United Nations Transforming Education Summit

TES Leaders Day: Spotlight Sessions (19 September, 2022)

Gateways to Public Digital Learning:
A multi-partner initiative to create and strengthen inclusive digital learning platforms and content

Reaffirming digital learning as a public good

UNESCO and UNICEF are launching a Global Initiative on Public Digital Learning to map, describe and analyze existing public platforms and content; help countries create and strengthen national platforms; identify and share best practices; and establish international norms and standards to guide the development of platforms in ways that advance national and international goals for education.

The time has come for countries as well as the international community to treat digital technology and virtual environments as core to the educational enterprise. They demand the same rigor, care and attention that are paid to the physical infrastructure of learning. Schools and their resources have long been treated as public goods. And rightly so. They benefit everyone and, as such, demand public support, oversight, and governance. The same needs to be done for the digital spaces and infrastructures of learning. The UNESCO-UNICEF Initiative will take concrete actions in close partnership with countries and drawing on the expertise of other organizations, groups, and alliances to close this gap and ensure more universal access to high quality digital learning platforms and content. All learners deserve opportunities to learn through high-quality digital gateways to education and this Initiative will move the world closer to this goal.

Background

Well into the 21st century and 20 years since the start of the Open Education Resources (OER) movement, progress to establish and strengthen public digital learning platforms and content remains deeply uneven. Many countries still do not have publicly sanctioned digital platforms for education and, even when they do, the platforms and the learning content they host are often of very low quality. Progress to build digital spaces dedicated to supporting education, boosted by COVID-19 induced school closures, has lost momentum and, in many places, backtracked. Over one-third of national digital learning platforms built during the pandemic are no longer functional or maintained. Today, despite the growing ubiquity of connected technology, public digital learning platforms and learning resources either do not exist or are difficult to find, difficult to navigate, lack quality and breadth, and are inaccessible to large numbers of learners and teachers.

Going forward this needs to change. It is imperative that countries and the broader international community get the fast-moving transition of education into digital spaces right. The virtual spaces of education that are increasingly central to teaching and learning must be developed and, if necessary, reengineered to support education as a public good and human right. A movement to assert the importance of freely accessible digital learning platforms and content will accelerate this endeavour.

Universally accessible public digital learning platforms – including websites, tools, and apps – carry enormous benefits. They can deliver rich and engaging content beneficial to learners, teachers, caregivers and other education stakeholders and can complement and enrich school-based education. They can also assure the continuity of learning and expand educational options for learners facing disadvantages due to disability, geography, conflict, poverty, ethnicity, language, gender, and/or other factors. They further carry unique potential to provide learning opportunities for learners outside formal education systems, such as migrants and refugees. Beyond helping learners, public digital platforms can extend assistance to teachers and caregivers and facilitate more active, stimulating, and collaborative ways of teaching and learning, both in and outside of classrooms.

In helping all countries establish and iteratively improve high-quality public platforms, the Gateways to Public Digital Learning Initiative is in line with UN-wide efforts to strengthen the public digital commons, including the UN Secretary General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, Our Common Agenda, the Global Rewired Declaration on Connectivity for Education, as well as the commitments made at the Transforming Education Summit.

Three keys to unlock the potential of digital learning

As affirmed during the Transforming Education Summit and in the Call to Action on Assuring and Improving Quality Digital Public Learning for All, there are three 'keys' to digital learning: content, capacity, and connectivity.

Key No 1: Content: High quality, curriculum-relevant digital teaching and learning content must be made available and accessible to all learners, teachers and caregivers through digital learning platforms.

Key No 2: Capacity: Capacity to use digital technology to improve learning must be strengthened to ensure teachers, learners and other education stakeholders have the skills and knowledge needed to leverage digital tools for learning using evidence-based approaches.

Key No 3: Connectivity: Digital connectivity ensures that all schools and individuals have the ability to benefit from the educational advantages that come with good quality internet connections.

The overlooked key of content and strengthening public digital public platforms for learning

Robust national and international efforts, such as Giga and the Global Education Coalition, already exist to advance progress towards connectivity and capacity building, in recognition of their importance to transform education through digital learning. However, all too often, countries as well as the international community, do not fully realize the importance of freely accessible national education platforms populated with high quality digital learning content. This is the overlooked key.

While the Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has called necessary attention to the importance of freely and openly accessible content, what is often missing are platforms which make this content accessible to teachers and learners, in particular the most marginalized. High quality platforms assure there is a 'front door' for public education on the internet – a trusted and reliable 'first port of call' for connected learning, and one that does not rely on advertising, data mining and monthly subscription fees. A global movement to establish and strengthen public digital learning platforms will directly complement wider efforts to expand digital connectivity and capacities for education. It will further help increase demand for connectivity and provide greater incentive to develop digital capacities. In reinforcing the 'content key' of digital learning, it is possible to buttress the other two keys of 'capacity' and 'connectivity'.

