CONCEPT NOTE
SCALING-UP DIGITAL LEARNING AND SKILLS TO ACCELERATE PROGRESS TOWARDS SDG4

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INTRODUCTION

The world is off track in achieving SDG4 and its targets. COVID-19 has deepened the existing learning crisis and inequality, and further exacerbated the mismatch between education, training and job prospects. A year into the crisis, over 800 million students are still out of school; students are on average losing two-thirds of an academic year and more than 20 million secondary school age girls are at risk of dropping out in developing countries. Without swift collective action, the hard-fought gains on access to education will be lost, and the economic and social loss to individuals and societies will be irreversible. As part of the Decade of Action to accelerate progress on SDG4 and in response to COVID-19, the 2020 GEM Declaration identified five priorities for urgent action: (i) education financing; (ii) safe school reopening; (iii) supporting teachers as frontline workers; (iv) investment in skills; and (v) narrowing the digital divide.

ACCELERATING DIGITAL LEARNING AND SKILLS

The COVID-19 crisis revealed the weakness and unpreparedness of the current education systems worldwide, prompting the deployment of digital learning during mass school closures across almost all countries. The momentum and political commitment built for digital learning during COVID-19 offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to leap-frog children and youth into fast moving, competitive, interconnected and digitalised economies.

But more than half of the world’s children and young people are on the wrong side of the digital divide. 463 million children cannot access digital and broadcast remote learning; in lower income countries, girls and women are 33 per cent less likely to access the internet and remote learning; and teachers too lack access to devices and data and to digital skills to deploy innovative pedagogies.

Digital learning, that is now considered foundational, can enable children and youth to build and accredit both basic skills (literacy and maths), transferable, entrepreneurial and job specific skills that are key to support the school to work transition through multiple and dynamic learning pathways. Digital skills are also increasingly important for daily life, including financial literacy, civic participation and addressing health and wellbeing, as well as conversance with media and information literacy (MIL) for mitigating online risks such as cyberbullying, sexual exploitation, privacy and freedom of expression concerns. However, the focus on skills, including digital skills, in education systems, although growing, is still nascent and uneven. This is critical to support the 267 million youth who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), three quarters of whom are female. The catalytic and multiplier effect of technology means that digital learning including mitigating its risks should be part of a basket of essential services for every child and youth.

This means connecting every child and youth—some 3.5 billion by 2030—to digital solutions that can offer personalized and relevant learning. The goal is ambitious, aligned to the political, financial and technical resources currently available on digital learning. By 2025, private sector investment in digital learning could unlock a US$350 billion market worldwide.

The UN is spearheading a global initiative on digital learning and skills for all, while targeting marginalized children and youth with an express goal of closing the digital divide and on driving rapid change.
in education systems in three of the five priority areas of the 2020 GEM Declaration: (i) support to teachers; (ii) investment in skills; and (iii) narrowing the digital divide (gender, socio-economic status, location etc.). This will be achieved by:

1. Expanding access to digital learning solutions\(^{16}\) that build a range of skills including MIL for all children and youth and ensures that teachers, parents\(^{17}\) and caregivers can offer the scaffolding that children need to learn.
2. Connecting schools, every child and every youth to the internet.
3. Providing children and youth with a range of devices [mobile, laptops, desktop] to access learning.
4. Ensuring that content and data are affordable for students, teachers and schools.
5. Investing in teacher training and scaling innovative practices to enable digital learning.
6. Addressing the barriers facing girls and young women to digital access, including social norms, online safety and privacy, skills and leadership to close the gender digital divides.
7. Investing in reskilling and up-skilling of youth to enable the school to work and life transition.
8. Engaging youth to achieve the ambition for digital learning and ensuring its relevance and protecting privacy and promoting safety.

ACCELERATING PROGRESS IN NINE HIGH POPULATION COUNTRIES – THE E9

To achieve the ambition of digital learning and skills requires a targeted approach. Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria and Pakistan (having the long standing history of partnership and collaboration under the banner of E9 since 1993) offer an initial springboard to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills in the immediate term and ultimately on the SDG4 agenda in the longer term:

