



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

# Education in a post-COVID world:

## Nine ideas for public action

International Commission on the Futures of Education



Futures of  
Education

LEARNING TO BECOME

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United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
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## Futures of Education: Learning to become

The International Commission on the Futures of Education was established by UNESCO in 2019 to reimagine how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet. The initiative incorporates extensive public and expert engagement and aims to catalyze a global debate on how education needs to be rethought in a world of increasing complexity, uncertainty, and fragility.

## Futures of Education

LEARNING TO BECOME

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Education in a post-COVID world

Nine ideas for public action

International Commission on the Futures of Education



## PREFACE

The global health pandemic has shined a harsh light on the vulnerabilities and challenges humanity faces. It has provided a clear picture of existing inequalities—and a clearer picture of what steps forward we need to take, chief among them addressing the education of more than 1.5 billion students whose learning has been hampered due to school closures.

This report is the result of the collective work of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, established by UNESCO in 2019. I would like to acknowledge the Members of the Commission for contributing to the timely preparation of this report.

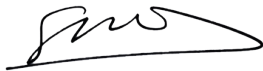
It presents nine key ideas for navigating through the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, contending that we cannot forget core principles and known strengths as we face unprecedented disruption to economies, societies and—our particular focus here—education systems.

It is evident that we cannot return to the world as it was before. One of the strongest messages in the attached report is that our common humanity necessitates global solidarity. We cannot accept the levels of inequality that have been permitted to emerge on our shared planet. It is particularly important that the world supports developing countries with investment in 21st century education infrastructures; this will require the mobilization of resources and support from developed countries, in particular with debt cancellation, restructuring, and new financing. The magnitude of this challenge is clearly evident with regard to the digital divide in Africa. For example, only 11% of learners in sub-Saharan Africa have a household computer and only 18% have household internet, as compared to the 50% of learners globally who have computers in the home and the 57% who have access to internet. Already we see that the disruptions brought on by the pandemic are exacerbating inequalities both within and across countries. We urgently need investment and structural change so that short-term setbacks do not grow into larger, long-lasting problems.

There is a serious risk that COVID-19 will wipe out several decades of progress—most notably the progress that has been made in addressing poverty and gender equality. While the pandemic demonstrates that we belong to one interconnected humanity, social

and economic arrangements mean that the impacts of the virus are disparate and unjust. Gender discrimination means that girls' educational attainments are likely to suffer greatly, with a risk of many not returning to school post-COVID-19. This is not something we should accept; we must do everything in our power to prevent it.

COVID-19 has the potential to radically reshape our world, but we must not passively sit back and observe what plays out. Now is the time for public deliberation and democratic accountability. Now is the time for intelligent collective action.



**Her Excellency Sahle-Work Zewde**

President of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia

Chair of the International Commission on the Futures of Education

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Decisions made today in the context of COVID-19 will have long-term consequences for the futures of education. Policy-makers, educators and communities must make high-stakes choices today—these decisions should be guided by shared principles and visions of desirable collective futures.

COVID-19 has revealed vulnerabilities; it has also surfaced extraordinary human resourcefulness and potential. This is a time for pragmatism and quick action, but it is also a moment when more than ever we cannot abandon scientific evidence. Nor can we operate without principles. Choices must be based on a humanistic vision of education and development and human rights frameworks.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides many of the necessary signposts and guidelines. In this report, the **International Commission on the Futures of Education**—established by UNESCO in 2019 and composed of thought leaders from the worlds of academia, science, government, business and education—presents **nine ideas for concrete actions today that will advance education tomorrow**.

- 1. Commit to **strengthen education as a common good**.** Education is a bulwark against inequalities. In education as in health, we are safe when everybody is safe; we flourish when everybody flourishes.
- 2. Expand the definition of **the right to education**** so that it addresses the importance of connectivity and access to knowledge and information. The Commission calls for a global public discussion—that includes, among others, learners of all ages—on ways the right to education needs to be expanded.
- 3. Value **the teaching profession and teacher collaboration**.** There has been remarkable innovation in the responses of educators to the COVID-19 crisis, with those systems most engaged with families and communities showing the most resilience. We must encourage conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively.

