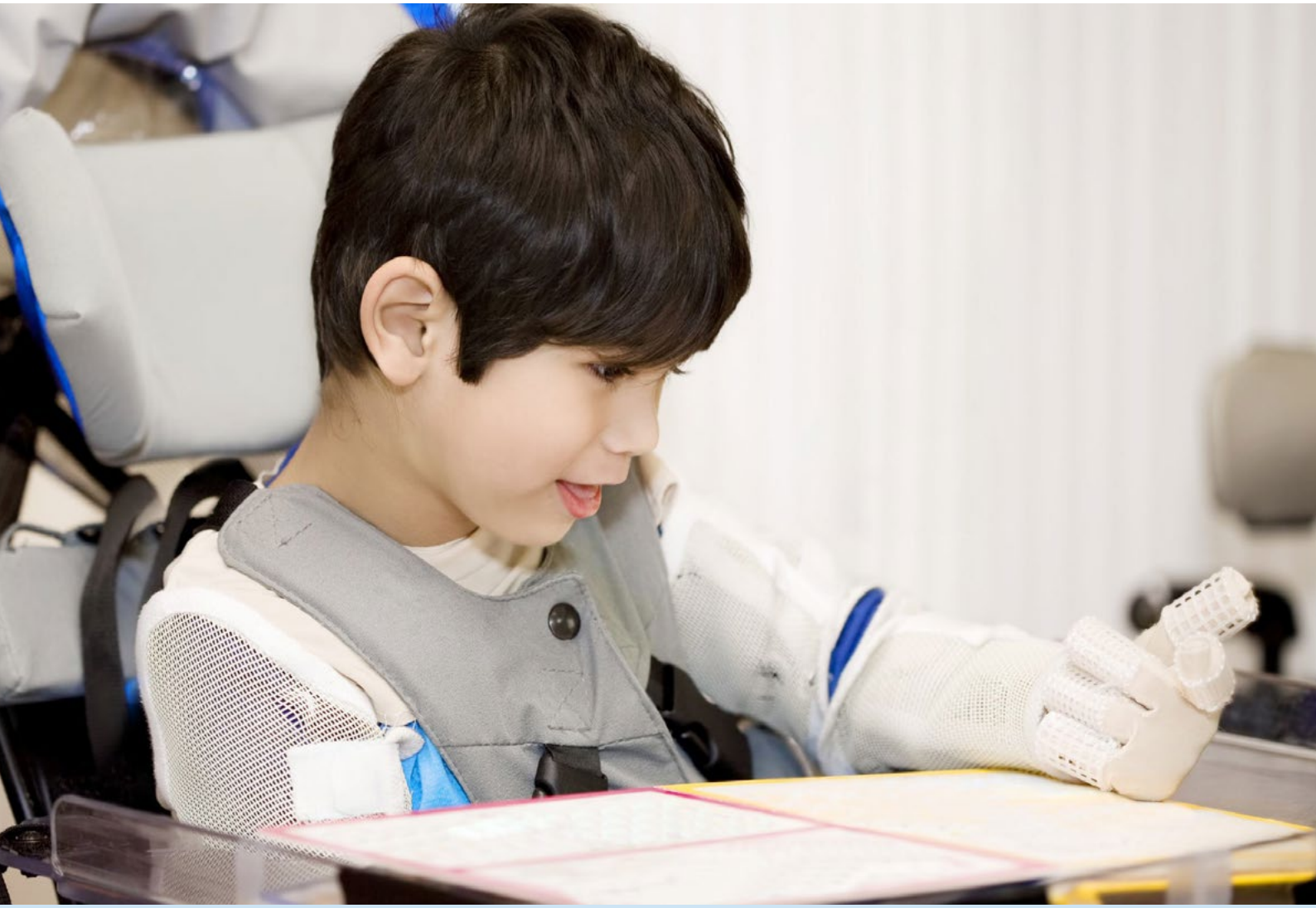
unesco



Policy Brief

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the education of persons with disabilities: Challenges and opportunities of distance education

UNPRPD MPTF
Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

This publication was produced by UNESCO, in the context of the Global Programme Supporting Disability Inclusive COVID-19 Response and Recovery at National Level supported by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Multi Partner Trust Fund.

Typesetting: IP Guslisty

Cover photo: Jaren Jai Wicklund/Shutterstock.com

Designed and printed by UNESCO IITE, Moscow

unesco
Institute for Information Technologies in Education

IITE-2021/PB/INCL/1

Context

More than 1 billion people, or 15 per cent of the global population, live with disabilities, with up to 190 million people (3.8 per cent) aged 15 years and older having significant difficulties in functioning, often requiring healthcare services (WHO, 2020). The number of people living with disability is dramatically increasing, due to epidemiological and demographic trends, and increases in chronic health conditions (WHO, 2020). Among the world's most disadvantaged groups are children with disabilities, with stigma and discrimination against them often leading to increased exposure to neglect, reduced access to services, and general lack of recognition (UNICEF, 2020*a*). The most widely reported estimate from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2004 corresponds to 93 million children with 'moderate or severe disability' aged under 15 years (WHO, 2011). However, the latest recent analysis of the Global Burden of Disease Study 2017 data on the prevalence of childhood epilepsy, intellectual disability, and vision or hearing loss, and on years lived with disability (derived from systematic reviews, health surveys, hospital and claims databases, cohort studies and disease-specific registries) revealed that the number of children and adolescents with these four disabilities is far higher than the 2004 estimate, increasing from infancy to adolescence. Thus, 291.2 million (11.2 per cent) of the 2.6 billion children and adolescents globally were estimated to have one of the four specified disabilities in 2017. The prevalence of these disabilities increased with age, from 6.1 per cent among children under 1 year of age to 13.9 per cent among adolescents aged 15 to 19 years. A total of 275.2 million (94.5 per cent) lived in low- and middle-income countries, predominantly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa (Olusanya et al., 2020).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such children may face heightened risk of exposure, complications and death due to underlying conditions and pre-existing vulnerabilities. Despite recent improvements in the availability of data on disability, internationally comparable data allowing an analysis of the links between disability and education remain scarce, and many disabilities remain unidentified. Nonetheless, as people differ in their learning needs and capabilities, educational opportunities must be inclusive and equally beneficial for all.

