

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically altered the lives of all individuals around the globe and changed the way people work and learn. As a response to the COVID-19 health crisis, for instance, many countries have decided to close schools, colleges and universities. Online and digital learning have become key for students to continue developing their skills and schools around the world have implemented digital solutions to face the crisis. Similarly, lockdowns around the globe have impeded many adults from physically going to work, making the use of digital technologies and smart working arrangements, whenever possible, more important than ever. Strengthening the digital skills of populations and improving access to online learning opportunities is critical to face the challenges of the future, and its importance will be heightened in the turbulent post COVID-19 world. This report provides valuable information on the specific challenges Latin American countries face in making the most of digital technologies for learning.

From initial to higher education and adult training, new technologies open the door to innumerable learning activities, available at any time, from anywhere and to anyone. In schools, the use of new technologies can support the development of 21st century skills, facilitate the deployment of innovative learning practices and personalise learning to engage students who are at risk of being left behind. For adults, digital resources expand opportunities to acquire knowledge and develop skills flexibly, at any point in life, for job-related purposes or just for the pleasure of learning.

This report shows that countries in Latin America need to help individuals strengthen their skills to thrive in a rapidly changing world of work and societies, as all Latin American countries for which information is available display high shares of low-performing students and adults. Technology can be part of the solution to foster the skills individuals need to engage in societies and in an increasingly digital-intensive future. However, in Latin American countries, the use of technology for learning and skills development has not reached its full potential yet. Different challenges emerge.

Boosting connectivity and Internet adoption is an essential first step in making the most of all the new learning and training opportunities brought about by new technologies. Digital divides are, however, still an obstacle for learning with new technologies in Latin America. Socio-economic background, for instance, plays an important role in Latin American students' access to technology. Around 18% of Latin American 15-year-olds from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds lack an Internet connection at home and at school, in contrast to less than 2% on average across OECD countries. Some 24% of them do not have access to a computer (desktop, laptop or tablet) neither at home, nor at school. These are challenges that policy makers should address urgently to provide equal opportunities to all students. Public institutions and in particular schools in Latin America can play a leading role in bringing individuals and young people on line.

In initial education, more should be done to integrate technology innovatively in teaching and learning practices as this is crucial to boost every student's performance and the ability to develop skills. To be successful, digital technologies need to be introduced into schools as part of a comprehensive approach that aligns technology use with curricular needs, and includes teacher training and ICT support. This sort of comprehensive approach is essential to ensure that innovative uses of new technologies support

teaching and learning practices. Gamification, flipped instruction or blended learning are some examples of innovative practices that can rely on digital technologies and show great potential for improved learning.

In this context, Latin American teachers play a pivotal role in realising the untapped potential of new technologies in initial education. Teachers in Latin American countries with available data report high levels of openness to innovation in their school, similar to those observed among OECD countries, and hence of potential readiness to adopt new technologies in schools.

Accounting for curricular needs and teachers' objectives is key when introducing digital technologies in schools. Similarly, providing ICT support and high-quality training to teachers on both 'when' and 'how' to integrate technology in their teaching are essential to ensure that technology is used at its best potential in the classroom. Those digital tools that reach schools and classrooms need to be of high quality, carefully designed and tailored to benefit teaching and improve student learning. In many Latin American countries, there is still scope for a more efficient and innovative integration of digital technologies in teaching and learning practices to allow everyone to reap the benefits stemming from the digital revolution.

Digitalisation is also transforming the world of work, making lifelong learning of paramount importance. Against this backdrop, Latin American countries need to foster high quality, flexible options for learning at all stages of life. In Latin American countries with available data, however, participation in formal and non-formal job-related adult learning is far from being widespread. New technologies can contribute to finding a solution to this problem by providing new opportunities for developing skills and engaging individuals who may find standard forms of adult training to be of difficult access, ineffective or of insufficient quality.

Those individuals who engage in open or distance education for job-related reasons tend to find it useful. Around 55% of Latin American adults who engage in open or distance education do so in order to perform better at their jobs and to improve their career prospects. Personal interests or desire to enhance one's knowledge or skills in a specific area come second among reasons for participation. This pattern holds in OECD and Latin American countries alike. Individuals who combine work and education are the most numerous to engage in open education.

That being said, in Latin American and OECD countries alike, participation levels in open and distance education increase with the level of skills (whether in literacy or problem solving in technology-rich environments) and with educational attainment. Conversely, workers who lack a contract in their current job are less likely to engage in open or distance education.

Policy makers should be careful when leveraging these tools as patterns of participation in open and distance education tend to reproduce or even amplify patterns of participation in standard forms of adult learning and therefore, potential inequalities. Tailored policy intervention is, therefore, needed to engage low-skilled workers in adult learning and make them part of the digital revolution.



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