



# What does ‘the new normal’ mean for teaching and learning quality in Rwandan secondary education?

Summary of May 2021 learning webinar



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## Acknowledgements

This work was carried out in partnership with the [Mastercard Foundation](#) as part of the [Leaders in Teaching](#) initiative. Leaders in Teaching supports teachers throughout their careers and prepares them to deliver high-quality education through a variety of interventions, with a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects in secondary education in Rwanda.

Laterite and the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge are learning partners for the Leaders in Teaching initiative, responsible for generating evidence on improved teacher performance and student learning in Rwandan secondary schools, particularly at schools where students are at most risk of not learning.

This brief reflects on topics that were discussed at a Leaders in Teaching learning webinar hosted by the learning partners in May 2021. The learning partners would like to thank the Mastercard Foundation as well representatives from the Leaders in Teaching implementing partners at the African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS), Inspire, Educate and Empower (IEE) Rwanda, University of Rwanda College of Education (UR-CE), VVOB Rwanda, and UNICEF Rwanda for their time and engaged discussions during this session.

## About Laterite and the REAL Centre

[Laterite](#) is a data, research and advisory firm dedicated to bringing high-quality research services to the most underserved markets. Based in East Africa, the firm strives to carry out impactful research that helps decision-makers find solutions to complex development problems.

The [REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge](#) pioneers research into overcoming barriers to education, such as poverty, gender, ethnicity, language and disability, and promotes education as an engine for inclusive growth and sustainable development.

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## What does ‘the new normal’ mean for teaching and learning quality in Rwandan secondary education?

*Summary from Leaders in Teaching learning webinar – 25-26 May 2021*

**Purpose:** To better understand ‘the new normal’ in Rwandan secondary education for teachers, school leaders, and the systems that support them by jointly reflecting on the shared opportunities and challenges of adapting to COVID-19 now that schools have reopened.

**Hosts:** Laterite and the REAL Centre at the University of Cambridge.

**Attendees (Implementing Partners):** African Institute for Mathematical Sciences (AIMS), Inspire, Educate, Empower Rwanda (IEE), the Mastercard Foundation, UNICEF Rwanda, University of Rwanda – College of Education (UR-CE), VVOB Rwanda.

**Format:** The webinar involved two 2-hour sessions that took place over two days. It included:

1. presentations from the learning partners reflecting on the “old normal” with a focus on systems, school leadership and teachers in Rwandan secondary schools;
2. discussions of the ways in which the ‘old normal’ is still relevant today; and
3. interviews of and discussions with implementing partners about the opportunities and challenges that the ‘new normal’ presents now that schools have reopened.

### 1. Exploring the ‘old normal: what were the key pre-COVID challenges to education in terms of systems, school leadership and teachers?

The learning partners presented emerging evidence on key challenges for improving teaching and learning in Rwandan secondary education in a pre-COVID context, drawing on data collected in late 2019 and early 2020. These challenges were explored within the framework of three key themes: systems, school leadership and teachers. Main points are outlined below.

#### **Systems**

- There is strong evidence that structural factors have an impact on teaching and learning quality in Rwanda. For example, the type of school a student attends (schools of excellence / boarding schools or non-schools of excellence / day schools) is associated with a range of factors that have a bearing on student outcomes. Schools of excellence / boarding schools perform better across a range

of metrics, from student assessment results to teacher qualifications and experience to school resources.

- In addition, smaller schools and those in rural areas have experienced the highest increases in enrolment, putting pressure on already limited resources.
- Evidence suggests that some students might have legacy learning gaps, which indicates that any approach to improving outcomes for these students will need to be holistic.

*Further reading from the Leaders in Teaching Research and Policy Series:*

> [Understanding the drivers of numeracy assessment scores in Secondary 3 classes in 14 districts in Rwanda](#)

> [Growing enrolment, static resources: Changes in school resources and infrastructure in relation to enrolment trends in Rwandan secondary schools](#)

### **School leadership**

- There are significantly more male than female school leaders: there is one female school leader for every five male school leaders. Female leaders tend to provide continuous professional development (CPD) and meet teachers less frequently than male leaders.
- Leaders of boarding schools are older and more experienced in school leadership, and report lower teacher absenteeism and lateness, report meeting with teachers more frequently, and report being more satisfied with cooperation from parents.
- Significant associations were found between higher student outcomes and various leadership practices (such as frequency of CPD and meetings with teachers, satisfaction with cooperation from parents, and low teacher absenteeism), and overall diversified leadership – that is, school leaders who allocate their time across a variety of tasks rather than focusing mostly on administrative and leadership tasks. It is important to note that (i) this link does not constitute a causal relationship; and (ii) the time allocation reported by the school leader does not necessarily reflect a choice or a preference.

