

GOLA!

GLOBAL ONLINE LEARNING ALLIANCE



SCHOOL RE-OPENINGS & POLICIES FOR RESILIENT EDUCATION, POST COVID-19



CAMBRIDGE



#LEARNINGMUSTNEVERSTOP

Section 1. Format & Participants

1.1 Introduction	04
1.2 Format of Video Conference & this Report	04
1.3 Participants	05

Section 2. Discussion

2.1 Abstract of Key Findings	08
2.2 Opening Statements	08
2.3 COVID-19 Responses & Remedial Actions	10
2.4 Lessons Learnt During School Closures	11
2.5 Policy Implications for the Future	13



FORMAT & PARTICIPANTS

SECTION 1.

Format & Participants

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this private video conference for government officials, organised in partnership with Cambridge, was to discuss school re-openings and policies for resilient education in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Generally, all participants were encouraged to discuss the responses of their governments, their actions in the immediate term to ensure the continuity of education and policy recommendations for long-term sustainability given the lessons learnt during the extended period of school closures.

This was an open discussion with moderated break-out groups and although the floor was open to any comment from officials, they were assisted with a series of key prompt questions, including:

What time frame is your country working to for school re-openings?

What preparations have you made for learners and teachers going back to school?

What lessons have you learnt over the last couple of months, especially your experience of out of classroom learning?

What has and has not worked in remote learning and can we take the best of it to integrate into a flexible model of schooling?

What policy recommendations would you make for remote learning to contribute to educational continuity?

Delivery of content has been a challenge; accordingly, what policy recommendations would you make to urgently upgrade the capacity of ICT systems for content delivery?

Closures will have worsened educational inequalities and thus affect attainment of SDG 4. What policies are required to ensure this temporary break does not become a permanent one for vulnerable children?

What recommendations would you make in compensating for lost instructional time?

Are hybrid and blended learning models now essential parts of policy frameworks to strengthen pedagogy in distance learning?



Do you have any advice in supporting parents in the usage of devices and e-learning technologies at home?

What guidelines for education officials and school leaders should be put in place to avoid a post COVID-19 “business as usual” approach and hence a failure to turn the recent lessons learnt into positive outcomes?

These questions were asked in the context of especially of emerging and developing countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Indian Ocean where the response to COVID-19 and ensuing school closures will have a long-term impact on education policy and infrastructure investment.

1.2 Format of Video Conference & this Report

In section 1.3 we list the participants of this video conference on the re-opening of schools. The most immediate lesson of online video conferencing is to ensure that every participant has a voice. Small groups are essential. So, after opening statements the event was broken into small groups each with a moderator to take notes and provide a summary.

Prior to the break-out rooms there were opening statements from Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Former UK Secretary of State for Education and Hon Abdulla Rasheed, Minister of State for Education, Maldives. Although all discussions were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of this report, none of the quotes or what was said during the private break-out rooms is made attributable to any one person.

The following was the video conference format

Part A: Introduction from Jane Mann, Managing Director, Cambridge

Part B: Opening statements from Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Former UK Secretary of State for Education and Hon Abdulla Rasheed, Minister of State for Education, Maldives

Part C: Eight break-out groups were formed, each with a moderator to record discussions and take note of the key points raised.

Part D: All participants returned from their break-out groups. The moderators summarised the main highlights of their group

The total time of the video conference was 110 minutes

After introducing the participants in 1.3, the format of this report is structured around the policy issues and not attributable quotations. The participants hold senior positions in education from multiple countries and expressed what they are experiencing in their countries in response to COVID-19, as well as giving their own opinions on policies for longer term sustainability.

Notably, the issues raised covered key topics such as re-opening schedules, teacher training, pedagogy,

1.3 Participants

We would like to thank all those for participating and providing such outstanding contributions. The opportunity for them to openly converse in small break-out groups provides us with a discerning judgement on the key challenges, responses, plans for the re-opening of schools and their own insights into future sustainability. Participants are listed by country, alphabetically:

ANGOLA: Gabriel Boaventura, National Director for General Education, Ministry of Education

BAHRAIN: Ahlam Al-Amer, Assistant Undersecretary for Curricula & Educational Supervision, Ministry of Education

BAHRAIN: Latifa Albusoodha, Assistant Undersecretary for General & Technical Education, Ministry of Education

BAHRAIN: Ibrahim Ali Alburshaid, Director of Secondary Education, Ministry of Education

BAHRAIN: Dr Mohamed Alseddiqi, Director of Technical & Vocational Education, Ministry of Education

