



# The Future is NOW

## Resilience is key to navigate it through

*Some ideas on how to approach the change imposed to us by the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic to ensure business continuation via modernization in Vocational Education in Albania.*

The revolution in education has started, in March 2020. It has no leading character. Force majeure dictated it. It embraced the entire planet with the

speed of the pandemic. The hymn borrows lines from Plato's Republic: "Necessity is the mother of invention". At some point we need to find the equilibrium so evolution takes over. This time, at a different level. Future-proofing educational institutions is the imperative. NOW! While we do that, we also must ensure business continuation for Academic Year 2020-2021 and the year to come.

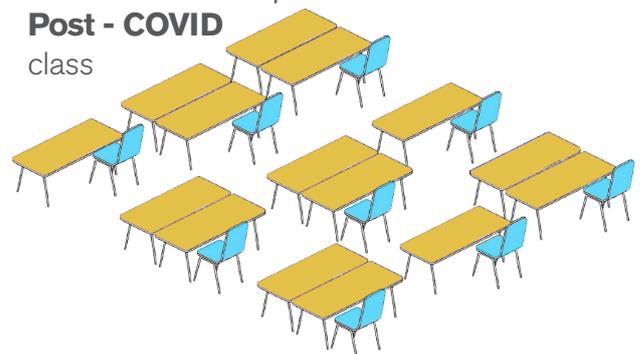
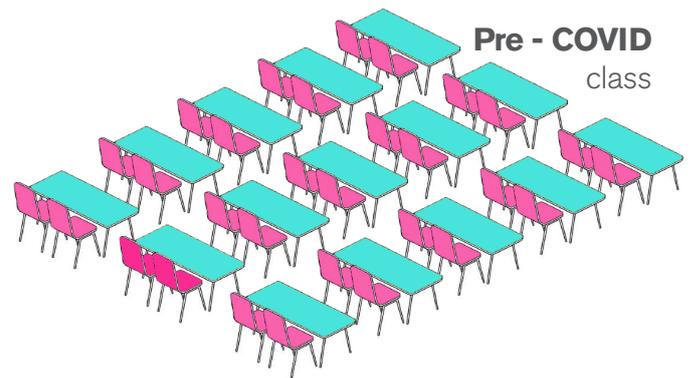
This position paper provides some ideas to feed a country-wide debate that must take place at full swing. We hope it can help a little.

## CONTEXT

The World Health Organization (WHO) classified COVID-19 as a pandemic on March 11. On April 3rd, UNESCO reported that schools were closed country-wide in 194 countries affecting 1.72 billion learners. After 10 weeks of strict lockdowns, some countries started cautiously reopening schools, including Albania (May 18) for students preparing for State Matura exams.

During this period, teachers and students across the globe were 'forced' to engage in some forms of remote learning. Using technologies was conditional in a situation of lock down. In any country, some forms of limitations were reported on: i) access to internet, ii) access to devices, iii) basic competence to use technologies, and iv) pedagogical competences to teach in the new context. The majority of didactical materials in circulation are produced based on the assumption that the learner and the teacher are exchanging in real time in a class environment. As a result, remote learning was rather an emergency quasi-solution, not a choice. Educational institutions in most countries closed the academic year (AY) 2019-2020 under emergency conditions.

Uncertainty for the future is at a historic high. As laws and regulations will change continuously (dependent on the cases reported), it will be difficult to plan for weeks ahead, let alone for months or an entire academic year. But, this is the new normal for some time to come. Being the victim in a crisis doesn't take much effort. Leading a crisis is possible. Planning while much is unpredictable is possible. It takes a mindset and rigor. ***Our plea is to create an enabling environment so remote learning and apprenticeships are a choice for vocational education institutions that guarantees a sustainable solution.***



## SOME ASSUMPTIONS

- 1. The pandemic is here to stay, for a while:** WHO declared that eradicating COVID-19 will take years, in the best case. This will affect countries at different levels at different times until an effective solution is found.
- 2. Less learners physically present in class:** In an effort to avoid massive outbreaks countries will be forced to comply with physical distancing rules. Therefore, classes will accommodate a third up to half of the students they were made to fit (see figure below). Same applies for campuses/dormitories. Harvard University announced (July 2020) only up to 40% of the students can return to campus in AY 2020-2021.
- 3. Sometimes, not possible to be physically present at school, for extended periods:** In the 3 years to come there will be moments when the number of affected people is so high, gatherings in closed spaces will be prohibited. Teachers and learners will not go to classes for weeks, maybe months.
- 4. Some teachers not physically present at school:** Teachers with chronic diseases and those 55+ will resist the idea to be present at school every day. They are aware chances for

