



Generation Connect Podcast

Episode 1

COVID-19 and the transition to online learning for youth around the world

With Connie Man Hei Siu & Sophiyat Sadiq.

Hosted by Arissandra Egorova (Aya)

Transcript

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Aya: Hi everyone, and welcome to the Generation Connect Podcast, co-designed with youth, for youth. The ITU Generation Connect initiative aims to engage global youth alongside the leaders of today's digital change, by championing youth voice in the digital development dialogue. Tune in every month to listen to inspiring stories of youth all across the world on the power of technology for sustainable development.

Get involved by joining a global community of future leaders to shape the world of tomorrow.

Aya: Hello everyone and welcome to this new ITU podcast series, the Generation Connect Podcast, co-designed with youth and for youth.

I am Aya and I'm part of the Generation Connect Team from ITU, and I will be your host for today. With this podcast, we are tackling issues that are relevant to youth all across the world. And so, we are kicking off this podcast with a mini-series of four episodes around the topic of digital learning and digital employment.

And for this first episode today we're exploring a very important issue that definitely touched almost every person around you and probably even yourself. It is the impact of Covid-19 on your academic experience and the transition, more or less sudden, to online learning. To discuss this topic today, I am so happy to have here with me, Connie and Sophiyat from the Generation Connect Asia Pacific and the Generation Connect African groups, that agreed to come and share their stories with us today! So, welcome Connie and welcome Sophiyat! For our listeners today, could you please introduce yourselves in a few words like where you based on what you study, and how you feel about being the first guests of the very first episode of the Generation Connect Podcast.

Connie Man Hei Siu: So, I guess I'll go first. Hi everyone, I'm Connie a year three undergraduate in biomedical engineering in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I'm currently a junior policy analyst intern at the ITU office of Europe and I'm actively engaged in digital inclusion, internet governance and stem. To be a part of the very first episode of the podcast, I'm actually really honored and thank you Aya I have for contacting me. And I'm also very happy to be able to meet Sofia again because we both spoke on the ITU ET's Week, so it's very nice to speak to her again as well.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Hi! Good morning, good afternoon or evening to everyone listening, and of course

Connie, it is absolutely amazing to meet you again! Hi everyone, my name is Sophiyat Sadiq. I'm from Lagos, Nigeria and I'm a final year student at Lagos State University, studying computer science. Well, actually I'm done now!

Aya: Oh, wow congrats!

Sophiyat Sadiq: Thank you Aya, thank you! And I'm absolutely excited to be the one of the very first guests of this podcast. And I'm absolutely looking forward to sharing all of my experiences with you all.

Aya: So, what about we start this podcast episode with a little game! So, we're going to play a short truth or lie game – I will be stating a fact, and you just have to guess whether it's a truth or a lie, all right?

Connie Man Hei Siu: Okay!

Aya: So, are you ready for the first fact?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Yep yep!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah, let's go!

Aya: All right, and for our listeners today, you can also try to play see how much you know about the impact of Covid-19 on education. So, first fact! Is it true or false that globally around 50% of children and youth, aged 25 or less, have Internet access at home?

Connie Man Hei Siu: I feel as though it could be less than 50%.

Aya: You think so?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Hmm, yes, right!

Aya: You're right! It's not 50%, it's less. It's actually around 30%! It's a total of 2.2 billion of children and youth worldwide.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Wow!

Aya: Yeah, I guess, we all have kind of an understanding of how important this issue is, but when you look at the numbers, they just speak for themselves. So, next fact! Is it true or false that at the peak of the pandemic in 2020, schooling was disrupted for over 1.9 billion learners, in more than 190 countries?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Hmm, I think this one's a bit tricky right, because I want to assume that there are more than 1.9 billion learners around the world, and at the peak of the pandemic, schooling was disrupted for everyone!

So, I think that figure is definitely above 1.9 billion. Connie, what do you think?

Connie Man Hei Siu: Oh, I actually yeah I agree with you, it's definitely affected everyone, regardless of what region you're in, and it could be either that number or it could go a bit higher up than that number.

Aya: Well, I, like the way you think! Those are the right numbers: apparently, it disrupted about 90% of learners worldwide, and it is estimated that about 24 million learners, in particular young

women and girls, are still at risk of not returning to school at all, following the education disruption due to Covid-19.