*Further reading from the Leaders in Teaching Research and Policy Series:*

> [School leadership and school quality in secondary education in Rwanda](#)

## Teachers

- According to evidence from classroom observations conducted in 101 Rwandan secondary mathematics classrooms using the World Bank's *Teach* tool, Rwandan secondary mathematics teachers demonstrated strengths in using their time effectively, promoting a supportive classroom environment, setting positive behavioural expectations and facilitating lessons.
- Teachers might benefit from support with their feedback practices, use of positive language in the classroom, and support of students' socioemotional skills.
- There is some evidence that female teachers were more likely to promote student autonomy in lessons, and teachers who used some Kinyarwanda in their classrooms were more likely to provide 'thinking tasks' to students.
- Schools of excellence scored higher than non-schools of excellence across dimensions of the [Teach observation instrument](#) used for the classroom observations.

*Further reading from the Leaders in Teaching Research and Policy Series:*

> [Teacher practices in Rwandan secondary mathematics classrooms: Findings from classroom observations](#)

> [Video recordings of classroom observations: using the Teach tool in Rwandan secondary schools](#)

## 2. The context for teaching and learning has changed as a result of COVID-19; but many of the issues around systems, school leadership and teachers which were relevant prior to the pandemic, continue to be relevant today

Since the last Leaders in Teaching webinar in November 2020, schools have reopened in Rwanda. In-person education looks a little different, with masks and social distancing required in the classroom, and blended learning is increasingly the norm. All Leaders in Teaching implementing partners are offering some or all of their training and CPD programmes online. Trainers and trainees (teachers) are continuing to improve their skills and knowledge in terms of receiving training via blended modalities.

Though we had anticipated that secondary enrolment might have been lower than expected following school closures, we have observed an unexpected increase in student enrolment in the first year of secondary education (S1) and the fourth year (S4) following schools reopening. S1 and S4 are at transition points in the education system: S1 is the first grade for students transitioning from primary school; S4 the first grade for students transitioning from lower to upper secondary school. Both transitions follow a national examination. Our working assumption is that this increase in enrolment is the result of

students that had previously dropped out of school at these transition points re-entering the education system, while all students already in the education system have essentially repeated their grade due to school closures. These trends might put extra pressure on teaching resources, particularly in S1 and S4.

However, it is important to note that early indications point to decreasing student retention in Secondary 3 (S3). As part of learning assessments conducted for the Leaders in Teaching initiative, we have been tracking over 4,000 students enrolled in Secondary 3 over the past year. While 96% of these students were still enrolled in school in term 2 of the 2020/21 school year, retention had decreased to 89% by term 3. Retention was lowest for older students and female students.

Over the same period, many new teachers have joined the profession following a drive by the Rwanda Basic Education Board (REB) to engage new teachers to continue the ongoing transformation of the education system in the country. This recruitment drive began before the pandemic, in an effort to improve student-to-teacher ratios in classrooms. Some of these new teachers do not yet have the desired credentials and may need additional support to build their confidence and skills in the classroom and online.

While priorities are shifting as a result of COVID-19, discussions with implementing partners confirmed that many of the issues relating to systems, leaders and teachers identified in the learning partner research continue to be relevant in the COVID-context. In particular:

- The divide between boarding and day schools continues to be an issue, with rural schools at a continued disadvantage and facing more resource shortages
- The gender gap for female teachers persists, and implementing partners are focused on addressing this by improving targeting of their programmes
- Pupil retention and teacher turnover are concerns and areas of focus
- The digital shift brings opportunities but also challenges when it comes to, for example, intersections with gender
- Use of language in the classroom appears to have a link with critical thinking
- Exploring the link between effective leadership practices and improved student outcomes is important for programming
- Alleviating pressures on school resources is still an important area of work.

### 3. This 'new normal presents both opportunities and challenges for programming and research

Implementing partners identified ways in which they are continuing to adapt their programmes to respond to both new needs that have arisen as a result of the pandemic, as well as the pre-COVID challenges that persist. These are discussed below in terms of the key themes of systems, school leadership and teachers. It is also important to remember that when we think about the new normal, we note that 'normal' is, by definition, an exclusionary term. We must remember to keep in mind those who are traditionally in the margins and how to include them in new spaces moving forward.

## Systems

### *Improving systems to support teacher management*

- UNICEF is continuing its work on the Teacher Management Information System (TMIS) that supports teacher recruitment and allocation in Rwanda. Given the high teacher recruitment drive in Rwanda at the moment, the TMIS is becoming increasingly critical in managing the teacher workforce.
- UNICEF is supporting REB and Ministry of Education staff to improve their skills with using the new TMIS, and supporting them to use this tool to improve decision-making around teacher recruitment and training needs.

### *Ensuring no teacher is left behind*

- We know from pre-COVID research that certain groups are already at a disadvantage. These are the same groups that are left at the margins in terms of the shift to digital learning, such as female teachers, teachers with disabilities, and teachers in rural areas or with less access to resources. All implementing partners are focused on addressing this critical challenge to prevent these groups from falling further behind.
- For example, AIMS specifically asks schools to send female teachers for training to ensure a more equitable gender balance in terms of teacher training programme attendance. AIMS works closely with female teachers, who are more likely to have difficulties balancing home and family responsibilities, to plan training and develop flexible timetables so that they are able to attend courses. Blended learning means that participants can access recorded resources at times that suit them.
- VVOB has developed a gender checklist to be used during CPD programmes to ensure that delivery is gender-responsive. They have developed special catch-up classes for cohorts who have been unable to attend training during school closures or have difficulty accessing online learning. They are also targeting their digital literacy training to women in particular.

