



Wilton Park



Report

**Learning key lessons on COVID: a UK/Netherlands
discussion on education**

Thursday 24 February 2022 | WP2030V

In association with:



British Embassy
The Hague



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“COVID has been a magnifying glass and can be an accelerator”

This virtual event, delivered by Wilton Park in conjunction with the British Embassy in the Hague, explored the impact of COVID on British and Dutch education systems, and considered some of the key lessons moving forward. The discussion focussed on a range of areas including British and Dutch responses to the pandemic and the education strategies that worked, the role of non-government institutions in providing education platforms as well as some of the wider challenges facing young people moving forwards. The virtual event was one of two British and Dutch dialogues, the first of which sought to establish health lessons from the pandemic.

Education systems have suffered significant disruptions due to COVID. Young people throughout the globe have been heavily affected by a host of challenges including school closures, hastily established remote learning strategies, cancelled exams and a general disruption to daily routines which are continuing to have wide impacts on mental health and wellbeing. This has also had profound impacts on those supporting children in education with teachers and families forced to adapt to the increased pressures mounted on young learners.

At the same time, the pandemic also highlighted pre-existing problems within these systems from tensions between central education policies and school autonomy to entrenched inequalities and inequities across society. The pandemic served as a magnifying glass into a range of structural problems that cannot be addressed with quick and ready-made strategies. Returning ‘back to normal’ is neither possible nor preferable; a more innovative, inclusive, and effective education model needs to be established to tackle some of these challenges.

A largely successful vaccination campaign combined with the emergence of the milder Omicron variant has presented an exit route from the pandemic’s disruption. The UK and the Netherlands are both committed to ‘Building Back Better’ and using the pandemic to catalyse positive change. This is urgently needed in the education space, and we are at an ideal stage to reflect on the strategies that worked and those that didn’t. British and Dutch governments are already committing significant recovery funds, but fundamentally enhancing the resilience of education systems requires close collaboration and dialogue between both countries.

Executive Summary

1. COVID has had significant impacts on education systems and has shone a light on a host of problems impacting children and young people. Responding to the long-term impacts of COVID requires increased public investment, the adoption of data-driven strategies and cross-border collaboration between countries.
2. The UK and the Netherlands have differing levels of centralisation in education systems. Balancing central education policy and decision making with local school needs and autonomy is a central challenge moving forward.
3. COVID has had heightened impacts on primary-level children with strong evidence showing widescale regressions in the development of basic skills like literacy and arithmetic.
4. COVID has also highlighted and exacerbated a youth mental health crisis, with almost a quarter of young people in the UK believing they will never recover from the emotional impact of the pandemic. Yet there is a growing de-stigmatisation of mental ill health in both the UK and the Netherlands which exposes a potential positive outcome of the crisis.
5. UK and Dutch governments are continuing to invest heavily in post-pandemic education. The Netherlands unveiled a €5.8 billion funding for schools to recover from COVID-19, while the Department for Education in England has increased post-COVID education spending with initiatives like the National Tutoring Program set to continue passed 2024.
6. While the pandemic has impacted all children, individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds have suffered disproportionate impacts and are likely to have slower recovery rates. Government and non-government groups in the UK and the Netherlands attempted to provide focussed support to disadvantaged children throughout the pandemic, yet the move to online teaching left many children neglected and further behind.
7. Harnessing the power of digital technology to supplement education is crucial moving forwards. Increasing access to digital technologies while improving digital literacy can improve teaching quality and reduce inequalities across society.

Recommendations

8. While Britain and the Netherlands have distinct education structures and are both adopting different strategies, they share many of the same challenges. Both countries can benefit from collaboration to share lessons on what strategies work and what strategies don't.
9. Data-based initiatives need to be built into the implementation of any education strategy. Learning which strategies work and which don't take time, but there needs to be effective systems in place. With limited budgets, governments cannot risk blindly throwing money at strategies that are ineffective or risk exacerbating existing education inequalities.
10. There needs to be a balance between autonomy of individual schools and central education policy. Empowering schools and teachers can be hugely effective in responding to the specific demands of students, however overly decentralised systems struggle to cope through crises and can leave some students further behind.
11. Career services play crucial roles in helping young individuals build confidence and transition into adulthood. COVID has irrevocably changed employment sectors, meaning that children and young adults require additional support in establishing next steps following education. More resources need to be available through, or in conjunction with, schools.

