Synthesis Report

COVID-19 and adult learning and education: a comparative scoping research study in Afghanistan, the Philippines and the UK

British Association for Literacy in Development (BALID),
Afghan National Association for Adult Education and Transformare (Philippines)

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Acknowledgements

Introduction and overview of the project

The current COVID-19 pandemic has increased inequalities in education which have been particularly evident in low and middle income countries - affecting both formal and non-formal learning. However, there seems to be a gap in the current debates around COVID-19 and education.

Discussions have largely focused on mitigating the pandemic's impacts on formal schooling including effects of a shift to online learning. Less attention has been given to the pandemic's impact on adult learning and education (ALE) provision - from literacy and basic skills to continuing education and professional development (vocational skills) and liberal, popular and community education. This is despite current statistics identifying 773 million adults as 'illiterate', most of whom are women (UNESCO 2020). The latest Global Report on Adult Learning and Education (GRALE) has noted unequal participation rates in ALE programmes - with low-income countries most likely to report a decline (UIL, 2019).

The aim of this scoping research was to explore ongoing and potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on adult learning and education programmes in the contrasting contexts of Afghanistan, the Philippines and the UK, with a particular interest in adult literacy components. This project was funded by the British Association for International and Comparative Education (BAICE) through a Seedcorn Funding Grant dedicated to supporting pilot and scoping research in education across different contexts. This project

was led by BALID (British Association for Literacy in Development) alongside BALID Members ANAFAE (Afghan National Association for Adult Education) in Afghanistan, Transformare in the Philippines and the UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation at the University of East Anglia.

The overarching research questions for the project were:

i) How, and to what extent, has COVID-19 affected ALE programmes in Afghanistan, the Philippines and the UK?

ii) What role might ALE have in responding to challenges presented by the pandemic in these contexts?

These questions signal a broader treatment of 'impact', recognising that while the project explores how ALE is affected as a sector (as in the first question), it is also interested in how ALE programmes play a role in responding to the multiple impacts of COVID-19 in the communities. Findings from this research will inform a policy brief presenting recommendations on how governments and non-state actors are able to take into account

the needs of adult learners as COVID-19 continues.

This comparative report brings together the findings from the three country reports (Maleki 2021, Lontoc *et al.* 2021, Newell-Jones *et al.* 2021) which are accessible on the BALID website. It is divided into the following parts: introduction (section 1), emerging literature on how ALE as a sector is being impacted by COVID-19 and, in turn, how ALE could be a tool for addressing COVID-19 challenges in this area (section 2), methodology for the research interviews (section 3), comparative findings (section 4), conclusions and further areas for enquiry (section 5).

Literature Review

ALE has been hit hard globally by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among numerous other concerns, the pandemic has exacerbated the social inequalities experienced by many adults who access ALE programmes - many of whom were already experiencing marginalisation pre-pandemic (ASPBAE 2020, Boeren, Roumell and Roessger 2020). Infection rates and deaths seem to be higher amongst the most vulnerable in a society, compounding economic insecurity and access to resources such as formal education and health services (Waller *et al.* 2020).

As the various parts of the world went into lockdown, community learning centres, public education centres and other adult learning and community-based learning programmes also closed with many shifting to online and distance learning provisions . The shift to online and distance learning became the alternative - which happened within a short time-frame and often with little support (McKenna *et al.* 2020). According to Stanistreet, Elfert and Atchoarena (2021), many adult educators struggle with online approaches to teaching. In many communities where internet and digital resources are a scarcity, accessing online learning remains a challenge.

According to Boeren, Roumell and Roessger (2020) almost 75% of adult education nowadays is related to the workplace. As industries and workplaces closed, it is estimated that participation in non-formal opportunities at work in OECD countries decreased by an average of 18% with significant implications for workplace skills (OECD 2021). Longer-term reskilling includes that attributable to the increasing use of technology (Frey and Osborne 2013; Manyika *et al.* 2017; Nedelkoska and Quintini 2018) alongside immediate reskilling for working from home during lockdown. For instance, this may require adults to return to school, reskill or upskill for new jobs (Boeren*,* Roumell and Roessger 2020). This may also have implications on funding priorities where vocational training is prioritised while literacy efforts and education for citizenship may be overlooked (Stanistreet, Elfert and Atchoarena 2021).

Globally, the funding pattern towards ALE was already scarce pre-pandemic with low-income countries more likely to report a decrease rather than an increase in allocation (see UIL 2019). ASPBAE (2020) cautions that the reallocation of funding to public health might have deep effects on the ALE sector in the Southeast Asian region, especially in countries where the health systems are already stretched. For Baril (2020), this funding landscape might signal a 'perilous time for ALE' post-pandemic. ALE researchers have also raised the concern that these changing funding priorities might

impact ALE educators and tutors the most (Käpplinger and Lichte 2020).

Evidence from the Asia Pacific region also demonstrates the gendered dimension of the pandemic. Research in the region has shown that women - due to less access to mobile phones and educational opportunities - are less likely to receive life-saving information to protect themselves from COVID-19 (UN Women 2020a). Increased domestic violence globally - what UN Women refer to as 'the shadow pandemic' (UN Women 2020) - and increased demand for caring responsibilities (Del Boca *et al.* 2020) could, in turn, limit the opportunities for women to access ALE.

