2 GOAL 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

2.1 Implications of the COVID-19 crisis on educational services

The COVID-19 crisis and the resulting closure of schools and universities has had a significant effect on the provision of educational services, accelerating the demand for online learning services worldwide. Online learning services have the potential to enhance access to education in support of the SDGs, while also bringing some old and new challenges to the forefront. Trade agreements can support and complement international efforts and domestic policies aimed at reaping the benefits of online education in pursuit of the SDGs.

2.1.1 The surge of distance learning and its potential to promote access to education

While traditionally student mobility represented the main form of supplying educational services internationally, the rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT) has allowed distance learning to gain prominence in the last years.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimated that during the peak of the crisis, school and university closures in 190 countries had impacted over 90 per cent of the world's student population.[1] While the period of closure ranges significantly across countries and regions, it invariably resulted in a massive use of online education to fill the gap. This trend is expected to continue and increase in the future due to the advantages offered by online learning services.

At the level of higher education, online education provides students the possibility to enrol in a foreign institution and receive a qualification, while staying at home, at a considerably lower fee. By aggregating the demand globally, online courses attract student numbers that even the largest universities cannot service in traditional settings.[2] Online courses offer not only more flexibility, but also more options and opportunities for students at a lower cost. It can also be used to upskill workers in specific areas, including new technologies.[3]

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated existing inequalities in accessing education and training and therefore, special efforts are required to recover leaning losses caused by the pandemic.[4] While governments have been the main funder for education, these funds have decreased in the last years. Since the pandemic started, an estimated 65 per cent of governments in low and lower-middle countries, and 35 per cent in upper-middle and high-income countries, have further reduced funding for education.[5]

Online education has the potential to provide further opportunities of access to information, knowledge, and skills to students at broader scales to meet the increasing demand for higher education, particularly in the development world. A study from 212 countries found that online learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are significantly more likely to report benefits from online learning.[6] Online education can complement traditional ways of learning and positively contribute to achieving SDG Goal 4 of ensuring inclusive and quality education and promoting lifelong learning, provided that the challenges associated with it are adequately addressed.

2.1.2 Challenges hampering the potential of online educational services

As a result of digitalization and the sudden spread of online education, governments and providers of educational services are facing the pressing need to develop and rapidly implement technical solutions to provide online education, including developing online materials and digital skills.

The lack of adequate digital infrastructure is one of the major challenges for taking advantage of online education. The provision of online education critically depends on the availability of computers, internet, and broadband.[7] Taking advantage of online education also requires having the necessary digital skills. A recent survey carried out by UNESCO, UNICEF and the World Bank found that Ministries of Education rank inadequate digital skills as a key barrier to technology use for education, regardless of the country's level of development.[8] Therefore, capacity building to take advantage of online education needs to be boosted especially for certain groups, such as girls and women, who tend to have lower levels of digital skills. Education is an important part of this capacity building and will benefit from it as well.

The sudden spread of distance learning also brings up old and new regulatory challenges to the forefront, such as those related to the accreditation of digital learning providers and material, as well as rules on the collection, management and use of data, especially personal data of children and young people.

2.2 How can trade agreements support the attainment of the SDGs in education?

International trade agreements, like the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), can contribute to increase the supply of educational services, including for online education. They can support efforts to meet the increasing demand for educational services by reducing barriers to entry for foreign providers, as well as enhancing the transparency and predictability of regulatory frameworks. International rules on services trade are also pivotal to support national strategies for developing and enhancing ITC infrastructure (e.g., telecommunication services, broadband, etc.), which is a key enabler of online educational services.

International agreements can contribute to reduce barriers on foreign online education providers, such as local presence requirements (e.g., requiring a representative office or any form of enterprise or residency as a condition to supply a service in a country),[9] as well as restrictions on the electronic transmissions of course material and course content.[10]

Taking advantage of the potential benefits of online education for reducing the educational gap in developing countries and contributing to lifelong learning in line with the SDGs will rely also upon putting in place the complementary regulatory framework to protect consumers and ensure that appropriate levels of quality are achieved.[11] This is particularly pressing in the field of online education. The GATS gives flexibility to WTO members to undertake commitments for liberalizing trade in services, while safeguarding policy objectives such as ensuring quality, in a way that the benefits of opening trade in education support the achievement of SDGs.

