



Mapping the Distance Learning Assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa



Background

Most of the world's governments (192 countries) have temporarily closed educational institutions in order to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, some countries have begun to reopen schools, but as of May 10, 2020, approximately 72% of the total number of pupils and students enrolled are still outside the classroom.

Mitigation schemes put in place by Governments include facilitating the delivery of distance learning programs through television and radio, encouraging the use of online courseware through forums such as webinars and podcasts, and subsidizing Internet connectivity rates so that more families, teachers and schools can afford connectivity. In addition, some teachers have put in place several distance learning mechanisms to ensure continuity of learning, including preparing take-home packages for students, creating online teaching and learning platforms, and using social media platforms such as WhatsApp to share learning materials and tests.

In the context of prolonged school and distance education closures, considerations related to the management of examinations and assessments have been among the main concerns of many governments. Several coping strategies are being adopted in different regions, such as maintaining examinations with special provisions, or decisions to cancel, postpone, organize online, or implement other approaches to validation and certification. This is particularly the case for end-of-cycle examinations, which would allow the student to progress to the next level or to certify the degree of knowledge acquisition.

Methodology

In response to the current crisis and updated information about the distance learning assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa, TALENT conducted three surveys for representatives of the Ministry of Education in 49 countries.

More specifically, the purpose of the surveys was to know the decision on learning assessment since the beginning of the pandemic, mainly about:

- 1) the status of the High-Stakes Certificate Examinations;
- 2) the status of the Large-scale assessment, and
- 3) initiatives of Classroom-based Assessments.

Between October 15th and November 3rd, 69 surveys were completed. The surveys were available in google form or digital file format and in three languages (English, French, and Portuguese).

Considering at least one survey was completed by country, the response rate was 73% (36 of 49). 29% of the countries responded to one survey, 22% two surveys and 22% three surveys.

The survey response rate was 41% for High-Stakes Certificate Examinations, 43% for Large-scale assessments, and 57% for Classroom-based assessments. The results consider a country as the unit of analysis.



Key Findings

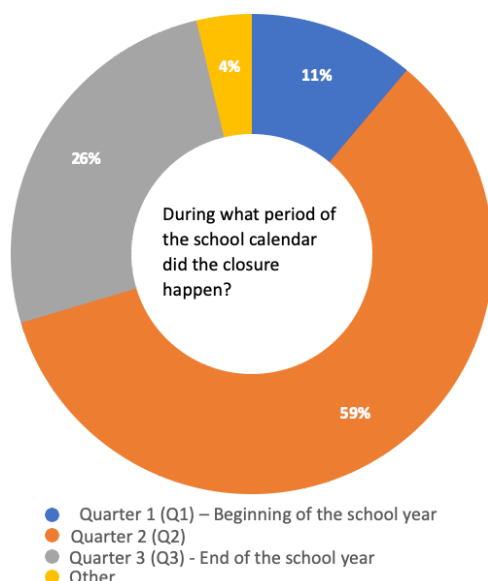
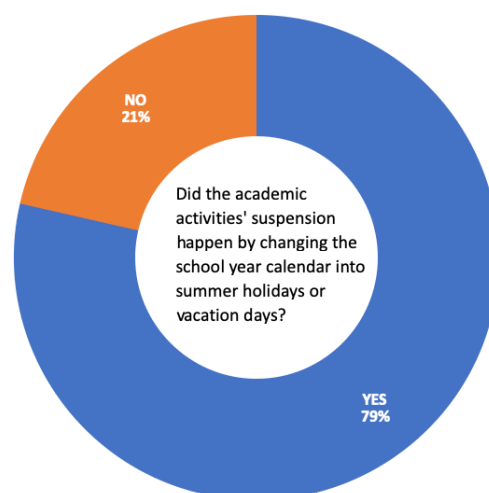
1. Due to the school closure, students fell behind more than two months of a year of learning.
2. Countries organized high and low-tech distance learning strategies in record time. However, the lack of monitoring of the beneficiaries, especially among the vulnerable students, could increase inequalities, even after schools reopen.
3. Despite challenges of access to distance learning and the lack of training for teachers, many countries continued to conduct school-based assessments.
4. School systems maintain end-of-the-year assessments and pass or fail students' policies, highlighting the importance of monitoring retention and drop-out rates, especially among vulnerable groups.
5. High-stakes examinations performed on a changed data, and large-scale assessments were postponed in many countries

Key Finding 1

Due to the school closure, students fell behind more than two months of a year of learning.