Alright, and then maybe the last fact now before we finish the game! Is it true or false that the largest to regional disparity in Internet access is in the Sub-Saharan African region?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Oh, that's true.

Aya: You think that's true?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Hmm, Connie what do you think?

Connie Man Hei Siu: Oh no, I'm not the expert in this region, I think you are the expert here!

Aya: Just follow your intuition!

Sophiyat Sadiq: I think we've got the worst end of the blow, so I'm gonna go with true.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah, I think it should be true as well.

Aya: This one was a bit tricky - actually the Sub-Saharan African region is on the second place.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Oh wow!

Aya: And it's interesting because the largest regional disparity in internet access, which is due to household wealth, is actually in East Asian Pacific Region.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Oh noo!

Aya: Apparently, only 20% of children and young people from the poorest households have Internet access and more than 80% of the richest households have Internet access. That's why I think it's quite surprising right, I didn't expect this.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yes, definitely!

Aya: You since you're base based in Hong Kong, is it something that you maybe have noticed or experience, because most would assume that Hong Kong is a really technologically advanced city, and most would think that you know the transition to online learning was easy or should be easy. So can you share with us how did this pandemic impact your studies and your life?

Connie Man Hei Siu: Sure! So in terms of whether that was actually noticed, in a way, yes, definitely so. I've actually been working in digital inclusion in Hong Kong, like working with the elderly and also other digitally marginalized communities. So, for that it could be in a way seen. So, overall speaking Hong Kong is a technologically advanced city, but underneath this sort of like glorified name, there are, of course, the respective challenges and also the difficulties that students face, including having insufficient data, devices, financial capabilities and so on, so on. And in terms of my academic experience and studies, it has been a roller coaster ride with a lot of like ups and downs. So at first when the pandemic started it was actually very exciting because we get to have online lessons, meaning that we could spend that time and energy commuting around like different buildings, places to attend lessons

Aya: That's true

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah but then very quickly, when the impact started to become more obvious more conspicuous, the reality started to kick into us and so gradually our learning experiences became underwhelming and so, for me, I was constantly at home, having lectures, from day to night, completing assignments, and there is somehow this feeling of isolation that started to begin to like brew.

And on top of that, as a student majoring in biomedical engineering, I'm supposed to be a hospital trainee to assist on daily operations and equipment usage in a hospital setting but, as you can imagine,

Aya: Oh no!

Connie Man Hei Siu: A hospital is not the place, you want to be during a pandemic.

Aya: Definitely not.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Especially with the risks you know, and also the burden on the public health care system, so we resorted to delaying the training. But then this resulted in them rushing the training in an online format alongside final exams and assessments, because the instructors didn't want to delay it any longer.

So, it has been really, really stressful, like originally it's already stressful but in addition to this training, alongside everything, it becomes even more stressful for us. And I'm also a research assistant at laboratories, so while it's possible for some research projects to be conducted at home, the projects that I was involved in had animal experiments, which is mice, so which could only be done in designated campus areas.

Aya: Well, you can't really do that at home, can you.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah we definitely cannot bring the MICE back home! And the lab had gathering restrictions and they were reserved for final year students like Sophiyat, since she urgently needed to graduate.

So, I resorted to conducting like literature reviews, which is of course a good experience, but at the same time, the thrill and the impressions of hands-on experiments were very much lacking, and it took me over half a year before the project could be resumed and, at that time, all the MICE on the campus suddenly had an epidemic of their own as well.

Aya: No, really??

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yes and then it started getting really chaotic and the time just kept delaying and delaying and a lot of the progress was delayed. It was a bit hectic.

Aya: I can imagine.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Also, in terms of exams the online assessment methods we had, raised certain concerns as well. My university has been notorious for strict online assessment, which is understandable given how they wanted to prevent cheating and keeping their grading up to standard, but overall, and not only has such online assessment methods encountered problems, including hackers, privacy invasions, and,

Aya: Oh my god.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah and also connectivity issues. We actually had an exam where there was a hacker that entered into the zoom room and started blasting music.

Aya: Really??

Connie Man Hei Siu: Sharing the screen, yes, that have been in my university.

Aya: That's crazy!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Because we used Zoom to monitor our like performance. And they've also raised accessibility concerns, for example, some online exams that I took required us to install systems that track your eyeball movement or your background and detect any noise, to ensure no cheating is like occurring, but this is actually not feasible like!

