

COVID-19 Impact on TVET and Online Higher Education

Ryotaro Hayashi

Social Sector Economist

Human and Social Development Division

South Asia Department, Asian Development Bank

Triangulation of Primary Dataset with Different Partners

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Real-Time Data
(Labor demand, Zoom)

Tracer Study
(2016, 2019, Nov 2020 on TVET)

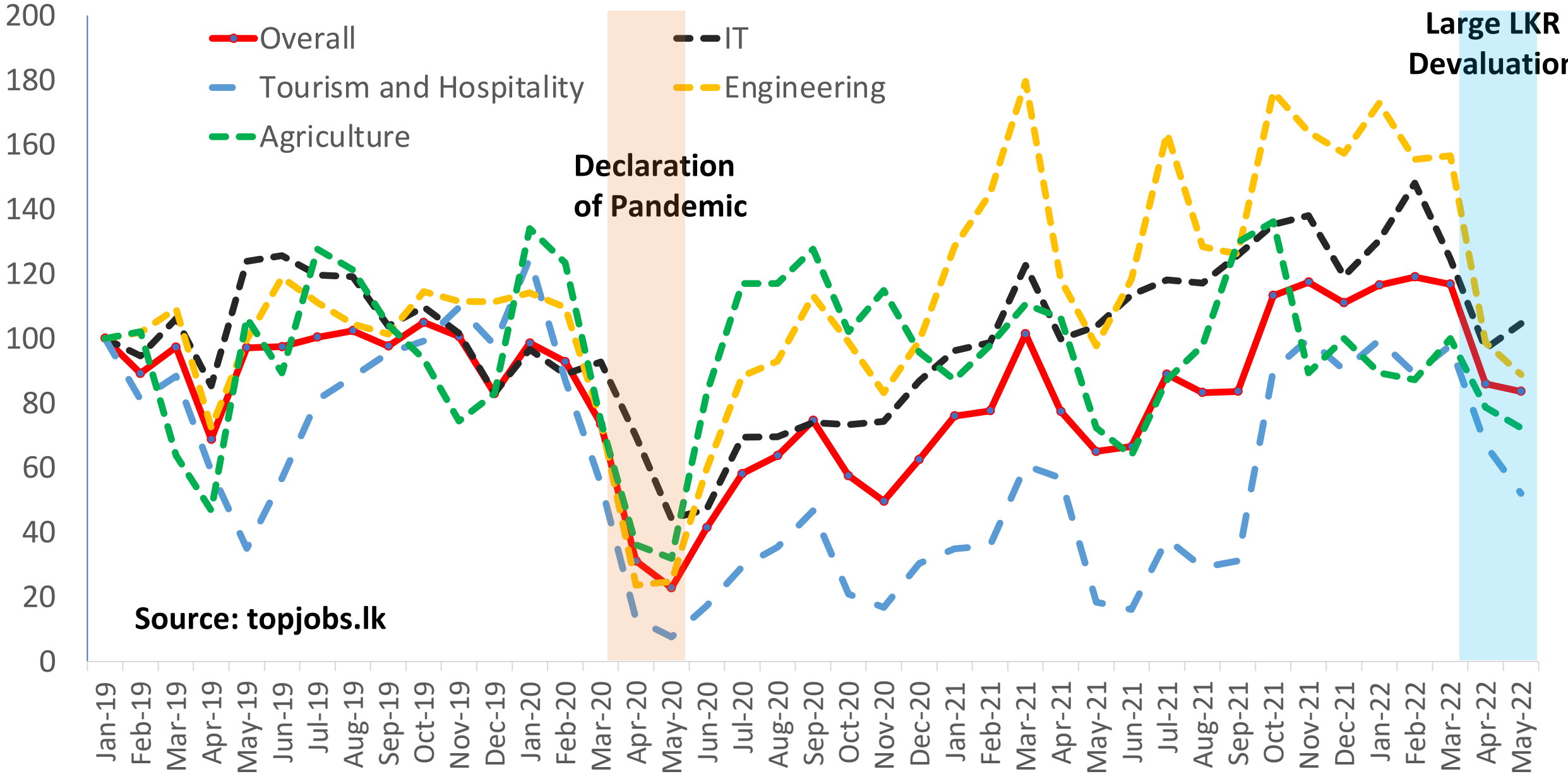
Online Survey
(June 2020, Nov-Dec 2021)

cepa
centre for poverty analysis


UCSC

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Disruptions in Labor Demand due to COVID-19 and Economic Crisis