“ We cannot return to  
the world as it was before ”

4. Promote **student, youth and children’s participation and rights**. Intergenerational justice and democratic principles should compel us to prioritize the participation of students and young people broadly in the co-construction of desirable change.
5. Protect the **social spaces provided by schools** as we transform education. The school as a physical space is indispensable. Traditional classroom organization must give way to a variety of ways of ‘doing school’ but the school as a separate space-time of collective living, specific and different from other spaces of learning must be preserved.
6. Make **free and open source technologies available to teachers and students**. Open educational resources and open access digital tools must be supported. Education cannot thrive with ready-made content built outside of the pedagogical space and outside of human relationships between teachers and students. Nor can education be dependent on digital platforms controlled by private companies.
7. Ensure **scientific literacy within the curriculum**. This is the right time for deep reflection on curriculum, particularly as we struggle against the denial of scientific knowledge and actively fight misinformation.
8. Protect **domestic and international financing of public education**. The pandemic has the power to undermine several decades of advances. National governments, international organizations, and all education and development partners must recognize the need to strengthen public health and social services but simultaneously mobilize around the protection of public education and its financing.
9. Advance **global solidarity to end current levels of inequality**. COVID-19 has shown us the extent to which our societies exploit power imbalances and our global system exploits inequalities. The Commission calls for renewed commitments to international cooperation and multilateralism, together with a revitalized global solidarity that has empathy and an appreciation of our common humanity at its core.

COVID-19 presents us with a real challenge and a real responsibility. These ideas invite debate, engagement and action by governments, international organizations, civil society, educational professionals, as well as learners and stakeholders at all levels.



## INTRODUCTION

In 2019 UNESCO launched the *Futures of Education: Learning to become* initiative with the aim of rethinking education and reimagining how knowledge and learning can shape the future of humanity and the planet. Even though we were inspired by a sense that the uncertainty, complexity and fragility of the world was accelerating, we were all far from thinking that in mere months a global health pandemic would remind us that dramatic changes can occur more suddenly and more unexpectedly than anyone expects. With a sense that the future is now—and the idea that how we respond to COVID-19 and its many layers of disruption will have significant implications in the short- and long-term—we believe this initiative has taken on a new necessity and pressing urgency.

COVID-19 has brought many existing patterns and trends to the surface. On the one hand, we have been shown many weaknesses and vulnerabilities: these include an accentuation of inequality, risks that follow from the privatization of education, and just how unprepared we were for a massive shift to digital and distance learning. On the other hand, some positive features within our societies have also become increasingly visible. We are seeing solidarity and a strong, resilient response to challenges in many societies. We are seeing increased attention to the public good. And, we are seeing resourcefulness, dedication and creativity from the many teachers, families and students who are collaboratively building remarkable learning experiences.

COVID-19 has brought dangerous times for public education, with risks of fragmentation and unravelling as we stand to lose both teachers and students who may not return to schools once they reopen. A certain privatization occurs when learning moves from schools into the home. We should be concerned that we can already hear claims that the current emergency and ad-hoc measures should be transformed into lasting reforms. Nonetheless, we also need to recognize that many parents and communities have awakened to an appreciation of teachers' work and their professionalism. More and more people are becoming aware of the multiple roles that schools play in providing for the well-being of children and youth, and in ensuring health and nutrition, alongside academic learning. This increased awareness and appreciation can serve as the basis for a new revival of public education.

The pandemic has forced a massive shift away from learning and teaching in traditional settings with physical interactions. This is a major problem for children living in poverty worldwide, who often rely on the physical setting of their schools to provide educational materials, guidance, and, sometimes, the only decent meal of the day. In their homes, especially during times of confinement or quarantine, children can face multiple forms of

“ We call on all education stakeholders to monitor that education resources are used for the sole purpose of advancing the interests and capabilities of learners ”

abuse and violence. Crowded conditions, a general lack of resources, particularly digital devices and connectivity, mean that typically the cost—in terms of education and general well-being—of the current health crisis will be highest for populations that are already vulnerable. And, for learners of all ages, as internships and apprenticeships have been cancelled, technical and vocational education programmes closed down, and community centres shuttered, it is those who have the least resources to begin with who will be harmed the most. These are problems that must be tackled now, lest disadvantage propel further disadvantages.

In the renewal of education, human interaction and well-being must be given priority. Technology—particularly digital technology that enables communication, collaboration and learning across distance—is a formidable tool, not a panacea but a source of innovation and expanded potentials. Yet we should be increasingly concerned that a shift to remote online learning will exacerbate inequalities, not only in the Global South but even in the most well-resourced corners of the planet. We must ensure that digitalization does not undermine privacy, free expression, informational self-determination or lead to abusive surveillance. It is an illusion to think that online learning is the way forward for all.

