UNESCO-GSMA Senior Education Policy Makers' Forum Report

The Event:

Building on its commitment to better understand the possibilities as well as the challenges of mobile learning, UNESCO, in partnership with the GSMA, hosted its first ever Senior Education Policy Makers' Forum on February 20, 2013 in Paris, France.

The Forum was a key component of UNESCO's broader Mobile Learning Week 2013. UNESCO is pleased to announce that it will be organising a Mobile Learning Week in 2014 and plans to include another Senior Education Policy Makers' Forum. The tentative dates for this flagship event are February 17 to 21, and the one-day Forum is currently planned for February 20, 2014.

Key Findings:

Perhaps the most important finding from the meeting was that mobile learning is, in many ways, the future of ICT in education. Participants insisted that the so-called computer-lab-model of technology integration in education—which allows students limited and largely scripted access to technology—is being replaced by technology that is easily portable; usually owned and controlled by an individual rather than an institution; has internet and multimedia capabilities; and can facilitate a large number of tasks, especially those related to communication. Leading thinkers in the field of technology-enhanced learning have long hoped for a day when technology would fit more seamlessly in teaching and learning.

Given the affordability and power of mobile technology, it appears that a 1:1 student-to-device ratio is increasingly within reach, and this carries enormous possibilities for education.   There was a consensus that sound and well-planned integration of mobile technology in education can bring impressive benefits: Learners are better able to study at an individual pace, follow idiosyncratic interests, collaborate with teachers and peers, receive instant feedback about their performance, and continue learning outside the classroom. These distinct advantages, and others, are articulated at length in the *UNESCO Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning* and GSMA's *The Mobile Proposition for Education*.

While a consensus emerged that mobile technology can widen access to education and improve its quality, participants were less clear about how exactly to move towards this promising future. Some key understandings did emerge though: Officials said that government commitment and drive was required to take mobile learning to scale. Participants also highlighted the need for holistic solutions that

consider the entire mobile learning ecosystem, encompassing not only learners and teachers, but administrators, content creators and service providers, among others. They said that strong leadership and shared objectives were key ingredients to successful initiatives.

Many country representatives who have already started major initiatives faced obstacles getting projects off the ground. For example, attendees described the reluctance of some teachers who were skeptical about moving away from familiar, traditional, textbook-based pedagogies as well as from some parents who are worried that their children spend too much time looking at digital screens. To assuage teacher concerns, representatives from education ministries said they made major investments in teacher training. Several participants insisted that investments to ensure teaching staff understand how to use mobile technologies to further student learning was as, if not more important, than investments in the technology itself.

While the panelists were cognisant that the road ahead will have bumps and pitfalls, they felt that the benefits of pioneering strategies to more fully leverage technology for learning were worth the risks. UNESCO and the GSMA look forward to hearing updates from participants at the next Forum in 2014 and sharing achievements, best practices, lessons learned, as well as continuing vital conversations about the role mobile technology will play in teaching and learning the years ahead.

Action Items:

Participants called for further opportunities to network and share knowledge with their counterparts working in other countries. The Forum in 2014 will help meet this demand but additional forums for collaboration and communication could be created. Some education ministry representatives expressed a desire to participate in virtual networks or communities of practice to continue contact and cooperation between face-to-face gatherings.

Participants also said that mobile learning implementations are still largely embryonic and that such initiatives demand rigorous and ongoing evaluation. It was recommended that government sponsored projects allocate larger portions of their budgets to monitoring and evaluation. Much can be learned from failures as well as from successes so it is important to look at both and decipher what, exactly, constitutes high quality mobile learning.

Areas of Future Focus:

Participants expressed a belief that future meetings should place greater focus on the financial aspects of mobile learning and education. Many felt it might be beneficial to focus on 'The Economics of Mobile Learning and Education' and study the relative cost advantages and disadvantages. This thematic lens is especially relevant in a time of government austerity. Other participants said it would be useful to examine opportunities to encourage private sector involvement in mobile learning.

Policy makers said that they need training and guidance, with support from the mobile industry, given that many mobile learning initiatives are largely without precedent in the field of ICT in education. Toward this end, future UNESCO and GSMA-led mobile learning policy workshops may be offered.

Conclusion:

Participants, as well as UNESCO and the GSMA, felt that the Forum was productive and, in many ways, groundbreaking. It was a rare opportunity for senior government officials to discuss mobile learning with peers and counterparts in an open and constructive venue. The findings and progress made after just a one-day meeting were impressive, and UNESCO and the GSMA look forward to building on the success of the first Senior Education Policy Makers' Forum, and to continuing the conversations.