Almost all (93%) of the countries that responded to the survey closed their schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic in March. Approximately 200 million students had their school routine interrupted abruptly, denying a daily opportunity for in-person classes. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to amplifying the education problems in the region because several months before, a significant number of schools in some countries had also been closed for months due to severe insecurity, strikes, or climatic hazards. The survey results show most countries closed their schools at least three months after the beginning of the school year. In 59% of countries, schools closed during the 2nd quarter and in 26% in the 3rd quarter.

The first response to school closures was essentially an extended summer break for students and teachers. In 79% of the countries, the academic activities were suspended by changing the school year calendar into summer holidays. On average, the summer break lasted 84 days. But in some countries, like Gambia, Mauritius, and Uganda, the summer break was over 100 days.

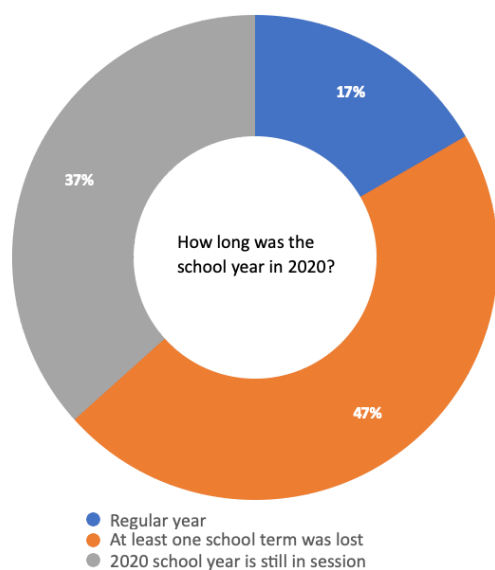


School closures' impact on educational outcomes significantly affects learning gaps and dropout rates, even after a short period (Alban Conto et al., 2020). The 'summer lost' literature shows that students experience learning loss in mathematics (particularly in computations/procedures) and reading during the summer break, and disadvantaged students have more significant learning decay. On average, students lose about one month's worth of learning over the entire summer break (Cooper et al., 1996). Considering the literature of the effects of disruptions due to epidemics or natural disasters, Sierra Leone's experience with Ebola shows that, after eight months of closure, most children returned unable to recall the pedagogical material they had learned pre-Ebola.

Almost all of the countries reopened (fully or partially) their schools by early November. In 64% of the countries, the schools reopened starting a new school year (2020/2021), which meant that the 2020 school year was shorter. For 46% of the countries, at least one school term was lost in 2020. On average, the schools remained closed for 172 days, considering as a baseline March 15th, the date the WHO declared a worldwide pandemic. 50% of the countries reopened schools earlier for only a few grades, mainly for the grades that take the high-stakes certification exams. On average, the schools reopened 30 days earlier for those grades. However, this difference could reach more than two months in some countries, such as Burkina Faso, Namibia, and Togo.

On June 15, 2020, the schools reopened for examination classes namely CM2 (Primary), class 3 e (Secondary 1), class 1 and Terminale (Secondary 2) for a period of 4 to 6 weeks of review before the official exams.

TOGO

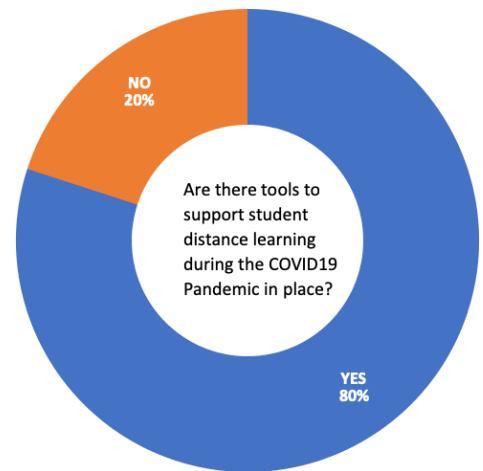


It is important to remember that the academic activities were suspended due to school closure. On average, during 50% of the school closure time, students and teachers were on summer holiday. The worldwide survey conducted by UNICEF, UNESCO, and the World Bank between June and October showed that in low and lower-middle-income countries, the share of instruction days missed corresponded to 31% and 35%, on average, respectively. The findings show that the school closures have a significant impact on reducing the students' learning time, which could lead to greater learning gaps between and within countries in the region.

