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THE IMPACTS OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON EDUCATION IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES AND AROUND THE WORLD

A situation analysis based on a
field study and education indi-
cators for 2020

DECEMBER 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Decisions to close schools in response to health or other crises are nothing new, and they usually have negative consequences in terms of learning losses and high dropout rates. The current COVID-19 crisis has affected students in the Arab region and around the world, especially those from the poorest and most vulnerable communities.

Amid the new situation imposed by COVID-19, students and teachers have had to adapt to new learning/teaching methods with which they were mostly unfamiliar. Adopting these alternative methods was, however, necessary to maintain instructional continuity, especially during lockdown periods.

It is now certain that distance/online education remains a distant dream for the majority of students in the Arab region and across the world. Data indicate that in 2019, about 51% of the world population had no Internet access. The figure stood at 45% in the Arab region (i.e. about 196 million people).

It is worth noting that in many developing countries where online or computer-assisted learning is not available for most students, radio has been instrumental in reaching out to millions of people and maintaining some form of instruction. In South Sudan, for example, “*Radio Miraya*”, run by the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), began broadcasting instructional programs for many students who could not attend classes.

It should be recalled that in 2019, before the outbreak of the pandemic, the world was already facing a learning crisis, with 256 million children and youth at primary and secondary levels having dropped out of school, including 15.6 million in the Arab countries. Besides, a study conducted by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) in 2018 indicates that 53% of 10-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read and understand a simple story.

This Statistical Bulletin issued by the ALECSO Observatory seeks to provide a preliminary assessment of the impacts of the pandemic on education in the Arab region. It is based on a field study as well as on an analysis of the data and indicators available for the pre-pandemic years (2017, 2018, and 2019) and the pandemic year (2020).

1 – OUTCOMES OF THE STUDY

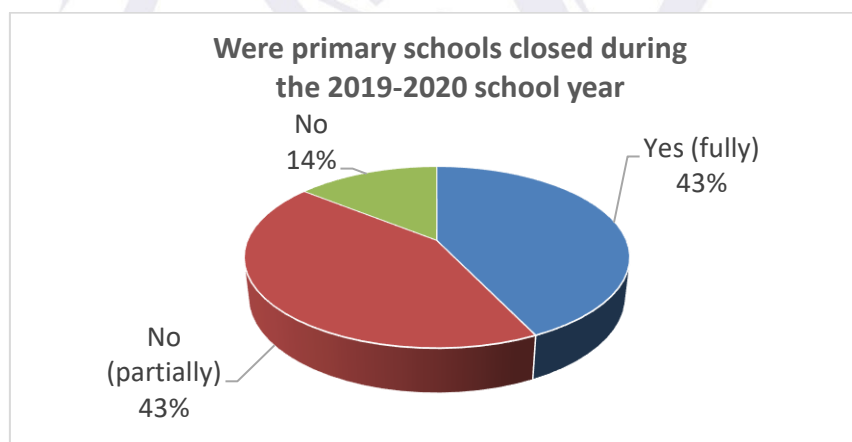
In 2021, ALECSO carried out a field study on the impacts of COVID-19 on education in the Arab World. A questionnaire was developed by the ALECSO Observatory to obtain relevant, accurate and first-hand data and statistics. It includes questions about the impacts of the pandemic on the learning/teaching process at the primary, lower secondary, secondary and higher levels, and the response actions taken by the Arab countries.

The questionnaire was sent to 22 Arab countries in July 2021, with two reminders in August 2021. Responses were received from 7 countries, namely : Kuwait, Mauritania, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Sudan, and Iraq.

The study has made it possible to gather significant input about the learning/teaching process during the pandemic at all levels of education.

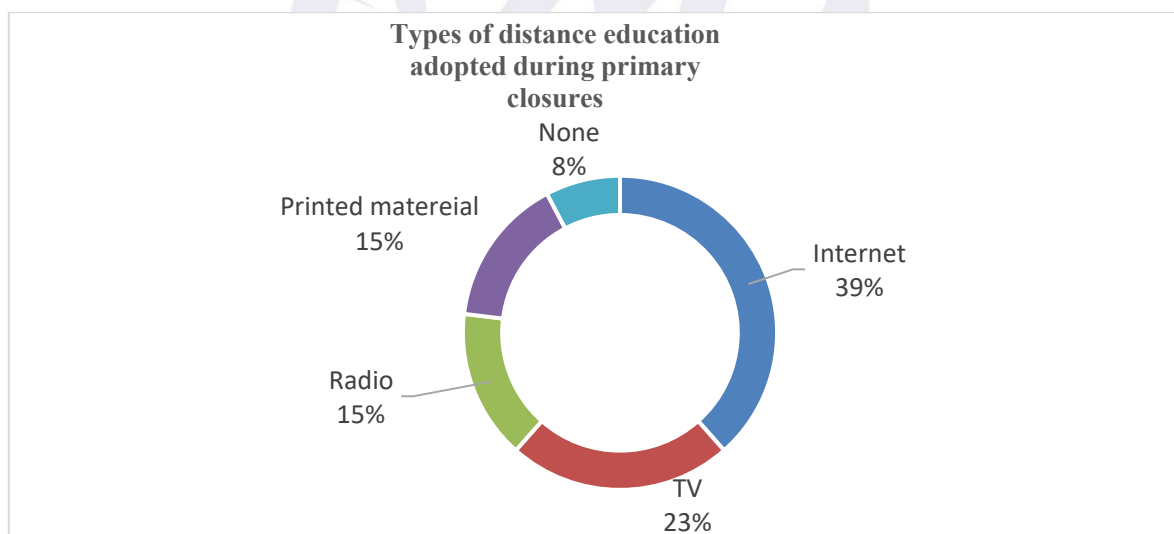
A – Primary education (2019-2020): Questions focused on whether (or not) schools were closed, the percentage of affected students and the actions taken in response to school closures.

Six (6) out of the seven (7) respondent countries closed schools during the pandemic : full closure in three (3) countries and partial closure in three (3) countries. Only the UAE did not close its primary schools.



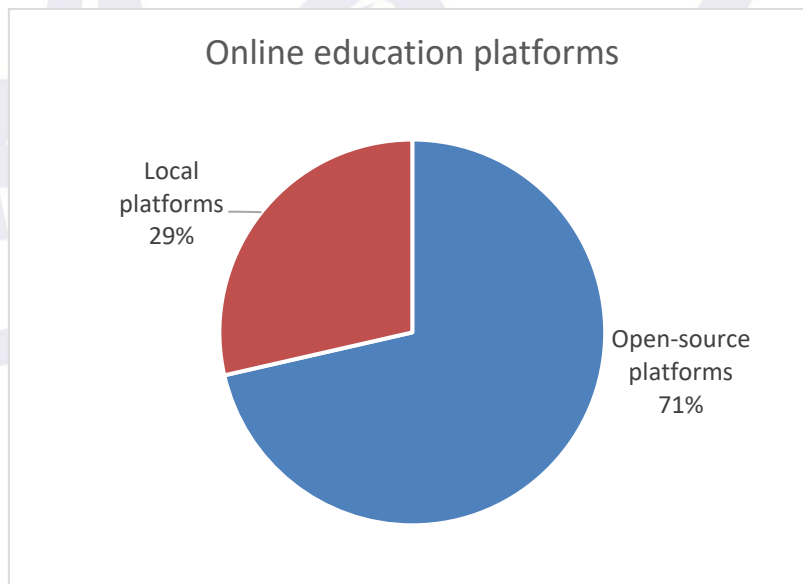
Almost 100% of the students were affected by school closures, a percentage that tells much about the severe impact of the pandemic on the learning process.

In response to school closures, States have resorted to various types of distance education :



The Internet ranked first (39%) as a means of online teaching, followed by television (23%), and then radio and printed instructional materials (15%). Sudan did not use any type of distance education.