Unfortunately, educational opportunities remain out of reach for the majority of children with disabilities, who are among the most left behind in education systems worldwide. Almost 25 per cent of more than 2 billion children globally are still out of school. Among these, at least 50 per cent of children with disabilities are excluded from education in low- and middle-income countries; in some contexts, the figure is closer to 90 per cent (HI, 2020). These children face multiple barriers, including challenging journeys to school owing to remote terrain, rural areas that are inaccessible to wheelchairs, busy roads in capital cities and a lack of accessible transport. Once the children are in school, teachers are generally not trained or supported in adapting the curriculum to children with different types of disabilities. As a result, these children often do not have opportunities to learn even the basics, and few are able to reach higher levels of education and training. In ten low- and middle-income countries, children with disabilities were found to be 19 per cent less likely to achieve minimum proficiency in reading than children without disabilities (UNESCO, 2020*a*). Those with a sensory, physical or intellectual disability are 2.5 times more likely to never have attended school than their peers without disabilities (UNESCO, 2020*a*).

> **'Not all children with disabilities have special education needs, nor do all children with special education needs have a disability.'**
>
> Porter et al. (2011), Recognizing the needs of every disabled child: the development of tools for a disability census.

Disability inclusion is an intersectional issue that is closely linked to gender equality: overall, girls with disabilities complete schooling at lower rates than boys with disabilities (World Bank, 2019). Boys with disabilities are 17.6 per cent less likely than boys without disabilities to complete primary school, and girls with disabilities are 15.4 per cent less likely than girls without disabilities

to complete primary school. Moreover, children with disabilities who attend school have a higher risk of exposure to school violence and bullying; they are also far more likely to drop out before continuing to secondary school and beyond (UNESCO, 2017).

There is a pressing need to form an understanding of what inclusion in education means in each context. While 68 per cent of countries have a definition of inclusive education, only 57 per cent of those definitions cover multiple marginalized groups (UNESCO, 2020*a*). The lack of a common understanding and recognition of disability has a direct impact on the availability of support services to make education more inclusive and accessible to learners with all types of disabilities. As a result, the share of students needing disability-linked adjustments varies significantly owing to different categorization approaches, posing additional challenges to monitoring.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the shortcomings, fragilities, risks and inequalities in the education of learners with disabilities within and across countries. According to the United Nations (2020*a*), '1 billion persons with disabilities in the world are among the hardest hit by COVID-19.' The United Nations policy brief (2020*a*) further states that persons with disabilities 'have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak.' Even prior to the pandemic, millions of learners with disabilities were reported to be receiving inferior-quality education, often separated from their peers (CRPD, 2016). The situation is compounded in emergency contexts (UNICEF, 2020*b*).

The global estimate of 1.5 billion students affected by educational discontinuity and disruption does not consider all of those who are marginalized, disadvantaged or 'invisible' in educational systems (UNESCO, 2020*e*). The lack of disaggregated data (by disability, gender, age or other characteristic) makes it impossible to determine the precise number of students with disabilities worldwide who have received inadequate educational support as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children and adults with disabilities are likely to remain invisible in data-collection efforts, unless dedicated measures are put in place to make such efforts disability-inclusive (UNICEF, 2020*a*). Existing data are key in identifying the vulnerabilities that make children with disabilities more likely to experience adverse outcomes during times of crisis. Understanding the pre-COVID-19 vulnerabilities can help governments anticipate how the pandemic could exacerbate current inequities. It can also shed light on those areas where targeted efforts are anticipated or required. Research and data collection are necessary to draw attention to the experiences of children with disabilities during the pandemic, advocate for a range of services to be available through and post the pandemic, and inform the design of specific interventions (UNICEF, 2020*b*).

> **'Most of the schools and centres in Mauritius and Rwanda adopted inclusive measures to support learners with disabilities during the COVID-19 outbreak. However, few schools have tried to adopt both inclusive methods and accessible digital learning environments adjusted to the needs of learners with disabilities. There are still many limitations regarding accessibility of ODL solutions for students with disabilities.'**
>
> UNESCO (2021), COVID-19 and inclusive open and distance learning solutions: A rapid assessment of the development and implementation of inclusive open and distance learning solutions for students with disabilities served by inclusive, special schools and resource centres in Rwanda and Mauritius.

Many countries around the world employed technology-based solutions to maintain the continuity of education through alternative delivery modalities, including online and distance learning. However, 40 per cent of poorer countries did not provide specific support to disadvantaged learners during the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020*a*). Worldwide, many students lacked the necessary equipment, internet access, accessible materials, adapted content and human support that would have allowed them to follow online programmes. For the most vulnerable learners, online and distance education deepened existing social inequalities: 826 million students (50 per cent of learners) around the world lacked a household computer, 706 million (43 per cent) lacked internet access, and 56 million were unable to use mobile phones to access information owing to limited coverage by mobile networks (UNESCO, 2020*b*). The cost of assistive technology and software could pose an additional challenge for families of learners with disabilities. In low-income countries, it is often argued that scarce financial resources should mainly

support the education of students who are perceived as more likely to contribute to national development; this category rarely includes persons with disabilities (UNESCO Chair in ICT4D, 2020).

> **'In times of local or global crisis, distance learning may be the only safe way to ensure students continue to learn.'**
>
> UNESCO and Microsoft (2020), UNESCO Coalition. Technology Blueprint.

Some countries have developed tools and resources for learners with disabilities and their parents, including enhanced accessibility features like simplified text, audio narration, captioned videos and sign language videos, as well as assistive devices (United Nations, 2020*b*). It remains vital to recognize the specificities of learners with disabilities, and provide further tools and software enabling their full participation in distance learning. For example, video lessons should contain captions, audio descriptions and sign language translation windows, text-based materials should be accessible through software with embedded accommodations, and assignments and teaching assistance should be tailored to students' individual capacities and capabilities (Instituto Rodrigo Mendez, 2020).

Despite ongoing challenges in providing inclusive educational environments, digital learning platforms can offer many opportunities to students with disabilities, if they are designed with the needs of all learners in mind. UNESCO's 'From Exclusion to Empowerment' programme highlights that 'access to information is recognized as one of the key fundamental human rights. Without access to reliable information and effective communication means, it is difficult to ensure an effective, inclusive and open learning process. … In this regard, opportunities for ODL [open and distance learning] may provide some solution to the difficulties faced by persons with disabilities in accessing information and education' (UNESCO, 2016).

ODL comprises online learning, e-learning, distance education, correspondence education, external studies, flexible learning and massive open online courses. It is often defined as learning that incorporates (UNESCO, 2016):

- teacher-learner separation by space or time (or both),
- two-way communication and group communication (network),
- use of media and technology through print-based learning materials, one-way massive broadcasting (TV and radio programmes), or web-based exchange through social media channels or learning platforms, and
- more personalized educational experiences.