Key Finding 2

Countries organized high and low-tech distance learning strategies in record time. However, the lack of monitoring of the beneficiaries could increase exclusion and inequality, even after schools reopen

The COVID-19 pandemic also forced the countries to start an unprecedented transition towards remote learning to facilitate education continuity and mitigate the school closures' impact. Among the survey respondents, 80% put in place tools to support student distance learning, including high and low-tech solutions. However, 1 and 5 countries faced problems establishing distance learning. In other countries, students may have access to programs, but they cannot complete any activities due to the lack of electricity, internet connectivity, and devices.



“ The main challenges are deficient access to electricity, media, and internet coverage. Also, low levels of education for many families and insufficient access to textbooks. ”

ANGOLA

In sub-Saharan Africa, barely 25% of families in rural areas have access to electricity. The internet connection is usually low and available to only 22% of the population. Nearly 90% of students in the region do not have home computers, and families often have only one smart phone. The countries also are using low-tech channels to reach students, such as radio, television programs and printed material.

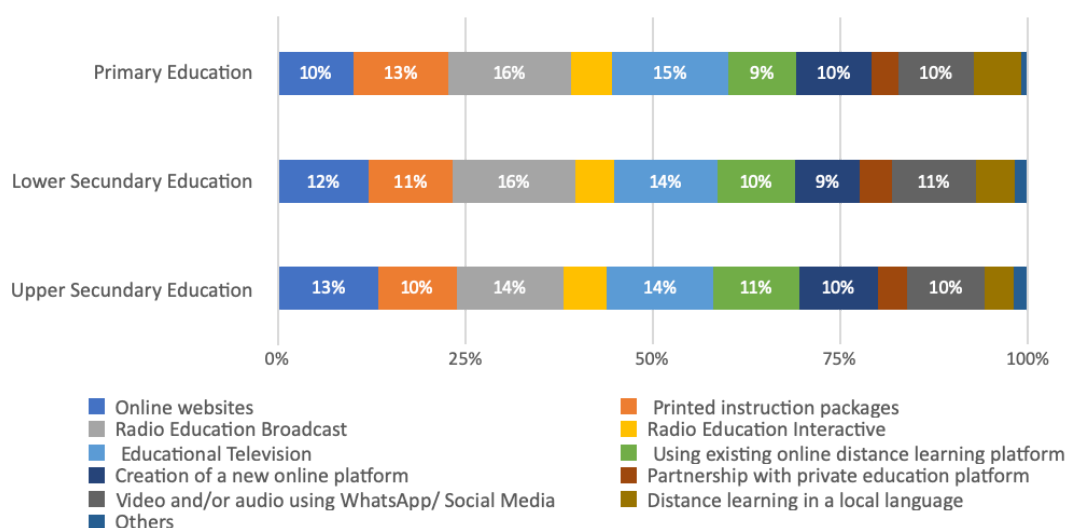
“ Inability to manage Distance Education and therefore need for training as well as computer tools and connections. ”

CAMEROON

However, despite the format of remote learning programs to mitigate school closures' impacts, it is important to consider the students' lack of motivation and difficulties in establishing a home study routine. These problems are heightened in the households negatively affected by the Covid-19 induced recession, and many children, especially girls, and special needs children.

The results indicate that the countries are using multiple strategies to provide distance education to students. Radio and television have been widely used to reach students of all educational levels (33% Primary Education; 30% Lower Secondary Education and 28% Upper Secondary Education). Countries have also adopted high-tech programs, such as online websites, WhatsApp, social media and learning platforms (29% Primary Education; 31% Lower Secondary Education and 34% Upper Secondary Education).

Equity-focused strategies like printed instruction packages and distance learning in a local language have been also part of some countries' strategies (20% Primary Education; 16% Lower Secondary Education and 14% Upper Secondary Education).



