



1ST KIX EDUCATION POLICY AND INNOVATION CONFERENCE (EPIC) DAY 1 SYNTHESIS REPORT

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ABOUT KIX EDUCATION POLICY AND INNOVATIONS CONFERENCE (EPIC)

The first KIX Education Policy and Innovation Conference took place on 7, 14, 21, and 28 October 2021. The conference aimed to create a forum for intensifying dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and beyond. It provided a venue for bridging the seemingly perennial gap between research, policy, and practice. In bringing together educational sector experts and institutions, the conference mobilized knowledge and provided visibility to national and regional expertise. It welcomed recent data-driven research and best practice, which addressed current national and regional challenges and provided prospective solutions.



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EPIC DAY 1 COVID-19 RESPONSE AND DIGITAL LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

The Global Partnership for Education's Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (GPE KIX) is a platform for connecting expertise, innovation and knowledge to developing countries that are building stronger education systems and progressing toward the Sustainable Development Goal of inclusive and equitable quality education for all (SDG4).

This paper summarises the outcomes of the first day of the KIX Education Policy Innovation Conference (EPIC). The first KIX EPIC was a four-day conference held on the 7th, 14th, 21st and 28th of October. The conference aimed to bring together the experiences of different countries to create a forum for intensifying dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners from the Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and beyond.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education was the primary focus of the conference. The pandemic resulted in one of the most fundamental disruptions in teaching and learning worldwide. More than 1.6 billion students and their teachers were affected in more than 200 countries (UNICEF, 2020).

Schools, institutions and other learning spaces closed, and this impacted more than 94% of the world's student population. Our lives are different now, and many aspects of human activities have been transformed in some way, with varying levels of success. As Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) noted, 'Transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning can be an entirely different experience for the learners and the educators, which they must adapt to with little or no other alternatives available'.

The EPIC conference highlighted several key messages, which have also been discussed extensively by researchers worldwide. The most significant one is that digitalisation is inevitable, has been boosted by the pandemic and will eventually reach every school, teacher, learner and parent. E-literacy has become the major skill of the 21st century. Digital skills are reported as a top priority to ensure no one is left behind in the transition towards a digital era and

together with problem-solving abilities, communication and entrepreneurship, they form the skills necessary for students to work effectively together.

However, UNESCO (2019) highlighted that in terms of 'teaching and learning digital skills, a major challenge lies in the "digital gap", illustrated by the fact that almost half of the world still has no access to a computer or the internet, leading to widening disparities in learning opportunities and outcomes'. During the pandemic, students have had to switch to a remote learning environment, which means utilising digital resources and new e-tools with limited or no support from teachers or parents. Teachers have tried to help increase students' digital competencies by incorporating digital skills development across subjects.

In addition, the shift to online learning has provided temporary solutions specifically in developing countries and has pushed students, teachers and parents in marginalised settings to be resilient, resourceful and flexible in overcoming constraints to maximise gains. The digital gap between well-off and developing nations has grown vastly, creating marginalised zones in the global educational landscape. Recently, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child noted the undue impact of these concerns on children, and specifically on learner wellbeing, due to 'major risks and concerns around data privacy and protection and increased digital divide' that is specifically noticeable in rural areas.

Moreover, different approaches towards digitalisation are being employed depending on contextual realities. In some instances, e-learning tools have played a crucial role during the pandemic, helping schools and universities facilitate student learning during the closure of universities and schools (Subedi et al., 2020). In other cases, radio and TV broadcasting were used to reach populations in need. The pandemic created contexts in which different approaches were applied to provide students with remote learning opportunities with varying degrees of success, leading researchers to believe that a more unified approach would be beneficial. UNICEF (2020) recommends that necessary support should be provided to everybody depending on the need dictated by context.

EPIC DAY 1

Day one of EPIC focused on the COVID-19 response and digital learning. Examples illustrating the challenges discussed earlier in this paper were presented to a diverse audience. The conference presenters shared their experiences in addressing many of these issues.

Margarita Focas Licht (Manager of the Partnerships Team at GPE) opened the conference, followed by Valtencir Mendes, Senior Education Programme Lead at UNESCO. According to Ms. Focas Licht, around 90% of the world's learners (i.e. an unprecedented 1.5 billion students) were affected by the pandemic. She focused her address on detailing the different ways that GPE has supported partner countries' response to the pandemic by mobilising stakeholders and creating opportunities for innovative educational approaches to reach the most marginalised groups. Building on this discussion, Mendes gave an overview of the GPE-supported collaboration between the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO on COVID-19 responses at the national, regional and global levels, which aimed to generate global public goods and build capacity. The keynote address was followed by four thematic sessions.