Aya: That's impossible!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah exactly! Like you're having different living conditions, there could be like a bit of noise, people talking behind you, and they see this as a red flag! They say that "oh you're cheating, someone's talking to you!"

And this just intensifies our stress. And also, with the eye tracking thing for students with like disorders, like ADHD, they have it even worse and this stress for them, I just can't imagine. And we also have to prepare like two or more devices to monitor our faces, and also to read the exam papers and for those who don't have the financial capability to purchase more than one device, or have like a suitable amount of data to access the zoom meetings, that just becomes unfeasible! And families are unable to support the purchase so, some solutions where to borrow from other students, other friends, but the professors, they usually just send an email telling us to go and purchase a good video camera, or go to places with pre-installed cameras.

Aya: Well... thank you?

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah really! There wasn't really any like helpful solutions from the University side and we kind of have to just find solutions to access these sorts of devices to counter these measures.

Aya: You were expected to adapt, basically. Yeah, you just have to adapt.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah...

Aya: Yeah, I actually totally relate, because on my side I'm doing a masters in Innovation and Sustainable in Geneva, in Switzerland. And this master is almost entirely focused, you know, on hands-on practice because we do team projects and workshops, and so, you know physical interactions are key. And when Covid hit, nobody really knew what to do, nobody knew how to make it work and how to, yeah, make it work in online format, so I totally understand where you come from and how hard it must have been for you, you know. Also, it's quite interesting to see that even in you know more technologically advanced cities with existing online tools, the educational system had a hard time to ensure a smooth and you know, inclusive, especially inclusive transition to e-learning.

So, I wanted to ask you Sophiyat, because you're from a completely different country with completely different challenges, so how was it for you this transition in comparison, because I can imagine, with regard to access to technology, it must have been challenging.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Of course, of course. I think that's probably why when we were playing the game earlier, we both answered Africa, because I mean everyone can imagine how difficult it is to transition to online learning in a region where people are not fully digitally included. I think there's just really a very small percentage of us that are fully digitally included. So, for us it was difficult, it was very difficult. And there's this section's split where it was now in terms of financial minorities in majorities, so the financial majority in the region are people who had access to better schools, to private schools, and they could continue their online learning.

There were also definitely issues with that, because the problem of Internet access really just had consequences for everybody, whether you can afford internet or not, the problem remains that we don't have reliable internet access, so the online learning for private school individuals was definitely still difficult, but then for public schools, we went right into the deep end. Right into the difficulties of everything. We were all sent packing from school, and we had no idea what the future was going to hold for us.

So initially, we're all just happy that we had like a two week break and then it was like two weeks turn into a month and then two months turned into three months, when we're doing absolutely nothing. Because even our lectures, our teachers didn't have the facilities to move online with us. And then, of course, some of the lecturers they tried to connect with this over Zoom and tried to continue the curriculum. But the problem remains that not everyone was able to come to class, because not everyone had devices that could connect to Zoom, not everyone could connect to the Internet... And here's the thing with Zoom, right. Zoom doesn't work on any internet below 3G or 4G. That sounds very "Oh my God wants to use this 2G?", but that's the truth right, so, it's like the system will always log you out right, so you cannot stay on Zoom for your classes. That system is not very inclusive, because you're really just thinking about people who have fast reliable Internet so, then what happens to us, we cannot connect in Zoom, it's always a problem. It's like I'm barely even understanding what's going on in class and just trying to make sure that my connection stays. And here was a lot of problems, it's like the university system itself and the lecturers were not empathic, right, so it's like, and then the lecturer says "after 10 Minutes, I'm going to lock the room. I don't care what happens to you". And it was like, hey! We're all struggling, you can you be a little more empathic?

Aya: Yeah definitely!

Sophiyat Sadiq: And there were cases where, hmm so we know that the Zoom has a limit of hundred participants per certain plans, and we're more than 100, of course, it's a university system! And so, once you get to 100, the room is locked. So, you have to pray to all the gods of the earth that somebody drops along so that you can join! They are problems that we have to deal with. And then all of that happened for over a year back and forth. We were not able to make any tangible progress, it was like we have to start the whole semester all over again, and here is, here is the catch: we were given two to three weeks to complete the whole semester of 10 different courses and take our exams in two weeks.

Aya: Whaat?