Without implying that all learning should be done online in the future, ODL has the potential to transcend issues faced by persons with disabilities, including geographical distance from learning centres, sensory issues (e.g. vision and hearing) and mobility issues (e.g. physical disabilities), as well as gender and economic inequalities. However, in many places, the digital divide hinders the implementation of these digital opportunities.

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased exclusion from education, causing an estimated 40 per cent of disadvantaged learners in low- and lower-middle-income countries to be entirely unsupported in their education (World Bank, 2020). The digital divide in learners' access to equipment, electricity, the internet and teacher quality is deepening the learning divide in every country – especially for learners with disabilities, who often face the additional barrier of inaccessible learning content.

The 'digital divide' refers to the existing inequality in digital technology access and use, largely determined by economic, social and cultural factors. According to the OECD (2001), 'the digital divide among households appears to depend primarily on two variables, income and education', as well as 'household size and type, age, gender, racial and linguistic backgrounds.' Pandemic-related school closures fuelled the expanded use of information and communication technology (ICT) in education, but these options hinged mainly on access to devices and internet connectivity. Thus, more than one-third (463 million) of all school children globally were unable to practise remote learning (United Nations, 2020*c*). Although increasing access to technology could bridge the learning divide by offering students access to remote education, students with disabilities may not have the same access to tools, the same support or the same skills to find their bearings in virtual environments. If digital technology is to be a tool for educational equity, distance learning programmes

must train teachers in differentiated learning methods tailored to their students' needs. Again, this is not to say that all learning must occur online, but if it is online, it must be a tool for educational equity.

> **'Education and digital technology must be two great enablers and equalizers. … Governments must prioritize equal access, from early learning to lifelong education.'**
>
> UN Secretary-General António Guterres, opening remarks at Nelson Mandela Lecture 'Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era', July 2020 (Guterres, 2020).

Beyond academics, school has long been key in promoting the social inclusion of persons with disabilities – a role that has been seriously undermined since the pandemic. For children with disabilities in particular, peer interaction, social perception and social competence are important features of the education experience. As schools provide spaces for social interaction – and often offer services such as counselling or speech and language therapy – lockdowns and social distancing meant that many children with disabilities, as well as other vulnerable groups, experienced limitations in social opportunities. School closures also resulted in a loss of essential services (e.g. health monitoring, food provision) and social protection mechanisms, which are often offered in school contexts (United Nations, 2020*b*). Civil society, such as organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), has been critical advocates for the right to inclusive quality education during this time, by highlighting systemic discrimination, spearheading campaigns to challenge stigma and monitoring the equitable provision of schooling.

Measuring the impact of COVID-19 on the education of persons with disabilities

This policy brief is part of the Global Programme Supporting Disability Inclusive COVID-19 Response and Recovery at National Level, funded by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

'Lack of computers or even smartphones is the main barrier to promoting effective distance learning for our children. It is too expensive for parents. We see that if the school can provide some equipment to students, the rate of schooling increases, because it provides new opportunities and motivates parents to enrol their kids.'

SEN teacher, public school, Kigali City, Rwanda.

The review of needs assessments was undertaken jointly by UNESCO IITE and UNESCO IIEP as part of the Global Programme. The related research conducted in Colombia, Bangladesh, Mauritius and Rwanda revealed the pressing issues pertaining to the role of ODL for learners with disabilities during and beyond the pandemic. It highlighted existing and emerging learning opportunities and problems, such as technology competence development for teachers working with students with disabilities. School closures revealed that teachers, students and parents across regions are often not equipped to use ODL solutions in education.

Figure 1 provides a matrix of the barriers to distance education facing students with disabilities, based on the latest literature reviews and analyses of the needs assessments.

High-impact barriers	Medium-impact barriers	Low-impact barriers
Digital divide	Low accessibility of platforms and learning materials	Lack of one-to-one pedagogical support for students with disabilities
Poor connectivity	Lack of ODL competencies of students, parents and teachers/school leaders	Lack of technical support to provide students with disabilities and their parents with ODL solutions
Lack of training programmes for teachers on using ODL solutions		

Figure 1. Barriers to the implementation of distance education for persons with disabilities

Across countries and regions, learners with disabilities are least likely to benefit from distance learning solutions (United Nations, 2020*d*). Accessibility means that every child can participate in education regardless of ability (World Bank, 2020). Full learner participation requires not only internet connectivity, devices and accommodated software, but also individualized support tailored to learners' communication abilities and educational activities. Many schools worldwide (particularly in low-income countries) were unable to introduce technology-based solutions and provide distance education during the pandemic because of substandard infrastructure and connectivity, and insufficient support from national and local governments. Those that did were not *all* prepared to support their teachers in acquiring the digital skills required to deliver one-on-one pedagogical and technological support to students with disabilities. It should be noted that beyond schooling, disruptions to capacity-building and training programmes generally have far-reaching negative effects on youth with disabilities, who already face multiple challenges to entering the workforce.

'Future research should examine the experiences of children with disabilities in using digital media during the pandemic period and evaluate the effectiveness of assistive technologies to meet the learning needs of people with disabilities.'

Prof. Cathy Mae Dabi Toquero (2020), Inclusion of People with Disabilities amid COVID-19: Laws, Interventions, Recommendations.

Recognizing and duly addressing various barriers, challenges and constraints will greatly contribute to timely and efficient mitigation of the pandemic's devastating impact on equitable quality education. While many publications currently advocate for disability-inclusive pandemic responses (Armitage and Nellums, 2020), few peer-reviewed studies specifically measure the impact of COVID-19 on students with disabilities, and even fewer propose explicit strategies to provide education that meets the needs of all learners. For further recovery actions to truly benefit persons with disabilities, today's specialized publications must recognize and highlight the issue of 'an internal gap, social exclusion, and digital divide among people with disabilities as they are not given the provision that they need before, during, and possibly after the pandemic' (Toquero, 2020). Concerned stakeholders are calling for strengthening research efforts on the use of digital technology; obtaining evidence on the effectiveness of policies and practices; and evaluating the efficacy of current initiatives and programmes, as well as emerging perspectives for students with disabilities.

The pandemic has heightened the need for online learning, presenting an opportunity to create a flexible, equitable and inclusive system of learning. While the global disruption in education will arguably have considerable long-term negative effects, education stakeholders need to work with persons with disabilities to ensure that digital education solutions are not just assistive technologies, but truly universally inclusive technologies.