SESSION 1: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATION AMID THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Thematic Session 1 focused on **challenges and opportunities for education amid the COVID-19 pandemic**. Four presentations were delivered during this session that considered obstacles and solutions in the countries in the post-Soviet territory.

Jyldyz Doolbekova and Almagul Osmonova (Taalim-Forum) presented on education interventions in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Tajikistan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This presentation's main findings touched upon the preparedness of different contexts for the online shift and the impact it had on stakeholders. In Tajikistan, international donors helped to create TV lessons after the whole country operations were paused for an extended period of time. One common problem across the three countries was the lack of preparation to properly engage teachers and students in distant areas; as a result, these teachers and students were excluded from mainstream measures in these countries. E-literacy was noted as another major problem. Although facilities were available, due to low capacity and, in some cases, a complete inability to operate with informational technology (IT), teaching and learning suffered greatly.

On the other hand, in some countries (e.g. Kyrgyzstan), there was a very quick pivot to online teaching using e-libraries, online lessons, training for teaching and educational mobile apps made available for teachers and students.

Subsequently, Assel Myrzakhmetova from Buketov Karaganda University spoke about the information culture of the youth in Kazakhstan, reporting on the level of IT literacy of young people aged 6–15 years. Findings demonstrate an observable increase of IT and internet use by youth since 2012. Changes in lifestyle increased IT skills and personal computer (PC) use by children. In 2020, all rural areas were provided with internet connection, which is considered a turning point in the country's history. However, the lack of systemic information and cultural skills were reported as an issue across the country.

Next, Iva Perković (Network of Education Policy Centers) presented 'A year on – education systems adjustments'. This presentation focused on the three major challenges in education that need to be explored further, namely learning gaps, social and psychological support to mitigate the shift to online learning, and solutions adopted. The presenters found that the following solutions assisted in minimising learning loss:

- Summer camps
- Unified guidelines for learning organisation
- Catch-up programmes
- Projects to minimise the learning gap
- Adaptation of legislation to allow variation in learning curves
- Adaptations of curricula and assessments
- Extra-curricular activities online
- After-school tutoring

Other important measures implemented included support for addressing the social-emotional wellbeing of students with the support of psychologists, adapting guidelines to organise online learning, introducing support schemes, hiring additional staff members, delivering professional development for teachers to become better aware of mental health issues and offering support for vulnerable students, including scholarships, free equipment, internet access and child allowances. Also, teachers in most contexts were given substantial guidance and opportunities for professional development that focused on mental health support and inclusivity.

The fourth presenter, Tamta Grigolia (Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia), focused on the computer technologies used during the COVID-19 pandemic in Georgia, specifically focusing on how teachers replaced traditional in-class processes. It was noted that a shift in thinking about how technology can be leveraged as an educational tool is needed, as many children consider the use of PCs mainly as an opportunity to play games.

Julia Levin, KIX EAP Knowledge Lead, summarised Thematic Session 1 by sharing her experience from Germany, where she highlighted great diversity among schools in the use of

technology. Usually, diversity is seen as a good characteristic in any context, but because of the pandemic, diversity of technology used has become problematic, as it has slowed down the communication processes among schools, districts and bigger areas, impeding administrative procedures. The bottom line of the session was that a single approach could have been adapted in different schools throughout the country to allow for consistency, resulting in better access for students and teachers in need.

To summarise, the first session highlighted the following problems: lack of support provided, low level of IT skills, undeveloped infrastructure, limited reach to rural cities and excessive diversity of approaches.

SESSION 2: PROSPECTS OF DIGITALISATION IN EDUCATION

Thematic Session 2 was chaired by Lana Jurko, Executive Director, Network of Education Policy Centers, who focused on the **prospects of digitalisation in education**. Presentations focused on digital equality.

The first presentation by Morward Sherzad (Aga Khan Foundation Afghanistan) discussed how the Schools 2030 project used digital learning solutions to keep Afghan children in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus was on support for teachers to design learning materials and on a discussion to raise awareness about the need for digital learning capacity development in schools. National radio and TV provided content for the students throughout the country; however, it was not accessible in rural and remote areas. The majority of students were left without learning opportunities.

