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# OBESSU Reaction to the Impact of Covid-19 on General Secondary Education and Vocational Education

*As the representatives of European school students, we have been advocating for quality access to education for more than 45 years. We strongly believe that inclusive, and quality education shall be present in each European country even in such unexpected times. The following remarks and recommendations are based on the results of a consultation carried out by OBESSU among its member organisations on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on general secondary education and vocational education.*

UNESCO reports that 1.5 billion students have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 outbreak, in 165 countries. This is more than 87 percent of all registered students. The Coronavirus crisis has become an education crisis[1]. "*Never before have we witnessed educational disruption on such a scale*," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay.

In Europe, most governments have temporarily closed their schools as a measure to contain the spread of the Covid-19. Education has shifted online but the situation is far from being ideal. While tertiary education institutions were already largely using online platforms to deliver courses before the crisis, in secondary education, distance learning platforms were not widely used or at least not to the same extent. In most countries, there is **no standardisation and a lack of clear guidelines from Ministries of Education**. Each school is responsible for providing online learning alternatives but they are lacking the financial and human resources needed to subscribe or set up efficient online learning platforms. There are disparities even within schools and the online learning tools used differ widely from a teacher to another. **This lack of framework and resources leads to an extremely unequal situation that affects schools, teachers and most importantly students and apprentices**.

All teachers and learners do not have the necessary financial means to cover for the equipment needed to take part in an online learning process. Those living in rural areas or with special learning needs are even more affected. **School closures are deepening inequalities and will have longer term consequences**.

Existing education online platforms are collapsing or experiencing technical issues due to the large number of users which also leads to inequality in education. **The use of platforms owned by private actors can be a danger for the authentic public nature of education, with still no clear consequences on the ownership of content and on the data protection.**

At this stage, very few countries have announced financial measures to support the education sector and for those who have, **the financial resources promised are really limited in**

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[1] UNESCO, *COVID-19 Educational Disruption and Response*: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

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**comparison to the challenges faced by educational institutions and learners**, especially referring to students without access to devices or to an efficient internet connection.

We observe **incoherence in curricula**. Some schools are providing new content others are only focusing on the content that had already been taught in the classrooms. Therefore, when existing, online lectures vary at lot in terms of quality and frequency.

**School students are under pressure and overwhelmed**. In many countries, teachers are assigning lots of homework that school students have to handle often alone. Not all school students have access to the necessary equipment to handle their homework, nor do they receive the same level of support at home, which also leads to inequalities.

These differences have an impact on the learning process and outcomes of students and will most probably impact assessments, considering in particular the difficulties for learners to adapt themselves to new forms of online examination. Many countries are **postponing exams, without clear answers about what will happen to the finals of the high school**, with a high possibility of delays.

**All the forms of teaching and training that need presential work are deeply affected by this crisis**. The impossibility of accessing laboratories, workplaces and all of the practical classes, especially in VET and apprenticeships, will mean a big loss for the personal growth and skill development of the learner as well as it can mean a loss of earnings for apprentices.

**Equity should be governments' main concern as these unprecedented measures affect disproportionately disadvantaged learners**. Nor only their learning path is interrupted but they are also losing access to social welfare services such as meals and accommodation.

Teachers are overwhelmed and denounce the **lack of training**. Education authorities should invest in developing the capacity of teachers by providing training to help them adapt to their new teaching environment and develop their online teaching skills. In some countries, the past lack of investment on digitalisation makes it even more complicated to effectively change methods and tools.

Our governments are not taking into consideration the **psychological impact of this crisis on teachers, students, apprentices and their families**, particularly considering the limitations of mental health services derived by the social distancing measures. There is a lot of uncertainty and lack of information which often leads school students to feel a higher level of stress and anxiety.

**Global solidarity and values need to be a top priority for education systems** and stakeholders in these times. Concrete actions should be ensured to make sure that the Covid-19 crisis does not result in extreme nationalisms and brings us together as citizens of the world

A relevant share of the measures taken in the last weeks was a result of a decision-making process that excluded school student unions and representatives, both at national level and at school level. Students remain, in fact, well aware of their learning needs and student organisations remain important stakeholders in the democratic life of our countries.

