



Viet Nam Case Study

Situation Analysis on the Effects
of and Responses to COVID-19
on the Education Sector in Asia



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October 2021

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Foreword

The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

COVID-19 – possibly the largest pandemic the world has ever seen- led to an economic crisis probably more radical and global than ever before; as well as disruption of learning on an unprecedented scale. The pandemic caused a major children's rights crisis: all service sectors being profoundly impacted, with the most disadvantaged being disproportionately affected.

In response, with support from the Global Partnership for Education, UNICEF and UNESCO joined forces with Mott MacDonald, Cambridge Education to carry out a situation analysis, primarily to generate analyses to inform strategic responses to the crisis going forward. While the extension and duration of the pandemic required to invest more time to produce the final analyses and reports, fortunately information had already been discussed through webinars and national conversations with Ministries of Education and other partners across large parts of the Asia Pacific region.

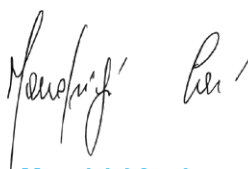
Furthermore, the reports continue to be of utmost relevance given subsequent waves of COVID-19 sweeping across the world in 2021 and very likely in 2022 as well. The task of learning from the crisis and how to mitigate its effects in education is on-going. More than one academic year has now been lost for many children. To ensure continuity of learning whilst schools are closed, the delivery of education is radically changing today through distance education: digital, blended or hybrid learning have become part of the new learning reality which all Governments, teachers and learners will have to adjust to.

While major efforts are needed to mitigate the learning loss of those children who return to school in the post-COVID-19 recovery phase, we must also remember that many children were not learning before the crisis and several million were not even in schools. The reports therefore also explore opportunities to build back better and to re-imagine education; to shift from fact-based didactic methodologies to competency-based approaches, which are more flexible, better respond to the holistic needs and aspirations of all children, and provide opportunities for life-long learning as per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 agenda.

While the suite of reports provided within the Regional Situation Analysis are particularly relevant to the Asia Pacific region, contexts of course vary considerably across our huge region. At the same time, the reports may also provide insights that are relevant to other regions around the world. Hopefully the findings, including the country case studies, and regional budget needs analysis will help governments resume and accelerate progress towards SDG 4. The way education is conceptualized and delivered is changing fast, and the transformation journey will be steep and full of challenges. Governments, donors, all partners and the private sector will need to work together, not only to get the strategies and levels of investment right, but to build more resilient, effective and inclusive systems, able to deliver on the promise of education as a fundamental human right for all children, whether schools are open or closed.



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List of acronyms

ANLAS	Analysis of National Learning Assessment Systems
AVR	Augmented and Virtual Reality
BOET	Bureau of Education and Training
CLC	Community Learning Centre
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
CRWG	Child Rights Working Group
GSO	General Statistics Office
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
MoET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOH	Ministry of Health
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
NMHP	National Mental Health Programme
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OMT	Online Management Training Company
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SEA-PLM	Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics
VAEFA	Vietnam Association of Education for All
VNDMA	Viet Nam Disaster Management Authority
VNIES	Viet Nam National Institute of Educational Sciences
WASH	Water, sanitation and hygiene
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Viet Nam reported its first case of COVID-19 on January 23, 2020¹, yet even before this case was discovered, the government had started planning a response, having established effective health structures following the management of SARS in 2003. The success of containing COVID-19 has been attributed to a well-developed public health system, a containment strategy based on comprehensive testing, tracing and quarantining, and an effective communication campaign.² The focus of this case study is to:

- Analyse the effects of and response to COVID-19 during the months of school closure; and
- Offer some recommendations for the Viet Nameese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) based on the Lessons learned.

This case study is part of a series of reports across Asia commissioned by UNICEF and UNESCO to share lessons across countries. It outlines the challenges facing Viet Nam's education sector prior to the pandemic, and exacerbated by it, as well as both the successes and lessons learned from MoET's response. This is followed by recommendations in the current context (in February 2021) for 'building back better' and focusing on the future.

The main challenges facing the education sector during the pandemic were:

- Providing a quick response to the pandemic so as to keep all children safe by closing schools, while facilitating distance learning;
- Ensuring access and connectivity issues are solved within a short period of time, particularly for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups of students;
- Capacitating teachers to adapt to preparing and supporting online and distance learning, without much prior training; and
- Child safety and protection issues such as reduced nutrition, water supply and increased risks to student mental health.

Main effects and responses

While the pandemic raged, the health of the nation was generally protected, but it came at a cost with reduced incomes, poor nutrition, reduced health services and the closure of schools.

As part of the COVID-19 containment strategy, schools did not open as planned at the end of January, 2020, but gradually re-opened in May, with a priority for exam classes in Grades 9 and 12. While reducing transmission and keeping children safe, MoET was determined that children and young people should "continue learning despite school closure"³, by implementing distance learning both online and on television. To make up for lost time, the length of the school holiday in July was reduced.



With teaching and learning moving online, a digital divide opened up in Viet Nam, particularly for ethnic minority children, kids with disabilities, and very young children and girls⁴, with some learners having no access to the internet, TV, or even electricity⁵.

Learning loss is predicted to be significant, with the share of 15-year-old students performing below basic proficiency of PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) Level 2, estimated to increase by 16 percentage points from pre-COVID-19 rate (14 per cent) to post-COVID-19 rate (30 per cent)⁶, implying that those who were already behind would fall further behind, leading to higher inequality in the long-run.

Effects

- The learning contexts for learners at home differed considerably, depending on socio-economic status, geography and levels of disadvantages, increasing potential learning loss.
- Teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas (such as the central highlands and northern mountainous areas) were not well prepared to facilitate online learning, with 93 per cent of teachers⁶ in remote provinces reporting never having used modern technologies in class, prior to COVID-19. This compromised the quality of online teaching. Teachers were not so skilled in differentiated learning (i.e., teaching at the right level) to cater for the wide disparity of learning levels during review and revision when schools re-opened.
- Some families lacked IT devices and Wi-Fi connectivity, and other families encountered technical problems during online classes. Parents also had difficulty supervising children using electronic/digital devices, and were concerned about their children with disabilities not being able to easily access and understand the lessons being sent out online. Girls were more often asked to undertake household chores and to look after younger siblings, as well as help with farming in rural areas⁷.
- In pre-school education there was a significant gap in readiness, digital skills, facilities, infrastructure and learning materials in ethnic minority languages⁸.
- School closures impacted about 26 per cent of households with children, where at least one adult had to reduce working hours or leave their job to care for children, particularly with the closure of kindergartens. Adults were more likely to disrupt their work due to school closures among ethnic minority and those in the bottom 40 per cent of households, due to a lack of alternate day-care options, or because their jobs were more likely to be among those (such as agricultural work) that cannot be done remotely.
- There were reported difficulties in accessing child health-care services compared to pre-pandemic times. At the national level, 23.8 per cent of five-year olds are stunted (2018), 41 per cent of the lowest wealth quintile and those from the mainly mountainous north east are stunted, compared to only 6 per cent in the highest quintile and urban areas⁹. This situation is likely to have worsened with children in some ethnic minority communities faring the worst scenario, with the reduction in quality nutrition.
- Families were under stress due to the immediate loss of income, reduction in travel and loss of employment and managing children's learning at home. Learners were anxious due to a lack of preparation for upcoming graduation exams, the inability to access the internet for their lessons, and not having any interaction with teachers or peers to help understand online material, and catching the virus. There was a rise in cyber-bullying, with adolescent girls being particularly at risk of online sexual abuse.
- Poverty rates (at the \$1.90 rate) are low overall in Viet Nam at 1.9 per cent, and the World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook predicts that poverty is not projected to increase significantly in Viet Nam, as "rural areas and the agriculture sector have been less impacted by the pandemic. Yet the increase in urban unemployment and under-employment could become a concern¹⁰." In ethnic minority areas, there was already a high poverty rate (18.8 per cent among ethnic minorities compared to 2.9 per cent among the Kinh majority), and many have to rely on day labour¹¹.

Responses

Access and participation in learning: Adjustments were made to the curriculum and the exam calendar.¹² There was a phased reopening of schools according to location. High schools and secondary schools reopened first, followed by primary schools, and finally kindergartens. The Government of Viet Nam is committed to a 'digital transformation' of society, and with this in mind MoET put in place:

- Online access to remote learning (home-based), which was later augmented with other learning media such as TV, radio and paper materials. Some specialist education centres developed their own materials and some teachers visited the homes of children with disabilities. Teachers were provided with guidance on how to conduct teaching online, and some teachers were recruited to develop video lessons for national use; and

- Partnerships between MoET, UNICEF, Microsoft, Viettel and other private sector actors provided devices and software to many of those learners who could not access online learning to allow more students to access the internet¹³. A reduction in internet costs and help from the Ministry of Information and Communications helped support skill development in information and communication technology (ICT) in general, especially relating to applying technology in teaching via the internet.

Safe operations: The Interim Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools¹⁴ and the Framework for Reopening Schools¹⁵ were adapted for Viet Nam and used to produce contextualized clear and actionable guidance for schools, teachers, caregivers/parents and students to ensure schools were safe and welcoming for children. MoET requested the Provincial Departments of Education and Training to evaluate the safety of schools, using a set of prescribed criteria before resuming classes and to monitor the situation afterwards¹⁶. At the start of the pandemic, around 30 per cent of schools initially lacked running water and other safe hygiene and sanitation measures. With technical support from UNICEF Viet Nam, all 43,966 schools nationwide implemented safe school protocols to ensure a safe and healthy return of students and teachers to school. While schools were closed, classrooms were disinfected, stocks of face masks were prepared, and new wash basins were installed. Some schools rearranged desks and some planned for a reduction in class sizes to ensure safe distancing¹⁷.

Health, well-being and protection: The health sector generally acted quickly and comprehensively, particularly in terms of messaging. The Ministry of Health's Department of General Preventive Medicine and National Institute of Nutrition issued nutrition guidelines for different vulnerable groups, i.e., the elderly, pregnant women, and children. The government has established the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP); but it seems it only covers approximately 30 per cent of the country, and uses a very narrow list of mental illness. To mitigate economic challenges for the most vulnerable, the government introduced social protection measures in the form of three new relief programmes to help laid-off informal workers, contracted workers not qualified for unemployment insurance, and to provide cash support for household businesses.

Recommendations

Learning loss can only be regained with assessment, remediation and a review of the curriculum content. Remediation will need to be implemented for all students, but to different degrees. In some cases, little learning will have taken place while schools were closed.

To achieve the government's vision, teacher training is an important investment with a focus on pedagogy (online and face-to-face), student assessment (particularly formative), and curriculum adjustment.

Chapter four explores some of the options that MoET could consider based on Lessons learned, increasing resilience to future shocks and preparation for the next 10-year education strategic plan. The two proposed options are:

- 1. Build an integrated distance and online learning system.** Quality of distance learning will need to be improved in line with a new curriculum, particularly in terms of pedagogy and assessment, necessitating investment in teacher and head-teacher training. Access and support for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups needs to be part of the integrated system, and understanding that this demands a budget increase. The final aim would be to have a fully blended education approach by 2030. Tackling the high rate of stunting and ensuring all young children have access to quality pre-primary education is critical for long-term human resource planning, and again demands a budget increase with targets for the most marginalized children.
- 2. Improve mental health and psychosocial well-being.** Competition is fierce in education in Viet Nam, leading to student stress and anxiety, which has been exacerbated by the range of stressors brought on by COVID-19. To provide both protection and prevention, students need to develop resilience by taking more responsibility for their learning, teachers need to be trained, and support services need to be provided—particularly in more remote locations.

Conclusion

One of the main effects on education from COVID-19 was the closure of schools, which has led to reduced or absence of education for many learners due to their location or home circumstances. Families lost income, which added stress to family life, and may have forced children to be workers, not learners. The response by the government was quick and attempted to move learning online, which fitted with a vision for the digitization of education services. However, the lack of expertise by teachers to move their teaching online, the lack of devices at home, and support and interaction for learners, meant that learners are going to inherit a learning loss that, without sufficient remediation, will affect their achievement for the next decade. Other effects of increased access to the internet include more cases of cyberbullying and online sexual abuse, particularly of girls.

Viet Nam has already proved itself in terms of managing an effective response to a health emergency; turning a crisis into an opportunity, by extending best practice to the present education crisis through effective remote learning for *all*, would help Viet Nam become a world leader by 2030. The Government of Viet Nam has a vision and determination to create a *digital transformation of society*, which must include the transformation of the education system. The pandemic has brought into focus the strengths of the present system, as well as a digital divide and the need for change at all levels of education in terms of management and infrastructure, but particularly for the teaching and learning process.