BOTSWANA: Lois Ngope, Director of ICT, Media & Services, Botswana Ministry of Basic Education

ETHIOPIA: Solomon Shiferaw, Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Education

FINLAND: Dr Eija Valanne, Director of Education, University of Jyväskylä

GHANA: Dr Kwabena Tandoh, Deputy Director General, Ghana Education Service

GHANA: Akwasi Addae-Boahene, Chief Technical Advisor, Ministry of Education

GHANA: Kwame Agyapong, Advisor to the Minister, Ministry of Education

GHANA: Rodney Boateng, Minister's Press Secretary, Ministry of Education

JORDAN: Dr Najwa Qbelat, Secretary General for Administrative & Financial Affairs, Ministry of Education

JORDAN: Dr Yosef Aboushaar, Director of the Directorate of Planning & Educational Research, Ministry of Education

JORDAN: Lama Al Natour, Head of Development Coordination Unit, Ministry of Education

assessment, ICT infrastructure, content delivery and technology platforms, the role of parents, access and equity, special needs students and inclusivity, government communication strategies and coordinated responses between departments. Clearly, these topics overlap and with the aim of preserving a holistic view of education policy, this report avoids splitting up into individual issues. Hence, after a summary of the opening statements, the format of this report is structured around three main headings:

COVID-19 Response & Remedial Actions

Experiences During Period of School Closures

Policy Implications for the Future

In section 2.1 we give an abstract of the key findings of this video conference and the remainder of the report further examines these issues according to the experiences of the conference participants.

1.3 Participants

JORDAN: Eng Ruba Omari, Director, Quen Rania Al Abdullah Centre for Education & Information Technology

KENYA: Bernard Isalambo, Chief Technical Education Officer, Ministry of Education

KENYA: John Kimotho, Director of Educational Media, Kenya Institute for Curriculum Development

MALDIVES: Hon Abdulla Rasheed, Minister of State, Ministry of Education

MALDIVES: Hon Mohammed Ihsan, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education

MALDIVES: Moosa Adam, Policy Executive, Ministry of Education

MALDIVES: Eedham Rasheed, CEO, Hologo World. Moderator

OMAN: Yahya Al-Harhi, Director of General Curriculum Development, Ministry of Education

QATAR: Reema Abu Khadijah, Director of Directorate of Schools Curricula, Ministry of Education and Higher Education

QATAR: Nouf Al-Kaabi, Director of Policies and Research, Ministry of Education and Higher Education

QATAR: Rawda Al-Zaidan, Director of Directorate of Private Schools Affairs, Ministry of Education and Higher Education

QATAR: Maryam Alboainain, Director of Directorate of Early Childhood Development, Ministry of Education and Higher Education

SENEGAL: Aminata Lo, Teacher Trainer - SIMEN, Ministry of National Education

SOUTH AFRICA: Taskeen Adam, Senior Analyst Education, Edtech Hub.

TAJIKISTAN: Hotam Qurbonov, Education Attaché, Embassy of Tajikistan

UK: Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Former UK Secretary of State for Education

UK: Jane Mann, Managing Director, Cambridge. Moderator

UK: Karen Kester, Deputy Director, Cambridge. Moderator

UK: Barry Johnston, Co-founder, Purpose Union. Moderator

UK: Dr Hanan Khalifa, Director Education Alliances, Cambridge. Moderator

UK: Elizabeth Cater, Managing Director CEM, Cambridge. Moderator

UK: Kate Bailey, Director of Policy CEM, Cambridge. Moderator

UK: Bjoern Hassler, Director Research, Edtech Hub. Moderator

UK: Annie Michailidou, International Development, Cambridge

UK: Kagendo Salisbury, Marketing Manager, Cambridge

UK: Tracey Peel-Ridealgh, Logistics coordinator, Cambridge

UK: Lucia Fry, Director of Policy & Research, Malala Fund

UK: John Glassey, CEO, Brains Global

UK: Claire Urie, Head of Government & International Relations, Brains Global

ZAMBIA: Leonard Sakala, Director - Quality Assurance & Security, Smart Zambia, Office of the President

ZAMBIA: Annie Daka, Director of Service Management, Smart Zambia, Office of the President

ZAMBIA: William Nyundu, Chief Planner, Ministry of General Education

ZAMBIA: Delice Chishinga, ICT Officer, Smart Zambia, Office of the President

ZAMBIA: Billy Jere, Analyst in Planning Department, Ministry of General Education

ZIMBABWE: John Dewah, Chief Director, Curriculum Development and Technical Services Department, Ministry of Primary & Secondary Education



DISCUSSIONS

SECTION 2.