To safeguard the right to education under the extraordinary circumstances created by the pandemic, and to facilitate the levels of trust necessary for global collaboration in mobilizing resources to support the universal right to education, we call on all education stakeholders to monitor that education resources are used for the sole purpose of advancing the interests and capabilities of learners. It is necessary to be especially vigilant of corruption and prevent the capture and diversion of education resources to advance private aims.

In recent weeks, numerous documents have been issued by a wide range of organizations providing extensive guidance on how to react to this crisis. Our intention here is to identify and focus on the areas where immediate decisions made now in the short-term have the greatest potential long-term implications. In these moments of crisis and uncertainty, we have to reaffirm our principles, otherwise we are at the mercy of the idea-of-the-week or illusory ready-made “solutions”. Nothing can substitute for collaborative work, collective thinking, dialogue and co-construction.

Three core commitments should always be remembered: public education, common goods, and global solidarity. This is not the time to step back and weaken these principles, but

“ The current crisis is reminding us how crucial public education is in societies, communities, and in individual lives ”

rather to affirm and reinforce them. We have opportunities to protect and advance public education, to fortify global common goods, and to advance international cooperation as we reassemble solidarity. We would be wise to seize the moment: history has taught us that transformational change can happen suddenly and often in the immediate aftermath of crisis.

The current crisis is reminding us how crucial public education is in societies, communities, and in individual lives. We have been reminded that education is a bulwark against inequality—and of the importance of schooling in enabling lives of dignity and purpose. As we embrace this exceptional opportunity to transform the world, and as we reimagine the organization of our educational institutions and learning environments, we will need to think about what we want to become. We have arrived at a moment—however unexpectedly—where collectively revisiting the purposes of education and organization of learning has become imperative.

In consideration of our mandate to reflect on alternative and possible futures, UNESCO's International Commission on the Futures of Education has decided to focus on ways to be helpful at this unprecedented moment in history, one that is causing a severe disruption in educational opportunity around the world. We offer the guidance below in a spirit of humility and in an effort to illuminate the ethical dilemmas and choices in front of us now.

in referring to a post-COVID world in the title of this report we mean both that the world will be profoundly transformed by the present pandemic—and that at some point our education systems will regain some kind of normalcy in their functioning. This should not be a continuation of the world as it was. It should be the world that is more just, more sustainable, and more peaceful.

This report is also written with a strong conviction that humanity must achieve a healthier relationship with the natural world. COVID-19 is the latest in a series of developments which show us that our humanism cannot be as narrow as it once was. We cannot separate humanity from the rest of the planet and this must be born in mind as we work to shape desirable alternative futures.

This report is organized around *nine ideas for public action*, which invite debate, engagement and action by governmental authorities, education professionals, researchers, as well as learners of all ages and society as a whole. We hope you find inspiration in these ideas and are impelled to action.

## 1. A STRENGTHENED PUBLIC COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION AS A COMMON GOOD

The Commission calls for a strengthened public commitment to education as a common good that is based in inclusion and solidarity, and supports individual and collective flourishing.

This pandemic has magnified many of the long-standing challenges facing humanity. The uneven opportunities that divide people within and across nations in fact seem to be worsening. Resilient societies that maximize human potential require a broad distribution of capabilities and a diversity of talents.

Public health and public education are closely interconnected as they show the undeniable necessity of collaboration, solidarity and collective action for the common good. This global health pandemic will not be defeated by health measures alone. It will be solved by building civic trust, deepening human empathy, progressing in science, and appreciating our common humanity. Education authorities should work in a coordinated manner with public health authorities. Each needs the other; each is underscored by a recognition of interdependencies that arise in a public space.

We cannot allow public health and public education to be posed in opposition to one another. Instead, our actions should be attuned to the synergies and overlaps between the two around human and societal well-being.

A strengthened commitment to education as a common good means an awareness that we are educating not just children and young people—but that we are educating publics. In addition, community-engaged and community-led learning is a key component of education and must be central to any strategy that addresses present and future challenges. Education has special significance for refugees and in societies scarred by armed conflict and civil strife. However, across the board in all settings education is our most important vehicle to ensure individual and societal flourishing.

The global pandemic has made visible the central role of adult education and lifelong learning, as people of all ages now need to learn to create new ways of (re)organizing social, economic and political life. The closure of public museums, libraries, and community centres has reminded us of the critical, complementary roles that these institutions play vis-a-vis schools and the ways that they too must be considered an essential part of a broad understanding of *public* education.

