

REGIONAL FORUM ON EDUCATION POLICY

Digital technologies to transform education in Latin America and the Caribbean

Virtual edition, 3-5 October 2023

The Regional Forum on Education Policy is an annual event that provides a space for dialogue, consultation, and reflection for education policymakers across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC). The purpose of this event is to analyze strategies to fulfill the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the Education 2030 Agenda. Each edition focuses on a specific theme. In 2023, over this three-day event, we will reflect on **how digital technologies can help transform education systems**.

Now in its seventh edition, the Forum is organized by the Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean of the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP-UNESCO), together with the UNESCO Regional Bureau for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (OREALC/UNESCO Santiago), the UNESCO International Bureau of Education (IBE-UNESCO), the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report), and the **Future of Learning and Innovation Team of UNESCO's Education Sector**.

1. Background

In 2015, countries all around the world adopted the 2030 Education Agenda and SDG 4, and thus stated their commitment to work towards ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education for all by 2030. Eight years later, and with only seven years to 2030, these goals are at risk of remaining unfulfilled ([OREALC/UNESCO, 2022](#)). Over the first two decades of this century, countries in LAC made significant progress towards educational inclusion. However, there are still historical debts, such as achieving universal education (especially at the initial and secondary levels), significantly and continuously improving learning levels, and reducing educational inequality among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sectors of society.

As part of this global commitment, the [2015 Incheon Declaration for Education 2030](#) states that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play an important role in “strengthening education systems, knowledge dissemination, information access, quality and effective learning, and more effective service provision” (p. 8). This was the first time ICTs were introduced as a tool to help achieve

SDG 4. At the same time, the [Education 2030 Framework for Action](#) called on governments to “be relevant and respond rapidly to [...] technological advances” and to help children, youth, and adults acquire “the flexible skills and competencies they need to live and work in a [...] technology-driven world” (p. 26). Furthermore, governments were urged to develop “relevant teaching and learning methods and content [...] taught by well-qualified [and] trained teachers [...] supported by appropriate information and communication technology”.

The first conference on ICTs for the 2030 Agenda was held in 2015 in Qingdao, China, with the aim of reflecting on how ICTs could be fully harnessed to strengthen education and help achieve SDG 4. Discussions highlighted the importance of ICTs in creating opportunities to reduce learning gaps, facilitating solutions to possible conflict or natural disasters, offering open resources to increase learning opportunities and learning materials, improving the quality of education and transforming learning, improving skills for the workplace, and generating solid data for policy-making to improve the management of education systems, among other recommendations ([Qingdao Declaration, 2015](#)). In 2019, the [Beijing Consensus on Artificial Intelligence and Education](#) was approved. This was the first document proposing recommendations and stating systematically integrating artificial intelligence (AI) in education can address the biggest challenges in education today, as well as help innovate teaching and learning practices to accelerate progress towards SDG 4.

More recently, the Transforming Education Summit (TES) took place in New York City, USA, in September 2022, with the aim of mobilizing action, solidarity, and solutions. The event zeroed in on [digital learning and transformation](#) among the five key action tracks to accelerate progress to transform education and achieve the Education 2030 Agenda. This track highlighted the role of digital technologies and resources in helping to improve learning by increasing access to content and teacher capacity, facilitating pedagogical approaches, helping learners to access information and knowledge, and providing education systems with expanded options to ensure quality education, including in emergency situations.

Finally, the Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM Report/UNESCO), which aims to monitor countries' progress in achieving SDG4, addresses in its [2023 edition](#) the link between technology and education. The document focuses on examining the impact of technologies in education to address certain educational challenges such as access, the improvement of basic skills, the management of education systems and the advancement of technological development. It also sheds light on the conditions that need to be met for technology to support education in terms of access to equipment and connectivity, teacher preparation, and governance and regulation to protect learners.

In sum, the conclusions of these agreements and consensus pinpoint **technology in general, and digital technologies in particular, as enablers to ensure access and inclusion, so that everyone can have**

quality education to be ready to live in an increasingly interconnected and complex world. These documents also mention technology's role in facilitating lifelong learning for teachers, rethinking alternative and innovative pedagogical approaches that are adapted to learners' needs, improving work skills, and helping to generate robust data and tools to improve the management of education systems.

2. Digital technologies and education in LAC

In recent decades, digital technologies have taken on an increasingly important role in the social and economic development of society. They have brought about substantial changes in the ways in which information and knowledge are produced and communicated. Therefore, the importance of analyzing the links between technological developments and education, and their impact on public policymaking, is now indisputable.

Since the mid-2000s, many governments in Latin America and the Caribbean have been investing heavily in formulating and implementing digital policies in education ([Lugo and Delgado, 2020](#)), arguing that these would help to substantially improve education systems. These policies have focused on educational actions aimed at strengthening student learning, digitizing education system management to improve access to information and decision-making, and guaranteeing learning continuity, mainly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some assumptions behind these policies were based on the widespread belief that integrating digital technologies into education systems would bring about some positive effects, such as:

- (a) progress in the educational **inclusion** of circumstantially or historically excluded populations, through the access to computers and the internet, and thus contribute to social integration;
- (b) **improvements in student learning**, including full digital literacy, by fostering changes in teachers' pedagogical practices and strengthening their professional development through continuous distance learning;
- (c) better **planning and management for education systems**, for example, by creating more robust information systems that would allow for better monitoring of educational trajectories, and optimizing procedures for managing human and budgetary resources.

