

# CALL FOR PROPOSAL (Organizations or legal entities only)

## UNESCO Bangkok Office and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO)

### Terms of Reference (TOR)

#### Research into the impact of digital technology in early learning in Asia and the Pacific

**Organizational unit:** UNESCO Bangkok Office, Section for Inclusive Quality Education (IQE)

**Type of contract:** Contract for Services (Author): Organizations or legal entities

**Duration:** May–October 2023 (6 months)

**Application deadline:** 7 April 2023, 17:00 hrs. Bangkok time (GMT+7)

### 1. Background

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) is the foundation of lifelong learning. It is widely recognized that early childhood – a period ranging from birth to 8 years of age – is the most significant development period, having a long-term impact on later stages of an individual's life. This development stage has gained much traction due to an increasing number of multidisciplinary researches that demonstrate both social and economic benefits of investing in a child's early years in relation to academic achievement, economic productivity, strong communities, responsible citizenship, and lifelong learning and development<sup>1</sup>. Quality ECCE can prepare children to begin their lifelong journey of learning and development with strong minds and bodies, better skills, and confidence.

Although significant progress has been made within the ECCE sector with increased enrolments and participation rates, a large proportion of children across the region are not able to read or understand an age-appropriate text by the age of 10 years – with large disparities between countries<sup>2</sup>. The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly set back efforts to achieve the 2030 Agenda. Due to lockdown measures in many countries, ECCE services were halted, thus have stopped young children from attending pre-school and early childhood centres. Instead, digital technologies were used to maintain continuity of education for young children in the form of online classes and lessons provided by pre-school and Early Childhood Development (ECD) teachers.

In addition to this, the role of parents in mediating the learning of their children at home emerged and recognized as a critical resource for ensuring the continuity of young children's learning at home during the pre-schools/ECD centres closure. The digital content was developed for the parents and caregivers to conduct early learning activities for their children at home.

Recently countries have adopted the '[Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education \(2022\)](#)', which stated as a guiding principle to "*make access to digital technology equitable, inclusive, non-intrusive, secure and ethical, and ensure the protection of children's rights in the digital environment.*"

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<sup>1</sup> Black et al. (2017); Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (2012); Heckman (2018) Four big benefits of investing in early childhood development. Heckman: The economics of human potential.

<sup>2</sup> GPE, UNESCO & UNICEF (2021) Report of the Sub-regional Webinars for South, East and Southeast Asia on the Situation Analysis on the Effects of and Responses to COVID-19 in Education Sector. Retrieved from [https://apa.sdg4education2030.org/sites/apa.sdg4education2030.org/files/2021-03/SitAn%20Webinar%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://apa.sdg4education2030.org/sites/apa.sdg4education2030.org/files/2021-03/SitAn%20Webinar%20Report_FINAL.pdf)

Digital learning platforms with high quality content have a great potential in expanding the learning for young children, not only during the situation like COVID-19 when ECCE centre and pre-school closures were closed but also beyond that for transforming the overall learning opportunities for all young children. In fact, prior to the pandemic as well, young children have been exposed to and used digital devices. However, it is important to consider the particularities of the use of digital technology for the young children as well as how such technology can be leveraged to effectively support the ECE teachers and improve the home learning environment. For example, during COVID-19, digital learning at home has resulted in increased screen time for young children for both learning and entertainment. The World Health Organization recommends that children up to one-year should not spend any time on digital screens, including watching videos or playing games. For children aged 2–4 years, sedentary screen time should be no more than one hour in a day, and even less is better<sup>3</sup>. The potential of using high quality digital content is important, and with this, it is needed to ensure the use of developmentally and contextually appropriate modalities, so that even the most vulnerable young children are able to equally access the quality early learning services.

As there has not been extensive research into this area in the region, for this purpose, UNESCO Bangkok Office<sup>4</sup> and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO)<sup>5</sup> are procuring a Contractor to research into the “impact of digital technology in early learning in Asia and the Pacific” and provide recommendations/guideline for digital learning interventions for pre-primary level (children age of 3–5 years), including children in other modalities and learning environments outside of the education system, such as daycare or community-based centres.

The research will provide an overview of the context, and regional characteristics on the use of technology with young children between the ages of 3–5 years. The research is expected to provide an analytical and critical overview of current situation, good practices/policies and different modalities implemented during and after the pandemic, its reach to the most vulnerable young children, the role that adults (including teachers, facilitators, caregivers and parents) have in mediating learning for child development through digital technologies, and major areas of progress/success, and risks and challenges on digital learning for young children. As an initial integral part of the research, the Contractor shall seek to conduct in-depth desk review of published literature and available documents/guidelines in printed and online formats in relation to technology and digital learning in early years. The study will also map out the areas of work that other development partners and donors in the Asia and the Pacific region have been implementing in this area.

