



# 2020 Global Education Meeting

Extraordinary Session on Education post-COVID-19 (online)

co-organized by UNESCO and the Government of the United Kingdom

20 October 2020, 13:00–16:00 (CEST–Paris)

22 October 2020, 13:00–15:00 (CEST–Paris)

## Concept note

### 1. Background

#### Context

The unprecedented global social and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed our world's fragility and interdependence, affecting every country, community and family. According to UNESCO, at the height of the pandemic, schools, universities and other learning institutions were closed in more than 190 countries, disrupting the education of 1.6 billion students with hundreds of millions of children and youth unable to continue their learning. Much of practical training for skills development was interrupted. There is growing evidence that even the best distance learning solutions are weak substitutes for classroom interactions and millions of disadvantaged students may not return to school. In other words, progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to achieve quality education and lifelong learning will slow, stagnate or even reverse.

With the world focusing on immediate public health, economic and social welfare responses, education is at a considerable risk of being overshadowed despite its role as a powerful and effective driver of economic recovery in the short term and sustainable development and transformation in the longer term. There are concerns that education financing, including international aid, is likely to decline sharply due to shrinking GDP, financing priorities for economic recovery and reduced Official Development Assistance (ODA). This is set to exacerbate the pre-COVID learning crisis and push millions more children and young people out of education systems, lowering their chances of future employability and decent livelihoods.

#### Preparing the ground for the Global Education Meeting

In response, the international education community has come together, mobilized their assets and expertise, and engaged in a series of joint campaigns and initiatives.

UNESCO launched the Global Education Coalition at the onset of the crisis in March, to support countries in ensuring continued learning for all during COVID-related school closures and to accompany the safe re-opening of schools. More than 150 members the UN family, international organizations, civil society, academia and the private sector rallied together to ensure that #LearningNeverStops.

Bringing together the expertise of the UN system and education partners, the UN Secretary-General issued an extensive policy brief in August: *Education during Covid-19 and beyond*. The Policy Brief provides a series of recommendations to Member States on policy responses during school closures and re-opening, and on protecting education financing in the recovery.

In addition, a White Paper of the #SaveOurFuture campaign provides recommendations for diverse actors—governments, donors, multilateral organizations, the teaching profession, civil society and the private sector—to address immediate challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Global Education Forum, aimed at gathering donors and partners to make the case for securing

education financing, met on 10 September. During the 75th session of the UN General Assembly, on 25 September, a high-level event will be held to share with Member States recommended measures and best practices during the education disruptions.

The 2020 extraordinary session of the Global Education Meeting (2020 GEM) will build on the momentum, lessons learned and outcomes of the above processes.

## 2. Meeting objective and expected outcomes

This extraordinary session of the GEM will serve as the platform for global leaders and high-level policy makers to agree on:

1. A set of global priority actions to be put in place by the end of 2021 for the recovery and strengthening of education systems at the country level, focusing around the following five themes considered central to the COVID-19 and recovery:
  - 1) Protect domestic and international financing of education
  - 2) Reopen schools safely
  - 3) Focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality
  - 4) Reimagine teaching and learning
  - 5) Harness equitable connectivity and technologies for learning
2. Modalities to work towards strengthening the coordination, alignment and effectiveness of SDG 4-Education 2030 implementation, with a view to presenting an improved global education cooperation mechanism, for adoption at the next GEM in 2021.

The concrete expected outcomes of the 2020 GEM are:

- Agreement on global priority actions to accelerate progress toward SDG 4 in the COVID-19 context and beyond.
- High-level political leaders' commitments to deliver on these critical actions by end of 2021.
- A roadmap to improve the global SDG 4 - Education 2030 coordination mechanism.

**These will be reflected in the 2020 GEM Declaration.**

Government leaders and the international education community will be invited to make their commitments – political, financial and/or technical – in relation to agreed priority actions. The progress and achievement of these actions and commitments will be reviewed at the next ordinary session of the GEM planned in 2021.

Leading up to the 2020 GEM, UNESCO will facilitate a series of consultations on the draft outcome document (the 2020 GEM Declaration) regionally with Member States, the SDG-Education 2030 Steering Committee, the Collective Consultation of NGOs on Education 2030 (CCNGO), multilateral organizations and regional organizations, as well as other key stakeholders.

## 3. Themes of the 2020 GEM

The themes and discussions of the 2020 GEM are informed by the evidence and recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's Policy Brief and the White Paper of the #SaveOurFuture campaign, while maintaining the universal relevance, lifelong perspective, holistic and humanistic nature of the SDG 4-Education 2030 agenda.

