UNESCO

**Beirut Office**

United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

# Alternative Solutions to School Closure in Arab Countries

# To Ensuring THAT LEARNING NEVER STOPS

## COVID-19 EDUCATION RESPONSE

Education
2030

UNESCO estimates that, as of 26 March 2020, 165 countries have closed schools and universities nationwide, affecting over 1.5 billion children and youth – or 87% of the world's student population and a further 11 countries have implemented localized school closures. As stressed during an emergency meeting of the principals of multilateral education partners that virtually took place on 24 March, equity is the principal concern because school closures adversely affect disproportionately vulnerable and disadvantaged learners and alternative distance learning modalities might even exacerbate learning inequities due to the gaps in technology access and in the resources and capacities of schools and teachers.

The Arab region, where 13 million children and youth are already out-of-school due to conflict, has been additionally challenged with more than **100 million affected learners across the region,** according to the Global monitoring of school closures caused by COVID-19.

Against this backdrop, the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States in close collaboration with field offices and cluster offices in the region is urging collective actions aiming to mitigate the collateral impacts of the pandemic on the education sector.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, UNESCO Beirut has been monitoring school closures, national responses, and government circulars. This brief report provides a summary of some measures taken by countries in the region.

# Countries prioritized continuation of learning despite school closure

Since the outbreak of the pandemic and the national lockdown measures countries in the region have implemented a variety of solutions. **Online learning** is gaining more ground as most countries begin to introduce online platforms for continued learning. For instance, the **UAE** has put its online learning system into action since the first weeks of the crisis. It was also decided by the Ministry of Education in UAE to continue the 2019/2020 academic school year through this online platform. **Jordan** has introduced 2 platforms: Darsak I and Darsak II, targeting all grade levels in the formal sector; **Lebanon** has launched a national platform developed by Microsoft for all grade levels; **Qatar** announced the activation of Microsoft Teams Platform using video lessons for the early education stage; **Egypt** opted the continuation of the school year through its national online platform The Egyptian Knowledge Bank which includes resources that provide access to learning resources and tools for educators, researchers, students (K to 12, in addition to technical classes), and all citizens of Egypt. Students in **Egyp**t have also the opportunity to continue learning and interact daily with teachers through Edmodo. The **KSA** has put into implementation a national online platform targeting 6 million students. **Iraq and Kurdistan Region** in Iraq (KRI) have established two platforms for all levels called "newton" and e-parwarda. **Syria** activated several online platforms including one for early childhood learning. **TV Based Learning** is another solution introduced by countries such as **Sudan, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Qatar**. **Radio Based Learning** has been used in **Palestine, Tunisia, Mauritania,** and the **UAE**. Other **online platforms** such as YOUTUBE TV have also been used, such as in **Syria, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Iraq, Sudan, and Palestine**. In addition, traditional ways of delivering learning have been promoted, such as the **home based learning and home based instruction** program implemented in **Lebanon** and **Morocco**. For more see <u>annex A.</u>

In addition, a variety of solutions have been promoted by the private and non-formal sector, including MOOC, ZOOM, Webinars, Webex, among others. These tools were mostly used for orientations, training, planning sessions, etc… For a comprehensive list of global applications/tools – see <u>annex B.</u>

## Policy measures/responses taken to ensure continuity of learning

| ALTERNATIVE LEARNING DELIVERY | |
|---|---|
| Setting up a national online learning platform | Yes |
| Using an existing national online platform | Yes |
| TV Based Learning | Yes – Most Countries |
| Radio Based Learning | Yes – Few Countries |
| Home Based / Traditional | Yes – Few Countries |
| Interactive online classes by teachers | Yes |
| Using other free / open source online learning platforms | Yes |
| Social Media | Yes |

Countries disseminated information about the different learning tracks to learners/families/volunteers/and teachers through national campaigns, circulars, decrees, video messages, TV interviews, radio talk shows, in addition to social media especially official Twitter accounts in the Gulf countries and Facebook in the Mashreq/Maghreb countries.

