



One year into COVID: Prioritizing education recovery to avoid a generational catastrophe

Report of UNESCO online conference

29 March 2021

Opening Session

Marking the first anniversary of the largest disruption to learning in recent history, UNESCO convened the world's education ministers to an online event on 29 March 2021 entitled *“One year into COVID: Prioritizing education recovery to avoid a generational catastrophe.”* The event focused on three themes of foremost concern on policy agendas: reopening schools and supporting teachers; mitigating drop-out and learning losses; and accelerating the digital transformation.

Opening the meeting, **Director-General Audrey Azoulay** affirmed that “in the face of a prolonged crisis, we must redouble our mobilization and target the right priorities, those that that will allow us to truly make education a common good, a fundamental right. The first of our principles is that schools are irreplaceable, as the pandemic has shown. The second is that more than ever we need resilient and innovative school systems to face present and future shocks. The third is that no screen can ever replace a teacher.” She said that the pandemic should spur us to rethink education, through better financing together with means and contents attuned to 21st challenges. The educational recovery also implies the continued deployment of distancing learning solutions to increase resilience to future shocks.

In his message echoing the themes of the conference, **UN Secretary-General António Guterres** stated that the crisis has shone a spotlight on the irreplaceable value of schools and teachers in our societies. He warned that “If we are to avert a generational catastrophe, reduce inequalities and

achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, then we simply must prioritize and protect education.” He further made a call to the global community. “At this pivotal moment, I am calling on all countries to protect education in national budgets, enhance the focus on education in stimulus packages, maintain or increase aid to education, fully replenish the Global Partnership for Education Fund and use the recovery to narrow education divides, expand digital connectivity and reimagine education.”

The **Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus**, noted that the COVID 19 pandemic has put the vital link between health and education in the spotlight. He warned that “without universal access to education and health services, the inequalities which have expended even further during the pandemic will continue to grow.” He underscored that WHO recognizes the central role schools play in safeguarding student health and well-being and will issue the first set of evidence based guidelines on school health services in the coming months.

The **Africa Union’s Commissioner for Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, Professor Sara Anyang Agbor**, emphasized that “the consequences of COVID 19 have reinforced the importance of transforming Africa’s education systems through digital transformation,” referring to the AU’s framework encompassing online learning, teachers, skills, school connectivity and on and offline safety.

Presenting a factual overview of the status of education one year into COVID, **UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education Stefania Giannini** noted the governments are taking every measure to keep schools open, reflecting that lessons have been learnt and guidance taken on board to support this process.

During the pandemic, the majority of governments (133 countries) provided a mix of online, television and radio solutions to ensure learning continuity, providing strong ground to build more resilient education systems and bridge the digital divide. However, we are just beginning to obtain a global picture of learning loss: according to a study by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 100 million children and youth are projected to fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading because of COVID-19, erasing gains made over the past two decades. Ms Giannini stressed the importance of protecting teachers, including by making them a priority group in vaccination campaigns, and reiterated the call to protect education finance. According to the joint Education Finance Watch Study with the World Bank, 65% of low-income countries are cutting education budgets while education only accounts for 2% allocation in stimulus packages of 56 countries. Finally, she referred to the achievements of the Global Education Coalition, marking its first anniversary, noting its actions in 100 countries and missions around skills, teachers and connectivity.

The opening also featured testimonies from UNESCO’s Associated Schools Network from Hong Kong (SAR China), Indonesia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and the Russian Federation who movingly conveyed how they missed their schools and teachers, while a teacher from Mexico provided insight into new teaching methods put in place to maintain communication with her students.

Following the opening, ministers joined a roundtable of their choice summarized in the following three sections.

Virtual Roundtable #1:

Keeping schools open, prioritizing & supporting teachers

Objectives of the session

The Roundtable session brought together Ministers of Education to answer the following questions relating to keeping schools open, prioritizing and supporting teachers:

- How are you keeping schools open as a priority and ensuring a safe learning environment?
- How are you ensuring that teachers are safe, considered as frontline workers and supported to adapt to a new learning reality?
- How can we ensure that learner wellbeing is prioritized and that teachers are well supported?