On the plus side, safe and secure community spaces were created to provide access to technology and the internet. The project also produced extracurricular videos to prepare students to return to their schools after the pandemic. An attempt was also made to prepare students for exams needed for graduation. One of the benefits of the project is that the materials that were produced are now in use in a wider range of schools. The project focused on 84 members of the community who were trained to facilitate student learning.

The next presentation was delivered by Daniyar Kussainov and Gulnaz Kordanova (Connect-ed), who reported on their project, Connect-ed, which aimed to facilitate digital equality among children in Kazakhstan. The project is a grassroots initiative to provide IT equipment, internet connection and digital skills development to vulnerable students. In Kazakhstan, there is a huge gap in IT and digital skills between rural and urban students. Children from vulnerable areas do not have access to technology nor the skills to use it. Tablets, notebooks and mobile phones were given to those students,

and a digital literacy course was developed. YouTube videos were created to deliver an open access course on digital literacy to students.

The next presentation, delivered by Pina Tarricone, Kemran Mestan and Ian Teo (ACER), introduced their policy-monitoring framework and tools aimed to assist policymakers with managing teaching and learning risks during emergencies. Presenters highlighted the following considerations to inform policy decisions:

- Constructing robust IT infrastructure
- Policy considerations – assessment integration
- Implementing digital teaching and learning
- Applying different technological modalities

The presentations of the second session highlighted the diversity in approaches and measures in different contexts.

SESSION 3: EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Thematic Session 3, chaired by Zakir Jumakulov of the Kazakh National Women's Teacher Training University, honed in on **educational development in the digital age**. Presentations focused on cyber pedagogy.

The first presentation by Nurgul Abisheva and Natalya Trnabaeva (Orleu) highlighted that cyber pedagogy is a new direction for delivering professional development and teacher training. This process started 15 years ago, and a large volume of subsequent research has resulted in interesting findings and conclusions. However, the shift to cyber pedagogy has not been a smooth one, resulting in a new and serious challenge for teachers. As such, there is a push to develop cyber pedagogy as a discipline in order to provide methodological underpinnings for teachers' actions. Building a conceptual basis of cyber education and developing a paradigm of cyber ontological views will allow for the development of pedagogical models to transform learning effectively. There is a need to experiment with learning platforms and push for online teaching and learning legislation to pave the way for a more harmonious education system.

The second presenter, Sarah Fuller (UNICEF), looked at research outcomes demonstrating the need for support for teachers during emergency remote teaching (ERT). The presenter referred to the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge Framework (TPACK) of teachers' knowledge and highlighted that the need for increased investments in Information Communication Technology should be accompanied by increased investment in teachers' learning (Mishra & Koehler, 2006).

It was argued that peer support for technology integration in ERT has become a vital source of help. Teaching beliefs can be dramatically changed in the new learning environment. Replacing traditional teaching with cyber pedagogy is causing undue stress for teachers. Thus, very specific attention should be given to teachers' mental health. However, as the research outcomes show, this has not been considered. To illustrate, approximately 70 percent of respondents reported that although they received instructions on ERT, they received limited or no mental health and emotional support.

The bottom line of the presentation was that teachers should become creators of knowledge. Their immediate needs should be taken into consideration. The view of teachers getting predefined but not tailored to their needs support packages should be reconsidered to better empower them for effective teaching and learning.

The next presenter, Aziz Soltobaev, spoke about IlimBox.kg, an offline educational platform that was created and implemented in Kyrgyzstan. Ilim Box was created to overcome the difficulty of students being unable to download large file sizes by compressing reading and video materials to make them more accessible for students. Some materials were even adapted and translated into Kyrgyz. Ilim Boxes have been made available in many schools already, and the project aims to increase its coverage.

The next presentation by Elena Volkova, Aleksey Semyonov and Gulnaz Bektemirova (Westminster International University, Uzbekistan) presented the findings of a feasibility study on scaling innovation – the Uzbekistan education sector development project. The speakers highlighted the outcomes of their qualitative research, revealing that teachers in Uzbekistan urgently need IT skills development training. It was also demonstrated that the content for online teachers' professional development needs to be thoroughly considered to ensure that it is tailored to the teachers' immediate needs instead of selected centralised topics (e.g. new laws in education) that can be studied by teachers independently.

Thematic Session 3 demonstrated the need for timely professional development opportunities for teachers, who took on the overall responsibility of content delivery during the pandemic.

SESSION 4: DIGITAL TEACHING AND LEARNING

Thematic Session 4 focused on **digital teaching and learning** and was chaired by Dr Aliandra Barlete from the University of Edinburgh.