The new solutions have brought many challenges and much needed innovation for the sector. Equity in **access to online learning** has been a major concern in the region especially for underprivileged communities who have limited or no access to free internet, electricity, computers, tablets, and other devices. Some countries like **Lebanon** and **Egypt** addressed this challenge by providing learners with free access to online platforms and providing users with extra internet free bundles to compensate for increased internet usage. Partnership with the ministry of communication has been made to facilitate access to services and increase the speed of the internet. To ease the disruption, the **United Arab Emirates and Iraq including KRI** created a hotline for teachers and students to seek technical support if they face any difficulties.

**Teacher preparedness** to deal with online learning was another challenge faced during this crisis. They are on the frontlines of the response to ensure that learning continues. Most countries of the region are implementing online learning on a national scale for the first time. For this they had to mobilize teachers in order to facilitate quality learning. However, so far the exercise proved that most teachers are not adequately supported or trained – neither were they included in developing the COVID-19 education responses. In addition, contracted teachers are threatened not to receive their salaries and benefit packages.

Online and remote learning have put a heavy burden on **parents and caregivers** who are unable to support their children due to variety of reasons. One major reason is digital literacy! Not all parents are able to facilitate online learning, neither are they familiar with the different applications, platforms, and devices. Some countries like UAE have put in place instructional guidelines specific for parents.

## Countries did not take decisive decisions yet in regard to national exams

As of today, all countries of the region did not make cancelation or waiving decisions in relation to national exams, especially the grade 12 exams. **Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Palestine** are still respecting the announced dates of the exams. Postponement has been announced in **Sudan, Oman** and **Iraq including KRI**. Countries are monitoring the situation week by week and will announce decisions at a later stage. **Online national** exams for grade 12 have been announced only in **Egypt.** Plans are on for holding the exams inside schools or centers in all other countries. **Egypt** announced that national exams for grades 11 and 12 will happen online, without postponement, noting that exams will only include what have been already covered before school closure.

| MEASURES | |
|---|---|
| **Exams Cancelled** | No |
| **Exams Waived** | No |
| **Exams Postponed** | Yes – Few Countries |
| **Exams as scheduled** | Yes – Most Countries |
| **Exams online** | Yes – Egypt and discussion is ongoing in other countries |
| **Exams in schools** | Yes – with sterilization measures |

Solutions for assessment still need to be studied in the region. Discussion is still ongoing regarding the use of different methods for different grade levels. In **Egypt**, traditional exams for all grades (except G11 and G12) have been replaced by research projects. Some countries reduced the number of exams and waived some subject matters from the requirements. Some countries are considering using previous grades (**Oman**), teachers' assessments, and student self-assessment - which poses questions of fairness and equality.

## PROMISING ACTIONS BUT CRITICAL GAPS REMAIN

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced schools and universities to close and send students home. Learning witnessed a transformation from a traditional to a more virtual delivery method. This reality may prove to help bridge the digital divide; as it has forced countries to find immediate solutions and innovations that will impact the education industry for a long time.

It is an opportunity for countries in the region to rethink education. More so, it is a call for building a more resilient and inclusive education system taking into consideration the critical role of teachers, parents, and availability of learning resources.

**For more information, contact**

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## Annex A

## Selection of national distance education platforms

**Bahrain**
EduNET (link is external) – Provides various educational services for all school levels and enables communication between faculty members, students and parents. Functions include assignments, discussions, timetables, attendance tracking, school events and announcements.

**Egypt**
Provides the national curriculum through the Knowledge Bank online study platform - study.ekb.eg  that inlcudes various curricula materials for all stages, starting from kindergarten until grade 12. Both basic and technical education students can also interact with teachers through the Edmodo.org platform.

**Iraq**
Educational channel on YouTube (link is external) - Lectures by the educational television for all levels provided by professors and the General Directorate of Curricula and produced by the Educational TV Directorate. available on Satellite TV. Newton and e-parwarda; platforms established by The Ministries of Education in Baghdad and Erbil allowing teachers and students to view lessons and interact with the teachers electronically and download electronic copies of school text books.