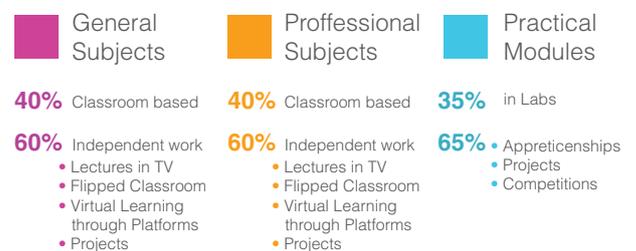
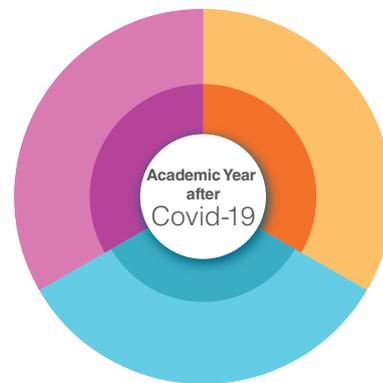
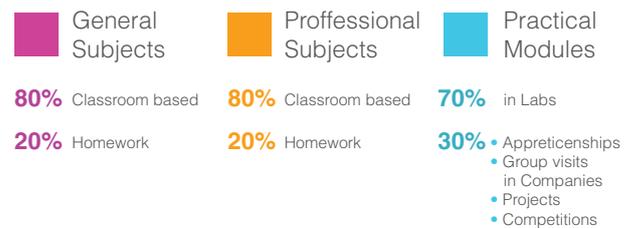
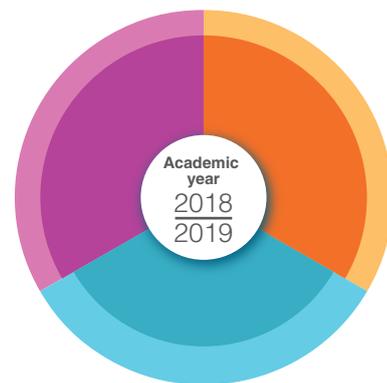
fatalities are higher for them should they contract the virus. In addition, as per instructions of the authorities, whenever a teacher (staff and learners included) suspects they may have contracted COVID-19 they shall (and will) not show up at school. With the flu season coming up, expect high rates of absentees.

**5. Learner's performance will suffer, initially:** as they find themselves in a context that changes often with facilitators (teachers) not being there sometimes (because of physical distance or because it is taking them a while to adapt to and own the new pedagogical requirements), learners will struggle. Their performance may suffer, at first. Out of necessity they will learn to cope with the new reality and so develop a very important skills: learnability. Once they do, there is no going back to the old ways of learning, virus or no virus threat.

**6. Massive investments in technologies for education:** Many companies operating in ICT related value chains are already investing billions in servers, cheaper devices, cheaper internet access (i.e. STARLINK), software solutions for education.

**7. The labour market with be troubled, constantly:** Many companies will restructure and redefine their products and services and the way they deliver them in an economic crises that affected both supply and demand. Some companies will not make it, many others will come to life in light of the opportunity this crises brings. This affects providers and students who are conducting apprenticeships or other forms of work-based learning in companies.

**8. The knowledge, skills and attitudes required in the labour market will change, continuously:** In the face of many limitations, consumers will have other needs (for goods and services) and therefore change their behaviors. As a result companies must change their products. The workforce will need to adapt, fast. If not, they leave the company or the company leaves the market.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

To ensure business continuation for vocational education institutions in Albania, 'Skills for Jobs' team recommends some measures:

### Principles:

- A. Close academic year 2019-2020 within July 2020:** Avoid, at any cost, transferring things for the upcoming academic year. The outlook shows clearly there is a lot on the plate already.
- B. Blended learning - online learning:** Plan to reduce teaching in class for theory subjects

by 50%. Organize the rest of the curricula (as per learning objectives) by blending different methods outside class. Online learning prevails. Revise time definition for learning step by step.