The UNESCO Chair in ICT4D (2020) emphasized four essential elements to facilitate the effective use of inclusive and assistive digital technologies in education:

- Technologies should be suited to the needs of learners with disabilities.
- Teachers and students with disabilities should be trained in the appropriate use of digital technologies.
- Such technologies should be affordable, especially when the only available solution is an assistive technology.
- Local language content should be made available in accessible formats.

'People with greater disabilities have much more to gain from using appropriate technologies to transform their lives than do those who have fewer disabilities.'

UNESCO Chair in ICT4D (2020), Education for the most marginalised post-COVID-19: Guidance for governments on the use of digital technologies in education.

The availability of assistive solutions varies by disability type, education level and country. In low- and middle-income countries, availability is limited. However, many excellent free and open initiatives currently support creative and cooperative learning environments, and

promote inclusion of students with disabilities. Such initiatives include:

- Apple Accessibility (https://www.apple.com/accessibility/),
- Google Accessibility (https://www.google.com/accessibility/products-features/),
- Microsoft Accessibility (https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/accessibility),
- Mada: Digital access for all (https://mada.org.qa/),
- New South Wales Government: Disability, learning and support (https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/disability-learning-and-support/resources/assistive-technology),
- Starfish Labs (https://starfishlabs.co.uk/products/),
- OptiKey (https://github.com/OptiKey/OptiKey/wiki),
- Learning for All: Guidelines on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in open and distance learning (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244355) (UNESCO, 2016),
- Model policy for inclusive IOCTs in education for persons with disabilities https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000227229) (UNESCO, 2014), and
- W3C Web design and applications: Accessibility (https://www.w3.org/WAI/redesign/2011/w3-sketch1.html).

To 'build back better' now, it is useful to emulate these initiatives in creating more disability-inclusive educational environments across the globe (World Bank, 2020).

COVID-19 response and recovery approaches

COVID-19 response and recovery programmes present a unique opportunity to reconsider the design and delivery of distance learning through the lens of inclusion, to avoid exacerbating educational and social inequalities (UNESCO, 2020*c*).

Grounded in the review and analysis of research findings, this policy brief presents recommendations to support relevant stakeholders and policy-makers in overcoming challenges to providing access to quality learning opportunities for persons with disabilities during and beyond the pandemic. These ODL strategies should be grounded in equity-building and guided by COVID-19 response objectives (ensuring continuity of education and preventing learning loss and dropouts among learners with disabilities) and broader sustainability goals for education (delivering inclusive education, helping persons with disabilities fulfil their potential, and reducing the risk of technology deepening inequality and marginalization). These recommendations are organized into three categories: government support, civil society and educational community.

1. Government support

While policy-makers worldwide express broad support for inclusive education, considerable obstacles to achieving this objective remain (UNESCO, 2016). One such barrier is concern about heavy costs, although research supports that 'inclusive education features better cost-effectiveness than education of children in separate spaces' (ADB, 2010; Banks and Polack, 2013; UNICEF, 2015; Save Our Future, 2020). A key issue for education policy-makers is mobilizing financial and technological resources to ensure that inclusive ODL is sustainable. They should also seek to guarantee that remotely delivered content and consultative support are accessible, rights and data privacy are protected, and teachers are supported in the transition to remote teaching.

A critical component of inclusive ODL policies is technology use. Policy-makers must bear in mind that persons with disabilities who lack assistive technologies may have limited access to learning content and will be unable to participate fully in education. To prevent technology-based solutions from worsening the educational divide for students with disabilities, all education stakeholders should consider special software for smart devices and technology that students with disabilities can use at home.

It is crucial that persons with disabilities and their representative ODL organizations participate in planning inclusive ODL. Special attention should be paid to empowering women and young girls with disabilities, who additionally face gender-based discrimination. Special dedicated acts, national laws and statutory instruments should ensure continuous monitoring and compliance with appropriate standards, procedures and mechanisms.

Governments play a pivotal role in the provision of educational opportunities to persons with disabilities. Access to ODL is no exception. While industry provides support and materials to enable learning, governments extend legislative and policy direction to institutions and teachers/instructors, which often entails inter- and cross-ministerial collaboration and coordination. In an emergency situation, governments may provide guidance in the form of national policy on ODL to all institutions providing educational services. They are responsible for ensuring that national educational policies include disability and accessibility strategies targeting mainstream educational settings, from early childhood to higher education; such measures should encompass ODL, as well as formal, non-formal and informal education, as part of a lifelong learning perspective (UNESCO, 2016).

In this context, governments would benefit from addressing the areas below:

1. **Legal and policy provisions:** Support and promote legislation and/or policy development to ensure that persons with disabilities are included in ODL programmes; ensure that such policies address the issue of monitoring and compliance with

appropriate standards, procedures and mechanisms (which also includes data collection and use).

2. **Ensure diverse accommodations:** Use alternatives to printed materials in instruction, such as audio or other formats, pictures, flexible scheduling and deadlines, and assistive technology; ensure full and equitable accessibility of alternatives, including captions for persons with hearing loss, sign language for deaf persons, descriptive audio for blind persons and plain language for those with intellectual disabilities.
3. **Ensure access to assistive technologies and inclusive ICT:** Facilitate access of persons with disabilities to assistive technologies and ICT to enhance ODL, including through committed government procurement of assistive technologies and the development of tools and services adapted to the diverse needs of persons with disabilities; focus efforts on creating and enabling appropriate ODL infrastructure for persons with disabilities.
4. **Promote research:** Support research on the use of open solutions for education to improve accessibility, including through open educational resources, free and open-source software, and open access to scientific information; ensure individualized education programmes, with educators, students, parents and families working together to decide on the most effective ODL settings and ways to promote a positive learning experience for each student.
5. **Provide training materials and learning aids:** Ensure that the accessibility aspects of universal design for learning (UDL) tailored to students with disabilities are an integral part of teacher education programmes (initial and in-service); facilitate curriculum modification and support the development of learning materials in accessible e-formats for each type of functional limitation of persons with disabilities; ensure that resources are available regardless of the user context and localization. While helping teachers reach a wide variety of students, focus on how they learn and demonstrate knowledge, acknowledging that 'in a classroom of learners, all are different. …UDL asserts that teaching and learning should utilize a multitude of methods to support all learners, including, but not limited to, learners with disabilities' (World Bank, 2020).
6. **Protect data privacy:** Strengthen legal frameworks and mechanisms to protect data privacy and the human rights of people with disabilities.