Discussion

2.1 Abstract of Key Findings

All participants contributed with their comments on the immediate remedial actions being taken to ensure health and safety to give parents and communities confidence in the re-opening of schools. Timings differ between countries, but all have plans, with contingency for different scenarios depending on the status of COVID-19. Where there have been re-openings, the priority has been for those students in the examination grades. The delivery of content and the use of online platforms varies country-to-country yet all who participated emphasised how they have dedicated TV channels to broadcast classes. The lessons of online learning immediately reveal the importance of human interaction in education and that digital technologies are no replacement for the structure of the school day and the duty of care that the education system offers. That said, a growing commitment to blended and online learning requires policy considerations on regulations, the type of content, teacher training in ICTs, the kind of e-learning platforms and above all the critical need for greater investment in national ICT infrastructures. COVID-19 cannot become the harbinger of a new digital divide in education. Every one of our participating officials paid heed to the impact of school closures on parents and how challenging they have found this period to be. Policy implications for the future are considerable and in need of both leadership and vision at the highest political levels:

health and safety in schools

the upskilling of teachers in the use of technologies and the importance of embedding ICT for education in pre-service qualification

the need to evaluate and assess the effect of COVID-19 on education strategies

the need to ensure resilience in the delivery of education

a long-term commitment to blended learning that can only be achieved by far greater investment in infrastructure and more productive partnerships with industry

the adaptation of content and curriculum reform

better international collaboration with the sharing of technologies

greater engagement with parents and a need to



allow for more flexible working hours for parents especially those with younger children

addressing the need for change in the assessment regime with a greater emphasis on formative and project-based assessment

ensuring equity and access across the board, with special attention paid to those with vulnerabilities and committing to more capacity in the system for special needs students

2.2 Opening Statements

In his opening statement, Rt Hon Charles Clarke, Former UK Secretary of State for Education emphasised the desirability to open schools, especially as the most disadvantaged groups are those impacted the most by the loss of the structure of the school day. Four key policy concerns were highlighted:

The question of how to physically open schools safely. Many countries have succeeded in organising schools with channels of movement around the campus, with handwashing and deep cleaning and the implementation of different forms of rotas to ensure it is possible to continue the most appropriate schooling. There is no one rule fits all but the one demand we should all aim for is to open schools as rapidly as possible.

Policy makers need to address the sustainable development of teaching and learning. The biggest development has been the rise in online learning, much more so than prior to COVID-19. But what forms of teaching and learning are taking place? TV and radio has been used in many countries to deliver content to pupils in a direct way. One effect of COVID-19 is that online learning will play a more significant role in the way schools are run. This is not just simply a matter of technology but a whole approach to education and particularly the ever more important role of parents in their children's education.

Assessment remains a conundrum that needs to be addressed by governments, schools, and education stakeholders. The balance between formative and summative assessment will likely change in the future and one possible to resolve the tension could be to have greater flexibility in the timing of examinations.

The need to support, train and upskill teachers throughout this process is critical. Teachers lie at the heart of education and as they find themselves in difficult situations, they need clear communication and support from education authorities. Online teacher training, especially in the use of ICTs and new technologies has the capacity to effectively contribute to the professional development of teachers.

Hon Abdulla Rasheed, Minister of State, Ministry of Education highlighted the key areas of how policy makers need to be ready during times of crisis management with their emergency response plans, the lessons learnt during COVID-19 and best practices that can be devised, and that we need to better integrate ICT for education more into the system.

In the Maldives, the immediate policies shared with school principals in response to COVID-19 was safety at school and maintaining physical distancing. So, for example, if classes have more than 15 students then they should be divided into two separate sessions. Currently, all schools in the Maldives remain closed and having lost three months this year has meant condensing the curriculum with lessons being delivered to students online and through TV. They expect to open the first group of schools at the beginning of July. Given the geographic nature of the Maldives, there are 198 islands with schools and hence a variety of different circumstances in which COVID-19 has not impacted and these are considered

safe islands for all schools to re-open. In the case of Malé, which is still on red alert, there will be phased re-openings with grades 9 and 12 returning first.

The country already utilises Google Classroom and will continue, when schools re-open, with modalities that combine face-to-face classroom learning with online. The government has developed their own dedicated TV education channel whereby over 500 teachers have produced content and lessons which they prepare on their devices at home first.