However, ALE has also been seen as a pathway to improve COVID-19 response and recovery in many communities. Literacy groups in Quebec, for instance, play an important role in making government COVID-19 information and guidelines more accessible while helping break isolation and address people's fear and anxiety (Brossard 2020, as cited in James and Thériault 2020). Facilitating health literacy - being able to engage with and use health information - could also be made possible through ALE (Lopes and McKay 2020). While access to technology remains an issue, this could also present an opportunity to focus on digital skills. For example, the National Open University of Nigeria, in cooperation with UNESCO, has launched a six-week open course on Media and Information Literacy to help combat fake news and misinformation. For James and Theriault (2020), examples such as these could be considered as 'resources of hope' (cf. Tett and Hamilton 2019 as cited in James and Theriault 2020) that demonstrates the resilience of the sector amidst crisis.

In primarily researching Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 *Quality Education*, the literature review highlights associated challenges with goals 3 *Good Health and Wellbeing*, 5 *Gender Equality*, 10 *Reduced Inequalities,* and 16 *Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions*. The challenges are mainly attributable to societal failures in enabling access and integration of the most marginalised, and pandemic increases in caring duties and in domestic violence. Projects contributed to ancillary SDGs through addressing SDG4. SDG 7 Affordable and Clean Energy impacts on women's reduced access to technology and digital health information and literacy learning. SDGs 1 No Poverty and 8 Decent Work and Economic Growth are undermined by the global pandemic.

The multidimensional and multisectoral impact of the current health crisis indicates a need to further explore the challenges faced by ALE programmes across different contexts as they navigate these drastic changes. There is evidence that countries in so-called Global South contexts already experience declining resourcing for ALE programmes in addition to poorer infrastructure and access to the internet - all of which were compounded by overwhelmed and already-stretched public health systems. This research looks into state and non-state actors that deliver ALE programmes that aim to address inequalities and improve participation with a focus on poorer and marginalised communities who otherwise would have a difficult time accessing formal systems. A better understanding of how COVID-19 affects ALE programmes will offer new opportunities for governments and civil society actors to be better equipped in responding to the needs of the sector post-pandemic and beyond.

Methodology

This research employed a comparative case study approach. These three countries were chosen because they offer contrasting contexts - being in Global South and Global North - in ALE provision such as in terms of target learners, financing, government policies, resources (of both learners and tutors), COVID-19 response and implementation of ALE programmes.

The work of BALID's partners in these countries involves varied ALE provisions including working with both statutory and non-statutory institutions and they have experienced varying government/NGO responses to COVID-19. These country contexts were chosen for their potential to generate relevant and useful insights on the topic when analysed comparatively.

Each country team developed a case study of ALE programmes in their countries (see specific methodology for each case study in the country reports). In Afghanistan, the case study focused on the work of the Education in Emergency Working Group (EiEWG) and the Islamic Relief Organisation (IR) - non-state actors that have been conducting ALE programmes in the country since 2014 and 1999 respectively. The Philippine case study drew from the Alternative Learning System (ALS) programme of the Department of Education that provides basic literacy classes to out-of-school youths and adults. Often, the ALS caters to marginalised populations such as those in urban and rural poor areas. The UK case study focused on the Islington Adult Community Learning Centre (ACL) in London. The ACL works with the hardest to reach learners and those that are furthest from employment.

The research was given ethical approval by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia (UEA) and the country teams were briefed on the required ethics procedures.

The case studies were developed through a combination of policy and literature reviews and semi-structured interviews. As an initial step, the teams collated and reviewed policy and programme documents related to ALE in their specific country. This review helped in narrowing down the overarching research question as well as in developing the interview topics. The semi-structured interviews involved adult literacy facilitators, managers and learners. Local government officials co-implementing the ALS programme were interviewed in the Philippines, and leaders of the NGOs were interviewed in Afghanistan. In the UK, interviewees included a senior ACL manager and a local NGO partner.

The research took a collaborative approach to the process. Drafts of the in-country policy

reviews were shared among the country teams and the consortium, with representation from each of the three countries, met to compare and contrast the findings. The consortium then developed the interview questions, and data collection, which took place between April and June 2021, was carried out by members of the consortium team. The country teams then prepared their reports based on the policy review and the interviews. The consortium reconvened for a virtual collaborative event which involved each country team presenting their report synthesising the key findings of the impact of COVID-19 on ALE in their own context, and an open discussion of the similarities and differences between countries.

Comparative Findings

In this section, the report brings together key findings from the case studies (Lontoc *et al.* 2021, Maleki 2021, Newell-Jones *et al.* 2021). The country reports which contain detailed findings and analysis for each country can be accessed via the BALID website. However, to better understand the similarities and differences of basic ALE provisions of the three countries, a summary of characteristics is described in Table 1 below.

