

POLICY BRIEF

POLICY AREA

Global Health and Covid-19

AUTHORS AND AFFILIATIONS

Silvia Lanza Castelli, MSc Ing., Universidad Tecnológica Nacional

Paul Grainger, Honorary Senior Research Associate, University College London

Stefanie Goldberg, Global Purpose Manager, PwC US

Bhushan Sethi, Joint Global Leader People & Organization, PwC US

HEADLINE

Education and training: recovering the ground lost during the lockdown.

Towards a more sustainable competence model for the future

ABSTRACT

Some organizations are awarding qualifications that reflect a normal distribution profile of passes and grades, despite the pandemic's impact on education. While helping assuage student and parent demands, and ensuring continuity of entry to universities, training, or employment, this potentially misrepresents actual skills, as these qualifications represent a certain level of competence. Without these skills, economies won't have enough skilled workers and individuals may find their career mobility hampered. Exploring the responses of TVET institutions to changed evaluation criteria and identifying their assessment of competency shortfalls and impact on progression into employment, can help empower educators, governments, students, and businesses.

CHALLENGE

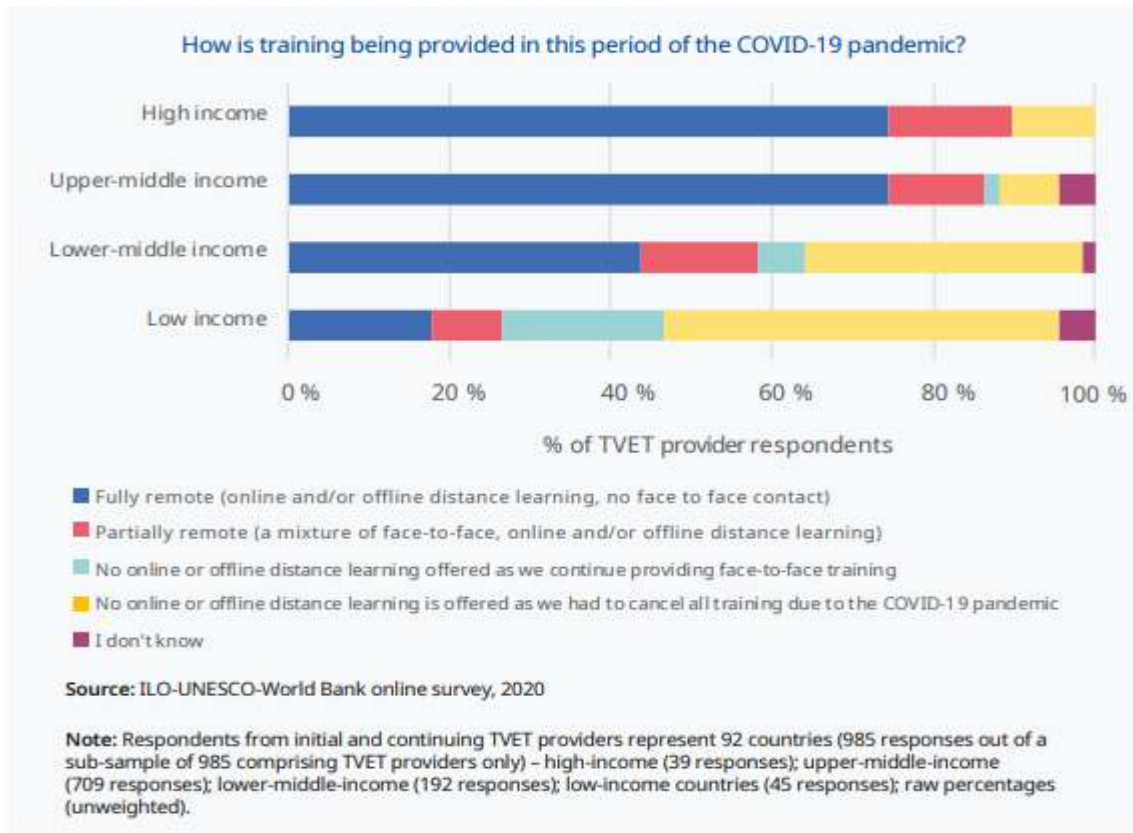
Given the disruptive impact of COVID-19 and the extended use of technological innovations to complement or replace in-person education, some educational and training organizations are awarding qualifications to those progressing through their education that reflect a normal distribution profile of passes and grades. This is

despite lost learning time, teacher shortages, increased anxiety, connectivity challenges, incomplete assessments, and other disruptions. Examination Boards are under pressure to assuage student and parent demands, and to support continuity of entry to universities, vocational training, or employment. While this might be considered to be 'fair' for this cohort of students, it represents a misunderstanding of the societal and economic value of qualifications at tertiary level. At this level, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) qualifications signify a certain level of competence to employers. Measures to award qualifications are masking that lost learning, social interactions, and skill deficiencies in employment are becoming heightened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Economic recovery from the pandemic will largely be skills-led. In fact, a study conducted by PwC of 32,500 workers found that 77% of workers globally are ready to learn new skills or completely re-train in order to remain employable in the futureⁱ. This will likely be hampered if qualifications do not confirm sufficient specific and transferable skills for the learner to be effective in the workplace.