12. Children have suffered immense psychological and social impacts from COVID, however there is also significant resilience. Perpetuating a doom and gloom narrative about 'lost generations' is damaging, as youth ought to be considered as a loose stage rather than a fixed period.
13. Cooperation between schools at regional levels through initiatives like head teacher networks can play important roles in enhancing school performance. Schools are often pitted against one another which tends to spar tensions and widen inequalities. Breaking down barriers between schools is integral to establishing a more effective and equitable education system.

How COVID impacted children and wider education

14. COVID-19 has had unprecedented impacts on how education has been delivered over the past two years. National lockdowns in both the UK and the Netherlands have led to school closures at various points, while nationally coordinated assessments have been heavily affected and even cancelled. Remote learning platforms were hastily established and rolled out in lieu of face to face teaching which gave students opportunities to continue with their studies, however the disruption to daily routines and the standard delivery of education has, and continues to be, significant.
15. The impacts of these changes on children have been deep and multifaceted, affecting a range of areas including learning ability, mental health and wellbeing and inequalities.
16. There have been significant impacts on learning ability with strong evidence showing widescale regressions in the development of basic skills like literacy and arithmetic. These problems are most notable at primary school levels where the proportionate impact of missing out on schooling is most evident. Online learning for primary schoolers was particularly disruptive, as younger children tended to have less access to digital devices than older children while the face-to-face benefits of teaching core skills like reading and writing were harder to replicate virtually.
17. Despite widely reported COVID impacts on literacy, Dutch participants expressed a positive outcome of the pandemic, namely, that many children have turned to reading and writing as a means to make sense of their increasingly complicated and disrupted daily routines. This helps demonstrate the subjective nature of the pandemic for many children and families, outlining that the pandemic had different consequences for different individuals.
18. COVID has dramatically impacted youth daily life, contributing to a sharp increase in mental health diagnoses. In England the pandemic coincided with a 77% increase in referrals for specialist mental health care. Disruptions to daily routines have been heavily associated with increases in youth anxiety levels, which has had a negative effect on resources for young people, while children with pre-existing conditions like eating disorders were left in more precarious positions and unable to access the right support and products consistent with a stable meal plan.
19. The long-term psychological impacts of COVID are complex. A report by the Prince's Trust revealed that almost a quarter of young British people surveyed feel they will never recover from the emotional impact of COVID, while an estimated 100,000 children in England are yet to return to school because of COVID-related anxieties. Participants discussed the "scarring effect" of the pandemic, which describes how the cumulative effects of COVID can have long-term impacts on the ability for children to continue education, establish long term relationships in life and eventually pursue career paths.

20. While the pandemic has exposed a burgeoning mental health crisis, some considerations are worth noting. First, besides COVID, a range of other global problems have posed an increased impact on mental health levels, notably climate change and global destabilisation. These wider factors must be considered when unpacking the specific consequences of COVID on wellbeing. Second, increases in psychological health conditions have been accompanied by a general de-stigmatisation of mental ill health, particularly in the UK. Over the last 10 years there has been a 450% increase in people declaring a mental health condition in the UK. As walls break down surrounding mental ill health stigma, there is more optimism that children can address serious conditions at a young age.
21. Remote learning exposed underlying inequalities across education sectors, with deprivations in access to technology, data and WIFI and space to learn providing core obstacles to equitable development. Some children suffered the absence of strict supervision, as many young people were essentially left at home alone during 'school hours' without any strong means of motivation. This was a huge challenge for parents, many of whom were working in the same makeshift spaces as children, forced to balance their work demands with both teaching and caretaking commitments. Remote learning benefitted some children and families more than others, and it is not a simplistic picture; some parents have gained a greater understanding on what their children are learning at school.
22. Many of the learning inequalities experienced during the pandemic have been in place for decades. Some children will be better equipped to recover from the pandemic due to their socio-economic status. This raises the need for countries to provide structural support throughout society beyond the pandemic, as recovery rates across youth populations will be heavily correlated with levels of regional deprivation and inequality.

Government responses and challenges

23. Early UK and Dutch government responses were focused on allowing schools and childcare settings to operate as normally as possible. This required keeping schools open where possible through enhancing ventilation in classrooms and increasing testing. Ventilation became a priority and the Department for Education in England provided £25 million in funding for CO2 monitors in state-funded education settings
24. When keeping schools open became untenable, the UK government introduced legislation forcing schools to facilitate remote learning in lieu of in-person teaching. Vulnerable children and children of essential workers were able to continue attending early year establishments, schools and colleges throughout the pandemic.
25. In England, over £520 million was invested in remote education and online learning, while 1.85 million devices were distributed to disadvantaged children and young people. The Oak National Academy, a centralised online learning database, was also set up to support schools in providing online learning in England.
26. Moving forward, both countries are focused on data-driven interventions and have designated significant investment in recovery programs to alleviate lost learning outcomes from COVID. The Dutch National Education Program has put significant investment aside, with €5.8 billion funding for schools to recover from COVID-19, with a focus on catching up on lost learning outcomes, enhancing the quality of teaching and reducing levels of inequalities. This involves targeting arithmetic, reading and digital skills and encourages collaboration in innovation through data analysis from different international approaches. The UK government works closely with originations such as the Education Endowment Fund which provides data-driven resources to improve attainment levels amongst young populations. England has introduced a National Tutoring Programme, which aims to deliver up to 100 million tutoring hours across England by 2024.