Source: topjobs.lk

COVID-19 Impact on TVET

1

TVET graduates in tourism and hospitality courses or self-employed graduates were the hardest hit

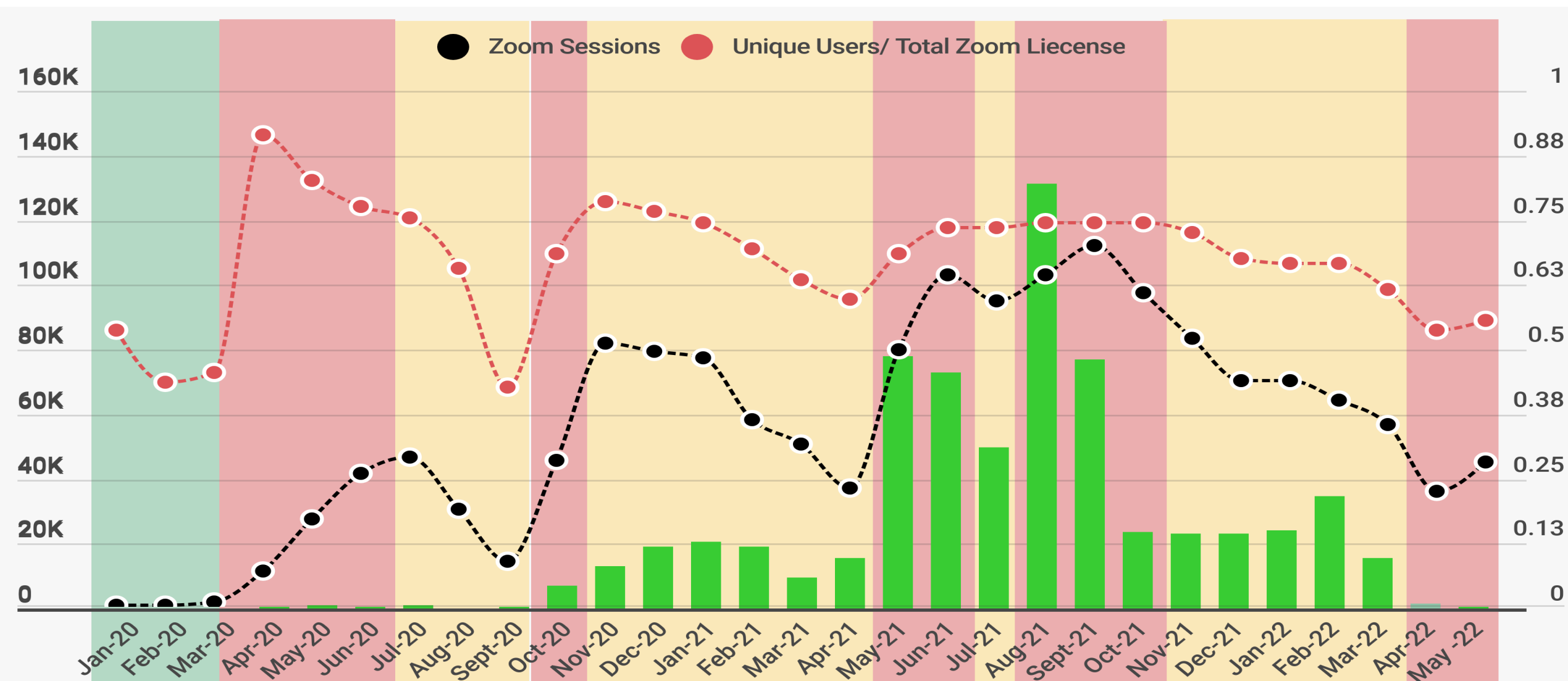
2

Quality of TVET was drastically reduced because of the difficulty in providing practical training online