For countries having opted for online teaching, two types of platforms were used : Open-Source platforms (71%) and local platforms (29%).



Some countries have offered training courses to help teachers adapt to new types of distance education, as shown in the following table:

Teacher training sessions

State	Yes	No	Percentage of beneficiary teachers
Kuwait	1		90
Mauritania	1		2
Oman	1		95
UAE	1		100
Qatar	1		100
Sudan		1	-
Iraq		1	-

The table shows that four (4) Arab countries provided training for 90 to 100% of their teachers, compared to only 2% for Mauritania. Iraq and Sudan did not provide any teacher-training courses.

Data also indicate that three (3) countries (Oman, UAE and Qatar) supported 80 to 100% of persons with disabilities with devices and applications for digital accessibility.

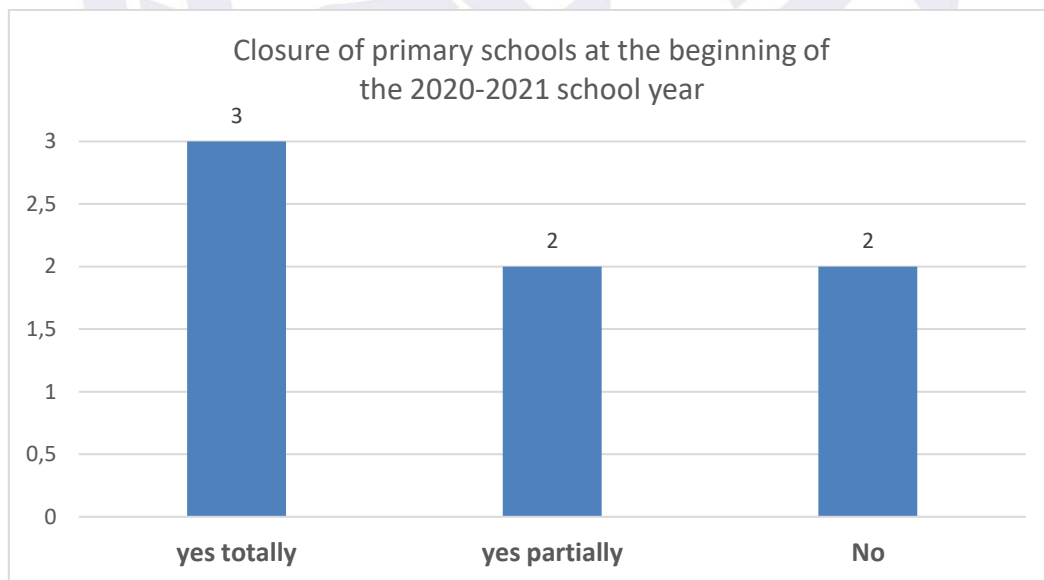
Respondent countries took other measures for the 2019-2020 school year, which can be summarized as follows:

- In Kuwait, accounts were activated on “Microsoft Teams” for online classes. Exams were taken in schools while respecting safety protocols.
- In Mauritania, WhatsApp was used to send lessons to students, whenever possible.
- In Oman, computers were provided for some Students, with USB flash drivers containing lessons. Education syllabi were electronically uploaded on the Education Ministry’s portal.
- In the UAE, free internet packages and laptops were provided for students enrolled in the general education system.
- In Qatar, e-learning tools were used and accounts were activated for students at all levels of education. Assistive devices were provided for those with disabilities, and the timing of classes was adjusted.

As can be noted, Arab countries having an adequate Internet infrastructure have used online platforms to overcome education disruption and maintain instructional continuity.

B – Primary education (2020-2021) : Questions focused on whether (or not) schools were closed, the percentage of affected students, and the actions taken in response to prolonged school closures.

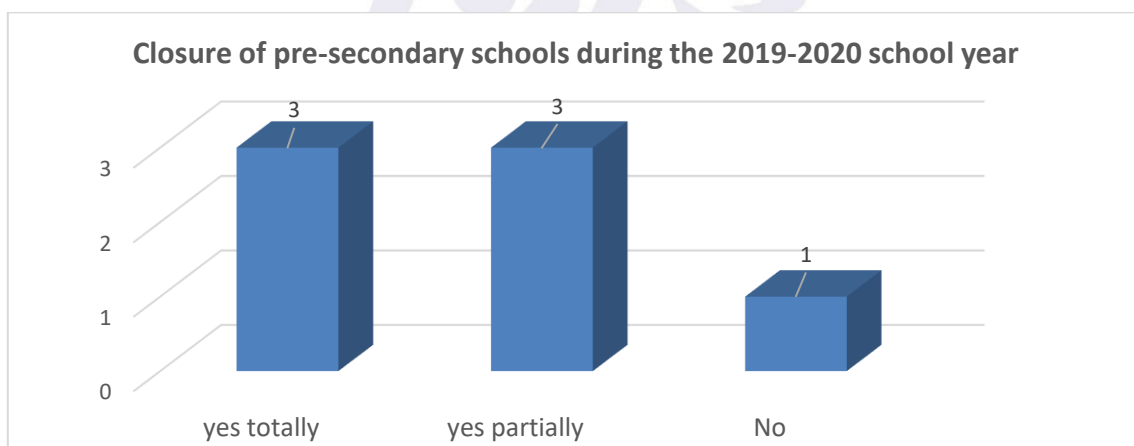
Responses indicate that the closure of primary schools continued at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year in five (5) Arab countries (full closure in 3 countries and partial closure in 2 countries), while schools were re-opened in Qatar and UAE.



90 to 100% of the students were affected by school closures, which are high percentages that might affect the students' level of educational attainment and their studies at subsequent levels of education (lower secondary and secondary).

C – Lower secondary education (2019-2020): Questions focused on whether (or not) schools were closed, the percentage of affected students, and the actions taken in response to school closures.

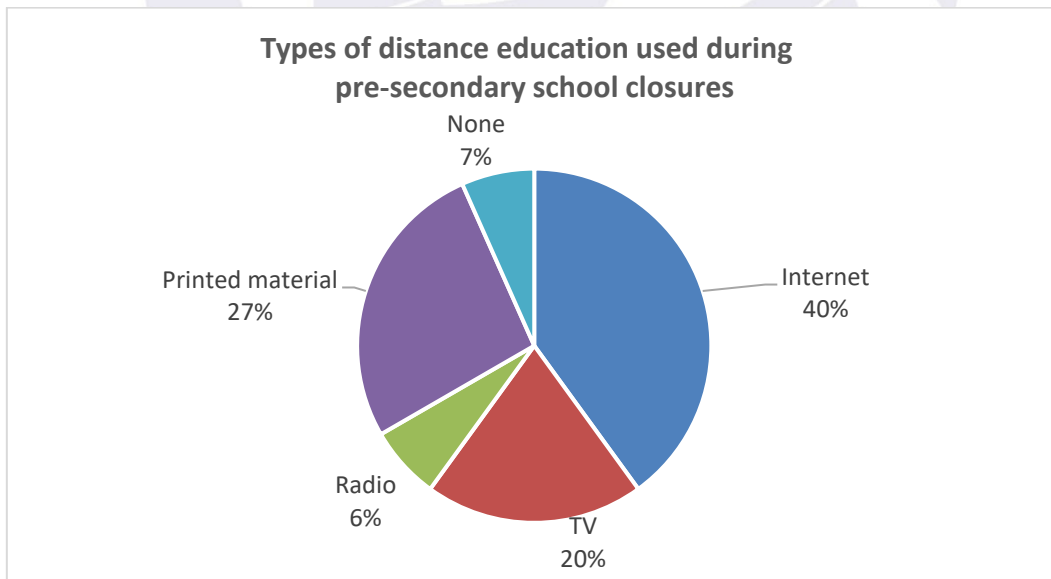
During the 2019-2020 school year, lower secondary schools were fully or partially closed in most Arab countries, except in the UAE.