An expert group shall be formed, consulted throughout the process, including finalizing the methodology for conducting the research, and an online meeting conducted to validate the draft research report. The study needs to suggest age-appropriate policy recommendation/guideline for digital learning interventions for pre-primary level learners. The research will examine in depth the following:

- the impact of digital use/overuse in the early years on:
  - their development, health, and well-being;
  - their ability to learn;
  - their social and emotional skills; and
  - their behaviours and communication;

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<sup>3</sup> WHO (2019) <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-04-2019-to-grow-up-healthy-children-need-to-sit-less-and-play-more>

<sup>4</sup> UNESCO Bangkok is fully committed to supporting Member States' efforts to expand and improve comprehensive ECCE that will optimize the potential of young children in the Asia and Pacific region. UNESCO Bangkok's ECCE programme is dedicated to advocating, building partnerships, providing technical assistance, researching, and implementing capacity development projects in the region.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF EAPRO is working to support young children and their families by providing technical guidance and support to all UNICEF country offices and stakeholders in this objective.

- the extent to which policies and/or guidelines are available for protecting the privacy and safety of technology usage of young learners;
- explore how children engage with digital experiences across different learning contexts;
- explore how digital play and digital play-based learning in the early years can take place;
- examine the roles of pre-primary teachers and caregivers in facilitating children’s learning with technologies;
- document promising practices in the region; and
- examine how digital learning can address inclusion in early learning and equity issues.

## **2. Objectives**

The main objectives of this consultancy are to:

- conduct a comprehensive research study to explore the situation and impact of early experience exposure to digital use on young children; and
- develop a set of policy recommendations/guideline for digital learning interventions for pre-primary level (children age of 3–5 years) learners in various learning environments.

## **3. Scope of the assignment**

The contractor is expected to provide UNESCO and UNICEF with a comprehensive research report on the impact of digital technology in early learning Asia and the Pacific region.

The contractor will be responsible for arranging his/her own logistics: office space, administrative and secretarial support, telecommunications, travel arrangements, printing of documentation, etc. The costs of these logistics, including all travel-related costs, will be included in the lump sum payment of the consultancy contract. The contractor will be home based in any location. It is expected that they will be available to meet with the UNESCO and UNICEF team (online) during office hours of Bangkok, Thailand. No duty travel or physical presence at the office is expected.

The UNESCO and UNICEF project team will assist in facilitating access to information and documents relevant to the study as well as providing suggestions of experts.

## **4. Activities**

The Contractor will be responsible for these following task and responsibilities:

### **4.1 Inception Report**

- Develop a feasible Inception Report, to include:
  - A detailed work plan and/or brief research proposal to carry out the assignment indicating specific methodologies and strategies to accomplish outputs of the activities;
  - An outline of the report;
  - Draft Inception Report, including data collection tools, to be submitted to UNESCO and UNICEF EAPRO project team for review, comments, and concurrence;
  - Conduct an online expert group meeting to discuss and finalize the methodology for conducting this research;
  - Incorporate suggested revisions into the Inception Report; and
  - Submit the final Inception Report.

The inception report will outline in detail, the scope of the work; methodology including sampling and stakeholders to be consulted; data analysis plan, data quality assurance plan and risk management; work and staffing plan; ethical considerations in data collection and management etc.

This includes looking across literature sources written by research institutions, governments, UN agencies, NGOs, among others.

#### 4.2 First draft of the research report

- Conducting a desktop study/literature review on effects of technology and digital learning on early years. The tasks include:
  - Carry out research and review of academic, non-academic literature and existing data in the related areas;
  - Conduct consultations through online as necessary with stakeholders;
  - Primary analysis of data based on the consultations with stakeholders;
  - Documenting best practices of online digital format during COVID-19 pandemic; and
  - Draft recommendations and possible future interventions, based on the preliminary findings and lessons learnt, and good practices.
- Write and submit the draft research report based on the agreed outline;
- Submit the draft research report to the UNESCO and UNICEF EAPRO project team for review, comments, and concurrence; and
- Incorporate suggested revisions into the draft research report.

#### 4.3 Second draft of the research report and validation workshop

- Submit the revised draft research report incorporating the feedback and suggested revisions;
- Conduct an online expert group meeting and validation of the draft research report;
- Finalize the recommendations and possible future interventions, based on the findings and good practices;
- Prepare a presentation for an online validation workshop at a date to be agreed;
  - The contractor will facilitate the workshop which will be aimed at discussing preliminary findings and conclusions of the research/review.
- Prepare a workshop report documenting the feedback.