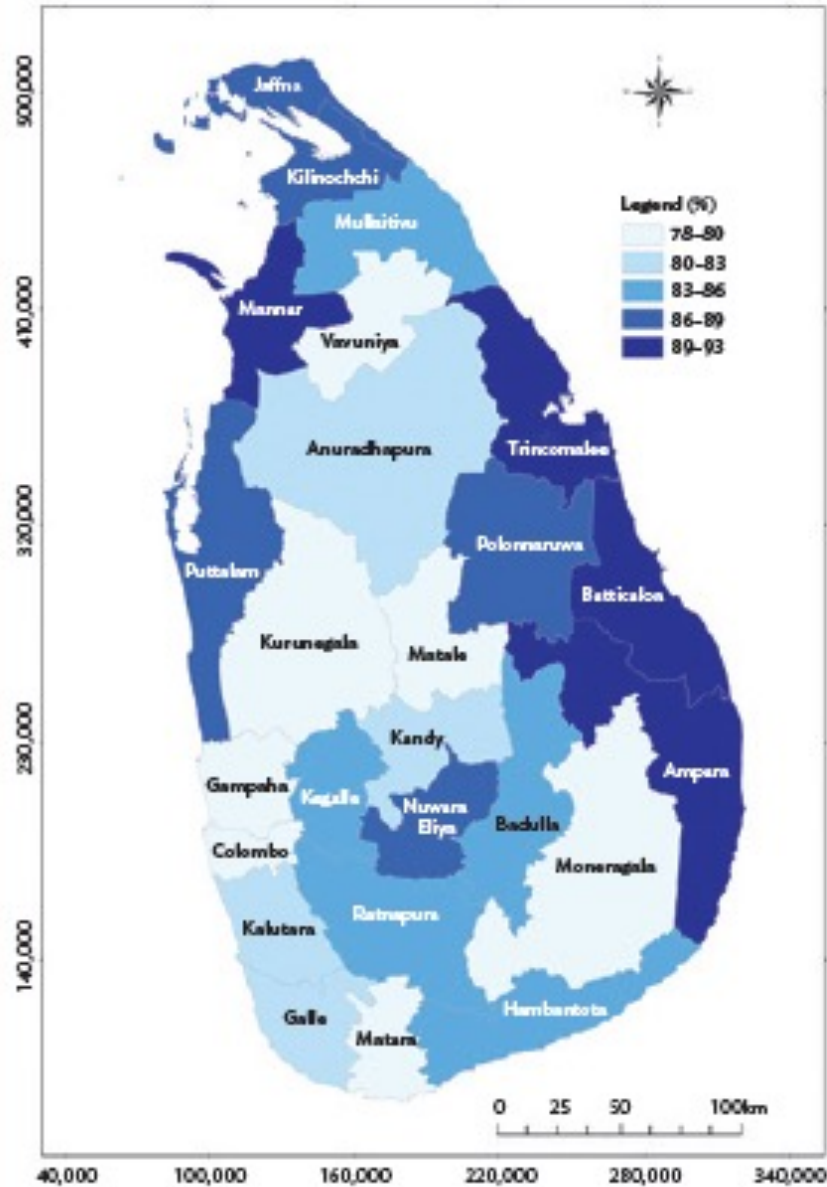
3

Continued TVET learning through social media (e.g., WhatsApp)

