Background and rationale for the group

Prior to COVID-19 the SDGs signalled global commitments to address inequalities and inequities in many areas that affect human development, including health, nutrition, education, and participation, as well as infrastructure and innovation (Goal 9). Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a growing awareness of the challenge of the digital divide, which impacts not just on the social development SDGs, but also on overall economic development. There is a need for a common vision in Asia and the Pacific around addressing the digital divide that has led to great inequities in opportunities for learning both within and between countries. There is also a need for a common understanding of the key elements of a digital transformation in education, and how to go about such a transformation, which goes beyond providing opportunities for digital learning. A system wide digital transformation is required across all areas of education, integrated in government strategies, plans and policies, and encompassing such areas as school infrastructure, devices and connectivity, curricula and textbooks, pedagogy, professional development for teachers and school leaders, monitoring, assessments and examinations, and education management information systems at national, sub-national and school levels.

While there has been some progress in closing the digital divide across the region, there is still a long road ahead of us.[1] According to the ITU, there has been significant growth in access to mobile broadband in Asia and the Pacific, growing from 61.7 to 76.6 for every 100 inhabitants between 2017 and 2020. However, many economies continue to have low rates below 50 per 100 inhabitants including Lao PDR, Nepal, India, Pakistan, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, Papua New Guinea as well as several small island states such as Kiribati, Samoa, and Solomon Islands. There are also persistent disparities in access to fixed broadband networks in Asia and the Pacific. While fixed broadband subscriptions stand at 15 per 100 inhabitants, which is nearly on par with the world average of 15.2 per 100 inhabitants, the average is skewed by some countries in the region with exceptionally high proportions of access to fixed broadband, such as South Korea (42.76%), Australia (34.73%), New Zealand (34.72%), Japan (33.5%), and China (31.34%). Many economies have less than five subscriptions per 100 and some have less than one.

The situation in education

While great strides have been made in improving school enrolment and completion in Asia and the Pacific, a large proportion of children live in Learning Poverty (over 50% in South Asia) – and are unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10. Even before the COVID pandemic millions of children and young people in Asia and the Pacific were not mastering foundational numeracy and literacy skills, let alone the ‘21st century skills’ required for meaningful employment, personal well-being and active participation in society. Since the
pandemic hit and due to extended school closures across Asia and the Pacific, the challenges are even greater. Most inequalities have significantly increased, while the resources required to fund effective education systems have also diminished due to other priorities.

In response to COVID-19 pandemic, governments around Asia and the Pacific introduced and expanded various digital learning platforms and learning modalities (online, mobile, TV, radio as well as no-tech modalities) to ensure the continuity of learning. Despite these important efforts, children and youth in poorer countries without inclusive digital infrastructure, devices, resources and teacher training, have been greatly disadvantaged compared with children and youth in richer countries. UNICEF reported that by October 2020, school children in the poorest countries had already lost nearly four months of schooling since the start of the pandemic, compared to six weeks in high-income countries.\[2\] Through household surveys conducted by UNICEF, significant inequities in learning opportunities were also found within countries in South Asia, according to various dimensions such as location (rural, urban, between states in India), income, parental education, gender and age (youth versus children). This is partially due to the digital divide in access to and opportunities to use devices for learning, but also partially due to the differential ability of governments to rapidly and effectively implement continuity of learning approaches to reach all children and youth via a combination of no-tech, low-tech and high-tech learning modalities.\[1\]

These inequities and the overall disruption in learning will have prolonged impact for many years to come. It is imperative that digital education infrastructure and human capital is developed to ensure that such disruptions are minimized in future, as well as for building back better – to address the learning crisis and the crisis of many millions of children and youth who remain out of school in Asia and the Pacific, even before the pandemic.

Going forward, this is an opportunity to build “forward” both in terms of preparedness for future emergencies and school closures, but also to strengthen formal and non-formal education systems to provide better learning opportunities for children and youth. The potential for technology to play a key role in enhancing learning opportunities both for those in school as well as those Not in Education, Training, or Employment (NEETs), has been dramatically amplified by responses to COVID.

