

Education in the Time of COVID-19 in Jordan: A Roadmap for Short, Medium, and Long-Term Responses

Report

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Introduction

In Jordan, more than 2 million students across public, private, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) schools have had their education interrupted since schools closed in mid-March 2020. With the spread of COVID-19, Jordan took the quick decision to implement lockdown but to continue with education, albeit delivering its content remotely. The Ministry of Education (MoE) developed a quick response plan to provide a sense of normalcy for students as well as prevent the risk of students dropping out due to interruption in learning. Perfect is the enemy of good, therefore the plan to continue with education went into action rapidly despite facing a number of challenges. This report aims to briefly outline the MoE response to COVID-19 in Jordan, and build on this response to visualize a roadmap for important interventions on the short, medium, and long terms. This roadmap is visualized based on emerging global resources during the pandemic and knowledge from education in emergency situations.



Formal education system response to COVID-19 in Jordan

With the lockdown implemented throughout Jordan to limit the spread of the virus, all schools in the kingdom were forced to close without prior preparation on 15 March 2020.

The MoE launched the Darsak education platform within a few days' time, on March 22 2020, in a bid to resume education remotely. The platform introduces educational content for all students from Grades 1 to 12 through video recordings of core subjects including Arabic Language, English Language, Science, Maths, as well as content for the different streams within Grades 11 and 12. This rapid setting up of the platform took place in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship and technically developed by Mawdoo3, with the educational content developed for free by Abwab, Jo Academy, and Edraak. The platform can be accessed for free without the need for internet from six in the morning until four in the afternoon. Nearly a month after the launch of the platform, "assessment for learning" tests were conducted for all students starting from the fourth grade, and with the approach of the General Secondary Certification "Tawjihi" Examination, experimental exams were also launched for students in the different Tawjihi streams.

The development of Darsak came at a record speed after it became clear that the MoE's formerly developed e-learning management system Noorspace will not be sufficient due to its inability to receive a large number of students daily. However, Noorspace provides in principle important interaction between the teacher and students. Through the platform teachers can send assignments to students, develop electronic tests, and build virtual classes that allow for direct communication through text and video using the "Microsoft Times" feature within the platform.

Parallel to the launch of Darsak platform, the MoE launched three national TV channels to broadcast and maximize accessibility to the educational content, one of which is specifically designated for 12th Grade Tawjihi students.

In addition to the above, the MoE launched in partnership with the Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship and the development of Mawdoo3 a platform for teachers that contains 6 massive open online courses (MOOCs) from Edraak on distance learning tools, education technology, blended learning, the inverted classroom, teaching with confidence, and reflective teaching. The Ministry has also re-launched the Digital Curriculum Library to allow all users to digitally review curricula for all grades. We believe that it is important today to develop a roadmap for response in the short, medium, and long term, and build on these various responses the MoE has undertaken, to formulate a clear and comprehensive action plan for the coming period.

Roadmap for the short-term responses

In the short-term, a sequenced, multimodal, and multi-pronged approach is required. This necessitates the active involvement of a number of stakeholders, including government authorities, NGOs and the private sector.

Maslow before Bloom

It is important to appreciate that parents and guardians, teachers, and school leaders are concerned about their own safety and physiological vulnerability, whilst adapting to new ways of maintaining education for young learners. The Jordanian government in partnership with NGOs is beginning to provide financial support to those who have been affected by the lockdown. However, a rapid assessment of the impact of COVID-19 in Jordan, particularly on vulnerable populations, has revealed that individuals who are in especially precarious employment may not be eligible for the government's social protections. The limited supply of essential goods and services, including food and medicine, has jeopardized the livelihoods of families across the Kingdom, many of whom do not have the necessary tools to support their children's distance learning. Within this context, access to education might be of the least concern for refugees and other vulnerable communities: another rapid assessment confirms that access to food, healthcare, and cash assistance are crucial in the short-term, in order for education interventions to be considered or adopted. Hence, it is important for the MoE to work closely with other relevant ministries and agencies to identify and support the most disadvantaged students and their families, putting Maslow's pyramid of needs, especially physiological and safety needs as a base without which they can not move towards Bloom's taxonomy for educational objectives.