To make practical the vision of the digital transformation of education, more investment is necessary in infrastructure and software, training of personnel (particularly teachers, head teachers and local education officers) and ensuring that new pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are aligned to the vision. Software must include social and emotional learning, a focus on the mental health of teachers and learners, and consideration of the elements that build lifelong learners, wherever you live.

In addition, 'building back better' will require a cross-agency focus on reducing stunting, early identification of learning difficulties through quality early childhood development programmes, good water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, and prepared options for any emergency. The attention to marginalized learners should be centre stage, rather than an add-on; an example is UNICEF's STEM innovation– introducing Augmented and Virtual Reality (AVR) education solutions for learners and teachers in hard-to-reach areas.

Collaboration will be the watchword of the future – collaboration with learners and their parents, local communities, teacher collaboration (professional learning communities) and inevitably collaboration across ministries with private sector and civil society organizations. This can ensure that the vision be made a reality within a decade, and become a model for the region.

The following table provides a snapshot of the pandemic, education sector response and background information for Viet Nam.

Country fact sheet

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION
Epidemiology	Date of first confirmed case	23 January, 2020
	Date of first confirmed death	31 July, 2020
	COVID-19 cases and deaths over time	Total cases 2,109 and 35 deaths ¹⁸ . No new deaths have been reported since September, 2020.
	Details about the pandemic and government responses and supports.	<p>Visitors from Wuhan (China) were the first cases on 23 January, 2020. On 24 January, 2020, Acting Minister of Health Vũ Đức Đam ordered the activation of the Emergency Epidemic Prevention Centre.</p> <p>From 1 April, Viet Nam implemented nationwide isolation for 15 days.</p> <p>Viet Nam responded to the pandemic “early and proactively” (WHO representative), and received acclaim for its immediacy, effectiveness and transparency. “One of the best-organized epidemic control programs in the world.”</p> <p>The second wave started in Da Nang on 25 July where the first deaths were recorded. A third wave started at the end of January 2021, but is quickly reducing.</p>
School closure	Were schools closed, partially or fully?	Partially at first, then fully.
	Date of school closures	Some closed by extending the Tet holiday (New Year Festival) in February, 2020. Schools were closed fully from 1 April, 2020.
	Date of school reopening	Partial at first with Grades 9 and 12. By 4 May, 2020 gradual opening of other classes before schools opened fully by 19 May, 2020. School holiday in August. Most schools opened again on 1 September, 2020 with some local variation due to the number of COVID-19 cases.
	Have schools reopened fully or partially?	Partially until May, now fully.
	What phase is the country currently? Phase 1, 2 or 3, and is this nationally or regionally?	Phase 3— schools re-opened, nationally.
Key vulnerable groups	Key vulnerable groups affected by the impact of COVID-19 on the education sector.	<p>Ethnic Minority populations— Central Highlands and Northern Mountainous provinces.</p> <p>Children with disabilities, migrant families, families living in poverty.</p>
Education system structure	Brief description of the structure of the education system— federal or centralized.	The education system includes five years of primary, four years of lower secondary, and three years for upper secondary, managed by MoET.

DIMENSION	INDICATOR/QUESTION	INFORMATION			
Education data	Number of learners	ECE	Primary	Lower Secondary	Upper Secondary
	Male	2,421,856	4,194,331	2,912,700	846,500
	Female	2,157,985	3,847,511	2,734,100	1,418,900
	Total	4,579,841	8,041,842	5,646,800	2,265,400
	Number of teachers				
	Male	525	82,000	84,700	50,800
	Female	261,576	299,600	202,200	92,700
	Total	262,101	381,600	286,900	143,500
	Ethnic Minority	13,000	49,000	9,120	2,376
	Number of education institutions	15,463	13,093		
Pre-COVID-19 progress towards SDG4 indicators	Primary completion rates:				
	All students		110% ¹⁹		
	Kinh students		86%		
	Ethnic minority students		61%		
	Literacy rate		98%		
	Out-of-school children		Total number of 5-14-year-old OOSC in 2014 was 715,400 (36.5% less than in 2009) ²⁰ .		
	Learning proficiency (SEA-PLM data, 2019)		82% of Viet Namese fifth graders surveyed qualified as being in Band 6 and above for reading literacy ²¹ (the level expected by the end of primary school); and 10% were in Band 5 (progressing towards achieving this level). 80% qualified for Band 6 and above for mathematical literacy.		

01

Introduction



Some of the most susceptible children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control its spread

1.1 Background

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic makes it different, affecting the whole world with the twin shocks of a health emergency and an economic recession. This will lead to long-term costs on human capital accumulation, development prospects and welfare. The containment measures have disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

Some of the most susceptible children felt the side-effects of COVID-19 from the moment nationwide lockdowns were put in place to control its spread. Markets, workshops, farms and factories closed, leaving children and families stranded. For many, the fear and uncertainty continue. Some minorities find themselves stigmatized and accused of causing or spreading the virus, while deep-rooted inequalities in societies are being exposed.

With its huge population and overcrowded cities, Asia is potentially very vulnerable to COVID-19, which spreads through close contact with infected people. The contexts within which people of South Asia, South East Asia and East Asia are having to cope with the virus are vastly different, with a disparity in living conditions and varying degrees of access to, and quality of, essential services such as health and education. Across the continent there is vast inequality between rich and poor, and therefore different levels of resilience to the shocks that this disease has brought, putting the deprived at long-term risks far beyond contracting the virus. This region regularly suffers from calamities, which lead to localized learning interruptions. For example, during the pandemic, Bangladesh and India were in the path of a cyclone, and recent floods have threatened communities.

This Situation Analysis has been undertaken as part of the broader examination initiated by UNICEF and UNESCO, to provide a snapshot of the educational responses and effects of COVID-19 across Asia. It considers the direct effects of school closures and reopening, and identifies the initial impact that this may have on learners, their families, and the overall education system. In doing so, it aims to develop insight based on the variety of responses to the pandemic, with a view to assessing their efficacy in Asia. It seeks understanding on the contextual factors that may have supported or hindered learning, with particular attention on the most disadvantaged groups (who will be most affected by the pandemic). For this, the analysis has the following objectives:

- To assess and estimate the various impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic on the education sector and stakeholders in Asia;
- To examine policy and financial implications on progress towards achieving SDG4-Education 2030; and
- To identify examples of promising responses and strategies in education and associated social sectors, which can be shared with other countries

The Situation Analysis focuses on countries across Asia, looking at how teachers, learners, and parents have been impacted by, and education systems have responded to, the threat of COVID-19. It identifies examples of effective country approaches that could be replicated or adapted for use in other countries. Following the development of the case studies (including this Viet Nam situation analysis), the overall study will include an overview of the situation in each of the three Asia sub-regions, with a more in-depth look at specific areas in 14 countries, including Viet Nam.

1.2 Methodology

The study includes an overview of the situation in each of these three sub-regions, with case studies providing a more in-depth look at specific areas in 14 countries. The case studies have been supported by the UNICEF and UNESCO offices in each country. They have provided relevant information and assisted the researchers to contact relevant officials to collect country-specific documents, grey literature and data that will help us tell the story of the COVID-19 disruption across Asia, its impact, and the responses of each education system.

In addition to a literature review, each case study has also involved interviews with key stakeholders (listed in Annex A), which include government policy makers and implementers, UNICEF and UNESCO teams, and NGO representatives at central level. This has provided an opportunity to learn more about the challenges faced and the responses developed, and provided a space for discussion and debate on Lessons learned, and what still needs to be done.

A cross-cutting focus on the most vulnerable members of society, particularly highlighting girls and learners with disabilities, has been used across the case studies. The aim of this is to identify interventions, which have been able to successfully reach the most marginalized communities, and how their different needs were addressed to increase accessibility and participation for all.

1.3 Structure of the case study

The case studies are structured in four sections. After this introduction and the above country profile, Chapter 2 discusses the effects of COVID-19 on the education system against four dimensions (see box below). Challenges are identified and then the responses are set out against the three phases of school re-opening, depending on the specific context of each case study country. Chapter 3 provides a deep dive into a particular theme, which was identified in each case study country by the UNICEF and UNESCO country teams. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the Lessons learned, providing specific recommendations for the case study country, as well as for other countries on building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

FIGURE 1 | THREE PHASES OF SCHOOL REOPENING

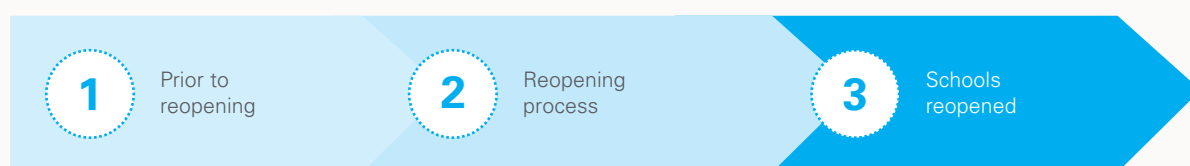
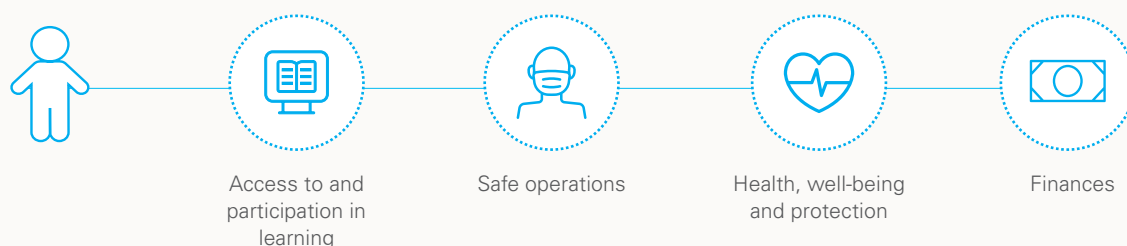


FIGURE 2 | FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANALYSIS OF EFFECTS





02

Effects of COVID-19 on the education sector in Viet Nam



Viet Nam, with a population of over 97 million people, has had remarkably few deaths from COVID-19, due to the rapid and coordinated response by the Government of Viet Nam

The purpose of this chapter is to show the effects on the education sector, and particularly learners, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Viet Nam, with a population of over 97 million people, has had remarkably few deaths from COVID-19, due to the rapid and coordinated response by the Government of Viet Nam. Viet Nam prepared for the outbreak before it recorded its first case. The Ministry of Health issued instructions to relevant government agencies on 16 January, 2020, and to all hospitals and clinics on 21 January. Viet Nam recorded its first cases of COVID-19 on 23 January in Ho Chi Minh City, just two days before the Lunar New Year (Tet) holidays.

In February 2020, MoET suspended all school activities across the country until the end of March, as part of quarantine measures against the spreading of the virus.

On 30 March, Viet Nam's then Prime Minister, Nguyen Xuan Phuc, declared COVID-19 a nationwide pandemic and on 1 April implemented strict social distancing rules nationwide for 15 days to curb the spread of COVID-19.

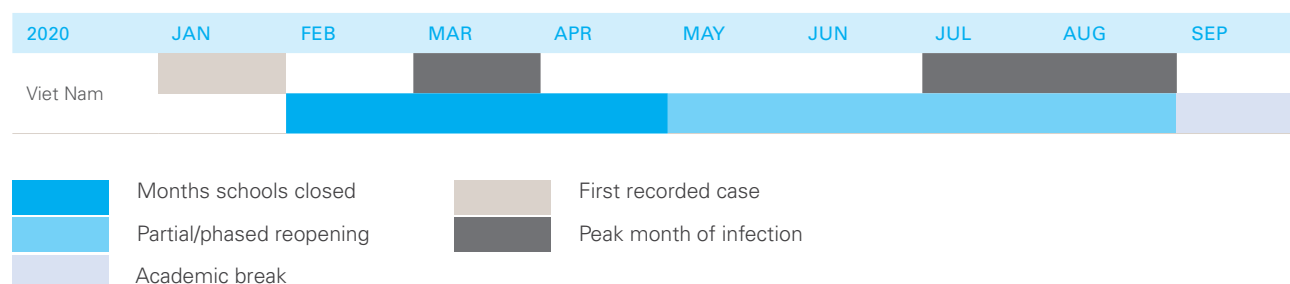
These included self-isolation and restricting people from leaving homes except for food and medicines. Borders were closed between Viet Nam and Cambodia, Lao PDR and China. On 1 April, strict measures of a national social distancing campaign were in place. On 15 April, the social distancing measures were loosened, except in 12 cities and provinces categorized as high risk, which continued the measures until 22 April. Most people complied, with all recommended actions as a 'patriotic' act²². Schools began to open from 4 May (gradual with limited grades), and then opened fully by 19 May, 2020.