It should be noted that COVID-19 and the wider political situations in the three countries have changed rapidly since the data collection and continue to do so. When the data was being collected in Afghanistan, educational facilities including universities, schools, madrasas and literacy courses had started phased reopening after being closed by the government from March 2020. Following the final Taliban takeover in August 2021, there remains a huge uncertainty on the future of the ALE sector and approach to the pandemic.

In the Philippines, COVID-19 rates were increasing during the time of the interviews and lockdown measures were imposed anew. It must be noted that as of this writing (November 2021), the Philippines has allowed medical schools that met the requirements of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to hold limited face-to-face classes. On the other hand, in basic education, a pilot run of limited face-to-face contact in areas which are considered low risk started on November 15, 2021.

In the UK, the interviews were conducted during the second wave of the COVID-19 infections in the country and restrictions to movement reappeared, although conversations were already in place for phased re-opening, with compulsory age education being prioritised.

Table 1. Some characteristics of basic ALE provisions in the three country contexts

	Afghanistan	Philippines	UK
Policy on ALE	The State - alongside the non-state actors - provides adult literacy courses throughout the country. All are required to teach the MoE's textbooks.	State-sanctioned and state-funded Bureau of Alternative Learning System delivers the Alternative Learning System. Non-state actors (such as NGOs) also deliver a variety of ALE programmes.	Further Education and Skills (FES) sector made up of colleges, independent learning providers (ILPs) and community learning and skills providers.
Delivery	No distance or online learning approaches were implemented prior to the COVID-19 lockdown. Most of the classes are offered in community centres.	Distance (modular) and online learning approaches were already implemented prior to COVID-19 lockdowns. Classes are often small and based in community centres.	Mostly face-to-face prior to COVID-19. Classes small, informal, in community centres and/or colleges. Adult literacy and ESOL working to a nationally accredited curriculum.
Profile of learners	Mostly females who have not had formal schooling.	Often those that have not finished elementary and secondary education.	Wide range, including, those most marginalised in society and furthest from employment.
Profile of facilitators	All come from the community where they teach.	ALS teachers employed by the Department of Education (DepEd), community ALS implementers engaged by DepEd or by the local government units (LGUs), and learning facilitators financed by the private sectors such as NGOs and individuals.	Some from the communities where they teach.
Training and support for facilitators	An intensive teacher training programme is a prerequisite for all the facilitators prior to their adult literacy teaching.	ALS teachers undergo training/seminars with corresponding Continuing Professional Development (CPD) units needed to renew licence. DepEd also provides capacity building activities for facilitators.	Accredited initial tutor preparation is formalised and mandatory for most ALE tutors. A range of in-service support and training is widely available, partly accredited.

Changes in modes of provisions, curriculum and assessment

While the most dominant narrative seems to be that education institutions shifted to online learning, findings from this research show that ALE[1] programmes have responded in a variety of ways - including face-to-face and hybrid solutions.

The figure below places some of these modes of provision in a matrix of level of technology required and degree of interaction between learners and tutors.

ALE provision requiring no or low access to technology by learners included the use of paper-based activities posted to learners, or which they collected from centres, phone calls and face-to-face learning in families. These modes of learning could be synchronous or asynchronous, and were generally framed as being self-directed and student-led, although the role of facilitators remained vital. They tended to use a variety of resources provided by educational institutions and/or activities developed by ALE tutors. Other modes of provision required greater access to technology and ranged from radio and TV-based instruction to online provision using virtual learning platforms which required reliable internet access and data. Provision also differed in the amount of interaction between tutors and learners, with most learners valuing provision with direct interaction with their tutors over modes with less direct interaction. Individual provision was seen by some as a preferred option, and in the UK, for example, provided opportunities for individuals to
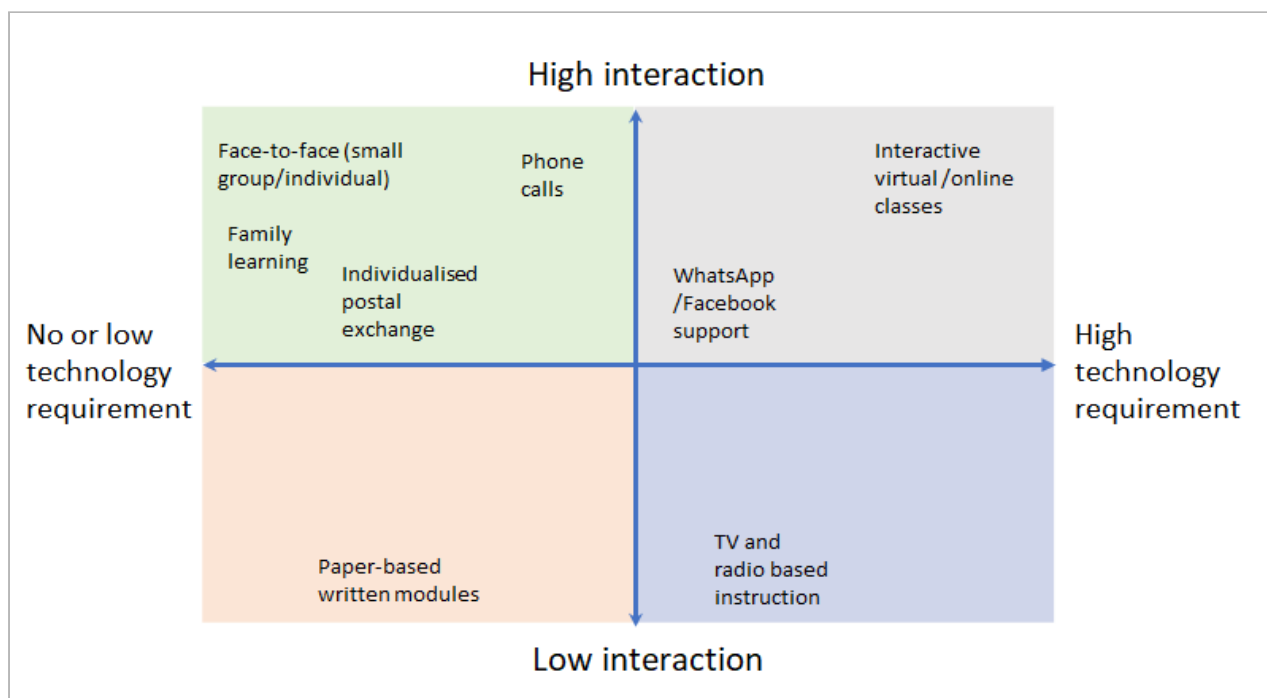