It is important today to develop a roadmap for response in the short, medium, and long term, and build on these various responses the MoE has undertaken, to formulate a clear and comprehensive action plan for the coming period.



Maximize access to educational content

The decision of continuing education must accompany necessary support for all students to be engaged in the educational process, particularly to those who are most marginalized, the disabled, and refugee students. The MoE has launched both low-tech and high-tech solutions to education during the pandemic, introducing the Darsak online platform and TV channels to share educational contents covering core subjects to all grades. However, it is important to ensure that new educational provisions do not exacerbate any inequities that existed prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. One of the main challenges facing the current educational response is that thousands of students still do not have access to the educational content, due to unreliable internet connections, lack of smartphones or laptops, or other challenges faced at home. In this instance, maximizing access requires understanding and addressing the barriers to current interventions, in addition to introducing new interventions to ensure maximizing access.

A one size fits all approach never worked for education in 'normal' situations, and cannot work in a crisis such as the one we are currently living in - especially if these education responses require access to electricity, the internet, or hardware. To overcome some of these challenges the MOE can consider other low-tech or no-tech interventions, such as distributing textbooks and other printed learning materials where the TV/online solutions are not accessible or feasible.

Partnerships with the private sector and not for profits can be leveraged to identify and respond to the barriers to online learning through a number of interventions. These interventions need to consider availability of digital infrastructure such as smartphones, tablets and laptops as well as the Internet connectivity, particularly remote and marginalized areas. Furthermore, providing stationary is important to enable the different learning processes. Equally important is to provide relevant information about how to access and use the different platforms (including how to download new channels onto their TV), as well as basic information around digital literacy.

In all cases, regular assessment of accessibility to educational content through the different provisions is crucial. Here schools can communicate directly with families and students to track students in need for additional support to access the content.

Throughout this process, it is important to ensure that the most marginalized individuals, including refugee students in camps and host communities, and students with disabilities, are able to access the digital learning platforms. Any content that is developed needs to be adapted to be inclusive for students with visual or hearing impairments. At this moment, only one stream of 12th Grade (Tawjihi) content has been made available in sign language. Furthermore, understanding and addressing the barriers faced by refugees inside the camps is important as they have limited access to electricity and interrupted internet connections. From the onset of the lockdown, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees extended hours of electricity supply in Za'atari and Al-Azraq refugee camps to ensure that students are able to continue their learning remotely. It is important for the MoE to clarify in its communication and media messages how their interventions target these different marginalized groups in effective coordination with various entities.



Identify and communicate education outcome priorities

It might be counterproductive to aim for the same educational outcomes as originally planned for the school year. Educational outcomes should be amended to accommodate the health crisis and current conditions in the country in general, as well as the shift to online or remote learning in specific. It is highly recommended in this instance that the MoE identifies priority educational outcomes for every subject, and to clearly communicate these to students and their parents and guardians. Attempting to go on with business as usual is both unrealistic and could lead to frustrations on the part of students and parents. By focusing on fewer priorities and learning contents and providing extra time for learning, students might be able to engage in education more meaningfully.

It is critical for the MoE to maintain clear, open, and consistent lines of communication about expectations and education outcomes and various developments during the pandemic and beyond. This transparent communication should be with all stakeholders including other entities working in the sector, schools and teachers, and students and parents and guardians. Constant communication about potential scenarios and perhaps consulting students and parents with some decisions can help reduce their anxiety during this time.

Moving from passive to active learning

One limitation of the current responses in distance education is that it does not foster interaction, rather rendering students as passive consumers. However, asynchronous learning - as is the case on Darsak - is not inherently bound to passive learning. Simple steps can be gradually introduced into each lesson in the current state to enable further interaction and active learning. A good place to start could be by providing content in a variety of formats, text, audio, and visual (image and video) rather than only video. Furthermore, video content should be segmented to multiple 15-20 minute clips rather than one long video. Additionally, adding a few summary of key points and an exercise to test students' learning and reflective questions after each lesson would make the distance learning exciting and productive. All of these proposals are easy to add to the current platform. In the same context, it is also preferable to develop the Noorspace platform to serve larger numbers of students and to make it more user friendly, in order to enable students to interact with educational content, with each other and with the teacher, by sharing comments, asking questions and even participating in the production of new content. Research and creating new content is an important pedagogical tool that can further engage students in their learning, and should be considered in medium and long term interventions.