The session's moderator, **Dr. Anshu Banerjee** from the World Health Organization, set the context by highlighting the unparalleled public crisis – both for education and for health. Specifically, the pandemic has resulted in increased anxiety and mental health distress among children and youth and disrupted access to school health services, including school meals. There is evidence of an increase in violence against children, and many are spending increased time online – often unsupervised – with potential safeguarding implications. In this context, it is important that we are ensuring that schools remain open to the extent possible and that the wellbeing of learners and teachers alike are a high priority.

Professor Didier Jourdan, UNESCO Chair Health and Education and head of WHO Collaborating Center Global Health and Education, Université Clermont Auvergne, France presented the latest evidence about keeping schools open safely. He stressed that schools should be 'among the last places to close, and the first to re-open'. There is strong evidence showing that school closures are detrimental to both health and wellbeing and educational outcomes. Moreover, when comprehensive infection control measures are in place and community transmission levels are low or moderate, school reopenings do not increase the latter. While school closure can contribute to reduced transmission, by itself this is insufficient to prevent community transmission in the absence of other interventions. However, secondary transmission can occur when schools do not implement protection measures, such as distancing, managing student numbers and testing. Recommended measures to put in place depend on the context and localized nature of the pandemic.

In a joint presentation, **Angelina Angie Matsie Motshekga, South African Minister of Basic Education & Mugwena Maluleke, General Secretary of the South African Democratic Teachers Union** stressed the crucial role of teachers in the context of the pandemic and the need to prioritize and support all education staff. They shared experiences around the importance of ministry and union cooperation, and the agreed imperative of in-person classroom learning. They noted that in South Africa, teachers have shown strong commitment to keeping schools open, not only to continue learning but also to protect the wellbeing of learners. Ministry and Unions have worked with teachers to ensure they have strong knowledge about prevention measures. Efforts have also been made to engage with parents and the broader community.

Summary of ministerial statements

Throughout the session, 25 ministers reflected on the importance of keeping schools open, prioritising and supporting learner and teacher wellbeing. Common practices and challenges are summarized below.

Keeping schools open by putting in place clear safety measures

Ministers related their efforts to keep schools open or re-open schools safely in the event of prolonged closures. Many have put in place locally adapted health and safety policies to protect learners and school staff. Several ministers noted that they had drawn on global guidance developed by UNESCO, UNICEF and other partners in the development of such policies.

In almost all countries, measures have included physical distancing (e.g. by reducing class sizes) and other hygiene measures such as hand washing stations or mask wearing. In some countries (e.g. Estonia, France and Qatar), testing within schools has been possible. However, others pointed to the issue of lack of access to testing kits. In Argentina, a website has been established to monitor the COVID situation in schools. Many mentioned specific efforts to ensure that teachers and learners from vulnerable groups are protected.

Measures put in place across and within countries are contextual - responding to localised factors including other existing public health risks. Decentralised decision-making processes were identified as central to ensuring measures are responsive to the local situation in many countries.

Despite continued efforts to ensure schools remain open, as many Ministers reported, widespread school closures have been necessary and remain in place in many countries.

Enabling effective distance learning when school closures are necessary

When full or partial school closures could not be avoided, governments and school communities mobilised to ensure the sustainability of quality, inclusive and accessible distance education for all to the extent possible. However, it has been particularly difficult to build an effective distance education system with little foresight and in many countries with resources constraints (e.g. Gabon). Many countries reported the lack of access to a reliable internet connection in all or part of their territory as a major issue in enabling teachers and students to continue working together in good conditions. In addition, some learners lacked access to the devices needed to access distance learning (e.g. computers or smartphones). The difficulties in accessing the internet have particularly hit the more vulnerable, geographically remote and poor populations.

To address this phenomenon, cater for inequalities in access to the internet and prevent school drop-out rates, several governments have resorted to various communication tools, such as TV and radio. These other media have proven to be particularly effective alternative distance teaching and learning tools.

Several countries, (e.g. Gabon and the Republic of Syria), wish to establish stronger and more sustainable and flexible distance education systems in the future. This will enable education systems to become more resilient, evolving perhaps towards a more hybrid (face-to-face and distance teaching and learning) model.

Measures to support learner wellbeing

While catching up on lost learning is a clear priority, many countries have put in place specific efforts to support learner wellbeing. Some acknowledged the link between wellbeing and learning outcomes, noting that investment in wellbeing was central to ensuring that learners are resilient,

able to cope with challenge and thus able to catch up on lost learning. Recognising the toll that the pandemic has taken on the mental health of children and young people, many pointed to specific efforts to provide psychosocial support (e.g. Armenia, Japan, South Africa). For example, allocation of additional school counsellors (Japan), provision of hotlines to provide psychological support (Armenia), and specific a school wellbeing policy (Québec/Canada).