With the help of UNICEF, the Ministry of Education has prepared an emergency response with five pillars:

Safety and security for all teachers and students

Ensuring the continuity of learning

Paying special attention in providing support for the most vulnerable

Protection of staff in the education sector

Building resilience into the system and strengthening coordination, such as with the Ministry of Health

The Maldives already has an ICT for education masterplan (developed with UNESCO) and COVID-19 has further highlighted the importance of ICTs and digital media. They have already given tablets to students from grades 3 to 12, though the crisis has exposed the problems of internet connectivity and speed. The government has learnt how much teachers are not fully trained in online teaching and need further support. They have found the use of TV very helpful in conjunction with online services.

The role of parents has been exposed with studying at home proving to be a burden for those without the necessary tools nor background. The challenge for parents getting their children ready to go back to school is particularly demanding in a country like the Maldives due to the distribution of so many islands.

Going forward, the Maldives is committed to strengthening the use of ICTs in education and to combine the modalities of physical classroom lessons, online learning, and TV. The ministry of education is establishing a special unit for distance learning to ensure the ICT for education masterplan is executed successfully. Of course, COVID-19 has had a huge impact on a country in which tourism accounts for about 30% of GDP and more than 60% of foreign exchange receipts. There is clearly a concern that this economic impact will place considerable budgetary constraints on the education sector in the next couple of years.



2.3 COVID-19 Responses & Remedial Actions

Governments have been deciding about the timing of when schools should re-open and what safety measures need to be adopted by schools. For example, in Oman, the government is working to account for three possible scenarios: if there is treatment for COVID-19 then schools can re-open normally; if there is no treatment then schools will open with students attending on a 50/50 split, week by week basis; if the dangers of COVID-19 persist then school closures will continue and the government will build further on remote learning activities.

Ghana has disinfected all schools across the country and the ministry of education has provided cleaning and personal protective equipment. Due to the problems of the connectivity and access, the concern of creating any digital divide meant the immediate deployment of radio and TV for early learning and the K12 sectors. There is now a dedicated free to air channel for education. The provision of distance learning is currently too fragmented so the focus of the ministry of education has been more on how to develop materials and content. The tertiary sector is largely taken care of as most Ghanaian universities have their own learning management systems already in place, some have even conducted online examinations. Assessment is a major challenge and in Ghana they have been working on the best solution for those students in their final year. So they announced measures to ensure there is no bottleneck in the system by deciding to only bring back final year students in junior high school who have national exit examinations and final years students in senior secondary schools who have their final year college examinations.

In Zambia, the government decided to only open those streams that need to complete examinations. These include grades 7, 9 and 12. Prior to this the Zambian ministries of education and health put in place measurements for schools to comply with health guidelines including, disinfecting, hand sanitisers and checking temperatures of all staff and students.

Schools in Jordan have been closed since the 15th March. The plan for re-opening schools in Jordan starts with introducing measures for health and safety procedures and the deep cleaning of all schools. The status of the COVID-19 infection will be the major determinant of which scenarios apply for going back to school. The immediate response plan involved recording all lessons of the curriculum on video and published on the national platform as well as being broadcast on TV for families who do not have devices or connectivity. They have also been

utilising the NoorSpace portal which is a learning management system for interaction between students and teachers, offering homework, quizzes, and messaging. The ministry of education identified students without technology and distributed tablets with internet to be sure they could attend lessons. Also, for the refugees in the Syrian camps have tried to distribute tablets with internet. Jordan even provided caravans for small schools – especially the desert areas.

Bahrain already had in place a locally developed learning platform, with in-built monitoring, connecting teachers with students. The government immediately selected the most qualified teachers to design lessons and have used dedicated TV channels and centralised the Microsoft Teams application. Since February, the government switched all ministry of education processes and operations to ensure that online learning could take place. They have had the King Hamad project for future schools since 2005, so many of the infrastructures were already in place, even though COVID-19 came suddenly. The government has addressed the question of how to communicate and provide awareness to the parents on the re-opening of schools. Most of the messaging currently uses Instagram because most of the parents use it. The country has provided both electronic copy of textbooks provided on the Edunet LMS as well as having hard copies which are distributed free of charge to all students. All students can log in to different learning materials and the ministry has a directorate of curriculum that decides the content of the main textbooks

The Maldives also quickly broadcast lessons on TV and found them very successful, giving teachers added confidence – effectively standing up in front of the whole country. 500 teachers recorded lessons at home with the support of coordinators and facilitators. The government provided the training for giving such broadcast lessons and have implemented the UNICEF guidelines for TV teaching, which includes recording and editing.

