How COVID-19 school closures will affect inequalities in adult skills

School closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected learning to varying degrees in different countries. A new study sheds light on what this learning loss will mean for countries’ human capital in the decades to come.

Education is a human right and ensuring access to quality education for all is the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4) set by the United Nations General Assembly. While there is evidence that more children and youth worldwide have access to education, according to some indicators, the quality is in decline when looking at acquired skills such as literacy or numeracy.

Deeper research into the level of education and acquired skills is crucial to see how recent trends, such as school closures in the COVID-19 pandemic affect the workforce. A new study published in PLOS ONE projected adult skills until 2050 while measuring the effect of pandemic school closures on these skills.

“Our study for the first time provides projections of future human capital that captures both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, with clear relevance for progress towards development goals,” says coauthor Dilek Yildiz, a researcher in the IIASA Migration and Sustainable Development Research Group.

The study showed that the adult skills gap between countries in the Global North and countries in the Global South would likely continue to exist by 2050, even under very optimistic assumptions. However, the gap may widen or narrow depending on specific development trajectories.

The researchers also found that the loss of learning due to school closures during the pandemic would likely further exacerbate inequalities between countries. The acquired skills of students have particularly been affected in countries where schools have been closed for a prolonged period of time and the infrastructure for effective online schooling is lacking.
“The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is projected to erase decades-long gains in adult skills for affected cohorts unless policies to mitigate learning loss are implemented immediately,” notes IIASA Population and Just Societies Program Director Anne Goujon, who was also a study coauthor. “This could seriously compromise the achievement of SDG4 in many countries and therefore requires further efforts than those already needed to progress successfully toward the goal.”

Reference


Contacts:

Researcher contact

Claudia Reiter
Research Scholar
Social Cohesion, Health, and Wellbeing Research Group
Population and Just Societies Program
reiter@iiasa.ac.at

Dilek Yildiz
Research Scholar
Migration and Sustainable Development Research Group
Population and Just Societies Program
Tel: +43 2236 807 407
yildiz@iiasa.ac.at

Anne Goujon
Program Director and Principal Research Scholar
Population and Just Societies Program
Tel: +43 2236 807 530
goujon@iiasa.ac.at

Press Officer
Ansa Heyl
IIASA Press Office
Tel: +43 2236 807 574
Mob: +43 676 83 807 574
heyl@iiasa.ac.at

About IIASA:

The International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) is an international scientific institute that conducts research into the critical issues of global environmental, economic, technological, and social change that we face in the twenty-first century. Our findings provide valuable options to policymakers to shape the future of our changing world. IIASA is independent and funded by prestigious research funding agencies in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe. www.iiasa.ac.at
URL for press release: