



Wilton Park



Report

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

Tuesday 22 February 2022 | WP2029V

In association with:



British Embassy
The Hague



Report

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

Tuesday 22 February 2022 | WP2029V

In association with the British Embassy in The Hague

These virtual events, delivered by Wilton Park in conjunction with the British Embassy in the Hague, explored the COVID impact on health and education systems in the UK and the Netherlands. The discussions focussed on a range of areas including vaccines, variants and future pandemics, the role of scientific institutions, winter planning, bilateral and multilateral cooperation, public trust, the impacts of COVID on young generations and schooling and the increasing role of technology across education systems.

Although the current pandemic is by no means over, there is a growing confidence, particularly amongst European countries, that the severity of the virus is waning. This confidence is vested in widescale vaccination and booster campaigns, the emergence of milder COVID variants (which are having a decreased impact on death rates and hospitalisations) and a subsequent loosening of government restrictions. At the same time, the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated many pre-existing tensions across economic, social and political grounds, while **lesser-known** challenges like long Covid and wider social impacts of the pandemic remain.

Given these developments, we are at an ideal moment to reflect on the health and education challenges posed by COVID and take stock of some of the positive and negative aspects of UK and Dutch responses. Careful, evidenced-based strategizing alongside continual momentum building towards pandemic preparedness is an essential next step in the transition out of COVID.

Despite many political, economic, and social similarities between the UK and the Netherlands, each country has experienced different challenges from the pandemic. The UK and the Netherlands are both committed to 'Building Back Better' and using the pandemic to catalyse positive change. This is urgently needed 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.

Key findings

Health

1. As Europe begins to emerge from the worst stages of COVID, the UK and the Netherlands are at an ideal stage to collaborate to strengthen responses and preparedness to future variants and pandemics.
2. Despite a consensus that COVID's impact is waning, there are significant long-term challenges ahead and wider difficulties in predicting how current and emerging variants might impact health systems.
3. Building momentum towards future pandemic preparedness is crucial and needs to be at the forefront of public and private agendas. Governments need to increase and sustain public investment in global health bodies yet face serious political challenges as public interest turns to other events. The private sector can also play a greater role in strengthening health resilience and large pharmaceutical companies need to pay their fair share through taxation and direct investment to health bodies. Unlocking and aligning capital from the finance sector must also be prioritised.
4. While supply chains have largely stabilised (at least in relation to the pandemic) questions remain over whether they are robust enough to handle future health shocks and crises.
5. Assessing how to rebuild public trust and compliance is an essential next step in the transition out of COVID. Strategies need to be geared towards specific groups, as public trust is complex and fluid.
6. Besides the immediate health impacts of the pandemic, COVID also outlined and exacerbated core inequalities in both national and global contexts. Responding to widening inequality as well as the social effects of the pandemic is an essential aspect of our recovery as we transition out of COVID.

Education

7. 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.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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.

12. 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.
13. 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.

“A pandemic is inclusive by nature and knows no borders”

Recommendations

Health

14. Enhancing cross-border cooperation in bilateral and multilateral spaces represents an integral element for future pandemic preparedness, and the tendency for countries to look inward needs to be tackled, as global pandemics are borderless.
15. The UK and the Netherlands share many similarities and can be considered global leaders in epidemiological research. Increasing collaboration between both countries is essential and the formation of a bilateral pandemic review board comprised of scientists and experts can play a key role in building momentum towards future pandemic preparedness.
16. On-going communication and collaboration between the scientific community and the policy space needs to be prioritised as European countries transition out of the pandemic. This requires maintained investment and will be challenged by political pressures to prioritise expenditure in other areas as the UK and the Netherlands experience milder levels of COVID.
17. Widescale cross-disciplinary consultation can enhance pandemic response strategies and future preparedness; besides typical virus research areas like epidemiology, social and behavioural sciences have offered crucial insights into a range of areas including vaccine uptake and wider compliance with public measures. Prioritising cross-disciplinary and cross-border research initiatives can better enable policy makers to make decisions at the right time.
18. Financiers can and ought to play a greater role in strengthening public health systems and institutions and pandemic preparedness can benefit from similar initiatives undertaken in the climate space. Mobilising private investments alongside public expenditure is critical to strengthening global responses to future pandemics.
19. To increase future vaccine uptake, politicians and scientists need to present clearer and more effective public messaging on the rare (but sometimes severe and deadly) side-effects of common vaccinations.
20. Tackling mistrust is a multifaceted challenge which needs a ‘two-pronged approach’ to respond to blatant disinformation and softer anxieties which can be more pernicious to wider society.

“Covid can serve as a catalyst for health infrastructure spending”

“Covid has served as a litmus test for pre-existing problems in society”

Education

21. 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.
22. Data-based initiatives need to be built into the implementation of any education strategy. Learning which strategies work and which don't takes 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.
23. 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.
24. 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.
25. 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.
26. 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.

Wilkie Briggs

Wilton Park | March 2022

Wilton Park reports are intended to be brief summaries of the main points and conclusions of an event. Reports reflect rapporteurs' accounts of the proceedings and do not necessarily reflect the views of the rapporteur. Wilton Park reports and any recommendations contained therein are for participants and are not a statement of policy for Wilton Park, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) or Her Majesty's Government.

Should you wish to read other Wilton Park reports, or participate in upcoming Wilton Park events, please consult our website www.wiltonpark.org.uk. To receive our monthly bulletin and latest updates, please subscribe to <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/newsletter/>