Reconsidering the philosophy and mechanisms of assessment

Countries around the world have postponed or cancelled examinations, citing challenges in conducting them online fairly and accessibly. However, regular assessments in various formats both formative and summative can be helpful to keep track of students' learning and help teachers identify gaps to develop better learning content and activities.

Formative assessment and constructive feedback from teachers can promote learning for life rather than just to pass examinations. The transition to online learning can be an opportunity to develop new types of assignments and assessments into the education system, such as project work and using learning logs and journals, eventually developing more self-directed, motivated, and lifelong learners.

Expanding relevant content and access to it

It is important to capitalize on the strengths of online learning, especially those that are not possible in traditional educational environments. For example, it is possible - and perhaps best - to provide educational content Darsak for longer periods of time so that students can view it at any time that suits them, in addition to the ability to refer to it and repeat the content when needed to enhance learning. At the moment, the educational content is only available for one week.

On another front, the rapid development of online learning platforms and content can address the limitations of present curricula. For instance, additional content that is relevant to COVID-19 and the experiences students and their families are currently going through can be developed. Such as content on physical and emotional well-being, how to deal with emergencies, personal hygiene, and media and information literacy. This content can be developed from available global resources and adapted to suit different contexts, age groups, and backgrounds.

Additional support to parents and guardians

As the provision of teaching and learning has shifted from schools to online platforms, parents and guardians have had to step into new roles as facilitators of learning. In addition to this, they have had to assume a large role in supporting their children's emotional wellbeing throughout this crisis. This new role that parents and guardians have to play is often challenging: adults who are required to continue working (whether remotely or in person as frontline support staff throughout the crisis) have had to perform multiple duties such as caretaking, supporting children's learning, and taking care of household chores. Others are unable to support their children's learning due to their own educational level or are unable to accommodate caring for several children at different grade levels.

It is recommended that the MoE work alongside other relevant ministries, organizations, and stakeholders to create or compile simple and accessible tips and guidelines for parents on how to take care of their psychological and mental health needs while being involved in supporting their children in education.

Several nonprofit organizations have published [tips and guidelines](#), suggesting a new routine, allowing children to discuss how they are feeling, and creating distractions and activities to provide some form of relief and entertainment. [UNICEF](#) recommends that adults be mindful of their own behavior and mental health, as it can transmit to their children and ignite fear or anxiety. There are also resources for parents to support their children's [learning at a distance](#). These [resources for parents and guardians](#) can easily be translated and communicated to the wider community.

Additional support to teachers and school leaders

The MoE developed the platform for teachers with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that aim to develop their online learning skills and relevant pedagogical approaches. To back up this positive initiative several other processes are necessary. As students need support to enable access, teachers and school leaders also require having the proper hardware and internet access to use and engage with the different education platforms and with their students. Teachers also need similar tips and guidelines to support themselves and students during this crisis, recognizing that many are also parents and guardians themselves. Additionally, a process that engages with teachers and school leaders in relation to the medium and longer term responses is necessary, to both consult them and prepare them for the next steps in returning to the 'new normal'.

Roadmap for the medium-term

As of now, it is unclear how much longer the current situation will remain. Hence, preparing for the medium term is largely stepping into unknown territories as the situation with COVID-19 continues to escalate in many parts of the world.

In the meantime, experts, NGOs, and governments are turning to lessons learned from the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa and learning from other education in emergencies responses to guide their preparation for this upcoming and critical phase in fighting the outbreak while attempting to resume life as we knew it. Critically, governments will not only be battling a pandemic in the medium term but also its ramifications: financial downturn, economic crisis, and large scale unemployment.