Figure 1. Matrix of modes of delivery of ALE during the COVID-19 pandemic

[1] In the following sections, we use the acronym ALE to refer to Adult Learning and Education. ALS refers to the Alternative Learning System which is a specific ALE programme in the Philippines. ACL refers to Adult Community Learning specific to the United Kingdom.

progress to joining groups. However, there was feedback from across the three countries that learners valued interacting directly with their peers as well as tutors.

In several communities of the ALE programme in Afghanistan, for instance, face-to-face teaching (in smaller groups in the open air) remained an option for a couple of weeks following the lockdown. It helped that most ALE tutors were recruited from the local area so they were able to visit learners in their home if they could not connect with them.

In the Philippines, many ALE programmes, including in the research site in rural Batangas, offered a modular approach, where ALE tutors printed out worksheets and modules that learners could then pick up and answer at home. This approach relied heavily on individual self-directed learning with minimal individual support and guidance, which proved to be a major challenge for many learners. For learners in Quezon City, the limited direct support came in the form of occasional chats on Facebook Messenger. This was an approach undertaken early in the pandemic so although the classes were online, physical movement (and accompanying transportation costs) were still required.

In the UK case study, ALE provision shifted online when lockdown measures were introduced, but many tutors remained in contact with some of their learners by phone and post. When restrictions were eased, some face-to-face learning took place, although most remained virtual.

The digital and online provisions were also diverse with each country quickly identifying the most accessible and least expensive means of communicating, with a heavy reliance on mobile phones. In the UK, support also came through informal phone calls and messaging applications such as WhatsApp. These modes also provided the tutors with more informal means to reach out

to the adult learners. The use of social media apps for communication and instruction was also seen in Afghanistan and the Philippines. In the Philippines for example, it was found that facilitators used the popular Facebook Messenger application - which arguably is much more familiar and accessible to adult learners as compared to Zoom and Skype. In the Philippines, there is no charge for sending messages via Facebook Messenger and it can be used even without paid mobile data. In both Afghanistan and the Philippines, radio-based and television-based instruction were also used, aimed at areas with limited internet but with basic radio and TV signals.

In Afghanistan, the importance of family learning was further highlighted. This was an approach used by literacy facilitators to encourage adult learning at home. According to Karima[2], a social mobiliser in Afghanistan, they would call learners at home and assign a literate member of the family to help a non-literate family member. This included younger members of the family teaching a respected elder, such as the experience of ALE learner Alizadhe who shared that

> *At home, I was a mother and my little child was my son, but during literacy lessons, my son was my teacher and I was his student. It was cute.*

Government officials have noted the effectiveness of this approach and have expressed a desire to take this up as a policy later on.

Apart from the mode of instruction, there was also a shift in the topics being covered in literacy classes from a largely pre-set curriculum to one which responded more directly to the immediate needs of learners. In Afghanistan, for instance, ALE classes became spaces where adult learners received information about protecting themselves from COVID-19 and navigating

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[2] All names in this report are pseudonyms

changing government restrictions. In the Philippines, the curriculum in ALE has normally been in line with the curriculum in formal schools, but this changed to take into account the changing interests of adult learners. Thus the key informants saw the need to update the curriculum, veering away from formal schooling not only in terms of curricular content but also in other programme components such as assessment and set-up. In the UK, tutors highlighted an increased interest in COVID-related topics such as: (1) understanding information on staying safe and understanding the government restrictions, (2) accessing government support and guidance on COVID-19, (3) gaining new employment skills, and (4) home schooling.

In terms of assessment, evidence from the UK and the Philippines shows that monitoring and evaluating students' learning took a back seat during these rapid changes. In rural Batangas, an instructional manager explained that the lack of direct supervision had led to low quality assessment. They noted, for instance, that learners' penmanship seemed to differ from one worksheet to the next (which suggested different individuals completing the learners' assessments) and answers were below the standard training delivered. In the UK, there

were attempts early in the pandemic to conduct exams at home, but these proved to be difficult to moderate and certificates had to be given based on the available reliable data.

