

Education in the Time of COVID-19 in Jordan: Reflecting on Priority Short Term Responses

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In Jordan, more than [2 million students](#) across public, private, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) schools have had their education interrupted since schools closed in mid-March. With the spread of COVID-19, Jordan took the quick decision to implement lockdown but to continue with education, albeit delivering its content remotely. Learning from previous emergency situations, the government took note of the importance of maintaining education to provide a sense of normalcy as well as preventing the risk of student dropout from learning interruptions, and developed a quick plan of action.



Photo by Amjad Ghsoun

In this blog, we reflect on the current education system response to COVID-19 in Jordan, and envision further priorities around short-term interventions, based on emerging global resources and knowledge from education in emergency situations.

Roadmap for 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 they are 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, 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.

At the time of crisis, access to education might be of 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. It is important for MoE to work closely with other relevant ministries and agencies to identify and support the most disadvantaged students and their families.

Maximize Access

The decision of continuing education must accompany necessary support particularly to those who are most marginalized, the disabled, and refugee students. MoE has launched both low-tech and high-tech solutions to education during the pandemic, introducing [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. Thousands of students still do not have access to this 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 in which we currently live. For example, 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. In any case, regular assessment of accessibility of these provisions is crucial, tracking specific students in need for support which can be done through schools directly contacting families and students.

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 Internet connectivity, particularly in areas that are hard to reach. Furthermore, providing stationary is important to enable different learning processes. Equally important is to provide relevant information about how to access and use different platforms (including how to download new channels onto their TV), as well as basic information around digital literacy.

Throughout this process, it is important to ensure that the most marginalized, including refugee students in camps and host communities and students with disabilities, are able to access digital learning platforms. Any content that is developed needs to be adapted to be inclusive for students with visual or hearing impairments. At the moment, only one stream of 12th Grade content has been made available in sign language. Furthermore, understanding and addressing the barriers faced by [refugees](#) inside camps is important because they have limited access to electricity and interrupted Internet connections. It is important for MoE to clarify in its communications how their interventions seek to target these different marginalized groups.

Identify and communicate education outcome priorities

During this unprecedented health crisis, it might be counterproductive to aim for the same educational outcomes as originally planned for the school year. It is highly recommended that 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 still be able to engage in education meaningfully.

It is critical for MoE to maintain clear, open, and consistent lines of communication about expectations and education outcomes with all stakeholders, including students and parents, throughout the pandemic. Communicating possible scenarios in a timely manner and perhaps consulting the students and parents could help decrease anxiety.

From passive to active learning

Asynchronous learning 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. With regards to Darsak, a good place to start is 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 into multiple 15-20-minute clips. Additionally, adding a few summaries of key points and an exercise to test students' learning and reflective questions after each lesson would make the distance learning exciting and productive, and are easy to introduce into the current platform. The already available online classroom management platform, [Noorspace](#), should also be further developed to be more user friendly with extra features that enable students to engage with the educational contents, share comments, raise questions, and co-produce new content.

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 activities. Formative assessment and constructive feedback from teachers can promote learning for life rather than just to pass examinations.

The move to online learning can be an opportunity to develop new types of assignments and assessments, such as project work, learning logs and journals, eventually developing more self-directed and motivated learners. Nevertheless, the question still remains for how to conduct the least flexible milestone examinations such as, 'Tawjihi', the [General Secondary Education Certificate Examination](#).

Expanding relevant and timely content and access

It is important to capitalize on the strengths of online learning, especially those that are not possible in traditional educational environments. Educational material being developed and offered on Darsak should be made available and accessible for a longer period so that students are able to go back to it and repeat the content to enhance learning. However, at the moment, educational materials are only available for one week on Darsak.

On another front, the rapid development of online learning platforms and content can address the limitations of present curricula. For instance, content can be developed around COVID-19, focusing on physical and emotional well-being as well as personal hygiene. Other relevant topics

include media and information literacy and how to deal with emergencies, all of which are relevant and timely topics. These topics can be covered with fairly easily accessible educational materials, many of which can be adapted from available global resources to suit different age groups and backgrounds.

Additional support to parents and guardians

As the provision of teaching and learning has shifted 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) have had to perform multiple duties such as caretaking, supporting children's learning, and working full time. Others are unable to support children's learning due to their own educational level or are unable to accommodate caring for several children at different grade levels.

MoE should 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

MoE has developed a [platform for teachers](#) with Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) that aim to develop online learning skills and relevant pedagogical approaches. In order for teachers and schools leaders to engage in digital platforms and adapt them in their teaching, many will also require appropriate hardware as well as reliable Internet access. Teachers also need tips and guidelines to support themselves and students during this crisis, recognizing that many are also parents and guardians themselves. Additionally, MoE should establish a mechanism to engage with teachers and school leaders in relation to the medium and longer term responses, to better prepare them for the next steps in returning to a 'new normal'.

As the situation continues to change in Jordan, MoE is responding rapidly to ensure that basic educational needs are met for the current school term. In this blog post, we envisioned several critical short-term approaches that should be considered in the coming weeks and months. It is equally important for MoE to develop a parallel process for medium-term and long-term interventions.

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