1. These countries are among the world’s most populous (4.1 of 7.9 billion)\(^{18}\) with large youth populations (1.6 billion by 2030) and with a high potential demographic dividend in low and low middle income countries.
2. The education systems are among the largest in the world; representing 51.6 percent of all learners of the world at all levels. Most countries have federal, decentralized education systems for education delivery, with diverse and complex governance and finance structures.
3. They have an established history of cooperation through the E9 partnership including on ICT.
4. They have an enabling ecosystem involving governments, the private sector, youth and other key partners with potential to engage in a renewed social compact in support of digital learning, skilling and livelihoods.
5. Most learners in the nine countries still face disruption to learning either fully or partially and 11.3 million are at risk of not returning to education institutions. How these countries manage the transition phase to recovery, build resilience and reimagine education is crucial for global progress and development, along with efforts to ensure no one is left behind.
6. The leadership offered and the success and lessons learned from high population countries (on governance and resource management, deploying learning assessment and certification, real time data collection in large decentralized systems, systematizing teaching training on pedagogical innovations etc.) will garner significant visibility and offer a blueprint for scaling progress in many countries across the world (see Annex 1 for potential areas of collaboration in the nine countries).
7. Their positions within global education and international cooperation fora, together with alignment of this initiative with the priorities of the G7 and G20, will ensure that lessons learned are cross fertilized and shared widely.
To achieve scale with speed and quality on digital learning and skills, and to ensure that the marginalized, especially girls, are reached, requires ‘high level political engagement, stronger collective action and diversified partnerships,’ as espoused by the SDG4 Steering Committee. To this end, the United Nations Secretary General and Bangladesh (as Chair of the E9) with the support of UNICEF, UNESCO, the Global Education Coalition and Generation Unlimited, will convene consultations with education ministers and a high-level strategic meeting with Heads of State from nine high population countries to propose digital learning and skills as a potential accelerator to recovery and advancing the SDG4 agenda. Malala Yousafzai, supported by the Malala Fund, will speak at the opening of the event, helping to mobilise and inspire youth behind the initiative in line with the Decade of Action platform. Generation Unlimited and the Global Education Coalition will mobilise their private sector leaders and partners that are leading on digital learning and skills to showcase solutions. Members of the Global Education Coalition’s Gender Flagship will also be invited to share their innovative solutions aiming to close the gender digital divide.

At the disposal of the initiative will be the UNICEF Global Digital Learning toolkit and UNESCO’s resources and toolkits, including the ICT in Education Policy Toolkit and the COVID-19 Response Toolkit, for countries’ consideration and use based on local context and needs. These toolkits and resources are intended as a supplement to local digital solutions and resources, are equity and quality focused, bringing useful global digital tools that can be further adapted at country level through collaboration and partnership with the solution provider. They are intended to be delivered through schools, implementing partners and/or directly to families and children.

OBJECTIVES

- To make the case for accelerating progress towards SDG4 in the nine countries.
- To highlight and share lessons learned regarding progress and challenges on digital learning and skills in the nine countries.
- To offer a roadmap to accelerate progress on digital learning and skills including closing the digital divide (gender, socioeconomic status, location etc.) based on country context and led by countries.
- To showcase promising global and local solutions and best practices on digital learning and skills with potential for scaling.
- To establish mission-aligned partnerships and synergies that accelerate scale and access to digital learning and skilling platforms, with a focus on marginalized children and youth.
OUTCOMES

Accelerate progress on the roll out of digital learning and skills at scale including closing the gap on the digital divides as a catalyst for achieving SDG4.

Champion and engage in high level advocacy on digital learning and skills.

Engage in peer learning, exchange on digital learning and skills and south-south cooperation.

FUNDING

The cost of digital learning for 1.6 billion children and youth by 2030 in the nine countries is $159 billion, with lower costs if implementation is at scale. This includes approximately $2.35 billion for digital learning; $108.9 billion for connecting every learner to the internet; $47.3 billion for devices and $90 million for engagement of young people. This bold ambition is achievable through a combination of domestic financing (building on existing initiatives) supported through rallying a global coalition of partners including businesses that are committed to and likely to benefit substantially by closing the equity gap through shared value partnerships (and drawing on local seed funding to catalyse the initiative). Domestic financing options include embedding education in COVID-19 fiscal response packages, repurposing education recurrent expenditure, investing in “green growth” economic transformation through reskilling and upskilling, building on ‘zero-rating’ agreements, rolling out universal service or access funds,22,23,24 and cross-subsidization (aligned to the benefits that are likely to accrue to the economy, labour, telecommunications etc.). E9 countries have also responded by introducing, scaling up or adapting social protection measures during the pandemic to protect previously uncovered or inadequately covered population groups. Many of these measures were financed from tax revenues or other state revenues, demonstrating the significance of noncontributory provision to ensure at least basic levels of protection for all25.

ROADMAP

The initiative will unfold in three phases co-created and co-convened with the nine countries:

1. A consultation phase will involve engagement with Permanent Delegations to UNESCO, with the nine education Ministries and with country level UN structures. Data will be assembled on the challenges and opportunities (including partnerships) on digital learning and skills in the nine countries and country plans developed.

2. A launch event during which the UN SG and Heads of State will come together with key global partners to launch the initiative and commit to drive forward the initiative over the coming 18-24 months.

3. An implementation phase during which country plans will be implemented on the eight pillars of digital learning and skills, mission-aligned strategic partnerships leveraged to advance progress in areas where there is convergence of thought leadership, content and platforms and funding and progress tracked on the benchmark indicators on the eight pillars, and reported on yearly.
ANNEX: DIGITAL LEARNING AND SKILLS – POTENTIAL AREAS OF COLLABORATION IN THE NINE COUNTRIES

The nine country profiles show that countries have made great efforts to address challenges caused by the COVID-19 disruption through the adoption of bold coping strategies, including designing, deploying and delivering remote learning programmes. However, while the scale varies considerably across and within countries, the challenges they are facing are still significant.