> **'It is necessary to take into account all the features of the neuropsychological, cognitive and emotional profile of the child when planning and delivering a lesson, and this is not very simple during "distance learning". The use of a "Universal Design for Learning" approach could be a way to address these situations, to develop learning materials and lessons and to increase inclusiveness of "distance learning".'**
>
> Donatella Rita Petretto, Ilaria Masala and Carmelo Masala (2020), Special Educational Needs, Distance Learning, Inclusion and COVID-19.

7. **Support teachers:** Provide teachers with guidance and evidence-based resources on delivering special education lessons in remote settings; support the training of instructors, and support staff and internet technology administrators on accessibility issues, assistive technologies and open solutions to effectively work with students with disabilities.
8. **Provide family and caregiver support:** Use systemic approaches to help parents and caregivers with both family responsibilities and students' education.
9. **Focus on the user:** Work together with organizations and associations for persons with disabilities to identify acute difficulties in, and viable solutions for, accessing quality ODL.
10. **Increase funding:** Develop more robust funding mechanisms during global crises such as COVID-19; secure adequate funding to bolster the functioning and sustainability of the enabling environments required to include persons with disabilities in ODL.
11. **Promote cooperation and partnership:** Enhance collaboration within and outside of school to share best practices, ideas and solutions; encourage the participation of civil society organizations, including OPDs, in the design, monitoring and evaluation of ODL programmes.

2. Civil society

Civil society organizations have a critical role to play in monitoring the impact of the education crisis on vulnerable learners and advocating for effective responses, although this is not happening in all

countries (United Nations, 2020*b*). Throughout the pandemic, many civil society organizations have worked with governments to ensure essential hardware, software and internet access for students and communities, or have organized teaching through TV, radio broadcasting or mobile telephony (OECD, 2020). Grassroot associations are key stakeholders on the ground, which local communities may trust more than official government institutions given their strong awareness of their audiences' requirements. It is therefore essential to engage and empower communities to be agents of change in tackling education inequalities and their effects on their own communities.

> **'We must ensure that any digital transition is not just an effort pushed by technology companies but that teachers, students, governments, civil society representatives and privacy advocates are also represented and shape these transformations.'**
>
> International Commission on the Futures of Education (2020), Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action.

Policy should therefore provide targeted measures to mobilize society-wide resources. Moreover, State Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) must 'closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations' (United Nations, 2006). Engaging with OPDs in planning, implementing and monitoring COVID-19-related ODL measures is integral to ensuring genuinely inclusive education.

During the school closures, a considerable share of educational responsibility shifted to families. Parents had to facilitate their children's home-based learning and were responsible for monitoring their progress, or lack thereof (Marhaba, 2020). While teachers still guided the learning process, parents and caregivers were mainly expected to support children's learning experience and understanding. Parents need to adopt age-appropriate tools and ways to discuss the situation with their children, as consideration of a child's development stage is essential to establish effective communication that neither underestimates nor overestimates the child's understanding. Providing children with an accurate explanation that is meaningful to them will help ensure they do not feel unnecessarily frightened or guilty about the situation (OECD, 2020).

Parents may be in the best position to judge their children's needs, and appraise the quality and adequacy of suggested teaching solutions. However, they often worry that their insufficient educational background or skills, combined with ever-increasing work and life commitments, will prevent them from providing adequate help or devoting enough time to their children's learning. The situation is further complicated when internet access and technology in homes is the exception rather than the rule (Whitley, 2020). Many parents who were engaged in a partnership with school staff and community organizations before the COVID-19 crisis struggled when face-to-face networks and collaboration disappeared during the pandemic (Whitley, 2020). Without collaboration with school staff, parents of children with disabilities in particular may find themselves under considerable stress. Connecting with school staff, community groups, family and friends may feel different right now, but some of the benefits remain (Whitley, 2020).

Not only can parents and caregivers of children with disabilities provide teachers with meaningful information, they also feel better engaged and respected when consulted. Back-to-school strategies should therefore prioritize family engagement to ensure higher return rates and the enrolment of children who were out of school before the COVID-19 crisis (UNESCO, 2020*d*). In her 2020 article for Thrive Global Community, Ms Raja Marhaba, founder of the Jonathan Foundation for Children with Learning Disabilities, emphasized (Marhaba, 2020):

> The best advice I can give a parent is to document, document, document. When the school opens the parent would have established a log with vital information in it. This information may be used to request Extended School Year (ESY) and Compensatory Services in the areas that the child may have regressed during the COVID-19 crisis. Compensatory Services will be determined based on whether or not the school was able to provide FAPE [Free and Appropriate Public Education] in accordance with the IEP during the COVID-19 crisis.

As education systems recover from the crisis, they need to integrate psychosocial support, using multiple modalities to ensure that the most vulnerable are not excluded or neglected. Civil society organizations, including OPDs and community activists, must play

more relevant roles in ensuring psychosocial support, preventing dropouts, protecting vulnerable children and encouraging and promoting parental engagement. To this end, community groups in Canada have come up with creative solutions to connect students virtually.[1] One example out of many is the Special Friends Network, a grassroots organization in the Halton region of Ontario (Canada), which organized Zoom sessions where youth with all types of disabilities could chat, play games, create artwork and participate in talent shows (Whitley, 2020).

3. Educational (school) community

Educational communities – in reference to the various individuals, groups, businesses and institutions that are invested in the welfare and vitality of educational institutions and their communities, i.e. the served neighbourhoods and municipalities (Glossary of Education Reform, 2019) – are often responsible for determining the educational content, delivery modes and platforms used for distance learning. Educational institutions must recognize that teaching and learning should accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. To this aim, they should introduce and implement policies procedures and standards that guarantee accessibility and inclusion for all students. Given the range of disability differences, it is inappropriate to provide support based on disability category alone. Identifying common challenges and barriers must be done systematically, always keeping in mind inclusive design and learning principles.