As of the time of writing this report, there have been 590 cases and 35 deaths²³, shown in Table 1. It was not until July 2020 that the first death was reported. A spike in cases at the end of July, in Da Nang, broke a long period with very few cases being reported and many businesses being able to continue, almost as normal. Due to the Da Nang spike and other outbreaks, some local lockdowns, which included local school closures, have since been enforced.

TABLE 1 | COVID-19 CASE PROGRESSION IN VIET NAM¹³⁸

	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN
Total confirmed cases	16	218	270	328	355	590	1,044	1,095	1,207	1,324	1,623
Deaths per month	0	0	0	0	2	35	1	0	0	0	0
New cases	16	202	68	58	27	235	454	51	112	117	299

TABLE 2 | THE PATH OF THE VIRUS AND SCHOOL CLOSURES IN VIET NAM



Students were on the annual Tet holiday when the first virus case was reported. MoET immediately decided to keep the schools closed by extending the holiday period until the end of March, 2020, which had to be extended once more due to the national lockdown from 1 April to 15 April. The nation's 44,000 schools closed for 11 weeks from 12 February to 4 May (Table 2). The learning of 21.2 million school children (ECE 4.6 million, primary 7.4 million, secondary 9.3 million)²⁴ has been affected by school closures. To compensate for the three-month school closure, the academic year break was shortened by one month, and schools stayed open until July. High school exams were organized later than usual (early August/September) instead of June/July. The new academic school year in Viet Nam restarted on 1 September, except in the two regions where the second COVID-19 wave hit. Viet Nam was the first country in South East Asia that closed its schools, and for which the duration of closure was among the shortest.

Student achievement prior to COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19, school achievement was quite high. In October 2019, according to the learning poverty report²⁵, only 2 per cent of children in Viet Nam at late primary age were not proficient in reading. Recent data compiled in the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) survey (2019) reported for Viet Nam:

- The majority of Grade 5 children had achieved the reading literacy skills expected of them at the end of primary school, and a further 10 per cent of children were in Band 5, and were thus progressing towards achieving this level;

- More than 30 per cent of Grade 5 children had writing skills described in Bands 7 and 8 and above. These children may be able to transition well through to secondary education;
- The majority of Grade 5 children have achieved the mathematical literacy skills expected at the end of primary school, as indicated by a SEA-PLM 2019 mathematical proficiency of Band 6 and above;
- In reading, writing and mathematics, children who had attended preschool had, on average, higher scores compared with those who had not attended;
- Children who reported that the language of instruction (also the language of the test) was the same as the language spoken at home outperformed children who spoke a different language at home; and
- Children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds outperformed those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Although there is not enough reported data yet to define the effect of COVID-19 on student achievement, the share of 15-year-old students performing below basic proficiency of PISA Level 2 is estimated to increase by 16 percentage points from the pre-COVID-19 rate (14 per cent) to post-COVID-19 rate (30 per cent)²⁶, implying that those who were already behind before will fall further behind, leading to higher inequality in the long-run.

2.1 Main effects of COVID-19 against four dimensions

Access to and participation in learning

Learners

With schools closed for approximately ten weeks, all learners were deprived of face-to-face education, leading to students starting online learning, where possible, and later also using television. The government acted quickly in promoting online learning so as to protect the health of learners while continuing with education. For the general population, internet penetration is relatively high (Table 3).

TABLE 3 | INTERNET ACCESS IN VIET NAM (2020)²⁷

	JANUARY 2020	BETWEEN 2019 AND 2020
Internet users	68.2 million	Increased by 6.2 million (+10%)
Total internet users as a % of total population	70%	
Internet penetration	70%	
Social media users	65%	Increased by 5.7 million (+9.6%)
Social media penetration	67%	
Mobile connections	145.8 million*	Increased by 2.7 million (+1.9%)

* (Equivalent to 150% of the population)

However, national averages hide inequalities, as the more marginalized members of the population do not have access to the internet. A digital divide opened up in Viet Nam, particularly for ethnic minority children, children with disabilities, very young children and girls²⁸. It is not possible to generalize about ethnic minorities, as some are more disadvantaged than others. For example, students from more remote H'mong and Kho Mu villages are the most underprivileged, as they generally do not have access to internet, TV, or even electricity.²⁹

The challenges for learners from disadvantaged families included the lack of digital devices accessible to students at home, internet access (cost and coverage), lack of assistive devices for children with disabilities at home, and support from families for active participation in learning at home. Internet access can be expensive and is not accessible for all students. The size of the screen on a mobile phone restricts the length of time a student can concentrate on a video clip, for example:

"Most of students in my school are ethnic minorities students and they don't have a TV at home so cannot join distance learning." Ninh Thuan

"During class, the internet could disconnect due to a bad connection. Since we did not have an internet connection at home, I had to use our neighbour's Wi-Fi. Sometimes during Zoom classes, the electricity in my mountainous area went out because of the rain, so I couldn't continue to study."³⁰ ID 433-G14, ethnic minority boy, 16, Quoc Oai, HN.

Although some materials were provided in ethnic minority languages, this was limited, so ethnic minority students could not greatly benefit from mother tongue-based online learning due to a lack of online materials in their first languages³¹. Their parents/grandparents also may not have been able to provide adequate support, for this reason. There is a variance in experience between ethnic groups, partly due to geography, as those living in more remote areas not only miss out on online learning, but miss out on teacher visits, or frequent delivery of learning materials.

The commitment to learning led some students from remote or hard-to-reach communities to walk considerable distances to reach the top of mountains so as to get an internet signal, as reported by Viet Nam Northern Upland High School's Youth Union (northern mountainous province of Thai Nguyen). With regards to household and caring responsibilities, some students lost the potential for studying due to their family's need for help with farming and harvesting; and girls were more often asked to undertake household chores and to look after younger siblings, as well as help with farming in rural areas³².

"In remote areas, students face countless difficulties with online classes because of the lack of hi-tech equipment, slow internet connection, unstable mobile signals, and more. However, thanks to their passion for studying and determination to overcome hardship, the ethnic minority students defeated all the difficulties to pursue their classes."

"They build tents on hilltops to take advantage of the high altitude for cellular signals, live alone 30 kilometres away from home-- so they could have internet access, or take time to study during break-time on farming days with their parents."

Learner readiness: anecdotal reports, gathered during the stakeholder interviews for this study, state that even in urban homes where there is easier access to fast internet, students find it difficult to concentrate and keep on task, get bored easily, and generally do not like online learning (or at least are not used to the style of teaching that is presented)³³. Learning loss is inevitable and is likely to hit the youngest and the more disadvantaged³⁴ the most, although an assessment has not been completed at the time of writing.

Children living with disabilities are particularly disadvantaged, as due to isolation, their specific social and learning needs are not being met. Appropriate learning materials with accommodations were not prepared and there may be a lack of support within the family, due to carers being busy, and lacking knowledge and skills on what type of support to provide. Children with hearing impairments were particularly affected, and in general were not catered for³⁵. Due to social distancing and restrictions on transport, some students were not able to access services to support their disability:

"Exercises and therapies for children with cerebral palsy were interrupted due to the outbreak. Their condition may worsen without such treatment."³⁶

The key challenge facing Viet Nam (and many other countries) is that those students who were disadvantaged prior to the pandemic are just as far behind one year into the pandemic, or will be even further behind, compared to their more advantaged peers, by the time the crisis passes. The effectiveness of online learning as an alternative to school is overestimated at present as the preparation has not been comprehensive enough, given the wide variety of contexts in which students are trying to learn.

The lack of interaction either with teachers or peers constitutes a significant constraint³⁷. The challenge faced by all learners due to the continued closure of their schools, was not just that students lost schooling days (although this will have an effect), but also the lack of a learning structure with its adult support, and the interaction with peers that will affect long-term learning and psychosocial stability. Students were not used to taking responsibility for their own learning, only waiting for directions from the teacher. For some, the change in education rhythm could cause them to drop out from formal education, or at least

underachieve, and decrease their potential. Expectations of their learning future may be in jeopardy, partly due to present anxiety, and partly due to the increasing learning gap between students who found distance learning acceptable, and those that found it difficult. Teachers will have to be particularly sensitive to these differences going forward. School closure also impacts all other services that are provided, such as counselling and school feeding.

Teachers

Lack of access to devices: The focus of pre-COVID-19 teacher training was to prepare educators to use ICT in the classroom. Teachers, especially in disadvantaged areas (particularly the central highlands and northern mountainous areas) were not well prepared to facilitate online learning, with 93 per cent of teachers³⁸ in remote provinces reporting never having used modern technologies in class, prior to COVID-19. From April, MoET has attempted to increase teacher training for accessing ICT while schools were closed, yet teachers still have had trouble using ICT for teaching, which may be partly due to a lack of infrastructure and devices as echoed in the results of the TALIS survey in 2018:

"Eighty-two per cent of school principals report that delivery of quality instruction in their school is hindered by a shortage or inadequacy of digital technology for instruction (compared to 25 per cent across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD])."³⁹

The lack of access to, and practice with, technology devices compromised the quality of online teaching, as did the low levels of teacher readiness for online teaching/learning, due to their emerging skill set as shown in the results of the same TALIS survey of teachers (2018)⁴⁰:

- "Use of ICT for teaching" is the professional development topic with the highest percentage of teachers in Viet Nam, reporting a high need for it – 55 per cent (compared to 18 per cent across the OECD); and
- On average in Viet Nam, 43 per cent of teachers "frequently" or "always" let students use ICT for projects or class work, which is lower than the average of OECD countries and economies participating in TALIS (53 per cent).

As teachers find they do not have the skills for online lesson preparation, this impacts on their motivation levels, and as a result, some find the workload onerous. A secondary school teacher explained:

"I feel under pressure. To prepare for a one 45-minute teaching period, I have to have two days' of preparation⁴¹."

The challenges teachers have faced as they quickly shifted to remote learning are complex, and require established skill sets. Teachers are attempting to provide learning opportunities at a distance and using the basic ICT skills they received during their initial training. This does not given them the depth of skills needed to design stimulating and differentiated online materials in line with 'normal' or reduced curriculum. Even when teachers produce quality online materials, the variety of student learning environments is so broad, and the devices on which they may receive the materials so varied, that these materials will not be received in the way in which the teacher planned. For example, watching an educational video with sight impairment on a mobile phone, rather than a laptop, reduces learners' ability to engage with and comprehend the content.

In addition, teachers will face further challenges once schools resume. Individual learners will need to be assessed, and it is likely that teachers will have a wider span of student learning experience to contend with. This also requires an established set of skills such as curriculum adaptation, differentiation (including remedial learning), revision and review, as well as formative assessment.

Some head teachers are not yet convinced about the quality of online learning:

"Online classes cannot replace traditional classes because of the lower volume of knowledge transferred to students and teacher-student interaction. (headteacher Tan Binh district)."⁴²

Guidance on assessment during the pandemic has been given by MoET, but teachers have reported challenges in understanding how to use this guidance. A high school teacher in Hanoi complained that there is no regulation about how to give grades and assess students' capability, and that each school follows its own way⁴³. Assessment of learners is an area that needs to be strengthened. A review of current practices would shine more light on whether the challenges facing teachers are due to a lack of skills, or whether the assessment processes need to be more clearly linked to curriculum and online pedagogy, or both.

Parents

As well as the inequality of access to distance learning that relies on technology, there was also inequality in the level of support from home that learners received, limiting their participation in learning. About 25.7 per cent of adult respondents in the Child Rights Working Group (CRWG) rapid assessment⁴⁴ had difficulty supervising children using electronic/digital devices.

"Not many primary students pay attention to online study if parents/adults are not with them. Some, who do, will get bored easily as they cannot interact with teachers or parents when they don't understand some points."⁴⁵

A parent from Ba Dinh district explains about some common issues facing parents during school closure:

"My son had online classes in April and May. At that time, my husband and I had to sit in front of the computer to study with him because he could not concentrate. He could not understand the lessons well, and we had to explain again. If online teaching hours are in the daytime, when we are at work, we won't be able to control the time my son uses the computer. Using a computer too much won't be good for my son. Besides, I am afraid he will use it to access websites with bad content."⁴⁶

Parents were concerned about their children with disabilities not being able to easily access and understand the lessons being sent out online. Some children with hearing and sight difficulties could not hear the commentaries well, and most videos did not have subtitles or signing⁴⁷.