Furthermore, countries could use trade policies and agreements to improve access to products that are linked to the provision of online education. A case in point is the WTO Information Technology Agreement (ITA),[12] which has played a key role in lowering prices for ICT hardware systems, computers, mobile phones and other devices that underpin the digitalization. In 2016, import prices of computers and semi-conductors were around 66 per cent lower than the corresponding level in 1996.[13] With the elimination of tariffs, cost of IT products, such as semi-conductors, telecommunication products, computers, touch screens and electronic education devices, have reduced significantly. By reducing the cost of ICT products, the ITA plays an important role in promoting affordable access to ICT, including products which are vital for benefiting from online education.

Given the key role played by education in building resilient and sustainable economies, building back better will require stepping up efforts to enhance education opportunities and access. As recognized by recent international instruments, promoting international cooperation to reap the benefits of online education to meet the SDGs will be key in the years to come.[14] Cooperation and dialogue among international institutions and relevant stakeholders can contribute to enhance synergies between different policies, like trade and education policies, reinforcing each other.

Endnotes

1 For information on the number of students and countries affected by the COVID-19 crisis, please refer to: https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse

2 Becker-Lindenthal, H. 2015. "Students' Impression Management in MOOCs: An Opportunity for Existential Learning?", MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching 11(2): 320–330.

3 The Earth Institute, Columbia University and Ericsson. 2016. "ICT & SDGs Final Report: How Information and Communications Technology can Accelerate Action on the Sustainable Development Goals." Available at: https://www.ericsson.com/res/docs/2016/ict-sdg.pdf

4 Hanushek, Eric A. and Woessmann, Ludger, "The Economic Impacts of Learning Losses", OECD, September 2020. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf

5 "Education during COVID-19 and beyond", United Nations Policy Brief, August 2020. Available at: https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/sg_policy_brief_covid-19_and_education_august_2020.pdf

6 Survey carried out by academics at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Washington. Wylie, I. 2016. "Free Moocs act as try-before-you-buy model for online courses". Financial Times.: http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/16214054-cb3b-11e5-a8ef-ea66e967dd44.html#axzz42xzf1FMf (accessed 12 February 2022).

7 Scaling up digital learning and skills in the world's most populous countries to drive education recovery, UNESCO, 4 April 2021. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/news/scaling-digital-learning-and-skills-worlds-most-populous-countries-drive-education-recovery.

8 UNESCO; UNICEF; World Bank. 2020. "What Have We Learnt? : Overview of Findings from a Survey of Ministries of Education on National Responses to COVID-19". Paris, New York, Washington D.C.: UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank.

9 Measures requiring the physical presence of the foreign institution have been identified as one of the main barriers affecting cross-border education. WTO Background Note by the Secretariat on Education Services (WTO official document number S/C/W/313), p.23.

10 Some recent regional trade agreements provide for cooperation on the prevention of deceptive practices to protect consumers, as well as rules on cross-border data flows.

11 Hopper, R. 2007. "Building Capacity in Quality Assurance: The Challenge of Context. In Cross-border Tertiary Education: A Way towards Capacity Development". Paris: OECD Publishing/World Bank, pp.109–157.

12 The ITA covers approximately 97 per cent of world trade in IT products. Initially an agreement among 29 members, the ITA now covers 82 WTO members. The tariff elimination under the ITA is implemented on a most-favoured national (MFN) basis, which means that all WTO members benefit from such tariff reductions.

13 At the 10th Ministerial Conference in Nairobi in December 2015, 53 members concluded the expansion of the ITA, which now covers an additional 201 products valued at over US$ 1.3 trillion per year. Products covered by the ITA Expansion include new generation of semi-conductors (multi-component integrated circuits), touch screens, GPS navigation equipment, portable interactive electronic education devices and medical equipment. For more information about the ITA, please refer to: https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/ita20years_2017_full_e.pdf

14 "Rewired Declaration on Connectivity for Education", dated 5 October 2021, available at: https://en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/sites/default/files/2021-12/Rewired%20Global%20Declaration%20on%20Connectivity%20for%20Education.pdf