

Education Union Responses in Year 3 of the Covid-19 Pandemic

10 February 2022

Webinar Report



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale

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Introduction and overview

On February 10, 2022, Education International (EI) hosted an online meeting for member organisations entitled *Education Union Responses in Year 3 of the Covid-19 Pandemic*. The event was an opportunity for EI member organisations to share experiences, learn from each other, and strategise together. It provided a space to discuss the current situation in different countries, the challenges facing the profession, unions' actions and priorities, and successful strategies to support educators and school communities at this stage of the pandemic.

The event was moderated by the EI Deputy General Secretary, Haldis Holst, with Susan Hopgood, the EI President, offering introductory remarks. The first part of the event featured an expert presentation by Professor Salim Abdool Karim, head of South Africa's Ministerial Advisory Committee. Professor Abdool Karim provided insights into the current pandemic situation and its impact on education and answered questions from participants.

In the second part of the event, participants took the floor and shared information about their local situation, as well as the challenges faced by, and priorities of their unions.

370 participants from over 80 EI member organisations in more than 70 countries joined the webinar.

Expert input

Keynote address by Professor Salim Abdool Karim

Professor Abdool Karim is chair of South Africa's Ministerial Advisory Committee - a team of expert advisors who provide guidance to the South African government on its response to the Covid-19 pandemic. He shared his insights on the current pandemic wave, caused by the Omicron variant, its impact on education, and what can be expected in the next few months.

Professor Abdool Karim highlighted the following in his presentation:

- The peak caused by the Omicron variant is the highest ever recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is four times higher than any of the previous peaks.
- Studies show that closing schools does help limit transmission of the virus, but Professor Abdool Karim stressed that school closures are not a measure to be taken lightly.

- Variants have changed the Covid-19 'endgame' insofar as they have dashed hopes that vaccines alone would spell the end of the pandemic. New variants are sufficiently different from the initial virus, with each variant to date having been more transmissible and resistant to vaccine immunity. Five variants of concern have been identified so far.
- The most common way for a new variant to develop is when individuals who are immunocompromised are infected.
- Omicron has over 15 mutations compared to the original virus. These mutations translate into the virus being more effective at affecting the nose and bronchus, but less effective in affecting the lungs. This also changes the symptoms– patients infected with Omicron are more likely to experience a sore throat and a cough but are less likely to experience loss of smell and taste.
- Omicron also has a much lower death rate compared to previous variants. Despite the number of cases being higher than ever, admissions to hospitals have decreased and cases are less severe. This is not only because the population has been immunised with vaccines or through previous infections – it is also because of the mutations specific to the Omicron variant.
- Referring to the situation in South Africa, Professor Abdool Karim noted that although the wave is over, the number of cases is once more on the increase. The increase is associated with the reopening of schools in January, with cases rising the most among those aged 10 to 19. Scientists have also identified a new sub-variant of Omicron – BA2 – which has now taken hold in the country.
- In terms of preventive measures, Professor Abdool Karim stressed the need to remain vigilant and to employ all available prevention tools, with vaccines being an essential component.
- Professor Abdool Karim noted that the pandemic peak has increased with each successive variant. Each wave lasted longer and caused a higher number of deaths than the one before it. However, Omicron has changed that pattern. While the number of cases is higher than ever before and transmissibility has increased considerably, the virus has taken fewer lives.
- Looking to the future, it is not possible to predict the evolution of the pandemic. Each variant is created independently from other variants so there is no way to know what the next variant will look like. However, more waves and more variants are to be expected.

Questions and Answers

- **On the challenges around vaccine equity**

- Africa is struggling to get enough vaccines. The goal is to achieve a vaccination rate of 70% of the population but new variants may push the necessary vaccination level to 80 or 90%.
- A global crisis requires a global solution, but the world was not prepared. Instead, we chose a country or regional approach to fighting the pandemic. In the case of Covid-19, the first thing to happen was funds being diverted from the World Health Organization. Countries then allowed pharma companies to lead the pandemic response and decide on vaccine distribution.
- The TRIPS Waiver at the World Trade Organisation (which would temporarily waive intellectual property on Covid-19 vaccines, treatments and diagnostics) was supported by the US, but most EU countries objected, including Germany. Vaccine intellectual property is still protected.
- South Africa has developed its own copy of the Moderna vaccine but both Pfizer and Moderna have refused to share intellectual property and transfer technology.
- Countries in Africa are working to boost their vaccine production capacity in order to prepare for the next pandemic.

- **On repeated vaccinations – will a booster shot become a yearly necessity?**

Six months after receiving a dose of the vaccine, the antibody levels decrease. Boosters work to increase the level of antibodies and are effective. However, endless doses of the vaccines are not the solution. Scientists are working on various alternatives. For example, an intranasal version of the vaccine or a pan-coronavirus vaccine that would provide protection against all variants.

- **On the challenge to ensure distancing in crowded classrooms and schools**

Social distancing is one of the important preventive tools in the fight against the virus. South Africa has noted cyclical waves of the pandemic. After the current Omicron wave, scientists are relatively confident that there will not be another wave in the next three or four months. South Africa is exploiting this inter-wave period by maximising schooling at this time. The county expects a new wave at the end of April and is preparing to restore measures to limit the spread.