Between 60 and 100% of the students were affected by school closures and education disruption, with severe impacts on the students' level of attainment.

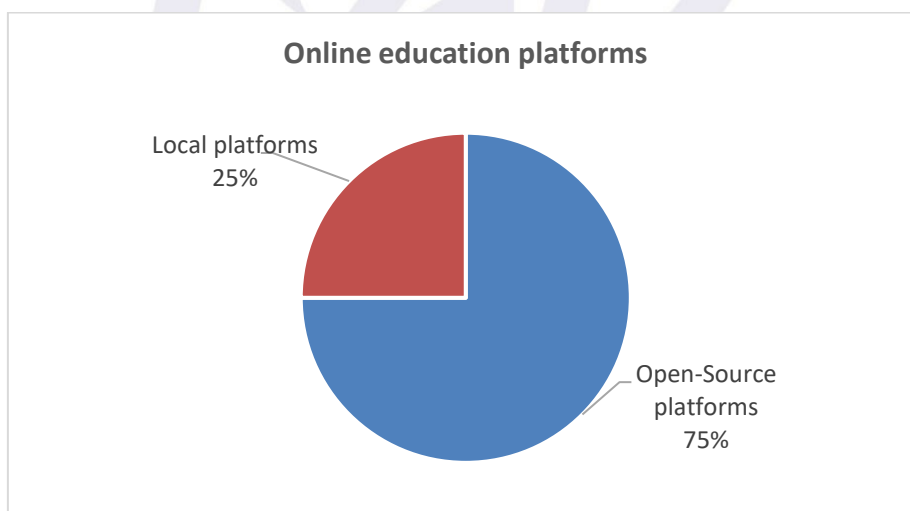
Respondent countries estimate that the percentage of students who dropped out of school ranges between 1 and 5%. Initial estimates are already high, and the actual percentage could be even higher.

Types of distance education used during school closures:



The above figure shows that the Internet was adopted in most cases (40%), printed materials (27%), television (20%), and radio (6%). No type of distance education was used in Sudan.

For countries having opted for online teaching, two types of platforms were used : Open-Source platforms (75%) and local platforms (25%), as shown in the following graph:



With regard to teacher-training on distance education, five (5) countries organized training courses to familiarize teachers with the new tools and methods of online teaching. These courses benefited a significant percentage of teachers (90 to 100%) in the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, compared to only 2% of the teachers in Mauritania. No teacher-training courses were provided in Iraq and Sudan, as shown in the following table:

Teacher training sessions

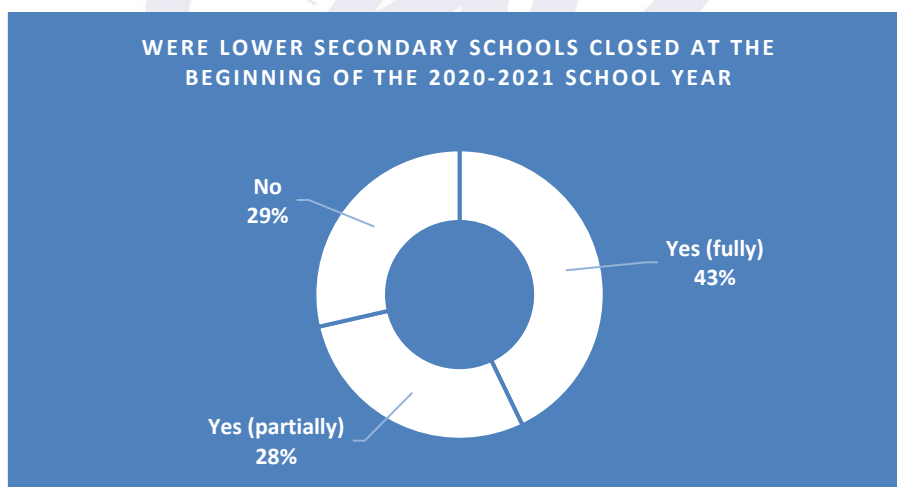
State	Yes	No	Percentage of beneficiary teachers
Kuwait	1		90
Mauritania	1		2
Oman	1		95
UAE	1		100
Qatar	1		100
Sudan		1	-
Iraq		1	-

Four (4) countries (Oman, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) supported 80 to 100% of persons with disabilities with devices and applications for digital accessibility, which was not the case for other countries.

Respondent countries indicated having taken measures to provide distance education for their students :

- In Oman, computers were offered for some students, and Internet access was provided to a number of schools.
- In the UAE, free internet packages and laptops were provided for students enrolled in the general education system.
- In Qatar, e-learning tools were used and accounts were activated for students at all levels of education. Assistive devices were provided for those with disabilities, the timing of classes and assessment methods were adjusted to meet distance education requirements.
- In Mauritania, TV and radio channels were used as a medium of teaching, and, whenever possible, educational materials were sent out to students via WhatsApp.

D – Lower secondary education (2020-2021):

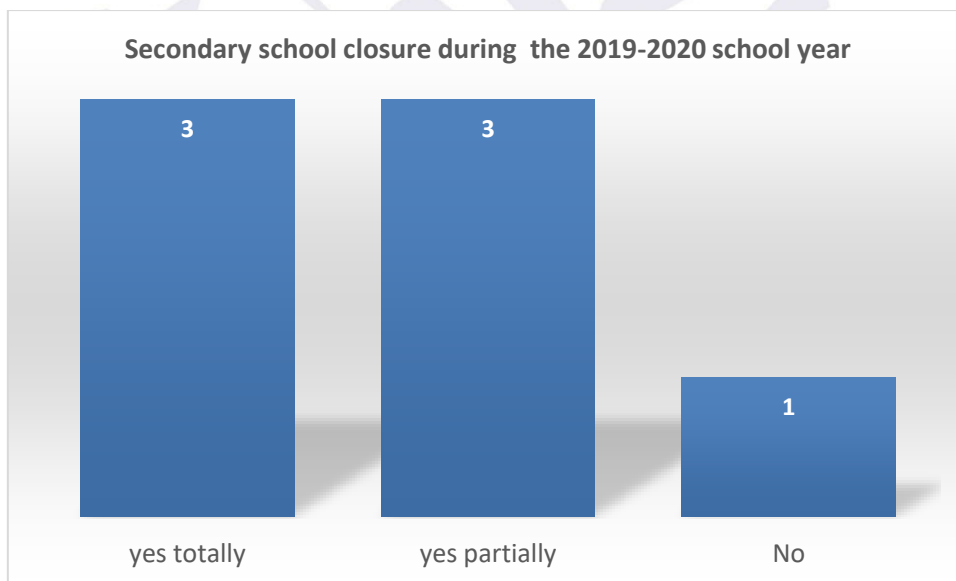


Responses indicate that the closure of lower secondary schools continued at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, whether fully (43%) or partially (28%). Lower secondary schools were not closed in UAE and Qatar.

For lower secondary schools that were partially closed, the percentage of affected students ranged between 20 and 100%, which are high percentages with potentially serious impacts on the educational attainment of this generation of students.