The medium-term poses new challenges in providing education and necessary support for students. Psychosocial support, child protection, and familial financial relief are just some of the services necessary to address the challenges resulting from the crisis. Hence, there is a clear need for partnership and coordination between governmental agencies, NGOs, and for profits to ensure the success of these different needed interventions in the medium term.

Prepare for going back to school in a post-‘COVID-19’ new normal

As important as it is to support the current and ongoing education response, it is equally important to prepare teachers, school leaders, schools, as well as students and their parents and guardians to the reality of going back to school in a ‘new normal’. One relevant example is the upcoming Tawjihi examination, which will take place as usual in school halls.

Policies and protocols for school reopening need to be both developed and communicated clearly to ensure their success. Such policies should include addressing infection prevention, ensuring safe environments within schools, and providing adequate WASH facilities and hygiene products to curb the spread of the virus. Guidelines for schools are being developed (including resources by the [Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies](#) and [UNICEF](#)) which suggest cancelling assemblies and other large gatherings, staggering attendance, decreasing classroom sizes and creating more space between children’s desks within classrooms to ensure that there are no large and overcrowded gatherings of student, all in line with current recommendations to continue “physical distancing”.

Equally important, protocols need to be put in place in the event that a student or teacher or one of their direct family members is diagnosed, which requires heightened diligence, reporting, and cooperation between schools, education directorates, and the Ministry of Health. Continued tips and guidelines communicated to parents and guardians, similar to those outlined earlier, are necessary to ensure students are able to return to schools safely.



Catch-up and remedial programs

Even with the enormous efforts to ensure access to learning content for all students through Darsak TV channel and platform, it is expected that many students will still be left behind. Vulnerable children and youth including girls, students with disabilities and special educational needs, and refugees, could especially be at risk of missing out on crucial learning during this period and will certainly need access to catch-up and remedial programs starting this summer.

Catch-up and remedial programs are especially important for students who have struggled to feel engaged or to follow the content in its new online format, considering that distance learning is not suitable for everyone. Furthermore, the content currently being provided does not cover all subjects and does not replace the full educational experience provided in brick and mortar schools. While it is important to note that remote learning has proved to be a crucial intervention for learning during crisis, there are different developmental skills and attitudes, such as social skills, that can be challenging to mediate through online learning.

Addressing drop-outs

The transition to distance learning has left certain vulnerable groups behind who might be now at high risk of dropping out for different reasons, including those related to being unable to access online learning content or digital illiteracy. In addition to this, some students could choose to drop out of school in the wake of the pandemic in order to seek employment and support their families. Research suggests that increases in child labour are often associated with economic or financial shocks such as household unemployment. As families across the country struggle to make ends meet throughout this unprecedented economic crisis, the risk of increased child labour and dropping out of education must be addressed.


Students who were already at-risk to leave school need to be supported. To address the issue, there is a need for teachers and other school staff members to work closely with communities to identify these students at higher risk of dropping out, such as those who have historically had low attendance or performance at school. After identifying these students, it is to come up with more inclusive distance learning approaches to re-engage them. Alternatively, the MoE can cooperate with other actors in the education sector to implement a nationwide back to school campaign in August, gearing for the upcoming school year. Since 2013, the MoE, in cooperation with actors such as UNICEF and Save the Children, has launched several back to school campaigns especially targeting at-risk youth and Syrian refugee children and youth who are out of school. Now, more than ever, such a campaign prior to the new academic year is crucial to re-engage students, parents, and guardians on the benefits and importance of returning to school after a period of uncertainty and interruption.

Learning from the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa, UNESCO recommends providing vital services, such as free meals and psychosocial support at schools, after the crisis. This can encourage vulnerable students to seek out schools to access these important services.

Catch-up programs highlighted earlier will prove an essential bridge for students to eventually return to formal education, especially for students who could not participate in distance learning throughout the pandemic.



Online Safety



Students are spending more time online than ever before, and are thus increasingly at risk of cyber bullying, harassment and exploitation, and even data theft. The MoE should work to ensure that students and teachers are safe and observe safe online practices. To this end, the MoE should launch awareness-raising campaigns about online safety to raise awareness towards healthy and positive online practices, and on the risks associated with being online.