Recovering lost ground cannot be achieved by labelling. This problem is most acute for those qualifications that can be described as 'licence to practice.' The lack of a specific skill could constitute a danger to colleagues and customers/patients, such as in gas safety or healthcare. Issues of academic assessment are of less immediate concern, as academic assessment is more easily achieved over digital platforms and deficiencies can be remedied over time. Licence to practice provision is more technical, hands on, and practical. Remote assessment is virtually impossible. In countries such as Finland and Ecuador, students are shooting videos and photos of practical tasks carried out at home as a means of assessment.ⁱⁱ

Digital platforms also tend to favour the affluent, who have connectivity, access, and digital literacy.ⁱⁱⁱ Students who seek 'technical' professions are often less well placed to access virtual learning environments at home, particularly those from marginalised communities, vulnerable groups, low-income families, or those who live in rural communities. For example, a study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, and Trinidad and Tobago where the government provided training via online platforms or television, TVET learners living in remote areas were unable to benefit from these measures, given the lack of connectivity or absence of devices like computers and TV sets.^{iv} The same study found that training and education was more likely to be cancelled altogether in low-income countries when compared to upper-middle and higher income countries.

EXHIBIT 1: How training is provided by countries' income level^v



PROPOSAL

This issue is of increasing importance as the pandemic has not so much introduced a new paradigm of skills requirements as accelerated fundamental changes that were already in transition. There is a danger that as reconstruction becomes urgent, economies will be denied or have misrepresented critical skills, particularly universally required soft, interactive, or practical skills—those that are hard to teach or assess virtually. Engineering, for example, now includes new skills in the areas of robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), neuroscience, sustainability, biotechnology, and so forth. Those born after 2002 may be branded the 'COVID Generation' for their lack of appropriate and accredited skills and for deficits at various stages of their education, and thus may be hampered in their careers long-term. There is likely to be significant impact on individuals, employers, communities, and society if current assessment approaches continue to disguise a loss of competency. One UK-based assessment authority estimates that 100,000 students are presently stuck in the system, unable to

achieve accreditation.^{vi} In Argentina, the usual numerical rating method has been downgraded to ‘formative’ only from being a summative assessment.^{vii}

The G20 and other policy platforms should alert governments to the damaging potential of masked skill shortfalls, assess any reduced ability to apply learning in the workplace, and recommend suitable compensatory programmes, beyond those distance learning methods identified in the 2000 Think20 (T20) statement, *Reskilling Employees*.^{viii} The G20 should also alert businesses that they will need to make up for the gaps created by a lack of in-person interaction, listening, problem solving, debating and learning, as they recruit and onboard interns, part-time, or full-time new employees.

In the longer term it will be important to explore the responses of TVET institutions internationally to emerging evaluation criteria and for them to be able to assess emerging competency shortfalls. This will need to be achieved in collaboration with employers given its impact on progression into employment. Options that may encourage more employer support include a mix of vocational simulations, role play, internships, and apprenticeships. In some administrations, TVET institutions are already collaborating with employers to provide post-employment accreditation.

This could point the way to a wholesale review of the interface between education and employment with deeper partnerships between educational institutions and businesses to fundamentally change curricula. Business leaders have indicated for several years now that skill mismatches and talent shortages are of top concern for future growth.^{ix} By investing in long-term partnerships with educational institutions to shape curricula, businesses can build and equip their future talent pipeline with the appropriate future-proof skills and subject matter knowledge that businesses see as critical to success. This will help to profile and enhance competencies that are being neglected by assessment bodies and lost during the pandemic with potential societal/economic impact. It will be important to assess this trend across G20 members in particular and consider the types of skills and experiences that will help empower educators, governments, students and businesses to develop a sustainable solution.

