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Global challenges – Global solutions: COVID-19 and the Employment Policy Response

Q&A for:

The skills challenge in the time of COVID-19

Interview with Ashwani Aggarwal, Senior Skills and Employability Specialist, Employment Policy Department

Introduction by host:

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously disrupted skills development around the world. Just as the lockdown of offices and workplaces has sent the number of people teleworking skyrocketing, the shuttering of training and educational institutions has resulted in a massive and unprecedented shift to online platforms and tools as the only way to ensure continued delivery of learning and skills development. Will this new on-line skills development become the new normal?

The ILO has been monitoring the impact of pandemic on lost working time and jobs, with alarming results: Hundreds of millions of jobs will be lost worldwide, and millions of enterprises may close or fail. Here's ILO Director-General Guy Ryder:

In the first instance, we have seen on the basis of survey work which is set out in the Monitor that there has been a very abrupt and very large scale interruption in education and training of young people around the world.

The survey results that you will see show that a high proportion of vocational and training institutions have stopped work. There has been some migration of training activities to online training, of course, that's not been available to everybody and low income countries are the least able to make that migration successfully.

With us today is ILO Senior Skills and Employability Specialist Ashwani Aggarwal to discuss the new world of on-line learning and e-training that is taking shape, and some of the challenges that have emerged. Ashwani, welcome to the program.

What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on the provision of training by TVET centres?

We are going through the worst global crisis since the Second World War. The COVID-19 pandemic has severely affected skills and lifelong learning systems including training by TVET centres and work-based learning and apprenticeships by enterprises. There has been a very abrupt and large scale interruption in skilling, reskilling, and up-skilling of young people and adult workers around the world.

According to a joint survey by the World Bank, ILO, and UNESCO, 90 per cent of respondents reported a complete closure of technical and vocational schools and training centres in their countries. The pandemic has disrupted examinations, delayed completion of programs, and will affect the immediate and future careers of millions of learners. It has also reinforced existing inequalities affecting workers and learners around the globe.

In the long-run, interruption to learning would be detrimental to human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare.

To what extent has the pandemic disrupted the training and development of employees, apprentices and interns in the enterprises?

The ILO together with nine other international and regional development partners has conducted a global survey on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staff training and development including apprenticeships and internships in enterprises. According to the initial findings of the survey, nearly nine in 10 employees, apprentices and interns have experienced an interruption to their training. It is also alarming that around a third of the surveyed enterprises have stopped paying stipends or wages to apprentices and interns.

Will the impact last after lockdown and social distancing measures are removed?

Even after the pandemic is over, it will take time for economies to recover fully and achieve employment rates that existed before the pandemic. In such cases, a sufficient number of mentors and trainers to supervise apprentices and interns will not be available. In addition, the demand for new employees and apprentices will also be lower. Therefore, the offer of new apprenticeships and internships is likely to be lower even after the lifting of lockdown measures.

For example, according to the global survey of enterprises, 46 per cent of the enterprises surveyed are intending to reduce investments in staff training. As per a forecast made by the Swiss Leading House on Economies of Education, there could be a drop of over 20 per cent of apprenticeship positions due to the pandemic.

Another ILO survey shows us that some 10 per cent of young people doubt that they will be able to complete their education and training and half of the young people think that there's going to be a considerable delay in the completion of their training.

This interruption of the skills pipeline, I think, has serious long-term consequences.

How are TVET institutions and enterprises responding to the challenge posed by the pandemic?

There is a massive shift in the use of digital online learning. The World Economic Forum mentioned that even before COVID-19, there was already high growth and adoption in education technology, with global ed-tech investments reaching US\$18.66 billion in 2019 and the overall market for online education is projected to reach \$350 billion by 2025. Whether it is language apps, virtual tutoring, video conferencing tools, or online learning software, there has been a significant surge in usage since the pandemic. According to the global survey of enterprises, the use of video conferencing tools and online learning programmes has increased by about 14 per cent following the outbreak.

So, can you provide some examples of how digital learning is being adopted by some countries?

While many countries have quickly created or adapted digital platforms to replace school-based learning, they are encountering many challenges such as instructors not being properly trained and prepared to deliver online courses, difficulties in adapting TVET curricula and training to online formats, and lack of access to the internet and ICT equipment to carry out training and learning. Many learners are unable to access the online training because they were not familiar with online platforms. Particular, women are being disproportionately cut off from distance learning due to lack of childcare or home help during the pandemic.

The digital divide is also widening the gap between countries, and between income brackets within countries. For example, according to the OECD, while 95 per cent of students in

Switzerland, Norway, and Austria have access to a computer to start online learning, in Indonesia the figure is only 34 per cent.

Another particular challenge in work-based learning programmes is that the delivery of practical training is much more difficult from a distance.

What are the policy recommendations to address such challenges after the lifting of lock-down measures?

While the immediate attention of policymakers may not be focussed on addressing skills development at a time when most workers are facing income and job losses, we should not lose sight of the importance of ensuring the continuation of staff training and apprenticeship programmes. In particular, apprentices and interns are often at a higher risk of losing their jobs and income, and the termination of work-based learning programmes would limit their employment prospects in the long run. Therefore, policy measures to protect workers during the crisis should have also provisions for apprentices and interns. These may include wage subsidies, payments for social security contributions, and tax deductions for employers.

Although the shift to online learning during the pandemic is generally seen first and foremost as an emergency response, the crisis also provides an opportunity for developing more flexible learning solutions that make better use of online learning and digital solutions. The digitalization of learning should not be considered as a short-term solution in response to the pandemic. Three important policy issues must be addressed to create long-term positive impacts and develop greater resilience in skills and lifelong learning systems.

First, it is important to invest in human resources to ensure universal access to digital infrastructure, tools, and online learning technologies.

Second, managers, teachers and trainers and learners require continuous training and support to engage in online learning.

Third, education and training providers should revise and improve learning methodologies and materials to make the best use of digital learning platforms.

For example, India is starting a PM eVIDYA programme for digital education, which will be delivered through online courses, free television channels, radio, and podcasts. The use of

multi-modal channels comprising high-tech, low-tech, and no-tech solutions enable all learners to benefit equally from the new learning modality.

Finally, as the world is finding itself in a new normal, I would reiterate what our Director-General has said, that the new normal has to be a better normal that leaves no one behind, that ensures equitable access to quality education and training for all women and men and those belonging to disadvantaged groups.

Moderator out:

Thank you, Ashwani, for your very interesting and incisive comments. It's clear that we still have much to learn and we will have to come up quickly with new policy recommendations. In order for us to address these challenges, it is more important than ever for governments, employers and workers to come together and to develop human-centred solutions, especially for the most vulnerable. The crisis has shown us the value of learning, adaptation and innovation. Hopefully the lessons learned will stay with us in the days that follow.

I'm Tom Netter and this is the new ILO Podcast series Global Challenges – Global Solutions: COVID-19 and the Employment Policy Response. Thank you for your time.