The diversity of provisions - and the capacity of ALE stakeholders to reform curriculum and assessment in response to pandemic restrictions - has highlighted the importance of providing different means for teaching and learning. Government officials in Afghanistan spoke strongly about the need to provide alternative education opportunities, beyond formal provisions. One shared,

> *[The pandemic] taught us to expand our alternative strategies and programmes for learning and service delivery or provision and have a variety of learning opportunities for the learners, especially for the adult literacy learners.*

A similar sentiment was expressed in the UK case study but the tutors and learners emphasised the importance of face-to-face provisions and how its benefits should not be forgotten in the midst of the flexibility offered by online modes. Diverse hybrid models of learning have been advocated.

The challenge of inclusion and digital inequalities

In all three case studies, barriers existed for learners to access changing ALE provisions following lockdown and other government restrictions, even if there have been positives in shifting to online and hybrid learning approaches, such as increased flexibility and continued learning and engagement even in the midst of different restrictions.

Table 2 lists the key benefits and challenges faced in online provision, but it must be noted

that different segments of society (e.g. in terms of gender and socioeconomic status, or literacy levels) are impacted differently. For instance, virtual classes offer learners who have home and work responsibilities the flexibility to organise their schedule but it also excludes those adult learners lacking the hardware and/or software to access online learning.

Table 2. Benefits and challenges of online instruction based on the interviews.

Benefits	Challenges
- Flexibility in time and place - No need for movement and transportation - Continued instruction despite mobility restrictions - A host of modes are available: from online synchronous classes to the use of online message apps, radio and TV	- Not all learners and facilitators have the same access to internet and digital devices - Learners and facilitators may lack the digital skills to engage with the tools effectively - Limited 'informal interaction' and sense of community that face-to-face classes can facilitate

Overall, enrollment and participation in these programmes decreased with a rate of decline as high as 55% in the Philippines during the time of the research. It is important to note that the case study organisations already catered to marginalised groups in their respective communities (e.g. those that are unable to access formal education, adults who cannot read and write, etc). The pandemic has therefore exacerbated this marginalisation. In the UK for instance, it was found that the pandemic has had a disproportionately high impact on entry level learners, leading to a change in the composition of their learners as a whole. One tutor remarked,

Our entry level learners have lost out massively. Many of them don't have technology, don't have the skills to use technology or their children are using their technology. Whereas at level 1 and level 2, some of them have some of those difficulties, but for others, they've actually really enjoyed going online because they don't need to leave the house. That's really a big divide.

Access to online tools, gadgets and internet connection was a significant challenge to learners and facilitators alike. Those with higher income had the possibility of buying new hardware such as laptops and computers and obtaining more data and a stronger connection. Those that have limited resources for these were consequently unable to access the online ACL

classes, get up to date information and reach out to their facilitators.

In the Philippines and Afghanistan, there is evidence that learners in rural areas were affected more than their peers in urban spaces - this despite the diversity of provisions/channels for ALE. For example, in the rural Bulacan in the Philippines, there is only a single centre from which learners can get printed modules. Without transportation allowances (and due to impeded public transport following lockdowns), learners are compelled to walk for many hours to get the materials and return them later. Lack of digital infrastructure such as little or no internet connection, digital devices, etc have also been a challenge for ALE participants in Quezon City. According to the Philippine report,

In Quezon City, which is a major urban city in the greater capital of Metro Manila, the pandemic aggravated these concerns all the more because many of these adult learners lost their jobs. Many can hardly participate in online classes because they do not have money to avail mobile data. This was confirmed by their instructional managers who shared that absenteeism increased because, aside from their inability to avail mobile data, many didn't have access to gadgets and the internet.

In the UK, Islington Council was able to provide tablets and internet data to a small

number of learners. However, as one manager explained,

Vodafone and other providers are able to offer chips and support to youth learners but when I asked from ACL we were told we were not eligible. That hurts, these are some of the most vulnerable in our society

The situation was similar in Afghanistan and the Philippines where government provision of this kind was focused on school children's digital tools. In the three countries, when the governments were unable to provide these, the burden of provision fell on NGOs, charities and other non-state actors and also on individual learners and their families - placing some of them at an even greater disadvantage.

Being equipped with digital tools and internet connectivity was just one of the many issues of access. Across the case studies, we have found that many learners and facilitators have inadequate digital literacy skills to actively engage with online classes and tasks. In the Philippines, for example, it was noted that most of the facilitators - many of whom are at a retirement age - found it hard to accomplish complex online tasks such as the use of online meeting tools, facilitating online classes, etc.

