



European Expert Network  
on Economics of Education

# Policy measures to monitor and mitigate the negative impacts of COVID-19 and COVID-19 related policy measures on education

*Executive Summary*

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## Executive summary

This Analytical Report extends beyond analysing the negative impact on children's education of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures imposed in relation to it, and goes on to describe the various policy responses implemented to counter these threats. The report focuses on seven EU Member States (Denmark, France, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovakia and Sweden), but is also informed by global experience and uses several examples from other countries. The principal findings of the Report are that:

- **No country's education system was prepared** for the possibility of a pandemic. Even so, countries differed significantly in their preparedness both for health security threats and in the digitalisation of education, with Nordic and north-western European countries being generally better prepared.
- One of the lessons of the pandemic is that **there is no single dimension of 'preparedness'** that fully determines subsequent success. Experience shows that, particularly during the early stages when rapid action was crucial, confidence in the effectiveness of government and societal resilience could have a negative affect, delaying necessary lockdowns.
- By the same token, **pre-pandemic investment in the digitalisation of education was of limited value if this was predominantly oriented towards classroom-based technologies** rather than the digital skills of educators and students. Here, countries such as Italy and Slovakia lagged behind despite large-scale investments.
- **Resilience and adaptability were also significantly influenced by the level of policy (de)centralisation** in responding to COVID-19 in education. In primary and secondary education, major differences can be seen between countries such as Denmark and Sweden, which employed the most highly decentralised responses; countries such as France, Italy and Slovakia, which gradually adopted localised policies that were still centrally determined; and countries such as Lithuania and the Netherlands which, due to the size or the density of their populations, opted for the most centralised approaches.
- **A high level of decentralisation in higher education translates into adaptability, depending on the capacities of specific institutions.** Thus, in Italy, one could see an enormous range of adaptive responses by universities, probably more extensive than within primary and secondary education. When higher education institutions face such an unexpected challenge, the absence of a decisive role by government can lead to a wide diversity of outcomes.
- **Countries took very different approaches towards providing devices, connectivity and content to enable online learning.** There was a nearly universal understanding that children required assistance, compared with more differentiated views with regard to adults – be they teachers or university students. There does not appear to be evidence that this has changed during the pandemic.
- **In every country and at every level of education, certain groups and individuals were identified as deserving special attention.** At primary and secondary education levels, three groups stand out as being universally or frequently targeted: children with special educational needs (SEN); migrants, refugees and ethnic minorities; and the children of essential workers or children who could not be safely left at home. In higher education, special attention generally focused on international students and courses involving field work or other elements that are difficult to do online.
- **The issue of mental health and well-being received much attention, but actual policies differed vastly between countries,** with Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries generally paying much more attention to the issue than others.

This is in line with a long-standing emphasis on holistic child well-being in Nordic approaches to education, as evidenced, for example, by the shorter school year or later starting age. While much of the debate concerning the effects of lockdowns has focused on children and their socialisation and well-being, the available data show they have also proved a significant challenge for university students.

