

COVID-19: Mental health and wellbeing of all learners come first

At this point in time, it has become apparent that the COVID-19 outbreak is an unprecedented global public health crisis, a danger to social and economic cohesion across our communities. But it is also a threat to education and training systems' stability and sustainability, a red flag for the need to upskill teachers, educators and trainers, and ultimately to massively [invest in education](#) and training. One might even say that, to some extent, it has led us to question the whole learning process at a pedagogical level, to the point that we are obliged to admit to ourselves: we were not ready and we were not aware.

Sailing in the storm?

All over the world, we are witnessing an (almost) unanimous call for education and training to surf the waves of digital technology and keep on going as if nothing was happening on the outside, to keep the boat sailing despite the storm. While this was often done for the benefit of the learners, the Lifelong Learning Platform views with growing scepticism the unadulterated reminder that education systems have the strength to go on alone: they don't.

Today, it is clear that the overriding priority is the health and wellbeing of individuals. While the physical health of the sick makes the titles of the newspapers - and rightfully so - it is the mental health of all people that remains sensationally untold. The fight against COVID-19 and the tight isolation measures bear deep psychological consequences on all of us: anxiety, depression, fear for ourselves and for our loved ones, inertia, stress, and many more yet to surface. Pedagogical provisions and education materials on keeping learners and teachers safe on the mental health side should be introduced in the emergency curricula: we hold the view that these should be priorities in the way the education system is addressing the current situation, which bears significant hardship on the wellbeing of all education actors. The very activities of teaching and learning have now become factors of stress: new evaluation methods and uncertainty, scarce equipment to properly follow education courses, lack of digital competences, etc. are all new stress-inducing factors.

The social role of educators

This is all the more true for teachers and trainers, who also have to endure the burden of the entire education and training system on their shoulders. Oftentimes they are left alone, coping with ministerial directives that push them to bring programmes to an end, teaching in abnormal contexts and lacking adequate tools and resources in unfriendly ecosystems. Policy directions have been offering wavering support at best, and unclear and contradictory guidance in far too many cases.

For too long, the very social role of teachers, educators and trainers has been ignored altogether. If anything, this emergency has made it unequivocally clear that countries need to invest in educators' training, in the set of competences they need to create inclusive and innovative (online/blended) [learning environments](#): while it is digital skills that are now under the magnifying glass, emotional intelligence, creativity and other supposedly soft skills are equally important. Besides, to assert that education begins and ends with a screen means to deny all social aspects of the learning process.

In [our claims](#), the future of learning lies with digital skills for all and adequate investments: last month a dystopian future came knocking on our doors and education and training systems were unprepared to serve all. In this context, we also see the pressing need to draw on the rich expertise and experience of online learning providers across the formal, non-formal and informal sectors when it comes to designing and delivering [high-quality inclusive instruction](#).

Don't let the gap grow larger

In the same way that economic recessions cause larger inequalities, today one of the most tangible results of the COVID-19 outbreak has been a wider gap between learners. Even in Europe, the wealthiest region in the world, there remain thousands of learners that are told to follow online courses but that do not have the means to do so. Families with numerous children that are forced to share one computer (if any at all), homes with poor internet connections, children with fragile mental health and motivation to keep on learning or who find themselves in unsupportive home environments are to be found everywhere; this is the case of learners with physical or cognitive disabilities who suddenly found equal learning opportunities denied. The universal access to education during the pandemic is also the object of an autonomous [initiative](#) by 28 MEPs from 13 countries and different political groups, that LLLP supports.

All of these are unanswered calls from the past, that today resonate stronger than before. What is more, parents around the world are facing the unexpected challenge of stepping up their educational support to their children in the months to come, and at the same time fulfil their professional and other responsibilities - an even greater challenge for parents working in the health and other key sectors.

Forward-looking and decisive actions

There is no "business as usual" anywhere in the world right now, and there cannot be one in the education sector. An emergency situation calls for emergency measures, and for these reasons the Lifelong Learning Platform calls upon all national and European decision-makers to show understanding of the extraordinary situation that education and training are facing today, and the unprecedented impact this will have on learners' mental health and wellbeing now and for the rest of their lives, as well as on their future academic and professional careers. This time of crisis shows more than ever the urgency to engage learners as [competent partners](#) taking into careful consideration their needs rather than passive recipients of knowledge and pre-defined solutions.

We urge all Ministries of Education to proactively stimulate teachers' training, allocate funds for disadvantaged children and families and for marginalised learners to truly benefit from online learning that focuses on their needs first, and also hold large consultations with all relevant stakeholders. Most importantly, we insist that European and national authorities include effective measures to communicate

about the vital importance of good mental health and wellbeing in current online learning, as well as collect and promote good practices on how to mitigate the above-mentioned negative consequences.

As representatives of learning providers and civil society organisations in Europe, we hope to see flexibility in the upcoming decisions, and care to remind all education stakeholders - including policy-makers - **that health shall remain a pivotal priority during public health crises while learning remains a weapon to defeat them.**

See also LLLP Members' responses:

- AEGEE
[*Refugees and COVID-19*](#)
- EAEA
[*Digital learning as a challenge and opportunity*](#)
[*Outreach and access to learning during the coronavirus pandemic*](#)
[*Everyone counts, is what this crisis teaches us*](#)
- ECSWE
[*Schools in Europe, do you cope with distance learning?*](#)
- EDEN
[*Education in times of pandemic: how to support teachers and students*](#)
- EEE-YFU
[*YFU Response to COVID-19*](#)
- ESN
[*#ErasmusAtHome - ESN initiatives during the COVID-19 outbreak*](#)
- ESU
[*Position paper: COVID-19, A multidimensional crisis that affects us all*](#)
- EVBB
[*Resolution on the health and economic situation in Europe in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic*](#)
- OBESSU
[*The Impact of COVID-19 on General Secondary Education and Vocational Education*](#)
- SOLIDAR
[*The time for the EU is now*](#)
[*Briefing Note: Universal Access to Education in Times of E-Learning*](#)
- WOSM
[*Community, Hope, and the Power to Do Good*](#)
- EMDR Europe
[*Coronavirus: what is happening? Guidelines on the psychological and emotional aspects*](#)
- ESHA
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