School boards and directorates around the world have asked parents and guardians to teach their children about how to be safe in online environments. UNICEF has developed recommendations for parents and guardians on cybersecurity, beginning with technological fixes to protect children online, working with them to develop safe online habits, and spending time with children online and keeping them safe using open communication. Some bodies recommend setting up parental controls on computers and smartphones, such as activating SafeSearch functions on browsers, to restrict potentially sensitive or mature content. Furthermore, the MoE should ensure that the education platforms it develops enforce high standards of cybersecurity measures for the safety of users and their data.

Roadmap for the long-term

As author and social activist Naomi Klein puts it, times of crisis and shock like the one we are currently experiencing are usually exploited to pass neo-liberal policies with little resistance. These times of change can also be used in the opposing direction, to create change towards more accessible and equitable and empathetic experiences of education.

The long-term plan should be about capitalizing on the current momentum of distance and online learning and various responses to: 1. maintaining and developing trust and partnerships between public, private, not-for-profit, and community bodies towards collaborative decision making and the development of shared objectives and plans, and in providing resources and capacities necessary to support these mutual objectives and plans; 2. incorporating blended learning elements that make use of both online and face-to-face learning into the education system, and most importantly; 3. working faster and more transparently on the implementation of education strategies (National Education Strategic Plan 2018-2022, National Strategy for Human Resource Development 2016-2025, and others) towards the pre-existing goals of providing access to quality education for learners from early childhood education all the way to Technical and Vocational Education and Training and Higher Education.

In order to do this in the longer-term, planning needs to start today, and to ensure the proper investment in a main player within the education system: teachers. COVID-19 has changed what it means to be a teacher. Throughout the crisis, teachers not only delivered content, but also became important facilitators between schools, parents, students, and the MoE.

They provided psychosocial support, adapted lesson plans and curricula, and created new forms of flexible content online, even making use of Facebook and WhatsApp to share educational content. They have had to shift from in-person to distance learning, and adapt alongside new platforms to deliver content and engage in their own professional development.

The crisis has drawn our attention to the needs of the teaching workforce, especially the need for greater professional development, training, and support for teachers. In 2019, Queen Rania Teacher Academy announced their plans to scale up pre-service teacher training through several public universities in Jordan, in order to prepare and equip aspiring teachers with the necessary practical and pedagogical skills before entering their classrooms. However, this crisis has indicated a need for new platforms, resources, and pedagogical approaches that teachers are not presently equipped with. Current predictions indicate that the provision of blended learning will only continue to grow, not only to increase preparedness in case of a future crisis, but also to support flipped classrooms and other teaching strategies in the future. This means that teachers should be equipped with skills to teach in both face-to-face and online environments. As a short-term measure, the government has set up a digital platform and encouraged teachers to participate in MOOCs for professional development in online teaching and learning. If these initiatives prove to be successful, MOOCs can become new tools to be used in teacher pre-service training and continuous professional development, making teacher training itself a blended process.

Ultimately, the long-term goal is to create a teaching workforce that is equipped with skills to deliver quality education including during emergencies, and be able to actively engage in partnerships with other actors to implement national education strategies.

On another front, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a risk to education funding. However, now is the most critical time to increase investment in education to enable developments in the many areas mentioned above, including infrastructural developments that are crucial to support further blended learning down the line. The educational system cannot be transformed into a stronger, fairer, more inclusive and more resilient system without the commitment of several bodies, starting with the government and ending with the various funding agencies, whether local or international, to increase funding for the education budget.

To sum, we have a golden opportunity now to expand the collective imagination of the purposes and modes of teaching, learning, and education at large. Times of crisis force us to adapt, but also allow the opportunity for re-building. This is an opportunity to broaden the education community, to bring back/in the role of parents and the household, to encourage independent learners and shape active citizens, and to redefine the role and value of the teacher both inside the classroom and within the community at large. It is an opportunity to reflect on what we would like to keep within education systems and what we would like to move away from or forward towards. It is an opportunity to build back better, and to be prepared for any future crisis.



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