevant digital skills. The webinar brought together leading experts and interested practitioners from the global TVET community to discuss the social aspects of digital learning in TVET.

It addressed questions such as what are some of the social challenges related to digital learning and how can they be mitigated? What do we know about teachers' and students' needs for support that have emerged following the COVID-19 disruption? What are some good practices that can ensure learning does not deepen isolation and silos? What organizational-level decisions help reduce teachers' workload?

The webinar was organized by OMNIA Education Partnerships of Finland on behalf of UNESCO-UNEVOC and attended by 242 participants from 62 countries. A recording of the webinar is available in [English](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#).

Key discussion points

1. What are some of the social challenges related to digital learning and how can we mitigate these challenges?

In the shift towards digitalization, the need to go beyond the purely technical challenge to the social and psychological dimensions of distance learning is often overlooked, noted Soo-Hyang Choi, Director of UNESCO-UNEVOC.

Some adapted quite quickly but others were struggling, and knowledge of how to set up inclusive and supportive digital teaching is still missing in many countries, said Jeannette Burmester, Head of the Sector Project on TVET at GIZ in Bonn, Germany. Beyond the technical aspects and putting classes online, it requires even more effort to create an online learning community, she noted.

In a poll of webinar participants, about a third indicated that support needs have been addressed poorly, or not at all.

Isolation, anonymity and loneliness, mental health issues, problems of motivation and the development of soft skills were some of the challenges. "Screens create new barriers between teachers and learners and between learners themselves, especially learners who are not familiar with the digital world," Ms Burmester noted, "individuals have to become more self-confident."

Digital learning also requires more responsibility from the individual learner. Some learners lack a specific time or working atmosphere and are easily distracted when learning alone — even more so if they have special needs.

Jani Goman, Counsellor of Evaluation in the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre's Vocational Education Unit cited a survey by the unit during January-March 2021. About 6500 students and 2300 teachers and study counsellors responded.

"Most students felt that studying during COVID-19 has been more stressful than studying in normal times," he said. One in four students had a lot of problems and these problems accumulated.

They included problems related to motivation, stress, and progress of studies. Some mentioned loneliness and lack of hope. "These students felt that their study skills are not good enough for distance learning. And that they did not get enough support and guidance during distance learning," he said.

A short video from the Business College Helsinki's International Study Programme provided students' perspectives.

Online learning “is not the same as real school interaction, when I see the teacher and students, when I have eye contact, see the body language, the faces. I really miss that,” said student Violetta Korhonen. Iness Belleilli said, “I really miss that interaction, and not being in class was a bit hard for me.” She added: “There were some low points where I really did not feel that motivated.”

“Sometimes it was hard to reach the teacher when you had a problem,” said student Heli Haavisto.

But another student Matias Korhonen said, “One good thing is that we really learn different ways to cope with different kinds of situations as students.”

2. What do we know about the teachers’ and students’ support needs that have emerged following the COVID-19 disruption?

Subisiso Moyo, Deputy-Vice Chancellor and Professor in the Department of Mathematics at Durban University of Technology (DUT), South Africa, noted that many students felt insecure. “Many underprivileged students were very anxious and worried about just making sure they could access devices and connect to data and to devices.”

She pointed to issues of self-isolation and indicated that some students may feel suicidal. Some students were also dealing with family loss. Mental health can be a big issue in South Africa, she said. Stress among youth can sometimes translate into student protests, “so we need to be very alert to these issues.”

DUT set up a counselling unit to deal with social problems and provide social and emotional support. The university also set up a fund where staff could contribute to assist some students with access to devices, data, and in some cases, providing meal allowances.

“We opened up some of our residences for smaller groups of students, even under COVID-19, as the only way they could access online teaching and learning materials,” Ms Moyo said.

Academic staff also experienced feelings of insecurity, having to deal with new changes almost every other week as classes moved online.