Measures to support teacher wellbeing

Importantly, many ministers acknowledged the heavy burden of responsibility that has fallen on the shoulders of teachers throughout the pandemic. They praised the great efforts from teachers (“the heroes”) to adapt to new methods, but also the toll that the pandemic has had on teachers – many of whom have been under pressure to continue to support learning in a new and challenging environment. Several countries (e.g. Angola, Argentina, Cuba, Gabon, Nauru) spoke of efforts made to ensure teachers received training in how to support student health and wellbeing. Some countries (e.g. Armenia, Mauritania) spoke about specific efforts to support teacher mental health and wellbeing.

Prioritizing teachers in vaccination drives

There is evidence that many countries (around two-thirds) are prioritising teachers as ‘front line workers’ in their national vaccination campaigns. In some countries (e.g. Lithuania) the majority of teachers (70%) have already been vaccinated. In others, general lack of access to vaccinations is hampering efforts, even when teachers are prioritized.

Increasing financial investments in education

As stressed by senior officials during the opening of this high-level ministerial event, education should be seen as an investment for recovery. Increasing the budget allocated to the education sector is part of many countries' plan to build more resilient education systems, and to support teachers, learners and other school personnel.

Argentina cited its plan to increase investment in education with the aim to reduce the digital divide and to strengthen teacher training. Mauritania reported a 12% boost to the education budget in order to support teachers. The government of Finland reported also substantially increased its investment in learner wellbeing with the *June 2020 Children Wellbeing Package*. Around 320 million euros have been invested in this country for mitigating the effects of distance learning.

Close partnerships between Ministry of Education & Ministry of Health

Some ministers (e.g. Nicaragua, Paraguay) stressed the importance of a strong partnership between Ministry of Education and Health in making the right decisions around the need for school closures and ensuring that schools have the right guidance and measures in place to prevent transmission.

Session conclusion

Dr. Suzanne Grant Lewis, Director of UNESCO’s International Institute for Educational Planning, provided overall reflections on the roundtable and key takeaways. She remarked on the ‘community of practice’ that had been formed via the sharing of numerous challenges and common responses to keep schools open and to support teachers in adapting to a new learning reality.

Reiterating the argument made by Professor Didier Jourdan, Dr Grant Lewis further stressed that there is clear evidence showing that schools should be the last institution to close and the first to reopen. Indeed, many countries have demonstrated their commitment to ensure that schools are reopening and that we continue to make progress to prevent the world from facing a ‘generational catastrophe’.

There is a clear concern about the impact of the pandemic on learning. Ministers are trying to address these issues in many ways and we must continue to learn from each other. As well as prioritising learning, countries have also underscored the imperative of supporting the socio-emotional wellbeing and mental health of learners and teachers. She noted that roundtable interventions had not referred to supporting the needs of the most marginalized, nor to the issues pertaining to the loss of nutrition and healthcare support in the context of school closure. Evidence shows that schools provide nutritional support through school feeding programmes as well as an entry point to a range of health care interventions – it will be important to ensure this is prioritized as schools reopen.

Finally, throughout the session, the crucial role that teachers play was underscored, with references to them as “heroes”. Going forward, it is key to adopt a holistic approach to the needs of teachers and give more attention to their socio-emotional and wellbeing dimension.

Dr. Grant Lewis concluded with a call to action to: Build and maintain trust in the professionalism of teachers; reduce the risks to everyone in the school community, including teachers; and provide more comprehensive support for teachers.