Many states cannot face this public health crisis without the help of society at large, through practices of self-isolation, distancing, hygiene, self-monitoring, and mutual caring. The social has been rediscovered. French philosopher Edgar Morin recently observed that even

“Public health and public education are closely interconnected as they show the undeniable necessity of collaboration, solidarity and collective action for the common good”

though we have seen a deterioration of solidarity in recent decades, “the pandemic and confinement have shown an awakening of solidarity, with numerous examples, especially in poor neighborhoods.” This is very clearly the case in education, with communities realizing the central role that public education plays in our interdependent lives. We realize that every dimension of well-being positively impacts others. In public education as in public health, the focus must be on cooperation not competition. We are safe when everybody is safe; we flourish when everybody flourishes.

## 2. AN EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING OF THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

The Commission calls for a global public discussion—that includes, among others, learners of all ages—on ways the right of education might need to be broadened to reflect changing contexts, learning throughout life, and the importance of access to knowledge and information.

Education is a fundamental and universal human right. Societies should make every effort to sustain it, by any means necessary. States, which are recognized under international law as duty bearers for fulfilling the right to education, bear the responsibility to facilitate and provide education, as well as respect and protect the right to education. In these times of disruption we have seen how difficult it is to ensure the availability of functioning educational institutions and programmes, and at acceptable levels of quality. All parties must commit to ensuring that any retrogression is temporary, truly prompted by emergency conditions, and redressed as soon as that becomes possible—so that the recent decades of progress are not undone, and so that the 2020s do not become a decade of lost opportunity.

Given the importance of a strengthened public commitment to education as a common good, we should also explore how knowledge itself should be considered a global common good. This requires us to think well beyond expanding and democratizing the ways knowledge is accessed. We must increasingly also consider the ways that the production and circulation of knowledge intersects with the right to education, whether this takes the form of a right to research or the imperative to respectfully engage with indigenous and

“ We should consider ways that the right to education might need to be broadened to encompass fluidity, capillarity and the changing contexts of contemporary societies ”

local knowledges. The COVID-19 crisis has shown us that the right to education needs to be flexible and adapted to different contexts and to the needs of changing societies. An updating and broadening of the right to education has clearly become necessary.

The deployment of radio and television to support the continuation of students' academic learning during COVID-19 school closures reminds us of the importance of these media for education, culture and general knowledge, especially for students who lack access to online materials and smart devices. The COVID-19 crisis has also revealed the massive importance of digital connectivity and online platforms—to the extent that we need to begin considering access to information, itself also a fundamental right, connected to the right to education in ways that were not foreseen even a decade ago.

Beyond the desired diversification of educational institutions (if evolution has taught us anything it is that homogeneity and monocultures respond poorly to shocks and disruption), we are seeing a move towards fluid approaches to learning as a continuum in which schooling and other formal education institutions interact more closely with other less formalized educational experiences from early childhood throughout life. The learning cities movement is one such example. We should consider ways that the right to education might need to be broadened to encompass fluidity, capillarity and the changing contexts of contemporary societies.

### 3. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEACHING PROFESSION AND TEACHER COLLABORATION

The Commission calls on policy-makers to value the professional expertise of teachers and create conditions that give frontline educators autonomy and flexibility to act collaboratively.

Throughout this crisis many societies have begun to acknowledge the importance of a set of workers who have not always been properly appreciated. We have seen health care professionals appropriately recognized as frontline responders who place themselves at great risk for the good of all. This has extended to a recognition that the often low-paid food, security and delivery workers are indeed “essential” and of great social importance. In

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many settings this has also been accompanied by an appreciation of the labour of teachers, particularly of their professional expertise and commitment.

Firstly, many parents now obliged to follow and supervise their children's learning at home have acquired a clearer awareness of the complexity of teachers' work. Second, like essential workers in other sectors, teachers have gone beyond the call of duty. They have responded to their students' needs with compassion and extra efforts that reinforce the value that parents and communities attach to their action. All of this underscores the importance of an overarching educational framework of trust and cooperation. The frontline service of teachers will become even more noticeable as schools begin to reopen and educators have to safeguard their own and their students' health as they develop new educational patterns.

