Commercialisation and privatisation in/of education in the context of Covid-19 SUMMARY

Ben Williamson & Anna Hogan
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The Covid-19 emergency has affected education systems worldwide. The pivot to online learning and 'emergency remote teaching' has positioned educational technology (edtech) as an integral component of education globally, bringing private sector and commercial organisations into the centre of essential educational services.

The effects are likely to persist, first of all in temporary blended models of 'socially distanced' schooling during the period of pandemic recovery, and for longer in *hybrid* approaches where edtech is embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and school management.

This project mapped out how privatisation and commercialisation of education advanced during the 2020 pandemic, particularly focusing on educational technologies. The research involved mapping out the activities of a range of organisations and relationships, considering their consequences for the future of education beyond the crisis, and identifying key issues to be considered as education systems begin the process of recovery.

The findings include:

1. Global Education Industry Solutionism

Edtech as a long-term fix for education

A global education industry of private and commercial organisations has played a significant role in educational provision during the Covid-19 crisis, working at local, national and international scales to **insert edtech into educational systems** and practices. It has often set the agenda, offered technical solutions for government departments of education to follow, and is actively pursuing long-term reforms whereby private technology companies would be

embedded in public education systems during the recovery from the Covid-19 crisis and beyond it in new models of *hybrid* teaching and learning.

During the pandemic, this instantiation of the global education industry produced and circulated powerful ideas about Covid-19 as a novel opportunity to **'reimagine' education**, treated home-based learning as a microcosm of a digital future for blended forms of education, and encouraged 'experimentation' and 'innovation' to shape education systems for the future. The Global education industry has established the crisis as a catalytic opportunity for educational transformation.

2. Covid Coalition-making

Enhancing the role of public-private partnerships in education policy

The role of commercial providers has been supported, promoted and advanced by a range of organisations that cut across public, private and third sectors. Some of the most influential promoters of edtech solutions during the pandemic include international multilateral organisations such as the **World Bank**, **OECD** and **UNESCO**, in many cases operating in global multisector coalitions to promote 'best practices' for policymaking centres to emulate.

Commercial edtech providers and advocacy organisations have also formed powerful networks and coalitions to highlight and promote edtech products for use by schools, teachers and parents. These coalitions illustrate the emergence of new kinds of multisector public-private partnerships and **policy networks** in relation to edtech expansion, and the enhanced role of the private sector in educational delivery and governance.

3. Pandemic Philanthropy

Individual technology wealth as a source for *reimagining* education

Financial support and political advocacy for edtech solutions to school closures during the pandemic have been provided by **technology philanthropies** such as the Gates Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. They have dedicated new multimillion dollar funds to a range of edtech programs and sought to consolidate the long-term role of the private sector and commercial technology in public education.

Wealthy individual tech philanthropists have also been given positions of authority as **experts in 'reimagining' education for the future**, in ways which reflect their pre-existing visions, their financial support for technology-centred models of schooling, and their efforts to influence policy agendas.

4. Edtech Market-making

Venture capital and impact investing catalysing the value of edtech

Financial organisations, market intelligence agencies, venture capital, and impact investors have sought to **capitalise on the pandemic**.

With edtech investment already at high levels, especially in the US and southeast Asia, market predictions have been made to stimulate capital markets, with the Covid-19 treated as a catalytic opportunity to capitalise on the sudden rise in use of technologies in education. **Financial models** including venture capital, private equity, impact investing and social bonds have all been utilised to fund educational technologies during the pandemic. Market projections of the value of digital learning technologies over the coming decade are

likely to attract further investors seeking profit from new disruptive models of public education.

5. Private Re-infrastructuring

Technology corporations expanding digital solutions across education at scale

Major multinational technology corporations including Google, Microsoft and Amazon have experienced a huge surge in demand for their products and services due to their capacity to deliver solutions at international scale, at speed, and for free. Supported by multilateral policy influencing organisations and national government departments, these companies have integrated schools, teachers and students into their global cloud systems and online education platforms, raising the prospect of **long-term dependencies of public education** institutions **on private technology infrastructures**.