List of speakers

1. H.E. Ms Luisa Maria Alves Grilo, Minister of Education, Angola
2. H.E. Mr Nicolás Trotta, Minister of Education, Argentina
3. H.E. Ms Zhanna Andreyan, Deputy Minister of Education Science, Culture and Sports, Armenia
4. H.E. Ms Caroline Désir, Minister of Education, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Belgium
5. H.E. Ms Ankica Gudeljević, Minister of Civil Affairs, Bosnia and Herzegovina
6. H.E. Mr Jean-François Roberge, Minister of Education, Quebec, Canada
7. H.E. Ms María Victoria Angulo González, Minister of National Education, Colombia
8. H.E. Ms Dania López, Vice-Minister of Education, Cuba
9. H.E. Ms Ligia Pérez, Vice-Minister of Education, Dominican Republic
10. H.E. Ms Liina Kersna, Minister of Education and Research, Estonia
11. H.E. Mr Jussi Saramo, Minister of Education, Finland
12. H.E. Mr Jean-Michel Blanquer, Minister of National Education, France
13. H.E. Mr Patrick Mouguiama Daouda, Minister of Higher Education and National Education, Gabon
14. H.E. Mr Nadiem Anwar Makarim, Minister of Education and Culture, Indonesia
15. H.E. Mr Yoji Maruyama, Senior Deputy Minister of Education, MEXT, Japan
16. H.E. Mr Almazbek Beishenaliev, Minister of Education and Science, Kyrgyzstan
17. H.E. Prof Ansu D. Sonii, Minister of Education, Liberia
18. H.E. Ms Jurgita Šiugždinienė, Minister of Education, Science and Sport, Republic of Lithuania
19. H.E. Mr Mohamed Melainine Eyih, Minister of National Education, Mauritania
20. H.E. Hon. Richard-Hyde Menke, MP, Deputy Minister for Education and Training, Nauru
21. H.E. Ms Miriam Raudez, Minister of Education, Nicaragua
22. H.E. Mr Juan Manuel Brunetti, Minister of Education and Science, Paraguay
23. H.E. Dr Ibrahim Al Nuaimi, Undersecretary for Education and Higher Education, Qatar
24. H.E. Ms Angelina Motshekga, Minister of Basic Education, Republic of South Africa
25. H.E. Dr.Darem Tabbaa, Minister of Education, Syrian Arab Republic

Virtual Roundtable#2:

School and university dropout and learning loss

Objectives of the session

This roundtable session was focused on sharing information on the success stories, experiences and lessons learnt from national policy measures taken to mitigate school dropout, progress made in catching up lost learning as well as further actions required to mitigate dropouts and learning inequalities. Ministers and high-level government officials from eighteen countries focused on the following questions:

- What the top policy measures you are taking to mitigate against dropout at different educational levels?
- What remedial actions are being put in place to make up for learning loss?
- What support, including psycho-social, is being provided to tertiary level students, to pursue their studies and enter the labour market?

Introducing the session, **Mr Jaime Saavedra Chanduvi**, Global Director of Education at the World Bank, emphasized that education disruption is driving a substantial loss of learning. While countries have implemented a wide range of measures to address learning loss and drop-out, there are currently no data available regarding the full scale of learning losses around the world and few resources are available showcasing effective and at-scale pedagogical strategies for remedial learning.

Broad picture

Ms Silvia Montoya, Director of UNESCO Institute for Statistics, delivered an opening presentation on *Learning Losses Assessment*. Mr Gwang-Chol Chang, Chief, Section of Education Policy, Division for Policies and Lifelong Learning System, UNESCO Education Sector, presented the outcomes of the *Global Education Coalition Surveys*.

In 2020, it was estimated that 24 million children, adolescents and youth from pre-primary to tertiary education globally will be at risk of not returning to learning due to economic impact of the crisis, among which 11 million are primary and secondary education students. They are predominantly found in South and West Asia (5.9 million) and sub-Saharan Africa (5.3 million), representing 47% of the total number of at-risk students. Also in 2020, schools were completely closed for an average of 15 weeks (4 months) worldwide. If partial closures are also included, the average duration represents 26 weeks (6.5 months) worldwide, or almost two thirds of a school year. As part of their fiscal responses, 46% of the countries surveyed by UNESCO prioritized funding in remote learning to ensure continuity of learning amid school closures.

Yet one year into the pandemic, more than two-thirds of the student population (70%), an equivalent of 1 billion students still face disruptions to schooling. An alarming increase in the absolute number of children below the minimum proficiency level (MPL) is directly linked to the duration of school closures and the percentage of children close to the MPL.

Even after children return to schools, learning losses due to school closures could continue to accumulate, unless an appropriate monitoring strategy is deployed, and necessary resources and

support are provided. Without mitigation programmes, losses are equivalent to a year's worth of learning for third grade students as they reach tenth grade. It is crucial for remediation strategies to focus on reducing detected learning gaps, notably among students without access to distance learning platforms. A newly launched UNESCO survey instrument on Monitoring the Impact of COVID-19 on Learning Outcome (MILO) will help measure learning outcomes at the end of primary level (SDG 4.1.1.b) and provide insights on emergency responses in the course of 2021.