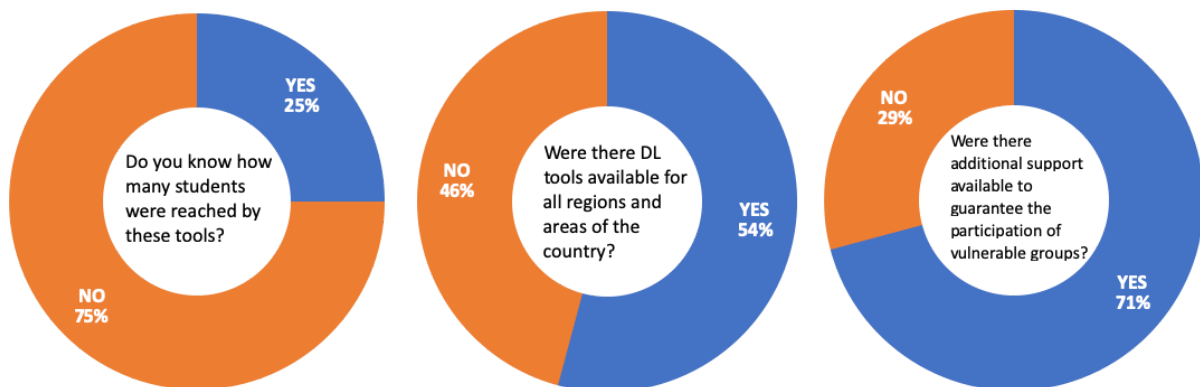
The rapid mobilization of resources (financial and technical) from different development partners in SSA countries has been an essential factor in organizing distance education programs involving a combination of high, low technology and an explicit focus on equity and inclusion.

Many countries established partnerships with national television networks, local radio stations, and internet companies (free access through special packages) to increase distance education programs' reach.

“ The Ministry's strategy is to multiply the channels of intervention: student's notebooks, courses on the radio, courses on television and a digital and interactive but limited platform. ”

GABON

There is no doubt that these distance education initiatives can be mobilized during other periods of school closures or in the process of reopening schools for the 2020/2021 school year. Indeed, 58% of the countries surveyed that have already reopened included some form of distance learning in their protocols. To mitigate learning gaps, countries should invest in robust monitoring systems to track access to distance learning programs. It also requires a significant effort to ensure curriculum content alignment across different distance education methods and the establishment of monitoring protocols for program beneficiaries. Information channels should be reconsidered and checked to ensure that they are sufficient and that they do indeed reach the intended beneficiaries. The results show that 75% of the countries did not have information on the number of students reached by the distance learning programs, indicating a lack of monitoring. Simultaneously, 46% of the countries answered that distance learning tools are not available for all regions.



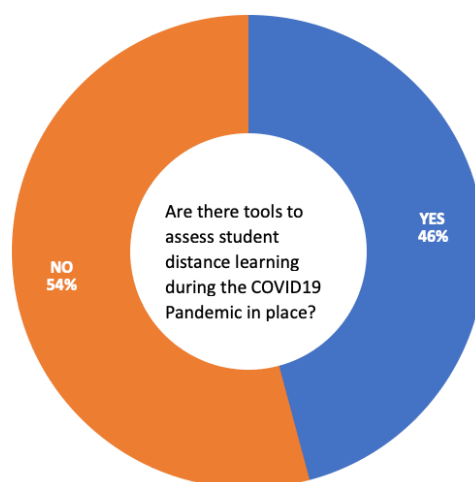
On the other hand, 71% of the countries provided additional support to guarantee girls, refugees, vulnerable students (including from the lowest quintile), and special needs children. These results could be capturing the low-tech distance learning programs implemented, like the printed instructions package. However, the monitoring system must be disaggregated by girls, refugees, and special needs children, considering each group's specific needs.

While the distance learning initiative was welcomed by education stakeholders and partners, it should be noted that Internet access was a great challenge for some beneficiaries, especially in remote localities where connection is sometimes uncertain. In addition, radio and television programs are not accessible to all children, due to multiple factors, among others: issues energy source, the modest income of some households.