## *Opportunities*

In terms of systems, implementing partners also identified several opportunities for mutual learning and further exploration within the Leaders in Teaching initiative:

- Understanding how Leaders in Teaching can work together to better respond to government priorities, for instance in terms of teacher recruitment.
- Learning about evidence-based ways to continue to improve digital literacy to enable more effective CPD.
- Taking opportunities to combine datasets to generate useful insights for Leaders in Teaching partners and for policy makers, both in terms of teacher recruitment and teacher motivation, and where to best focus efforts to improve teaching quality. For example, there might be opportunities to connect TMIS data with findings from the learning partner's research to understand disparities and synergies in terms of which teachers attend CPD, trends in teacher progression, and much more.

## **School leadership**

### *Improving ICT access and digital literacy*

- Equipping school leaders with the skills to train their teachers, and students, in turn, is an important component of CPD. Important work to improve ICT access and digital literacy among teachers and in schools continues, with AIMS and VVOB continuing to provide laptops, computers and internet bundles to teachers and schools. VVOB is providing digital literacy training to beneficiaries so they are best able to engage with course materials. This includes work to change attitudes to digital learning, so that participants see online courses as being equally valuable to in-person courses.

### *Enabling continuous learning about CPD*

- Implementing partners are also exploring new ways to share data on training attendance and satisfaction with CPD participants, trainers and other education stakeholders. VVOB has collaborated with Laterite to develop its digital data ecosystem, which helps VVOB to collect and display data on a range of metrics. Participants, including school leaders, can use this resource to reflect on their training experience, view aggregate trends, and even make decisions about recommending training to their teaching workforce.

## *Opportunities*

In terms of school leadership, implementing partners also identified several opportunities for mutual learning and further exploration within the Leaders in Teaching initiative:

- Exploring the causal pathways between school leadership and learning outcomes in more depth to inform school leadership practices for CPD purposes.
- Learning more about distributed leadership and parental participation, and how these might vary in boarding schools and day schools.
- Better understanding – and learning how to address - the barriers faced by female leaders and teachers, who appear to be more encouraging in the classroom and provide more autonomy but are less satisfied with engagement outside the classroom.
- Better understanding – and learning how to address - the barriers faced by leaders and teachers with disabilities.
- Enhancing cascade training (i.e. ‘train the trainer’) – making training more cost effective, facilitating a more rapid dissemination of knowledge and experience, and improving the leadership and communication skills of trainers.
- Scaling up CPD to different people and districts – making training programmes more flexible.

## **Teachers**

### *Online learning requires new pedagogies*

- We know from [previous webinars](#) that the onset of the pandemic has made the transition to online and blended forms of learning more urgent. Leaders in Teaching implementing partners have embraced the changes, rapidly adapting programming so that it can be accessed via blended learning modalities. Blended learning gives implementing partners the ability to scale programmes to different districts and experiment with different learning modalities. It also gives trainers and teachers more flexibility in terms of how they carry out and complete their training. This brings with it a learning curve in terms of how to maintain the quality of learning in a blended learning environment.
- VVOB is focusing on pedagogy with its trainers so they can support participants to get the most out of digital learning. This includes training trainers on strategies to engage participants in online learning and changing assessment protocols so they are relevant to the online modes of learning.
- AIMS has designed a digital literacy course to enhance teachers’ abilities to engage with online courses. AIMS is also working to create spaces online – including on social media - where trainees and participants can come together and reflect on lessons learned. These kinds of engagement are critical because online

pedagogies are more self-directed. Without opportunities to engage with other participants, it can be a challenge to maintain participant motivation.

- Interestingly, as a result of the need for socially distancing in classrooms, UR-CE reported that classroom practices are becoming more student-centred given the small sizes. This means that teachers can have more time to engage individually with learners, and learners have more opportunities to voice their opinions and share their insights. Teachers are also displaying and exercising more autonomy when it comes to deciding which CPD to take and when to take it.

### *Opportunities*

In terms of teachers, implementing partners also identified several opportunities for mutual learning and further exploration within the Leaders in Teaching initiative:

- Exploring whether the *TEACH* observation tool (used by the learning partners to conduct classroom observations in 2019-20) can cover aspects of teaching planning, or provide a deeper understanding of how teachers and learners interact. By focusing on broader definitions of learning, including socioemotional learning, there might be opportunities to use this information to adjust programming.
- Learning more about the use of language, code switch and other strategies used by teachers to enhance learning.
- Finding ways to empower teachers to support critical thinking in the classroom.
- Further exploring the association between gender-responsive methods and the ability of teachers to enable change that proactively challenges gender stereotypes in the classroom.



Research for Equitable Access and Learning



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