One way to keep students connected with the wider world and combat isolation was the use of social innovation hubs that brought students together to share ideas. With an emphasis on entrepreneurship at the institution, Ms Moyo added: “they identify a social problem which, as a group, they can try and find entrepreneurial solutions.”

The hub is a virtual platform that brings together people from different walks of life — DUT students, students from other universities in South Africa and abroad as well as people from industry to tackle problems together.

3. What good practices can we reflect on to ensure learning does not deepen isolation and silos?

Denise Amyot, President and CEO of Colleges and Institutes Canada (CICan), emphasized inclusion in dealing with the shift to online learning.

The social divide, anxiety and lack of funds affected both learners and faculty but impacted groups differently, especially women and vulnerable groups such as low-income, indigenous, rural or remote communities. For example, some faculty “had to sit in their cars in parking lots to access Wi-Fi,” she said.

Virtual mentorship, virtual counselling, and what she described as “virtual wraparound support” was provided for students facing barriers to online learning. For example, in Canada “indigenous leaders play a very important role for indigenous people. So, we had to teach many indigenous elders to use Zoom, in order to be able to support students.”

Online learning is not always the best option for those with physical or learning disabilities or mental health problems, she noted. Institutions used hands-on learning in very small groups, while respecting social distancing. This meant that sometimes a course had to be repeated up to four times to

accommodate a regular class, Ms Amyot said.

Another was to offer micro-credentials, or short courses to boost digital literacy skills for both faculty and learners. Institutions developed kits for students to use at home for a more hands-on experience.

Internet connectivity support, technology and equipment, loan programmes and a Wi-Fi voucher drive, relief funds, and even food hampers, were some of the support measures for disadvantaged groups.

With hands-on experience so critical in TVET, digital learning tools were created using simulation, augmented reality (AR), or virtual reality (VR). These are expensive so the association is working with members of three health associations to develop such AR and VR tools, which will be made available to all the association's members, she said.

Paola Vilar, Teaching Advisor to the General Directorate of Secondary Education for the National Administration of Public Education (ANEP) in Uruguay, said Uruguay's national Ceibal platform for video conferences and interactive classes was used as a hub to bring together families, teachers, administrative staff and students.

The idea was not only to work with students but to be a space where the family could follow the content alongside the student, she said.

Ceibal is a programme for children to remain connected. Students from primary level upwards received a laptop and Uruguay's Educa portal provided multimedia content for all levels. Alongside Ceibal, the public education ministry created cross-media programmes that could also be viewed on television so that students did not have to worry about internet connectivity. The TV programmes included education content for certain curricula.

The Ceibal platform provided innovative ways to engage young people in online education, for example, using a YouTuber, a gamer, and influencers that young people could relate to, and bring them closer to the learning tools.

Through the online portal LiceoEnCasa "we provided training for families and students in how to use different digital tools," Ms Vilar explained.

To prevent isolation, the education ministry also supported teachers, through video conferencing and multidisciplinary teams with psychologists and social workers who worked throughout the country using "individualized inboxes" linked to the Educa portal, to personalize support.

The system included webinars for all types of teachers so that specialist teachers could help other teachers. "It doesn't matter what tools we use; it is important to allow others to see they are not alone," said Ms Vilar.

4. What organizational-level decisions help reduce teachers' workload?

According to another poll of participants held during the webinar, teachers experienced a big increase in workload during the pandemic, particularly during the transition period when faculty had to review their curricula and adjust to teaching online.

Ms Amyot said that to reduce the workload, institutions in Canada delayed the start of the autumn and winter semesters by 1–2 weeks to allow faculty to prepare for online teaching. They eliminated a lot of non-essential administrative work and provided relief to some teachers to support their colleagues in developing online teaching strategies.

Many institutions created, or provided access to, wellness resources for staff, including podcasts and videos on topics such as positive psychology, strategies for sleep, or on ways to create a positive mindset, or boost resilience.

In concluding remarks, it was noted that diversified support was needed because people are at different levels of mastering technology and online pedagogy. However, encouraging communities of learning and communities of practice went a long way towards providing much-needed social support.