**C. Practical modules in companies (apprenticeships-like schemes):** Providers to coordinate with companies for accommodating learners in apprenticeships. Only when not possible to organize practical modules in companies consider organizing at school. When selecting companies include assessment on the likability for business continuation due to the pandemic. Checklists to be developed.

**D. Enabling regulatory framework:** Authorities shall approve rules and regulations allowing for blended learning to ensure business continuation.

**E. Enabling infrastructure:** The GoA and its partners commit to provide the necessary infrastructure for a) providers, b) teachers and c) learners.

**F. Dialogue with companies on skills needs:** Engage in constant dialogue between businesses, national agencies and providers to assess in a dynamic manner the needs for skills in a changing context.

Building on these principles, we recommend the following measures. The list is not exhausting and numbers do not show the level of importance:

## Measures

1. Providers to revise their strategic priorities in view of the changing context within 2020;
2. Broadband Internet connection for every teacher and student in VE. In 2019, 32% of the students (total 19,500) reported to have no internet in their household. (Estimates:  $\pm$  \$120K)  
*Possible source of funding: Scholarships and books funds. Within 2020;*

3. Devices for all teachers and learners in VE. Teachers shall have a PC home. Learners can benefit greatly from tablets - a form of student loan to finance it may be applied (within AY 2020-2021). Bring-Your-Own-Device (BYOD) becomes the norm in VE schools. Mobile phones are allowed in class. (Est.: 19,500 pupils x 60% opt for a device x \$250/device =  $\pm$  \$2.5M)

*Possible sources of funding: School (re)construction funds, donors;*

4. Internet infrastructure in VE schools. Mainly wifi (Estimates: 23 schools x \$20K = \$500K)  
Possible sources of funding: MFE through annual budgets to providers

5. Digital learning materials to enable online learning as part of blended learning. Teachers are capacitated to adapt existing learning materials and/or develop new ones. Peer Review as modality to ensure quality. Companies producing books (for general subjects mainly) provide e-copies to students and teachers. (Est.: S4J is testing models. No estimates yet)

*Possible sources of funding: NAIS, Donors;*

6. Online learning platform used as a learning environment. Mesovet.al could be populated relatively fast. After a while NAIS and the two national agencies take over from S4J. Teachers identify and use other platforms available. No major investments foreseen soon.

*Possible sources of funding: NAIS, NAES, NAVETQ, Donors;*

7. Continuous professional development (CPD) for teachers intensified on i) pedagogical aspects for online and remote learning as part of blended learning, b) redefining teaching plans (reflecting the context), c) use of devices and online learning platform(s), and d) development of digital learning materials for online learning. CPD moves mostly online reducing costs by  $\pm$ 60%. No estimates available. Ongoing initiative.

*Possible sources of funding: NAES, NAVETQ, ongoing projects, Donors;*

8. Partnership with local companies for students to engage in apprenticeships. Development Unit leads the efforts ( $\pm 70$  companies needed per school) within 2020. Online capacity-building for in-company instructors is provided. Funds for school instructors to monitor apprenticeships made available in annual budgets of providers.
9. Revise protocols for internal monitoring, inspection and quality assurance. Start a national debate on new guiding principles for quality assurance in VE. During 2020-2021.
10. School libraries transformed into infotheques contributing to blended learning. Literature teachers are not necessarily the ones managing the school libraries. Teachers with advanced digital skills take over.

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## Digital transformation as a risk mitigation strategy

Up to now, in those few cases when educational institutions invested in digital transformations, they did so by looking at it as an opportunity to improve pedagogical practices and learners experience. From now on, as schools must consider the possibility that learners may not be allowed in the school building for extended periods of time, they must prepare to ensure business continuation and help youngsters to advance. Those educational institutions that will build up their digital capacities will be able to overcome with some ease this crisis, and any other one.

This platform requires a lot of detailing. However, until we find a consensus on the guiding principles and the key measures we shall refrain ourselves.



Skills for Jobs' (S4J) is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by Swisscontact.

S4J main goal is to offer young people in Albania the best vocational education and training. Better skills will help young people find a job they love and that pays them well.

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