

8 September 2021



## Concept note

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been the worst disturbance to education and training systems in a century, with the longest school closures affecting more than 1.6 billion learners at its peak time. By November 2020, the average child had lost 54 percent of a year's contact time, which could be interpreted as the loss of over a year's learning if the time of forgetting what was previously acquired is counted<sup>1</sup>.

The pandemic and its repercussions have also magnified the pre-existing inequalities in access to meaningful literacy learning opportunities, disproportionately affecting 773 million non-literate young people and adults<sup>2</sup>. With low or no reading and writing skills, they tend to be more vulnerable in managing their health, work, and life<sup>3</sup>. In OECD countries, low-skilled adults are also less likely to recognize their learning needs (11 percent) than those with higher skills (35

<sup>1</sup> The UIS adopted 'forgetting ratio of 2.0' for its model in light of the loss of skills acquired by learners even before the interruption. In this model, for every month of contact time lost, two months of learning are assumed to have been lost.

<sup>2</sup> <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/literacy?page=1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374187>

percent), and are therefore less likely to look for learning opportunities<sup>4</sup>, a source of further widening inequalities. Despite this, initial global and national responses to COVID-19 concentrated on formal basic and higher education. The best efforts of governments and partners have been employed to ensure the continuity of literacy learning through distance and blended education. However, non-literate young people and adults who tend to face intersecting disadvantages, for instance, due to poverty, gender, social status, ethnicity, language, disabilities, and geographical location, have been at higher risk of being left behind. In the recovery phase, therefore, youth and adult literacy should be integrated into national strategies and plans from a lifelong learning perspective.

The rapid shift to distance learning also highlighted the persistent digital divide in terms of connectivity, infrastructure, and the ability to engage with technology. According to the International Telecommunications Union, nearly half of the world's people (3.7 billion) do not use the Internet, many of whom are in least developed countries, and urban-rural disparities and gender gaps continue to be present. In sub-Saharan Africa, only 7.7 percent were estimated to have a computer at home. Household internet access in the region is still limited with a rate of approximately 22 percent. Also made visible with the shift to distance learning was the insufficiency of other infrastructure and services that can facilitate learning. In Burkina Faso, Burundi and Chad, for instance, at least 85 percent of the population did not even have access to electricity in 2018<sup>5</sup>.

At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis amplified the centrality of literacy to people's life, work and lifelong learning. Reading and writing skills are essential, for instance, to access life-saving information and sustain livelihoods. In addition, the need for digital skills, which are part of today's literacy skills, have been recognized for distance learning, a digitally transformed workplace, and participation in a digitalized society. While there is no single internationally agreed definition, digital skills are broadly understood as a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access, manage, understand, integrate, communicate, evaluate and create information safely and appropriately in an increasingly technological and information-rich environment<sup>6</sup>. Various aspects of digital skills are increasingly becoming indispensable to be literate. However, many young people and adults are digitally non-literate, including those who lack basic reading and writing skills. In Europe, 43 percent of adults lack the basic digital skills required to participate in distance digital learning<sup>7</sup>. As acquisition of digital skills involves complex cognitive processes, these emerging skills demand calls for ensuring an adequate level of reading and writing skills<sup>8</sup>, the integration of digital skills into literacy programmes, if appropriate, and the consideration of the inter-relations between these skills, kinds of technology and teaching approaches to be adopted, as well as learners' motivation, life situations, contexts, and cultures.

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<sup>4</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC)

<sup>5</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/eg.elc.accs.zs>

<sup>6</sup> The definitions of [the World Bank](#) and that of [the UNESCO Institute for Statistics \(UIS\)](#) are similar and have been adapted in this note. [UNICEF](#) defines digital literacy as 'the knowledge, skills and attitudes that allow children to flourish and thrive in an increasingly global digital world, being both safe and empowered, in ways that are appropriate to their age and local cultures and contexts'. [OECD's](#) framework of digital skills outlines a range of 'ICT generic skills' to use such technologies for task-orientated purposes, such as using software and accessing information. [The Broadband Commission for Sustainable development](#) also explains main components of digital skills.

<sup>7</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/digital-skills-all-europeans-brochure>

<sup>8</sup> The OECD's [2018 Programme for International Student Assessment \(PISA\) findings](#) show that 'youth with low basic skills found it difficult to process digital information in multiple presentation formats'.

## *Putting literacy and digital skills at the heart of a human-centered recovery*

The COVID-19 crisis contains the seeds of opportunity for a human-centered recovery. As the pandemic forced numerous literacy programmes to halt normal modes of operation, administrators, managers, educators, communities and learners themselves have struggled and found ways to ensure continuity of learning. Where face-to-face teaching and learning was restricted, distance learning supported by high-tech (e.g. computers, mobile phones, tablets), low-tech (e.g. TV, radio) and/or no-tech (e.g. print-based learning materials) solutions, and hybrid learning that combined face-to-face and distance learning, have been adopted. The specific situations of COVID-19 crisis have also fostered family-based learning and have enhanced the content of literacy programmes through intersectoral collaboration and new partnerships.

