

UNICEF Education COVID-19 Case Study

Timor Leste – Opening up better with the Learning Passport

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for every child



Girls learning at home using the Learning Passport - © UNICEF / Timor Leste / 2020 / UNI3207854 / Soares

When schools closed in Timor Leste at the end of March, affecting [408,633 learners](#), the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports quickly seized on the online learning platform [Learning Passport](#) developed through a [partnership between UNICEF and Microsoft](#) as a way to deliver its “[Eskola ba Uma](#)” (School at Home) distance learning programme. Although it was the country’s first foray into digital learning, within 48 hours of its launch, nearly 1,000 users signed up. This marked the beginning of a series of transformative changes in the Timorese education system.

COVID-19 as a catalyst to change

The Learning Passport is a critical tool in the country’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. During school closures from 23 March to 23 June, it was a way to keep children learning from home. During reopening, it was used successfully to prepare teachers, reaching 95 percent of the work force or more than 15,000 teachers through online training. As of September 2020, the total number of registered users had climbed to 23,454. The Director General of Policy, Planning and Inclusion at the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sports, Ms. Odilia Martins, captured the excitement of the achievement:

The introduction of the Learning Passport during the COVID-19 emergency made us rethink and prioritise ICT in education in Timor-Leste. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to UNICEF and Microsoft for helping us set up the Learning Passport in such a short time span. Not only did it allow us to continue to offer digital access to educational materials to children while schools were closed, it also allowed us to train all teachers on COVID-19 prevention, helping us meet the requirements for the reopening of schools. Although schools are now back in session, the Learning Passport continues to be our public access digital library for all Ministry teaching and learning materials, for students as well as teacher training.

A sentiment echoed by UNICEF Representative, Valérie Taton:

We moved extremely fast. We had television programmes being broadcast within a week of schools being closed. One week later, we had launched the Learning Passport and for the first time ever, we now have the entire curriculum online. The Learning Passport has helped us reimagine the future of education – from purely school or physical space reliant learning to online studying and training.

It has not been easy. Internet connectivity is not always stable; data can be costly; families typically have only one smart phone; and most teachers and parents did not head into the pandemic with well practised digital skills. The education community had to find solutions along the way, including the development of a [mobile app](#) to enable learners to download

contents and work offline; negotiated agreements with mobile phone companies to reduce data costs; and rapidly executed online training for teachers and educational personnel to get up to speed.

Despite these challenges, change began to take root. Students adapted to digital learning. Teachers gained new skills. Teacher training went online – something the Ministry plans to continue, given the cost savings and simplified logistics. Content is growing to include courses for adolescents – previously reviewed by a seven-person Youth Advisory Group – to help them to develop 21st century skills, such as problem solving, critical thinking, financial literacy, and coding, thanks to partnerships with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Brazil’s INSPER. Education officials began to upload e-books in local languages and other learning materials with an accessible format, featuring audio and interactive elements to engage children with disabilities as well as their peers. Inspired by the possibilities, the country is now working on making its textbooks available in digital, accessible formats. Longer-term investments are being planned to increase educational authorities’ ability to develop new multimedia content and to broaden the country’s digital architecture, connectivity, and access to affordable data and devices. Inspired by successes during COVID-19, the vision is to connect every child in Timor Leste to world-class digital learning.

KEY FEATURES

- **Embrace innovation** – Willing to embrace innovation, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, with support from UNICEF and Microsoft, was able to launch a national online learning platform for children within weeks.
- **Engage partners** – The leapfrog to digital learning was a result of many partners joining together, including the Government, UNICEF, Microsoft, national telecommunication companies, development partners, non-governmental organisations, and volunteers.
- **Put equity at the centre** – Materials on the Learning Passport quickly grew to include an increasing number of accessible e-books as well as titles available in a variety of national languages. The development of the mobile app also expanded access by increasing the number of devices able to access content and enabling offline learning.

EMERGENT LESSONS LEARNED

- **Maintain momentum despite challenges** – To find solutions to the digital divide, UNICEF is collaborating with Government and other key partners to hold the first ever “Reimagine Education: ICT & Innovation in Timor Leste” conference in October 2020.
- **Adopt a communication strategy to increase engagement** – UNICEF is assisting the Government with a communications strategy to increase the number of children, teachers, and parents who embrace digital learning. The behaviour change element is necessary to overcome beliefs that ICT in education is a nice-to-have rather than a critical way to open up learning opportunities and life prospects for Timorese children. Ways to link the Learning Passport to social media are also being explored.
- **Link to longer-term opportunities** – Education authorities used the Learning Passport to confront the pandemic. They are also strengthening digital learning in longer-term sector planning and budgeting to make the system more resilient.
- **Use equity to guide expansion and make transformative change** – Government has been quick to seize on digital learning as a way to overcome long-standing bottlenecks gaps in educational rights based on disability and language and to modernise pedagogy and professional development. COVID-19 has been the catalyst to spur rapid, long-lasting change to how the system works.
- **Make learning more interactive and fun** – Use digital tools to increase student motivation and engage young children.

OTHER RESOURCES

For other resources, including more case studies, please click [here](#) and filter by “Area of Work” (Education).

For more information, please see:

The Timor Leste Country Office Website: <https://www.unicef.org/timorleste/>

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