The educational response to the COVID-19 crisis has revealed the capacity of educators to draw on their professional knowledge and collaboratively mobilize with a resourcefulness and creativity that could not have been achieved by a public authority simply issuing top-down orders. In fact, over the last several months, the education sector which is often unfairly critiqued for its conservatism has shown itself to be among the most robust and adaptable of all social institutions. This is an important lesson from this crisis and one which should lead us to grant teachers greater autonomy and freedom. Teachers need to be more recognized and more highly valued; they are essential participants in defining the futures of education.

Today it is clear that nothing can substitute for collaboration between teachers, whose function is not to apply ready-made technologies or pre-prepared didactics, but to fully assume their role as knowledge enablers and pedagogic guides. The capacity to initiate, experiment and innovate that has been unleashed during these pandemic disruptions must be allowed to continue. Teacher collaboration should also be understood as expanding to include engagement with a wide set of educational stakeholders, particularly because in this crisis those education systems most engaged with families and communities have shown the most resilience.

The centre of any educational process is the human relationship between a student and a teacher. The educational systems best prepared to respond to the crisis will be those that are capable of valuing their teachers and giving them the conditions for autonomous and collaborative work. This crisis revealed the difficulty of dealing with unexpected situations in centralized bureaucracies and showed us that the real capacity for response and innovation lies in the initiative of educators who, together with parents and communities, have in many cases found ingenious and contextualized solutions.

## 4. AN EMPHASIS ON STUDENT, YOUTH AND CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION AND RIGHTS

The Commission calls on everyone with educational responsibilities, from government officials to teachers to parents, to prioritize the participation of students and young people broadly in order to co-construct with them the change they wish to see.

In many COVID-19 responses children and young people are being asked to limit their freedoms and suspend their educations to protect adults and older generations. However, the rights of children and youth to participate in decisions that concern them, particularly those about the future, must not be put on hold.

We talk a lot, and rightly so, about the threats to human rights posed by the current pandemic. Nonetheless, it is essential to draw attention to the risks it poses to the rights of the youngest. The exceptional measures related to COVID-19 have indeed put a significant number of people in great discomfort, all over the world. In particular the mental health and well-being of children and youth have been greatly endangered, and in ways that could have lasting repercussions.

Not only do we have to reshape schools and the supports we provide them with so that students can resume their learning in classrooms and return to school activities as soon as possible, we also need to think in the medium term so that this extraordinary situation young people have experienced becomes an opportunity for learning how to meet the challenges of our time, an opportunity to restore trust in institutions, and an opportunity to enact intergenerational justice.

In a post-COVID-19 world there will be a great need to cure the separations that have arisen as a result of quarantines and distancing restrictions. We will need to think creatively about ways to re-connect people. Trusting young people and empowering them to think and act together is one important way to accomplish this.

Policies and strategies to address the massive social, political and economic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic cannot simply be handed down from on high. We must guard against the rise of authoritarian politics and the hollowing of civic trust. Public policies

“ The mental health and well-being of children and youth have been greatly endangered, and in ways that could have lasting repercussions ”



must be worked out according to democratic principles and through civic engagement—most critically, the participation of children and youth in these deliberations cannot be an afterthought. As but one example, students should be given a leading voice in designing the learning opportunities and learning communities they return to when schools reopen.

## 5. PROTECTING THE SOCIAL SPACE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION

The Commission calls on all educational stakeholders to protect and transform the school as a separate space-time, specific and different from home and other spaces of learning, where there is as much growth and expansion of social understanding as there is acquisition of skills, competencies and knowledge.

The educational landscape of today's world is undergoing radical transformation. Many changes that have been developing for some time have accelerated with the pandemic. Increased awareness and appreciation of schools can serve as the basis for a new revival of public education, one that transforms the idea of schooling.

Does this mean that school as a physical place is dispensable? Not at all. The physical space defined by the school as the main locus of learning remains a central feature of formal education systems at all levels. The COVID-19 crisis has reminded us of the importance of schools as centres of social services, notably in the provision of nutritious meals. As community centres, schools can offer powerful supports for self-reliance and for cultivating ecologically sustainable relationships with nature. Most important is that the space of the school houses social relationships. Education and learning are about human interactions, dialogue and exchange. Others are essential to our own learning. Schools are forms of collective living that cannot be replaced by distance or remote learning.

For some years, we have seen the idea of a single, standardized school model giving rise to a variety of ways of “doing school,” more advanced in some places than in others but nonetheless changing educational landscapes around the world. We can expect to increasingly have hybrid forms of teaching and learning, in different spaces, inside and outside the school, at different times, synchronous and asynchronous, using a multiplicity of means and methods (among others: individual study, group work, one-on-one meetings with teachers, research projects, citizen science, community service, and performance). These are the directions we must move in—based on broader global transformations as well as on the basis of everything we have learned in recent weeks.