27. There are distinct differences between the UK and Dutch education structures. In the Netherlands, there are greater levels of education autonomy which enables individual schools to cater to the needs of their specific students. Informed by the Netherlands Initiative for Education Research (NRO), the Dutch Government through the National Education Program provide a menu of strategies which individual schools can select which determine the type of intervention, cost, effectiveness, and evidence behind a certain strategy.
28. The UK has a degree of regional autonomy vested through the devolved nations, however there is a greater degree of centralisation which was seen to have delivered some efficiency benefits during the pandemic. One area of comparison is in government virtual learning programs like Oak National Academy, which the UK successfully rolled out during the pandemic. There was agreement that these central online learning resources provided effective supplements without distracting or competing with the online lessons provided by individual schools. The more decentralised Dutch system has greater challenges in balancing central government approaches with autonomous decisions by schools.
29. Both countries have significant challenges with teacher quality and retention. Recruitment for teachers has recently been made more central in England which has led to a drop in applications. Meanwhile there are severe shortages of quality teachers in the Netherlands, especially in urban contexts. To break this cycle, there is a pressing need for both countries to improve support systems for young teachers beyond the standard two-year period. There is an equivalent 'burnout challenge' amongst more experienced teachers. Both issues are being addressed through recovery programs which are issuing extra funds to enhance teacher quality.

Non-government initiatives

30. Initiatives to cope with and recover from the pandemic also exist outside of the state. In both countries, organisations and charities have played a key role in providing research, resources, and wider support to schools and children.
31. Local organisations play a key role in boosting educational outcomes for children from disadvantaged background. During the pandemic, many UK and Dutch organisations worked to reduce digital gaps by providing devices to children and offering a range of support systems like online tutoring, mentoring programs, and crucial spaces to work. Non-government institutions can thereby enhance learning outcomes and play a key role in reducing inequality in communities.
32. Schools themselves can also establish regional networks to improve teaching quality and share ideas and initiatives. Building knowledge hubs and disseminating evidence throughout school systems can help schools learn from one another and help introduce evidenced based strategies that work. Head teacher networks – as set up across London – can also provide key communication channels between schools allowing a holistic and unified approach to lost learning outcomes. Schools in the UK and the Netherlands have typically been forced to compete with one another which restricts the dissemination of good practice and widens inequality between schools.
33. Despite structural differences and varying levels of centralisation, the UK and the Netherlands can learn from one another as they share many of the same regional challenges. On a local level, cities like London and Rotterdam share many qualities like large ethnic diversity and deprivation. Both can learn from one another, and educational exchanges are key to breaking down structural barriers at the heart of education outcomes.

Technology

34. Digital technology in education has been on the agenda for decades but never properly taken hold. The COVID pandemic has added impetus to these developments, and the rollout of digital learning played a significant role in enabling the continuation of schooling throughout the pandemic. Digital technologies like ICTs are regarded as important tools for augmenting learning experiences and responding to future education shocks like pandemics. However, there are significant barriers and ethical challenges to consider.
35. While UK schools were legislated to provide digital learning platforms, the rollout of remote learning was not wholly effective and led to significant disparities between schools and widening digital divide. Deprivations in access to WIFI, data and technological equipment widened education inequalities and poor-quality learning experiences. Governments and local organisations invested in closing the digital divide, yet there are still significant inequities with access and usage.
36. Cyber security and privacy concerns need to be emphasised within the design and implementation of digital learning platforms. The Dutch National Education Program is prioritising safety, privacy and access to secure systems. Considerations over who controls the systems and their interests needs to be highlighted as virtual learning databases can fall into the hands of a select few.
37. Digital literacy is another barrier preventing the effective use of digital learning platforms. Including digital literacy as part of education curriculums, training teachers to understand and use technologies effectively, and using data-based evaluations into different systems can improve teaching techniques and unlock the potential of online learning moving forward.

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