



(Virtual) Central Asia Symposium on ICT in Education (vCASIE) 2020: ICT-enabled Skills Development in Rural and Remote Areas Impacted by COVID-19 in Central Asia and Beyond

CONCEPT NOTE

Background

Since 2011, UNESCO has been organizing the Central Asia Symposium on ICT in Education (CASIE) to bring together Central Asian Member States to collectively deliberate on innovative solutions to the issues at all levels of education. Since then, the Symposium has covered such themes as ICT for learning and education management, ICT practices for lifelong learning, empowering teachers and teacher innovation, skills development and TVET, as well as data collection and EMIS in various Central Asian countries.

This year's CASIE (2020) is organized virtually (vCASIE, hereafter) to discuss COVID-19 related challenges and impact on education in particular. Due to the unique geographical characteristics of Central Asian countries, the pandemic has dramatically affected education provision, delivery, accessibility and quality, especially for learners and teachers in rural and remote areas.

This is a particularly pertinent issue in Central Asia, as more than a half of the region's population resides in rural areas (57.5%), with the lowest in Kazakhstan (43%), followed by 50% in Uzbekistan, 64% in Kyrgyzstan, and highest in Tajikistan (73%).¹ Even before the pandemic, an evident skills gap between rural and urban students' learning outcomes has been observed, where those from rural areas consistently underperform in several subjects. For instance in Uzbekistan, students from rural areas scored below average for maths, reading and native language. In Kyrgyzstan, more than 50% of students do not reach the basic level of reading, maths and science".² According to several large-scale assessment studies, such as PISA and TIMSS, Kazakhstan's 2015 results showed evidence that children from rural schools lag behind their urban counterparts by more than half a year of schooling in such subjects as maths, science and reading.³ In terms of the International Computer and Information Literacy Study (ICILS) in 2018, 54% of students did not achieve minimal scores.⁴

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought forward renewed attention to the importance of inclusive access to continuous learning throughout one's life within and beyond formal schooling. The uncertainty

¹ World Bank Data. <https://www.worldbank.org/>

² UNICEF Kyrgyzstan. « Education » (Russian). <https://www.unicef.org/kyrgyzstan/ru/образование>

³ Irsaliev, S., Kultumanova, A., Sabyruly, E. and Amangazy, M. 2017. *National Report on PISA 2015 Results* (Russian). Astana, IAC. http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/nac_otchet_pisa-2015_final.pdf

⁴ IEA. 2019. *Preparing For Life in a Digital World: IEA International Computer and Information Literacy Study 2018. International Report*. Amsterdam, IEA. <https://www.iea.nl/sites/default/files/2019-11/ICILS%202019%20Digital%20final%2004112019.pdf>

Atanaeva, M., Amangazy, M., Nogaybeva, G., Akhmetzhanova, A., et al. 2019. *National Report on the Status of the Education System in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2018*. Astana, IAC. http://iac.kz/sites/default/files/0_nacionalnyy_doklad_za_2018_god_final_s_oblozhkami_na_sayt_compressed_0.pdf

caused by such a crisis has created high demand for new knowledge and skills development, and thus an urgent need for learning, unlearning and relearning to deal with new normalcies, particularly in marginalized areas. To ensure employability and relevance, reskilling or upskilling is not a choice but a necessity. It is evident that such lifelong and life-wide learning is critical if we are to emerge from this crisis into a better future.

In response to such challenges, vCASIE will include a series of three (3) webinars:

Webinar 1: ICT-enabled distance education opportunities for students and teachers in the context of COVID-19;

Webinar 2: Open and distance education to promote learning and skills development throughout life;

Webinar 3: Relevant educational content and OER for skills development.