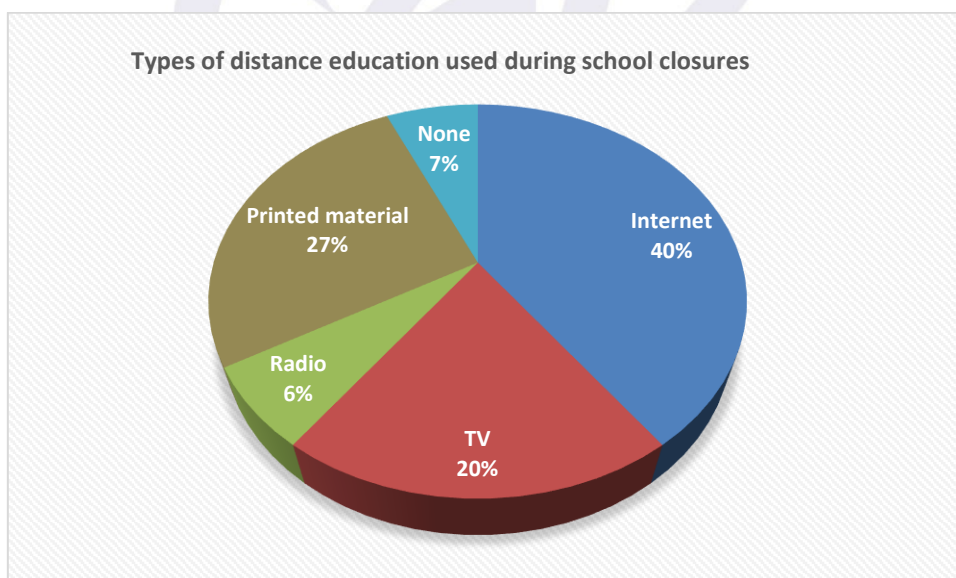
E – Secondary education (2019-2020) :

During the 2019-2020 school year, secondary schools in most Arab countries were (fully or partially) closed, except in the UAE.



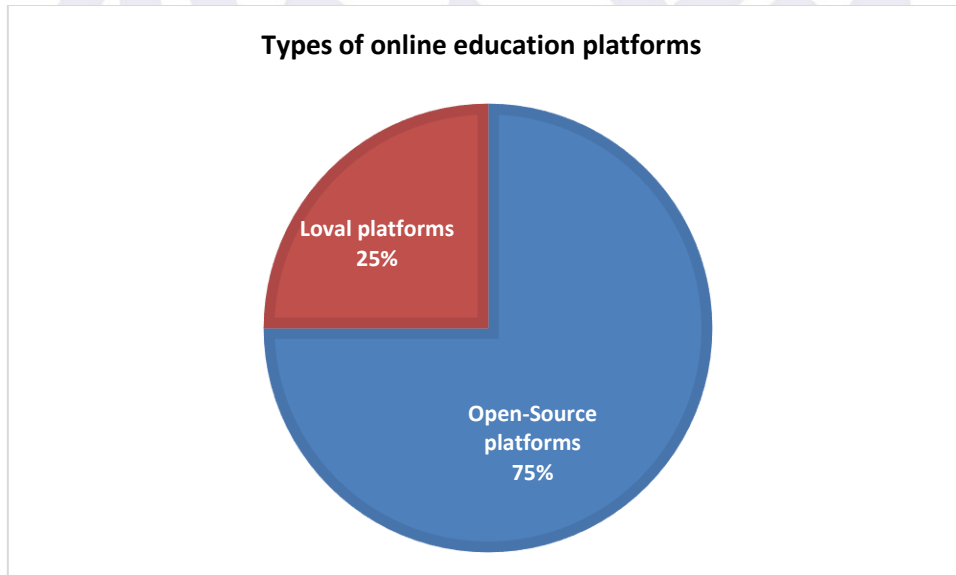
Between 20 and 100% of the students were affected by education disruption, with severe repercussions on their level of learning attainment.

Respondent countries indicated having taken measures to provide distance education during school closures:



The above graph shows that the Internet was adopted in most cases (40%), printed materials (27%), television (20%), and radio (6%).

For countries having opted for online teaching, two types of platforms were used : Open-source platforms (75%) and local platforms (25%).



Five (5) countries provided training courses to familiarize teachers with the tools and methods of online teaching. These courses benefited a significant percentage of teachers (90 to 100%) in the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, compared to only 2% of teachers in Mauritania. No teacher-training courses were offered in Iraq and Sudan, as shown in the following table:

Teacher training sessions

State	Yes	No	Percentage of beneficiary teachers
Kuwait	1		90
Mauritania	1		2
Oman	1		97
UAE	1		100
Qatar	1		100
Sudan		1	-
Iraq		1	-

Four (4) countries (Oman, UAE, Qatar and Kuwait) supported 90 to 100% of persons with disabilities with devices and applications for digital accessibility, which was not the case for other countries.

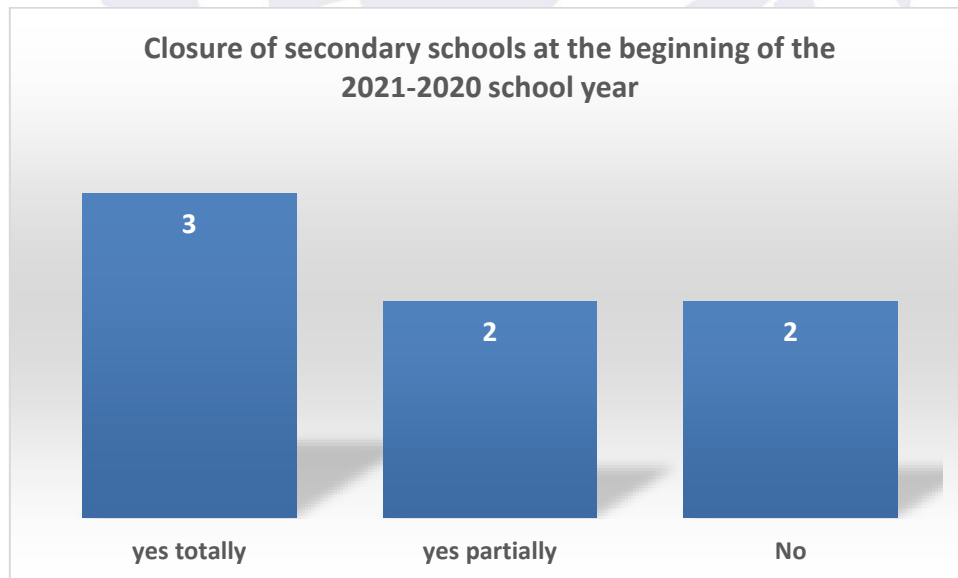
Other measures were taken by respondent countries to facilitate access to distance education:

- In Kuwait, accounts were activated on “Microsoft Teams” for online classes.
- In Mauritania, social platforms were used for online teacher-student communication.
- In Oman, computers with Internet access were provided for some students.
- In the UAE, free internet packages and laptops were provided for students enrolled in the general education system.

- In Qatar, e-learning tools were used, accounts were activated for all students, assistive devices were provided for those with disabilities, and assessment methods were adjusted to meet distance education requirements.

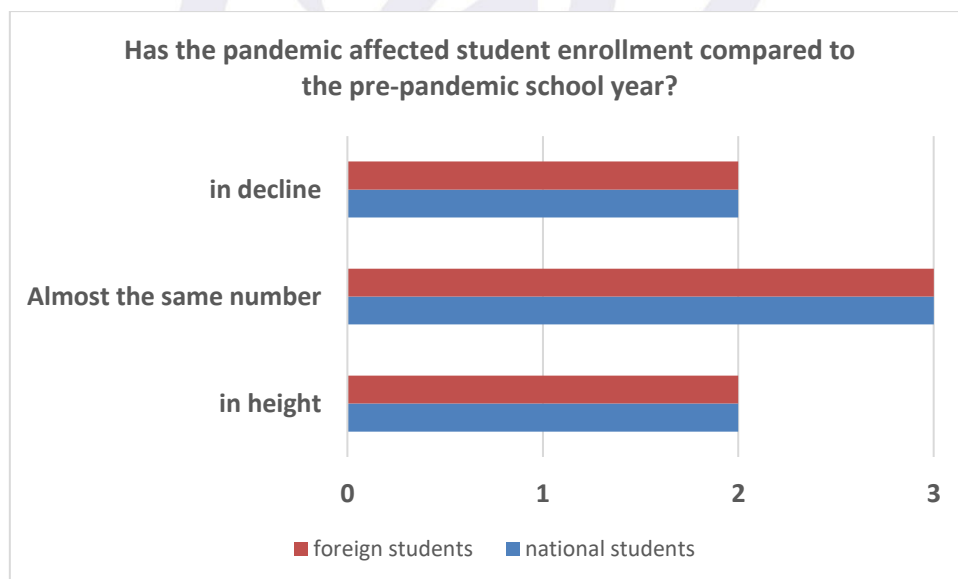
F – Secondary education (2020-2021): Questions focused on whether (or not) secondary schools were closed and on the percentage of affected students.