Ethiopia has a quarter of its entire population in school – 26 million students. Technologically the country needs huge investment in the ICT infrastructure to provide equitable access. The content is there but how to use digital technology was a new initiative of the minister of education. One area of intervention involved doing assessment online of national examinations. Secondly, they created a digital interactive platform for federal and regional school level interventions. The third intervention is to provide tablets with textbooks and reference materials and construct more ICT laboratories in schools.

For those who have connectivity in Senegal, they have delivered online classes and for others they have a TV channel with teachers preparing lessons accompanied by the inspector general of schools. For those students in the most remote areas with no access to internet or TV, the government has sent hard copies of the texts and course materials. They will continue with TV and community radio for providing lessons.

In Kenya, the universities were able to quickly adopt online options, which included examinations and even some online graduation ceremonies. The technical, vocational education & training (TVET) institutes represent more of a challenge in how to teach practical and technical lessons digital platforms. At the primary education level, TV has been the prime media but there have still been murmurings amongst disadvantaged groups because of intermittent power supplies.

In Qatar they have used a mixture of technology during school closures, both online and utilising a dedicated TV channel for broadcasting lessons. Qualified teachers prepared virtual lessons, supervised by the ministry of education and higher education, and have distributed these to all schools for all subjects at all grade levels.

In Zimbabwe, during COVID-19 they have coordinated online and radio lessons. Schools are going to open at the end of July, and in a few weeks will start to broadcast lessons on TV. From the day the schools closed they have prepared lessons to continue where they left off. Schools have reached out to parents directly through email and WhatsApp. Any problems with connectivity and they make announcements through the radio. In terms of equity, the school population is very inclusive, and the ministry is preparing for special needs students. They have staggered the re-opening, starting with the examination classes, followed three weeks later for those who have examinations next year and then the remainder another three weeks later. By the time we get to September Zimbabwe hopes that COVID-19 will have diminished.

2.4 Lessons Learnt During School Closures

The ministry of education and higher education in Qatar has given parents devices for children to assist them in distance learning. In supporting teachers on how to design appropriate content for students they have learnt that the learning resources must be regular and consistent. The ministry transferred much of the educational content online with little difficulty in converting to a virtual format, but this exposes that the need for human interaction lies at

the heart of education. COVID-19 has made many ask about the nature of learning and certainly digital technologies are no substitute for the pastoral care of the school day and the necessary interaction between teacher and learner. Qatar is going to focus more on technology for grade 1 and 2 and provide students with devices if they do not have any. They will try to partner with industry and telecoms operators to reach the most vulnerable students.

In the Maldives they have already provided basic training for teachers on Google classroom over the last five years and upscaled this because of COVID-19. That said, they found that teachers were not at the required competency levels and so, in collaboration with UNICEF, have decided to make sure all teachers are certified as Google educators. This involves a “training the trainers” model whereby they selected about 100 of the most ICT competent teachers who will in turn help the next 2000 teachers and so on. The positive experience of broadcasting



lessons on TV has not only helped students but also many parents are now learning. So, the ministry of education has decided that even when “normality” returns, they will not discontinue teaching through TV. This is also supplemented by an online portal managed by the ministry of education and lessons are uploaded onto a dedicated YouTube channel.

With so many countries using broadcast media to deliver lessons, there was general agreement that evaluation of the TV classes is necessary. This can be achieved using online forms and even on screen QR

codes for each TV lesson which parents and students can scan. Students can complete their attendance record and parents can give feedback on the lessons themselves.

Given the movement towards greater commitment to blended learning, the ICT infrastructure in many countries, its capacity, usage, and responsiveness have been truly tested. Especially problems of connectivity in poorer countries and rural areas are accentuated, along with the lack of access to devices and e-learning platforms. Investment in ICT for education will form a necessary part of future resilience but, of course, concerns were raised about the economic impact of COVID-19 and the budgetary constraints it will put on governments. Here the role of the telecommunications operators is critical and after all they benefit from more people being connected so need to be persuaded to have a greater stake in education. The cost of internet for education is a major issue and it will remain prohibitive if it is the same for education as it is for business.

In Botswana, the inequity of access is a concern; with very remote areas but access to technology and internet is mainly based in the urban areas. When they closed their schools three months ago this was a primary concern when trying to have continuity of learning. With the view of not leaving anyone behind they employed three methods – internet, some education websites were zero rated; TV broadcasting content mainly for secondary level schools but not every house has a TV; and the third mechanism was radio which has nearly 100% penetration. Botswana has long had a radio program for primary school learners. When schools are fully re-opened, they know that they must go back to check student levels and, if necessary, to repeat the content so that nobody is left behind.