To cushion the impact of COVID-19, governments have deployed massive fiscal measures, across key economic and social sectors, yet according to UNESCO's survey, the proportion allocated to education out of stimulus packages amounted to around 2%.

Summary of ministerial statements

Throughout the session, 18 ministers reflected on the issues of school and university dropout and learning loss. Common policy measures, strategies, remedial actions and challenges are summarized below.

Policy measure 1: Deploying diverse learning platforms and hybrid learning to mitigate learning disruptions

More investments in digital and non-digital resources are being made in Congo, Ecuador, India, Iran, Lao PDR, Maldives, Mauritius, Oman, Romania and Venezuela. These include putting in place dedicated radio and TV channels and programmes and online platforms. Mauritius established a dedicated TV channel to broadcast video lessons daily and online resources. Oman implements a hybrid learning strategy and established educational platforms in collaboration with the telecommunication sector, while Iran has established a dedicated interactive platform to keep the motivation of learners and teachers. Efforts also focus on avoiding long phases of distance learning and fix daily schedules for hybrid learning.

Bahrain focuses on multi-modal digital solutions and provides virtual classrooms to all learners and teachers. Teachers are also trained, and necessary equipment is provided. Virtual lessons are being uploaded on the education portal. Portugal prioritized digital transformation and strategically invested in a learning recovery plan, which identified the needs of schools and learners and response strategies to avoid early dropouts and ensure learning continues.

Policy measure 2: Supporting teachers and their professional development

Online teaching training is being carried out in Congo and Romania. To support teacher deployment and management, India employs diverse mediums, including digital technologies, television, and community radios.

To keep schools open and safe teachers are considered a priority group for vaccination in Ecuador and Canada. 75% of teachers have already been vaccinated in Romania.

Policy measure 3: Attending to the wellbeing of teachers and learners

To ensure the wellbeing of learners, school meals are currently being delivered to homes in Congo. Venezuela maintains the school feeding programme, thus protecting the most vulnerable students. Both countries also ensure that all learners have regular and dedicated contact with teachers.

In Ecuador, while learning at home, social and emotional support is provided for learners and families to mitigate critical learning disruptions in cooperation with other ministers. In Maldives academic counselling sessions and specialized therapies are being provided to ensure psycho-social

support and wellbeing of learners. In China university students receive psycho-social support through wide-reaching counselling centres. Mauritius and Portugal are also attending to the wellbeing of learners and teachers by providing psycho-social support.

Policy measure 4: Readjusting academic calendars and providing catch-up and remedial programmes

Romania increased the number of remedial education classes and addressed the emotional disruptions by taking specific measures. Canada redoubled investment in remedial education by providing online catch-up courses, drawing on the best practices that UNESCO shares.

Lao PDR adjusted the curriculum and academic calendar and implemented learning strategies for learners living in remote areas by distributing necessary teaching and learning materials and take-home packages. Maldives extended the academic calendar for 6 months to spare more time for learners to catch up with the expected learning outcomes and designed special remedial programmes dedicated to children with special needs.

Policy measure 5: Addressing marginalization and inequalities and focusing on equity

Equity is a core consideration in education provision by redoubling investments in remedial education in Canada and Romania.

Addressing early dropouts, fostering, and ensuring learning have been the strategic priorities in Portugal and China. Italy places education at the centre of efforts on recovery and resilience and aims at reducing the dropout rates at all levels.

Malta aims at strengthening the digital capacity of the education system to ensure better connectivity. Free provision of digital devices is being offered to foster inclusion in the national system. Resources are effectively aligned with needs, by using funding formulas in Ecuador and Oman. Iran targets the most marginalized groups and refugees by providing learning packages and printed materials for learners who cannot access remote learning. Specific policy measures were implemented to ensure that learning continues for all learners in Mauritius.

Policy measure 6: Building resilience and trust in education through system-wide planning

Solid education systems are far more resilient to crisis, hence building resilience through investing in education is crucial. Albania recognizes that extended school closures in 2020 reversed decades of learning gains and investing in education through regional cooperation would be vital.

