



29 March 2021 14:00-16:00 CET

Background

As the world enters a second year living with the COVID19 pandemic, two-thirds of the global student population is still affected by full or partial school closures. From the outset of the crisis, the risk of inequalities rising was the top concern, leading UNESCO to establish the Global Education Coalition that one year later, counts 160 members mobilized to support learning continuity.

This has been a year of intensive partnership and innovation. Most governments have developed solutions for learning to continue remotely or in hybrid format. Teachers have displayed tremendous resourcefulness to support their students. Extensive knowledge has been built up at record speed. New health protocols have been established to enable a safe return to school. The international community has partnered to build capacity, provide guidance and raise awareness of the potentially devastating impact of shortchanging education in the recovery.

As such the pandemic is not a parenthesis in education but a bridge to transform education systems, to make them more inclusive, resilient and responsive to global societal trends and challenges, including the reality of the digital revolution. The right to education has become nearly inseparable from connectivity, making this crisis a turning point in factoring digital skills and learning into education systems at all levels and more boldly addressing the injustice of the digital divide.

Eight months ago, the UN Secretary-General warned of the risk of a generational catastrophe. The longer schools stay closed, the higher the risk of children and youth losing out on their future. Lost learning is no longer being counted in days and weeks, but in months. It is taking a rising toll on the mental health of students. Over 450 million children and youth cannot access remote learning. Progress made towards narrowing gender gaps in education could be reversed, with girls at increased risk of exposure of early marriage and drop out. In every country, university students are struggling with access to remote learning, social isolation and economic strife. The pandemic has widened inequalities, amplifying a pre-existing learning crisis. Progress towards Sustainable Development Goal 4 is at risk of severe setback.

An opportunity to prioritize education

At the Global Education Meeting convened in October 2020, governments and the international community agreed on priority actions to steer the education recovery. Today, five months on, as the pandemic remains and vaccination campaigns roll out, governments face decisions how to reopen schools or keep them open; assess learning and address losses; ensure that all students return to school, and introduce new, often blended learning modalities. This takes place in the context of a global economic crisis, with education budgets being cut in many low and lower-income countries and education not being prioritized in stimulus packages.

To be inclusive, the education recovery must be transformative in order to better address inequities, both in terms of access and quality. We must draw on lessons learned to build back equal and more resilient at every level of the system. Education must become a pillar of recovery plans alongside health,

jobs, and climate. Education is a bulwark against inequalities, a driver of economic and social development and the basis for nurturing responsible, democratic citizenship.

Ministerial event on 29 March

In line with its mission to facilitate policy dialogue and knowledge sharing, UNESCO will convene a high-level ministerial event on 29 March (14:00-16:00 CET) to take stock of lessons learnt, the greatest risks facing education today and strategies to leave no learner behind. It will provide a space for policy dialogue to examine the most pressing current challenges, informed by the presentation of some key data sets. It will show how the Global Education Coalition has mobilized partners to support learners, teachers and policymakers with new tools and knowledge.

Participants will be Ministers of Education, high level representatives of partners within the Global Education Coalition and of sister agencies.

Three High-level Round tables will be organized as parallel sessions focusing on the following topics that have emerged as concerns in every country:

- i. **Keeping schools open, prioritizing and supporting teachers:** what measures must be taken to keep schools open as a priority and ensure a safe learning environment? How is the safety of teachers being ensured and how are they being supported to adapt to a new learning reality?
- ii. **School and university dropout & learning loss:** what are the top policy measures taken to mitigate against drop out at different education levels? What remedial actions have been most successful so far to make up for learning loss? What support, including psychosocial, is being provided to tertiary level students to pursue their studies and transition to the world of the work?
- iii. **Digital transformation and the future of education:** What are the key strategies for 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 to improving the transition to the world of work?

One year after UNESCO convened a first ministerial meeting to encourage exchange of practice in the face of an unprecedented situation, this high-level online meeting will provide a platform for mutual learning to shape an inclusive education recovery, informed by knowledge and evidence, and buttressed by effective multilateral engagement and cooperation.