



UNESCO Beirut and the Regional Center for Educational Planning initiate a regional dialogue on the Future of Education after COVID-19 in presence of UAE Minister of Education

The current global pandemic has changed anticipated futures across the globe. The COVID-19 crisis is both world-shattering and world-making as there is a widely shared sense that humanity is at a defining moment for rethinking the future. While a reflection on probable/anticipated and possible/alternative futures is well underway within UNESCO's *Futures of Education: Learning to Become* initiative launched before the crisis in September 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has made this initiative more timely, giving it a key momentum.

Against this backdrop, UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States (UNESCO Beirut), in partnership with UNESCO HQ and the Regional Center for Educational Planning (RCEP), organized on 16 June 2020 an Arab Region Dialogue on the Future of Education after COVID-19. The webinar aimed to examine the impact of COVID-19 on educational continuity in the Arab region, to reflect on the lessons learnt from the challenges faced during the COVID-19 crisis as we look to the futures of education, and to explore and analyze plans and strategies proposed to frame the vision of education after COVID-19. The webinar is built upon the achievement of a 2017 regional think tank seminar on "Rethinking Education" organized in Sharm EL Sheikh, Egypt and reaffirms the 2016 Cairo Declarations for rethinking education. It also comes in the framework of UNESCO's Education Response to the COVID-19 crisis and the Organization's continuous support for Arab Member States during and after COVID-19.

The event was attended by high-level personalities including H.E. Hussain Ibrahim Al Hammadi, UAE Minister of Education, UNESCO Beirut Director Dr Hamed al Hammami, RCEP Director Dr Mahra AlMutawiei, and Dr Sobhi Tawil, Chief of Section for Education Research and Foresight at UNESCO HQ. 500 participants took part in the Dialogue.

Idris

The event started with welcome remarks by Dr Hegazi Idris, UNESCO Beirut's Programme Specialist for Basic Education, who highlighted that: "This regional discussion aims to answer the following questions: What are the options in educational policies and opportunities that we can benefit from for the future of education in the Arab region? What do we mean by new pedagogy or pedagogy 4.0? What are the options in practice to ensure continuity of education, especially in countries in crisis and for children outside of school? What about children with special needs now and in the future? What are the lessons learnt about the parents' role in learning and education? Do children now and after returning to school need psychosocial support? Finally, what about UNESCO's Global Initiative on the Future of Education 2050?"



Al Mutaweiei

As to RCEP Director Dr AlMutawiei, she stated that “the COVID-19 pandemic has cast a long shadow and took its toll on the educational systems around the world, as the crisis impacted the education process of 1.6 billion students who ceased going to schools and universities and engaged in distance learning. This has pushed education stakeholders to think out of the box to provide unconventional and alternative approaches for education via several means such as; the internet and TV”. Al Mutawiei added: “There were, nonetheless, constructive and positive changes created by this pandemic. Therefore it is inevitable that educational systems shall discover novel methods to prepare and qualify the teachers and educators, so as to they may attain the required skills and capabilities to tackle and keep pace with this changing reality of the educational process. Moreover, the systems shall review and upgrade the matrix of skills given to students in a manner that shall make students more equipped and prepared for encountering the future. And due to the fact that the pandemic has imposed a significant challenge concerning the quality of the provided education, educational systems shall initiate new measures for benchmarking the quality of education and tackling with the current digital gap”. She concluded: “It is essential and inevitable to develop a worldwide framework for coordination and cooperation, as well as to initiate effective and operative partnerships between public and private institutions with the aim that all the students around the world receive equitable and quality education”.

Al Hammami

Then, UNESCO Beirut Director Dr Hamed Al Hammami made an opening speech in which he highlighted that: “ Education in the Arab region after COVID-19, and the features of teaching and learning, will witness great transformations. We should draw lessons from the challenges faced by ministries of education and educational systems during this pandemic”. He added: “Among the challenges faced by educational systems during COVID-19 are the unreadiness of some education systems in the Arab region for remote learning, weak educational infrastructure, inequality in terms of access to the internet, and teachers’ unpreparedness to switch to remote learning”. Dr Al Hammami said: “We can turn this crisis into an opportunity by building a more resilient education system. We should capitalize on IT, enhance teachers’ capacities, review assessment methods, engage in a comprehensive digital transformation, and build effective partnerships. It is also necessary to review old educational philosophies, as well as the goals and outputs of the educational system, in line with recent evolutions and the requirements of the labor market”.