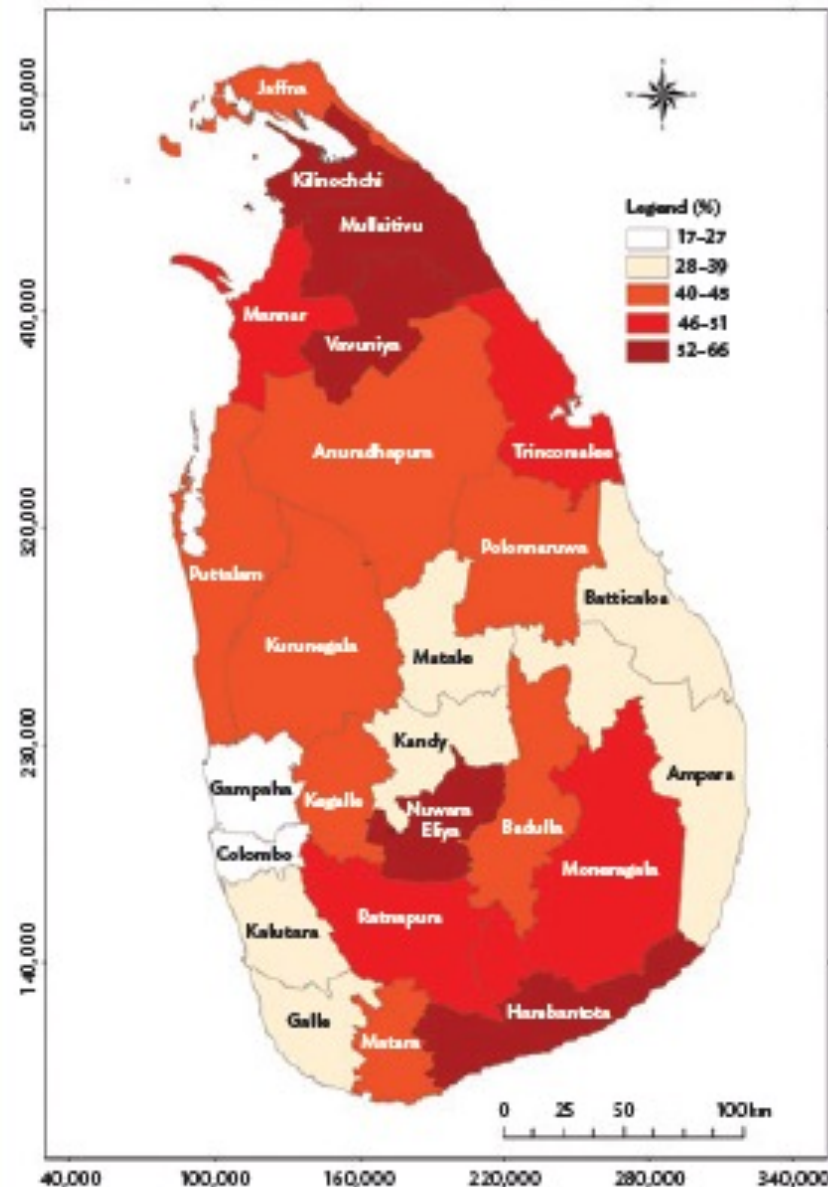
COVID-19 Waves Were “Booster Shots” for Online Higher Education



Map 1: Share of Students Using Smartphones for Online Higher Education by District, 2021



Map 2: Share of Students with Poor Internet Connection by District, 2021



Different quality of access in online higher education between urban and rural areas.

Students Realize the Benefit but Show Fatigue on Online Higher Education

“It [online learning] gives confidence that we can learn anything at our own pace.”

“It’s very difficult to do exams or quizzes online. Because unexpectedly we are having signal issues and power cuts.”

“Everything is very expensive these days in our country, please give our Mahapola regularly. I cannot buy a laptop because even their prices are increasing.”

Ongoing economic crisis is likely to amplify these challenges.

COVID-19 Impact on Higher Education

1

Sri Lanka made a remarkable transition to online higher education soon after the pandemic

2

Low-income students and students living in remote areas have struggled the most

3

Students have shown fatigue (e.g., limited interaction, extended screen time, large online assignments etc)

For Further Details, Please Take a Look at ADB Briefs.

Thank you for your attention.