In Oman, the ministry of education started to work with Moodle classroom, but it is not a bespoke solution and it is recommended that each country should have its own platform suitable to its needs. This raises the question of what type of online content is provided to students. Teachers have started to put their own lessons on the platform, but video lessons without interactivity are not enough. Accordingly, the ministry has been working with the private sector to produce suitable content related to the curriculum.

A considerable observation of the school closures has been the impact on parents and how challenging they have found this period to be. Online learning means parents have to dedicate time supervising their children at the expense of work, especially for the younger and early learning children. For those

more vulnerable households and those working in the informal sector this has proved to be particularly demanding.

The biggest challenge in Zambia has been internet connectivity, even more so in rural and remote areas. There are those in urban areas who can afford to use remote learning technologies, but this disadvantages those in rural areas, so the government is now looking at investing in infrastructure to ensure that no learners are left behind. This priority in Zambia resonates with many countries. They also found that provision of content through TV channels does not benefit every learner, with the signal worse in rural areas. This meant having to print out learning materials and deliver hard copies to the most remote parts of the country. In response, the ministry of general education launched an education channel on DSTV to boost access in remote areas.

In the Maldives they decided to reduce content for grades 1 to 8 but not for grades 9 and 10 because of their requirement to sit final examinations. Prior to COVID-19 the government had already decided to change the academic year, starting in January, and ending in November. Since the best part of four months has been lost, the current academic year will continue until June 2021, with the new year starting in July 2021. This means that students in the system now will remain at the same grade until June 2021. Ghana is also considering their own adjustments to the existing academic year of September to July with the possibility of moving to the calendar year of January to December to accommodate the shocks to the system.

The experience in Qatar has meant the ministry of education and higher education creating an evaluation and assessment policy on how to assist students. This has been sent to all schools and all parents have been informed. Their experience of using TV and YouTube, especially lessons for younger students, has highlighted the critical role of parental supervision. They have also managed to support under-privileged students and the ministry has distributed laptops via the schools to students; but there has been an issue with students with disabilities especially if parents themselves are not educated on these platforms and they have needed the support of an expert in special needs education. The government is also utilising holidays to ensure continuity. That said, this policy may not work in territories where there are many foreign teachers who have planned future holidays.

In Senegal they remain optimistic to re-open schools in July. All teachers have returned to their place of work – they have had 14 days of confinement

to ensure they are safe from COVID-19. The work currently has been to ensure that schools are safe places. Phase one of returns is those final years that have exams in primary and secondary schools. They are going to maximise 20 students per class to respect social distancing. The government has already provided for face mask and sanitisers in all schools – health protocols determined with ministry of health.

Bahrain is still assessing the impact of COVID-19 and so are preparing for different scenarios, depending on whether learners are back in school or they are going to need blended learning. Given previous years of investment, the shift to online learning has not been a massive challenge in Bahrain.

Evidence (from financial and Ebola crises) shows that the poorest, the most left behind are the least likely to re-enrol in schools. The Malala Fund has published research that potentially over 10 million girls may never return to the classroom because once lost it is very difficult to get them back into the education system. Girls are less likely to have access and have less sophisticated technologies. Girls are more likely to face gender specific barriers. This includes unpaid care responsibilities in the household and the dangers of sexual violence. For example, in the Ebola crisis we learnt that one of the reasons why re-enrolment dropped off so much for girls is because they became pregnant at a higher rate than before. So, what future plans for enrolment do governments need to make?



2.5 Policy Implications for the Future

Return to schooling means immediate policy action on disinfecting, providing hygiene equipment as well as better water and sanitation facilities as part of the interventions. Minimising school interaction is a challenge amongst so many young people, but effective policies and school leadership is a must in both communicating and enforcing this. Overall risk management plans are necessary for all education policy makers. When it comes to social distancing, we need to think about it from the students' point of view. The younger ones will not necessarily figure out whether they are 2 or 3 metres apart.

A major issue, common to all from the COVID-19 experience, is the training of teachers to be better prepared for remote learning. In Oman, from the beginning of next term, the ministry of education is working on a package of training on how to deal with online platforms and how to build e-content for learning. This raises an important concern about regulations. Currently, there are no regulations and protocols for remote learning. Such guidelines are necessary to provide certain guarantees to learners. Regulations need to be devised that provide accountability for both students and teachers.