Maldives monitors the learning outcomes by introducing diagnostic tests to assess potential learning losses in numeracy and literacy. Portugal focused on designing a learning recovery plan at the macro-level and Benin introduced micro-planning through mobilizing local stakeholders to build resilience. Reform efforts towards digital transformation are also being made in Italy, Malta and Portugal.

Session conclusion

Mr Andreas Schleicher, Director for Education and Skills, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), provided overall reflections on the roundtable and key policy takeaways. Clearly, solid education systems are far more resilient to the crisis than the weaker ones. He stressed the importance of a focus on equity, redoubling investments in remedial education and better aligning resources with needs. Data and evidence show that in 2020-2021 OECD countries are prioritising investment in education. He concluded at this critical juncture, investing more in education could avoid further learning losses and contribute to the future well-being of the younger generation.

List of speakers

1. H.E. Mr Oltion Rrumbullaku, Deputy Minister of Education, Sports and Youth, Albania
2. H.E. Dr. Majid Alnoaimi, Minister of Education, Bahrain
3. H.E. Mr Mahougnon Kakpo,, Minister of Technical Secondary Education and Professional Development, Benin
4. H.E. Mr Stephen Lecce, Minister of Education, Ontario, Canada
5. H.E. Mr Denghua Zhong, Vice Minister of Education, People's Republic of China
6. H.E. Mr Anatole Collinet Makosso, Minister of Primary and Secondary Education and Literacy, Republic of Congo
7. H.E. Ms Monserrat Creamer, Minister of Education, Ecuador
8. H.E. Mr Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank, Minister for Education, India
9. H.E. Mr Mohsen Haji-Mirzaei, Minister of Education, Islamic Republic of Iran
10. H.E. Mr Patrizio Bianchi, Minister of Education, Italy
11. H.E. Mr Phout Simmalavong, Minister of Education and Sports, Lao PDR
12. H.E. Ms Aishath Ali, Minister of Education, Maldives
13. H.E. Dr Justyne Caruana, Minister for Education, Malta
14. H.E. Ms Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, Hon. Vice Prime Minister, Mauritius
15. H.E. Ms Madiha Al Shaibaniyah, Minister of Education, Oman
16. H.E. Mr Tiago Brandão Rodrigues, Minister of Education, Portugal
17. H.E. Mr Aristóbulo Istúriz, Minister of Education, Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
18. H.E. Mr Radu Szekely, Secretary of State for Equality and Equal Chances, Romania

Virtual Roundtable #3:

Digital transformation and the future of education

Objectives of the session

The Roundtable session brought together Ministers of Education to answer the following questions relating to digital transformation and the future of education:

- What are the key strategies for the digital transformation of education systems?
- How has Covid-19 impacted the future of education?
- How can public-private partnerships contribute to advancing the digital transformation at all levels and improving the transition to the world of work?

The roundtable invited ministers of education to reflect on the experience of the past year in order to look to the future. Based on diverse national experiences in leveraging digital technology to address the Covid-19 disruption, and the widely differing digital learning ecosystems, the 22 ministers who participated in this session focused on one main lesson or takeaway for the future development of national education systems.

Introducing the session, the moderator, **Mr Fernando Reimers**, Professor at Harvard University, and member of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, offered avenues for reflection on key takeaways from the past year. Noting that collaboration and communication among teachers, schools, parents and other stakeholders had helped us through the crisis, he evoked the importance of holistic and project-based approaches to learning and much more connectivity between schools and other institutions.

Framing the discussion, **Ms Sonia Jorge**, Executive Director of the Alliance for Affordable Internet, underscored that technology must work for people - digital connectivity must work for education and not drive education. Covid-19 laid bare the reality of digital inequality and exclusion. One in three young people have no access to the Internet at all. Digital deprivation is felt most acutely in low-income countries, where just 6% of young people have internet at home. Across Africa, only one in four people have any form of internet access. Across the world, women and girls often experience social and cultural obstacles preventing them from meaningful use of connectivity.

While digital connectivity can be an enabler of education for marginalized communities, in many countries, students, especially in rural areas, did not have access to remote learning over the past year. In response, digital learning was most often combined with alternative technologies to ensure greater reach. In all experiences of digital learning, on-line safety is a central concern. There is the need for strengthened cooperation, wider societal engagement, and new partnerships to secure affordable and meaningful connectivity and to ensure effective and relevant education for all. National experiences over the past provided useful insights in the future development of education systems.