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ADB BRIEFS

KEY POINTS

- Sri Lanka made a remarkable transition to online tertiary education after closing its higher education institutions in response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. According to the universities surveyed, nearly 90% of student respondents have been able to access online education. This rate is comparable to developed countries like Japan.
- All internet service providers in Sri Lanka provided free internet access to university servers during COVID-19 until 17 August 2020. This has been instrumental in promoting online learning for students.
- Given sampling limitations, this survey might overrepresent students with online access. The adoption of online learning varied by discipline, university, and household income. Survey results showed poor internet connections disrupted online education, and some students had to access other websites to prepare for lectures and complete assignments.
- Providing laptops and uninterrupted, affordable, high-speed internet access, particularly for students in poor households or remote areas, is crucial to ensuring equal access to tertiary education.
- Higher education institutions need to revisit curricula, pedagogy, and assessments for online education and blended learning. Loan schemes to purchase laptops could be considered.
- Practical laboratory training for certain disciplines, student engagement, and credible online examination will remain challenging. With university reopening in July 2020, strategies need to be developed for implementing blended learning.
- Changing the mindsets and attitudes of faculty and students is critical. A few hours of training for both to learn tactics for blended learning is necessary, but may not be sufficient. Strong leadership and incentives are also needed.

Online Learning in Sri Lanka's Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

Ryotaro Hayashi
Social Sector Economist
Human and Social Development
Division, South Asia Department
Asian Development Bank

Marito Garcia
Fellow, Darden Business School
Center for Global Initiatives
University of Virginia

K. P. Hewagamage
Professor in Computer Science
University of Colombo

Angelica Maddawin
ADB Consultant

INTRODUCTION

The temporary closure of educational institutions during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has abruptly transformed the global education landscape in favor of distance learning.² This radical shift saw a surge in the use of various digital platforms and applications, including digital learning management systems, collaboration platforms for live-video communication, massive open online courses (MOOCs), and tools for creating learning content.³ Some platforms have offered free access to basic services, especially during the pandemic, which higher education institutions used extensively, especially among academic staff and students with digital experience. For example, 90.3% of universities in Japan were providing distance learning as of 1 June 2020.⁴ In upper-middle-income countries, 88% of youth managed to continue learning, including 54% by video lectures and 40% by online testing.⁵

¹ This brief was peer reviewed by Jian Xu, Senior Education Specialist (Education Technology), Education Sector Group, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department, Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Bartlett W. Edes, Representative, North American Representative Office, ADB. The authors are also grateful for review and valuable inputs from Utsav Kumar, Senior Country Economist, Sri Lanka Resident Mission (SLRM), ADB; and Herathbanda Jayasundara, Social Development Officer, SLRM, ADB. The authors appreciate the invaluable support from the Presidential Taskforce for Education Affairs: University Grants Commission, and Ministry of Education. In conducting this online survey, valuable and candid feedback from university students, faculty, and administration are also acknowledged.

² United Nations. 2020. *Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and Beyond*. New York.

³ UNESCO. Distance Learning Solutions. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponsesolutions>.

⁴ Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. 2020. *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on HE and MEXT's Main Countermeasures—Starting Period for Classes and Promotion of Utilization of Distance Learning*. Tokyo. https://www.mext.go.jp/en/content/20200707-mxt_kokusa_000005414_02.pdf.

⁵ International Labour Organization. 2020. *Youth and COVID-19: Impacts on Jobs, Education, Rights and Mental Well-being*. Geneva.

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KEY POINTS

- In Sri Lanka, the impact on employment immediately after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak was cushioned by significantly reduced working hours instead of layoffs.
- Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) graduates from tourism and hospitality courses or TVET graduates working as self-employed were the hardest hit.
- The quality of TVET was drastically reduced because of the difficulty in providing practical training online, and delivering lectures under limited access to the internet and devices.
- Students enrolled in TVET courses managed to review lecture notes and submit assignments through low-tech solutions like social media (e.g., WhatsApp).
- Quality of learning could be improved significantly through financial support to students for internet access as well as acquisition of laptops and smartphones as medium-tech solutions. High-tech solutions such as simulation and virtual laboratories could also be explored. In addition to instructor training, changing mindsets toward blended learning will be important as further courses of action.