The first presentation, delivered by Maia Bliadze and Nino Petviashvili (European University), highlighted two barriers to implementing a universal online education: unequal availability of internet connectivity and emotional burnout of teachers. The project 'Model of a new school' was launched to address the situation. Hybrid teaching was used as a temporary measure to mitigate the difficulties that stakeholders experienced. Reflecting on the processes taking part in the education system in Georgia, there were some drawbacks of distance learning including social alienation of students and teachers, heavy socio-emotional stress and overwhelming working hours. Teachers were supported through a series of webinars based on the needs of individual schools. E-resources were developed in-house so that teachers to provide better methodological support for teachers.

The second presentation by Yung Nietschke (ACER) and Reiko Take (DFAT) focused on the Australian Strategic Partnerships in Remote Education (ASPIRE) project, which supports learning continuity, access and equity in the Indo-Pacific region. The main activities included provision of support to teachers to fight against the challenges of the pandemic in the five areas below:

1. Parental involvement
2. Student engagement
3. Community participation
4. Ongoing support for teachers
5. Equity and inclusion

These are the vectors that need to be considered when technology supplements teaching and learning. To provide support to teachers, the science curriculum regional network was created, through which teachers could share knowledge and exchange ideas. The fundamental principle of such networks is the importance of using the local context as the environment for professional development. It was noted that governments are often slow when introducing reforms or responding to challenges and, in such cases, community participation can become a key support and resource to respond to such needs. To address equity and inclusion, it was recommended not to rush the introduction of technological support for education. High-tech, low-tech and no-tech solutions need to be considered thoroughly before starting full-scale reforms.

In the last presentation, Liliya Makovskaya (Westminster International University in Tashkent) and Deniza Alieva

(Webster University, USA) shared their study on the feasibility of scaling the online platform 'EduMarket', a rapidly growing smart mobile application. EduMarket can be downloaded for free by students of grades five to nine. The application is an opportunity for skills development that can be integrated into school programmes to supplement classroom processes and make them more student oriented.

Following this, Leila Almagambetova (Orleu) gave a presentation on video tutorials as an effective means of distance learning. Integrating video in students' learning during the pandemic increased students' motivation for learning. Furthermore, students could better understand and recall the content of the school programme.

The session ended with Garen Avanesyan's (UNICEF) data-packed presentation on household-level readiness for remote learning using evidence from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). This project, running from 2020–2023 and engaging 30 countries, had the main goal of teaching key stakeholders to make better use of educational data. This, in turn, is believed to produce information for equitable and inclusive education development systems and evidence-based policy and advocacy. Remote learning, as one of the major focuses of the project, is looked at from three perspectives: household factors, government policy response and education system preparedness. These three factors should complement each other, as only achievement in all three will ensure the achievement of the primary goal.

Thematic Session 4 concluded that learning and teaching should and will move online, and a great number of small steps are being taken to facilitate this process.

CONCLUSION

The first day of the conference presented a productive discussion of the challenges experienced across contexts and possible effective solutions to enhance student learning. The COVID-19 pandemic affected education systems in various ways around the world. In many countries, schools and universities were closed or switched to distance learning, thus disrupting the academic year and creating challenges for students, teachers and families. The impact of COVID on education has been particularly severe in developing countries, where access to technology and internet connectivity is often limited. Remote learning has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in educational outcomes, and some students have fallen behind due to lack of resources or support. Additionally, school closures have disrupted education systems, leading to a loss of teaching and learning time, as well as social and emotional wellbeing. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of ensuring resilient and adaptive education systems that can respond to emergencies and crises in the future. Exchanging experiences on these shared challenges opens a wider pool

of solutions and responses that could potentially be piloted by the countries to support good teaching practices. Joint research can make our practices more informed, which can enable the teaching and learning community to become better equipped on a wider policy-making level to continue to address unexpected challenges such as COVID-19.

To summarise, the main takeaways from day one of EPIC were the following:

- The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities in education, with disadvantaged students being disproportionately impacted and facing greater challenges in accessing remote learning and resources.
- Schools and educators have had to quickly adopt and adapt to new methods of teaching, such as online and hybrid learning, which require additional resources and training.
- The pandemic highlighted the importance of social-emotional learning and mental health support for students, as well as the need for greater focus on resilience and academic preparedness.
- Collaboration and partnership between educators, policymakers and parents are essential for ensuring equitable access to education and supporting student learning in challenging circumstances.
- The pandemic has presented an opportunity for reimagining and transforming education, with a focus on innovation and more student-centred approaches.

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