Objectives

- To provide a platform for national education policy-makers, statisticians, practitioners and development partners to share issues and challenges that Central Asian countries are facing in ensuring the learning continuity under a crisis such as the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in rural and remote areas;
- To share and learn from regional and international best practices and lessons learned;
- To promote collaboration and partnerships among the Central Asian countries in the identification of solutions in response to similar issues and challenges toward the effective and efficient integration of ICT in education;

Expected outputs

- Issue Note on rural and remote skills development in Central Asia (in light of COVID-19)

Schedule and brief overview of webinars

This is a series of 90-minute webinars that will each include 3 panelists from various organizations and selected countries around the world. A moderator will facilitate the discussion between the discussants on the various themes. A Q&A session will follow the discussion.

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1. **Webinar 1: ICT-enabled Distance Education Opportunities for Students and Teachers in light of COVID-19** (organized by UNESCO Bangkok) 10:00-11:30 Bangkok time/11:00-12:30 Almaty time, 25 September 2020

The first webinar of vCASIE will examine the impact of COVID-19 on Central Asian countries, who have taken emergency measures and moved towards providing education through distance and online modes. Each country approached the education delivery responses differently, depending on the existing digital infrastructure and capacity. Some countries employed various modalities at once (such as the Internet, TV, radio and postal services), while others focused more on TV-based and/or mobile phone-based distance education. Despite the efforts, some students in rural areas had to continue face-to-face learning or were released for early holidays, while students and teachers have struggled in terms of digital skills

and competencies required to move to online education.⁵

The webinar will address the following questions:

- How do we ensure that distance learning does not widen the educational gap for rural/remote students?
- What approaches, strategies and interventions could be used in order to effectively connect and provide uninterrupted learning and teaching in rural and remote areas, based on the experiences of other countries?

11:00-11:10 (Almaty time)	Welcoming remarks, Mr Shigeru Aoyagi, Director, UNESCO Bangkok Welcoming remarks, Ms Krista Pikkat, Director, UNESCO Almaty Welcoming remarks, Dr Sanghyun Jang, Director, Higher Education and Academic Division, KERIS
11:10-11:15	Moderator
11:15-11:55	Panel presentations 1. Overview of Central Asian countries' experiences and responses to COVID-19, particularly in terms of supporting teachers and students in rural/remote areas a. Republic of Kazakhstan b. Kyrgyz Republic c. Republic of Tajikistan d. Republic of Uzbekistan 2. Distance learning in Uzbekistan to cope with COVID-19 challenges (Mr Jaewon Cho, Programme Officer, KERIS) 3. Systematic teacher support & public-private partnerships for underprivileged students in Republic of Korea (Dr Sanghyun Jang, Director, Higher Education and Academic Division, KERIS on behalf of the Republic of Korea Ministry of Education)
11:55-12:25	Q&A
12:25-12:30	Closing remarks (Mr Nyi Nyi Thaung, Programme Specialist, Policy and Planning, Section for Inclusive Quality Education, UNESCO Bangkok)

2. **Webinar 2: Open and Distance Education to Promote Learning and Skills Development throughout Life** (organized by UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning), 16:00-17:45 (Bangkok time)/15:00-16:45 Almaty time, 7 October 2020

Webinar 2 focuses on promoting lifelong learning and skills development through innovative approaches such as ICT-supported open and distance learning, in particular in response to the COVID-19 situation. It will look at promising policies and practices within the sub-region and beyond in harnessing the potential of open and distance learning to promote inclusive lifelong learning for all.

A recent UNESCO report (2020) on lifelong learning in Central Asia indicates an overall absence of policies on adult and continued learning with strong needs for inter-departmental cooperation. Such systemic barriers have exacerbated the impact of the Covid-19 and hindered timely responses to the learning disruption outside of formal education system, especially for the most disadvantaged rural populations.

⁵ <http://en.unesco.kz/the-vice-ministers-of-education-in-the-central-asian-countries-agreed-on-common>

On the ground, however, demands for acquiring new knowledge and skills have been ever growing than before in order to cope with new uncertainties that a crisis like the current pandemic imposes. These emerging learning needs include basic health literacy, digital and media literacy, parenting for home-learning children and professional development to counteract job losses brought on by the pandemic. Globally, learners have been seeking alternative ways to access to learning opportunities as it has been evident in [soaring enrolment in Massive Open Online Courses \(MOOCs\)](#) between March and April compared to the same period last year.