Summary of ministerial statements

Digital preparedness and prior investment

For most countries, the pandemic has challenged education systems and speeded up digital transformation. New methodologies and approaches were required, adequate infrastructure, access to connectivity, devices, digital platforms, appropriate learning resources and adequate digital skills.

The diverse experiences show how the success in transitioning to digital education during Covid-19 school closures was largely conditioned by different levels of prior investment in digital transformation for education. Some countries were better placed to ensure a smooth transition because of significant pre-COVID efforts (e.g. United Arab Emirates). In others, prior investment in infrastructure, access to devices, digital platforms, appropriate learning content and training in digital skills for online learning helped greatly but did not always suffice to ensure the sudden massive pivot to on-line distance learning (e.g. Egypt, Jordan).

Importance of the human factor

Ministers recognized that it is not digital technologies in themselves that will transform education. Rather, it is people with adequate digital skills that will transform the culture of learning (Sudan). Beyond digital infrastructure, access to devices and educational resources, diverse country experiences emphasized the importance of the human factor, including of developing the new skills needed by teachers, parents/caregivers and students (e.g. Costa Rica, Egypt). Even when access to digital technology exists, there is the need for school leaders, teachers and students to gain experience of quality online and blended learning (Serbia). Examples of efforts to move in this direction abound, whether by establishing networks of coordinators for digital education across schools (Czech Republic), training teachers to support the shift towards blended learning (Seychelles), or better embedding digital technology into pedagogical practices to strengthen a culture of digital learning and transformation (Jordan).

Need for wider social engagement and partnerships

Recognizing that parents everywhere have also become teachers as schools expanded into homes, many countries have stepped up pedagogical support to parents, including in one instance the establishment of a dedicated educational TV channel for parents on how to be teachers at home, especially for early childhood education (Egypt). A number of countries have stepped up studies in digital skills, for students, teachers and family members involved in the learning process (e.g. Andorra, Rwanda, Seychelles).

Beyond stronger engagement with families and parents, public-private-partnerships were also critical in supporting distance learning (Andorra, Latvia, Seychelles), whether through the provision of free data to students by telecom companies, the use of software available in the market to help monitor student and teacher interactions on national education platforms (Azerbaijan), the mobilization of public broadcast media (e.g. Sudan, Republic of North Macedonia), or through the establishment of ICT in education funds to support more equitable access to quality education (Sudan).

Developing a culture of digital learning and transformation

Beyond schooling, some countries have developed more ambitious national plans to strengthen digital capacities, involving both basic education and vocational training (Côte d'Ivoire, Hungary, Spain). Recognizing that students need to be adaptive lifelong learners, National Digital Training Centres, for example, can reinforce the digital capacities of teachers to support the transition to a digital labour market (Spain). The potential of digital transformation has been recognized across a diversity of development settings with some countries building capacity for the different scenarios that might play out as far as 50 years in the future (United Arab Emirates). Developing a culture of digital learning cannot be dissociated from the wider digital transformation of societies (Jordan).

Reimagining and transforming education for the future

In adjusting to distance and blended learning, the pandemic offers the opportunity to reimagine pedagogies, assessment and curriculum (e.g. Andorra, Côte d'Ivoire, Georgia, Mongolia). The educational disruption brought on by the pandemic was seen as an opportunity to reimagine educational models in which soft skills, life skills, digital skills, as well as interdisciplinary skills gain more importance (e.g. Greece).

Moreover, future educational ecosystems will increasingly link up diverse learning spaces, looking beyond physical classrooms, and including institutions, both public and private, that interact to support learning (Philippines). The co-creation of networks of learning spaces will be a main feature of the future of education the coming decades. More broadly, the experience over the past year raises important questions about the meaning and purposes of education and about models of teaching and learning adapted to the challenges and opportunities as we look to 2030 and beyond.

Session conclusion

Summing up the discussion, Mr Alex Wong, Senior Strategy Advisor, International Telecommunication Union, pointed to three main areas of the digital challenge that had been evoked by ministers:

- The ongoing need to create new models and tools to adapt to the digital environments, including for learning, teacher training and assessment
- The importance of specific training to teachers to be successful in a digital environment
- The opportunity that the pandemic has provided to engage with parents and communities, and to expand partnerships with the private sector.

In concluding, he commended the leadership of ministers, who recognized the crisis as an opportunity to rethink how to deliver education.