Responses indicate that the (full or partial) closure of secondary schools continued at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year. Between 90 and 100% of students were affected by the partial school closure.

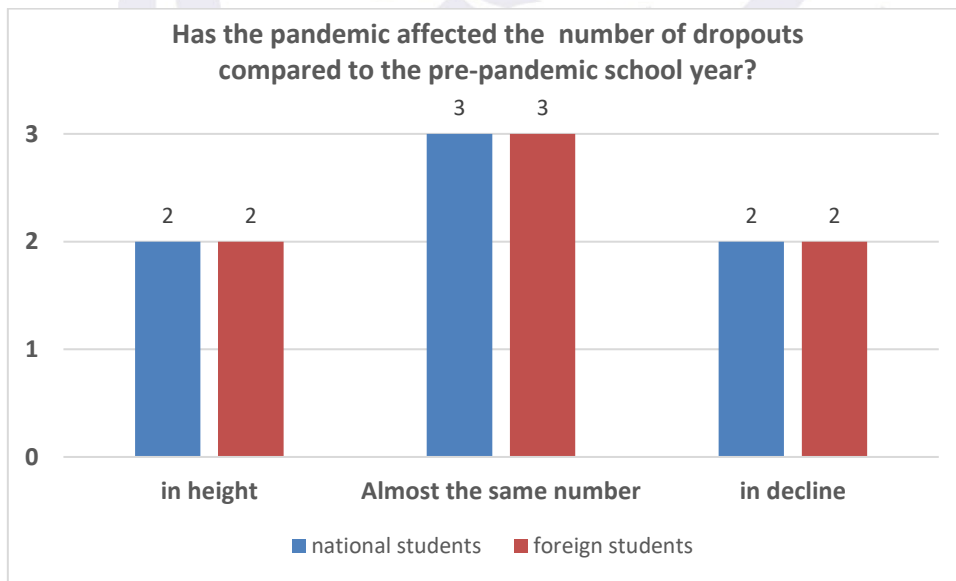


G – Higher education (2019-2020) : Questions focused on the impact of the pandemic, the number of enrolled students compared to the preceding year, the number of dropouts from higher education, and the measures taken to curb the impact of the pandemic on higher education.

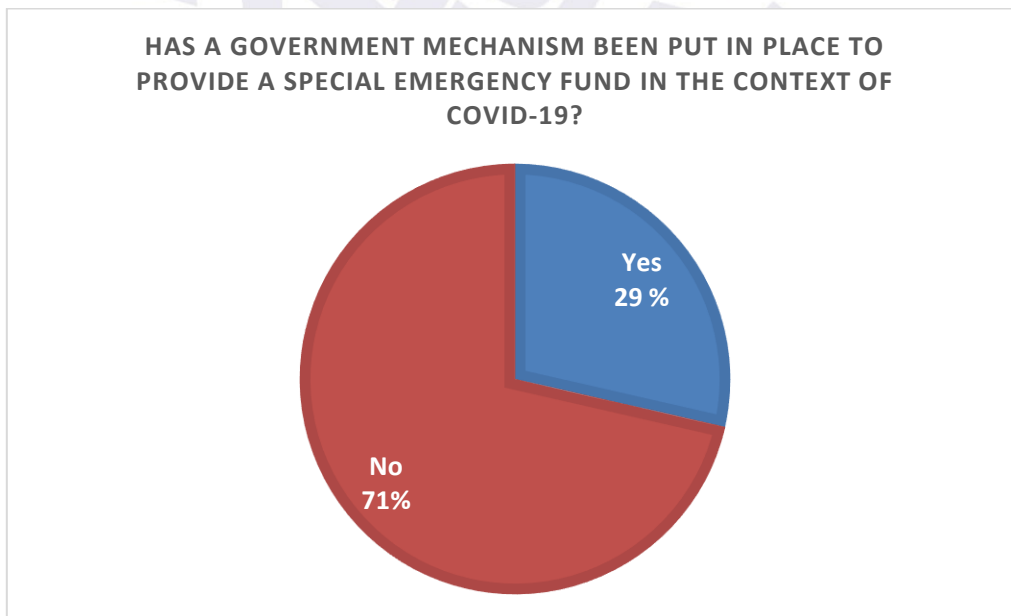
The number of students, both nationals and foreigners, enrolled in higher education institutions increased in Mauritania and Kuwait. The number remained the same in UAE, Qatar and Oman, while it decreased in Iraq and Sudan. This shows that the pandemic has had varying degrees of impact on higher education students in the Arab countries.



The number of dropouts from higher education, both nationals and foreigners, during the 2019-2020 academic year, compared to the pre-pandemic year, increased in some countries, decreased in others, and remained unchanged in most countries.

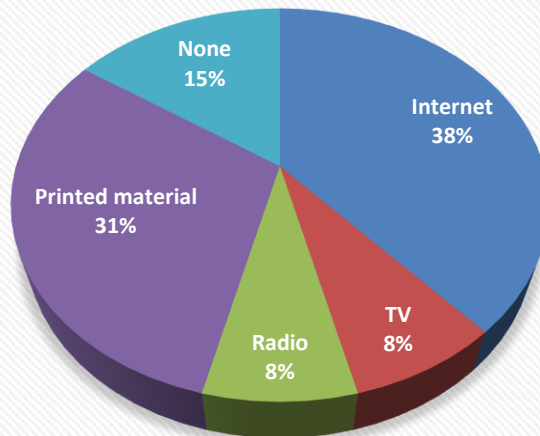


Except for Qatar and Kuwait, almost no country has set up a government mechanism that provides an emergency fund in response to COVID-19.



During the period of university closure, several measures were taken in some countries, with varying degrees, to adopt alternative teaching methods, through the use of the Internet, printed materials, and TV & radio, as shown in the following graph :

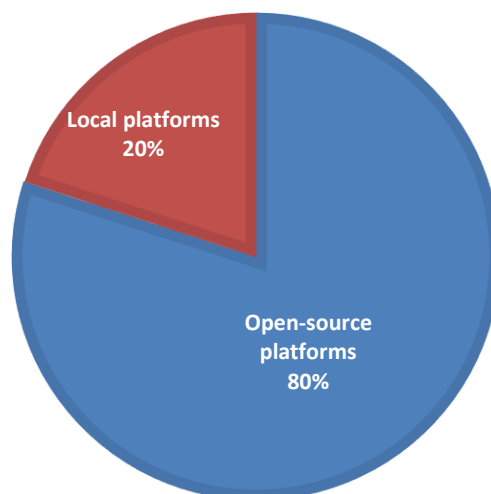
Types of distance education used during university closures



Most of the measures involved the use of the Internet (38%), printed materials (31%), TV and radio (8%). No such measures were taken in Iraq and Sudan during university closures.

For countries having opted for online teaching, two types of platforms were used : Open-source platforms and local platforms.