The coming year will very much be one of transition where ministries of education should have a comprehensive evaluation of their education strategies, focussing on the type of content, the type of platforms, the type of regulation and the type of training for teachers. All countries would be well served in dedicating time to have a detailed evaluation as a result of COVID-19. Also, some students may be behind, so it is necessary to have programs to both assess the level of learners and implement a catch-up program for those who have lost time.

All governments realise the need to consider long-term measures to ensure resilience in the delivery of education. For example, Ghana has adopted a project called the Ghana Resilience in Education Project, which includes setting up technology architecture that will be integrated into the schooling infrastructure, starting with a learning management system that can deliver education across all levels. Setting up knowledge banks and accessible online libraries for students and stakeholders is a common-sense response.

Ministries of education are still taking a watching brief as the difficulties on COVID-19 have not yet passed, with some countries still to make final decisions on the start dates for the next academic year. As well as all the academic considerations,

such preparations for the new academic year also concern healthcare, cleaning, treatment, sanitation, clean water, and the provision of school meals. For example, in Zambia they have still not decided to open all school at all grades and the final decision will depend on guidance from the ministry of health. That said, the government realises the necessity to implement a back to school awareness campaign for parents and communities, especially using the radio. The government is also trying to partner with different stakeholders to help us ensure they have connectivity throughout the country. This includes looking at content, as they do not want different content on different platforms. Once unified content has been developed then it can be uploaded onto any of the ICT technologies.

All participants spoke of their expectations of how online and blended learning is going to be a permanent feature of education service delivery and thus teacher training and continuous professional development is critical. We need to adapt training and pre-service qualification such that online learning and virtual lessons are included in the curriculum of teacher training colleges. Fundamentally, teachers are trained to teach in a physical setting and so new initiatives are required to ensure professional development in online pedagogy and assessment.

Qatar's experience of school closures during COVID-19 has led to the policy decision to produce interactive books for learners online to ensure consistency in the delivery of the curriculum. Ghana has also decided to accelerate its digital educational programs, including the reduction of textbook production and the use of paper in schools. Online assessment still remains a major challenge.

Adaptation of content will be key in the future because of the difference between content online (and broadcast) and the delivery of content face-to-face in the classroom. A review of curricula is a must and accordingly materials need to be adapted appropriate for online learning.

The concern for parents loomed large amongst all participants in the video conference. There is a call for action to ensure joined up government whereby the pressures experienced by ministries of education on the frontline are coordinated with ministries of labour and manpower working with businesses to better support parents. How do we influence policy to give greater flexibility in working hours? Parents need support in this regard, especially those with younger children at home. The biggest challenge for many has been the early learners in grades 1 to 4 who need specific criteria and methodology as well

as the parental supervision.

If committing to greater blended learning, then engaging with parents is essential for policy makers. Current e-content is often not attractive to students and so parents need to spend more time with their children to teach them the most important skills. What are we going to do about content for grades 1 to 4 if the impact of COVID-19 continues? The content requirements for older students are very different, so policy makers need to differentiate between grades and governments need to give more guidance to the parents.

In Qatar, for example, there have been reassuring messages to parents saying there will be phased openings. The key is transparent and honest messages from the government. This communication is critical – how they communicate, and the messages sent to communities is very important. This is something across government that all departments should consider. There may have been some fear at the beginning, and this is where education needs to play a role and manage expectations. Parents are ready and in Qatar are trusting of the communication channels especially with the schools having robust health plans. In their next semester they will focus on the first three months of basic numeracy and literacy and review this ahead of the curriculum. During this summer, the ministry of education and higher education will publish a newsletter to families with website resources and links.

In Ghana, they certainly believe that education delivery will never be the same again, so are looking at the long-term to make sure resilience is built into a system ready for future shocks. They plan to introduce more devices for learners including tablets and laptops to take home. They have realised that the extent of the role of the parent has mostly been a function of the literacy levels of the parents themselves. The more they are educated the more they seem involved in their children's education. There have been attempts to try to get parents more involved, such as strong parent-teacher associations; yet there have been structural challenges and the Ghana Education Service is working on modalities to restructure them and make sure they play a more active role in the children's lives. The country is introducing a phased approach to getting back to school. For now, only final year students are going back. The President has launched GALOP, the learning outcomes project - \$200m investment in identifying and targeting the 10,000 least performing schools in Ghana and putting in the necessary interventions to catch up with other parts of the countries.

