



Social Sciences & Humanities 7

COVID-19 Recovery

Education, Skills and Employment

A series of statements from national social science and humanities bodies in the G7 on one of the greatest challenges we face: the COVID-19 pandemic and our recovery from its impacts.

This statement on education, skills and employment focuses on responses in and beyond the pandemic for education, work and employment.

It outlines some of the key insights from across our collective work as the representative bodies for the humanities and social sciences in our respective countries on how COVID-19 has had significant and unequal effects on access to education, employment prospects and experiences, and individual and household incomes. These effects have been differentially experienced, depending on where people live, their qualification level, their socioeconomic status, and their health status. Wider issues around economic, education and social security infrastructures have compounded these impacts, pushing many more people into poverty. In the immediate term, poverty affects the likelihood of contracting and surviving COVID-19. In the longer term, poverty will make it harder to weather the economic effects of the pandemic and lockdowns, as it is linked to worsening health and social outcomes.

Education and skills

The consequences of lost access to in-school education at all levels, coupled with changes made to the structure, format and grading of assessments which evaluate the attainment of this education, will be felt for years to come, and wholly recovering lost education is unfeasible. This has exacerbated existing socioeconomic inequalities in attainment and highlighted digital inequality. Because a high-skill economy will be essential for future prosperity and for societies to thrive, it will be vital to consider whether lifelong educational opportunities are sufficiently comprehensive, diverse and flexible.

Education plays a crucial role in a child's social, cultural and emotional development. It is too early to appreciate and understand fully the long-term impact that the loss of time in the formal school setting and social interaction with peers will have on this generation, particularly for the youngest children missing out on early years education. However, these impacts are expected to be most severe for the most disadvantaged children and families.

The process of closing schools to all or some pupils during the pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities. Many early years settings were also closed to some or all children at different points in the pandemic. In many countries, high-quality early years provision is key to tackling socioeconomic inequalities and closing an attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children. Where children have been unable to attend a childcare provider, stark differences have been noted in physical, social and emotional development compared to those who were able to attend.

For older children receiving schooling, inequalities are evident in the level of access to provision and resources. Some of the lost schooling has been ameliorated by efforts to home school with distance learning, but the level and quality of this provision is positively associated with household income. So too is access to digital infrastructure and hardware, and resources such as dedicated study spaces and adult support.

Regardless of age, many vulnerable children and young people who were already struggling have been significantly affected due to the pandemic. Issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, and the health conditions of children (e.g. insufficient nutritional intake due to the poor socioeconomic status of the family) have all been exacerbated over the course of the pandemic. For these children and young people, schools and education systems function as shelters where they are protected and proper nutrition intake is ensured. They also offer the support needed for emotional development and of social skills, contributing to the building of social

capital. In countries where the most vulnerable in these circumstances were not able to attend school due to school closures, they are at even further risk.

The disruption from lockdowns, social distancing and self-isolation to all types and levels of education – from early years to higher education, in education institutions, the home and the workplace – may be felt for years to come. Past international examples of missed education- from teacher strikes, extreme weather and other quasi-random circumstances - demonstrate that it is likely to have significant adverse effects on educational outcomes, employment opportunities, and intergenerational mobility.

Pre-pandemic, much research which focussed on the skills needed for the future considered the overlapping and interconnected roles of the compulsory, tertiary and adult education systems as a mechanism for life-long skills delivery. A more agile and interconnected education system that focuses on building life-long skills that can flexibly respond to the new social and economic environments in which we will find ourselves post-pandemic will be required. Employment opportunities for young people, in particular, will be needed and support for education to increase employability (e.g. practical training, internships, and so on). Sufficient material and human resources and necessary financial support should be provided to revitalise educational and cultural institutions, such as museums, art galleries, libraries, theatres, gymnasia, sports stadia, and so on. Individual sectors alone cannot address these challenges independently.

Employment and incomes

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing inequalities: vulnerable people (such as those with caring responsibilities, older workers or disabled people) are more likely to have lost work; women are more likely to have borne the economic and caring burden; young people entering a job market in a recession face lower wages and higher unemployment for up to a decade; and there is a relationship between insecure housing and income, leaving many in precarious situations.