Al Hammadi

This was followed by a keynote speech by UAE Minister of Education H.E. . Hussain Ibrahim Al Hammadi in which he presented his country’s vision of the future of education after COVID-19. Minister Al Hammadi said that “the future of education is perhaps the most important issue to be examined at the moment regionally and globally”. Al Hammadi explained that urgent discussions should be taking place about this topic, as the new reality of education requires a radical shift in



educational practices, as well as innovative educational strategies and policies, new educational tools, and extensive cooperation between countries towards institutionalizing educational systems that are able to adapt with the world post COVID-19. Further, H.E. Minister Al Hammadi highlighted that “the UAE has made great strides in this context, as it was proactive in adopting educational strategies, plans, and scenarios that would achieve an effective smart learning system supported by multiple educational resources and means. This was accomplished years ago, thanks to the guidance and support of the wise UAE leadership. All of this has paved the way to activate the smart learning system for almost 1.2 million Emirati school students”.

Minister Al Hammadi added that “the possibility of improving educational frameworks and achieving the best educational opportunities post COVID-19 depends on our ability to address the challenges and problems that have arisen, while simultaneously building on emerging educational developments. This will ensure equitable and inclusive education for all, while offering lifelong learning without excluding any specific category or segment of students”.

He also outlined four enablers for developing education post-COVID-19, namely improved infrastructure, reorganized policies and frameworks, evolving curricula, and improved qualification and training processes. Lastly, Al Hammadi indicated that the outcomes of any educational system should be measured based on imperative guidelines, which include an integrated evaluation framework that tracks performance, utilizing smart monitoring systems, and impact tracing functions, in addition to creating educational partnerships that are based on knowledge exchange, as well as investing heavily and holistically in education at the country level.

Presentations

The event featured presentations by renowned speakers. Dr Sobhi Tawil spoke of the “Future of education from a global perspective”, highlighting the efforts UNESCO has initiated to launch a global reflection on the matter. Dr Tawil stressed that: “The COVID=19 crisis offers us the opportunity to address longstanding disparities in access to education, to reframe the right to education, and to reimagine the purpose of education and the organization of learning”. He added: “Close to half of all primary and secondary students being provisioned by national online learning platforms, do not have access to the Internet at home. We need to ensure universal connectivity and close digital divides to advance learning for all”.

Dr Yin Cheong Cheng, Emeritus Professor of Education and Senior Research Fellow (APCLC) at the University of Hongkong spoke of the lessons learnt from the challenges that faced education systems during the pandemic, suggesting the way forward to build on these lessons to design the future of education. He highlighted, in particular, the need to capitalize on IT and artificial intelligence to re-define learning in nature, context, players, format & speed, creating unlimited opportunities for learning; and the importance of contextualization and creativity to meet multiple developments and disruptions.



H.E. Khalfan Belhoul, CEO of Dubai Future Foundation, spoke of the scenarios for the future of education in the short and long term after the end of the pandemic. As to Dr Federico Biagi, researcher at the European Commission, he made a presentation on the impact of COVID-19 on students' learning and achievement. He stressed that: "Estimates for a few selected EU countries consistently indicate that, on average, students will suffer a learning loss. It is also suggested that COVID-19 will not affect students equally, will influence negatively both cognitive and non-cognitive skills acquisition, and may have important long-term consequences in addition to the short-term ones. Policy makers and stakeholders should collaborate and try to improve the efficacy of online and blended learning models, while reducing educational inequalities".

Dr Sami Nassar, Dean of the faculty of Education Studies at the National Egyptian E-Learning University, spoke of "Education : the 4th generation". He stated that: "The pandemic revealed the size of the falsehood which we have lived for a time, and the shortcomings of the educational system and institutions we have built. It has also revealed the weakness of the values that we always pretend to preserve and defend. It also proved the weakness and shortcomings of the "routine" we had inserted our daily social and economic life in", encouraging education stakeholders to think of a more flexible and resilient education system in the future.

Lastly, Dr Ahmad Ouzi, Emeritus Professor at University of Mohammed V, presented a new pedagogical paradigm for the future of education.

After closing remarks by Dr Idris, Dr AlMutawiei, and Dr Sobe Noah Webster, Senior Project Officer for Education Research and Foresight at UNESCO – HQ, an interactive debate took place with the participants.

The Regional Dialogue provided a platform for participants to reflect on the educational challenges and opportunities offered by the COVID-19 pandemic and to share lessons learnt during the crisis. It also allowed participants to learn from the diverse insights of regional and international education thinkers with respect to the future of education during and after COVID-19.