“ Schools are also places where we can encounter others not like ourselves, others whom we learn from and with, others who expand our understanding of the global tapestry of ways of being human ”

Schools also provide children and youth with safe environments in which to take risks, experiment with possibilities, and explore purposes. They are key places of becoming who we want to become. Crucially, schools are also places where we can encounter others not like ourselves, others whom we learn from and with, others who expand our understanding of the global tapestry of ways of being human.

Though the school space remains fundamental, it needs to be transformed and augmented by a much broader space for learning. In this pandemic we have seen the extent to which professional and economic life is organized around the school, its schedules and its calendars. When schools close, society as a whole goes into lockdown. Understanding this reality can help us to build a new social contract around education, one that might be very different from the “school model” that consolidated across the 20th century. It is no longer simply a question of delivering our children to schools at fixed times and relying on the inherited belief that time-spent equals learning-achieved. Instead, we must find flexible forms, flexible times, shared educational commitments, and an understanding of the ways that learning is broadly diffused across contemporary societies.

## 6. FREE AND OPEN SOURCE TECHNOLOGIES FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

The Commission calls for global collaboration among governments, philanthropy, and non-profit organizations to develop and distribute open educational resources and open platforms, recognizing that much of what is currently provided by private companies should become a public undertaking where advancing the interests and capabilities of learners is the sole purpose.

The use of digital technologies for learning has generated interest for a number of years. In fact, lightweight and portable digital devices have liberated learning from being restricted to fixed and predetermined locations, fundamentally changing the ways that knowledge circulates within societies. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis interest in mobile learning technologies has grown exponentially.

## “Public education cannot be dependent on digital platforms provided by private companies”

However, two very distinct situations are often confused. It is one thing to employ digital tools in teachers’ pedagogical work with students. In digital societies it is unthinkable to exclude from school the possibilities of access to knowledge and communication that are increasingly seen as a necessary component of daily life—that we correctly speak of “digital divides” shows how important internet access and device connectivity have become. Here, our efforts should focus on open licensing and open access policies that facilitate no-cost use, reuse, repurposing and adaption. Open educational resources must be prioritized; public education cannot be dependent on digital platforms provided by private companies.

It is a very different thing to design teaching and learning out of ready-made materials and content as this reduces and distorts the work of teachers and students. Public education cannot be defined and controlled by content and methods built outside of the pedagogical space and outside of the human relationships between teachers and students. The forced scramble for materials and platforms that we have seen during the pandemic poses a great risk to the teaching profession and its autonomy and could have serious consequences for the futures of education.

We must ensure that any digital transition is not just an effort pushed by technology companies but that teachers, students, governments, civil society representatives and privacy advocates are also represented and shape these transformations.

## 7. SCIENTIFIC LITERACY WITHIN A CURRICULUM BASED ON STRONG PURPOSE

The Commission calls on all educational stakeholders to prioritize scientific literacy to ensure a curriculum with strong humanistic objectives that explores the relationship between fact and knowledge and is capable of leading students to understand and situate themselves in a complex world.

COVID-19 makes us ask “what is learning for” and invites us to reassess what sort of skills and capabilities we are really expecting education and learning to deliver. There is considerable danger that the restriction of learning to curricular basics that we see occurring when

“ Curricula should be increasingly integrated and based on themes and problems that allows us to learn to live in peace with our common humanity and our common planet ”

schools close will limit the broad humanistic dimension of education that is of great importance for the flourishing of peace, democracy and intercultural understanding. The danger is that these dimensions could be eclipsed by the emphasis on technical skills, curricular modularity and the numerical assessment of progress and benchmarks, which are natural parts of digital educational culture. These are already familiar trade-offs and the current crisis might push us quickly in this troubling direction, in which educational form is forced to follow technological function.

This is the right time for a deep reflection on curriculum. We must prioritize the development of the whole person not just academic skills. Here, we can find useful inspiration in the 1996 Delors report, *Learning the treasure within*, in its specification of four pillars of learning as learning to know, to do, to be, and to live together. Curricula should be increasingly integrated and based on themes and problems that allows us to learn to live in peace with our common humanity and our common planet. Finally, it is important to develop a strong base of knowledge about one's self and about the world—twinning objectives that allow each of us to find purpose and be better able to participate in social and political life.

