

Teacher Task Force Regional Virtual Meeting for Arab States Region

COVID-19 education crisis - Supporting teachers in distance learning and on school reopening

3 June 2020, 15:00 (Mecca /GMT+3 hrs.)

Final Report

Under the auspices of the Teacher Task Force (TTF), a regional meeting for members from the Arab States region was held to discuss countries' challenges and national responses in relation to teachers in the use of distance education and for the return to school (Annex 1). The meeting brought together a combination of country level perspectives and those from international organizations operating in the region. The speakers represented Teacher Task Force members from Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Global Campaign for Education/the Teacher Creativity Centre also participated from a regional and NGO perspective. (Annex 2).

Across the presentations and during the question and answer session, the following emerged as important considerations for COVID-19 related education responses specific to supporting teachers and teaching during closures and the return to schools.

Challenges raised by COVID-19 school closures

1. A systematic lack of remote learning systems to access teaching and learning content;
2. Access to digital devices and internet connectivity;
3. Teacher training and support; and
4. Learning assessment.

COVID-19 responses developed by countries and organisations

1. **Reinforcing learning management systems:** Countries strengthened pre-pandemic e-learning systems and/or launched new portals, platforms, and distance learning alternatives to support teaching and learning during school closures related to COVID-19.
 - a. In **Lebanon**, the Center for Educational Research and Development (CRDP) launched a [digital learning platform](#) providing teachers, students and parents with services such as virtual classes, interactive spaces and a digital library offering more than 3,000 international and local digital resources in addition to a modern adaptive Learning Management System (LMS) that was setup for all Lebanese students.
 - b. In **Morocco**, teachers contributed to developing and collecting more than 6,000 digital resources to serve over 600,000 daily users throughout national learning platforms.
 - c. In **Saudi Arabia**, authorities provided with several options to ensure the continuity of learning including increasing the number and variety of national portals and platforms, virtual classes, YouTube and satellite channels. Over 1,800,000 students, 290,000 teachers, 11,000 supervisors, 85% of schools and over 70 million viewers benefited from these services.
 - d. In the **United Arab Emirates**, the Ministry has reinforced the Mohammed Bin Rashid Smart Learning Programme in collaboration with the UAE Telecommunications Regulatory Authority, launched in 2012, which integrates 'smart learning' into the educational system using smart devices and 4G Internet. Furthermore, numerous national and international online learning platforms and solutions have been made available for teachers and students, including Edushare, Learning curve, LMS, Mc Graw Hill, Twig and Matific.

2. **Access to devices and connectivity:** Ministries of education, cooperated with national telecommunications authorities or private providers to offer free Internet to access educational resources for students with connectivity issues in underprivileged communities and remote areas. Ministries, in partnership with local organisations and charities, also provided students with electronic devices.
 - a. In **Lebanon**, the ministry of education collaborated with the ministry of national telecommunications to offer free Internet to access educational resources by all students. In Lebanon, CRDP has broadcasted 350 television classes for 41 days over 10 weeks on the national public channel which is accessible to all learners and teachers.
 - b. In **Morocco**, due to low connectivity, the ministry disseminated 59 daily lessons on national television channels; they also collaborated with publishing houses to print materials and make them available to students with low or no access to internet or television.
 - c. In **Saudi Arabia**, the ministry collaborated with their national telecommunications company to provide free Internet to access educational resources for students with connectivity issues in underprivileged communities. The Saudi Ministry of Education also collaborated with the Takaful Foundation¹ to provide underprivileged students with devices. Lastly, the government has increased the number of satellite channels from 14 to 20, and has arranged for remedial classes for underprivileged students.
 - d. In the **United Arab Emirates**, teachers were provided with devices and internet connections as part of Mohammed Bin Rashid Smart Learning Programme. Teachers also have a hotline for technical support. Working with the telecommunications authorities, they facilitated connectivity issues in remote or new areas with no or weak Internet. All students received devices building on the fact students in grades 9-12 already had learning devices prior to the pandemic. As an alternative, ministries also broadcasted lessons using satellite channels to serve students with low or no access to internet.

