

UNICEF Study Guide

Agenda - Enhancing the Quality and Accessibility of Digital
Education and Remote Learning

KIIT Model United Nations 2021

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WELCOME LETTER

Greetings delegates,

Welcome to the 2021 edition of the Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (KIIT) Model United Nations! It is our honour to welcome you to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) council, a beginner-friendly simulation of the world of diplomacy. Although the online Model United Nations (MUN) experience may be far different compared to conventional in-person conferences, we hope to be able to provide an excellent and productive experience for all delegates involved. The topic of this council, which is "Enhancing the Quality and Accessibility of Digital Education and Remote Learning", invites delegates to assess the status quo of education in a world grappled by the pandemic, along with possible solutions to assist with the issue.

Although the prospect of joining MUNs is often intimidating to the beginner delegate, the most important first step has been taken by simply registering for this conference. When researching for possible solutions to bring to the council, delegates are encouraged to also research on their country stances, along with past actions (both domestic and international) regarding the topic at hand. This study guide was created to be a starting point for research, and I hope that delegates are able to utilize external resources as well to further enhance their

preparation for the conference. All in all, we hope that all delegates will come out of the conference with wide smiles on their faces.

Best,

UNICEF Board of Dais, KIIT MUN 2021

KEY DEFINITIONS

Asynchronous Education	Education that is not taught in real-time, with learners able to access materials at their own pace.
Blended Education	A style of education that involves both face-to-face and online learning.
Curriculum	Courses that are taught in an educational institution.
Digital Education	A form of education that is conducted through the internet.
Distance Education	A field of education that focuses on delivering learning to students from a different location.
Literacy	The level of basic competence in reading and writing (in some countries, Maths is also included).
Special Education	A type of learning designed to cater to students having learning and/or physical disabilities.
Vocational Education	Specialized education that focuses on practical skills such as mechanics and hospitality.

Table 1. A chart of the UN system.

Historically speaking, UNICEF was established as a direct successor to the League of Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, with its legal status being confirmed by the United Nations Relief Rehabilitation Administration on December 11, 1946. With its original purpose being to provide support towards children in countries that were devastated by the Second World War, UNICEF has since expanded its mandate to support access to education for children, along with other aspects such as but not limited to promoting primary healthcare and supporting children in slums.

UNICEF-led programmes are mostly guided by the principles outlined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), a legally-binding convention that established the rights that are enjoyed by all children living in countries that have ratified it, which includes but is not limited to the prohibition of capital punishment for children, along with the protection from abuse and exploitation. In the status quo, UNICEF programmes have focused on mitigating the devastating impacts of the pandemic on children, with emphasis on health and education. Just like a typical United Nations General Assembly committee, resolutions pertaining to UNICEF are not legally binding, which means that any outcomes are limited towards recommendations that every Member State can implement at their own will.

TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Remote learning or distance learning can be generally defined as the provision of any form of education to students who are not physically present in the same venue. The history of remote learning goes all the way back, with one of the most famous examples being the University of London, which began offering the world's first degrees that can be conducted via distance learning through its External Programme established in 1858. Since then, the concept of remote learning has changed throughout the years; from correspondence learning via mail, TV, radio, and the internet.

With the arrival and development of the internet, remote learning has shifted towards an online-based form of learning, which recreates the classroom environment in a virtual setting through the use of third-party platforms such as but not limited to ZOOM and Blackboard. This is a popular choice especially in countries where the internet is widely accessible to all citizens. On the other hand, countries that are considered low-income tend to

implement alternative forms of distance learning that do not require the use of the internet, although some areas do not have the means to restart education in any form due to the lack of resources.

Since remote learning is easily accessible in most countries, students are able to continue learning course materials throughout the pandemic. However, remote learning also has several downsides, which includes problems such as but not limited to practical lessons in the sciences, along with the difficulties in implementing apprenticeship and work-based learning modes via distance learning. As stated above, access to technology is also a concern, especially in developing countries.

Even before the pandemic, access to education has been inaccessible to a number of children worldwide, with 258 million children around the world that were out of school in 2018. This number is expected to rise due to the pandemic, with access to the internet being an important factor in receiving distance education in the pandemic era — something that is not widely available to students in developing regions.

From the estimated 1.57 billion students that were affected by school closures due to the pandemic, the UN estimates that around 500 million of them are unable to access distance learning options. With the absence of education having potential negative learning outcomes in terms of literacy and student retention rates, the disruption of education caused by the pandemic is a major threat to the global fulfilment of SDG 4 (Quality of Education).