School closures impacted about 26 per cent of households with children, where at least one adult had to reduce working hours, or leave their job to care for children due to school closures. The likelihood of parents staying home due to school closures was higher among households with younger children in lower grades. Adults were more likely to disrupt their work due to school closures among ethnic minorities and bottom 40 per cent households, due to a lack of alternate day-care options, or because their jobs are more likely to be among those (such as agricultural work) that cannot be done remotely. Mothers were more likely than fathers to stop working, or reduce work hours during school closure. Learners of pre-school age were the least likely to remain engaged in learning during closure⁴⁸, as there were no prescribed online programmes for them, and parents are less likely to know how to engage with them for a significant length of time.

A reminder of how difficult it is for parents to oversee distance learning at home:

"I separate myself into different parts, keep an eye on the younger one when she is playing, another on the elder to see if he focuses on learning, while cooking and cleaning." Female garment worker in Thai Nguyen⁴⁹

As kindergartens were closed for longer than other schools, parents had more stress in managing childcare, as well as supporting learning at home.

"In Viet Nam, during school closure period, efforts have been made to provide pre-school children with online learning opportunities. However, a lack of internet access and devices, limited digital skills of parents, and the fact that pre-school teachers are largely unfamiliar with new technologies made it challenging to facilitate learning through play online."⁵⁰

MoET provided learning materials— partly online and partly via TV, but 15 per cent of disadvantaged families do not have a TV⁵¹. Some students, due to geographic location (especially the mountainous communities) were not receiving materials in a consistent manner. In addition, some students were not able to interact with their teacher and their peers. And some parents were not sure/not able to provide support to learners at home. Understanding and addressing some of these issues can ensure that the Viet Nameese education system can be built back better over the next decade.

Education system

On 31 March, 2020, MoET issued guidelines to adjust the content of teaching for the second semester of the school year 2019-2020 for general education levels. This was in accordance with the situation of the COVID-19 epidemic, and ensure completion of the general curriculum according to the adjusted school year plan⁵².

The pressure was also on MoET to re-plan national exams, as these would have to be face-to-face, not online (i.e., Grade 12 entrance to university exams). Dates for the exams had to be adjusted.

After providing the push towards online learning, the challenges shifted to the involvement of teachers, students and parents. Guidance had to be provided for those students who had access to the internet, on how to access home learning materials, and what to access. This was distributed via their teachers. Parents needed guidance on how to support their children's learning at home and how to supervise their digital interaction.

Online assessment was also a challenge, and MoET decided that assessments would be left until schools re-opened— although some informal assessments such as online quizzes were acceptable. The area of classroom/ student assessment is something that seems weak generally, particularly for remote and formative contexts.

Safe operations

With technical support from UNICEF Viet Nam, all 43,966 schools nationwide have implemented the safe school protocols to ensure a safe and healthy return of students and teachers to school. To support families during the pandemic, 12 episodes of 'Staying Home During Pandemic' were broadcast on VTV7 and through UNICEF social media channels. UNICEF's expert blogs also provided parents with practical information on how to care and protect children in relation to health care, nutrition, WASH practices, brain development, education, protection, and online safety during the pandemic⁵³.

Handwashing is a key intervention to reduce virus transmission, yet some schools and communities did not have continuous access to clean water. Thirty per cent of interviewees in a UNICEF survey⁵⁴ had limited availability to basic handwashing facilities at home. About 13 per cent had a shortage of hand sanitizers for children, families and other guests, while 6 per cent had no soap nor sanitizers. In the central highlands and Mekong Delta regions, 70 per cent still relied on centralized water collection points due to a lack of piped water at home. In addition, 30 per cent of schools in these regions did not have running water. Southern provinces had reduced access to safe water due to drought and salination, and central areas due to flooding.⁵⁵

Health, well-being and protection

In a UNICEF rapid assessment, 44 per cent of study participants with children reported difficulties in accessing child health care services compared to pre-pandemic times⁵⁶. This included interrupted vaccination schedules of many children, including in areas with already low immunization rates prior to the pandemic. In the same study 22.7 per cent of the children complained of minor health problems (such as temporary blurred vision, hearing, back, and neck problems) after having online sessions. This particular outcome of online learning has been reported in other countries.

With reduced income at home and a lack of availability of reasonably priced protein-rich foods at the market, young children's nutritional status will have been degraded. Recent typhoons have added to the disruption in the food chain. The early years of children up to the age of three is the period when the brain develops more rapidly. The quality of their nutrition, cognitive stimulation and early experiences until the age of five provides a strong foundation for reaching their full potential, resulting in a more skilled workforce that is better prepared to take on the future challenges of a global and digital economy. With a large population, data averages can mask disparities by wealth, region, and ethnicity. Were at the national level, 23.8 per cent of five-year-olds are stunted (2018)⁵⁷, 41 per cent of the lowest wealth quintile and those from the mainly mountainous north east are stunted, compared to only 6 per cent in the highest quintile and urban areas⁵⁸. Reduction in food supplies and income will result in an increase in stunting, just when the government has been witnessing a slight reduction in the national level. School feeding will also have been lost for some months, further reducing the potential for adequate nutrition. If we are looking at a 10-year plan, aiming for a large reduction in stunting would prevent significant loss in human potential.

"Now I eat less because the seller no longer comes to the market. Money is available, but no one sells meat or vegetables. My family has no food hoard, we only have veggies and bamboo shoots. We raise only a few chickens and ducks, but don't eat them. We have no eggs available in the house, no green beans, black beans, or peanuts, and daily we eat only with vegetables. Rice is enough to eat. The last two months I have not eaten meat or eggs. (Female Student, 15, Thai ethnic group)."⁵⁹

Some of the stress factors impinging on children's and young people's mental health include:

- **Worry about catching COVID-19 (for themselves and their family members).** Data from other countries show that more than 10 per cent of the adolescent population may have developed mental health problems during the time of the pandemic. From a Viet Nam Child Rights Working Group survey, girls (60 per cent of the surveyed children) often felt more worried and pressured than boys (40 per cent). Young people in Viet Nam were anxious, not only about catching the virus, but about missing their opportunities for learning and interaction, particularly those with looming exams.
- **Fear and anxiety were common particularly among adolescents,** who were more aware of the local situation, and were concerned for themselves and their family members catching the disease. This fear, exacerbated if they had access to social media, would have put more restrictions on their movements, thus reducing physical exercise and interactions with others.

"I'm quite worried and scared of COVID-19. I'm afraid that someone in my family might get infected, and I might get it at any time." ID 433-G14, ethnic minority boy, 16, Quoc Oai, HN.⁶⁰

- **VVOB Viet Nam conducted research on the well-being of young children** (using the Leuven Scale) when they start back in school following a period away due to the pandemic. The results showed that children as young as three have shown anxiety⁶¹ due to the pandemic, and that three and four-year olds were more effected than five-year olds.
- **Worry about loss of income and unemployment within the family.** The financial shocks brought about by COVID-19 have had an impact on the physical and mental health of learners and their families. Those living in poverty have fewer safety nets during emergencies, and due to the immediate loss of income, reduction in travel and loss of employment, many families have been under considerable stress. Migrant families stranded in Hanoi whom could not get home had to use up all their resources to pay the rent, as they could not travel.

"The pandemic broke out again so things were very difficult; the children could not go to school, the older one could not go to work, and my family could not sell agricultural products, so it was a struggle. Luckily, thanks to farming, we can eat rice. We were also given a small amount of money from the local government due to COVID-19. Member of the Trung Hai People with Disabilities Club."⁶²

- **Anxiety about their learning.** There are a number of factors here including: upcoming graduation exams, not being able to access the internet for their lessons, not having interaction with teachers to help understand online materials, and constant pressure from parents to study and achieve.

"I was in Grade 12 and very close to my university exam. When I heard about social distancing and had to leave school to stay at home, I was scared and did not know how to review, practice or compensate for the knowledge required to take university exams." ID431-G14, boy, 18, Hoan Kiem, HN.⁶³

"Learning through TV, the teachers were sometimes too quick and hard to understand." ID 433-G14, ethnic minority boy, 16, Quoc Oai, HN⁶⁴

- **Isolation:** Separation from friends and the importance of connections to others, in relation to learning, was reported. Secondary impacts reported by Bureau of Education and Training (BOET) officers, school leaders and teachers include the long period of school closure, limited access to playful activities and age-appropriate materials, limited opportunities to connect with friends and their teacher, as well as family stress due to the interruption of labour and reduced income:

"When I was worried, I shared with friends and family. My parents told me to think positively and have faith in the future." ID 431-G14, boy, 18, Hoan Kiem, HN

- **Violence at home:** Parents may take it out on their children due to frustration over loss of income, job, and food supplies.

"While staying at home, I easily got angry at my child. Sometimes I could not control myself and shouted or hit him." ID 414-G5, mother, Thanh Xuan, HN, HN⁶⁵

"Dad often drank because he didn't have a job. Then he came back and talked badly and vulgarly." Female, 13, Thua Thien, Hue⁶⁶

- **Abuse online:** While physical bullying may be less of a threat while schools are closed, where access to the internet is possible, there has been a rise in cyberbullying alongside a loss of privacy⁶⁷. Adolescent girls were particularly at risk and preyed upon. Forms of online abuse have also been reported by the National Hotline for Child Protection under the Ministry of Labour, War Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA).

"After finishing online classes, some children surfed the internet and visited age-inappropriate websites. Although sometimes children did not intend to, these black websites just popped up and children accidentally clicked them. Online quarrels and cyberbullying sometimes happened." ID 424-G10, social worker on the frontline, Truc Bach, HN⁶⁸

"A few times some foreigners came into the chat, then sent me sensitive photos. At that time, I reported it to Facebook, told my parents and stopped those people. Since then I have been more careful when making friends with strangers." Female, 15, Thua Thien, Hue⁶⁹

"One or two people sent pornographic pictures or movies to me, so I blocked them. A few close friends with me had the same situation. I did not tell anyone. I didn't know them, so I didn't know how to tell them, so I just blocked them." Female Student, 15, Thai ethnic group⁷⁰

"My niece told me that during her online studies through Zoom, someone hacked in and uploaded some unorthodox and age-inappropriate images, which the teachers could not handle. It affected their mental state and quality of lessons." ID 421-G9, teacher, HN⁷¹

- **Discrimination:** Following quarantine, some children have been ostracized. Some children living in ethnic minority communities suffer discrimination. Some girls may worry about entering into early marriage. Children, with family members infected with COVID-19 or admitted to quarantine centres, were reported by UNICEF study participants to have personal and inaccurate data leaked on social media sites. Such problems deeply impacted children's mental health and lowered their self-esteem, even when they tested negative.

"After my relative was infected and put in quarantine, our neighbour didn't want to let their children play with my son. They said that playing with my son would only lead to their children getting infected. My son cried a lot." ID 403-G1, mother, Son Loi, VP⁷²

"My son's studying time decreased; he could not concentrate. After COVID-19, when returning to school, he started lying that he had finished all his homework, but the teacher called me saying that he did not." ID 407-G3, mother, HN⁷³

What is positive is that with the right support, most children can improve their well-being within a month.

"Most children, especially the three-year-olds, forgot many regulations and instructions, so that the teachers needed to train them again. The older groups could recover to the normal state after few days, but the three-year-old group took longer." Kon Plong BOET and School Leader⁷⁴

Teachers used four strategies to support children's well-being at the reopening of the school:

- They prioritized well-being;
- They paid attention to the children's needs and took the time needed to let them settle in;
- They offered playful activities and materials and offered chances to interact and reconnect; and
- Teachers applied action points, and found additional inspiration from the VVOB COVID-19 brochure⁷⁵.

Financial implications of COVID-19

Viet Nam reported 1.81 per cent GDP growth (gross domestic product) in the first half of 2020— its lowest since 2011, due to the pandemic as per the General Statistics Office (GSO)⁷⁶. Around 7.8 million workers lost their jobs or were furloughed due to the pandemic, as recorded by MOLISA⁷⁷, while 17.6 million people suffered salary cuts.