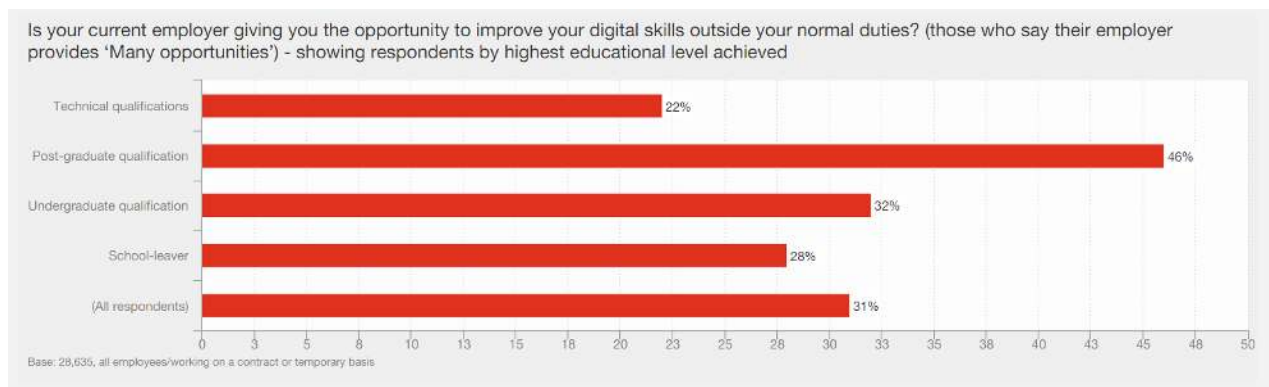
Progression into employment

Technological changes were already profoundly transforming the occupations and the required skills of labour markets around the world. An increasing proportion of people cannot find work in their intended occupation and end up employed in insecure, low-income, poor-quality work.^x This is due to the shift in economic and employment

patterns brought about by the mass use of AI and required digital skills and intensified by COVID-19 associated lockdowns and closures.

This is not only true for new entrants to the labour market. For those already in employment, opportunities to improve skills (including digital) vary significantly by education level and industry. According to PwC’s Global Hopes & Fears Survey, employers are twice as likely to provide skilling opportunities to employees with postgraduate qualifications when compared with those with technical qualifications or school-leaver status, and industries like retail or transport score 25% and 20% respectively, whereas banking scores a 42%.

EXHIBIT 2: Hopes & Fears Survey, 2021



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As technological changes continue to intensify—and, if current patterns in access to training persist, social inequality will increase—those who lack access to opportunities face potential threats of job loss, changing nature of employment (e.g., forced from the formal economy into ‘gig’ work) and lower lifetime earnings because they lack the skills that will be required to sustain employment in the new economy.

Aligning to new technology

Engineering training has always faced multiple changes. The current demands of digitization, AI, and many others make these changes more urgent. For example, the Universidad Tecnológica Nacional (UTN) is considering a competency assessment model for engineering career students.^{xii} It is an initiative that aligns with ongoing efforts at the G20 to ensure better-prepared graduates, as well as reskilling those in employment towards a learning and working environment that allows adaptation. UTN’s research has found that:

- The pandemic has reinforced many skills mismatches that were already happening with technological changes.

- Knowledge transmission can be enjoyable because knowledge can be transferred through any virtual platform that enables students to see videos, but there is no strong interaction in the construction of new knowledge.
- On the other hand, students and teachers are not able to establish interactive skills and collaborations, for example being part of the team or being able to develop conversational and communication skills.
- Students are losing practical manipulation skills.
- It has become more difficult to understand the requirements and needs of a stakeholder because of a lack of ability to interact face to face and reliance on video interactions.

In light of these developments there is an urgent need to look at the qualifications as they are awarded to this 'COVID Generation' to ensure there will be sufficient knowledge and appropriate skills, both to work with people and perform practical tasks.

At present, many regulatory bodies are concerned solely with ensuring 'fairness' for the COVID cohort. Those responsible for assessment do not want to appear to penalize those who have had crucial periods of their education blighted by the pandemic.^{xiii} But this short-term approach, awarding qualifications to a normal distribution curve, may have serious long-term consequences. Two 'big picture' issues have emerged.

1. Education by video-interactive platform is socially divisive. To maximise its effectiveness the learner needs a good Wi-Fi connection, access to a suitable computer, space, peace and quiet. These are, by and large, socially determined. The greater the reliance on these platforms, the more that relative disadvantage is reinforced. A potential consequence of this will be further social divisions between the digitally advantaged and disadvantaged, with longer-term consequences of bigger gaps in lifetime earnings, quality employment, and social stability.
2. The long-term impact of the pandemic varies greatly by qualification type.
 - a. Academic and theoretical knowledge is more easily exchanged in data form. Moreover, progression for academic studies is generally through the system, into another learning organisation. It is relatively simple to arrange compensatory learning to fill in any gaps.
 - b. Skills and practical know-how, such as in licence to practice qualifications, are not as amenable to remote learning, and accurate assessment is challenging. Progression is frequently into

employment, where compensatory skills acquisition and assessment is more difficult to arrange.