- **On vaccine hesitancy and how to make people feel safe to get the vaccine**

People who are genuinely anti-vaccine tend to comprise a very small group that receives disproportionate attention and is very vocal on social media. It is very unlikely to

convince them of the safety of vaccines. For the rest of the population, the situation is not as bleak. The early adopters of the vaccines were the people who lined up to receive their shot. The second group, however, must be reached out to and convinced – they are not vaccine hesitant but will not take initiative. South Africa is now running an outreach and information campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated.

- **On face masks for children and the extent of their usefulness**

The main value of wearing a mask is not protecting oneself but protecting those around us. The World Health Organization does not recommend that children wear masks because they produce less virus. Mask wearing for children should be restricted to congregated settings, where large groups gather in a closed space, like a classroom.

- **On whether the World Health Organization will declare Covid-19 endemic**

Professor Abdool Karim warned that endemic does not mean mild and gave HIV as an example of an endemic but fatal virus. We can hope the next variant will be mild but there are no guarantees.

[Click here](#) to download Professor Abdool Karim's presentation.

Input from education unions

One of the key objectives of the event was to provide a space for EI member organisations to share experiences and learn from each other about ongoing national developments, union priorities and successful strategies to support educators and education communities at this stage of the pandemic. Below is a summary of inputs provided by participants: it includes interventions made during the online open discussion, written contributions in the Zoom chat box and responses to the survey that was sent to all participants following registration. In total, 72 survey responses from 44 different countries were collected¹.

¹ Survey responses from the following 44 countries were collected: Argentina, Bahrain, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Costa Rica, Czech Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, France, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Kiribati, Kosovo, Liberia, Luxembourg, Mauritania, Mauritius, Namibia, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Northern Cyprus, Papua New Guinea, Portugal, Rwanda, Senegal, Solomon Islands, South Africa, South Korea, South Sudan, Spain, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Taiwan, The Netherlands, Turkey, Tuvalu, Uganda, United Kingdom (Scotland), United States of America, Zimbabwe.

Union demands and priorities

The **health and safety** of education personnel and communities remain among the top priorities for unions across contexts. Many participants from a variety of countries and regions reported that their current demands and actions are related to this aspect (Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Senegal, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Spain, Sri Lanka). Participants reported ongoing work and advocacy to ensure, in particular:

- The provision of Personal Protective Equipment (Kenya, Mauritania, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe), including in some cases the distribution of highly protective masks such as N95/FFP2 respirators (Canada, Germany, Ireland).
- The improvement of school infrastructure (Northern Cyprus, South Africa) and, in particular, ventilation practices indoors, through the provision of carbon dioxide monitors, mechanical ventilation, etc. (Brazil, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, New Zealand, South Africa).
- Appropriate testing strategies and adequate testing capacity in school settings (Germany, The Netherlands, Northern Cyprus).
- The provision of medical insurance for teachers and education personnel (Liberia, Mauritania).
- Entitlement to pay for staff required to isolate (New Zealand) or Covid-19 allowance (Zimbabwe).

Several participants mentioned that their organisation is calling for greater clarity and consistency around health protocols in schools and education settings (Canada, the Netherlands) and more dialogue with education unions on the matter (France, Kiribati, Portugal).

Education unions have also been working tirelessly to ensure the widespread **vaccination** of education personnel (Costa Rica, Mauritius, Solomon Islands, Turkey, Uganda) and sometimes including students (Brazil, Solomon Islands, Turkey).

In some cases, like South Africa, unions have been supporting compulsory vaccination for education personnel. Survey respondents from 18 countries reported that it was in place in their country. In jurisdictions for which survey respondents indicated that vaccination was not compulsory for education personnel (32 in total), it was reported that in 10 of them, staff needed to show some sort of certificate (proof of vaccination, negative test and/or recovery) to enter educational settings.

Respondents from 10 different countries indicated that education personnel had limited access to Covid-19 vaccines and vaccine hesitancy among education personnel was reported to be an issue in 26 countries.

Staff shortages, which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, are very prominent among union demands and priorities. Many unions are calling on governments to recruit more staff, including education support personnel, to support the implementation of Covid-19 protocols and guidelines in schools and allow for the replacement of infected staff (France, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, The Netherlands, Northern Cyprus, South Africa, Spain, Turkey). Closely related to this is unions' demand to reduce **class sizes** in many countries (Ireland, Israel, Japan, Mauritania, Namibia, Northern Cyprus, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey), especially to facilitate the implementation of social distancing in school settings.

Several participants shared that their organisation is calling for greater **investment** in schools and in education personnel, in general (Portugal, Sweden, Turkey, Uganda).

Assessing and addressing the **impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning** is high on unions' agenda. Issues related to the use of digital technologies in education were mentioned as a focus area by participants from several countries (Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Taiwan) and, in particular, the provision of IT tools for emergency online teaching and learning (Ghana, Japan, Namibia, Taiwan, Tuvalu). The need to clarify working conditions during online teaching was also reported to be a priority (New Zealand).