The challenges surrounding the socio-economic landscape of the region calls for a strategic approach to reskill and upskill people to boost their employability and ensure accelerated economic development in the region. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically revealed the vulnerability of skills and lifelong learning systems including Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) providers that faced closures in the region. In a short span of time, TVET systems were challenged to move to distance and blended learning offers, which in many cases are not well designed or implemented. The overall crisis of the skills development system in the face of the pandemic hence urges the adoption of innovative distance learning approaches, including low- and high-tech, to empower the most vulnerable. The COVID-19 crisis should be seen as an opportunity to innovate, reflect and build a cost-efficient system capable of addressing both the immediate needs as well as the required longer-term reforms. There is also an opportunity to use technology to transform education

and make it more relevant to the future of work, by building 21st century skills through technology, and integration of ICT for TVET. At the same time, we also need to align technology for learning approaches with efforts to strengthen Education Management Information Systems (EMIS), School Management Information Systems (SMIS), Early Warning Systems (EWS) for preventing dropout, use of technology in risk reduction and preparedness and DRRM, Adaptive Learning Systems (ALS), Learning Management Systems (LMS), and other systems, platforms and tools which play a key role in managing, monitoring and delivering quality education, as well as identifying and addressing equity gaps. It is also important to ensure that technology is designed so that it is accessible to marginalized groups, and where possible and relevant, adhering to the Principles for Digital Development.

Some of the key challenges faced in the region include the gender digital divide: girls are much less likely to have (control over) access to devices, time to use them, and opportunity to develop digital literacy; the difficulty of cost-effectively scaling digital learning solutions without exacerbating inequities; and the need to address and mitigate risks introduced by technology for learning, especially online learning – such as exposure to cyberbullying, technology-facilitated school-related gender-based violence prevention, and threats to protection of personal data. But there are also many opportunities to address equity issues, such as leveraging assistive technologies for children with disabilities and technology-supported individualized learning approaches which are especially important for children with special needs. A cohesive and systematic approach is required to leverage such opportunities while mitigating risks and addressing the challenges with appropriate strategies.

This WG will therefore focus on system level digital transformation in education linked to enhanced, more equitable access to quality life-long learning and skilling opportunities. It will also look at digitization from a cross-sectoral perspective – keeping in mind the broader perspective that connecting a remote school could mean connecting a community, and digitization in education has the potential to have a huge enabling effect on communities’ access not just to education, but also health, social welfare and many other services, and overall integration and connectedness within society.

1. **Purpose**

As a WG under the Asia-Pacific Network Group on 'Learning+Education2030+' and the RCP (Regional Collaborative Platform) structure, the purpose of the group is to co-develop a coherent and cohesive vision and roadmap around key areas of the Digital Transformation in Education agenda in Asia and the Pacific, which include but are not limited to:

1. Identifying the key common outcomes sought by Member organizations, such as quality digital learning opportunities for all children and youth; school connectivity; digital literacy for all children and youth; online safety; capacity building of Ministry and private sector staff on digital transformation, with teacher trainers and teachers trained on the effective use of ICT for teaching and learning; and inclusive national strategies on technology for learning.
2. Completing a system-level mapping of the key elements which influence these outcomes, across and within different areas such as research and evidence, strategy, partnerships, policies and plans, innovations, costing, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The
mapping would distinguish between universal elements vis-à-vis more context and country specific elements, elaborating where necessary.

3. With reference to this mapping, identifying the key areas of work each Member organization is engaged in, as well as their key priorities, challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

4. With respect to the identified priorities and opportunities for collaboration, using meetings to exchange and discuss relevant information, evidence, research, news, tools and guidance; as well as jointly identify strategies to achieve and implement key common outcomes, mobilize and support mutual collaboration and partnerships, and coordinate the planning and delivery of agreed, time-bound joint activities and events.

5. Link with and provide inputs to other RCP groups and IBCs (Issue Based Coalitions), as relevant and where there is complementarity, and contribute to the Network Group on 'Learning+Education2030+' under the RCP structure.

2. Membership

2.1 The organizations in the Group will constitute its “Members”.

2.2 Coordination

• Co-Chair: ITU Regional Office for Asia & the Pacific
• Co-Chair: UNICEF ROSA

This is an initial arrangement, but chairing will rotate in future, from 2022, based on the agreement of members.