Countries will also need to consider adapting study plans if the consequences of COVID-19 continue. Will there be plans to reduce the number of subjects and focus only on the main skills and competencies instead of covering all academic subjects? In Oman there is an ongoing debate on whether to reduce the number of subjects, for example do we need to teach music and sport through e-learning? In the Maldives they reduced the number of subjects and the reduced the content from grades 1 to 8.

With social distancing the number of classrooms is going to increase along with the number of sessions with three categories – 1. Those that have the infrastructure in place and can do all lessons in one; 2 schools that need to operate in two shifts; 3 schools that do not have enough capacity and will need to operate on alternate days. Teaching two types of lesson – one to directly in the classroom and one for distance learning, may result in adjusting the standards set in each subject, which will have consequences for assessment. A key theme is that COVID-19 has shown us that assessment should not be the be all and end all. Not a gatekeeper.

A number of the conference participants pointed to national differences and the need to avoid falling into a “one size fits all”, especially for blended learning policies and curriculum reforms; but all countries will have a new generation of digital learners with new competencies. Teaching and pedagogy is very different with online learning and preparations need to be made accordingly. Even though there may be differences between countries, the post COVID-19 landscape could well lead to better international collaboration with shared technologies and the leveraging of regional purchasing power with the edtech industry.

The education community all over the world must take a hard look at the one size fits all. This calls for a more flexible education system on what students really need and what skills need to be prioritised for teachers. This includes asking the right question about whether students are learning what really needs to be learnt in the event of such a crisis as COVID-19. This is important that the education research community needs to address. Furthermore, it is important to appreciate the role of communication between schools and families. What is the quality of communication – do you understand what is going on? This has always been important in education, but this crisis has accentuated the need for this.

ICT becomes more important, but it does not replace the teachers and classroom interaction. The key question is what is the capacity of teachers to use the technology in an effective way? The story of COVID-19

will be a massive acceleration in the use of online and ICT for education, but not at the cost of teachers. The question is making the teachers better prepared and more able to use it. The implications in resource terms are substantial and the whole economic picture will look different very after COVID-19 has moved on. The question for governments will be the control of the cost of ICT for education.



For example, in Ethiopia, the next target is to connect high schools with a minimum 10 mb connectivity. Then to have a national education ID. This unique ID will enable the ministry of education to track student mobility and the qualification of teachers. Ethiopia already has an education management information system, but they need aggregated results at the national level. Student statistics may be inputted in September, but this does not produce the aggregated data until the following June. So, it is necessary to avoid all that paperwork by using the digital interactive platform. This can be achieved by using high school as hubs – each then reaching out to 10- 15 schools in their district area.

For many countries, the issue goes beyond just providing the technology. A more basic problem is the overall internet access which means more investment into the ICT backbone. Ministries of education and communications need to work together to ensure there is a wider spread of availability that is also affordable. This requires leadership and vision from the very top of government. One crucial issue is for the funding agencies to be responsive to digital technologies. There is a view that the donors look at ICT as a luxury and that there is not enough capacity. We need to narrow the gap between developing and developed

countries by using ICT for leapfrogging. But digital learning is not a luxury. Initial investment in ICT infrastructure looks heavy but the cost over the time and the reward for education in the future is greater.

A lot still needs to be done in reassuring parents that kids are safe to go back to school. On equity there is concern across the board of children who may have fallen through the cracks and these must be attended to. There was unanimous agreement that a lot of education research needs to be done so we have better evidence-based information to make decisions. Also, education departments and governments in general need to become a lot better in crisis management and scenario planning. A call to action of the video conference was that when schools are closed, we must be better at educating and in future education will need to be more flexible, more useful but still remain social.

When re-opening we need to think about not just learning but enjoying school and being involved in physical activities. Assessment is important but we need to adjust our goals and many of the video conference participants were in favour of greater emphasis on formative assessment. We want kids to learn not just academically but also the importance

of social interactions and life skills.

In the future what struck amongst officials, was the need to create an ecosystem where students self-learn and more emphasis is needed on learning to learn along with having more competency-based skills with teachers supporting accordingly.

Finally, there remains a critical need to focus on vulnerabilities. We must not lose this group – they could drop out and leave the education system for good. Distance learning policies must be cognisant of this by being totally inclusive and have the capacity for special needs students. Considered thought on how to utilise distance learning and turn it into a successful experience – make it interactive, make it participatory – requires vision in the public sector. Equally, the education community needs to develop and conduct better partnerships with the private sector and the those who are needed for technology and knowledge transfer.

- End -

For further details or copies of this report, please contact john.glassey@brains.global