COVID-19 has had a negative impact on household level income, as well as interest payments of loans and savings. Poverty rates (at the \$3.20 rate) are low at 6.2 per cent in 2019⁷⁸, and the World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook predicts that poverty is not projected to increase significantly, as “rural areas and agriculture sector have been less impacted by the pandemic. Yet the increase in urban unemployment and under-employment could become a concern⁷⁹.” However, the impact on household level income is likely to have greater impacts in ethnic minority areas, where there is a high poverty rate (18.8 per cent for the ethnic minority population, with wide variations between ethnic minority groups, compared to 2.9 per cent of the majority Kinh population), and many rely on day labour⁸⁰.

Reduced demand and temporary work suspension caused by COVID-19 temporarily increased poverty during the first half of 2020, and stalled poverty reduction. This risk is elevated by the high informality of both wage and self-employment in affected sectors, implying that most of the exposed non-agriculture workers— up to 42 per cent of the labour force— are not covered by social insurance. While Viet Nam has fared well in both health and economic outcomes compared to other economies in the region, the extended slowdown in business activity is starting to take a toll on households. Preliminary data from a 2020 Q2 nationally representative household survey shows that almost one-third of households are earning lower incomes in July/August than in the previous month⁸¹.

A rising poverty rate is a threat for school access as children from the poorest families have lower enrolments in school. Reduced income has impacted on 53.7 per cent of workers in Viet Nam. A survey of rural households by the Institute of Policy and Strategies for Agriculture and Rural Development reported an average income decrease

of 38.3 per cent from agricultural activities. As women tend to work in the informal sectors, they are the most vulnerable, and those living in ethnic minority communities — who have been unable to transport and sell their goods and unable to sell to tourists— are likely to suffer increased poverty. Increasing poverty can have further effects, such as pushing children into work rather than school, early marriage for some girls, and less investment in education. Indeed, the economic shock resulting from COVID-19 is expected to reduce the ability of households to finance education expenses, such as tuition fees, as well as the cost of meals, travel, uniforms, textbooks, and other materials.

The government will have to provide continued funding for ongoing emergency preparedness; due to climate change, violent storms and typhoons are increasing. The Viet Nam Disaster Management Authority (VNDMA) reported⁸² that as many as 1.5 million people have been directly affected in 2020 by the recent Typhoon Molave (fifth tropical storm in a month). Of these, an estimated 177,000 people were already considered vulnerable (poor or near-poor). A total of 5,000 houses completely collapsed, while over 800 schools and hospitals were damaged⁸³.

2.2 Main challenges faced by the education sector

As remote learning was the main intervention to continue learning while protecting children’s health, a number of issues were discovered. It is common to consider internet infrastructure (access to devices and internet connection) as being the main component of online learning (and of course it is a starting point), yet the range of possible barriers to learning is quite extensive (Figure 3). If blended learning is going to be an important part of the next 10-year Education Strategic Plan, then a thorough evaluation of the impact of these barriers on learning and learning loss is necessary. If data can be collected related to some of these issues, it would support the ‘building back better’ innovations.

FIGURE 3 | SUMMARY OF ISSUES CONCERNING REMOTE LEARNING



In summary, the main challenges to the education sector during the pandemic were:

Student learning gaps

- 1. Access gaps** – where students could not access online platforms, with those living in more rural and remote locations being the most disadvantaged, in terms of signal reception. Poverty also played a part as the cost of devices limited the possibilities for access. Ethno-linguistic minorities were particularly disadvantaged due to difficulties in accessing the internet, and a lack of devices and lack of support while learning at home, as well as a lack of home language translation.
- 2. Quality gaps** – some online learning was ineffective due to the lack of training and expertise teachers expressed while attempting to create online lessons. Support for learning at home may not have led to quality learning due to the lack of experience and knowledge on how to support digital learning, and the motivation of students to learn online.
- 3. Learning gaps leading to learning loss** – students' lack of learning structure at home, their difficulties getting online, lack of interaction with peers and teachers, and gaps in assessment profile all lead to learning loss.

Vulnerable children

Children in some ethnic minority families, children living with disability, children in migrant families and those living in poverty will be made particularly vulnerable during this unpredictable time. They are not only susceptible to the challenges listed above, such as lack of digital devices, poor nutrition, poor access to health and other support services (as they may live in geographically remote locations), but they are also likely to suffer from multiple disadvantages. Children living with a disability are unlikely to have their needs met, partly because they might be away from school for some time, missing their assistive devices for learning, missing interaction with friends, and missing learning support from teachers and care assistants. When designing and providing online learning materials, it is rare to find those that take into consideration learners with restricted vision or hearing impairment.

According to one caregiver⁸⁴:

"My child's education was interrupted. When the school applied online teaching, he could not participate because he is a child with an intellectual disability, so he couldn't absorb it."

According to a teacher of children with disabilities:

"Hearing impaired students are not yet able to be independent in learning online. They depend on their parents, but their parents are busy working or lack child supporting skills."⁸⁵

The data is insufficient to map in detail all those with special needs and where they live, and thus difficult to reduce their vulnerability and make them 'visible'. Improved data would mean cost savings due to better targeting of limited resources.



03

Education sector responses to COVID-19: A deeper dive



At the start of the pandemic, the Government of Viet Nam swung into action quickly and decisively.

This chapter focuses on the responses of education sector stakeholders to maintain safety while continuing education.

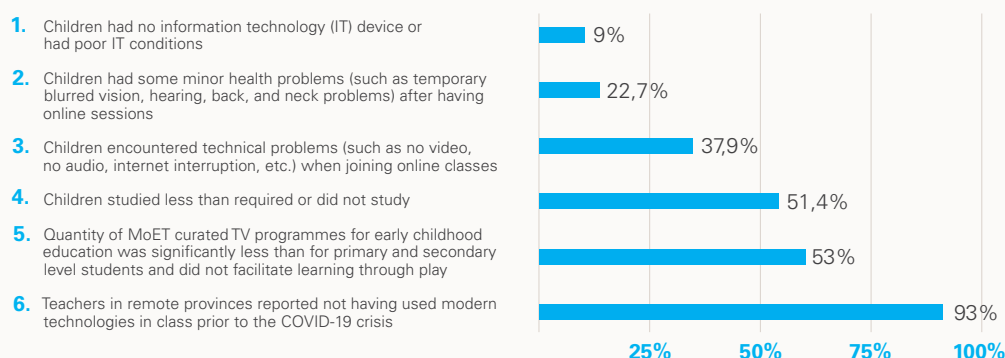
At the start of the pandemic, the Government of Viet Nam swung into action quickly and decisively. While it protected the physical health of students, what could not be guaranteed was the amount and quality of learning that could be achieved by all students. Within the system, the pockets of traditional disadvantage were still very much apparent. Even though Viet Nam is used to emergencies (due to climate change), the system was not prepared to provide education when the pandemic closed schools. Looking in more depth at the phases of school closure, remote learning and returning to school may help illuminate lessons to be learnt.

3.1 Phase 1: Prior to reopening

Access to and participation in learning

MoET acted quickly to provide notice of school closure and luckily, students were already on their Lunar New Year holiday. The move to online learning was relatively prompt (after a few weeks) for some provinces, but others did not take action in terms of online learning until mid-March⁸⁶. MoET put in place online access to remote learning (home-based), which was later augmented with other learning media such as TV, radio and paper materials.

FIGURE 4 | DISTANCE EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC – DIFFICULTIES EXAMINED



Sources: 1-4 and 6- Summary of rapid assessment on the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on children and families in Viet Nam (UNICEF 2020)

Source: 5- a rapid assessment led by Viet Nam Institute of Educational Science (Ministry of Education and Training) 2020.

MoET reduced or made free many internet costs and teamed up with the Ministry of Information and Communications to support skill development in ICT in general, and especially related to applying technology in teaching via the internet, and using television. TV came later when it was understood that many students could not access online programmes. Distance learning programmes tended to prioritize exam classes (Grades 9 and 12), with some programmes for primary and hardly any for pre-primary (Figure 4)⁸⁷. Local TV channels were used, but little use was made of radio.

Learners

Pre-primary does not have the support, even though demand is high, as younger children need more stimulation and may be less supervised in terms of their learning. A lack of active stimulation and interactive play will have an ongoing impact on children's development. According to the Online Management Training Company (OMT), an assessment of 500 pre-schools in Viet Nam by KidsOnline showed a significant gap in readiness, digital skills, facilities, infrastructure and learning materials in ethnic minority languages in pre-school education⁸⁸.

Only some programmes are in ethnic minority languages, and then only the 'majority' languages such as Cham and Chinese (Cantonese). Central highland respondents in the UNICEF rapid assessment⁸⁹ particularly requested programmes in their local languages. This is partly so that parents/grandparents can find ways to support their children's learning at home. It is not easy for students in remote areas, especially ethnic minority students, to access distance learning, thus increasing the digital and achievement divide.

Programmes for children with disabilities are limited, and where they do exist, are mainly suitable for the visually impaired⁹⁰. Some specialist centres develop their own materials and some teachers visit the homes of children with disabilities.

MoET developed a database of 2,000-plus videos, and specific programmes were broadcast on national TV channels (VTV1 and VTV7), and 27 local TV channels⁹¹. Video lessons follow VTV (national channel) schedules and some provinces make their own lessons for their own TV channels. Accurate curating and labelling of programmes will be necessary for the development of distance learning for all, so as to align with curriculum adjustments and to cater for a diversity of learners (particularly those with sight and hearing difficulties).

Guidance was provided from schools for parents in terms of online/distance learning. What could not be achieved easily was providing digital devices for students to use, the appropriate training for teachers when preparing online materials, and orienting students and their parents to learn at a distance.

Nearly six out of 10 households in Viet Nam with children enrolled in school, pre-crisis, took part in online activities through an online platform and 45 per cent through teacher given assignments, and the gap in access online between the richest households and the poorest was approximately 30 percentage points, leading to poor learning productivity.⁹² In a UNICEF study⁹³, 9 per cent of participants reported not having the required IT devices nor Wi-Fi connectivity to benefit from online learning opportunities, and 37 per cent of interviewees reported their children encountered technical problems during online classes that prevented them from joining online classes regularly. MoET teamed up with UNICEF and the private sector to provide tablets and Wi-Fi services to allow more students to access the internet.⁹⁴

Until COVID-19 struck, most learners experienced learning at home through teacher-assigned homework; however, this is only one type of learning. When schools closed, learners suddenly had to adjust their study habits, and deal with technological challenges as well as family concerns. To learn well at home, students need:

- Adequate support from family, a comfortable learning environment, sufficient learning resources, and communication with friends; and
- Intrinsic factors such as learning motivation, an ability to set daily learning objectives, and concentration⁹⁵.

Lacking understanding of these phenomena will lead to failures in educational policy and practices, which will cause long-lasting costs to society. Further research into individual distance learning constructs linked to achievement will provide a more comprehensive basis for policy and action development.

Teachers

MoET was able to mobilize teachers across the country to devise and film TV lessons, many of which were ready to be broadcast within a few weeks. Teachers had prepared scripts for the TV lessons, and a group of senior teachers and some education officers would quality assure them prior to finalizing and broadcasting. Although all subjects and grades were covered, the emphasis was on lessons

for exam Grades 9 and 12. There was some variation between provinces, districts and even between schools, with some schools having a focus on just a few subjects (maths and literacy for example), and some, all subjects.

Depending on access to the internet or TV, teachers prepared materials as below:

- Teachers give assignments and/or lessons for revision to students through group chats using social media platforms such as Zalo, Viber, Facebook Messenger, Gmail or Zoom; and
- Teachers give paper-based assignments and/or lessons for revision to students, as some students did not have access to TV and/internet.⁹⁶

Not all subjects are covered online, and it also depends on the schools which programmes are able to be supported by the teachers, but all subjects for online learning are available on the VNPT (state owned) e-learning system. With above 70 per cent internet coverage across the country, students in urban areas have more ease in accessing online learning materials, whereas the remaining 30 per cent either struggle with reliable access, or are learning primarily through TV lessons, which may be unsupported (i.e., no paper-based materials or potential for interaction with teachers or peers).

Teachers were provided with guidance on how to manage online/distance learning— some online training and some face-to-face, as all teachers were expected to report to school after the national social distancing campaign.

Whilst teachers can only be commended for their efforts and initiatives, specific preparation for teachers to deliver interesting and engaging online lessons was not available, with students reporting that they found some lessons boring, and some incomprehensible⁹⁷. All teachers need upgrading in their ability to prepare and support online lessons. In any future school closures, a revision course online would be preferable rather than a continuation of any new material, without the usual in-class support.

Safe operations

The delivery of essential and routine health care (including vaccination and nutrition services) was interrupted or halted entirely, which poses the risk of other communicable diseases spreading. With schools closed, some parents and caregivers struggled with finding alternative care arrangements, some children were left alone at home, and others drawn into child labour.