One particular curricular aspect deserves urgent attention. This problem did not start with the crisis, but it has become particularly serious now: the spread of misinformation and fake news. This is now proving fatal for social life and human understanding, but is also literally destroying lives.

We all know that this is a deep and complex problem, involving the relationship between science and knowledge. However, both with coronavirus and with climate change we have seen the denial of scientific knowledge and the creation of “facts” that serve the most disastrous of purposes. The field of education cannot idly stand by and watch this all occur.

We must actively fight misinformation, as the United Nations is doing with its new COVID-19 Communications Response Initiative. It is vital that there be a renewed effort to promote world-wide scientific literacy, especially to disenfranchised populations. All of us face an unprecedented quantity of information, which is quite often in disagreement even when coming from credible sources. The classic distinction between risk and uncertainty is no longer valid, since there is growing uncertainty about risk itself, for example how to interpret competing representations of trends and data. Education cannot ignore this situation.

Once again, the COVID-19 crisis has crudely forced us to action—action that has long since been necessary. The relationship between knowledge and truth needs to be openly explored. The issue of scientific literacy has gained great visibility and urgency.

## 8. THE NEED TO PROTECT DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL FINANCING OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Commission calls on national governments, international organizations, civil society and citizens to mobilize around the protection of public education and its financing—and that those responsible be held accountable for the just and effective use of these resources.

It is clear that we do not yet know what the full impact of the pandemic will be on education. However, we do know that the emerging economic crises are leading to loss of jobs and livelihoods and levels of vulnerability not seen for many decades. This will have drastic consequences on the ability of children and youth to advance their education, both for the familial disruption it brings and because opportunity gaps will widen as families experience diminished capacities to support their children's education.

On its own this would be worrying enough, however the financial burden of addressing the pandemic is likely to result in fiscal austerity. Governments will need to resist pressures to constrain education expenditures in the future. And even if the share of public expenditure allocated to education does not change, economic recessions will lower the overall base of public resources. That the consequences of such developments are likely to fall disproportionately on the children of the poor, whose lives are already significantly more disrupted by the pandemic, is antithetical to the basic tenets of justice and human rights. The impacts of this already-emerging crisis in educational opportunity will be mediated by how national and international authorities act now and in the months to come.

The pandemic has the power to undermine education for years to come, particularly in the most vulnerable communities, regions and countries. Already, many nations around the world are heavily indebted and the pressure of debt servicing reduces the fiscal capacity for funding much needed investments in education. Without necessary debt restructuring and support of new funding, there is the risk that countries will be brought to the precipice, to the point where they have to choose between funding essential services to sustain social and economic life, and servicing these debts. We still have the power to stop what could be the most serious disruption of educational opportunity in a century, where important gains in educational expansion and efforts to achieve educational equity could be erased.

“ Governments and citizens alike should be encouraged to demand strong responses both in public health and in public education ”

Governments and international organizations must coordinate efforts to ensure continuity of learning and protect the domestic and international financing of education. Applying principles of redistributive justice, resources must be directed to those who have been hardest hit economically, socially and educationally. Every government will have to look at restructuring education financing. There will be enormous pressures to restrict public services just at the time when we should grow and expand them. Governments and citizens alike should be encouraged to demand strong responses both in public health and in public education. The leadership of UN and other international development actors will be essential to sustaining the fiscal commitments that will keep the SDG 4 Education 2030 agenda from being pushed back by a decade.

The request for maintaining a priority for education and for greater international cooperation to help ensure the human right of education in what are likely to be very challenging times, comes coupled with a request for greater efficiency and accountability of international education organizations, so they can continue to add value to national efforts to advance education for all that is relevant to a changing world. This will require that international organizations continue to improve their capacity to add value based on a clear and non-negotiable commitment to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and based on high level technical capacity anchored in a solid scientific foundation and on the ability to transfer ideas and practices from comparative analysis across countries and jurisdictions.

## 9. A GLOBAL SOLIDARITY THAT DOES NOT ACCEPT CURRENT LEVELS OF INEQUALITY

The Commission calls on governments to recommit to multilateralism and on all education actors to revitalize international cooperation and global solidarity—with empathy and an appreciation of our common humanity at the core.

The speed at which the Coronavirus has traveled has delivered a powerful reminder of how tightly humanity is linked together. We must address the forces that pull us apart. Uneven and sometimes haphazard national responses to COVID-19 will have tragic, unjust consequences.