Key Finding 3

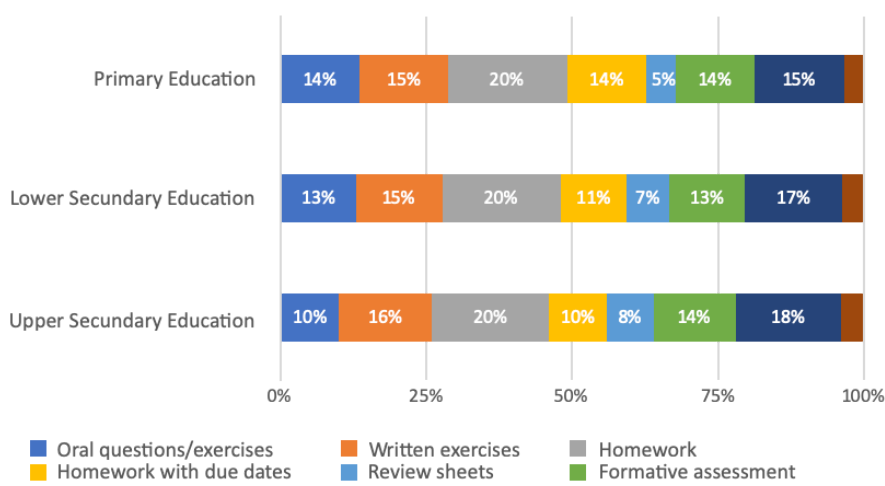
Despite challenges of access to distance learning and the lack of training for teachers, many countries continued to conduct school-based assessments

The results indicate that more than half (54%) of the countries that offered distance learning programs did not use tools to assess students during the pandemic. This approach of distance learning allows students to keep a routine, participate in some academic activities, and stay connected to their schools. However, teachers are unable to monitor learning and identify students that are falling behind. Less than half (46%) of countries with distance learning programs used tools to assess students. They used a combination of homework and written exercises (35% across the levels) and formative and summative assessments (29% in Primary Education, 30% in Secondary Education, 32% in Upper Secondary Education). These classroom assessments are often used to prepare students for the end-of-the year / high stakes exams .



In 54% of the countries, the assignments were graded, which indicates that despite the difficulties to implement distance learning programs, schools continued to maintain evaluation policies.

Given the inequities generated by massive school closure and unequal access to distance learning, high stakes assessment and grading policies could affect the most disadvantaged students. School systems should take this into account in the reopening protocols. In addition, over half (52%) of teachers did not receive training in distance learning. This likely hindered their effectiveness and ability to conduct assessments.



Key Finding 4

School systems maintain end-of-the-year assessments and pass or fail students policies, highlighting the importance of monitoring retention and drop-out rates, especially among vulnerable groups

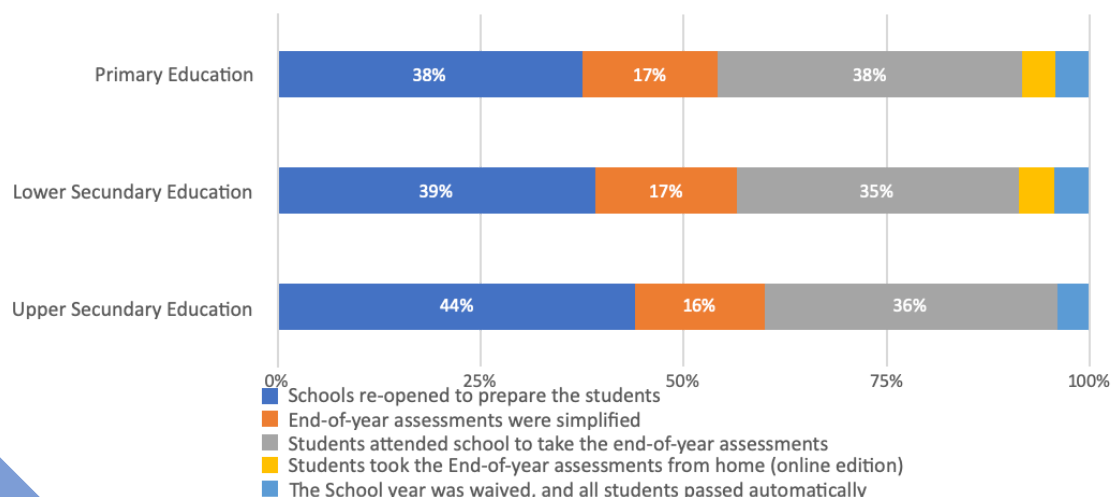
Despite the disruptive nature of the school year, nearly all the countries surveyed that have completed the 2020 school year have maintained their policies to pass or fail students at the end of the year. While almost 1 out of 5 countries offered a simplified version of the exam either online or in-person, most conducted standard in-person assessments.