**Jordan**
DARSAK E-learning platform (www.darsak.gov.jo) which includes recorded lessons by teachers on different subjects based on national curriculum. DARSAK 1 focuses on primary level while Darsak II focuses on grades 9 to 11.

**Kuwait**
MOE video channel (link is external) – A dedicated YouTube channel featuring video lessons and conferences from teachers.

**Qatar**
Ministry of Education and Higher Education's online learning portal (link is external https://qlearning.edu.gov.qa/) – Official online learning portal for public (government) schools, including user guides, links to Microsoft Teams, and Youtube videos.

**Syria**
Ministry of Education activated the following national learning platforms: a) Damascus educational platform: www.Dep.edu.sy; b) Syrian educational  platform: www.Sep.edu.sy; C) ECE platform: www.Sepel.edu.sy; and d) Syria Educational channel - YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCFG-Jj7Ar1RjKZNg0LfTf6g

**United Arab Emirates**
MOE Library (link is external) – A platform established by The Ministry of Education allowing teachers and students to view and interact with the learning curriculum electronically and download electronic copies of books.

**UNRWA**
Resources collected by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency mainly for students in Jordan, Lebanon, Gaza, Syria and the West Bank.

Interactive Learning Programme (link is external) – an app designed for Grades 1-9.
UNRWA TV - provides educational lessons in Arabic, English, mathematics and science for Grades 4-9.

On how to use the resources:
- Arabic (link is external) and English (link is external) Guidelines for parents
- Arabic (link is external)and English (link is external) Guidelines for teachers

## Annex B

The list of educational applications, platforms and resources below aim to help parents, teachers, schools and school administrators facilitate student learning and provide social care and interaction during periods of school closure. Most of the solutions curated are free and many cater to multiple languages. While these solutions do not carry UNESCO's explicit endorsement, they tend to have a wide reach, a strong user-base and evidence of impact. They are categorized based on distance learning needs, but most of them offer functionalities across multiple categories.

- Blackboard (link is external) – Resources and tools to transition and deliver quality teaching and learning online.
- CenturyTech (link is external) – Personal learning pathways with micro-lessons to address gaps in knowledge, challenge students and promote long-term memory retention.
- ClassDojo (link is external) – Connects teachers with students and parents to build classroom communities.
- Edmodo (link is external) – Tools and resources to manage classrooms and engage students remotely.
- Edraak (link is external) – Arabic language online education with resources for school learners and teachers.
- EkStep (link is external) – Open learning platform with a collection of learning resources to support literacy and numeracy.
- Google Classroom (link is external) – Helps classes connect remotely, communicate and stay-organized.
- Moodle (link is external) – Community-driven and globally-supported open learning platform.
- Nafham (link is external) – Arabic language online learning platform hosting educational video lessons that correspond with Egyptian and Syrian curricula.
- Schoology (link is external) – Tools to support instruction, learning, grading, collaboration and assessment.
- Seesaw (link is external) – Enables the creation of collaborative and sharable digital learning portfolios and learning resources.
- Skooler (link is external) – Tools to turn Microsoft Office software into an education platform.
- Study Sapuri (link is external) – Japanese language online learning platform for middle school students.

Systems purpose-built for mobile phones
- Cell-Ed (link is external) – Learner-centered, skills-based learning platform with offline options.
- Eneza Education (link is external) - Revision and learning materials for basic feature phones.
- Funzi (link is external) – Mobile learning service that supports teaching and training for large groups.
- KaiOS (link is external) – Software that gives smartphone capabilities to inexpensive mobile phones and helps open portals to learning opportunities.
- Ubongo (link is external) – Uses entertainment, mass media, and the connectivity of mobile devices to deliver localized learning to African families at low cost and scale.
- Ustad Mobile (link is external) – Access and share educational content offline.