Sophiyat Sadiq: The school was trying so hard to comply to Covid protocols, but still make sure that we completed the semester online, so usually we'd have like three to four months per semester, so my co-classmates, my friends and I, had to just find a way around it and literally putting our lives on the line to be able to learn! Because now we had to be in school overnight. So, this was the bad thing. Being in school overnight, there was no lights, there was no electricity, we could not see, we could not learn. We couldn't learn in school anymore because the school system that is supposed to be safe, is no longer safe. People were getting kidnapped...

Aya: Wait, what!

Sophiyat Sadiq: Right? We had cases of missing students, and that just really put everyone on edge! So, we can no longer study in school, I mean we were studying during the day at school and then at night, we had to find an alternative, go to somebody's house, and go and study there. You know, and even like that, we had to be transporting ourselves at night. I remember, personally, I had a very bad case of anxiety just from it, right, because I'd be transporting myself from my apartment to my friend's apartment at night, and I would just pray every single day that this is not the night that I become the girl on the news, the next day. Every single night. And of course, I had to enter public transport and the public transport down here is not the safe type where you're on trains, right. Sometimes I would enter the small buses with scary looking men, and I would just be praying - I don't want to be the girl where they're going to say "Oh, have you found her?", I didn't want my posters to be all around, I don't want to go viral on social media for being missing! Every day and I won't be able to talk to my parents, because I didn't want them to know that this is what I was risking just to be able to pass the semester. And these were situations where I felt like nobody was listening to us, nobody was being empathic to our situation.

All of my friends, right, we all fell sick, right after the exams. It was like a ripple effect. One after the other, we were just going down and down and down, and here we were treating sicknesses and all of the things that could have been avoided if we just had like a more empathic system.

We cannot continue with this educational system; we cannot continue with this curriculum! We had so much to digest in such little time and nobody was offering a helping hand. So, it's like, there's so much to be done! Connie, I don't know what the education system is like for you, but I feel like it needs to be completely dismantled and built all over again, it's not working.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah, I agree with you Sophiat, definitely the education system has to be like re-renovated in a sense, entirely. So while you're over there just like risking your life, just to go and take exams, revise, just trying to graduate, I think that you're really brave and really strong for this Sophiat, I really admire your courage, yeah definitely. But there's such a stark contrast between what's happening in your place and in my region. So, in Hong Kong, like in terms of exams like regardless of how many methods for online exams the university tried to come up with, students are always able to or try to find a way to outplay the system. And, in last semester so many students got caught cheating and were given a demerit, so this really leads us to think about whether the exams is really the way for students to truly learn. And so, basically, here we focus on just getting good grades, while you guys over there, are just risking your lives, just to learn something, just to hopefully graduate and I find that really ironic and it's really sad in a way. And somehow if we could revamp the whole education system like rather than putting as much focus on exams, courses should consider other assessment methods that could show the proficiency achieved, for example, an improving could be allowing students to submit work until they fully understand the materials, set more lenient deadlines. And instead of having predefined answers in exams, change the method from exams to let's say doing projects or reports by utilizing the concepts learned, etc. And with the pandemic taking a toll on everyone's mental health or even lives, these proficiency-based assessment methods could demonstrate a bit of like, care, for their well-being.

And I do understand that this could be quite difficult, especially for higher ranked universities to implement these assessment methods. Because they want a stable and conservative way to have students that attain good grades, and thereby maintain the reputation of the universities, so these proficiency-based assessment methods could be a risky choice for them, and they don't know how to implement them. But that is the problem and that's why we need to redo the whole education system! They have to consider that universities are not the places for grades, and they are rather the places for education and also like exchanging knowledge. And sometimes they have to be brave enough to take this first step to change for the better of both students and teachers. If students like Sophiyat are risking their lives every day to try to like pass a course and take the exams, then why can't the university like take this first step to start in doing something to change this education system to make like a better learning environment for everyone.

Aya: Yeah, well definitely, definitely, I'm sorry you all had to go through all of this. It just sounds crazy to just imagine that for a second. I actually think that this pandemic really, you know, brought to light very pressing and inherent problems in the current educational system and curriculum. Like you said, for me it first highlighted this kind of you know unspoken pressure on students to just hmm, you're just expected to adapt, to the changes, even if they are brutal, instead of just questioning the current status quo and like you said, thinking of new ways to teach and learn because I do feel like we're not really learning anymore, we just trying to get good grades. That's not really the point of what education is right! Especially when we kind of transition to a digital environment, we can't just copy and paste what has been done for so long, especially if what's done is not really the best way either you know. And also, to me accessibility you know to digital devices, to Internet connection is also very crucial, but just like you said it's also important to just raise the question on how we are being taught, what are the teaching methods, how they should change.

