First virtual meeting of the Bureau of the Executive Board  
Tuesday 21 April 2020

Summary of key recommendations

The Chairperson expressed his appreciation for the active participation of the Executive Board members at the first virtual meeting of the Board that took place on Friday 17 April 2020.

1. Proposed UNESCO initiative "No teacher or student should be left behind"

After requesting the Legal Advisor to state the functions of the Bureau as laid out in the Rules of Procedure, the Chairperson briefed the Bureau stating that this is an information item only at this stage. A concept paper on this initiative is being drafted for the Executive Board and the Bureau members are invited to contribute to or comment on the proposal, if they so wish.

It was noted by the Chair that this initiative would lead to the creation of a committee that would be led by the Director-General, who would appoint representatives and advisors in the various regions. The Chairperson of the Board would have an advisory role on the committee. This initiative would be put on the agenda of the next session of the Executive Board in conformity with prevailing rules.

The Vice-Chairpersons and the Chairpersons of the Commissions and Committees were invited to comment on this initiative, and the main comments were:

· They commended the Chairperson for taking this initiative.
· They look forward to receiving the document/concept note on this initiative.
· Bearing in mind that similar activities already exist within the Organization, it would be important to consider integrating this initiative into such existing activities and mechanisms so as to enhance the impact.
· It is important to ensure more focus and coordination within UNESCO’s programmes, in order to avoid fragmentation and better concentrate funding efforts.
· It is important to consult with the Secretariat on such a proposal.

2. Possible new dates for the earlier postponed 209th session of the Executive Board

3. Our working methods under COVID-19

Given that they are inter-linked, the Bureau took to discussing items 2 and 3 simultaneously.

During the virtual meeting with the EXB members on 17 April, many members stated that the Board must not remain inactive but that any steps taken must not lead to a change in the Rules of Procedure of the Executive Board. On this, the Chair reiterated that no-one has the intention of changing the rules. In his view, our working methods have indeed been affected and we should be realistic and adapt when necessary. He cited, for instance, the virtual meetings of the Bureau and the Executive Board as new evolving realities that have bearing on our working methods.

The main questions discussed by the Bureau meeting were around:

· Is it considered necessary to organize a virtual special session of the Executive Board or should a meeting only take place face-to-face, when possible?
· If so, what could be the possible difficulties encountered?
· Which items would such a virtual session deal with?
· Could dates for the 209th session of the Executive Board be proposed at this stage?
The Bureau was informed by the Legal Advisor of steps that have been taken in other UN organizations in light of the current COVID-19 lockdown. During these exceptional times, exceptional steps are necessary.

The Legal Advisor provided the Bureau with detailed legal advice with reference to the Rules of Procedure of the Board. It was noted that the Rules were drafted in 1952 and no explicit reference is made to the possibility of virtual meetings.

The role of the Executive Board as the decision-making body was underlined. The Bureau acts as an advisory body to the Chairperson on items related to the agenda and in the organization of the Board’s work.

The Legal Advisor drew the Bureau’s attention to the relevant rules of the Rules of Procedure concerning the timeline for the organization of a special or a formal session of the Board, with regard to the dispatch of an invitation letter, the documents, etc.

A special session: According to Rule 4 of the Rules of Procedure, a written notice of convocation shall be sent by the Chairperson at least fifteen days before the opening of a special session. Rule 5 stipulates that the Chairman shall prepare a provisional agenda which shall be dispatched to Members of the Board as soon as possible in the case of a special session.

It was stated by the Legal Advisor that the Executive Board could in its entirety, if it so decided, suspend the Rules of Procedure (for example with regard to the working languages of the Organization if interpretation is not possible in all 6 languages during a virtual meeting).

To date, only 5 special sessions of the Board have taken place (1948, 1949, 1982, 1985 and 2013) with very specific agenda items.

With regards to a virtual meeting, possible challenges include ensuring the technical facilities available to all members, ensuring confidentiality, the holding of private meetings, votes by secret ballots, interpretation, committee/commission meetings taking place simultaneously (FA & PX), etc.

At present, other UN agencies are considering organizing formal meetings of their Governing Bodies meetings virtually, but so far only IFAD has actually done so (currently in session) with only one language (English). WHO is still examining whether they will hold their governing bodies meeting. The Security Council and Human Rights Council are holding informal sessions with special procedures in place with regard to decision-making.

All Bureau members agreed the Board cannot remain inactive and must continue to work in order to meet its mandate, in full respect of the Rules of Procedure. Some Bureau members felt it is too soon to propose dates for the 209th session of the Board, until the restrictions within the host country after a possible deconfinement (11 May 2020) are announced. Issues thereafter on applicable travel restrictions etc were also mentioned.

It was clear that some items on the provisional agenda of the 209th session could be deemed as important and would need to be dealt with sooner rather than later. The Director-General indicated that it would be necessary to examine some items on the agenda of the 209th session and it was proposed that the Secretariat provide an analysis of the provisional agenda indicating the items that would need the most urgent attention.
After a long exchange during which the opinions of the electoral groups were expressed by the Vice-Chairpersons, and upon proposal by the Chairperson, the following was recommended:

- A second virtual Bureau meeting will take place on Tuesday 28 April to consider items to be included on the agenda of a special session, taking into consideration the analysis of such items to be provided by the Director-General. The Bureau also requested a technical and legal analysis vis-à-vis the respect of the existing Rules of Procedure. The Bureau would also like to be informed on the best practices by other UN agencies on the conducting of virtual meetings of their governing bodies.
- A special session of the Executive Board could take place virtually during the week of 25-29 May 2020. The agenda of this meeting will be proposed after discussion by the Bureau on 28 April (according to Rule 4 of the Rules of Procedure a written notice of convocation shall be sent by the Chairperson at least fifteen days before the opening of a special session). No committees/commission meetings would take place during this special session.
- The 209th session of the Executive Board could take place from 29 June to 10 July 2020 (foreseen as a face-to-face meeting in full respect of sanitary restrictions that will still be in place at that time). Should the conditions not permit, a new date or modality might be envisaged and communicated to Member States in conformity with prevailing rules and regulations.
- Sensitive items requiring comprehensive debates and discussions will not be dealt with during the virtual meeting and will be debated during the face-to-face session.

The Chair endorsed the dates as stated earlier for the tenure of the special virtual session of the Executive Board during the week 25 to 29 May 2020, the face-to-face session of the 209th session from 29 June to 10 July 2020 and the meeting of the Bureau to prepare for the special session on 28 April 2020.

In conformity with rules 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the Rules of Procedure, the Chairperson will send the corresponding official communication regarding these dates on Wednesday 29 April 2020. Member States that would like to propose alternative dates to be considered by the Chairperson are kindly requested to do so in a written statement addressed to the Chairperson (pres.exb@unesco.org), together with the necessary argumentations, by Monday 27 April 2020.