Systems with strong offline functionality
- Can't wait to Learn (link is external) – Gaming technology to deliver quality education to children, including those in conflict contexts.
- Kolibri (link is external) – Learning application to support universal education.
- Rumie (link is external) – Education tools and content to enable lifelong learning for underserved communities.
- Ustad Mobile (link is external) – Access and share educational content offline.

Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Platforms
- Alison (link is external) – Online courses from experts.
- Canvas (link is external)– Lifelong learning and professional development for educators.
- Coursera (link is external) – Online courses taught by instructors from well-recognized universities and companies.
- EdX (link is external) – Online courses from leading educational institutions.
- University of the People (link is external) - Online university with open access to higher education.
- Icourses (link is external) – Chinese language courses for university students.
- Future Learn (link is external) – Online courses to help learners study, build professional skills and connect with experts.

Self-directed learning content
- Byju's (link is external) – Learning application with large repositories of educational content tailored for different grades and learning levels.
- Discovery Education (link is external) – Free educational resources and lessons about viruses and outbreaks for different grade levels.

- [Geekie (link is external)](#) – Portuguese language web-based platform that provides personalized educational content using adaptive learning technology.
- [Khan Academy (link is external)](#) – Free online lessons and practice in math, sciences and humanities, as well as free tools for parents and teachers to track student progress. Available in 40+ languages, and aligned to national curriculum for over 10 countries.
- [KitKit School (link is external)](#) - Tablet-based learning suite with a comprehensive curriculum spanning early childhood through early primary levels.
- [LabXchange (link is external)](#) – Curated and user-created digital learning content delivered on an online platform that enables educational and research experiences.
- [Mindspark (link is external)](#) – Adaptive online tutoring system that helps students practice and learn mathematics.
- [Mosoteach (link is external)](#) – Chinese language application hosting cloud classes.
- [OneCourse (link is external)](#) – Child-focused application to deliver reading, writing and numeracy education.
- [Quizlet (link is external)](#) – Learning flashcards and games to support learning in multiple subjects.
- [Siyavula (link is external)](#) – Mathematics and physical sciences education aligned with South African curriculum.
- [YouTube (link is external)](#) – Huge repository of educational videos and learning channels.

Mobile reading applications
- [African Storybook (link is external)](#) - Open access to picture storybooks in African languages.
- [Global Digital Library (link is external)](#) – Digital storybooks and other reading materials easily accessible from mobile phones or computers.
- Lezioni sul sofà – A collection of Italian language books for children, complemented with read-aloud features as well as videos discussing books and art.
- [StoryWeaver (link is external)](#) – Digital repository of multilingual stories for children.
- [Worldreader (link is external)](#) – Digital books and stories accessible from mobile devices and functionality to support reading instruction.

Collaboration platforms that support live-video communication
- [Dingtalk (link is external)](#) – Communication platform that supports video conferencing, task and calendar management, attendance tracking and instant messaging.
- [Lark (link is external)](#) – Collaboration suite of interconnected tools, including chat, calendar, creation and cloud storage.
- [Hangouts Meet (link is external)](#) – Video calls integrated with other Google's G-Suite tools.
- [Teams (link is external)](#) – Chat, meet, call and collaboration features integrated with Microsoft Office software.
- [Skype (link is external)](#) – Video and audio calls with talk, chat and collaboration features.
- [Zoom (link is external)](#) – Cloud platform for video and audio conferencing, collaboration, chat and webinars.

Tools to create of digital learning content
- [Thinglink (link is external)](#) – Tools to create interactive images, videos and other multimedia resources.
- [Buncee (link is external)](#) – Supports the creation and sharing visual representations of learning content, including media-rich lessons, reports, newsletters and presentations.
- [EdPuzzle (link is external)](#) – Video lesson creation software.
- [Kaltura (link is external)](#) – Video management and creation tools with integration options for various learning management systems.
- [Nearpod (link is external)](#) – Software to create lessons with informative and interactive assessment activities.
- [Pear Deck (link is external)](#) – Facilitates the design of engaging instructional content with various integration features.
- [Squigl (link is external)](#) – Content creation platform that transforms speech or text into animated videos.