Many of these initiatives for sustaining literacy learning, generated, implemented and owned by individuals, communities, local authorities, and national institutions through their active participation, can contribute to building a solid foundation for a human-centred recovery. The pandemic has shown that the specific needs of heterogenous learners in challenging conditions can be better met by embracing diverse solutions of distance, face-to-face and hybrid learning. Also highlighted was the immediate need to equip those who are in digital environments with adequate literacy and digital skills, while stepping up efforts to narrow the digital divide. This calls for attention to several policy areas, including providing literacy programmes with no and low-tech solutions for those who do not have access to internet and/or electricity, exploring technology-enabled learning that facilitates acquisition of reading, writing and digital skills, and ensuring equitable access to inclusive and quality literacy learning<sup>9</sup>. More structurally, this will require good governance and bold partnerships as well as further integration of youth and adult literacy into national lifelong learning policies and systems.

**Embracing diverse solutions for distance, face-to-face and hybrid learning for literacy:** During the pandemic, many countries adopted a mix of no, low-, and high-tech solutions to ensure continuity of learning and to reach out to learners who otherwise had limited learning opportunities in their proximity. The pandemic illuminated the importance of adding a human factor through face-to-face interaction, creating physical or virtual communities for educator-learner interactions and peer support, and/or blended learning.

**Integration of learning of reading and writing skills and digital skills:** It is increasingly important to provide literacy programmes that prepare learners to thrive in a digital world through integrating digital skills into learning content. Founded on adequate reading and writing skills, digital skills enable learners to benefit from technology-enabled literacy programmes and further learning opportunities. As such, designing a literacy programme that integrates digital skills requires consideration of the inter-relations between these skills, together with kinds of technology and teaching approaches to be adopted.

**Quality of technology-enabled literacy learning:** Technology is not a panacea for malfunctioning learning. Central to quality technology-enabled literacy learning is the adoption of an appropriate type of technology to support the good teaching approach, learning content,

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<sup>9</sup> UN, 2020

assessment and certification. Literacy educators, together with relevant educational materials, also play a critical role, as well as learners' motivation, life situations, contexts, and cultures. A caution has been made for over-romanticizing technology-enabled personalized learning, as learning is situated and not an individual activity, and the increased use of artificial intelligence (AI) could intensify inequalities due to the likelihood of 'disadvantaged groups being misrepresented within AI-driven education'<sup>10</sup>.

**Equitable and inclusive access to technology-enabled literacy programmes:** Making inclusive technology-enabled literacy programmes accessible requires efforts within and outside the education sector given the cross-sectoral roots of disadvantages and educational marginalization faced by non-literate youth and adults. This includes online/offline technology-enabled learning, facilitating connectivity of learners, and the use of mixed distance learning strategies, such as television, radio and telephones, distribution of printed materials, and on-line learning.

**Good governance and partnerships for technology-enabled literacy learning:** Actors from different education constituencies and non-education sectors form local ecosystems and contribute to inclusive and meaningful literacy learning. Examples of multi-stakeholder partnerships include telecom companies ensuring the provision of zero-rating internet access and access to on-line resources and platforms, and partnerships, involving adult learning authorities and local universities sharing free online content. Governments have responsibilities, together with other stakeholders, to ensure that learners' privacy is protected, physical and mental well-being are preserved, and their safety is maintained. Also important is the fostering of digital citizenship and reaffirming education as a public good.

**Promoting youth and adult literacy as an integral part of national lifelong learning policies and systems:** By further integrating youth and adult literacy, national lifelong learning policies and systems can be enhanced to benefit from system-wide approaches and cross-sectoral collaboration, including that between the sub-sectors of 'adult literacy, learning and education' and basic education. Such collaboration could facilitate intergenerational learning and development of a sector-wide digital platform for technology-enhanced learning, recognition, validation, accreditation and certification of skills, monitoring and information management.

**Coordinated and sustained collective support, advocacy, and knowledge management:** Global and regional platforms and initiatives can continue to support national efforts to promote literacy, including SDG-Education 2030 coordination mechanisms, the Global Alliance for Literacy within the Lifelong Learning Framework (GAL), the Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC), the Global Alliance to Monitor Learning (GAML), the Global Education Coalition (GEC), UNESCO Chairs, the Global Partnership for Education, Education Cannot Wait and the International Financing Facility for Education.

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<sup>10</sup> [Digital technology and the futures of education – towards 'non-stupid' optimism - UNESCO Digital Library](#)

## Celebrations of International Literacy Day 2021

Building on ILD2020<sup>11</sup>, ILD2021 will be celebrated across the world by UNESCO, governments and partners to uphold the right to literacy and foster the acquisition of literacy and digital skills by youth and adults for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. While numerous events will be organized at community, school, and country levels, there will be two online global meetings on 8-9 September 2021 for the ILD2021 celebration and the UNESCO International Literacy Prizes (UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize and UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy).

### Key questions

- What are inclusive and good policies, measures and interventions to put literacy, and possibly also digital skills, at the heart of a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis and to narrow the digital divide?
- How can learning of digital skills be integrated into technology-enabled literacy programmes in a meaningful manner?
- How can we mobilize adequate technical and financial support for the promotion of literacy programmes, including the ones that integrate digital skills learning?
- What are the kinds of partnerships and governance required to enhance technology-enabled literacy programmes for youth and adults?

### Expected outcomes

- Increased awareness of the importance of literacy and digital skills for a human-centred recovery and possible ways to make policies, measures and interventions for youth and adult literacy better and more inclusive to counter the digital divide.
- Key issues identified and new ideas generated for reimagined literacy teaching and learning that integrate literacy and digital skills.
- Concrete ways in which governments and partners can collaborate identified to promote technology-enabled literacy programmes.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/commemorations/literacyday>