Actions to establish public digital learning platforms must not entail a divestment in schooling as an in-person experience conducted in a community of peers and led by skilled teachers. It is rather a process of turning digital environments into hubs and centres that enrich learning in ways that complement, improve, and extend the vital work that happens in brick-and-mortar education institutions.

Harnessing the power of technology for education will ripple through every corner of education and catalyse transformations beyond technology itself. It will lead to changes in teaching and learning by enabling, for example, students to learn fundamental concepts through dynamic multimedia digital content and then apply these concepts practically and collaboratively at school. It will help reinvent assessment and move it away from merely ranking and sorting and towards formative evaluations that can identify and fill knowledge and skills gaps in ways that facilitate educational progression. Most importantly, it can help close, rather than widen, equity gaps in learning opportunities by, for example, ensuring the accessibility of educational content for students with disabilities and bringing world class learning resources to underprivileged children, youth, and adults.

The Gateways to Public Digital Learning Initiative

Objective and proposed actions

The main objective of the Initiative is to establish and technically support an international movement to ensure that every learner, teacher, and family can easily access, find, and use high-quality and curriculum-aligned digital education content to advance their learning.

In most contexts, content should be accessible via a national platform that is overseen, sustained, and improved with public resources. These platforms should be free for all users and complement and support teaching and learning that happens in school. They should also open avenues for self-driven education and lifelong learning.

The Initiative will further seek to help countries recognize and act on national, regional and global possibilities to advance education through digital cooperation and solidarity. The internet allows unprecedented – although currently underutilized – possibilities for sharing, cooperation, and the pooling of resources that can benefit learners, teachers and families within countries and also across them. This Initiative aims to maximize these collaborative actions.

The Initiative is also a natural extension of the Transforming Education Summit Call to Action to Assure and Improve Quality Public Digital Learning. As part of this Call to Action, countries were invited to make two important commitments concerning the 'content key' of digital learning:

- Establish and iteratively improve public digital learning platforms with high quality, curriculum-aligned education resources, ensuring they are free, open, and accessible for all, in line with UNESCO's Recommendation on Open Educational Resources, while also protecting the privacy, safety and data security of users.

- Ensure these platforms empower teachers, learners, and families, support accessibility and sharing of content, and meet the diverse needs of users including learners with disabilities, speakers of minority languages, girls and women, and people on the move.

To complement and facilitate the realization of these two commitments, the Gateways to Public Digital Learning Initiative will advance progress across three components: #1 A Global Gateway; #2 Evidence Generation and Good Practices; #3 Norms and Standards.

Component #1: Global Gateway to Public Digital Learning Platforms (UNESCO and UNICEF led)

Action: Create and maintain a global gateway to existing public digital learning platforms sanctioned or formally recommended by ministries of education or other public authorities. Most of this work will be centred on national platforms but will also include relevant regional platforms. The Global Gateway will provide detailed information about the quality of each platform and monitor indicators established through the analysis of evidence and best practices (Component #2) and building on the norms and standards (Component #3).

Description: The gateway, to be established and maintained by UNESCO and UNICEF, will provide rich descriptions of different public digital learning platforms, including, for example, details about reach, content organization, constituencies served, quality-control processes, governance, funding, planned improvements, and differences to other public digital learning platforms that might be used in a particular country. The gateway will display quantitative and qualitative information about digital learning platforms and content, highlighting indicators and gaps related to accessibility, inclusion, equity, safety, and overall quality. Indicators and targets will be established in consultation with an expert group (see section on Partners), and the gateway will also monitor and map progress in achieving these targets. This information will be presented in a user-friendly format and incorporate a map and various dashboard views. The gateway will be tailored to assist cross-country analysis of emerging trends concerning public digital education platforms. It will also aim to highlight good and innovative practices and facilitate the sharing of country experiences related to the establishment, maintenance, and iterative improvement of public platforms for learning. Finally, the gateway will help establish channels of communication and dialogue with countries about their platforms. This will maximize opportunities for countries to cooperate through knowledge sharing and peer learning.

Component #2. Evidence Generation and Good Practices (UNICEF led)

Action: Create and showcase good practices, research, and evidence about digital education resources and platforms, across different contexts, focusing on equity, scalability, safety, and impact.

Description: Sharing of robust research will support evidence-informed decision making and help ensure the impact of the Initiative. Good practices and case studies, in particular from 'champion countries', will serve to provide inspiration and guidance. Through this component, the Initiative will highlight examples of high-quality platforms built and improved in different contexts across the globe. It will pay special attention to platforms and resources that are reaching and meeting the needs of the most marginalized. The initiative will establish an evidence base of "what works" for digital resources and platforms and develop a searchable database (repository) of case studies and best practices. This will serve to guide country efforts to establish and strengthen public digital learning platforms with the aim of making them safer and more accessible, usable, and equitable for end-users, including by developing guidance on reaching remote and marginalised populations, supporting teacher-centred solutions, and on ensuring accessibility of digital platforms in contexts of limited or no connectivity and on low-cost mobile devices. It will also include guidance and learning resources for national monitoring and evidence generation. The work will be undertaken in collaboration with partners, including EdTech Hub, and help lay foundations for norms and standards (Component #3).