3. **Teacher training and support:** Teachers were trained to use online learning solutions and adapt to the new ways of teaching and learning. Ministries of education continue to explore alternative strategies to remote learning.
 - a. In **Lebanon**, CRDP's new digital learning platform offers several services to assist teachers including user-guide videos. CRDP also placed special emphasis on parents' psychological health and support via short films posted on the different CRDP media (Facebook, twitter, website) and prepared other activities which will be extended to teachers and learners during the first phase of reopening schools.
 - b. In **Morocco**, grassroots leadership has emerged during the crisis to support teachers reinforced by the fact that specific teachers were already designated as resource persons or experts among their colleagues. This led to the growth of professional learning communities—both formal and informal—to facilitate peer learning and collaboration.
 - c. In **Saudi Arabia**, training was conducted to support teachers in the delivery of online and remote learning using e-platforms. Training also included instruction on remote assessment of students.
 - a. In the **United Arab Emirates**, the ministry started training teachers on SMART learning in 2012, yet a training on digital and remote learning strategies was in fact implemented for teachers and school leaders in public and private schools just a week before school

¹ Charity foundation was established to support financially disadvantaged students in Saudi public schools to continue and succeed in receiving proper education.

closures. Professional development continued during the crisis and also covered teacher wellness training and other specialized areas including planning, implementing and evaluating remote learning once a week. In partnership with Hamdan Bin Mohammed Smart University (HBMSU), the UAE has qualified many teachers in the region through the free course “How to become an online tutor in 24 hours”.

4. **Assessment:** As the crisis has led to sudden shifts in education resulting in curricular modifications, assessment stands out as one of the greatest concerns for many countries.
 - a. In **Lebanon** and **Morocco**, more investment and creativity has been suggested to adopt alternative assessment strategies asking educators to reconsider what and how to assess students ensuring fairness and promoting equity for all.
 - b. In **Saudi Arabia**, assessment took two forms. The first is directly between teacher and student, in collaboration with parents who played an essential role to facilitate communication and follow-up, to assess specific skills such as reading and writing. The second is national exams which were delayed for all students but are only now available to some.
 - c. In the **United Arab Emirates**, national exams are taking place in specific centers and with precautionary measures as planned.

Concluding Remarks

The presentations discussed a number of distance and online technological solutions implemented at country-level. However, details are limited on the scope and depth of teacher training, preparation and support. As mentioned in the [seven dimensions discussed in the TTF guidance note on reopening schools](#), teachers will require significant assistance in the transition to online learning and using other distance education methodologies. Responses that reflect the TTF guidance note on returning to schools and the WB principles for effective response strategies will be instrumental to ensure teachers have the tools, knowledge and support to ensure the continuation of learning and deliver quality teaching.

The meeting also discussed aspects of the return to school including safety and health of teachers, psychological support and working conditions and rights as professionals. It also covered the issue of teachers’ centrality in equity-backed strategies as underlined in the [Teacher Task Force Call for Action on teachers](#). Countries can consider the [TTF Guidance Note on the Return to School](#) as well as the [TTF Toolkit for School Leaders](#) on the Reopening of Schools for guidance, tips and resources.

Based on the different country examples, the pandemic poses an opportunity to increase thinking about how teaching, learning and assessment can be conducted. Precise data and information of the national context is key to understanding the challenges and developing effective remote learning policies and frameworks to shape teachers’ roles to ensure the continuity of learning through distance education and other means. The use of technology should not however result that countries regress to traditional, rote-learning models of education; nor should it exacerbate tendencies to use data-driven models to centralize decision-making at the cost of developing and building trust in the professional autonomy of teachers.

In order to move ahead, countries might also focus on highlighting (in detail) the financial implications of different strategies based on current weaknesses, and as relates to national priorities aligned to the TTF’s seven dimensions for reopening schools.

The TTF plays an important role in supporting teachers in the context of the COVID-19 crisis and the return to school process. This includes its coordination efforts between various UNESCO teacher

initiatives and those by different partners working on teachers. Moreover, the new [TTF Knowledge Hub](#) provides Country members and the wider education community with a central repository of quality resources on teachers and teaching for policy-makers, decisions-makers and teacher educators to remain knowledgeable of better practices and evidence-based research around teachers and teaching.