Women took the brunt of childcare, often having to give up employment or taking reduced hours and income to look after children when schools closed. Some communities supported families in terms of childcare for parents who were working. Schools and some early learning centres were used for emergency childcare while parents were at work.

While schools were closed, classrooms were disinfected, stocks of face masks were prepared, and new wash basins were installed. Some schools rearranged desks and some planned for a reduction in class sizes to ensure safe distancing⁹⁸.

Health and well-being

The immediate closing down of COVID-19 'hotspots' such as Da Nang, prevented the contagious corridors from expanding. Local authorities had the power to close down whole villages when necessary.

The health sector generally acted quickly and comprehensively, particularly in terms of messaging. As the British Council director in Hanoi stated:

"Text messages were sent to every mobile phone on a daily basis. Some areas have community speaker systems, so the local people's committee would issue daily announcements through them. The police would reinforce the messaging at a local level. The entire process was all very well-managed."⁹⁹

Traditional poster forms were used to visually reinforce health messages¹⁰⁰.

Awareness of the need for handwashing and mask wearing was exceptional due to the comprehensive communication channels in common use in Viet Nam. An example of effective communication about keeping safe was the initiative of Viet Nam's National Institute of Occupational and Environmental Health, who commissioned artists to release the song "Ghen Cô Vy" ("Jealous Coronavirus")¹⁰¹. The song went viral and achieved much praise for reinforcing a clear message about how to keep safe. The well-known pop song was given new lyrics and turned into a handwashing public service announcement.

As the communication channels were so effective for health messaging, the system could be used for other important messages— for example, communicating mental health helpline details. Some schools have provided psycho-social support (outreach from school) to students, but mental health, in general, has not been a priority.

On 29 March, 2020, the government released Resolution 37/NQ-CP to ensure nutritious meal support for all people in quarantine, aimed at ensuring their health to defeat the virus.

On 5 April, the Ministry of Health's Department of General Preventive Medicine and National Institute of Nutrition issued the nutrition guideline for different vulnerable groups, i.e., the elderly, pregnant women, and children. Dr Le Danh Tuyen, Director of the National Institute of Nutrition said: "The guideline highlights home-based food, recommends avoiding fast food, and supplement with micronutrients, in addition to practicing proper hygiene¹⁰²."

Finance

In late March 2020, Viet Nam received a Global Partnership for Education (GPE) grant of \$140,000 for two initiatives: (i) to support MoET in planning its response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and (ii) to develop a longer-term plan, particularly, its 10-year strategic plan¹⁰³.

The government allocated 62 trillion Viet Nameese dong, roughly \$2.7 billion, for social assistance, yet the aid was largely inaccessible to those with no legal documentation or working in the informal sector (statement by the director of Centre for Supporting Community Development Initiatives)¹⁰⁴.

In response to the negative economic impacts from COVID-19, the Viet Nameese Government implemented top-ups to existing social assistance programmes, and introduced three new relief programmes to help laid-off informal workers, contracted workers not qualified for unemployment insurance, and to provide cash support for household businesses. About 20 per cent of households were already receiving social assistance from existing programmes targeting the poor.

While the bottom 40 per cent and ethnic minorities are the poorest groups, they were also the least likely to apply for new COVID-19 relief¹⁰⁵; there have been reports that some benefits were difficult to apply for due to the challenges of providing the range of paper work, such as those for proving loss of income¹⁰⁶. Informal workers, particularly women, would have lost a critical safety net for their family if they could not produce the correct documents. Migrant families may have lost precious credentials when their

houses were washed away in the recent floods. Although support was provided from the above interventions, families in more disadvantaged areas (such as the northern and central mountainous areas) would have found it difficult to provide adequate nutrition, and would have been under increased stress due to economic pressures.

Education system

MoET immediately put in place opportunities for distance learning (online first and later TV) when school closures were announced, but, as described above, the digital divide was not sufficiently addressed, particularly in remote and mountainous areas (where most of the ethnic minority communities are located).

MoET partnered with the Ministry of Information and Communications to:

"Support free broadcasting of lectures appraised by the Ministry of Education and Training on television, and free data access fees for students, teachers, and teachers related to distance learning programmes of education and training."¹⁰⁷

Partnerships between MoET, UNICEF, Microsoft, Viettel and other private sector actors attempted to fill the gaps in the digital divide in terms of devices and software. Other partnerships were established with internet providers to reduce fees and provide free access to the internet during the pandemic.

Two digital platforms were initiated by MoET. One popular private sector platform was Viettel Study, where teachers and students could interact with each other and access unlimited resources, while allowing teachers to create free lectures. It has been recognized by MoET and the Ministry of Information and Communications to promote digital transformation in the education sector.

Due to the lack of preparation and the timing of school closure, exams had to be postponed.

The school calendar was changed twice, and the curriculum was pruned to reduce the amount expected to be taught during this time. On 31 March, MoET issued a guide of adjusted teaching plans for the second semester of the academic year 2019–2020 for junior and high school levels¹⁰⁸.



3.2 Phase 2: Prior and during reopening

The Interim Guidance for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools¹⁰⁹ and the Framework for Reopening Schools¹¹⁰ were adapted for Viet Nam and used to produce contextualized clear and actionable guidance for schools, teachers, caregivers/parents and students, to ensure schools were safe and healthy for children and staff.

Schools and educational institutions had to meet a set of 15 criteria issued by MoET, such as:

- All students, teachers and staff must wear a face mask or face shield and have their temperature checked daily at the school entrance;
- Equipment during physical education and games cannot be shared;
- All equipment and other items around the school are disinfected regularly throughout the day;
- Desks in classrooms and school canteens have been arranged to ensure social distancing is maintained and students have rotated lunch breaks;
- Large group gatherings, such as school assemblies and team sports and competitions remain cancelled; and
- Throughout the school day, teachers remind students to wash their hands regularly and maintain social distancing.

However, around 30 per cent of schools lacked running water and other safe hygiene and sanitation measures, which are key conditions for them to be able to operate safely.

Schools were advised on how to prepare classrooms for the re-opening of schools. Several criteria were used to ensure the safe opening of schools, such as:

- Schools should organize training on preventive measures and are required to follow them, strictly;
- Before class, both students and teachers will have their temperature checked and have to wear face masks and keep a safe distance from each other in class;
- Classes, learning equipment and vehicles should be cleaned as recommended by the health sector;
- The schools must co-operate with local authorities and students' families to ensure safe distance when students are taken to school and picked up later; and
- MoET asked the departments of education and training to evaluate the safety of schools before resuming classes.

These guidelines were distributed to schools. MoET requested the departments of education and training to evaluate the safety of schools before resuming classes and to monitor the situation afterwards¹¹¹. Parents were constantly updated by teachers via a group chat with pupils' parents on Zalo, a Viet Nameese messaging app, which was to inform them about COVID-19 prevention measures¹¹².

The government, supported by development partners and local CSOs, ensured that schools were provided with masks, soap and sanitizer. In some communities, water was not in continuous supply or reduced, due to other recent disasters such as drought, salination and floods (south and central areas).

Modifications to the school calendar were made to increase access to school. Due to the late and gradual start of the school year (mid-April to 1 May), the school year was extended to mid-July instead of the regular end date in late May. However, in some areas the rising heat of the summer made school attendance uncomfortable. Schools planned to reopen in September (the normal date for this semester after the summer holiday). Provinces had some flexibility in decisions on exact dates for re-opening,

depending on the local rate of COVID-19 transmission, but had to ensure the safety of all children. The school curriculum was adapted (some ‘simplification’ and a reduction of two weeks).

On 31 March, MoET issued a guide for teaching plans for the second semester of the academic year 2019 – 2020 for junior high school and high school levels. On 24 August, MoET issued Official Letter No. 3219/BGDĐT-QLCL on guiding the organization of the second high school graduation exam in 2020 to the Departments of Education and Training. Although it was a difficult and last-minute decision, the exam was divided into two phases– the first took place from 8 August to 10 August for the least affected provinces. The second phase was implemented on 3 September and 4 September in 11 exam councils, with the participation of more than 26,000 students, mostly in the coronavirus epicentre in central Viet Nam, along with others quarantined for having close contact with confirmed COVID-19 cases¹¹³.

In organising the exam, MoET proposed that the Exam Councils should ensure two principles: safety and health for all candidates, staff, teachers participating in the exam and parents of students; and secondly, safety and security in accordance with the Exam Regulations. The results of this important exam (it will determine whether the student goes to university or not) were as expected by their teachers¹¹⁴, and in fact may have been a little better for some, as students had an extra month to study.

Alongside the pandemic, families living in southern provinces have had to cope with loss of income and in some cases housing loss, due to the effects of climate change, bringing first drought, salination, then followed by flooding¹¹⁵. Further flooding occurred in the central provinces. These natural disasters caused a number of families to migrate to ‘safer’ areas.

3.3. Phase 3: With schools reopened

There was a phased reopening of schools according to location and grades. High schools and secondary schools reopened first. It began with Grades 9 and 12, giving priority to the lower and upper secondary students preparing for end-of-year exams. It was followed by primary schools and kindergartens.

MoET was faced with trying to continue with school openings while simultaneously keeping staff and students safe from COVID-19. This would be felt in different ways in different locations, which is why a strong local level of decision making was necessary. If a school is not overcrowded, then it may be that social distancing is possible; in another school an extra shift may have to be organized to reduce numbers in each class. The speed in which a school opens will also be determined by the transmission rate of the virus, and after opening, it may close once more if cases are found within the school (e.g., in Da Nang, high schools were closed for this reason).

This situation was particularly difficult for school managers who are making health and safety arrangements, but these decisions also had an impact on parents, who may worry about supervising their children at home (thus possibly leaving work), and for the students who are anxious about catching the virus, when they return to school. There have been reports of discriminatory comments where families have had to be isolated– following quarantine they are avoided or called names, as if they are still likely to spread the disease. This reminds us about the multiple layers of anxiety that some families are trying to manage.

Students may well worry about how they are going to ‘fit’ into a class where half of the class has been able to study online, and half have not. The teacher will also be working out how to provide adequate and differentiated revision for all students. A recent RISE report¹¹⁶ estimated the long-term learning loss inflicted on students due to school closure. This can be mitigated with a planned and targeted remediation programme, grouping children by learning level, alongside curriculum adaptation and prioritization and appropriate initial and on-going formative assessment.

The government, while planning to ‘build back better’, could take the advice of GPE, following their Analysis of National Learning Assessment Systems (ANLAS) for Viet Nam 2019. This analysis, undertaken in November 2019¹¹⁷, was to ensure that the learning assessment system in place was sustainable and effective. Table 4 summarizes some of the recommendations provided by GPE, which could be used to link with the new competency-based curriculum and pedagogy presently being implemented.¹¹⁸

TABLE 4 | QUALITY OF CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT (GPE OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS)

KEY AREA	OBSERVATIONS	RECOMMENDATIONS
Guidelines There are national or subnational level documents that provide guidelines or recommendations for classroom assessment.	However, some of these circulars on classroom assessment may no longer be relevant to today's education environment, nor to the current working conditions of teachers. These must be amended or replaced. Teachers need more specific guidelines beyond the circulars. Currently, there is little in the way of practical guidance.	There is a need to develop practical guidelines for classroom assessment, with specific methods and details to support effective implementation. Revised guidelines for classroom assessment must be developed that consider the realities of today's classroom environment, as well as the programmes and textbooks that are currently used.
Training Training programmes are provided to (future and current) teachers and school leaders to build their capacity to assess students' learning.	Every year, MoET and DOETs conduct short-term training programmes for teachers on innovative teaching methods and assessment at the classroom level. Currently, there are unequal levels of teacher qualifications in the regions. Many teachers are proficient in test development, but some teachers (especially those in rural and mountainous areas) are not yet proficient and use their own experiences as a guide.	MoET should provide more training materials and guidelines on assessment, particularly at the classroom level. Training courses on methods and techniques for assessment at the classroom level must be provided for education managers and teachers.
Resources and tools Teachers use a variety of resources and tools for classroom assessment.	While report cards are generally not used, a few schools follow the VNEN (innovative new model of primary school) model, which incorporate thematic exercises, projects, portfolios and experiments.	MoET needs to provide more refresher materials on developing test techniques, with illustrative examples.
Assessment methods Teachers use multiple assessment methods in order to support valid and reliable assessment of students' learning.	Teachers seldom use methods such as projects, portfolios, experiments and other practical methods. There is also a lack of knowledge and guidance on assessing areas such as global citizenship education and 21st century skills.	It would be helpful to compile theoretical materials on classroom assessment in general, as well as specific guidance on assessing areas such as global citizenship education and 21st century skills. There is a need to train teachers in methods for classroom assessment of areas such as global citizenship education and 21st century skills.
Assessment content The knowledge and skills assessed are clearly defined.		MoET needs to compile a specific document on teaching and assessment of 21st century skills.
Use of assessment data Data from classroom assessment is used to improve teaching and learning.	MoET needs to compile simple and easy-to-implement documents to guide teachers on how-to-use data entry software in order to analyse students' learning results.	There is a need for training in data analysis methods for full-time officials of the DOET, as well as education managers and teachers. Such training should cover how to use software to analyse students' learning results, thereby helping teachers improve teaching, testing and evaluation practices.