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We call for action with the following recommendations when implementing distance learning measures.

- Education must stay public and independent, so **any form of monopoly of a private online platform for lectures and assessment must be avoided**.
- When choosing an online learning platform, educational authorities should pay the utmost attention to learners with special needs and provide **inclusive learning alternatives**.
- **Students who don't have access to the needed devices or to the internet** must be supported with concrete measures to fully include them in the learning process. Ministries of Education should give schools **clear guidelines on the content that need to be taught online and on how to conduct assessments** in order to attain a certain level of standardisation at least within a country and reduce the current inequalities.
- A **balance between digital learning activities and screen-free activities needs to be found**. Online classes may have an impact on student's health so it is important to provide non-digital learning materials.
- In a context of isolation, school institutions especially the mental health counselors must consider an **increase of cyberbullying** due to the fact that educational activities are mainly taking place in an online setting and **implement all the necessary measures to prevent this phenomenon**.
- Education authorities should invest in **developing the capacity of teachers** by providing training to help them adapt to their new teaching environment and develop their online teaching skills.
- Education authorities should provide **platforms for interaction between teachers and students** in order to keep alive the social aspect of teaching and learning and minimise the negative impact of social isolation on learners.
- **Online collaborative platforms** should also be set up **to allow teachers to share their resources and give and receive peer feedback**.
- **The difficulties in ensuring the continuation of VET teaching, training, apprenticeships, and the impossibility of using laboratories for experimental activity must never penalise learners** in the future recognition of prior learning, especially connected with third-level education and the labour market. A common European policy must be given to assess eventual losses and to allow a common answer to catch-up without discriminations. Apprentices whose pay is at risk should receive alternative welfare measures and educational institutions together with companies should work in cooperation to guarantee advancement in their learning path.
- Any obliged changes in the evaluation methods must be considered as an increased difficulty from the learner's side too (e.g. moving from written tests to oral exams via webcam) and **students must never be penalised for difficulties in adapting.**
- Eventual delays in recognition of prior learning must not lead to discrimination of school students, so **entrance procedures for university and civil servant examinations must be coordinated to the end of the secondary education.**
- **Full recognition of prior learning** must be granted for school students that will apply to foreign educational institutions, both in second level and third level education. **Common European solutions of recognition must be found for the students that**

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- **had to interrupt their semester of exchange abroad**, to allow them to continue their studies without any further disadvantage.
- **Our school student unions are unanimously against an extension of the school year** and call for a recognition of the time spent at home as learning time. Possible extensions should be discussed with teachers, students and parents' unions.
- In some countries, **public TV channels and radio stations have been used to provide classes**. We found this measure very interesting and effective as most families have access to TV and radio, even in remote areas, and it does not require an extra cost for students and their families. **This measure could be implemented in other countries and be expanded for all levels of secondary education, not only for those that are to sit exams.**
- School closures may have longer term consequences and lead students to drop out their education. **Early school leaving** as a result of school closures **must be tackled with effective economic and social support.**
- **Alternative welfare measures need to be granted** for school student and families relying on the school system to provide for their needs. **No one can be left behind.**
- **No decision about our future can be taken effectively without including school students**. Student organisations should be consulted in all forms possible and cooperation between school actors in this moment should be a top priority.
- School Student Unions need to **receive continued support** from institutions and stakeholders to safeguard their activities and continue contributing actively to our democratic societies.

The current crisis shows that education institutions are not prepared for distance learning. This crisis also gives us the opportunity to rethink our schooling models and find new innovative methods of teaching. This period can be taken as an experimenting period to test new online learning platforms, learning outcomes and assessment methods. However, it also reminds us that technology cannot replace classroom teaching and the face-to-face interactions between students and teachers and most importantly that the social aspects of teaching and learning are fundamental.

**Together, we are stronger!**