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Futures of Education

LEARNING TO BECOME

Advisory Board meeting 19 June 2020 (online)

Synthesis of Discussion

Participants:

H.E. President Sahle-Work Zewde (International Commission Chair), Ms. Stefania Giannini (Assistant Director-General for Education, UNESCO), Henrietta Fore (UNICEF), Alice Albright (GPE), Liesbet Steer (Education Commission, representing Gordon Brown), Tariq Al Gurg (Dubai Cares), Susan Hopgood (Education International), Carlos Moedas (former EU Commissioner), Jaime Saavedra (World Bank, representing Annette Dixon), Alette van Leur (ILO), Refat Sabbah (Global Campaign for Education), Matías Rodríguez Inciarte (Santander Universities), Hilligje Van't Land (International Association of Universities), Yume Yamaguchi (UNU), and Jeffrey Sachs (Columbia University). Regrets were received from Andreas Schleicher (OECD), who sent an observer to the meeting, and Cecilia Sharp (Sweden/SIDA) who sent comments in advance of the meeting.

Welcome:

In her opening remarks, H.E. Sahle-Work discussed the impacts of the global health crisis, noting that the education sector, and inequalities in education, had been particularly hard hit. Her Excellency briefed Advisory Board members on the decision of the International Commission to issue broad policy guidance in the context of COVID-19 and reviewed the importance of each of the nine ideas presented in the Commission's most recent publication. Her Excellency expressed her hope that at this defining moment the nine ideas could help us to leapfrog advancement in education. Ms. Giannini, chairing the meeting on behalf of UNESCO, reviewed the objectives of the meeting as (1) to discuss the new report and (2) identify ways to catalyze and coordinate policy action.

Discussion of *Education in a post-COVID world: Nine ideas for public action report*:

The new report and its calls to action were widely welcomed and endorsed by members of the Advisory Board. Many indicated that the report was well stated, effective and driven by the correct set of principles and values. Each of the nine ideas received some comment. A synthesis of these reactions and suggestions follows:

(1) A strengthened public commitment to education as a global common good

The commitment to the common good was seen as one of the core commitments of the report, with Albright suggesting that connectivity should be added to the must-have global good category. Van Leur



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additionally identified lifelong learning as a global common good. Moedas mentioned the tension between the social and private benefits of education, arguing that the report correctly placed an emphasis on the collective good.

(2) An expanded understanding of the right to education

The idea that the right to education needed to be broadened to address the importance of connectivity and access to knowledge and information was widely endorsed. Fore mentioned UNICEF's Back to School Campaign and a project to enable 500 million students to learn remotely by the end of 2020 and all children by 2030. She discussed working with telecom operators to arrange zero-rate / no cost downloads of educational materials. Al Gurg suggested that it was less that the right to education needed to be broadened to encompass connectivity and more the case that connectivity needed to be expanded in order to support the right to education. Hopgood expressed concern that EdTech actors have disproportionate power and called for public authorities to address governance and accountability concerns.

(3) The importance of the teaching profession and teacher collaboration

Saavedra noted that the crisis had debunked the myth that technology will be the solution for everything and called for massive investment in the human factor, namely teachers and users of technology. van Leur discussed the occupational challenges COVID-19 had brought to the teaching profession, arguing that the health and education sectors unfortunately have to compete for resources. She also underscored the need for dialogue with teachers as well as all school staff. Referencing the 1966 Recommendation concerning the status of teachers Hopgood also emphasized the importance of the professional autonomy of teachers and argued that in the rebuilding of education the well-being of both students and teachers needed attention.

(4) An emphasis on student, youth and children's participation and rights

Sabbah discussed the importance of enabling children (as well as parents and teachers) to contribute to the process of 'making meaning' of the crisis. Hopgood suggested that governments conduct an 'equity audit' to understand which groups of students will have the most difficulty returning to schools in the context of reopening. Al Gurg welcomed the engagement of children and youth in their learning, cautioning against politicizing, from the global level, children's political participation. In her comments, Sharp tied student, youth and children's participation and rights to the fostering of democratic principles and the importance of fostering critical thinking.