- **Countries differed greatly in terms of investment in mitigation and catching up after the end of the first (and subsequent) lockdowns.** In primary and secondary education, countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and the UK pursued ambitious and often strategically thought-through policies aimed at minimising the damage resulting from the lockdowns. Such well-developed policies were absent or less developed in other countries examined here. Every country did, however, take some steps in this regard. The more decentralised nature of higher education and the different approaches taken to managing the pandemic's impact have meant that government funding for subsequent mitigation has frequently translated into direct financial support for students. However, there have been instances of more strategic investment.
- With regard to teachers, the focus during the initial stages of the pandemic was on providing educational resources. Gradually, though, it became clear that attention was required to prevent burn-out and exit among teachers who were exhausted and frustrated from remote learning. Examples of broadly-based and effective action in this area are scarce, however. In this respect, **the plight of teachers was overshadowed by the similar yet more dramatic experiences of health care personnel.**
- The pandemic is not a single event, but a crisis lasting years. Learning and adaptability have therefore played a significant role in responses to it. This is most obvious in the case of school closures. The speed of policy learning has differed. In the case of countries that have lagged behind, it has negatively impacted the education of millions and creating sizeable problems for the future. Some countries – notably Denmark and Sweden – demonstrated an ambition to keep schools open under most circumstances. These countries were gradually joined during the academic year 2020/2021 by Italy, and in the academic year 2021/2022 by the Netherlands, Slovakia and Lithuania. **Relative to other societal priorities, the perceived importance of keeping children in school has increased throughout the course of the pandemic.** This appears to have been driven by the increasing academic, economic and emotional costs of lockdowns and the global nature of the pandemic, which has stimulated cross-border comparisons and accelerated policy learning and dissemination.
- **In higher education, international and horizontal networks were important in exchanging information and shaping 'the approaches of universities.** Repeated attempts were made to reopen universities; however, due to outbreaks of infection, such moves were frequently abandoned in favour of online instruction.
- **On a broader scale, overall government strategies have evolved over the course of the three waves of the pandemic so far (spring 2020, autumn/winter 2020, autumn/winter 2021).** During the first wave, government strategies emphasised support for online academic learning and teacher needs. Concern for students' emotional and social development appears to have been placed on the backburner. This approach was given a rethink for the 2020/2021 academic year, when it became apparent that pre-pandemic education had delivered a much broader range of services than simply academic learning, and that online education was generally not delivering equal outcomes. For the 2021/2022 academic year, the focus shifted again to availability, with governments focusing on minimising disruptions to education caused by sick teachers or students, rather than implementing full-blown lockdowns.
- **One area in which there has been a general lack of learning or progress during this period is in instituting a genuinely strategic and forward-**

**looking approach at national level** . The Netherlands provides a rare positive example of a more comprehensive national plan that, relatively early on, was already considering what actions would be required in the future. In Sweden, governments made similar investments, particularly with regard to higher education. However, even in the case of these two countries, the comprehensiveness of such actions should not be overstated.

A century ago, in the wake of the Spanish flu pandemic, there was such a rush to return to 'normal' once the immediate threat had passed that the lessons of the pandemic were effectively forgotten in terms of subsequent policy learning, adaptation and development. While it is too soon to tell, the risk of a similar rush to return to the *status quo ante* should not be underestimated. The pandemic is far from over, and the monitoring and mitigation of its effects in education are likely to continue for many years to come. This report is thus only 'a first draft of history', to be further developed and refined through other outputs in the years to come.

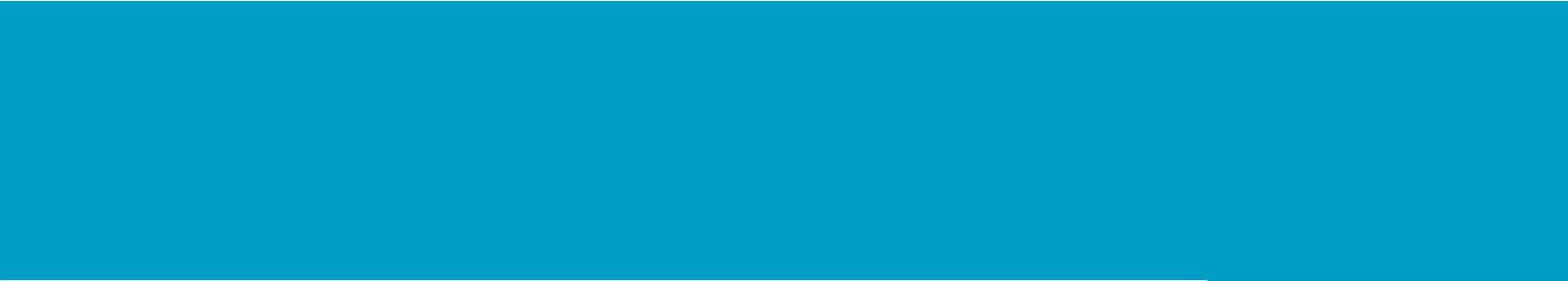
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