In the UK, the digital divide was not limited to the ACL learners, but was evident among tutors and managers; staff faced a steep learning curve, up-skilling themselves, whilst at the same time trying to support the learners in making the same transition. In Afghanistan, the learners were assisted not only by the facilitators but also for instance by younger members of the family helping the adult learner with online tasks. In the Philippines, several approaches (e.g. modular learning, asynchronous online classes) also relied on self-directed learning and learners' agency (sometimes with little or no support from facilitators). This had a significant impact on the learning experience of many people, especially

those who were not used to doing tasks individually. A manager in the UK said,

If you've never used a computer, even if I give you a Chromebook, you're not going to use it, you need to be trained and taught how to use the devices. Some learners need support… we were able to offer this to a small number of learners, sending them materials… but not to all.

Across the case studies, one-to-one, tailor-made instruction was appreciated by many learners both in limited face-to-face and in online instruction. However, direct one-to-one instruction was different across the case studies. In the Philippines, this was drastically decreased (and in some cases was not offered at all) and instead focused on self-directed forms of learning:

Since there was no direct teacher's supervision, the learners shared that independent learning is hard, especially to those who are still learning basic literacy. Since many Filipino adult learners attend continuing education programmes to make up for the basic formal schooling that they have missed, it is expected that they don't yet possess the necessary literacy skills needed to engage in independent learning.

In Afghanistan, classes were reduced from 2 hours to 30 minutes (although this changed later when an NGO funded an extra 30 minutes of instruction, totalling 2.5 hours). In the UK, as provision moved online, class lengths tended to be reduced. However, one positive initiative, by one of the managers, was the introduction of some individual face-to-face provision. This proved to be successful and is going to be incorporated into future provision, although only for a few and usually as a means of developing the skills to join and actively gain from group provision.

ALE provisions: more than skills

Across all case studies, we have seen that ALE programmes went beyond providing literacy skills and basic knowledge to the learners. These interactions also became an important source of community and solidarity during an isolating pandemic experience. In Afghanistan, many learners interviewed considered Islamic Relief as their 'family' and their generosity has motivated them to participate in ALE classes during the phased reopening despite anxiety. As a learner shared:

> *May God bless them [Islamic Relief]; they gave us many things to stay safe. I felt like they are our family and joined the class with confidence.*

Informal chats and fellowship activities helped facilitate these. In addition, ALE programmes became an important resource for adults to learn more about COVID-19 including about vaccines. Tutors and managers had a significant role to play for this to happen. In Afghanistan, learners and facilitators expressed that they experienced stress and anxiety in returning to face-to-face classes during a pandemic. And while the state and the NGO did not have any specific programme to support adult learners' mental and psychological well-being, distribution of health kits and careful attention to safety measures and social distancing helped lower adult learners' and facilitators' worries. An adult literacy facilitator explained that:

> *The health kit [including face-masks, soap, gloves, detergent], which was distributed by the [Islamic Relief] office to the teachers and students has helped the students to trust that we care about their health and they can come to class.*

In the Philippines, ALE facilitators in Quezon City received training on stress management and well-being. In the UK, a strategy developed to combat the anxiety of learners was to recreate the informal gatherings that had already been conducted when learning took place face to face. As one tutor commented:

> *I've set up what we call hang-outs so anyone can come at lunch time or have a cup of tea. They have the option to talk about anything! I learned so much about the learners and their families and suddenly we stopped being teachers and learners - we were all in this together! I was learning a lot - I remember when there was no flour anywhere and there was one Italian learner who taught us how to make bread without flour!*

When the provisions were conducted online and students were at home, evidence from the Philippines and the UK demonstrates that adult learners often had difficulty managing time for class requirements alongside household responsibilities such as childcare, eldercare and, in the case of the farmers in rural Bulacan, their agricultural activities which included fishing and merchandising. A tutor in the UK described the situation of one of the learners:

> *.......she was in a flat, trying to homeschool, she was shielding so got deliveries and didn't go out. She was worried about her children. I was worried about the whole vitamin D thing. I was worried, I said, 'Is there someone else who could take the children out?' She somehow made an arrangement with her ex-husband to take the children out.... So we've always done this but now it's been magnified, we do even more of this.*

The many and changing roles of ALE facilitators and tutors

Across the case studies, the commitment and dedication of ALE facilitators has played a significant role in providing continued learning opportunities during the pandemic. This is despite the fact that many facilitators themselves were facing challenging circumstances, limited resources, unconducive home environments and hospitalisation/death of family members and friends. Some of these roles emerged as they provided services and were done informally, such as checking on learners, providing emotional support and helping peers navigate online platforms. The tutors assumed a variety of roles when provisions evolved following different government lockdown measures and restrictions - some of these were not part of their original remit.

In the Philippines, for example, ALE facilitators were expected to handle areas of provision that they were not an expert in. Similarly, in the UK, tutors were not only expected to be subject and pedagogy experts but also experts in managing online learning. A manager explained:

> *[The pandemic has] forced tutors to develop pedagogy, there's a real new pedagogy as a result of online learning. There's an old notion of tutors needing to be dual-professionals, that's outdated now and there's a baseline expectation for them to be tri-professionals: subject, pedagogical, and now expect users in technology to leverage and develop learning.*

It should also be noted that problems of resources and access were also experienced by ALE facilitators. Evidence from the UK and the Philippines has demonstrated that the additional ad hoc expenses often fell on the shoulders of the facilitators themselves. Instructional managers interviewed in the Philippines shared that the designated mobile and transportation allowance from the Department of Education did not arrive on time and. in many cases, did not arrive at all. Therefore, they had to cover their own expenses, for instance for mobile data, printing and travel when visiting learners at home. So-called 'hazard pay' that was intended to be a safety support for facilitators when they visited rural areas also did not arrive on time.