On the one hand, monitoring student performance is crucial to identify inequities in learning and students at risk of dropping out and effectively allocate resources to the most disadvantaged students and schools. Results from assessments are key inputs to develop effective remedial programs that target the lowest performing students. On the other hand, high stakes assessments that determine student promotion may foster greater inequities due to the unequal access to distance learning opportunities and resources in the household.

“The courses were held on TV, radio and students to better prepare for in-person exams during the closing of classes and on the resumption on June 2 only for the exam classes, the course booklets were distributed to all students.”

CONGO, REP

The most disadvantaged students are less likely to have access to remote learning opportunities and thus are more likely to repeat grades and drop-out of school. This result needs to be carefully monitored, considering the high levels of retention and dropout rates in Sub-Saharan Africa, especially among vulnerable children.



Key Finding 5

High-stakes examinations performed on a changed date, and large-scale assessments were postponed in many countries

The COVID-19 pandemic and related school closures impacted learning assessments. All the countries that responded to the survey affirmed to plan a high-stake certification in 2020, in a total of 29 assessments, including Lower and Upper Secondary Education and 18 assessments for Primary Education. Most part of the the high-stakes exams were conducted on a different date than the original one proposed. All the cases the main strategy to conduct the exams was to reopen school to prepare the students and take the exams. Around 20% of the countries reduced the curriculum content to be assessed. Less than half (41%) of countries had additional support or resources available to guarantee the participation of girls and refugees, vulnerable (including from the lowest quintile), and special needs children during certification examination period.

Many of the schools had large class sizes with poor sanitation that are difficult for physical distancing and washing . Besides, many of the secondary schools had been used as quarantine centers for the patients. **ETHIOPIA**

After the closure of schools due to the COVID-19, our examination calendar was greatly affected as we had to postpone the examination timetables for all the levels. This also affected the preparations for the subsequent examinations. **MALAWI**

The Ministry had to pay the examination fees for candidates whose parents had lost their jobs and could not pay as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. **LESOTHO**

Many countries report the difficulties of organizing the certification exams, mainly related to maintain the health recommendations (social distancing and hygiene) and to have less time to prepare students due to the school closure and changes of the calendar.

Lessons learned from the exams' organization can be useful resources in the reopening school period, mostly focusing the schools' efforts on developing a more systematic diagnostic and formative assessment of student learning.

In 64% of the countries that responded to the survey, large-scale assessment were planned in 2020, for a total of 20 assessments, including national and international assessments such as EGRA/EGRAM, PASEC and SEACMEQ and involving Primary Education students. In many countries (72%), the large-scale assessments were postponed until further notice or cancelled. South Sudan conducted an assessment to monitor student performance using household surveys and to measure school readiness on WASH facilities to support the development of reopening school protocols and the effectiveness of the distance learning activities.

📖📖 The large-scale learning assessment was initially planned for 2020. Following the disruptions due to Covid-19, this activity was postponed to 2021, however, the pilot assessment is being carried out in early November 2020 in the 4 targeted provinces. 📖📖 **CONGO, DEM. REP.**

📖📖 The competence on recognition of the letters of the alphabet reveals that the majority of the Grade Three pupils had not mastered the basic skills of literacy specified in the syllabus. 📖📖 **SOUTH SUDAN**

📖📖 Considering that our examination and assessment were not supported by technology, we could not administer them online. It was totally cancelled. So, this year two overlapping cohorts will take the examination both at the beginning and end of the academic year. 📖📖 **ETHIOPIA**

The loss of government revenues due to COVID-19 and reallocation of resources towards healthcare-related spending will likely lead to significant cuts in funding for public education. The current economic slowdown and increased demands for spending to cover the costs associated with the COVID-19 response (school hygiene, social distancing, technology and training for remote learning, targeted interventions for students falling behind) requires governments to make more efficient and equitable financial decisions to minimize the negative effects of revenue losses. Conducting national assessments is crucial to manage educational finance more efficiently and make more informed decisions.