

Online education could accentuate inequality in educational outcomes

By [Sofia Neves](#)

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Covid-19 has ratcheted up online learning across the world as people are forced to stay at home to curb the spread of the pandemic. But what has been offered as an easy tech solution in place of face to face teaching time has highlighted deep inequality when it comes to broad connectivity, access to sophisticated hardware and, most revealingly, family stability in households to make online learning possible for some students.



Sofia Neves is managing director of Salesian Life Choices.

President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national lockdown from 26 March to 16 April to stem the tide against Covid-19 in South Africa and this has been subsequently extended until the end of April. In response to the president's initial announcement, the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology announced that it would help tertiary institutions prepare to switch to remote teaching.



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Learner support programmes

Basic education Minister Angie Motshekga also [revealed](#) plans to support school learners during the Covid-19 lockdown with learner support programmes which include online and broadcast support resources.

In addition, the private sector in South Africa have made known their contribution to online learning during the lockdown. Some South African telecommunication networks have zero-rated learning sites available, allowing for materials to be downloaded for free. [Vodafone](#) announced that it is making a new range of online educational and training support available to customers and employees for free, including online e-learning courses from Udemy and extended access to Perlego's online library of academic text books and publications.

However, the optimistic view that the Covid-19 crisis will spark an irreversible and positive system change in education,

particularly in the arena of online learning in the world, is a view that has been challenged by the reality of South Africa's deep inequality.



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Limited benefit on low-income communities

In a developed country or in South African suburbs, these initiatives can work, however in South African low-income communities, the challenges faced by young people are complex, limiting the benefit of such initiatives.

What we have observed with our coding academy summarises some of these struggles. Life Choices Academy is a 12-month initiative where students attend classes in the first six months on site and join a paid-internship with industry in the second part of the course. After President Ramaphosa announced that schools would close down, our team immediately brainstormed how we could move to online teaching.

The first challenge we needed to overcome was hardware. Less than 10% of our 60 students had a computer or laptop at home and we needed to lend laptops to the remaining students. The second challenge was data, no student could afford data. Data therefore needed to be provided and with that came the challenge of finding a reliable platform that uses limited data from where online lectures can take place. When we finally managed to solve the first three challenges and we began trialing the online course, we got our next wake-up call.



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Some of the challenges that are preventing students to fully participate in the course are:

- Limited network coverage in some areas of the township. Some of our students experience intermittent connection throughout the day;
- Overcrowded homes with no available space to be alone and focus on lecturers or studying;
- Increased household responsibilities. Now students are at home, some families rely on them for childcare, cleaning, cooking and other things;
- High levels of noise in the surroundings that are disturbing when trying to concentrate. Some students describe churches singing and drumming all day next door, others describe people just meeting on the street to have drinks,

talk and listen to music; and finally

- Difficulty in adapting to a completely new way of learning. No student had experience with online learning in the past and the transition was not as easy as we were expecting. Some students managed well, where other students' learning style is not fully compatible with this new methodology and is making their progression slow.



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Adapting to students' reality

Due to our size as an academy, we have been able to pivot several times in order to adapt to the reality of our students. We have decreased daily classroom contact time and increased one-on-one support. However, we can see this is going to affect the duration of the course or the content covered adversely. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find solutions for some of the students with the biggest challenges. They have stopped the course for now and will rejoin in the following cohort when things go back to normal.

We commend all educational online initiatives, but wonder if after the lockdown the educational gap between suburban kids and township kids will be even bigger despite all educational online efforts.

However, it is clear that the crisis has spurred momentum in the online education space that may not have been accelerated otherwise. To continue building on the momentum created, the challenge to education innovators is to ensure that online education initiatives is driven by an inclusive approach, so that all can truly benefit in South Africa.

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