In this context, it is recommended that educational communities address the areas below:

1. **Strategy and internal disability policy:** Put in place strategies and internal disability policies (including recruitment and workplace adjustments) aiming for the systematic inclusion of students and staff with disabilities.
2. **Enrolment:** Ensure that persons with disabilities can enrol in ODL by providing accessible open solutions throughout the enrolment process (from accessing the public course offering to registration, entrance exams, face-to-face interviews and acceptance).
3. **Needs assessment:** Ensure that all students with disabilities undergo needs assessments to further improve and ensure full access to learning programmes.
4. **Removal of barriers:** Ensure that assistive technologies effectively remove obstacles to learning, including sensory and physical barriers.
5. **Content:** Create learning content that is well understood by all, promoting comprehension, confidence and performance of students with different types of disabilities.
6. **Integration of open solutions:** Integrate open solutions in programme design and delivery, with a view to enhancing accessibility.
7. **Efficacy:** Enforce regular feedback, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms of the inclusive ODL process.
8. **Support services:** Provide targeted support services, including by identifying needs and providing benefits through school psychologists, student welfare coordinators, social workers supporting family needs, behavioural specialists, special education supports, language support and school care programmes. For students with severe multiple disabilities, conveyance school allowances help with travel costs to and from education institutions. To ensure access to the latter, schools can apply for special needs modifications.
9. **Training:** Consider and address the training requirements of students, faculty and other professionals to access content and technology.
10. **Compliance:** Support the deployment and implementation of best practices recommended or required by authorized (government) agencies.

During the COVID-19 response and recovery period, education systems should emphasize both building teacher capacity through a teacher competency framework in diversity and inclusive education, and helping educators working with learners with disabilities to develop digital skills. As exposed by the field research conducted in African, Asian and South American regions, the lack of practice-based initial and continuous teacher education, combined with poor salaries, results in a pervasive shortage of teaching staff willing or ready to invest in enhancing the quality and accessibility of education. Teacher motivation depends on various factors, including funding, good leadership, opportunities to exchange best practices and professional networking arrangements.

1 For a description of the solutions used, see the website of CTV News Toronto, available at: https://toronto.ctvnews.ca/how-people-with-neuro-differences-and-disabilities-are-staying-connected-during-the-pandemic-1.4907560 (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

Reopening of schools

Rethinking the role of the school after COVID-19 became an important topic of discussions. In the 2020 collective article for the Lancet, the authors emphasized (Colao et al., 2020):

> The COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that school fulfils not only an educational mission of knowledge acquisition, but it also satisfies the socialisation needs of young people. School provides a structured setting in which children can learn and develop social competencies, such as self-confidence, friendship, empathy, participation, respect, gratitude, compassion and responsibility. With students at home … despite the virtual interactions and learning opportunities provided by the internet and social networks, a barrier is created in the educational relationship between pupils and teachers. Moreover, children are missing a physical space for sharing interests, thoughts, hopes, and emotions among peers. … Social and emotional learning is important for young people to become conscious members of a solidarity-based community.

Despite the alarming numbers relative to learning loss, the real impact of the crisis, especially on vulnerable students, has yet to be measured. Therefore, education systems should see the current situation not only as a challenge, but also as an opportunity to focus on reducing existing educational gaps, by implementing initiatives to promote equity and inclusion for those student groups that could be the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (OECD, 2020).

All public and private stakeholders and parties involved in education, including persons with disabilities, must understand the milestones in reopening schools, duly considering the prerequisite, implementation and monitoring phases in both emergency settings and beyond. Pertaining to ODL opportunities for persons living with disability, the specified action phases stipulate the appropriate platforms, relevant learning content and viable modalities for reopening schools.

The prerequisite phase stipulates establishing comprehensive institutional policies, covering issues from admissions to graduation, including curricular and extra-curricular activities. The implementation phase calls for ensuring the actual accessibility of ODL solutions and improving the educational experience of learners with disabilities, including by providing them, their instructors and parents with access to a helpline or support service. The monitoring phase entails assessing and analysing ongoing results and the net effect of ODL for persons with disabilities, along with student attainment, the satisfaction of primary beneficiaries and the efficiency of measures taken (on policy, infrastructure, technology, software, teaching approaches, etc.) during the prerequisite and implementation phases.

Many schools are tackling reopening in waves with students attending classes both online and in-person. Blended/hybrid learning combines the features of traditional education with the benefits of online learning to deliver personalized, differentiated courses across diverse groups of learners, including children with disabilities. Students with disabilities should be encouraged to share their challenges, struggles and fears with other peers with learning difficulties, thereby increasing a sense of community. With blended/hybrid learning, students can perform independently and at their own pace online while still maintaining access to teachers' individual attention, knowledge and guidance, as well as available resources. Meanwhile, teachers can structure courses and deliver them more flexibly or creatively than in a traditional classroom setting.

'Flexibility needs to be the standard. … Nobody asked for this pandemic and everyone has to be flexible, staff and students.'

Marcia Lyner-Cleophas (2020), Head of the Disability Unit at the Centre for Student Counselling and Development, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Adequate learning opportunities that duly reflect the issues of inclusion and accessibility are vital to ensure that all citizens, including persons with disabilities, are active participants and contributors to economic and social life in increasingly technology-based knowledge societies. Actions that support accessibility, such as

ensuring that the principles of UDL benefit all members of society, improve the quality of learning for all members of society (UNESCO, 2014).

> **'Today more than ever before, no learner should be left behind. Addressing the challenge of delivering quality education equitably and inclusively requires out-of-the-box ideas, strategies and partnerships, least of which is deploying a multipronged approach, as one solution does not fit them all.'**
>
> Albert Nsengiyumva, Executive Secretary, Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).

Shifting from the traditional educational approach to providing ODL for students with disabilities during the unstable global pandemic situation means establishing effective international collaboration drawing on shared experience, constructive dialogue and mutual support. The future development of a long-term UN Global Initiative for e-Inclusion of Students with Disabilities could provide the basis for such cooperation. Based on countries' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Global Initiative will strengthen the international integration of UN Member States' processes when implementing ODL solutions for students with disabilities in the context of existing and future possible pandemic restrictions.

> **'The ability to personalize technology to suit one's preferences and needs is a life-skill that will benefit learners as they progress through the educational system.'**
>
> UNESCO (2011), Consultative Expert Meeting Report. Accessible ICTs and Personalized Learning for Students with Disabilities: A Dialogue among Educators, Industry, Government and Civil Society.

Students with disabilities need support to develop and benefit academically, socially and emotionally. Ensuring that online learning delivery modes are both appropriate and rewarding for students poses specific challenges for education systems. Technology solutions, including ODL, can and should have a beneficial impact on learners with disabilities, who are vulnerable to the digital divide and exclusion from educational opportunities because of existing and emerging barriers. During and after the pandemic, technology should widen participation and expand educational opportunities for learners with disabilities. It should complement other measures aiming to remove the various barriers facing persons with disabilities in education and beyond.