### Theme 1 – Protect domestic and international financing of education

While the COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in history, its impact on the world's economy is “a crisis like no other” with global growth in 2020 projected at -4.9% and the gross domestic product in advanced economies expected to decline by 8%<sup>1</sup>. All major sources of education financing—domestic education budgets, household contributions and remittance flows, and international aid flows to education—are under severe threat. Indeed, the world is facing “a generational catastrophe” as warned by the UN Secretary-General in launching his policy paper on education during and beyond COVID-19.

Recent studies show an alarming magnitude of COVID-19 impact on education budgets as well as strong evidence that early and sustained investment in education will reduce long-term costs for achieving SDG 4 and increase both social and private returns to achieving other SDGs. COVID-19 related school closures risk increasing the annual financial gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4 from US\$148 billion to nearly US\$200 billion<sup>2</sup> while the aid to education is projected to fall by US\$ 2 billion by 2022<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, investing now in remedial and re-enrolment programmes could reduce this additional cost by as much as 75%<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, governments need to maintain and even increase domestic financing and international aid to education *now*, as this investment will pay off and carry positive impact across the Sustainable Development Goals.

### Theme 2 – Reopen schools safely

The COVID-19 pandemic was and continues to be a stress test for students, teachers, parents and the wider community on many fronts: loss of nutrition as well as of health and psychosocial support that schools provide, loss of family income and increased child abuse and violence are among the damaging effects reported. As many countries start reopening schools, school hygiene and safety are the principal public health concern; however, the mental and psychological aspects are also crucial and require multi-dimensional policy and programmatic responses.

Planning ahead is essential to ensure a smooth transition for students, teachers and families, taking into account the impact of prolonged school closures on learning and well-being and ensuring conditions for reopening schools are met. These conditions include the safe and hygienic environment, the availability of school personnel and the capacity of education institutions to implement changes and remedial actions, such as accelerated learning strategies and adjustments of the school calendar, curriculum and classroom organization. Moreover, consultation, communication and coordination among education and other ministries and within the school community are critical to building trust.

### Theme 3 – Focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality

COVID-19 starkly exposed and deepened existing inequalities, including socioeconomic ones that lead to the exclusion of the poorest, most disadvantaged and marginalized. Prior to the pandemic, the world already struggled to tackle a severe education crisis with 258 million children and youth being entirely excluded from education while at least 773 million youth and adults lacked basic literacy skills. UNESCO estimates that additional 24 million students from pre-primary to tertiary education across 180 countries and territories will be at risk of not returning to education

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<sup>1</sup> IMF. World Economic Outlook Update. June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> GEM Report. Policy Paper 42. “Act now: Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4”. September 2020.

<sup>3</sup> GEM Report. Policy Paper 41. “COVID-19 is a serious threat to aid to education recovery”. July 2020.

<sup>4</sup> GEM Report. Policy Paper 42. “Act now: Reduce the Impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4”. September 2020.

institutions in 2020<sup>5</sup>. As the global health crisis continued to unfold, digital gaps, limited accessibility to remote learning materials due to place of residence, disability, conflict and crisis situations and limited education content in minority languages were depriving millions from learning during school closures and suspension of educational programmes, further amplifying pre-COVID learning crisis.

Experience tells us that public health emergencies have distinct gendered impacts. Prolonged confinement and school closures have exacerbated girls' and women's unpaid care work, limiting the time to learn at home, and heightened their risk of gender-based violence, early and forced marriages and early and unintended pregnancies. Strengthening the preparedness, resilience, inclusion and gender-responsiveness of education systems will be key to prevent the widening of inequalities in education, ensuring all learners' return to school and educational programmes, and immediate and concerted action to prevent major setbacks in the progress achieved over several decades.

#### Theme 4 – Reimagine teaching and learning

The global health crisis underscored that teachers are the backbone of every education system and frontline workers. Teachers and school leaders were forced to adapt quickly, and often without preparation, to remote learning modalities. Despite the challenges, the crisis allowed for creativity and innovation in teaching and learning that must be capitalized upon. As schools reopen, it will be critical to provide stronger support to teachers, including through continuing professional development, in particular in the area of ICTs; to place more attention on their social and emotional well-being; and ensure social dialogue to protect their rights and ensure they are actively engaged in shaping the educational recovery.

The COVID-19 pandemic, marked by rising intolerance and hate speech, is a reminder that not only the delivery of learning but also its content and approaches must be transformed so that learners are more resilient, adaptable and better prepared for the uncertain future. Furthermore, the current pandemic warns us that unregulated human activities and disregard for the environment that are partially blamed for the current crisis, could open the way for other pandemics and natural disasters. In recovering from the COVID-19 crisis, therefore, the knowledge, values, attitude, skills and behaviours needed to strengthen global peace and support human and planetary well-being must move to the centre of learning. This implies integrating themes of sustainable development and global citizenship into teacher professional development and equipping them with pedagogical skills to allow learner-centred and active learning to provide learners not only with relevant knowledge, but also enable them to take action against injustice, racism and intolerance, and in favour of the massive transformation towards sustainable development that is needed today.