Despite the high expectations and the resources invested in the region, although there are some outstanding experiences, results seem to be meagre ([IIEP-UNESCO, 2022](#)). We are, therefore, forced to engage with this debate on a deeper and more complex level, to overcome the view that sees technology as the key to solving problems such as exclusion, low-quality education, and the ineffective management of education systems. Today, in light of this experience, it should be evident that

introducing digital technologies in education does not automatically alter the structural conditions of the organizational and pedagogical model of education systems ([IIEP-UNESCO, 2019](#)). Digital technologies cannot – by themselves – be credited with an impact on improving educational inclusion, student achievement, or school system management. To accomplish this, we must discuss in depth, for example, how learning times, spaces, and groups in schools are decided and how digital technologies can help design pedagogical proposals that enable learning, among other recommendations made in the recent study *Políticas digitales en educación en América Latina* (Digital policies in education in Latin America) ([IIEP-UNESCO, 2022](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that educational inequality is expressed not only in poor access to education, but also in learning gaps. The speedy integration of digital technologies during the context of emergency remote learning produced a paradoxical result: On the one hand, technologies enabled educational continuity and helped to mitigate the effects of social isolation, but on the other hand, unequal socio-economic conditions led to deeper educational gaps. There is strong evidence that these inequalities have most affected lower socio-economic groups, rural communities, Indigenous populations, and people with disabilities or different educational needs, i.e. traditionally excluded groups ([IIEP-UNESCO, 2022](#)). A lesson learned from the pandemic is that the potential of digital technologies to increase the quality and inclusiveness of education systems, by improving student learning and expanding coverage, depends on enabling conditions. These include connectivity, access to appropriate devices, and robust training in educational technologies for teachers and intermediate actors in education systems, such as head teachers, supervisors, and education officials (IIEP-UNESCO, in press).

The progress in the digitization of planning and management processes and their impact on education system governance faces two challenges. The first is linked to the limited use of educational management and information systems (EMIS) in the region's education systems. Digitizing management procedures is a must for robust information systems, but it is not sufficient to ensure they are used for decision-making. The second challenge is related to the progress in the digital transformation of management processes. The most recent data indicate that most countries in the region continue to collect physical data ([UIS-UNESCO, 2020](#)), and that many EMIS are at an incipient level, with a low level of digital development, due to conditions linked to technological infrastructure ([IADB, 2021](#)).

In short, the regional scenario for digital technologies for education still has many challenges. Despite the high expectations on the digitization of education systems, their limitations were largely associated with the lack of an approach that would articulate this with other initiatives to actively address exclusion and low-quality education.

Digital technologies are an unavoidable tool for governments. Therefore, it is necessary to define their limits and potential to improve and transform education. Moving in this direction requires a deep and

honest reflection on the successes and failures both in the design and implementation of digital technologies in education. This analysis should question the assumptions and set more realistic expectations based on the experience of the region in recent years.

3. The Regional Forum on Education Policy 2023

This will be a virtual event, divided into two parts:

Part I will take place on the first day of the event, and will include an opening session and three panels. These will all take place via Zoom and will also be streamed on the Forum's website, available in real time to anyone interested in the topic.

1. **Opening session.** This will include the opening remarks from the organizing offices and the keynote presentation.
2. **Panels.** They will address the issues in a conceptual way, through three thematic areas linked to the use of digital technologies in education. Panels will be led by subject-matter experts and, in some cases, will also include representatives of international organizations.
 - a. The **first panel** will explore the **current state of digital technologies in the education systems of the region**. Speakers will analyze the current access and use of these technologies in teaching and learning. They will also assess the integration of technology into the planning and management of education systems. In addition, they will present innovations and findings on Latin America's use and integration of digital technologies in education. Emerging trends and new scenarios for the future will be identified, highlighting statistical gaps and issues that hinder progress in diagnosing and measuring the impact of digital technology integration in education systems.
 - b. The **second panel** will address the **opportunities and challenges from using digital technologies as tools for educational inclusion and for improving teaching and learning processes**. Speakers will identify and consider some technology-based educational models intended to promote pedagogical innovation, reduce gaps in accessing knowledge, and minimize educational exclusion — all while promoting access to and appropriation of knowledge. Special attention will be given to so-called “hybrid” models, both for their potential to organize teaching processes in a flexible and open way and their possibilities to promote educational inclusion in specific contexts.
 - c. The **third panel** will address **technology's potential for improving the planning and management of education systems**, mainly by offering tools to improve information systems and data production. The panel will identify a policy agenda that can contribute to more

efficient information and management systems for the planning and management of education systems by governments in the region.

Part II will cover the second and third day of the event, which will include two workshops and the closing session. This part will be exclusively available for participants representing the Member States of the region, representatives of international organizations, and guests.

3. **Workshops.** Participants will work in small discussion groups, where they will take up the inputs presented in the panels and collectively reflect on how countries in the region can respond, in a practical way, to the challenges posed by the use of digital technologies in the region's education systems for education policymaking.
4. **Closing session.** In this last part of the Regional Forum, there will be a plenary session to share the lessons learned and the recommendations that emerged from the workshops, as well as a final presentation with the general conclusions.

4. Preliminary agenda

Tuesday, 3 October

GMT -3	Activities
11:00-12:00 <small>(Click on the links to see the time in your city)</small>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opening remarks • Welcome address to the 2023 edition of the Regional Forum • Keynote presentation
12:00-13:15	Panel 1: The state of digital technologies in education systems
13:15-13:30	Coffee break
13:30-14:45	Panel 2: Digital technologies for educational inclusion and learning improvement

Wednesday, 4 October

GMT -3	Activities
11:00-12:15	Panel 3: Digital technologies for the planning and management of education systems
12:15-12:30	Coffee break
12:30-15:00	Workshop 1: The planning of digital technologies in education

Thursday, 5 October

GMT -3	Activities
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11:00-13:30	Workshop 2: Strengthening the digital ecosystem: the case of EMIS and EWS as tools for management and planning
13:30-14:00	Coffee break
14:00-15:00	Closing session