



## Briefing Note

# SOLIDAR FOUNDATION UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO EDUCATION AT A TIME OF ONLINE LEARNING

### Introduction

COVID-19, the most recent coronavirus strain, forced all countries to readjust in these trying times. The outbreak of this respiratory disease, that spreads person-to-person, emerged in November 2019 in China, in the Wuhan region. As authorities did not realise what they were confronting with, and as symptoms are flu-like, the virus spread unchecked until the end of December 2019 and beginning of January 2020. The first lockdown measures were set in the Wuhan province only at the end of January 2020. In the meantime, the new hotspot for COVID-19 became Italy and soon after the entire Europe. More countries announced different lockdown, which included limiting group gatherings, confining people to their homes unless for emergency grocery shopping, medical emergencies and work that cannot be performed remotely. As infection cases reached over 300000 and as the World Health Organisation (WHO) announced that the spreading of the virus accelerates, the current disruption is bound to last longer than foreseen.

Though the infected go through the most suffering, the disruption affects populations worldwide, especially as lockdowns impact all learning activities, formal, informal or non-formal. This is not to say that learning has been suspended but that it requires adaptation. Though the numbers update on a daily basis, data from UNESCO reveals that over 1.3 billion learners have been affected by educational institutions closures

across all levels of education, with 138 states announced country-wide closures. All EU learners in educational institutions are affected by this as there is an EU-wide closure, and the question is how can education be provided while ensuring people are not in limbo and do not suffer from isolation. As teleworking kicked off, online learning is the option for affected learners.

### Is online learning a viable alternative?

Online learning has not worked as planned, and, as our upcoming Citizenship and Lifelong Learning 2019 findings reveal, European education systems are underprepared for digitalisation. Since over 40% of EU citizens lack basic digital skills, how will it be possible for them to access online learning, or simply put to cope with a longer-term COVID-19 disruption? This part of the population is left behind due to inadequate implementation of national digital strategies. However, as our Monitor reveals, this is not a problem only for the ones lacking skills, but also for the others as there is tremendous regional inequality of digital infrastructure and possibility to attain digital skills across Europe. Italy, the epicentre of the COVID-19 crisis in Europe, was supposed to roll out a fast internet connection for the 36% of the households in the Southern part of the country by 2020. This number has not been achieved yet, and it would still be 20 percentage points lower than in the rest of Italy. As people are confined to their houses, they will not have access to teleworking or to online learning,

being completely excluded from society while in lockdown. Similar situations are found across rural areas in Spain and Germany, and this digital divide will only widen the gap in terms of academic achievement, since some learners, even if digitally skilled, are left behind by their peers that can engage in online learning. Out of the countries assessed within our Monitor, only Denmark and the UK recognised a fast internet connection as a public good. The COVID-19 outbreak establishes that this should be a universal acknowledgement given the level of digitalisation. States were not prepared to deal with such unforeseen circumstances which will only contribute to worsening the situation for the ones who are already the most disadvantaged in society.

The school curriculum, as our Monitor reveals, was not prepared for a society transitioning almost completely to the digital environment. The impact of COVID-19 requires citizens to have competences to behave socially responsible and civically conscious in the online realm, but as basic critical thinking skills have not been instilled into learners on this matter, it becomes dangerous to see how participation manifests in this age. The proliferation of fake news regarding the virus online is booming while sound advice is disregarded in the overload of information that citizens experience. Such misinformation online is becoming criminal because disregarding official advice has led to many life losses.

Though e-learning was seen as the solution to educational institutions' closures, it was little considered how this was to be delivered by teachers. Less than 40% across Europe report receiving 'ICT in the classroom' training in Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and 16% of them request the need for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) on this matter. With the teaching profession experiencing serious shortages due to perceived lack of appreciation and

due to an overwhelming workload which is poorly remunerated, this puts even more stress on teachers who are already seriously strained by the virus. Even though they lack proper training, they are supposed to implement digital alternatives which are not even properly established, with countries across the EU struggling to find the best tools for this and with each having different methods of implementation. The implementation of e-learning is left to teachers, who, again, must digitally upskill with limited support offered by authorities given the current lockdown conditions.