TYPES OF ONLINE EDUCATION PLATFORMS



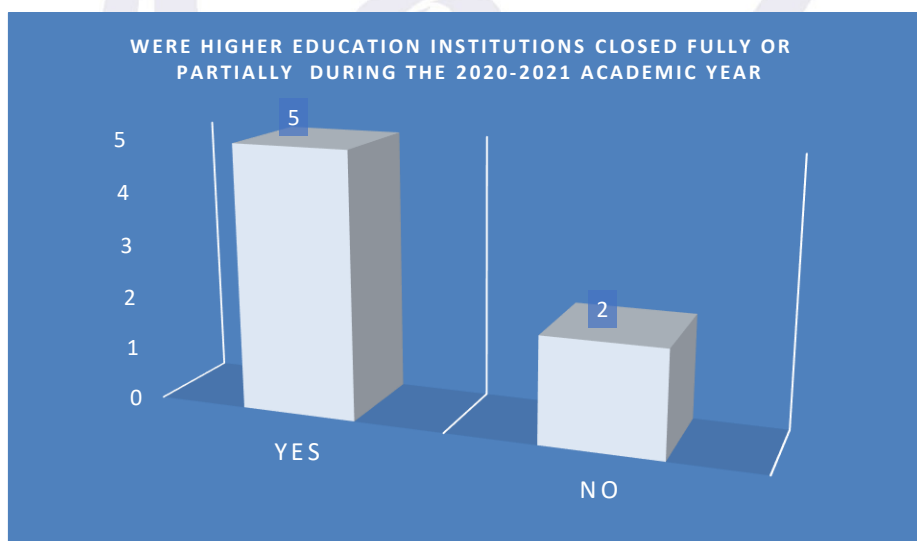
Open-source platforms were used in most cases (80%). Open-source technology does not place restrictions on developers in the process of designing services, programs and applications. Only skills and knowledge are needed to develop efficient and high-quality platforms.

Other measures were taken by respondent countries to facilitate access to distance education :

- In Kuwait, accounts were activated for students on Microsoft Teams for online classes.
- In Mauritania, social platforms were used for online teacher-student and student-student communication.
- In Oman and UAE, electronic applications were developed to conduct exams.
- In Qatar, universities made extensive use of e-learning tools. Transition to online teaching/learning methods went very smoothly.

H – Higher Education (2020-2021):

During the 2020-2021 academic year, higher education institutions were closed in five (5) out of the seven (7) respondent countries, but remained open in Qatar and UAE.



Between 30 and 100% of the students were affected by the closure, with potentially severe impacts on the level of attainment of an entire generation of students.

KEY FINDINGS

Most of the respondent countries closed their schools and universities during the 2019-2020 school year. Closures continued at the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year.

Being part of the social distancing measures designed to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, school and university closures have had a disproportionate negative impact on students, particularly those with less or no opportunities to join distance learning. The time that these students spend outside of school often present their parents with additional challenges.

The study shows that dropout rates have tended to increase in some countries. After prolonged periods of closure, ensuring that all children and young people return to school when schools reopen is a challenge in itself.

Alternative learning methods, such as distance/online education, seem to be out of reach for those who do not have the needed ICT infrastructure. In some countries, TV and radio were used to broadcast education materials, but evaluation remains difficult, as it is hardly possible to determine the number of students who follow these lessons on a regular basis.

Significant efforts have been invested in Arab countries, each depending on its means and capacities, to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on education and to provide alternative methods of learning. However, while some countries with strong ICT capacities have made considerable strides in terms e-learning, teaching and assessment, other middle and low-income countries are still incapable of providing access to online education, given their lack of the needed ICT infrastructure. Moreover, a large number of students in these latter countries do not have the needed computer devices at home.

During school and university closures, teachers were asked to teach remotely, often without adequate training, guidance, or resources. In fact, teachers in almost all countries of the world were generally unprepared to use online tools and platforms. The study shows that countries with strong ICT capacities were able to provide training programs for teachers at all education levels; other countries offered such training to a limited number of teachers; still others did not provide any such

training. With a significant percentage of teachers having no digital skills and competence enabling them to teach online, distance/online education has not been adequately benefited from.

2 – IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON DROPOUT RATES

As indicated by the available data, the number of out-of-school children and youth in Arab countries is significantly high, amounting to nearly 5 million in primary education, 3.5 million in lower secondary education, and 7.5 million in secondary education. This means that about 16 million children and youth are outside the school system, which represents 6.2% of the total number of out-of-school children and youth in the world (259.5 million).

Data from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (Table 1 below) indicate a decrease by 6.68%, between 2017 and 2018 (i.e. before the pandemic) in the number of out-of-school children and youth (8.86% for males and 4.87% for females). The number decreased for all children and adults, regardless of the dropout age, except for the number of young males at upper secondary education age which slightly increased by 0.46% in the Arab region and by 0.26% globally.

Between 2019 and 2020, however, the number of out-of-school children and youth increased, especially those at primary and lower secondary school age, with 11.14% in the Arab region, compared to 2.14% globally (12.3% for males and 10.21% for females). As can be noted, school closures have had negative effects on Arab countries, with a considerable increase in the number of dropouts at all education levels.

It should also be stressed that the global economic downturn has had its adverse repercussions on household income, which has further worsened the situation and exacerbated the risks of school dropout, especially among poor communities. To this should be added the shrinking public spending on education, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.

Table 1

Out-of-school children and youth before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

statement or indicator	year	2017	2018	2019	2020	Evolution rate 2017-2018	Evolution rate 2019-2020
out of primary school Children - male and female	World	62 812 382	61 639 606	62 810 909	64 162 252	-1,87	2,15
	All Arab countries	5 180 159	4 813 824	4 941 722	5 022 771	-7,07	1,64
out of primary school Children - male	World	29 304 482	28 162 789	29 018 367	30 290 251	-3,90	4,38
	All Arab countries	2 351 198	2 115 764	2 203 132	2 235 522	-10,01	1,47
out of primary school Children - female	World	33 507 899	33 476 817	33 792 541	33 872 001	-0,09	0,24
	All Arab countries	2 828 961	2 698 060	2 738 591	2 787 249	-4,63	1,78
out of lower secondary school children and youth - male and female	World	61 706 660	60 658 547	61 936 725	63 263 886	-1,70	2,14
	All Arab countries	3 566 285	3 348 331	3 211 394	3 569 133	-6,11	11,14
out of lower secondary school children and youth - male	World	31 853 010	31 216 795	32 264 629	32 857 192	-2,00	1,84
	All Arab countries	1 614 224	1 498 204	1 433 517	1 609 781	-7,19	12,30
out of lower secondary school children and youth - female	World	29 853 650	29 441 752	29 672 096	30 406 693	-1,38	2,48
	All Arab countries	1 952 060	1 850 127	1 777 878	1 959 352	-5,22	10,21
out of 2nd cycle secondary school youth - male and female	World	131 590 702	131 329 143	131 251 058	132 078 897	-0,20	0,63
	All Arab countries	7 537 231	7 533 928	7 479 357	7 457 936	-0,04	-0,29
	world total	68 518 053	68 689 947	68 556 009	69 104 199	0,25	0,80

out of 2nd cycle secondary school youth - male	All Arab countries	3 575 529	3 591 924	3 575 366	3 569 389	0,46	-0,17
out of 2nd cycle secondary school youth - female	World	63 072 649	62 639 196	62 695 049	62 974 698	-0,69	0,45
	All Arab countries	3 961 702	3 942 004	3 903 991	3 888 547	-0,50	-0,40
out of primary and lower secondary school children and youth	World	124 519 042	122 298 152	124 747 633	127 426 137	-1,78	2,15
	All Arab countries	8 746 443	8 162 155	8 153 117	8 591 904	-6,68	5,38
out of primary and lower secondary school children and youth - male	World	61 157 493	59 379 584	61 282 996	63 147 443	-2,91	3,04
	All Arab countries	3 965 422	3 613 969	3 636 648	3 845 303	-8,86	5,74
out of primary and lower secondary school children and youth - female	World	63 361 549	62 918 569	63 464 637	64 278 695	-0,70	1,28
	All Arab countries	4 781 021	4 548 186	4 516 469	4 746 601	-4,87	5,10
out of primary and secondary school children and youth - male and female	World	256 109 744	253 627 295	255 998 691	259 505 034	-0,97	1,37
	All Arab countries	16 283 674	15 696 083	15 632 474	16 049 840	-3,61	2,67
out of primary and secondary school children and youth - male	World	129 675 546	128 069 531	129 839 005	132 251 641	-1,24	1,86
	All Arab countries	7 540 951	7 205 892	7 212 014	7 414 692	-4,44	2,81
out of primary and secondary school children and youth - female	World	126 434 199	125 557 765	126 159 686	127 253 393	-0,69	0,87
	All Arab countries	8 742 723	8 490 190	8 420 460	8 635 148	-2,89	2,55