In both cases there is a strong need for some form of compensatory education. Four models are being explored by institutions that deliver a high proportion of technical and vocational learning, generally as a response to local issues rather than regional strategies:

1. An additional semester added to the academic year
2. A delayed start for progressing students in order to complete the learning and assessment of existing students
3. A doubling up of cohorts so that the older cohort, in effect, repeats a year
4. A programme of in-work assessment whereby instruction and assessment are organised for a student post progression into employment

Each of these solutions is resource heavy and relies upon the good will of a teaching workforce that is already overloaded because of greater demand on time, and strong institutional leadership.^{xiv} Furthermore, these solutions are short-term in nature and do not seek to address the broader issue of the current mismatch between skills gained in education and those required for future employment, as outlined above.

Policy Recommendations

In order to move towards a more sustainable competence model for the future, policymakers should look to implement measures that incentivize businesses and academia to expand and strengthen partnerships. While businesses and educational institutions were already moving toward a model of increased collaboration to address skills gaps, the need for this has been greatly accelerated as a result of COVID-19, particularly in licence to practice courses.

This set of measures can include both a short-term and longer-term set of actions.

Short-term policy actions

Given TVET colleges have significantly fewer resources to complete the accreditation cycle,^{xv} policymakers should provide support to employers to enable employees coming in from tertiary education to finish their accreditations after moving into employment. This will require employers to take on additional training costs as well as the administration of assessments. Thus, support from policymakers could be in the form of monetary incentives, as well as instructional guidance to employers on how to administer such assessments.

Furthermore, these incentives could be used by employers to offer new employees the opportunity to ‘re-learn’ and/or get reassessed in critical subject matter or skill areas that were insufficiently learned and/or evaluated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could be done through on-the-job training, specialized training cohort programmes, or the opportunity to return to education for a short duration at a partnering educational institution in a qualifying educational track.

While the main beneficiaries of this solution are the employees who will be adequately equipped with the necessary competence for employment, employers will also benefit from the attraction and retention of a broader pool of appropriately skilled talent.

Furthermore, G20 policy makers should continue to monitor organisations that are developing strategic responses to the post-COVID skills threat in order to learn from and adopt these leading practices (e.g., Singapore^{xvi}), but only when these responses have been measured and proven successful. Post-recovery manifests, public declaration of principles and intentions, as well as recommendations from organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) should also be considered when shaping short-term policies.

Long-term policy actions

Parallel with alleviating the immediate issue of competency loss due to COVID-19, policymakers should seek to implement a series of interrelated policy actions to reset the educational agenda, define a new assessment standard and upskill educators to deliver in this new model.

1. The G20 should establish a working group or joint task force between businesses, academia, and regulatory bodies (e.g., across the T20 and Business20 (B20) at a minimum, but could also include the Labour20 (L20) and Youth20 (Y20) to:
 - a. Collectively determine a set of indicators to measure competence in future-proof skill areas and employment readiness.
 - b. Develop a globally consistent framework and/or set of international standards for assessment of future-proof skill areas and employment readiness, as well as the process by which credentials are granted for various professions, particularly in the area of licence to practice. The recognition system for skills and credentials should be adopted at scale across countries, education systems and industries, and be underpinned by a globally recognized, consistent skills taxonomy.^{xvii}
2. The G20 should encourage national policymakers to provide employer incentives and earmark education funding to allow for businesses and academia to come together to restructure curricula from front-to-back to

account for changing skills needs. The curricula should be redesigned to provide learning and training to students at all stages, via various modes of learning, in areas that enable students to gain the necessary competence and skills to obtain updated qualifications and accreditations (as defined above) for future employment. This could be done in a phased approach, looking first at education pathways to industries and roles with the greatest skills shortages. Lessons learned can then be applied to curriculum redesign for other occupations and licenses.

3. As upskilling educators becomes increasingly vital in order to successfully implement the above policy actions, G20 policymakers should encourage national policymakers to provide employer incentives to upskill this set of key stakeholders. Educators found themselves ill-equipped with the skills required to effectively deliver distance learning during school closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Research found that 35% of students in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries are in schools where teachers lack the skills “to integrate digital devices into their instructor.”^{xviii} Even prior to the pandemic, it was becoming increasingly clear that many educators do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to educate students in the digital, transferable and technical skills required for employment in the future of work.

Conclusion

Measures to award qualifications are masking that lost learning, social interactions, and skill deficiencies in employment are becoming heightened as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Global recovery will depend on the skills and competencies of the workforce, both traditional expertise and new capabilities. In the aftermath of the widespread disruption to education it is vital that assessment bodies, while acknowledging 'fairness' to learners, do not confuse certification with expertise or work-readiness. Worldwide, there is an urgent need for transparency, so that employers may collaborate positively with educators to ensure that this generation is provided with the proficiencies they need to engage fully with the new economy. Applying the above policy actions can result in increased quality employment and more sustainable economies.

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^v Copyright © International Labour Organisation, 2020.

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