Impacts on incomes have widened a schism across societies, highlighting differences between those in knowledge-intensive sectors often able to continue working seamlessly from home – and able to save part of their income– and those in front-line or shut-down sectors, suffering either increased exposure or loss of income. This schism operates along existing income inequalities, with poorer sections of society more likely to have lost employment and income. Lost employment and exposure to the virus through employment have also disproportionately impacted some minority ethnic groups and women in their respective countries. In the latter case, this has compounded gender inequalities with respect to earnings, childcare and housework, and socioeconomic inequalities in education. Skills depreciation and scarring effects, which can be particularly severe for workers from poorer households and those with lower skills, can have a persistent impact on employment and wages.

Employment and household income levels have fallen for many and will likely worsen for the foreseeable future. This will lead to an increased dependency on social security, which current systems may be ill equipped to deal with effectively. This will matter not only for those who are (or will become) dependent on state social security support, but also because it may require significant adjustments to social security systems to keep pace with demand.

Recommendations

We ask that all G7 Governments:

- Create a more agile, responsive and inclusive education and training system capable of meeting the needs of a new social and economic environment and acting as a catalyst to develop and enhance our future.
- Introduce adequate education systems, which ensure that no one is left behind (as set out in the SDGs), and social welfare systems that offer an environment and circumstances where everyone, including children, can access education during and after the pandemic. The role of child mental health in educational attainment means that these systems should be considered together, as does the role of education in supporting child wellbeing. To support this, sufficient financial support should be provided for research on the impact of the pandemic, not only on children but also on socially vulnerable people and minorities.
- Ensure a more joined-up policy approach across government bodies focusing on children and young people to support their experiences in childhood and adolescence as well as their chances later in life, spanning education, health and social care, employment, crime and policing, culture, community support, and rental and housing policy.
- Provide sufficient financial support that is required to establish more agile, responsive, and comprehensive education and social welfare systems during and after the pandemic, including sufficient human resources for education and social welfare to ensure that these systems function smoothly. Efforts should be made to increase the number of teachers and enhance the quality of teacher training to improve teaching skills. The number of qualified specialists and supporters, such as counsellors, social workers, lawyers, doctors, nurses, ICT supporters, etc., available to help teachers should be increased.
- Retrain people who have fallen out of the labour market, such as those with caring responsibilities including single mothers who must stay home to take care of their children, with a clear focus on the future economy we want to underpin our societies. This should be part of reaffirming strong general commitment to lifelong learning but include a focus on improving digital literacy and specific training programmes to support key recovery sectors (such as new technologies, green innovation and health and social care) and address existing inequalities. There may also be a need to improve access to services which enable people to work, including affordable childcare and improving parental leave policies.
- Reconsider the breadth of school curricula so that new graduates are able to respond to shifting labour market structures throughout the recovery and employ multidisciplinary knowledge and skills in rapidly changing social, economic and technological environments.
- Explore ways to improve flexibility for those currently in education and training to change courses in light of the shifting economy, and ensure adequate funding, particularly in further education, for students to stay in college longer to accommodate retraining and broadening of skills.

- Enhance access to digital infrastructure and technology for both education and employment sectors. Support for the translation of knowledge between researchers, educational professionals and the EdTech industry to improve digital technology and resources for education can ensure schools and colleges can confidently invest in new technology and better digital services. Improvements in this area can help tackle educational inequalities and improve the overall quality of education, while wider investments in digital infrastructure and access to virtual public services could help micro and small firms, which are critical for bringing back jobs for vulnerable workers, to stay in business and become more competitive.
- Look at ways to provide additional opportunities for children to catch up on physical, social and emotional development, with a particular focus on sustaining strong early years provision. This could include supporting and strengthening cooperation between the education and social welfare section, for example actively establishing scholarship systems and other reforms required for other systems to mitigate the loss of educational opportunities and cultural experiences during the pandemic.