Across the three case studies, training and support for ALE facilitators and managers has been an important aspect of the changing teaching styles and approaches. In Afghanistan and the Philippines, much of these were conducted by government institutions usually through structured workshops, seminars and training for teachers, administrators and other facilitators. In the Philippines, these programmes built upon previous training received, as distance learning approaches had already been implemented within ALS even prior to the pandemic. However, instructional managers in the Philippines interviewed for this study expressed the view that the training programmes often added to their already demanding and increased workload managing a variety of programmes.

Blended curricula and online learning content, and the associated continuing professional development and training, are well-established across UK ALE, but irregular, particularly at entry level, where face-to-face learning has traditionally been prioritised. Facilitators and managers managed the 'steep learning curve' presented by the pandemic primarily through peer learning and used online sources to develop skills and new practices. Tutor development in the UK case study was unstructured and could be best described as 'learning by doing' and 'learning as they went

along'. The UK case study demonstrated the importance of peer support. A tutor shared:

> We have been supporting each other, not just within our ESOL tutor group but in the wider service.......I realised when I was finding it hard to get motivated at home and struggling to prepare for this term's teaching that as soon as I got in touch with the other ESOL teachers and that everyone was feeling the same way and we immediately organised a meeting to talk about it and share resources; this also happened last year so that has been good.

Shifting of facilitation roles

In the Philippines, the learners shared that prior to the pandemic, they could meet with their literacy facilitators once or twice a week to receive direct instruction. However, when the pandemic broke out, direct instruction was no longer or minimally provided. The new mode of instruction, particularly modular learning, is the prevalent source of challenge for learners in the middle of the pandemic. Facilitators became busy attending meetings and training.

Participants who were attending online classes lamented that sometimes they only had one meeting per month. They expressed that it was difficult for them to do the activities in the modules when no direct instruction was provided. In rural areas, synchronous online class sessions were not available because of learners' minimal access to the internet and gadgets. The interaction was limited to text messaging wherein students only asked questions in relation to the modules that they had to complete.

Since there was no direct teacher's supervision, the learners shared that independent learning was hard, especially to those who were still learning basic literacy. Thus, the facilitation role was taken up by family members and peers of the learners. Somehow, the pandemic has enhanced family/peer interaction and support. Siblings and children of adult learners assisted the participants in completing modules. In the case of persons deprived of liberty in Quezon City, their peers who had completed the literacy programmes had to act as literacy facilitators who implemented the lessons.

In the UK, tutors underwent a rapid change in their roles during the pandemic, which required personal and professional development. ACL tutors have always had a pastoral care role with respect to their learners; however, this increased exponentially as a result of the lockdown and challenges of COVID-19. Tutors were being led less by the ALE curriculum and assessment criteria and more by the expressed, and often urgent, needs of the learners. Many of these needs, like understanding the government restrictions and accessing health care information were new to all and impacted on the lives of the families of tutors and learners alike.

State and non-state support

Across the board, we have seen how governments swiftly developed new policies in response to the challenges of the pandemic on education. However, the extent to which ALE benefited from these new policy developments varied between countries. In Afghanistan, for example, the government created a response and recovery plan that aimed at mitigating the impact of the pandemic on education and learning across all levels.

However, our interviews with stakeholders revealed challenges in successfully implementing the policies, particularly when the responsibility for implementation was 'passed on' to education providers. Senior government officials noted the government's lack of an adequate infrastructure - such as internet connection or electricity in many areas - to implement the policies successfully. Referring to the literacy programme broadcast, a cluster supervisor commented:

> *There was teaching on TV but for school students and not for literacy learners; and there was a problem with signals in some places, and people could not watch the school programmes either.*

ALE moderators noted that the success rate of the policy was only 30% with many learners having trouble accessing radio based programming despite the policy's promise. In Afghanistan, there was also the challenge in non-state actors working with state institutions especially because the government's strategies changed quite drastically. A member of the EiEWG shared that some of their activities were paused by the government and some funds needed to be returned to the donors.

When national legislation was unable to step in, local communities, government practitioners

and non-state actors provided support. In the Philippines, the provision of programmes and funding promised in the ALS policy have not materialised during the pandemic - with many services still funded by non-state actors. The Ayala Foundation, for instance, provided a few laptops, tablets and SIM cards to a number of ALE teachers and learners. Local government officials, in turn, provided free transport services and provided ink and bond paper from local funds so they could print the modules. The support of local community councils was vital in Afghanistan, as an ALE facilitator shared:

> *We really owe our community and Shura [community council]; they gave us a room for our class, and after the Government said we needed to have social distance in the class, the Shura provided us with a much bigger room.*

In the UK, the case study highlighted a marked difference between the UK government response and that of the local authority. Interviewees felt that ALE was largely forgotten by a government overwhelmingly focused on compulsory schooling, with one manager saying,