#### 4.4 Final research report

- Write and submit the final research report based on the validation workshop feedback.
  - The final report shall be no more than 60 pages (excluding necessary annexes and references).
- Prepare and submit a PowerPoint presentation summarising the key contents and findings of the final report.
- The draft and final reports should be presented in English and structured as follows:
  - Executive summary;
  - Purpose and objectives of the study;
  - Methodology;
  - Background, context, and regional characteristics;
  - Current situation of the impact of the use of technology in ECCE in the region;
  - Conclusions;
  - Opportunities and key priorities on ECCE in the region;
  - Recommendations for future interventions; and
  - Annexes (including the list of stakeholders consulted during the review, key documents and websites consulted, etc.).

## 5. Style manual, format and intellectual property rights

The research report will be co-published between UNESCO and UNICEF EAPRO. Contractor shall specifically perform the following:

- 5.1 Provide author services by following the requirements as listed below:
- a) Make sure that all the details of Style Manual (2004 version available at <https://bit.ly/37b6qXb>) have been adhered such as terminology, abbreviations, acronyms and format of footnotes, etc.;
  - b) Use the proper names and place names that correspond to UNESCO official usage and be aware of official names of these following countries (if applicable): Taiwan = Taiwan province of China, Hong Kong = Hong Kong SAR, China, South Korea = Republic of Korea, Vietnam = Viet Nam, Iran = Iran (Islamic Republic of), Laos = Lao PDR. UNESCO member states to be double checked at <https://en.unesco.org/countries>;
  - c) Secure the intellectual property rights by using the “permission consent form” (provided by UNESCO) to obtain written authorization from the original source of work wherever a photo, illustration, figure, diagram or other visual materials from the third party is used;
  - d) Provide a proper credit or citation to the original work of the third-party materials. For any photo, illustration, figure, diagram and table created by author, the “Source: author” should be placed underneath aforementioned materials;
  - e) All references must be fully stated in the footnote and references list at the end of the report. UNESCO and UNICEF must be informed of the necessary follow-up actions to seek acknowledgement and agreement by the relevant contributors;
  - f) Ensure full compliance with the international copyrights policy to avoid any illegal violation of copyrights and related issues;
  - g) Submit a draft manuscript in MS Word file including those permission form (if any) to the project team;
  - h) Improve and incorporate suggested changes (if required) and finalize the manuscript until it is considered as satisfactory; and
  - i) Strictly meet the committed deadline.

5.2 Strictly treat the publication confidential and the rights of distribution will reside solely with the co-publishers (UNESCO and UNICEF).

In line with UNESCO and UNICEF’s overall gender mainstreaming strategy, the contractor is expected to integrate a gender perspective in all activities and apply gender analysis and mainstreaming concepts wherever feasible.

The work shall be completed by 30 October 2023.

## 6. Deliverables and timeframe

The contractor shall complete the following work assignment by the indicated tentative timeline for UNESCO and UNICEF’s review and approval. To the extent possible, the Contractor shall reflect comments and suggested modifications submitted by the project team.

| No. | Deliverables  | Tentative timeline |
|-----|---|--------------------|
| 1   | Inception Report with detailed workplan, research proposal, data collection tools and outline of the final report | 15 May 2023        |
| 2   | First draft of the report   | 15 July 2023       |
| 3   | Second draft of the report and presented at an online validation workshop and workshop report                     | 30 August 2023     |
| 4   | Final research report and PowerPoint slides   | 30 October 2023    |

## 7. Eligibility/qualification/experience requirements

### Mandatory:

- At least ten years of experience in early childhood care and education, with demonstrated technical, and contextual knowledge evidenced by a portfolio of successful research projects related to ECCE and ICT in education in Asia and the Pacific region.
- Must have outstanding research and analysis skills.
- Proficiency in research design, research report writing, and source analysis.

### Desirable:

- Previous experience with UN or other international organizations, governments, donors, and civil society institutions would be an advantage.
- Impeccable analytical, writing, communication, and organizational skills.

## 8. Submission of expression of interest:

At minimum, expression of interest should include the following:

- 1) A technical proposal, including institution profile, relevant experiences, evidence/reference of previous similar works, proposed methodology/approach, proposed personnel and their CVs, and workplan. Must include at least three (3) references of projects in the field.
- 2) A financial proposal, providing a breakdown/rate per day, per unit, etc.

The expression of interest must be received by email at [ige.bgk@unesco.org](mailto:ige.bgk@unesco.org) to the attention of the Chief, IQE Section UNESCO Bangkok Office, with Subject line: Proposal - Impact of digital technology in early learning, no later than **7 April 2023, 17:00 hrs Bangkok time (GMT+7)**. Only complete applications submitted before the deadline will be considered.

Only short-listed institutions/organizations will be contacted.