When it comes to addressing the impact of distance education on students and planning recovery, several unions reported that they are specifically exploring ways to address aspects related to assessment and examinations (France, South Africa, United Kingdom) and possible curriculum adaptation (Northern Cyprus). Some highlighted the need to support students who are struggling in the transition back to presential education after two years in an unregulated home environment (UK) and their call to put in place remedial programmes for students at risk of dropout (Argentina, France, Kenya).

Addressing mental health needs and providing psychosocial support for both students and staff is a priority across contexts (Brazil, Kenya, Namibia, Spain). Several participants mentioned that their unions are working to improve staff well-being and address increased workloads (Kenya, New Zealand, Sweden, Uganda, UK).

Union actions

Many participants reported that their organisation have been - or soon will be - engaging in collective bargaining (Argentina, New Zealand) and social dialogue (Canada, Czech Republic, Ireland, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kenya, The Netherlands, Nicaragua, South Africa, UK) to address issues related to Covid-19. In South Africa, the five teacher unions worked closely with the government to respond to the pandemic, amending learning programmes and school calendars to adapt to the situation. In Nicaragua, Québec and Scotland unions had successful dialogue and collaboration with the relevant authorities.

In some countries, unions had to take strike action to make their voices heard (Democratic Republic of Congo, France, Mauritania, Spain) or have been considering/threatening to do so (Israel, Liberia). In France, the unions staged a massive strike to protest the lack of consultation with the profession in decision-making processes, and teachers' poor working conditions.

Many unions are undertaking campaigns and awareness-raising activities (Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Uganda) to share information about Covid-19 and specifically, in relation to vaccination. In Israel, the union has set up a hotline for teachers. Participants from Senegal and Sweden indicated their organisations work closely with press and media in their Covid-19 response. In France, Northern Cyprus and South Africa, there have been collaborations with groups of doctors and/or scientists.

Unions have stepped up their work to support members and education communities in a variety of ways. In some countries, unions directly distributed Personal Protective Equipment (Brazil, Egypt, Kazakhstan, South Sudan) or handwashing stations (Liberia). In Mauritania, the union raised funds among members to provide financial assistance to members, as required. In Costa Rica, the union joined forces with another union from the *Istituto Costarricense de Electricidad* (ICE - Costa Rican Institute of Electricity) to lobby the government to set up telecommunications infrastructure in places where the internet was not accessible, to facilitate teaching remotely in these areas. In Nigeria, the union is supporting a programme where each teacher receives a laptop. In Rwanda, the union is working to train teachers in the use of technology. In Sweden, additional support and capacity development was provided to health and safety union representatives and membership services were expanded (increased opening hours and availability to non-members).

Successful measures and policies

Though in many cases participants indicated that their government's response was deemed insufficient or unsatisfactory in different respects, they did praise their Covid-19 response in relation to specific measures that were adopted and made a difference over the recent period:

- The distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (Canada, Czech Republic, Ireland, Kazakhstan, Mauritius, New Zealand);
- The vaccination campaign (Argentina) and the possibility to get vaccinated at the workplace (Nigeria, Uganda);
- The introduction of compulsory vaccination (New Zealand);
- The implementation of health protocols and mitigative measures in educational settings, e.g. compulsory mask wearing, social distancing, guidelines etc. (Canada, Kenya, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Sweden);
- The provision of carbon dioxide monitors/HEPA filters (Ireland);
- The implementation and improvement of testing strategies in educational settings (Germany, Israel);
- The possibility for vulnerable staff to work from home (France, Namibia), adjustments to sick leave provisions (New Zealand) and the introduction of an allowance for hazardous work (Japan);
- The provision of Employment Assistance Programme to all teachers (New Zealand);
- The provision of additional funding to schools with freedom to allocate as deemed appropriate (Japan);
- The additional recruitment of staff (Japan, Luxembourg);
- The reduction of class sizes (South Korea);
- The distribution of devices (PC/tablets) to students (Japan).

Participants from a few countries did report at this stage, **great unsatisfaction** in relation to their government's Covid-19 response in education (Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo, France, Northern Cyprus, Solomon Islands).

In France, the pandemic showed that education systems were not prepared to deal with the shock of the pandemic: large class sizes made social distancing impossible, and Omicron led to many cases of Covid-19 among students and teachers, resulting in school closures, as only 5% of absent teachers were replaced.

In Brazil, schools have been closed for a very long time and the pandemic has claimed many victims: the anti-vaccine movement is gaining ground and the union is working to educate people about vaccine safety. Teaching online is challenging and staff bear the extra cost it entails. Collaborating with the government is impossible.

In Northern Cyprus, for many years, public education has been underfunded and undermined by growing privatisation and commercialisation. During the pandemic, private schools were in a much better position to ensure that education could continue while public schools faced financial challenges. The union is advocating for quality public education for all.

You can find more information about EI's Covid-19 response on our dedicated [hub](#). Do not hesitate to share with us any update via covidresponse@ei-ie.org.