In support of this component, UNESCO will produce occasional case studies, think pieces and foresight work to help shine light on emerging and futures trends. Specific work will unpack, for example, options available to countries to manage digital content approval processes or the implications of technological innovations for digital learning platforms.

Component #3: Norms and Standards (UNESCO led)

<u>Action:</u> Establish international norms and standards to help countries ensure the quality of public digital learning platforms and inform national targets and benchmarks.

<u>Description:</u> Creating and sustaining digital platforms for education involves technical, legal, institutional, and economic challenges that encompass national, regional and global actors. Governments as well as schools will be well served with coherent visions of what public digital learning platforms should entail. This will help clarify steps required to establish and improve platforms from very different starting points and in diverse contexts.

Benchmarks and standards for developing and strengthening public digital platforms for education will draw on an analysis of existing public platforms (Component #1), as well as good practices and the experiences of countries with robust learning platforms already in place (Component #2). The norms and standards work will also look beyond what currently exists to consider what *might* and *should* exist. This Component will examine what functionalities, content and characteristics that are not already in place should be hallmarks of excellent quality public platforms for learning. This will provide a basis to identify 'platforms of excellence' – platforms that meet or exceed rigorous quality standards – a designation that can be indicated on the Global Gateway (Component #1).

UNESCO will work closely with Member States that might wish to propose a formal UNESCO Recommendation concerning digital learning platforms. Such a Recommendation would establish international consensus about the aims and core characteristics public digital learning platforms.

In support of this component, UNICEF will advance work to clarify equity, accessibility and online safety standards in collaboration with relevant partners.

Monitoring

Digital learning does not feature prominently in the Sustainable Development Goals, and the few indicators that exist to track it and assure accountability have major gaps and provide only a blurry sense of the availability and quality of digital learning opportunities. Given the growing importance of digital learning, it is necessary to develop better and clearer indicators and targets that provide a more complete snapshot of how countries and the world are advancing commitments to harness the power of the digital and internet revolution for education.

Goals, targets, commitments, and actions concerning national digital learning platforms will need to be realistic to monitor and at a reasonable cost. The existence of platforms, key indicators concerning quality and equity, and data about the volume and frequency with which platforms are used and by whom are fairly straightforward to measure.

The Gateways to Public Digital Learning Initiative will – across its three components – monitor the development and quality of public platforms and content and track progress towards targets. It will do this by mapping, as a first step, the existence of publicly sanctioned learning platforms and content (component #1). The identification of good practices (component #2) will enlarge possibilities for monitoring the quality of public platforms, as will the development of norms and standards (component #3).

Partners

The global Gateways to Public Digital Learning initiative will draw on the expertise of global, regional, and national partners, many of whom already have significant roles and experiences in the field of digital learning.

Specifically, the global initiative will leverage:

- Partners involved in the Transforming Education Summit Digital Learning Action Track
- Champion countries with experiences in successfully scaling equitable digital learning platforms and initiatives (initially Argentina, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Egypt, Mongolia, Nigeria, Spain, Switzerland, the UAE, and Uruguay).
- Regional and international institutions active in the area of digital learning.
- The Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation.
- Existing global initiatives about digital learning and connectivity, including GIGA, with the objective of catalysing action for high-impact, equitable and sustainable change.

The Initiative will mobilize partners to establish international expert groups that will inform and guide the work under each of the three components:

Component 1: **Reference Group** composed of 6-10 international experts to guide work on the global gateway to public digital learning platforms and content.

Component 2: **Evidence Group** composed of 3-4 organisations with expertise in education research and evidence-building.

Component 3: **Advisory Group** composed of a large and diverse group of national and international experts contributing in their individual capacity.

At the regional level, the initiative will seek to help countries come together to act on regional possibilities to advance education through digital collaboration and solidarity, building on existing efforts. Towards this end, regional organizations will be encouraged to collate and disseminate research, evidence, and best practices on digital learning between countries; establish networks of champion countries; and develop and disseminate education resources through regional platforms (for example, across countries that share a common language).

Preliminary List of Partners:

Co-leads: UNESCO and UNICEF

Global Technical Partners: Digital Public Goods Alliance, EdTech Hub, Global Education Monitoring Report, GenU, ITU, Giga, UIS, UNHCR, World Bank

Alignment: Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Digital Cooperation

Champion Countries: Argentina, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Egypt, Mongolia, Nigeria, Spain, Switzerland, United Arab Emirates, Uruguay

The Initiative will build on the work of organizations and partners involved in digital public resources for education, such as those developing freely accessible reading books (e.g., Global Digital Library, Library For All, Bibliothèques Sans Frontières), open educational resources (e.g., OER Africa, OER Commons, OER Dynamic Coalition), freely accessible digital platforms (e.g., Learning Passport, Global Education Coalition, Digital Public Goods Alliance), co-creation with youth (e.g., Generation Unlimited, Learning to Action), and convening organisations (e.g., mEducation Alliance).