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Educational preparedness and policy learning during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Two keys to success: pre-pandemic preparedness and adaptability

Which factors drove the comparatively different performances of Member States with regard to school closures and remote learning during the pandemic? No single aspect of governments' approaches ensured success. This policy brief explores the roles of two factors: (i) preparedness for the pandemic, especially as manifested in the extent and areas of investments in digital learning; and (ii) the ability of policy-makers to respond to the changing needs of the education sector as the pandemic progressed.

Preparedness for the pandemic

Broadly speaking, a government's preparedness for a pandemic naturally relates primarily to its health security capabilities. For example, while the Global Health Security Index (GHSI, 2019) – dubbed "the first comprehensive assessment and benchmarking of health security and related capabilities across the 195 countries" – did not include any indicators relating to education, those countries that performed better in the 2019 GHSI have reported lower death rates caused by the pandemic. This is relevant, because the less stark public health situations in better-performing countries allowed their governments greater flexibility with regard to school reopening and the easing of restrictions. However, an even more relevant facet of preparedness was the readiness of countries for digital learning, as measured by the Index of Readiness for Digital Lifelong Learning (IRDLL). One positive example that demonstrating the merit of pre-pandemic preparedness was Estonia, which ranked first in the overall IRDLL and seventh for the availability and accessibility of digital learning: "*When schools in Estonia switched to the remote-learning system on 16 March 2020, the number of users of e-learning platforms increased tenfold. The smooth transfer was ensured by regular use of national electronic homework diaries/communication points eSchool and Stuudium by all schools. Investment for good internet connection, development of electronic study materials and development of teachers' digital skills benefited the situation.*" (SIRIUS, 2020).

But while overall government effectiveness and pre-pandemic investment in the digitalisation of the education sector proved helpful during the pandemic, important caveats must be made. Pre-pandemic investments in the digitalisation of education were seen as less helpful when they primarily targeted the physical infrastructure intended for in-person education, rather than the digital skills of teachers and students. For instance, Italy or Slovakia scored relatively highly in the IRDLL in terms of their extensive investments in school-based digital equipment – but they lacked investments in the skills of teachers, and overlooked the students' access to devices and connectivity at home. During the pandemic, school-based investments were naturally of lesser importance.

The autonomy of higher education institutions (HEIs) was another crucial factor that contributes to smoother transitions to remote learning. Higher education already had much more extensive experience than primary or secondary schooling with regard to digital learning, and evidence prior to the pandemic supported the notion that such learning could (though not necessarily that it would) be equivalent, in terms of quality, to in-person instruction. A survey report on digitally enhanced learning and teaching (DELT) in European HEIs found that since the European University Association (EUA)'s E-Learning Study in 2014, online and blended learning strategies have increased across the European HEIs (Gaebel et al., 2021). This survey further reveals that HEIs already had plans to increase the use of DELT even before the pandemic. While HEIs have shown less concern with regard to the negative implications of the shift online, the exception to this to this lies with laboratory-based disciplines.

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The adaptability of government policy

As the COVID-19 pandemic does not represent a singular event but a crisis lasting multiple years, adaptability has been an important element of management in the education sector during this time. The support that was needed most during the first wave revolved around providing guidance to educators on online learning, and listening to their needs. During the second wave, however, policy-makers began to recognise the extent to which remote learning lacked the broader range of services provided by in-person instruction (such as nutrition, socio-emotional health, and socialisation). They therefore began to consider policy measures in this area (Reimers, 2022). For the 2021/2022 academic year, the roll-out of vaccines has again modified the priorities of policy-makers.

The most adaptable systems were those with long-standing decentralisation, which allowed for rapid and localised responses, particularly during the early period of the pandemic. Decentralisation also made it more likely that schools and other institutions already possessed the experience and capacity to act on their own. Denmark and Sweden opted for the most decentralised responses, building on capacities that had been presciently described even before the pandemic: "Schools and teachers have significant autonomy in funding and running courses. This means schools have uneven implementation of digital tools ... However, the high autonomy of teachers and schools means that experimentation is encouraged, and innovative practices have a chance to develop." (Beblavý et al. 2019, in the chapter on Sweden).

Slovakia, on the other hand, chose a mostly centralised approach. While this resulted in rapid decision-making on school closures, in combination with limited central government capacity, it led to a sluggish and uneven ability to adapt to the subsequent challenges (Ostertágová and Čokyna, 2020). In France, fragmentation in the management of education policy had hindered digitalisation even before the pandemic, but has also brought about experience in coordinating stakeholders (Beblavý et al., 2019). Therefore, while (de)centralisation can, in itself, lead to a wide range of outcomes, in combination with the appropriate pre-pandemic allocation of capacities to specific institutions, it has proved to be an important element in the management of the education sector during the pandemic.

The uneven pace of policy learning

One important area in which the different speeds of policy learning by various governments can be examined is school reopening. While in the first wave, all governments resorted to full-scale closures of schools (even if these were brief in certain cases), a gradual shift occurred towards making sure that schools remained open and, when closures became inevitable, targeted approaches were prioritised. Countries including France, Denmark and Sweden demonstrated a strong commitment to keeping schools open, or re-opening them as quickly as possible (see McNicoll, 2021 for an illustration of the political importance of this issue in France). The perceived importance of keeping schools open continued to increase throughout the pandemic, due to global policy learning and dissemination, and to pedagogical recognition that remote education exacerbated inequalities and hindered the healthy development of children and young people. In countries that lagged behind in the reopening of schools, such provisions have excluded millions from education and created issues that may not be solvable in the long term.

Policy-makers have also found it difficult to think ahead during the pandemic. The Netherlands provided a rare exception, rolling out a multi-year financial package in early 2021 that focused on catching up and mitigation (Dutch News, 2021). But while some governments have claimed to be considering plans for the post-pandemic period, so far these have mostly remained within the realms of verbal ambitions.

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