

When the Great Equalizer Closes

Differential Learning Environment and Access to Quality Education and Jobs for Vocational Students in Uganda

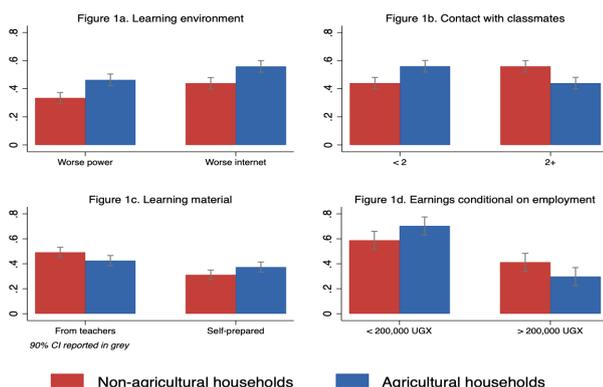
Livia Alfonsi (University of California, Berkeley)
Sara Spaziani (Brown University)
Mary Namubiru (BRAC Uganda)

Covid-19 induced school closure is likely to exacerbate pre-existing poverty and gender gaps in access to quality education and jobs

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Topic at a Glance

To curb the spread of COVID-19, Uganda implemented one of Africa's strictest lockdowns. With all educational institutions entirely shut down for seven months, students, and in particular, those attending boarding schools, found their daily lives in total disarray. In this policy brief, we use data from a phone survey with 811 students enrolled in the National Certificate Course at five Vocational Training Institutes (VTIs) across central and eastern Uganda. 60% of the students in the sample are male, and the average student is 20 years old. In 2020 school closures impacted around 250 million students in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2021). Our survey was conducted in June 2020, three months into the Ugandan school closure, to contribute evidence toward understanding how the pandemic affected students' learning environments, mental health and time use in the very short run. This study is a spin-off of the Meet Your Future Project, an ongoing RCT designed to investigate the relative importance of several barriers to quality employment that students face when transitioning from the educational sector into labor markets characterized by high levels of informality. Evidence on medium and long run effects of the school closure will be available in the near future.



New Insights

Across the world, the prevalence and intensity of the pandemic's negative consequences on the youths have largely been determined by their household coping capacity. In the analysis that follows we proxy respondents' socio-economic status (SES) with pre-pandemic data on household's main source of income which we classify as agricultural in 49% of cases, either subsistence or commercial, and non-agricultural, either wage employment or family business, for the remaining 51% of cases. Agricultural households reported substantially lower household asset (car, fridge, electricity) and technological asset (smartphone, computer, tv) ownership and they are more likely to be situated in rural areas. Consistent with information from developed and developing contexts, we find that the closure of schools in their role of great equalizers exacerbated existing inequalities, with potentially long-term consequences on education and labor market outcomes.

School closures widen pre-existing inequalities in access to schooling

Forced by the school dorms' closure in late March, the students moved back to their family home. There, many had to adjust to inadequate learning environments: 52% reported having worse access to internet, 39% worse access to power and 52% less space to study and concentrate. These shares are significantly higher among agricultural households, particularly for those who rely on subsistence agriculture as their main source of income (Figure 1a).

Students were not only physically uprooted but also overall disconnected from their school communities. In the first three months of school closure 53% of the students never heard from their teachers. The rest reported communicating with them once a month or once a week in approximately equal share. Students have instead maintained some contact with their classmates: the majority are in contact with more than two of them and only 7% of the students reported not being in contact with any. Students from agricultural households, underrepresented among those in contact with more than two classmates, seem more detached from their school (Figure 1b).

In the first three months of school closure, 80% of the students reported trying to keep up with the syllabus. Before the lockdown, teachers prepared materials to help students continue their studies remotely. To supplement, some teachers created WhatsApp groups through which to share new material and links to online material. However, smartphone penetration is not high among the sample. As a result, only 46% of the students practiced on teacher-prepared or online materials. The rest practiced on self-prepared material. Students from agricultural households are overrepresented among those relying on self-prepared material and underrepresented among those studying on material prepared by teachers and online material (Figure 1c). The disparities are substantially worse when looking at students from agricultural households that rely on subsistence agriculture as main source of income.

School closures likely widen pre-existing gaps in access to labor market opportunities

Since the beginning of the lockdown, over 30% of the students in our sample had worked, mostly for pay and in the sector in which they were being trained while at the VTIs. Even though there emerges no difference between female and male students when it comes to time spent studying as well as contacts with classmates and teachers, less than half as many of the female students as male students were involved in any work activity (18% vs. 40%). One explanation could be that female students were required to help with domestic work and childcare. Another explanation could be that the sectors characterized by a stricter lockdown are female dominated (hairdressing, hotel services, teachers, and catering/restaurants). This difference is likely to widen the gender gap present in access to quality employment as male students may acquire an advantage in the labor market by gaining practical knowledge and job experience during the school closures. Students from agricultural households were as likely to work as the students from non-agricultural households. However, conditional on having worked, they worked for more days but overall earned significantly less (Figure 1d).

Policy Recommendations

When possible, operate partial closures or staggered reopen prioritizing on SES

Schools should remain open as much as possible, with closure as a last resort, and actions, such as providing masks and offering single dormitory rooms, should be taken in accordance with public health guidelines. The education system should also consider infrastructure adjustments and offering in-person study to disadvantaged students who lack the possibility to learn from home to lessen strain on their learning progress.

Shared ad hoc tools to assess learning losses and remedial education

The heterogeneity in learnings material and time devoted to schooling portend heterogenous learnings losses across students. New standardized learning assessment tools would be developed to allow the government to direct resources in a targeted manner to those most in need. Remedial education should be provided to those students who have fallen behind and should be offered at no cost as these students are likely to belong to the poorest households and areas.

Be prepared should it happen again

In this era of increased mobility and interconnectedness, disrupting events similar to the pandemic are a continuous threat. The first two recommendations below intend to level the playing field in the present, while the following two aim to prepare a level field for the future.

- Facilitate access to smart phones through loan programs to the schools who will then loan out devices to students who do not have one;
- Reduce the cost of data by partnering with Internet service providers to provide free internet access to educational content;
- Enhance internet coverage in peri-urban and rural areas;
- Organize all the material produced so far to facilitate remote learning by educational institutions across the country in one location so that all the work does not go to waste and less resourceful schools can have access to better material.

Limitations

The study's attrition of approximately 25% is also correlated with ownership of a telephone or smartphone, indicating that attrition has likely contributed to restricting the sample of students to those of a higher socioeconomic status than the poorest households. Last, it is important to stress that although the research establishes that female students are half as likely to have worked during the lockdown in comparison to their male counterparts, we acknowledge that it is not possible for us to determine the mechanism that is responsible for this disparity.

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