Annex 1: Concept Note

Background and Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted education in an unprecedented way with, at its height, some 194 countries closing their schools affecting 1.58 billion learners from all levels and over 63 million primary and secondary teachers. Governments have had to act rapidly to continue providing quality education in a new environment, where face-to-face pedagogy is no longer possible and where many teachers lack skills related to ICT, distance education and education in emergencies.

Throughout school closures, governments have adopted various measures to ensure learning continuity. In some cases, this has meant working with infrastructure constraints, such as a lack of connectivity or devices. As countries plan to reopen schools, teachers' role will shift significantly for a second time. Teachers' knowledge of learners' needs and their pedagogical expertise will be critical to develop school reopening plans and responses. Teachers themselves have also been impacted by the crisis professionally and personally. Therefore, the voices of teachers, teacher educators and their representatives need to be included when designing context-sensitive resilience strategies.

Acknowledging these challenges, the Teacher Task Force (TTF) launched a [Call to Action on Teachers](#) that emphasises the following six key messages for governments and education stakeholders:

- preserve employment and wages;
- prioritise teachers' and learners' health, safety and well-being;
- include teachers in developing COVID-19 education responses;
- provide adequate professional support and training;
- put equity at the heart of education responses; and
- include teachers in aid responses.

Objectives of the regional meeting

In the Arab States region, educational responses to Covid-19 crisis varied due to disparities of economic and social determinants, needs, readiness, and national infrastructures. Several countries in the region had e-learning systems, digitalized curricula, and online teacher professional development programmes within their educational systems before the pandemic. However, most countries face challenges related to information and communication technologies, access and connectivity to online learning, teaching staff preparedness to provide, facilitate and assess distance and on-line education in emergencies and crises. In some cases, countries suffer from conflicts or have large populations of disadvantaged communities including migrant workers and marginalized students where health risks, learning losses and lack of safety, support and well-being are magnified for teachers and learners.

The Regional Virtual meeting for the Arab States region was organised by the International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 with the support of the UNESCO Office in Beirut and the UNESCO Office in Doha on 3 June 2020. The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Understand the challenges faced by countries in addressing issues related to teachers and teaching while designing education responses to COVID-19;
- Share promising practices to support teachers, including training, psycho-social support, and others; and
- Highlight challenges and opportunities in the reopening of schools.

Some of the main questions to be covered included:

- How are governments ensuring adequate training and support for in-service teachers to deliver effective distance/online instruction? How prepared are education systems in deploying online platforms and supporting teachers in using digital technology?
- How are governments supporting teachers working in areas with poor or no internet connectivity?
- What are the challenges and opportunities for the reopening of schools and how to best include teachers in responses? How should governments support teachers to meet their professional and personal needs?
- What measures are in place or planned that consider vulnerable populations (e.g. girls, disabled learners, cultural and linguistic minorities, displaced persons) to ensure equity in teaching and learning and mitigate dropout?

Annex 2: Arab States Regional Meeting of Teacher Task Force Webinar Agenda and list of presenters

ITEM	TIME
Welcome and introduction	5 mins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chair: Dr Abdelrahman Almedaires, TTF Co-Chair, Director General of Regional Center for Quality and Excellence in Education (RCQE), Saudi Arabia
Presentation of the TTF work	10 mins <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Gerd Hanne Fosen, TTF Co-Chair, Head of Section, Education Section, Department for Global Health, Education and Research, Norway
Countries perspective -4 country experiences	20 mins (5 mins each) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saudi Arabia: Dr Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Almoqbel, Deputy Minister for General Education, Ministry of Education • Lebanon: Ms Tassama Saleh, Resource Center Manager, The Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD) • United Arab Emirates: Ms Hessah Rasheid, Cluster Manager, Ministry of Education

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morocco: Ms Samira Idelcadi, English Language Teacher Supervisor, Tiznit Directorate
NGO/IGO intervention	<p>5 mins</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mr Refaat Sabbah, President of the Global Campaign for Education, Director and Founder of the Teacher Creativity Centre
Q&A and discussion	45 mins
Closing remarks	<p>5 mins</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ms Dakmara Georgescu, Senior Programme Specialist, UNESCO Beirut