As a prerequisite to enacting the rights of learners with disabilities, it is vital to ensure (UNESCO, 2014):

- Inclusive learning opportunities at all possible stages of education, which provide truly inclusive curricula and reasonable accommodation to meet individual needs, and enable all learners to access the same participation and achievement opportunities.
- Access to appropriate and inclusive technology solutions, which support flexible, personalized learning approaches.
- An effective inclusive ICT infrastructure incorporating needs assessment, procurement, installation, maintenance, training and support, which promotes innovation in inclusive education practice at organizational levels and is maintained over the long term within all educational settings.
- Active and ongoing dialogue and consultation with the main stakeholders, including learners with disabilities, their parents, families and advocates, as well as representatives from civil society, community-based rehabilitation service providers and professionals working in the inclusive ICT ecosystem.
- Support for research and development initiatives taking 'user-involved' and 'user-centred' approaches, and leading to new inclusive ICT tools that are applicable to learners with disabilities.
- Self-advocacy and training for learners with disabilities, their families and representatives.
- Effective data collection for benchmarking, as well as short-, medium- and long-term policy monitoring and evaluation.
- Whenever possible, procurement of inclusive and accessible technology products and services by all national, regional and local government entities, civil society representatives and educational organizations involved in policy implementation, following a UDL approach.

Throughout the education crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, ODL has ranked among the most efficient and meaningful solutions to address dramatic

learning losses and prevent major dropouts, including among students with disabilities. In the immediate aftermath of the crisis, it is essential to strengthen global collaboration and create an encouraging and sustainable ODL ecosystem. ICT and ODL solutions for the education of students with disabilities can act as a real-time support system, but require a system-wide educational reform that recognizes the multiple and diverse channels for learning, and encourages learning beyond formal education.

References

Armitage, R. and Nellums, L. 2020. The COVID-19 response must be disability inclusive. *The Lancet. Public Health*. Vol. 5, No. 5, E257. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30076-1 (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

Banks, L. and Polack, S. 2013. *The Economic Costs of Exclusion and Gains of Inclusion of People with Disabilities: Evidence from Low and Middle Income Countries.* https://www.cbm.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Costs-of-Exclusion-and-Gains-of-Inclusion-Report.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

Colao, A., Piscitelli, P., Pulimeno, M., Colazzo, S., Miani, A. and Giannini, S. 2020. Rethinking the role of the school after COVID-19. *The Lancet. Public Health*. Vol. 5, No. 7, E370. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(20)30124-9 (Accessed 08 May 2021.)

CRPD. 2016. *Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. General comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education*. https://undocs.org/CRPD/C/GC/4 (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

GEM Report. How is the coronavirus affecting learners with disabilities? *World Education Blog 2020*. https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/03/30/how-is-the-coronavirus-affecting-learners-with-disabilities/ (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

Global Campaign for Education and Handicap International. 2014. *Equal Right, Equal Opportunity: Education and Disability.* https://campaignforeducation.org/en/2013/06/29/equal-right-equal-opportunity-inclusive-education-for-children-with-disabilities-global-campaign-for-education-and-handicap-international-2013/ (Accessed 08 May 2021.)

Glossary of Education Reform. 2019. *School Community*. https://www.edglossary.org/school-community/ (Accessed 07 May 2021.)

Guterres, A. 2020. Opening remarks at Nelson Mandela Lecture: *'Tackling the Inequality Pandemic: A New Social Contract for a New Era'*. https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2020-07-18/remarks-nelson-mandela-lecture-tackling-the-inequality-pandemic-new-social-contract-for-new-era (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

HI. 2020. *No more children with disabilities out of school.* https://hi.org/en/news/no-more-children-with-disabilities-out-of-school#:~:text=Almost%2025%25%20of%20the%20billion,figure%20is%20closer%20to%2090%25 (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

Instituto Rodrigo Mendez. 2020. *Protocols on inclusive education during the COVID-19 pandemic. An overview of 23 countries and international organizations.* https://institutorodrigomendes.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/research-pandemic-protocols.pdf (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

International Commission on the Futures of Education. 2020. *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action.* https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/education_in_a_post-covid_world-nine_ideas_for_public_action.pdf (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

Marhaba, R. 2020. *Tips for Parents With Special Needs Children and IEPs During The COVID-19 Crisis.* https://thriveglobal.com/stories/tips-for-parents-with-special-needs-children-and-ieps-during-the-covid-19-crisis/ (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

McClain-Nhlapo, C. 2020. *An inclusive response to COVID-19: Education for children with disabilities.* https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/inclusive-response-covid-19-education-children-disabilities (Accessed 12 May 2021.)

OECD. 2001. Understanding the Digital Divide. *OECD Digital Economy Papers*, No. 49, p. 5. Paris, OECD Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1787/236405667766 (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020. *The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings.* https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=434_434914-59wd7ekj29&title=The-impact-of-COVID-19-on-student-equity-and-inclusion (Accessed 12 May 2021.)

Olusanya, B. O. et al., 2020. Global Research on Developmental Disabilities Collaborators (GRDDC). Global burden of childhood epilepsy, intellectual disability, and sensory impairments*. Pediatrics*, Vol. 146, Issue 1, e20192623. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-2623

Petretto, D. R., Masala, I. and Masala, C. 2020. *Special Educational Needs, Distance Learning, Inclusion and COVID-19. Education Sciences*, Vol. 10, No. 154, p. 154. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10060154 (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

Porter, J., Daniels, H., Feiler, A. and Georgeson, J. 2011. *Recognizing the needs of every disabled child: the development of tools for a disability census*. https://www.academia.edu/28390653/Recognising_the_needs_of_every_disabled_child_the_development_of_tools_for_a_disability_census (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

Rivera, J. H., 2017. *The Blended Learning Environment: A Viable Alternative for Special Needs Students.* https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1125804.pdfhttps://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1125804.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

Save Our Future. 2020. *Averting an Education Catastrophe for the World's Children.* https://saveourfuture.world/white-paper/https://saveourfuture.world/white-paper/ (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

Sawahel, W. 2020. *Shift to online learning exposes need for disability strategy.* University World News. African Edition. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200701104119405https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200701104119405 (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

The Education Commission. 2016. *The Learning Generation. Investing in education for a changing world.* https://report.educationcommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Learning_Generation_Full_Report.pdf (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

Toquero, C. M. D. 2020. *Inclusion of People with Disabilities amid COVID-19: Laws, Interventions, Recommendations.* Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 158–177. 10.4471/remie.2020.5877