The UNESCO report (2020) suggests that Central Asian countries can benefit from institutionalizing flexible learning pathways and providing open and distance education to close the skill gaps between urban and rural areas. More specifically, the report recommends the Central Asian countries to 1) enhance ICT infrastructure and online learning platforms to ensure inclusive access for all, 2) create relevant curriculum to the learning needs and integrate life skills, entrepreneurship and digital skills into national curriculum, and 3) raise public awareness on lifelong learning by engaging local communities, such as Learning Cities.

The webinar will address the following questions:

- What are the potential of ICTs to support and promote lifelong learning in Central Asia and what are the existing initiatives and the lessons learnt?
- How can Central Asian countries ensure that youth and adults who are not in formal education systems acquire newly emerging needs for basic competencies, such as digital skills, health literacy, financial literacy, vocational skills, and other life skills?

15:00-15:10 (Almaty time)	Welcoming remarks Director, UNESCO Almaty Welcoming remarks Director, UIL Welcoming remarks, KERIS
15:10-15:15	Moderator
15:15-16:15	Panel presentations (15 min each) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Digital skills for adults (EU's DigiComp or European Basic Skills Network (EBSN)) 2. DVV skills development programme in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan 3. Cambodia's ICT based Basic Education Equivalency Programme (BEEP)/UIL Learning City/EU Silk Road (TBD)
16:15-16:40	Q&A and Discussion
16:40-16:45	Closing remarks

3. **Webinar 3 on Quality OER contents for skills development** (organized by UNESCO Almaty), 10:00-11:30 (Bangkok time)/11:00-12:30 Almaty time, 23 October 2020

Coherent curricula, quality teacher education and training, pedagogy as well as relevant teaching/learning content are all interlinked components of the classroom.⁶ However, access to usable, relevant and interactive textbooks as well as teaching and learning content is a challenge in rural and remote areas of Central Asia. Moreover, the ongoing pandemic of COVID-19 has placed more challenges on accessing

⁶ ADB. 2018. *Textbook Policies in Asia: Development, Publishing, Printing, Distribution, and Future Implications*. Manila, ADB.
<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/478946/textbook-policies-asia.pdf>

relevant content and OER, as teachers and students have already had a little access to other content and materials before.⁷ Considering that up-to-date textbooks and learning materials are not often readily available, various websites and online educational resources (OER) that are free in different languages can fill this gap and provide myriad choices of content that is relevant to the curriculum and learning outcomes, especially in response to COVID-19 impact. With proper support mechanisms in place, teachers can adapt various OER or digital content to suit the teaching and learning needs in line with the curricular requirements. Overall, if utilized effectively, OERs can act as affordable and accessible resources for effective teaching and learning at any point in time, even beyond the pandemic.

The webinar will address the following questions:

- How to ensure that quality digital content is accessible by everyone, especially to rural/remote teachers and students?
- What mechanisms should be in place to effectively use and adapt various OER or digital content to suit the teaching and learning needs in line with the curricular requirements?

11:00-11:05 (Almaty time)	Welcoming remarks, Director, UNESCO Almaty Welcoming remarks, KERIS
11:05-11:10	Moderator
11:10-11:50	Panel presentations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. RoK/KERIS (tbc) 2. OER and overview of quality content in various countries (UNESCO HQ/IITE) 3. Bilimland online learning platform in Kazakhstan (TBC)
11:50-12:25	Q&A
12:25-12:30	Closing remarks

Language of vCASIE webinar series

Russian and English with simultaneous translation in two languages

Main audience

- Focus countries: Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Uzbekistan.
- Other countries interested in the webinar series are welcome to join.
- KERIS and Officials from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea.
- Experts from UNESCO and other international organizations.

UNESCO contacts

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⁷ World Bank. N.d. "ECA Knowledge Brief: Education Reform in the Kyrgyz Republic – Lessons from PISA". http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01419/WEB/0_C-124.HTM