

COVID-19 and education reform in Indonesia

by Mark Heyward

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Learning from home in Indonesia
Photo Credit: INOVASI

COVID-19 hit Indonesia in March 2020. From then until early 2022, schools have been mostly closed and children have been learning from home. However, the level of participation and the reality of ‘learning from home’ are highly variable and context specific.

An emergency curriculum was released in mid-2020 – a slimmed down version of the 2013 national curriculum. Schools were expected to reopen for face-to-face classes in July 2021. However, a surge of COVID-19 cases in June-July saw fresh lockdowns. Schools did not reopen, as planned, for the new school year. Most partially reopened in late 2021 with a blend of home- and school-based classes: but in early 2022 the omicron variant caused another surge of cases, resulting in more closures.

In 2021, the Innovation for Indonesia’s School Children (**INOVASI**) program conducted a **major study** into COVID-19-related learning gaps, with Indonesia’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (MoECRT) and the Australian Council for Educational Research (**ACER**). INOVASI is an eight-year partnership between the governments of Australia and Indonesia. It is managed by **Palladium** on behalf of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

The study found that, after one year of school closures, children in early grades had lost the equivalent of 5-6 months of learning – but this is an average, and in some cases the loss was as great as 15 months. The results highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on marginalised children, focusing on disability, digital access and poverty. Key findings were highlighted in a **policy brief** published on MoECRT’s website.

The COVID-19 pandemic has coincided with a period of major educational reform in Indonesia. The Minister for Education, Culture, Research and Technology, **Nadiem Makarim**, has survived four cabinet reshuffles since his appointment in October

2019. This indicates a strong commitment from the President to the Minister's ambitious reform agenda, which includes a prototype national curriculum known as *Kurikulum Merdeka* (Emancipation Curriculum), a new approach to competency-based assessment, and a teacher development program.

This agenda is, potentially, a game changer, in terms of upgrading the country's basic education system, improving learning outcomes, and thereby supporting the development of a more open, economically advanced and democratic Indonesia. It is also expected to address COVID-19-related learning loss.

Kurikulum Merdeka is a departure from previous curricula, in that it specifies learning outcomes at a high level in broad two-year learning stages. The aim is to free up teaching and learning, enabling competent teachers to go beyond the specified curriculum, while providing resources for less skilled teachers.

There is an expectation that the new curriculum will help teachers 'teach at the right level', and draw on local context to make teaching more relevant and engaging. A new competency-based assessment (*Asesmen Kompetensi Murni*, or AKM) was rolled out in 2021-2022. The AKM tests basic competencies in years 5, 8 and 11, leaving teachers free to conduct class-based formative assessments of subject content mastery.

Curriculum and assessment are politically fraught domains in Indonesia. Previous attempts to end the archaic national examination system, which has distorted curriculum implementation for years, failed due to political opposition. Curriculum change is no less challenging, with opponents of the current administration likely to take the opportunity to mobilise teachers and the broader community to undermine the reform process for political ends, as Indonesia prepares for a national election in 2024.

Paradoxically, the COVID-19 pandemic may have created a fertile environment for reform, mitigating the risk of opposition. Indonesia's traditional, high-stakes national examinations were abandoned in 2020, as it was not possible to conduct the examinations during lockdowns. This created space to introduce the new competency-based approach, which has replaced the national examinations. Unlike this previous census-based examination, the AKM is survey-based. It is thus unlikely to be as high stakes.

The emergency curriculum and teaching modules introduced in 2020 focused on foundational skills in literacy and numeracy, rather than traditional content for early grades. Meanwhile, MoECRT is taking time to pilot and refine the new national curriculum, based on research, expert advice and field experience. The curriculum

was trialled in selected schools in 2021 and launched in February 2022. Schools are invited to opt into the new curriculum in the 2022-2023 school year, and 66% have registered as at the end of April 2022. The intention is to roll it out, using a continuous improvement approach.

The pandemic has also increased acceptance of digital and blended learning approaches, both for teachers and students. Teacher working groups and continuing professional development have gone online, and virtual classrooms are now the norm – for children with access to the internet. This digital pivot is a two-edged sword. While the pandemic has accelerated take-up of digital learning, it is leaving many children behind. About **61 million Indonesians do not have access to the internet**, and nearly all of these are poor and remote families.

The pandemic has created a heightened awareness among policymakers of the digital divide and equity issues, as the need for a differentiated approach to mitigating learning loss has become obvious – due to differing impacts for girls, boys, children with disabilities, and speakers of different languages. The government is still looking for solutions to the issue of access for marginalised children.

INOVASI is supporting MoECRT to manage learning recovery, to refine and implement its big reforms, and to address equity issues. Teaching modules for the literacy component of the emergency curriculum were developed by local NGOs **Litara** and **YLAI**, in a partnership with MoECRT brokered by INOVASI. INOVASI's learning gap study found that children performed better using these modules than the traditional 2013 curriculum textbooks.

These findings were used to advocate within the national parliament for the new simplified curriculum. INOVASI is helping to refine the curriculum to ensure that it has a strong focus on foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. INOVASI also helped with the development of AKM and the introduction of formative assessment in the COVID-19 context. Now MoECRT is using results of the study to improve its new curriculum, ensuring that foundational skills are well covered in the early grades.

*Read the INOVASI report '**Beyond letters and numbers: the COVID-19 pandemic and foundational literacy and numeracy in Indonesia**'.*

Disclosures:

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/covid-19-and-education-reform-in-indonesia-20220525/>