Source: UIS estimates - October 2021

3 – IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON REPETITION RATES:

Figures indicate that the number of repeaters has, since 2017, decreased in all Arab countries in which relevant data is available. During the period between 2017 and 2018, the number of repeaters significantly went down, especially in Mauritania (-24.7%), Djibouti (-12.9%), Sudan (-11.5%), Jordan (-10.9%) and Lebanon (-9.7%), whereas it increased significantly in Qatar (35.1%) and slightly in Kuwait (3.5%) and Algeria (0.5%). This decrease is a positive indicator towards achieving Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda, particularly Target 4.1: “Ensure, by 2030, that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.”

This downward trend in the number of repeaters continued between 2018 and 2019 in almost all Arab countries (except in Bahrain where an increase by 21.3% was recorded). This decrease occurred at different percentages, with 39.2% in Palestine, 35.1% in Qatar, 28.8% in Egypt, 19.3% in Jordan, 17.9% in Djibouti, 17.8% in Morocco, and 10.7% in Saudi Arabia, and with lower percentages in other Arab countries. Consequently, the Arab average decreased by 5.8%, which is better than the global average (-4.4%).

Between 2019 and 2020, the number of repeaters continued to go down, but with more significant percentages in some Arab countries, despite COVID-19 school closures in 2020. Percentages stood at -77.8% in UAE, -62.2% in Jordan, -23.4% in Saudi Arabia, and -17.4% in Algeria, with lower percentages ranging between 7.3% and 1.1% in the rest of the countries (Table 2). This led to a decrease by 2.2% in the estimated total number of repeaters in the Arab countries (3.6% for females and 1.5% for males). These estimates will be adjusted when relevant data is available for most Arab countries.

While the declining number of repeaters during the two pre-pandemic periods (i.e. 2017-2018 and 2018-2019) was viewed as a positive indicator in relation to the achievement of Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda, the decrease recorded between 2019 and 2020 was mostly associated with the COVID-19 school closures that seriously disrupted the student assessment process and necessitated changes in assessment methods. In this regard, several UN and country reports indicate that exams were postponed in some countries and canceled in others. Still in other countries, exams were replaced by continuous assessments, research papers, or other alternative

methods, such as taking final exams online. It should be noted that remote assessment requires strict controls to make sure it is properly conducted.

School closures result in significant learning losses and have adverse effects on the level of educational attainment. In this regard, UNICEF issued a report entitled : “Averting a Lost COVID Generation”, in which it warned that the “*longer-term impact of the pandemic on the education, nutrition and well-being of an entire generation of children and young people can be life-altering.*”

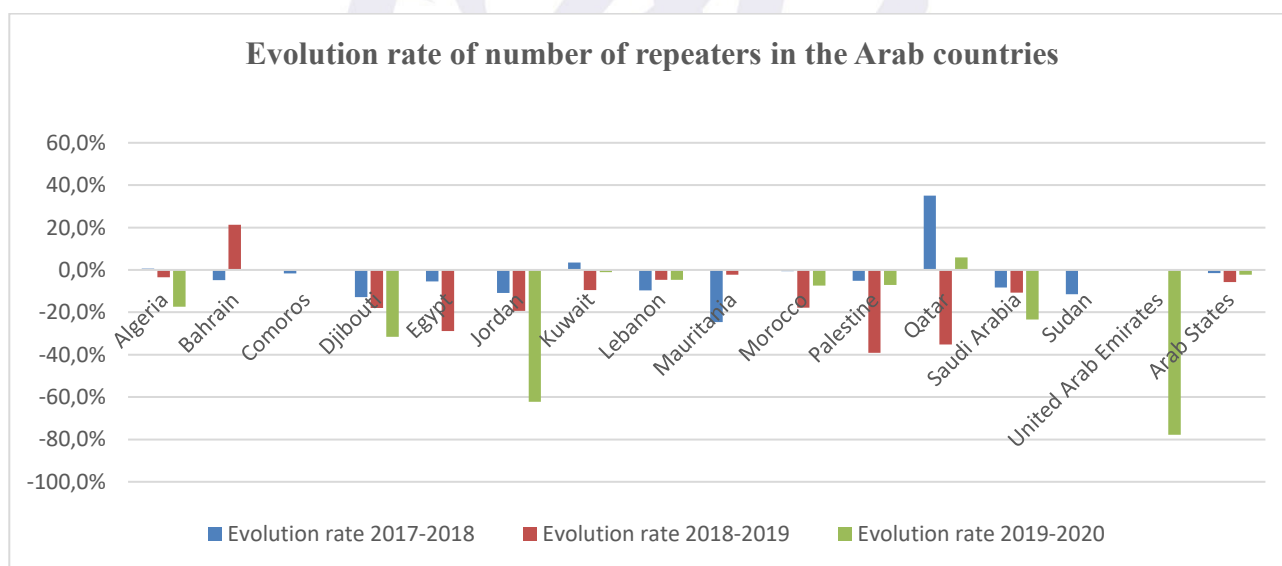
Table 2

Evolution of the number of repeaters in the Arab countries (2017-2020)

Country	Evolution rate 2017-2018	Evolution rate 2018-2019	Evolution rate 2019-2020
Algeria	0,5%	-3,4%	-17,4%
Bahrain	-4,9%	21,3%	
Comoros	-1,7%		
Djibouti	-12,9%	-17,9%	-31,6%
Egypt	-5,4%	-28,8%	
Jordan	-10,9%	-19,3%	-62,2%
Kuwait	3,5%	-9,5%	-1,1%
Lebanon	-9,7%	-4,7%	-4,6%
Mauritania	-24,7%	-2,3%	
Morocco	-0,5%	-17,8%	-7,3%
Palestine	-5,2%	-39,2%	-7,1%
Qatar	35,1%	-35,1%	5,8%
Saudi Arabia	-8,3%	-10,7%	-23,4%
Sudan	-11,5%		
United Arab Emirates			-77,8%
Arab States	-1,5%	-5,8%	-2,2%
World	-1,0%	-4,4%	2,1%