Given their diversity and the common challenges they face in recovery, building resilience and reimagining education, E9 countries have numerous opportunities to make further progress through sharing knowledge and experience, learning from one another and pooling efforts and resources for joint initiatives. In light of the preliminary analyses, the potential areas for initial collaboration are as follows:

1. **Promote peer-learning in strengthening education governance and resource management of digital transformation and infrastructure to enhance equity and quality of digital learning and skills.**

Countries are innovating with different ways of steering governance, roles and responsibilities for smart and innovative investment including mobilisation of new financial resources across national and sub-national levels of government. Sharing this breadth of experience to scaling these innovations through structured policy dialogue would benefit countries committed to tackling education inequities and raising standards, efficiency and effectiveness of digital learning and skills.
2. Scale up deployment of personalized, high-quality digital learning and skills solutions.

Most countries are investing considerably in digital teaching and learning, thereby strengthening the resilience of education delivery. There is wide scope for countries to learn from one another and from the international experience, in particular in designing, managing and using digital learning and skills programmes, in order to inform the collective efforts toward recovery, resilience and reimagining of education systems. This includes deploying, improving and localizing digital learning and skills platforms, digital content and utilization of high-quality learning applications to reach the most vulnerable groups of the population, while addressing the gender digital divide and inequalities.

3. Pool forces to improve the quality of education data in the recovery phase and beyond.

As countries pursue their commitment to enhance the quality of education data, they face many common challenges, such as: how to gather data across large, often decentralized, and now disrupted, education systems; how to collect and use disaggregated and timely data to better implement and monitor digital learning and skills and equity gaps; and how to document and report data that are comparable across and within countries. There is a need to strengthen data analytics to collect, process, analyze and use system-level and disaggregate data on access, equity, learning and cost to inform policy and action. Assessments of learning through digital platforms can support teaching at the right level and produce learning analytics for more personalized learning.

4. Harness teacher support and innovative pedagogies.

All countries are facing challenges on teachers’ digital skills. Some countries have been able to deploy a wide range of support for teachers to ensure continuity of teaching and learning. They can collaborate to harness these innovations to reach scale and to be replicated. This should include systematizing pedagogical innovations, dissecting their attributes and conditions for replicability so they can be adapted and adopted in different geographies. Enhancing the digital literacy of teachers is important along with pedagogical capacity development on digital and blended learning approaches. Robust digital platforms for teacher training, management and administrative systems will allow for more effective recruitment, deployment and teacher professional development (through online or blended learning approaches).

5. Invest in reskilling and up-skilling children and youth in support of the school to work transition.

All countries are engaging in structural and technological transformation of their economy, while trying to close high levels of skills mismatch and disparities within the labour market. The post COVID-19 era will compel a higher level of inclusive and green recovery and structural transformation of the economy. To prepare for economies to create jobs particularly for disadvantaged groups and boost economic activity, governments have announced reskilling and upskilling programmes. However, they are facing challenges to identify skills in demand in the disrupted labour market and to deliver them, through public-private partnership, fast, in a flexible manner and at scale. Digital learning solutions should focus on providing children and young people with the skills they need to succeed in school, to transition effectively to work and life and to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

6. Address barriers to digital learning and skills facing girls and young women.

As countries make efforts to address inequalities in digital learning and skills, specific measures are required to address socio-cultural norms, gender biases, economic and other barriers impeding girls and women’s digital access and skills. This includes removing stereotypes and gender bias from digital learning and skills materials and ensuring learning spaces for all girls and boys are safe and free from harassment and gender-based violence. Parental outreach programmes can also help facilitate equal opportunities for learning and be part of broader efforts to build girls’ and women’s self-efficacy in operating in online spaces. Teacher training can also help teachers identify and mitigate bias in their practices and adopt gender-responsive approaches while teaching online.


This includes increasing connectivity – connecting schools and communities to the internet; devices – ensuring affordable access to devices for children and schools; and affordability of data and content to remove barriers to digital learning, including gendered dimensions. Engaging young people as agents of change and as volunteers to advocate, promote and inform the development of digital learning and skills solutions is a necessary and viable condition for success.
ENDNOTES


13 Children and youth 0-24 years


15 The push for digital learning and skills in no way undermines the importance of reopening schools. Reopening schools is critical not only for learning but for the physical, social, emotional and mental wellbeing of children and youth.

16 Interactive, adaptive, playful, inclusive, market-relevant, nimble, gender-sensitive

17 For successful implementation, public perceptions of digital learning and skills, in particular parents, must be addressed.

18 Calculated from United Nations Population Division (UNPD) - World Population Prospects 2019 Database

19 The Global Digital Learning and Skills Toolkit is a collection of world-class digital solutions covering a broad range of skills that UNICEF makes available to country programmes through partnerships

20 The ICT in Education Policy toolkit is a platform providing a step-by-step guide to create education policy and masterplans, using six toolboxes simulating the policy development process.

21 The COVID-19 Response Toolkit consists of eight tools developed by UNESCO Global Education Coalition, in collaboration with McKinsey and Company. It provides COVID-19 education response frameworks, country practices and examples, concrete steps for intervention, and tactical action checklists to support governments. These approaches can be used regardless of the digital learning response stage; the kit is modular and each of its chapters can be used in a stand-alone manner.