List of speakers

1. H.E. Mr Tarek Shawki, Minister of Education, Egypt
2. H.E. Mr Hussain bin Ibrahim Al Hammadi, Minister of Education, the United Arab Emirates
3. H.E. Ms Rosy S. Akbar, Minister of Education, Heritage & Arts, Fiji
4. H.E. Mr Enkh-Amgalan Luvsantseren, Minister of Education and Science and Member of Parliament, Mongolia
5. H.E. Mr Nepomuceno Malauan, Undersecretary (Minister) of Education, Philippines
6. H.E. Mr Mohammad Khair Abu-Qudais, Minister of Education, Jordan

7. H.E. Ms Kandia Kamara Kamissoko, Minister of Education, Côte d'Ivoire
8. H.E. Mr Gaspard Twagirayezu, , Minister of State in charge of Primary and Secondary Education, Rwanda
9. H.E Ms Tamador Eltirefi Awadelkreem, Undersecretary of Education, Sudan
10. H.E. Mr Justin Valentin, Minister of Education, Seychelles
11. H.E. Ms Ester Vilarrubla, Minister of Education, Andorra
12. H.E. Mr Idris Isayev, Deputy Minister of Education, Azerbaijan
13. H.E. Mr Mikheil Chkhenkeli, Minister of Education and Science, Georgia
14. H.E. Ms Ilga Šuplinska, Minister for Education and Science, Latvia
15. H.E. Ms Niki Kerameus, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, Greece
16. H.E. Ms Mila Carovska, Minister of Education & Science, Republic of North Macedonia
17. H.E. Mr. Karel Kovar, Vice Minister of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic, Czech Republic
18. H.E. Prof. Dr. József Bódis, Minister of State for Higher Education, Innovation, Vocational Education and Training, Hungary
19. H.E. Mr Branko Ruzic, Minister of Education, Science and Technological Development, Serbia
20. H.E. Mr Artur Seletskyi, Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Ukraine
21. H.E. Ms Isabel Celaá Diéguez, Minister of Education & Vocational Training, Spain
22. H.E. Ms Melania Brenes, Vice Minister of Public Education, Costa Rica

Conclusion: the necessity of united multilateral support

Returning to plenary, the Assistant Director-General for Education affirmed that “No government can respond to this ongoing education crisis alone. Multilateral cooperation is indispensable to uphold the right to education and ensure learning continuity”. Joined by colleagues from UNICEF and the World Bank, she introduced “Mission: Recovering Education for 2021” and its three priorities, identified by Ministers at the Global Education Meeting last October and dovetailing with the themes of the current conference.

Recovering education aims to ensure that:

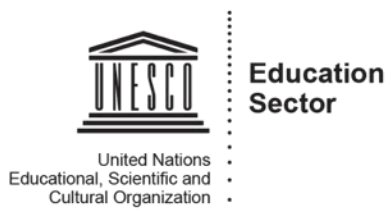
1. No child is left behind - ensuring all children and youth are back in school and receiving comprehensive support to succeed
2. Every child is learning - accelerating learning and breaking down the digital learning divide
3. All teachers are empowered - supporting the teaching workforce

Robert Jenkins, Chief of Education and Associate Director at UNICEF emphasized the need to proactively identify marginalized children within each community, understand barriers to their return and work to overcome them. Jaime Saavedra, Global Director of Education at the World Bank, recalled that even before the pandemic, 53% of children were not able to understand a text by age 10, a figure that is increasing. Emphasizing the need to act with urgency, he underlined the importance of learning assessment tools to know the needs of each students, remedial programmes and ensuring that schools incorporate socio-emotional skills as part of the crisis response menu. Regarding the third pillar Ms Giannini recalled the recommendation to prioritize them in vaccination campaigns and to ensure they have access to adequate professional development and socio-emotional support.

Concluding the event, Ms Giannini thanked Ministers for sharing experiences, challenges, lessons and innovative solutions, affirming that that these offer a message of hope for the near future.

UNESCO Education Sector

Education is UNESCO's top priority because it is a basic human right and the foundation on which to build peace and drive sustainable development. UNESCO is the United Nations' specialized agency for education and the Education Sector provides global and regional leadership in education, strengthens national education systems and responds to contemporary global challenges through education with a special focus on gender equality and Africa.



The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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