(5) Protecting the social space of the school in the transformation of education

The importance of safeguarding face-to-face education was raised by Van't Land. Sabbah introduced the observation that in COVID-19 responses too many policy makers had narrowly focused in the continuation of academic learning while ignoring the social outcomes of education and marginalizing issues such as anti-racism, solidarity, justice and freedom. Saavedra mentioned the importance of



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understanding home, community and school as linked learning environments. Moedas proposed that physical and digital learning could be also understood as tension or ‘pendulum swing’ with the challenge being to work out the appropriate balance and combination of each in particular contexts.

(6) Free and open source technologies for teachers and students

A number of participants welcomed the attention paid to teachers and the tools they need. Sharp argued that even in highly digitized settings, teachers are the cornerstone of learning environments. Yamaguchi mentioned the importance of extending the availability of open source technology to higher education. Saavedra emphasized the need to address the digital divide but also continue using television and radio resources, a comment complemented by Albright’s observation that high-tech, low-tech and all different types of learning environments need reconstruction assistance. Hopgood cautioned that EdTech is not neutral and that what is designed for one part of the world may not be suitable in another part.

(7) Scientific literacy within a curriculum based on strong purpose

Albright emphasized the importance of education in countering misinformation. The importance of curriculum content was mentioned by several participants, with Sachs offering the observation that at this particular juncture more than ever philosophy and the humanities are needed. Sabbah opined that social justice and human rights needed to remain at the center of school curricula. Van’t Land warned of cuts in higher education funding leading to cuts in the social sciences and other areas. Yamaguchi highlighted the need for interdisciplinary approaches to curricula and research.

(8) The need to protect domestic and international financing of public education

Many participants expressed concern about losing hard-won gains of the past two decades and underscored the importance of careful, coordinated planning around investment in education. Steer discussed work underway on a White Paper for release in September that would set forth a common narrative on educational financing. Several participants emphasized the need to ‘build back better’ and make sure that education was presented as the solution to the health, economic and social crisis, and not only as a victim. Albright welcomed the G20 announcement of ‘debt pause’ but recommended that this be extended to ‘debt cancellation’. Sachs warned against financing education on loans and argued that there are adequate fiscal resources in the world to properly fund education, provided that wealth is properly taxed. President Sahle-Work added the observation that the many wealthy universities in the world have resources that could be dedicated to supporting education equity and building capacity globally.

(9) A global solidarity that does not accept current levels of inequality

Global solidarity was mentioned by nearly all participants, with increased partnership and strengthened multilateralism pulled out as key strategies for reinforcing global solidarity. Van’t Land noted that too



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many countries are looking inward rather than outward. Inciarte noted that international bodies need to point out that education is the main force against inequalities.

The Commission's position that short-term decisions should be linked to long-term goals was welcomed by all participants, with Inciarte, Yamaguchi and others mentioning the 2030 agenda as continuing to be of great relevance. While the emphasis of the *Nine ideas* report on the current context of COVID-19 disruptions was applauded, the broader strategic visioning of the Futures of Education initiative was also raised, with Sharp recalling the importance of the 2050 horizon and recommending the Commission to continue taking a long-term perspective on predicted and possible changes beyond the current crisis.

In her closing remarks Commission chair President Sahle-Work welcomed the ideas and input of all members of the Advisory Board. Her Excellency underscored the urgency of the current global situation, arguing that the world cannot afford to regress on progress made in education in recent decades. Stating that although the virus has not hit everybody, it has knocked on the door of almost every household, if only because of the disruptions in the education sector, Her Excellency also called for UNESCO and all its partners to set ambitious goals and expressed the hope that if the fast-moving virus were to produce one positive outcome this should be to accelerate our work on building a better future. Our response to the crisis needs to be guided by shared values and principles.

From the side of UNESCO, Giannini also offered her appreciation for the ideas and contributions from the Advisory Board. She noted the strong sense of cooperation and the widely-shared conclusion that the International Commission is bringing an important future-oriented intellectual perspective into discussions about COVID-19 and education. Giannini reminded those present that a joint meeting (online) of the Advisory Board and the International Commission is planned for Friday 18 September 14h00-17h00 (CET/Paris).