Social media platforms including YouTube and TikTok have also sought to grow their presence in education through content creation partnerships for students learning at home, increasing their revenue through attracting advertisers and turning education into a vehicle for the **commercial advertising industry**.

6. Edu-business Expansion

Extending the reach of online schools, AI and student surveillance

Educational companies of various types—from global edu-businesses like Pearson to new startups—have rapidly marketed and promoted their products for use by schools, often for free or heavily subsidized for a temporary period. Online schooling platforms are promoted by many education companies as long-term alternative models for education. 'AI' technologies have also experienced significant growth, especially in China, owing to their capacity to provide 'personalized' education in the absence of teachers, and student surveillance technologies have been adopted to monitor students' virtual attendance, assess social-emotional learning and well-being, and enable schools to fulfil their safeguarding responsibilities. These developments will extend the reach of edu-businesses to new areas of schooling, and heighten their long-term influence in classrooms.

Suggestions for Further Research

The key issues arising from the mapping of commercialisation and privatisation of education in the context of Covid-19 point to a number of urgent research priorities:

1. Examine the extent to which schools maintain their **use of education technologies** employed during periods of lockdown, and how this affects key schooling practices and teachers' work including curriculum delivery, pedagogy, assessment and learning management.

2. Sustained research on the promotion, roll-out and uptake of educational technologies and associated practices during the pandemic in **low-income countries** and international development contexts, including detailed focus on **development agencies** and **multilateral organisation** influence.

3. Ongoing analysis of **country-specific policy evolution** and mutation in relation to commercialisation, privatisation and education technology as nations revert to in-school education, including studies of key government priorities and private sector involvement

in shaping policy agendas, and attention to **cross-border 'travelling policy' dynamics**.

4. Research on emerging **(re)configurations of the global education industry** in different local and geographical sites, tracing out new **public-private partnerships**, new sources of influence and expertise, and new priorities regarding education technology in the context of diverse policy spaces.

5. Studies on **global technology companies**' increasing involvement in public education (Microsoft, Google, Amazon) focusing on their competition for structural dominance of school infrastructure, data collection and processing practices.

6. Research on **emerging priorities in education technology** development, particularly Artificial Intelligence and safeguarding and social-emotional learning technologies that have expanded in reach during the pandemic, and their impact on school practices over the longer term.

7. Detailed analysis of **financial models and practices**, particularly venture capital, philanthropy and impact investing, which have been developed and expanded to fund education technology development and dissemination during the crisis, and their long-term implications for which technologies are funded and/or scaled-up.

8. Research on the emerging phenomenon of **private online home tutoring** as a new instantiation of the 'shadow education industry', exploring parents' motivations to maintain subscriptions to fee-paying edtech products and their producers' strategies of marketing to and profiting from parent consumer markets.
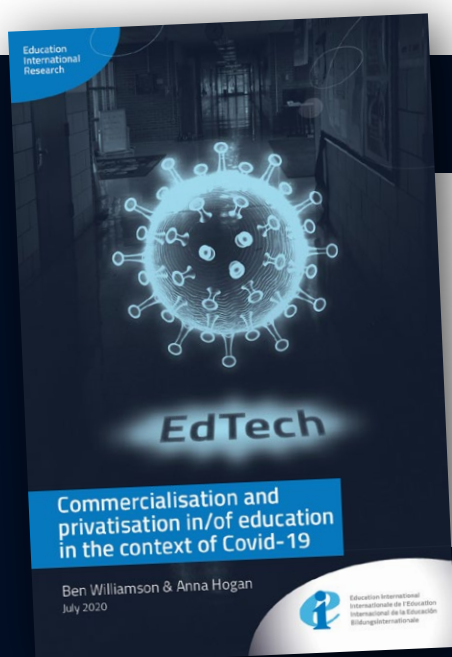
The full research paper By Ben Williamson and Anna Hogan can be found here:
https://go.ei-ie.org/GRCovid-19

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