> *With the government, it's hard not to feel that adult learning is an afterthought. I felt we [ACL] were forgotten...The government advice wasn't useful or relevant to us. It didn't always feel like it was for us.....*

However, the experience was markedly different at a local authority level where interviewees felt that ALE was treated as a front-line service during the pandemic. The tutors and managers interviewed cited the strong support of the Greater London Authority as part of the broader, coherent local government response to the pandemic. A manager shared:

Our delivery, it formed part of a coherent response of the council to a global pandemic affecting our residents on our doorstep. I was able to go to council meetings and say how grateful our learners were that we were still in touch with our learners and that they were grateful for this and that they hadn't been forgotten......[ACL] was at the forefront of the response – it framed us as more than just adult community learning – we are small but we are a really important part of the recovery.

Conclusion and further areas of inquiry

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a considerable challenge to basic ALE provision, disrupting the service and presenting a steep learning curve to tutors, coordinators and managers, as well as learners. Increased funding went primarily to health; in some countries this led to a decrease in funding for ALE.

Across all case studies, the pandemic has increased inequalities in terms of access to education and learning opportunities. Findings from this research points to a decrease in participation in ALE programmes. However, the impact was disproportionately high on already marginalised ALE learners. These are among the most socio-economically excluded and least able to support themselves and their families. **The longer term impact of the pandemic on the participation in ALE of these groups merits further study. There are insights in the individual country reports that invite further exploration of the gendered impact of COVID-19 on ALE.**

New approaches to teaching and learning have emerged. Whilst various configurations of online, blended and distance learning have been developed and adopted, the value of face-to-face provision continues to be widely recognised. The unequal access to digital tools and the internet - and limited support - meant that the financial burdens were placed on the students themselves and their families which, in some cases, placed them at an even greater disadvantage. **This insight encourages further exploration into (1) profiling the learning of diverse marginalised groups; and (2) ways of ensuring continued access to support and learning services by the most vulnerable groups in future crises. Similarly, more needs**

to be learned about the role of non-state actors, charities and government institutions at the local level in providing much needed support (training, finance, etc) to ALE learners and facilitators.

The commitment, creativity and dedication of ALE facilitators played a significant role in providing continued learning opportunities. However, many of them also faced similar challenges and resource constraints to those experienced by learners, including needing to pay for their own transportation and internet requirements. **More research needs to be done that focuses on facilitators' (1) accelerated professional development of new pedagogical methods, and (2) the wider social contributions of ALE facilitators in moments of crises including the challenges they faced in navigating rapid and multiple changes (including their ever-changing roles).**

The Islington ACL curriculum was adapted rapidly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to address the immediate challenges faced by learners in their lives and livelihoods. Evidence from across the case studies demonstrates that ALE provision supported not only the development of literacy skills but also community-building and the reduction of isolation. ALE facilitated critical health literacy as the provision became a space where learners

could better engage with and critically sift through various COVID-related information. Tutors needed to stay up to date on COVID-related health information to support their own families and disseminate this information to ALE learners. Learners in turn brought additional, sometimes contradictory, information and new questions to the debate. The research documented a wealth of informal learning practices such as peer-to-peer learning, collaborative learning and learners and tutors learning to navigate online tools as they went along. **More research needs to be done on responding effectively to diverse learner needs within the curriculum, especially in rapidly changing contexts, where misinformation is rife and tutors and learners are faced with contradictory information on which to base life-changing decisions.**

In the post-pandemic climate, digital literacy and digital tools are seen increasingly as a key component of ALE and as a cross-cutting theme, embedded into all provision from entry level onwards. **Among those interviewed, there seemed to be a commitment to understand the various contextual issues and factors that make various approaches 'work' and integrate those that do (e.g. family learning, asynchronous online learning) into future policies and programmes on ALE.**

Despite the challenges, findings in this research also point to how ALE programmes could continue to contribute to global goals such as the SDGs. As evidenced in this study, providers globally worked to provide the highest quality education they could in rapidly changing circumstances. A range of hybrid models were developed. However, many incipient literacy learners found the individual and self-directed learning of lockdown a major challenge. Beyond SDG 4 *Quality Education*, the findings of these exploratory case studies are pertinent to other goals such as SDG 1 *No Poverty*, SDG 8 *Decent Work and Economic Growth* and SDG 10 *Reduced Inequalities*. Participation in adult

literacy learning has been demonstrated to increase socio-economic wellbeing (Reder 2009, 2014). Those with higher literacy levels and digital access were significantly more likely to continue to access education; while lower level learners were most likely to discontinue participation. Poverty, including digital poverty, significantly excluded adults from participation in ALE. However, peer learning was utilised where trained facilitators were not available. Provision lacked core societal support as the validity of children's education was recognised in the allocation of resources which was significantly less in relation to ALE.

These findings suggest that ALE as a sector demonstrates resilience and the ability to adapt effectively in response to crises; and that strengthening this resilience and adaptability contributes to social cohesion and socio-economic participation. When harnessed and supported, ALE is a cornerstone of community building as countries begin conversations and interventions towards a post-pandemic future.

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