3.4 Analysing the response

Given the rapidity of the spread of COVID-19, the speedy response by the government on the health side was impressive and saved many lives. The SARS (2003) experience increased the awareness of emergency preparedness, particularly in terms of health, and the same readiness can now be applied to education. MoET's reaction was also impressive, and a thorough evaluation and analysis leading to action can ensure a more resilient education system that meets the needs of all students, wherever they may live.

On the supply side, MoET did as much as they could to mobilize schools and teachers to develop distance learning resources in as little as a few weeks. Less focus was on the demand side to ensure that students could access learning materials in a student-friendly way. Learning support is something more difficult to manage due to the uniqueness of each student's home environment, yet this is key to successful learning within an equitable framework. Student engagement could be improved, not only in terms of being engaged with learning tasks, but providing feedback to schools, encouraged to network with other learners, and generally having some agency within the whole problem-solving process. Best practice needs to be shared and learned from, and 'horizontal' peer-to-peer learning (for students, teachers and parents) may be the preferred option, rather than a top-down approach.

Provinces have some autonomy, which they have been using to manage school opening and closing, as well as providing support to TV lesson production, but more support to teachers as mediators between school and home could ensure that all students have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. There is a strong competitive drive in Viet Nam, particularly in terms of exam achievement, which can be unhealthy if driven to extreme, so a stronger focus on student mental health and psychosocial development would be advisable. Mental health services are not strong in Viet Nam, and limited geographically, so a more preventative approach would reduce the need, while at the same time expanding support services to more rural and remote communities.

The Government of Viet Nam achieved remarkable success in rapidly bringing together ministries to control the spread of COVID-19, and keep to a minimum the number of deaths. However, due to the speed in which actions were taken, the barriers to ensure all students could continue learning, even while schools were closed, could not be overcome. One challenge for MoET was how to coordinate with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and other ministries on a day-to-day basis, as virus transmission rates changed, while attempting to provide adequate learning opportunities for all students when schools were forced to close.

MoH used traditional communication strategies to produce a comprehensive and successful information campaign, which now could be used to provide clear messages about learning at home, avoiding online abuse etc. Traditional poster forms were used to remind the population that the government and nation were on a war footing against an unseen but now, well known, enemy.

What the education system has faced is not only the macro challenges of providing policy and guidance for opening, closing and re-opening schools at relatively short notice, but the impact these decisions have on teachers, students and parents, particularly those living away from urban areas.

From these conditions— where the three jigsaw pieces of teacher-parent-student are not fitting easily together, remote learning as it is now, may not be, at present, a valid alternative to in-school learning opportunities. ‘Building back better’ will have to take into consideration these localized contexts, and provide a robust but flexible framework for blended learning, starting with planning for the most disadvantaged.



04

Lessons learned, building back better, and recommendations



The Minister of Education acknowledged that COVID-19 brought pressure on educational activities, but at the same time created an impetus for the digital transformation to become stronger, and create opportunities and motivation for teachers and students to adapt and apply online teaching methods.

The Government of Viet Nam is committed to a ‘digital transformation’ of society. In June 2020, the Prime Minister approved the National Digital Transformation Programme to 2025, with a vision to 2030, in which education and training is one of the eight top-priority areas in implementation.

In December 2020, the Minister of Education and Training along with the Minister of Information and Communications headed a workshop on ‘Digital Transformation in Education and Training’¹¹⁹. The Minister of Education acknowledged that COVID-19 brought pressure on educational activities, but at the same time created an impetus for the digital transformation to become stronger, and create opportunities and motivation for teachers and students to adapt and apply online teaching methods.

“The results of online teaching in the time of COVID-19 are highly appreciated. However, Viet Nam still needs to organize digital transformation in a more methodical way to improve efficiency.”¹²⁰

The Minister of Education stated that “the education sector still lacks an effective implementation tool, which is an integrated digital platform. This must be an open platform, to be continually updated and improved day by day. This platform contains not just the content but also the way of teaching, how to learn, how to take tests, or in other words, learning processes. Viet Nameese digital technology businesses can help the education sector build such platforms.”¹²¹

Having a vision is part of an important process of transformation, leading to a comprehensive digital platform, as long as it is comprehensive enough to ensure the rights of all children and young people to participate in an education of quality. This would be the path to building back equally as well as better.

4.1 Lessons learned

1. During the pandemic, planning for the greatest coverage of remote learning resulted in the most disadvantaged being left behind— further widening inequalities.
2. The most disadvantaged are likely to suffer the most during an emergency as they have fewer safety nets, and learners may have the least support (nutrition and mental health can suffer, parents may have the least resources and possibly least education themselves). If all learners are going to have equal opportunities to learn during an emergency, expect to incur higher costs, which should be budgeted for in advance.
3. Distance learning (including online learning) is not the same as face-to-face instruction, and different approaches need to be used to ensure engagement in learning.
4. Students need to be given more responsibility for their learning and metacognition (learning how to learn effectively). Interaction with teachers and peers is an important consideration in this. To prepare for emergencies where remote learning has to be implemented, small student group learning ‘bubbles’ can be created, to reduce learning isolation. Student mental health needs to be considered and acted upon. In particular, pre-school lessons cannot be given on-line without considerable support from parents. Instead there is a need to support primary caregivers to facilitate more developmentally appropriate activities at home for young children, through normally household activities such as cooking, washing, play, etc.

5. Current infrastructure and support systems are not extensive or strong enough for introducing distance learning, online learning and integrating technology into education.
6. An internet infrastructure has to be created to allow all learners, wherever they may live, to access the internet for online learning. All students need access to digital devices, and the time to practice using them for their learning and support at home, if this is not available from parents or caregivers. The cost of using online learning has been prohibitive to many families. Where online learning is not possible, other media such as TV, with support materials and some interaction (SMS) with their teachers, can be appropriate and cost effective.
7. Teachers have worked very hard to engage with the new realities of their role, but their existing skill set is not aligned to remote working and the use of ICT to facilitate learning.
8. Teacher well-being need to be considered and acted upon. Teachers need training and support in not only using ICT but applying ICT, and active pedagogy for the creation of relevant and effective learning packages for remote learning, for all learners (K-12). Principals and teachers need to engage with parents and the local community so that families and learners are supported, particularly in times of increased stress, such as this pandemic.
9. Learning has been lost during school closures and this cannot be regained quickly without assessment, remediation and a review of the curriculum content.
10. During re-opening of schools, assessment to determine learning loss with remediation will need to be implemented. Some reduction in curriculum content will be necessary to make up for lost time.
11. With remote learning, teachers do not have the skills or adequate guidance on how to assess learning remotely and how to assess students when they are not with them face-to-face, so that observation of the learning process can be achieved. This makes evaluation of learning loss more difficult. This is in addition to the skills and practices of teachers in the classroom, particularly in light of the aim of learning 21st-century skills.

4.2 Building back better: Building an integrated distance and online learning system

MoET is taking seriously the future of distance and online learning (see seminar held on 27 October, 2020¹²²). The question is how can we create a model of learning that encompasses both face-to-face and online dimensions for **all** children and young people **wherever** they may live? The task is to design a model of blended learning that can propel the Viet Nameese education system into a world-leading position, while 'leaving no one behind'. There is a danger that higher education leads the push for online learning, and that those 'on the margins' are not considered, until much later. To overcome some of the barriers to online learning discovered during the pandemic, **the system must consider the most disadvantaged from the outset**, not as an afterthought.

UNICEF implemented a rapid survey on distance learning¹²³ and found the following list of parameters constraining the development of an integrated distance/online learning platform:

- Remote and/or low-income families do not have a TV, radio or device to get connected to the internet. Students in disadvantaged areas cannot afford online learning. Ethnic minority students may not have a TV and/or internet at home or a connection in the area;
- Teachers are not confident in teaching remotely because they have not been trained to teach digitally (teacher's skills for online teaching are limited);
- The curriculum and teaching materials through e-learning on the internet or educational TV programmes are not systematic, integrated or updated;
- Students and parents are not given specific guidance on how to use online and/or TV media for learning;
- Families with more than one child have difficulty in prioritizing TV/radio/online learning devices for which child at the same time. Parents are busy and cannot pay much attention to supervise their children's study; and
- There are difficulties in tracking student progress and learning quality through remote instruction.

Thus, the supply side (MoET mainly) is providing learning materials on different platforms, but teachers are not skilled in mediating these materials and the demand side (families) are so varied that it is difficult to measure learning gained and learning lost.

At present, the internet infrastructure is not built to reach all students. Partnerships with internet providers with a five-year goal to reach everyone— particularly the last 10 per cent, is a goal worth pursuing. Tech companies have earned a lot during the pandemic¹²⁴, and they could be persuaded to search for cost effective solutions to reach the more marginalized. Even a student with a disability, living in a remote village, should have all the learning opportunities that someone in a town can have. This is in some ways the promise of technology— learning opportunities designed for all learners to access and achieve (i.e., individualized learning). Building schools in remote locations can be expensive, but by using modern technology, all students can be reached, even where there is no school.

Furthermore, learning materials need to be more learner-centred and aligned with other supportive materials when uploaded online or broadcast. At present, teachers have not been trained to design learning packages that can be used by all students, and again, they are not trained to use them within online lessons. However, there are teachers who have these skills (and have been chosen to record some of the TV lessons), who could be seconded for a year to work on integrated packages for all subjects and competences and build a peer-to-peer training regime. This could be a relatively low-cost option.

Video clips would need to be accessible to all, by using subtitles (in Viet Nameese and relevant ethnic minority languages), a clear soundtrack, and signing to support learners with restricted hearing. If video clips are subtitled, then text-to-sound versions may also be available. For mobile phone access, where there is a limited signal, micro-SD cards could be loaded with relevant learning materials (as UNICEF has done with tablets¹²⁵). Formative assessment techniques can be developed to provide continuous feedback to learners to act as self-assessment, and as motivators for learners.

Once the packages have been developed and trialled and shown to be able to be used on TV, a mobile phone and a laptop, then detailed guidance needs to be developed for both parents and students on how to make effective use of the packages. For parents, cartoon style video clips broadcast on TV could help understanding how to better support learning at home. Different guidance will be necessary for parents of very young children and children with disabilities. A more community/village approach to provide support for remote learning would ensure that all learners (including those normally out of school) can receive appropriate support.

The finished packages can be the model for use in any emergency, for out-of-school learners and those with an illness that keeps them out of school, i.e., they can be used by all learners, whenever they need, wherever they are, thus building resilience into the system. During natural disasters such as typhoons, these learning packages would also be available. A model for a paper-based package would be the VNEN¹²⁶ student learning guides (which would now need to be updated due to curriculum changes). These guides can act as a model for self-instructional learning using active pedagogies, encouraging student leadership and collaboration, while promoting a closer partnership between the school and the local community.¹²⁷

Many students have been disciplined within a teacher-directed learning environment that does not provide them with the skills or habits of more self-directed learning. The VNEN model could be helpful here, to develop the necessary behaviours of taking more responsibility for their own learning and to learn the skills of enquiry, research and collaboration (e.g., using WhatsApp-style networks for exchanging ideas and providing support to peers). These skills and habits may also improve their mental health. Those provinces that have continued to apply the VNEN model and have supported their teachers to be more autonomous, have found the transition to the new competency-based curriculum much easier.¹²⁸

FIGURE 5 | A MODEL FOR A COMMUNITY LEARNING HUB



Innovative methods to monitor and assess learning, such as telephone-based assessment, would be a good investment, as understanding the accessibility and effectiveness of remote learning programmes will be critical to creating resilient systems. Teachers and parents at early childhood level could use mobile technology to record everyday observations to assess developmental stages.

