



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Education
Sector

COVID-19 Education Response Roundtable

Connectivity for learning

Friday 22 May 2020

13h00 – 14h30 GMT+2



Concept note and agenda

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed sudden and radical shifts that affect all aspects of our lives. Public health efforts to contain the spread of the virus have restricted movement and have forced schools, businesses, and cultural venues to close. During this unprecedented experience of lockdown, Internet provides a crucial portal that allows individuals to access critical information, to maintain social communication, to work, and to continue their education.¹ Yet, despite the enlarged importance of the internet during the pandemic, many people remain unconnected to this vital tool. Close to half of the world's population (46%), or some three billion people, do not have access to the internet². Not only does connectivity remain far from universal, but significant gaps exist across countries, as well as within

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/25/closing-digital-divide-critical-covid-19-response>.

² International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

them in terms of income, geography, age, and gender. The pandemic has laid bare these long-standing connectivity divides, exposed new ones and, overall, given their resolution a new sense of urgency.

This is particularly true for education. In response to the disruption caused by school closures, governments have scrambled to move school and classroom-based learning to the home. By necessity, this transition to remote learning has been reliant on connected technology, whether radios, TVs, mobile phones, tablets, laptops, or personal computers. Overnight, the provision of education as a basic right, and an essential public service, has become dependent on connectivity. Indeed, over three quarters of national distance learning solutions proposed during the COVID-19 pandemic rely exclusively on on-line platforms. But as many as 465 million children and youth, or almost 47 % of all primary and secondary students being targeted by national on-line learning platforms, do not have access to the Internet at home.³ While the share of students with no access to internet at home is less than 15% in Western Europe and North America, it is as high as 80% in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴

In response to the outsize importance of connectivity during the pandemic, governments and other organizations are working to expand the reach and affordability of the internet, as well as to reinforce TV and radio signals that can also relay information and facilitate learning and education. As observed by a Minister of Education during a recent UNESCO forum, the pandemic has done more to make distance learning a reality in a few short months, than the culmination of efforts over the previous decade, when remote learning was ‘nice-to-have’ rather than ‘need-to-have’. The ‘need-to-have’ nature of distance learning and the connectivity upon which it relies have supercharged middling initiatives—at all levels: local, national, regional and global—to make connectivity universal.

Although huge gaps remain, more people are connecting to education remotely and, in some instance, with greater equality than at any time in the past. A number of actions—despite a piecemeal rollout—are having an impact and bringing connectivity to learners that did not previously have it, at a pace that is often unprecedented. Schools have raced to equip teachers and learners with connected technology and mobile and internet service providers have increased their reach and capacity and, in some instances, lowered prices, sometimes waving costs to access educational material.

Gains being made in connectivity are expected to remain in place beyond the crisis and may spark deep changes to traditional teaching and learning practices, even when schools reopen. Overall, understandings about the need for connectivity and the technical and human foundations that make distance learning possible have shifted considerably since the start of 2020 and are quickly ushering in new futures for education.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sudden push to make connectivity universal and preserve the right to education during a period of widespread school closures, has come with ethical as well as technical challenges. In the immediate term, teachers and families across the world are being ‘forced’ to use technologies that they did not choose and are not necessarily prepared to use skillfully. Technologies that provide a portal to education are typically a patchwork of government and non-government-controlled devices, broadcasts, networks, content, and platforms. Learners often consent to complex

³ UNESCO May 2020. <https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/05/15/distance-learning-denied/>. Also to note that average share of households with computer access around the world is 53%.

⁴ International Telecommunications Union (ITU)

terms and conditions to use educational technologies to maintain their connection to education and, by extension, their human right to education. This changed environment of obligation and limited alternatives requires revisiting business models predicated on voluntary use and profit models based on advertising, data mining and locking people into proprietary ecosystems and services. Numerous observers have claimed that the transition of education from brick-and-mortar institutions to virtual environments, is accelerating a trend of privatization and substituting notions of education as a public good towards models of education as private good. And indeed much of the recent shift from offline to online learning has been reliant on profit-driven digital services.

Discussion questions

This round table provides an opportunity to explore the following questions:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic has pulled back the curtain on connectivity challenges and gaps. What have we learned over the past several months about connectivity divides and different dimensions of this divide? Specially, what do we know now that we did not know previously? How does this knowledge inform our work moving ahead?
2. What have we learned in the scramble to provide connectivity in hurry that can be applied over the short and medium term to make universal connectivity a reality? What do we know that we did not know prior the crisis? And to what extent will the rush to make connectivity more inclusive and equitable carry forward as/if the pandemic winds down and schools reopen? What steps are needed to keep a newfound urgency alive and maintain momentum?
3. Has connectivity become a pillar of the right to education and, if so, is it also a right and/or a precondition to other rights? What steps should be taken to preserve education as a public good when its provision is increasingly mediated by a complex ecosystem of mostly for-profit technology and connectivity providers? What can we expect in terms of connectivity for learning over the longer term?

Audience

Ministry of Education officials responsible for national distance learning strategies, curriculum development, teacher development and management as well as ICT in education leaders, teachers, teacher educators, as well as students and their families.

Technical specifications

The webinars will use Zoom as a technical platform. Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions, make comments and share relevant information and material through the Q&A function.