“ An expanding solidarity is necessary because COVID-19 has also shown us the extent to which our societies exploit gender inequalities and power imbalances ”

But the underlying reality is that we are biologically all citizens of a single planet. A global response to this global problem is the only path to a solution.

Yet, COVID-19 has further spurred the resurgence of nativist politics that has been developing in various parts of the globe in recent years. Often coupled with political extremism and autarchic disregard for democratic principles, too many countries have moved towards isolation and competition when instead it is solidarity and cooperation that will most successfully lead us through the crisis. However, there are also spots of hope. A strengthened sense of solidarity has gotten many communities successfully through lockdown and has ensured that food and medical care remain available. The global scientific community is collaborating across national borders at a scale never seen before. Now is the time for all countries to ensure that an expansive solidarity is writ large. Our common humanity—particularly as it has been revealed by this pandemic—necessitates a global solidarity. We will only be safe when everyone is safe.

An expanding solidarity is necessary because COVID-19 has also shown us the extent to which our societies exploit gender inequalities and power imbalances. Once again, disruption has starkly revealed patterns we have long accepted as “normal”. As children and entire families have been confined within homes, we starkly see ways that gendered expectations for childrearing often lead to curtailed opportunities for women. With only certain sectors of the economy operating, we have been forced to recognize the essential work done by minimally paid workers who are often under precarious and temporary work contracts. Exploitative, asymmetrical relationships must be questioned wherever they exist.

The gravest levels of human-made inequalities exist between the Global North and the Global South—and COVID-19 has forced us to a moment of reckoning. Tragically, the most dire consequences of these inequities in terms of lost human lives and livelihoods will unfold in the weeks and months ahead. The time for action is now. We cannot countenance the levels of inequality that have been permitted to emerge on our planet.





## CONCLUSION

The International Commission on the Futures of Education began its work in 2019 with the observation—shared by many—that the world is increasingly complex, uncertain and fragile. COVID-19 has revealed the anxious difficulties that come with that *complexity*, but it has shown us that complexity also generates potent dynamism and multiple possibilities. The overwhelming challenges that accompany *uncertainty* have been thoroughly exposed in recent months. But, COVID-19 has reminded humanity that uncertainty also contains great potentials and puts lie to determinism. We have seen the terrifying risks and vulnerabilities of our fragility, but COVID-19 has prompted us to recall that *fragility* also generates awareness, sensitivity to our interdependencies, and can be a wellspring for hope.

Following this pandemic education is going to change profoundly. But in what ways? The Commission calls for the mobilization and participation of all in shaping the futures of education. There are no acceptable ready-made solutions, technological or otherwise, outside of our work and our actions—and outside the responses we collectively arrive at through inclusive dialogue and decision-making.

History is being written with great speed and we are faced with choices and decisions that will define the futures of education. When we look at responses to this crisis, we find original and creative ideas coming from all corners of the world. In fact, in some instances it is those who are most marginalized and disadvantaged who have shown both the greatest care for others—and the greatest resourcefulness and ingenuity. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the fact that innovation and creativity are broadly distributed and not the exclusive purview of select, well-resourced centres. We have to learn from and support the responses coming from teachers, students and communities—for in them lies the potential for transforming education during and after the present crisis.

These responses to the pandemic will be different from one place to another, from one context to another. But, they must be based on a humanistic vision of education and development and human rights frameworks. Actions must strengthen public education, fortify common goods and expand a global solidarity that emphasizes the collective responsibility for the education of everyone everywhere.

We close this short report with words of hope and trust. The situation we face is so dramatic and difficult that we cannot afford to be pessimistic. We are facing the biggest changes in education since public schooling emerged in the 19th century. The urgency of improving on the world that was before presents us all with a real challenge and responsibility. We must build narratives for what the new reality could look like. We have to nourish the sources that give us hope for rethinking how the world works. Education needs to be at the heart of a post-COVID-19 world. For that future we need boldness of thought and courageous action now.





United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Education  
Sector

## Education in a post-COVID world:

### Nine ideas for public action

Decisions made today in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-term consequences for the futures of education. In this report the International Commission on the Futures of Education presents nine key ideas for navigating through the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath, contending that we must build on core principles and known strengths as we face unprecedented disruption to economies, societies and education systems. In the renewal and reimagining of education human interaction and well-being must be given priority. This must also be accompanied by a commitment to global solidarity that does not accept the levels of inequality that have been permitted to emerge in the contemporary world.



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