It may be necessary to provide support for families who do not have a TV—either sponsored or provision of a low/no-interest loan for a TV or tablet. In more remote communities, internet hubs could be established to serve the whole community (Figure 5). These could be based at schools so that students and teachers use the facilities during the day, and community members early morning and evening.

Alternative sites for these hubs would be Community Learning Centres (CLCs), which were set up to support National Literacy and Post-Literacy activities and implemented by the Continuing Education Department (MoET). The CLC programme is a large-scale government-run plan that aims to alleviate poverty among the rural

poor, and to promote gender equality.¹²⁹ The programme costs were approximately \$5 million per annum¹³⁰. The Government of Viet Nam currently operates more than 11,900 CLCs to ensure a focus on lifelong learning¹³¹.

CLCs could develop into a community learning hub, as not only could these be used as internet and literacy centres, but also centres for integrated services covering WASH, early learning/parental education, internet access for all, and even community technology centres for such developments as solar energy.

An active community and connected learning hub could provide fast responses to the learning needs of even the hardest-to-reach communities in emergency situations, as well as stem the loss of young people from the villages to the towns.

The attention to marginalized learners should be centre stage rather than an add-on; an example is UNICEF's STEM innovation, by introducing Augmented and Virtual Reality (AVR) education solutions for learners and teachers in hard-to-reach areas.

4.3 Building back better: Mental health and psychosocial well-being

What has become apparent is the increased stress that students are under and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The health initiatives taken during the last six months have had tremendous success in protecting the physical self during the pandemic, but the hidden disease affecting mental health is becoming more apparent and probably harder to treat.

- There is a strong link between psychosocial well-being and learning, so mental health must be seen as a critical part of education policy and action if learning for all is to be promoted¹³²;
- The lack of student control over their learning, partly due to a competitive exam culture, teacher-directed learning and unquestioning respect for elders may increase the amount of cognitive stress in young people; and
- The VNEN programme has taught a number of students that they can have some control over their relationships and their learning, and this aspect of student agency can help reduce anxiety and stress:

"During COVID-19, my close friends and I shared relevant updates [new case records] from the government, Ministry of Health, VTV24 channel of Viet Nam Television, and other reliable websites. Our aim was to have more people accessing accurate, reliable information to reduce unnecessary anxiety and fear caused by fake news, tabloids, and distorted information. We also shared information about practices to prevent and control COVID-19 [how to wear masks correctly, proper handwashing steps] so more people could self-protect during the outbreak." ID431, boy, 18, Hoan Kiem, HN¹³³

While the government estimates that approximately 15 per cent of the population require mental health-care services, research¹³⁴ suggests that the figure is closer to 20 per cent of the population relating to less severe mental health issues such as depression. The government has established the National Mental Health Programme (NMHP); but it seems this only covers approximately 30 per cent of the country, and uses a very narrow list to determine mental illness.

A longitudinal study in Viet Nam conducted by the UK-based 'Young Lives Project'¹³⁵ found that poverty-related stressors compromise healthy child development. The study found that across both urban and rural areas, vulnerable youths and women lacked adequate personal resources to deal with their anxieties.

In 2014, Viet Nam's Psychiatric Association conducted a study¹³⁶ to identify which of the 10 most common mental illnesses affected the country the most. Of the formal list of mental illnesses, the two most well-known issues were depression and anxiety. However, further research is needed, particularly with children and young people, to address these and other conclusions, and to identify their causes.

4.4 Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Build an integrated remote and online learning system.

The quality of remote learning will need to be improved in line with the new curriculum, particularly in terms of a better link between pedagogy and assessment, necessitating investment in teacher and head teacher training and support. Access and support for the most marginalized and vulnerable groups is an essential part of the integrated system. The final aim would be to have a fully blended education approach by 2030 (this is in line with the development of the 10-year education strategic plan, as well as SDG 4 goals).

- **Evaluate.** Thoroughly **evaluate the quality** of present distance learning packages, involving students as well as teachers to provide specific and actionable feedback, based on this most recent use of remote learning. Ensure that students living in rural and remote locations are included in providing feedback and suggestions for improvement.
- **Assess.** Evaluate students at all levels to **understand the level of learning loss**, paying particular attention to those who are disadvantaged (e.g., children with disabilities, ethnic minority students, students from migrant families, those living in poverty) while reviewing the curriculum so that core competencies can be developed in the reduced time available. With the new curriculum, there would normally be a natural review process that can encompass preparation for any future emergencies, a reduced (i.e., core competency) curriculum could be prepared with appropriate assessment procedures and distance learning packages. Ensure that assessment data is disaggregated so that girls are not found to be disadvantaged due to a potential digital divide between females and males.

- **Review and Train.** Continuously review of the alignment of new curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Ensure that teachers' skills are improved enough to take on a competency-based curriculum with a student-friendly teaching process and appropriate assessment, which is more **formative**. Teacher training for remote and relevant learning (linked to 21st-century skill development, including a strong socio-emotional component) needs to be a key investment for the next 10 years. Move towards an inclusive and blended education experience for all students so that provinces can enhance learning packages with relevant ethnic minority languages, sub-titling and signing, so that all students can easily access remote learning. School principals will also need the type of training that not only provides the skills for instructional leadership, but includes emergency assessment and planning. Apart from future pandemics, schools may also be closed as a result of climate change and the resulting droughts and flooding. Frequent 'fire drills' could test out the remote learning model in real time, i.e., one day is allocated for students to work online/TV (at school or at home) to test out bugs in the system. Next year's typhoon season could be the ideal trial time for blended or remote education packages. Teachers need to learn from each other through strategies such as lesson study, professional learning communities, and action research.
- **Integrate.** Mix early child development initiatives. The online strategies should include a focus on children up to five years of age, and their parents. Health and education should not be separated. Parents need to learn about early stimulation, health and nutrition. Due to the importance of early brain development, the country cannot afford to lose human potential by maintaining more than one fifth of their under-five population being stunted. This year, particular concern should be for pre-school and Grade 1 students who may have transition difficulties due to the loss of three months' schooling. This will involve cooperation and coordination with other government agencies working for early childhood, such as MOLISA, who oversees the coordination of ECD programmes across ministries.
- **Data.** Improve data collection and analysis. At present, it is still difficult to target resources where they are needed, during emergencies, due to a lack of nuanced data. Apart from data on the range of disadvantaged children, some of whom may not be counted as they are out of school, categories such as presence and use of digital devices at home, single parent status and mental health referral, could be included. Data protection protocols would need to be in place to ensure protection of sensitive and personal data.

- **Develop.** Advance local learning 'bubbles' with better connections. These bubbles maintain health restrictions such as social distancing, while supporting student interaction. These bubbles could be at a community facility, school or Community Learning Centre (see model of community learning hub, above).
- **Build** competence at local authority level so that more decentralized decision making can reflect the local conditions, so necessary during the present pandemic.

Recommendation 2: Improve mental health and psychosocial well-being of learners in the post COVID-19 era.

Competition is fierce in education, leading to student stress and anxiety, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19. To provide both protection and prevention, students need to develop resilience, teachers need to be trained, and support services need to be provided in the more remote locations.

- **Support services.** Prepare schools to provide mental health and psycho-social support services to address the range of preventable stressors due to school violence, bullying and cyberbullying, as well as isolation due to school closure.
- **Teacher training.** With the necessary investment in teacher training, ensure it does not separate content from process – for example, when training science teachers the pedagogy of science, teaching includes positive discipline, growth mindset and a focus on student mental health. Training teachers for preparation for online teaching and learning demands a holistic approach, which includes socio-emotional development and online risk factor identification, as well as cognitive development and the practical preparation of stimulating and challenging online tasks.
- **Helpline.** Ensure the National Child Helpline is fully funded and accessible to all children wherever they may live. It should be well publicized so that children not only know their rights, but know how to protect their rights against violence, abuse and exploitation. Support services naturally link to the Helpline so that action can easily be taken following calls to the helpline. Ensure the NMHP is funded to cover the whole country, not just 30 per cent.

- **Protection.** The Government of Viet Nam could extend their partnership with internet providers to secure online child protection. With an increase in online learning there needs to be enough protection under relevant regulations to ensure safety online to protect against cyber bullying, online abuse and discrimination, and to ensure children's privacy as well as data protection. Learners need more guidance so that they can also inoculate themselves against online abuse.
- **Student agency.** Use the strategies from VNEN for increasing student agency— including student government and child-to-child health approaches¹³⁷. Students taking more control over their learning at school will be able to seamlessly use the same habits at home with self-study. Having more individual control reduces stress and improves mental health.

4.5 Conclusion

One of the main effects on education of COVID-19 was the closure of schools, which has led to reduced or absence of education for some learners due to their location, or home circumstances. Families lost income, which added stress to family life and may have forced children to be workers, not learners. The response by the government was quick and attempted to move learning online, which fitted with a vision for the digitization of education services. However, the lack of expertise by teachers to move their teaching online, and the lack of devices, support and interaction for learners meant that learners are going to inherit a learning loss, and that without sufficient remediation, will affect their achievement for the next few years. Other effects of increased access to the internet include more cases of cyberbullying and online sexual abuse.

Viet Nam has already proved itself in terms of managing an effective response to a health emergency; turning a crisis into an opportunity, by extending best practice

to the present education emergency through effective remote learning for all, would help Viet Nam become a world leader by 2030. The Government of Viet Nam has a vision and determination to create a digital transformation of society, which must include the transformation of the education system. The pandemic has brought into focus the strengths of the present system, as well as a digital divide and the need for change at all levels of education in terms of management and infrastructure, but particularly for the teaching and learning process.

To operationalize the vision of the digital transformation of education, more investment is necessary in infrastructure and software, training of personnel (particularly teachers, head teachers and local education officers) and ensuring that new pedagogy, curriculum and assessment are aligned to the vision. Software must include social and emotional learning, a focus on the mental health of teachers and learners, and consideration of the elements that build lifelong learners.

In addition, 'building back better' will require a cross-agency focus on reducing stunting, early identification of learning difficulties through quality early childhood development programmes, good WASH facilities and prepared options for any emergency. The attention to marginalized learners should be centre stage rather than an add-on; an example is UNICEF's STEM innovation, by introducing Augmented and Virtual Reality (AVR) education solutions for learners and teachers in hard-to-reach areas.

Collaboration will be the watchword of the future – collaboration with learners and their parents, local communities, teacher collaboration (professional learning communities) and inevitably collaboration across ministries and with the private sector, that can ensure that the vision can be made visible within a decade, and become a model for the region.

Annex: List of stakeholders interviewed and questions

Government Stakeholders and Civil Society Organizations

NAME	ORGANIZATION	TITLE
Ms. Nguyen Thi Kim Anh	Vietnam Association for Education for All (VAEFA)	National Coordinator
Mr. Le Anh Vinh	Viet Nam Institute of Educational Sciences (VNIES)	Vice Director General
Toshiyuki Matsumoto	UNESCO Hanoi	Programme Specialist (Education)
Nhat Linh Nguyen	UNESCO	Education Project Officer
Simone Vis	UNICEF Viet Nam	Chief of Education
Le Anh Lan	UNICEF Viet Nam	Education Specialist
Huyen Tran Thanh Ho	UNICEF Viet Nam	Adolescent Development Officer

Questions asked:

- What has been done (or not done) in terms of monitoring of the adherence to the 15 criteria for re-opening of schools in each school in Viet Nam? Who monitors and how is it monitored and recorded?
- How is info being reported and consolidated at national level etc.?
- How is learning being assessed during closure of schools? How are learning gaps/learning losses being identified on re-opening of schools? How do teachers tackle this challenge? Is there any support /guidance provided to teachers to facilitate it?
- When identifying learning gaps, what measures have been taken to remediate any learning losses?
- Has there been an assessment to identify how students with disabilities have been impacted by school closures? Both academically and socially?
- What data is being collected on student safeguarding and well-being during the reopening of schools? How is this being used in school planning?
- What lessons can be learned from the recent experience and what are MoET and Education Sector Plan partners planning to do to make the education system more resilient, agile and responsive?
- How far has the plan for a national digital literacy framework been developed?



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Viet Nam Case Study

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This report reviews the impacts of and responses to COVID-19 on education in Viet Nam, provides reflections on lessons learned so far in Viet Nam's COVID-19 response, and analyzes capacity gaps for recovery. It explores successful elements of the Government response, issues and challenges faced, and strategies adopted to continue students' learning during school closure. It also looks to the future, in building back better and increasing the resilience of the education system to future shocks.

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