So, that was actually extremely interesting, but let's finish up on a more positive note, right! Although you both faced very difficult and terrible challenges, you both took the time to help others in need during this pandemic and also you both joined ITU Generation Connect Regional Youth Groups, right?

Sophiyat Sadiq: Yes!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Yeah, we have, we have.

Sophiyat Sadiq: I think is very exciting. For me personally, when I saw all the problems that I was facing just being able to access education, I knew somebody was having it worse. I had Internet, I had a device and it still had it bad. The people with no Internet or no devices and they have it worse! And that really led me to go into different communities in helping them continue their own online learning and helping them continue their own education. That was also me putting my life at the risk, because you know it was at the peak of Covid, and here I was in different communities just saying "hey, you have to continue learning, you have to continue schooling". And that really was how I started my nonprofit, just centered around ensuring that people from marginalized communities can access quality education.

And it was one of the key reasons why I was interested in joining the Generation Connect Youth Groups. I was able to fulfill that mission through the youth group, so you know, initially, I was a bit skeptical because I didn't see the full picture of what I was going to be doing.

But I knew that it was trying to create an inclusive world for everyone. And so, one of our very first tasks, we had to create different policies to advise the key UN leaders on how they could advise the AU member states, as the African Union Member States.

And I worked with a team of very amazing five Africans around the world and we were focusing on digital inclusion and capacity development. And look, this was the pandemic right everything was disrupted and for the first time I felt like I had a voice. And I felt like somebody was listening to my valid concerns and the concerns of my community. Because you know, in the policy, I had a very interesting role! I was the policy reviewer, so everyone from around the African Union Youth, everyone just wrote about the differences that they have faced when it comes to digital inclusion and capacity development. And my task was really to put everything together into one document, and that was interesting. I saw the problem that we face from the eyes of other people. You know, I've been seeing the problem as a me problem, as my community's problem. But you know this time, I was really seeing how it affects other people, I was seeing how it affects people from Botswana, people from Equatorial Guinea, from Kenya and I said look, this really is a global problem, that's really a problem that really affects Sub-Saharan Africa, and so being in that space where we presented the document, was very refreshing for me, as a young person, for the first time

I felt like those people asked for my opinion and they listen. So that was an amazing experience for me, I loved it.

Aya: Thank you so much Sophiyat, what about you Connie, in a few words?

Connie Man Hei Siu: For me, I also like share the same feeling from Sophiyat, after joining the Generation Connect Youth Group, it has been an amazing experience and overall the pandemic has changed a lot of things, and while it's true I didn't get to experience the pre-pandemic university life or the normal life, it hasn't been entirely underwhelming and instead of focusing on local experiences, I decided to expand my horizons, which gave me chances to work in like global scientific journals.

Aya: Great!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Organizing United Nations Internet Governance Forum workshops, promoting digital inclusion and even joining like ITU's Generation Connect. And working with people internationally allowed me to be more accustomed to this sudden transition in life. And it's been all these new experiences that keep me motivated to continue trying, learning and also hoping for a better future. Being in the Generation Connect Group, not only have I gotten to meet amazing people across the Asia Pacific Region, I've also gotten the chance to participate in different events like the ITU emerging technologies' week, voicing out the youth perspective, drafting policy recommendations based on pressing topics in the region like Sophiyat, and also getting to know talented people like you both, so it has been a really beautiful experience and I'm absolutely honored to be even a in part of all of this.

Aya: Thank you so much, I'm glad to hear that and I'm glad to see that some positive experiences did come out of this pandemic still. Thank you so much again Connie and Sophiyat for being here today and sharing your inspiring stories, and also a big thank you to our listeners for tuning in today for our very first episode and, if you want to learn more about Generation Connect, I encourage you to visit the ITU Generation Connect website. So, thank you so much girls again for joining us. Thank you so much.

Sophiyat Sadiq: Thank you!

Connie Man Hei Siu: Thank you, thank you, you too.

Aya: And to our listeners, see you again next month, for a brand new episode of the Generation Connect Podcast.

Connie Man Hei Siu: Bye bye!

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