Furthermore, the teaching of classes that do go online has been undermined by a lack of digital literacy from both students and teachers. With many academic institutions unused to delivering education online, the quality of instruction from teachers and knowledge retention from students has declined during the pandemic.

An increase in stress levels has also been seen throughout the pandemic, with reports that virtual learning can present a stressful learning environment for students due to physical isolation from their peers. Although the pandemic has begun to slowly subside, distance education is expected to continue for a substantial number of students around the world for the time being as the world tries to recover from the devastation of the pandemic.

AREAS OF DEBATE

1. Technological Access

One of the biggest challenges faced in remote learning is the technological gaps that exist among countries, especially between developed and developing countries. In this context, the technological gap can refer to the availability (or lack thereof) of necessary infrastructures for remote learning, such as but not limited to laptops. Even before the pandemic, the majority of people living in developing countries have had difficulties accessing the internet compared to people in developed countries, and this issue is expected to be exacerbated in the pandemic era.

2. Quality of Education

As the world shifts to remote learning during the pandemic, the dilemma that is faced by educational institutions worldwide is whether or not the quality standards of education can be maintained. This is especially prominent in STEM-based fields, where laboratory work and practical exercises are essential to understanding the material. Furthermore, teachers are also less likely to be able to deliver the same quality of instruction as they did previously due to the change in the learning environment, along with a possible lack of understanding and access to technology.

3. Alternative Forms of Distance Education

While distance education is often associated with online learning, it is not the only method that can be used — in fact, distance education has existed long before the creation of the internet. In a world where access to technology is not something that can be automatically assumed, the use of traditional methods for distance education needs to be considered by UNICEF to facilitate better access to education in areas with limited technology.

4. Mental Health

Mental health among students has been negatively impacted by the pandemic around the world, with reports of an increase in anxiety and stress due to the isolation faced during the distance learning process. While mental health problems among students are not new issues, the pandemic has uniquely exacerbated the crisis due to the physical isolation that students are experiencing in the current times. UNICEF has a unique opportunity to facilitate the provision of mental health support globally, but the question remains on whether that will be enough to mitigate the mental health crisis faced by students.

5. Special Needs Accommodation

Even in a regular classroom setting, special needs students are already having difficulty adapting to the environment. With the classroom transitioning to remote learning, they encounter more barriers than other students. From the lack of physical support from teachers to the issue of poorer learning retention than other students, the issue of special needs students is often overlooked in debates surrounding the topic of remote education.

PAST ACTIONS

In April 2020, UNICEF collaborated with Microsoft and the University of Cambridge to launch a global learning platform to help students study during the pandemic, which is now referred to as the UNICEF Learning Passport. It aims to provide key resources for learning, with online books and videos provided to students and teachers. The initiative has plans to facilitate country-specific curricula in its programme, along with the facilitation of support for parents of children with disabilities.

Furthermore, UNICEF has established a five-year partnership with Airtel Africa in November 2021. This partnership aims to accelerate digital learning across 13 countries:

Chad, Congo, DR Congo, Gabon, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

UNICEF has also worked together with the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) to establish the Giga initiative in September 2019. This initiative aims to connect every school to the internet and improve connectivity. The programme has been accelerated in lieu of the pandemic, with over 30 countries expressing interest in being part of the initiative.

All of the actions outlined above are part of the greater “Reimagine Education” initiative by UNICEF, which was established to dramatically increase digital learning accessibility to children, especially the ones who are marginalized. This includes goals such as but not limited to the upskilling of digital skills among educators, as well as increasing access to devices and providing affordable internet data.

QUESTIONS A RESOLUTION MUST ANSWER (QARMAs)

1. How can UNICEF ensure that the educational quality in distance education is not compromised? Are there any parameters that can help in assessing the quality of remote learning education?
2. How can UNICEF bridge the digital divide that exists among countries?
3. Are there any alternative distance learning mechanisms that UNICEF can embrace? Or should UNICEF prioritize the development of digital education first?
4. What would be the best approach for UNICEF to address the mental health crisis faced by students experiencing distance learning?
5. How can UNICEF ensure that all countries have sufficient funding resources to facilitate the accessibility of remote learning?
6. How can UNICEF help the education of special needs students?

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