COVID-19 Impact on Technical and Vocational Education and Training in Sri Lanka

Ryotaro Hayashi
Social Sector Economist
Human and Social Development
Division, South Asia Department
Asian Development Bank

Marito Garcia
Fellow
Darden Business School
Center for Global Initiatives
University of Virginia

Amila Balasuriya
Senior Research Professional
Centre for Poverty Analysis

Tatsuya Hirokawa
University of Tokyo

Halgamage Don Sudarshana
Anojan Jayasundara
Senior Social Economist Officer
(Gender)
Sri Lanka Resident Mission
Asian Development Bank

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Sri Lanka President Gotabaya Rajapaksa declared 2021–2030 as the "Decade of Skills Development", which has the ambitious goal of reducing the population of unskilled labor to 10%. This is in line with the national development policy framework "Vistas of Prosperity and Splendour" (Government of Sri Lanka 2020a). Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) will play an instrumental role to realize the "Decade of Skills Development". After the parliamentary elections in August 2020, the government strengthened institutional arrangements by integrating responsibility for TVET into the Ministry of Education so that all education subsectors (general education, skills development, and higher education) could be holistically geared toward skills development to meet the fast-changing demands of the fourth industrial revolution.

However, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has posed significant challenges to education and employment, including TVET. Current TVET instructors and students have struggled with online and distance education, which was introduced abruptly under

¹ This brief was peer reviewed by Paul Vandenberg, senior economist, Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department, Asian Development Bank (ADB); and Fook Yen Chong, senior social sector specialist (skills development), Southeast Asia Department, ADB. The authors are grateful for the review and inputs from Utsav Kumar, senior country economist, Sri Lanka Resident Mission, ADB; Sangun Choi, social sector specialist, South Asia Department, ADB. The authors also appreciate topjobs.lk for sharing their data.

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KEY POINTS

- Sri Lanka made a remarkable transition to online higher education soon after the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic began in 2020. Take-up of online higher education had improved further by December 2021 with the use of quality videoconferencing systems such as Zoom.
- After nearly 2 years of online higher education, students have shown fatigue due to limited interactions with students and academic staff, extended screen time, lack of practical sessions, large volume of online assignments, and online proctored examinations. Students are also concerned about employment after graduation.
- Poor internet connection and lack of access to digital devices remain key challenges. Many higher education students still rely on smartphones for tasks needing laptops or desktops and a landline connection. Low-income students and students living in remote places have struggled most.
- While an array of measures introduced by the government and the private telecommunication industry were instrumental in continuing online higher education in Sri Lanka, cost-effective measures need to be explored further to address emerging challenges.

Sri Lanka: Progress and Remaining Challenges in Online Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic¹

Ryotaro Hayashi
Social Sector Economist
Human and Social Development
Division
Asian Development Bank

Marito Garcia
Fellow
Darden Business School
Center for Global Initiatives,
University of Virginia

Sampath Amararatne
Chairman
University Grants Commission
Sri Lanka

Thilani Kaushalya
Senior Research Professional
Centre for Poverty Analysis

K. P. Hewagamage
Professor in Computer Science
University of Colombo

INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted education globally, and higher education in Sri Lanka was no exception.² The national government closed all schools, including higher education institutions, from 13 March 2020 to contain the spread of the virus. These institutions gradually reopened from 6 July 2020 on a limited scale by prioritizing final year students, but had to close periodically due to repeated COVID-19 waves. The University Grants Commission after 1 January 2022 permitted universities to reopen but only up to 50% of student capacity. Some students reported to university premises to attend practical hands-on laboratory sessions and examinations. Some students also went to their universities given the frequent, long power cuts and unstable internet access in their homes due to shortage of fuels.

Higher education institutions in Sri Lanka had to deliver education services online at the onset of the pandemic, and this has continued since, even as limited face-to-face higher education has resumed.³ The quick transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to online was challenging for both students and academic staff. Access to digital devices

¹ This brief was peer reviewed by Paul Vandenberg, senior economist, Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department (ERCD), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Meekyung Shin, education specialist, Education Sector Group, Sustainable Development and Climate Change Department, ADB. The authors are also grateful for review and valuable inputs from Rhea M. Molato, associate economics officer, ERCD, ADB and Roshan G. Ragel, professor, Computer Engineering, University of Peradeniya.

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. 2022. *The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Education: International Evidence from the Responses to Educational Disruption Survey (REDS)*. Paris.

³ R. Hayashi et al. 2020. *Online Learning in Sri Lanka's Higher Education Institutions during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. ADB Briefs, No. 151. Manila.

Note: In this publication, "\$" refers to United States dollars and "SLR" to Sri Lanka rupees.

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