UNESCO and Microsoft. 2020. *UNESCO Coalition: Technology Blueprint. A Guide for Microsoft Country Engagement Teams Implementing Distance Learning in Emerging Connectivity Contexts. April 2020*. https://edudownloads.azureedge.net/msdownloads/Microsoft_Technology_Blueprint_for_Distance_Learning.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

UNESCO Chair in ICT4D. 2020. *Education for the most marginalised post-COVID-19: Guidance for governments on the use of digital technologies in education. Guidance Note 4*. https://edtechhub.org/education-for-the-most-marginalised-post-covid-19/ (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

UNESCO. 2011. *Consultative Expert Meeting Report. Accessible ICTs and Personalized Learning for Students with Disabilities: A Dialogue among Educators, Industry, Government and Civil Society.* Paris, UNESCO. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/CI/CI/pdf/accessible_ict_personalized_learning_2012%20.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2014. *Model policy for inclusive ICTs in education for persons with disabilities.* https://en.unesco.org/inclusivepolicylab/sites/default/files/publication/document/2017/2/227229e.pdf

–––. 2016. *Learning for All: Guidelines on the inclusion of learners with disabilities in open and distance learning.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244355 (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2017. *School violence and bullying: Global status report.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246970https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246970 (Accessed 12 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*a*. *Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and education: All means all*. Paris, UNESCO, p. xviii. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373718 (Accessed 12 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*b*. *COVID-19.* A Global Crisis for Teaching and Learning. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373233/PDF/373233eng.pdf.multi (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*c*. *Distance learning strategies in response to COVID-19 school closures.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373305 (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*d*. *Inclusive School Reopening: Supporting the Most Marginalized Children to go to School.* https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/inclusive_school_reopening_-_supporting_marginalised_children_during_school_re._.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*e*. *Leave No One Behind. Empowering students with disabilities during the COVID-19 crisis.* UNESCO Bangkok Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education. https://bangkok.unesco.org/content/empowering-students-disabilities-during-covid-19-crisis (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*g*. *Open and distance learning to support youth and adult learning.* UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response. Education Sector issue notes. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373815/PDF/373815eng.pdf.multi (Accessed 08 May 2021.)

–––. n.d. *Education: From disruption to recovery*. https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

–––. n.d. *From Exclusion to Empowerment: Role of ICTs for Persons with Disabilities.* https://en.unesco.org/news/exclusion-empowerment-role-icts-persons-disabilities

UNICEF. 2019. Inclusive education. *Every child has the right to quality education and learning.* https://www.unicef.org/education/inclusive-education

UNICEF. 2020*a*. *Children with Disabilities: Ensuring their inclusion in COVID-19 response strategies and evidence generation*. https://data..org/resources/children-with-disabilities-ensuring-inclusion-in-covid-19-response/. (Accessed 06 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*b*. *All Means All – How to support learning for the most vulnerable children in areas of school closures.* https://sites.unicef.org/disabilities/files/All_means_All_-_Equity_and_Inclusion_in_COVID-19_EiE_Response.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––.2020*c*. *COVID-19 response. Considerations for Children and Adults with Disabilities.* https://www.unicef.org/ukraine/media/5371/file/COVID19_responce_eng.pdf (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

–––.2020*d*. *Framework for reopening schools*. https://www.unicef.org/media/94946/file/Framework%20for%20Reopening%20Schools%20.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

United Nations. n.d.*a. UN Factsheet on Persons with Disabilities*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/resources/factsheet-on-persons-with-disabilities.html

–––. 2006. *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). Article 4*. https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-4-general-obligations.html (Accessed 10 May 2021.)

–––. 2020. *A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_on_persons_with_disabilities_final.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*a*. *Policy Brief: A Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19*. https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/sg_policy_brief_on_persons_with_disabilities_final.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*b*. *Policy brief: Education During COVID-19 and Beyond.* https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2020/08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*c*. *United Nations System Comprehensive Response to COVID-19: Saving Lives, Protecting Societies, Recovering Better.* https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un-comprehensive-response-to-covid-19.pdf (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

–––. 2020*d*. *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children.* https://www.unicef.org/dominicanrepublic/media/3021/file/Publication%20%7C%20Policy%20Brief:%20The%20impact%20of%20the%20COVID-19%20on%20Children.pdf (Accessed 05 May 2021.)

Whitley, J. 2020. *Coronavirus: Distance learning poses challenges for some families of children with disabilities.* https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-distance-learning-poses-challenges-for-some-families-of-children-with-disabilities-136696 (Accessed 03 May 2021.)

WHO and World Bank. 2011. Education. *World Report on Disability*. Geneva, World Health Organization, Chap. 7, p. 205. https://www.who.int/disabilities/world_report/2011/chapter7.pdf (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

WHO. 2020. *Disability and health.* https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health (Accessed 05 May 2021.)

World Bank. 2019. *Every learner matters: Unpacking the learning crisis for children with disabilities.* http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/756811560851384787/pdf/Every-Learner-Matters-Unpacking-the-Learning-Crisis-for-Children-With-Disabilities.pdf (Accessed 12 May 2021.)

–––. 2020. *Pivoting to Inclusion: Leveraging Lessons from the COVID-19 Crisis for Learners with Disabilities.* https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability/publication/pivoting-to-inclusion-leveraging-lessons-from-the-c-ovid-19-crisis-for-learners-with-disabilities (Accessed 15 May 2021.)

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was coordinated by the UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education (UNESCO IITE) and the Section of Education for Inclusion and Gender Equality at UNESCO Headquarters. UNESCO would like to thank Mr Sergey Pankin for drafting this document. UNESCO also acknowledges Ms Juliette Norrmen-Smith for her support in finalizing the document. UNESCO gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the International Disability and Development Consortium (IDDC).

unesco

Policy brief
Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the education of persons with disabilities: Challenges and opportunities of distance education

This policy brief is part of the Global Programme Supporting Disability Inclusive COVID-19 Response and Recovery at National Level, funded by the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Proceeding from the review and analysis of the Programme-related research findings, this policy brief presents recommendations to support relevant stakeholders and policy-makers in overcoming challenges to providing access to quality learning opportunities for persons with disabilities during and beyond the pandemic. The document places special emphasis on feasible approaches, means and solutions to maintain the continuity of, and achieve authentic inclusion in, the education of persons with disabilities through alternative delivery modalities, most notably open and distance learning.

Stay in touch

inclusion@unesco.org;
Liste.info.iite@unesco.org

on.unesco.org/InclusionInED;
www.iite.unesco.org

@UNESCO

UNESCO

4 QUALITY EDUCATION

Sustainable Development Goals