Agenda

Friday, 22 May 2020	
13:00 – 13:05	Opening remarks: Mr. Sobhi Tawil , Chief, Education Research and Foresight, UNESCO (moderator)
13:15 – 14:15	Panelists: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ms. Payal Arora, Professor and Chair in Technology, Values, and Global Media Cultures at Erasmus University Rotterdam• Mr. Alexandre Barbosa, Head of the Regional Center for Studies on the Development of the Information Society, CETIC.br• Mr. Hani Eskandar, ICT Applications Coordinator, International Telecommunication Union• Mr. Joseph Nsengimana, Director of the Mastercard Foundation’s Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning in ICT• Ms. Alexa Joyce, Future-Ready Skills Lead and previously Global Director for Education, Microsoft• Mr. Tim Unwin, UNESCO Chair ICT4D and Emeritus Professor of Geography at Royal Holloway, University of London• Ms. Zohra Yermeche, Ericsson, Program Director, Connect To Learn, Sustainability and Corporate Responsibility
14:15-14:30	Questions and answers

Panelists

Ms Payal Arora is a digital anthropologist and author of award-winning books including “The Next Billion Users” with Harvard Press. Her expertise lies in digital experience and informal learning among low-income communities worldwide and comes with more than a decade of fieldwork experience in such contexts. Forbes named her the “next billion champion” and the right kind of person to reform tech. Several international media outlets have covered her work including the BBC, The Economist, Quartz, Tech Crunch, The Boston Globe, F.A.Z, The Nation and CBC. She has pioneered novel blended learning strategies, which resulted in her being nominated for several teaching awards at the university to national level, including for the ISO (Interurban Student Consultation) ‘Teacher of the Year’ in higher education across the Netherlands. She won the University Education prize in 2017. She is Indian and currently lives in Amsterdam.



Mr Alexandre Barbosa is responsible for managing nationwide ICT stand-alone survey projects for the production of ICT-related statistics on the access and use of ICTs in different segments of society in Brazil, including indicators on ICT in education, child online protection, ICT in health, digital economy, e-commerce and e-government. He coordinates capacity-building programs in survey methodologies in Latin America and Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa. Mr. Barbosa was the Chair of the Expert Group on ICT Households indicators (EGH) from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) from 2012 to 2017 and currently is member of the International Advisory Group of Experts on the Global Kids Online project (UNICEF and LSE) and member of the Council Board of The Innovation Center for Brazilian Education (CIEB).



Mr Hani Eskandar is the ICT Applications Coordinator at the ICT Applications and Cybersecurity Division of the Telecommunication Development Bureau of ITU. Mr. Eskandar is currently involved in providing assistance to several developing countries by advising on eApplications strategies and policies, assisting in implementing technical co-operation projects in areas of digital health, agriculture, governance and education. He has lead the development of several guidelines and best-practices reports on eApplications. Previously, Mr. Eskandar had extensive experience in the field of ICT for Development where he, through working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent in Switzerland and, UNDP and other NGOs in Egypt, was involved in several development projects in the fields of Health, Education, Illiteracy Eradication, Community Development, SME development and Micro Credits. This included, among others, introducing Telemedicine services in rural areas, introducing ICT in Schools, creating Community Development Portals, Community Learning Centres, developing e-Learning and training programs for Youth.



Mr Joseph Nsengimana is the Director for the Mastercard Foundation's African Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning in ICT, based in Kigali Rwanda. Prior to joining the Mastercard Foundation, Joseph had a long career at Intel Corporation. His last role at Intel was Executive Director of Global Diversity and Inclusion (GDI) Policy, Strategy and External Partnerships (PSEP), responsible for helping Intel reach full representation in its US workforce in 2018 two years ahead of schedule. He crafted and led the implementation of Intel's Africa public policy and corporate affairs strategy. He led the team responsible for government affairs, education, ICT and broadband policies in Sub Saharan Africa. He has worked closely with Ministries of Education and other stakeholders in using ICT to transform their education systems. He was involved in the roll out of Intel Teach. Joseph also led Intel's participation in the Partnership to Strengthen Innovation and Practice in Secondary Education (PSIPSE).



Ms Alexa Joyce, currently Skills Lead for EMEA, works closely with governments and education institutions to ensure students, educators and staff have the skills they need for the future. Formerly Director, Education Systems she supported national and regional governments and other education bodies in transforming education. She has worked in more than 100 countries across the globe in re-designing national and regional strategies for education transformation, including policy models, teacher training and IT infrastructure for schools. Prior to joining Microsoft, Alexa worked with European Schoolnet (a network of 30 Ministries of Education in Europe), UNESCO and OECD.



Mr Tim Unwin is Emeritus Professor of Geography (since 2011) and Chairholder of the UNESCO Chair in ICT4D (since 2007) at Royal Holloway, University of London. He was Secretary General of the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO) from 2011-2015, and was Chair of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission from 2009-2014. He is also Honorary Professor at Lanzhou University in China. In 2018-19 he led the co-ordination of 21 UN agencies on behalf of UNESCO and UNICEF to develop a system-wide strategy on the future of education and learning for the UN's High Level Committee on Programmes and Chief Executives Board. Most of his research and writing currently focuses on the inequalities caused by digital technologies and what needs to be done to ensure that the poorest and most marginalised people can benefit from them.



Ms. Zohra Yermeche is Program Director for Connect To Learn at Ericsson. Dr. Yermeche oversees the development and deployment of Ericsson's ICT solutions for education. She has worked at the intersection of ICT and education in various projects around the globe, coordinating the effort of large coalitions of public and private partners. Dr. Yermeche received her Ph.D. in Applied Signal Processing from the Blekinge Institute of Technology (Sweden). Her professional experience includes working as a senior researcher in Multimedia Technologies at Ericsson Research.



Stay in touch

UNESCO's COVID-19 Education Response



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<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>



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