As this provision of online learning is unequal, depending on the resources that educational institutions have, that learners have at home, that the facilitators of online learning have – in terms of both digital infrastructure but also skills to use digital tools – many learners are left behind, which leads to inequality in academic achievement and ultimately leads to inequalities throughout life, that in a worst case scenario can be translated into social exclusion. Though we are in the early stages and is, therefore, difficult to track how much online learning is provided, data from the World Bank on Europe and Central Asia reveal that in 70% of the countries there is zero to minimal distance learning capabilities, with no country having universal curriculum-linked resources for teaching and learning, regardless of place and time.

### **Rescuing online learning one digital tool at a time**

Under this situation, we see how the backwardness regarding implementation of digital strategies is being addressed by contributions from private organisations, whether for profit or not for profit. The tech sector has provided many tools and alternatives for moving work and learning remotely, with a multitude of such digital resources being offered without the need to

pay for premium subscription. A list of such services can be found [here](#). These facilitate the operations of CSOs as well, as many depend on such tools to be able to continue their activity. The demand on CSOs is greater than ever, even as their resources are being threatened by this crisis. However, the work across Europe is inspiring. CSOs have served as a point of information for European citizens across this time of isolation. SOLIDAR Foundation members have been promoting the official advice in relation to the COVID-19 crisis, combatting fake news and informing citizens about their responsibility for social distancing and good hygiene.

[La Ligue de l'Enseignement](#), in France, raised awareness specifically for the 13 million French users that are digitally illiterate, organising a programme specifically for the ones most disadvantaged by the crisis. Their [Digital Solidarity programme](#) is set in partnership with [MEDNUM](#) (a digital inclusion cooperative organisation) and it provides a platform that contains tutorials on how to perform various basic digital tasks for the digitally illiterate. For those unable to access the platform, a phone number is provided, with volunteers working in two-hour shifts to assist with basic digital needs that people might have. This initiative is setting the groundwork for empowering people to engage in digital learning and participate responsibly in the digital society.

[Willi Eichler Foundation](#), in Germany, has gone one step further, providing educational cues based on the #stayathomechallenge. Every day, they have been posting various suggestions of documentaries, books, articles and other such cultural products for people to consume while in lockdown. A similar concept was employed by [CEMEA Belgium](#), with their Bubble of Air Facebook campaign, in which they provide podcasts, videos, articles or books and any other such products as suggestions for consumption

during the lockdown. The show of solidarity, coupled with the educational material, reveals an effort to maintain informal learning by all costs within the civil society.

[CEMEA France](#) has been making available free software digital tools. Though the tech sector has been offering free premium access to digital tools to all users, the cost paid is the copious amount of data that giants such as Google and Microsoft receive in such times of emergency when everyone is fully connected. [CEMEA France](#) offers an alternative in this way by providing access to a platform that links all digital tools needed for online learning without collecting data on its users. [The Zourit.net platform](#) used by [CEMEA France](#) allows for digital learning without giving up on freedom. This crisis should not provide a window of opportunity for uncritically using all digital tools available at hand.

### Digital reform

People have come together during this hardship and proved a tremendous amount of innovation in securing ways to continue the promotion of lifelong learning, revealing a rebellion against anything that would put life on hold. However, with all the support from various CSOs and from actors from the business sector, it remains true that many will remain socially excluded and that the current educational systems are not prepared for ensuring lifelong learning for integration in a digital society. When the crisis will pass, there will be moments to reflect, and public authorities must take action, contributing more to the development of digital skills. Digital strategies need to be effectively implemented and monitored, more resources must be allocated to close digital infrastructure gaps, teachers must be adequately prepared to use digital tools in the classroom, and CSOs must be allowed to participate in the promotion of digital skills given the creativity that they showed in this

time but also given the powerful reach that they have in people's lives for the promotion of lifelong learning.

SOLIDAR Foundation urges all education stakeholders to come together and to find alternatives for putting an end to the lack of preparation for digital participation, such as the effective implementation and monitoring of digital strategies, the provision of 'ICT in the classroom' training for teachers via ITE and CPD, ensuring inclusive learning environments as well as the reliance on all stakeholders, including CSOs, for delivering lifelong learning activities.