Current members (listed alphabetically):

- ADB
- Child Funds
- EdTech Hub
- FCDO
- GSMA
- ILO
- ITU Regional Office for Asia & the Pacific
- GIGA
- Save the Children International
- UNESCO
- UNICEF EAPRO
- UNICEF ROSA
- UNODC
- World Bank

2.3 Member organizations join the TWG for meetings on particular themes that these partners and organizations are working on in Asia and the Pacific.

2.4 A Management Team consisting of representatives from up 4 member organisations will be responsible for sending out invitations to meetings, approving and making revisions to the ToR, and deciding on expanding membership and inviting organisations, including the private sector where relevant, to join relevant meetings.
2.5. Any Member organization can provide suggestions for changes to this TOR, which will be integrated by the Management Team following endorsement.

2.6. Any Member organization can provide suggestions for organizations to join as Members or to join a meeting on a specific theme.

3. Benefits of membership

3.1. Avoid duplication and ensure synergies between member organizations on work related to digital transformation in learning and education.

3.2. Benefit from cross-sectoral and holistic perspectives and insights, to complement areas of work engaged in and helping ensure there are no (major) gaps or oversights in our work.

3.3. Ensure more coherent policy and strategic advice and recommendations across member organizations.

3.4. Benefit from sharing of research and evidence between member organizations.

3.5. Better awareness of what each member organization is working on and identify areas for collaboration, both at regional and country level.

4. Group operations and frequency of meetings

4.1. The Group will be ad-hoc in nature and function in a structured but fairly informal manner.

4.2. In the first 3 months of operation the Group will meet virtually on a monthly basis for at least one hour on a pre-arranged and confirmed date and time. The frequency of meetings and the date of the meeting(s) may be changed in advance via email exchange with agreement of the majority of the Group’s members, for example, if the scheduled date falls on a public holiday.

4.3. A face-to-face meeting will be considered when conditions permit linked to a regional event/meeting when many representatives or their alternate would already be attending, with possibility to attend the meeting remotely.

5. Roles and Responsibilities

5.1. Two of the Member organizations will act as Co-Chairs and either or both can act as the Convening Organization for each meeting.

5.2. A Member organization will provide the Secretary for the Group on a rotating basis. The Secretary will prepare the minutes of the meetings and, in consultation with the Co-Chairs, prepare and circulate the agenda and supporting documents at least one week in advance of meetings.

5.3. The initial Convenor will be UNICEF ROSA, with UNICEF ROSA acting as Secretary.

5.4. A call for nominations for the next Chair & Secretary of the Group will be circulated by the Secretary at least two months before the end of the term of office.

This TOR will take effect subject to consensus of the founding Group members and remain in force until at least December 2021.
6. Role vis-à-vis other partnerships within the UN-ESCAP Framework

6.1 This working group will be an addition to existing working groups and networks that co-ordinate UN support for the roll out of the SDGs across the Asia-Pacific. These groups include: The Asia Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ARNEC); UNGEI; Mother Tongue Education, and Disability and Inclusive Education. As noted above, digitisation presents new opportunities for those represented by these groups, such as those with disabilities and minority language speakers.

6.2 The group will use the Secretariat provided by Education 2030+. It may however have to identify its own Knowledge Management and logistical support systems.

6.3 The WG will report to the meetings of the Education 2030+ group, which occur on at least a biannual basis. This allows for exchange with the other aforementioned groups and networks.

6.4 There will also be synergies to be established between the WG on Digital Transformation other groups within the UN-ESCAP architecture, including the WG on Disabilities, for example.

6.5 The group will also be linked to the NORRAG Knowledge and Management Exchange Europe | Asia | Pacific Hub, for dissemination activities.

6.6. The group will provide inputs to UN IBCs as relevant.
Annex I

Short-term (6-8 months) Joint Tasks of the Working Group

i. Completion of the mapping as outlined in Section 1.
ii. Establish an internal communication and document exchange platform for the Group.
iii. Collate a calendar of major events being organized by Member organizations on relevant events pertaining to digital transformation in education and technology for learning (the calendar will be linked to the internal Group platform mentioned above).
iv. Establish an online repository of resources, curated by Member organizations and made available to the public.
v. Co-publish a brief “Vision and Road Map for Digital Transformation in Education in Asia Pacific” based on the mapping, setting out the common vision, roadmap, priorities, challenges and areas of collaboration identified.