#### Theme 5 – Harness equitable connectivity and technologies for learning

In the context of the current crisis, we have witnessed impressive creativity and a spirit of innovation and collaboration to ensure that learning never stops, using diverse technologies—radio, TV, internet platforms and other (often hybrid) learning modalities. The coverage and effectiveness of remote educational responses, however, has been challenging in all contexts. Yet, in many countries connected technology remains the only link to formal education and as a result, the right to education has become dependent on internet access. Infrastructure, technologies and capabilities that seemed optional as late as February 2020, dictated whether hundreds of millions of students could access educational opportunities in March 2020.

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<sup>5</sup> UNESCO (2020). *UNESCO. COVID-19 education response: how many students are at risk of not returning to school? Advocacy paper.*

Governments are already planning the future along the lines of hybrid learning models. This requires not only adequate infrastructure but equitable access to digitalized curricula, digital skills training for teachers and students and measures to protect privacy. The time is also right for countries to look critically at the education sector’s growing reliance on technology. As learning and schooling move deeper into virtual environments largely owned and controlled by private for-profit companies, governments need to consider how to maintain education as a public good and guarantee the right to education. As it remains uncertain how the current crisis will unfold and in anticipation of future school closures, it is essential to build on the experiences and lessons learned on the use of technologies to reach all learners, in particular the most vulnerable, to encourage pedagogical innovation, and to increase the flexibility and resilience of education systems.

#### 4. Follow up of the 2020 GEM: towards improved global cooperation for education

The COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity for better cooperation, coordination and collaboration among education stakeholders; it has contributed to an unprecedented level of multilateral and multi-stakeholder joint advocacy, consultation and country support, including through the Global Education Coalition. The 2020 GEM will draw lessons from regional and global partnerships for COVID-19 response, with a view to improving data, evidence and knowledge for informed decision-making and planning; guiding countries’ efforts in educational recovery and transformation ; advocating for education as a political priority; coordinating for increased and better education financing; and strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of the governance of the SDG 4-Education 2030 coordination mechanism by better linking high level policy steer with robust data and financial cooperation.

#### 5. Provisional agenda

The extraordinary session of the GEM will consist of a technical segment and a high-level segment.

1. The technical segment will review the recommended priority actions of the 2020 GEM Declaration through thematic discussions and consolidate the Declaration to be presented to the high-level segment.

20 October 2020 Technical segment	
13:00–13:10	<b>Opening address and setting the scene</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education</li> <li>• Minister, Government of the United Kingdom</li> </ul>
13:10–14:40	<b>Breakout session: thematic discussion on priority actions</b> Theme 1: Protect domestic and international financing of education Theme 2: Reopen schools safely Theme 3: Focus on inclusion, equity and gender equality Theme 4: Reimagine teaching and learning Theme 5: Harness equitable connectivity and technologies for learning
14:40–15:10	<b>The enabling environment for action – strengthening global cooperation for education</b>
15:10–15:50	<b>Discussion of the draft 2020 GEM Declaration</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reporting back of priority actions from the breakout session</li> <li>• Discussion of the draft Declaration</li> </ul>
15:50–16:00	<b>Closing remarks</b>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education</li> <li>• Minister, Government of the United Kingdom</li> </ul>
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2. The high-level commitment meeting is expected to adopt the 2020 GEM Declaration. Representatives of Member States and eminent personalities will be invited to make commitments for the fulfilment of the global action points at the country level.

22 October 2020 High-level segment	
13:00–13:15	<b>High-level opening addresses</b>
13:15–13:20	<b>Presentation of the 2020 GEM Declaration</b>
13:20–14:45	<b>Statements by the Heads of State/Government</b> <i>“Reimagine and re-commit to education”</i>
14:45–14:50	<b>Adoption of the 2020 GEM Declaration</b>
14:50–15:00	<b>Closing</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• United Kingdom</li> <li>• UNESCO</li> </ul>

## 6. Participants – by invitation

- High-level representatives of Member States
- UN agencies and other development partners
- Regional organizations
- Civil society organizations, the teacher profession
- Private sector and foundations
- Youth and student representatives

Participants will be invited to register on line and upon registration, they will receive a link to the on-line meeting platform. The meeting will be made available for public view through streaming.

## 7. Working languages

The technical segment will be conducted in English and French with simultaneous interpretation. During the high-level segment, simultaneous interpretation will be available in the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish).

Working documents will be made available in English and French, except the draft 2020 GEM Declaration, which is worked upon in English only. After its adoption, the Declaration will be translated into the other UN official languages.

## 8. Contact

For additional information on the meeting, we kindly invite you to contact the UNESCO Secretariat by sending an e-mail to [GlobalMeeting@unesco.org](mailto:GlobalMeeting@unesco.org).