Source: UIS estimates - October 2021

Figure 1



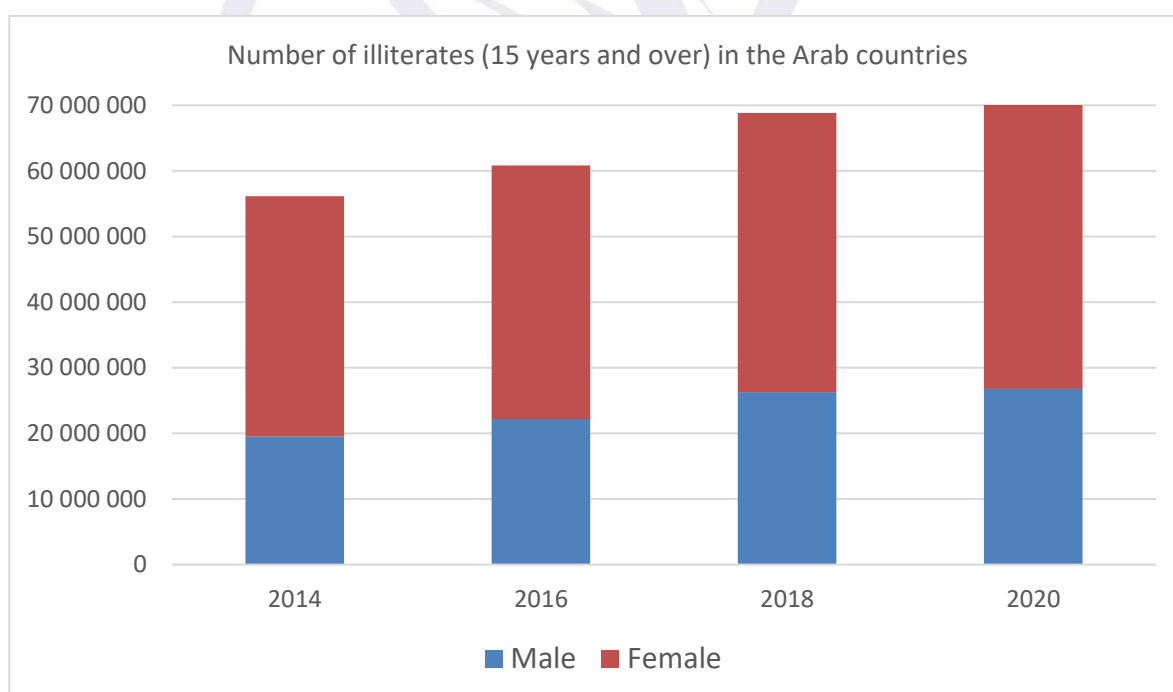
Source: UIS - October 2021

3 – IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ILLITERACY IN THE ARAB COUNTRIES:

The latest available data indicate that the number of illiterates in the 15-and-above age group in the Arab countries has significantly increased in recent years (Figure 1) to reach about 70 million. This already high figure is expected to further increase as a result of COVID-19.

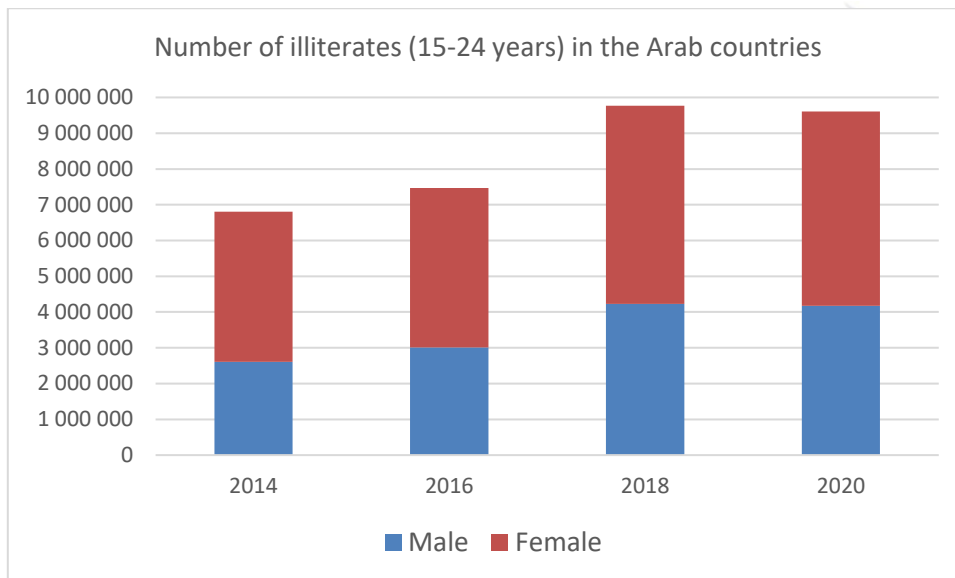
The substantial rise in the number of out-of-school children and youth in 2020, compared to the pre-pandemic years, portends an unprecedented number of illiterates in the coming years.

Figure 2



Source: UIS estimates - October 2021

The number of illiterate youth in the 14-25 age group has also increased in recent years (Figure 2), to reach about 9.6 million (5.4 million females and 4.2 million males). With the growing number of illiterates during the past five years in the Arab countries, Target 4.6 of the Sustainable Development Agenda (“ensure that, by 2030, all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy”) will be difficult to achieve, especially under the impact of the pandemic.



Source: UIS estimates - October 2021

4 – THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND EQUITY IN DISTANCE LEARNING

In view of the current digital divide and the resulting equity gaps, governments and development partners are called on to work together to remove technological barriers by investing in digital infrastructure and reducing Internet connectivity costs.

Technology alone, however, is not enough to ensure effective learning for all children and youth, particularly those from marginalized populations. In addition to improving children’s access to the Internet, strong parental support and increased availability of educational materials are essential in order to make the most of digital solutions.

In this context, Table 3 indicates a significant increase in the percentage of individuals using the Internet in the Arab countries during the period 2014-2020, with the Arab average rate going up from 38.2% in 2015 to nearly 55% at the end of 2019. Those without Internet access are estimated at 196 million people.

Significant efforts have been made in recent years to develop the Internet infrastructure in the Arab countries, making possible a remarkable rise in the percentage of individuals using the Internet. In the Gulf countries, the figure reached as high as 95-100% in early 2020. The percentage significantly increased in several other Arab countries, exceeding 80% in Lebanon, Jordan and Morocco, and reaching 72% in Iraq and Palestine. The most significant evolution occurred in Djibouti where the percentage soared from 12% in 2015 to over 60% in 2020, a respectable figure compared to other countries having the same economic and social situation. Conversely, Somalia and Comoros still have low percentages whose improvement needs further action.

These indicators tell much about the widening digital divide among Arab countries in relation to education. While the more affluent and developed countries have established distance learning strategies, the situation is different in middle- and low-income countries where many children still do not have study desks, books, or computers at home, not to speak of Internet connectivity.

On their part, educational institutions are unable, given their limited capacities, to provide sustainable alternative solutions. A relevant international report indicates that very few universities in middle- and low-income countries are adequately prepared and equipped to offer courses online. Internet connectivity remains a major problem, and some countries are even facing difficulties in ensuring continuous electricity supply. The result has been a slow growth of distance education in these

countries, compared to an unprecedented development of online learning in other countries that possess an advanced technology infrastructure.

Table 3:

Individuals using the Internet in Arab countries (2014-2020)

Country / year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Algeria	29,5	38,2	42,95	47,69	49,04	57,5	60
Bahrain	90,5	93,48	98	95,88	98,64	99,7	99,54
Comoros	6,98	7,46	7,94	8,48	9,01	9,49	9,99
Djibouti	10,71	11,92	13,13	55,68	58	59	60,5
Egypt	33,89	37,82	41,25	44,95	46,92	57,28	71,91
Iraq	13,21	18	21,23	49,36	64	70	72
Jordan	46,2	60,11	62,3	66,79	73,8	76,5	80,9
Kuwait	78,7	72	78,37	98	99,6	99,54	98,6
Lebanon	73	74	76,11	78,18	79,8	81,5	83
Libya	17,76	19,02	20,27	21,76	23	24,2	28
Mauritania	10,7	15,2	18	20,8	22	25	28
Morocco	56,8	57,08	58,27	61,76	64,8	74,38	84,12
Oman	70,22	73,53	76,85	80,19	85,5	90,3	95,23
Palestine	53,67	57,42	61,18	65,2	64,4	70,62	72
Qatar	91,49	92,88	95,12	97,39	99,65	99,65	99,65
Saudi Arabia	64,71	69,62	74,88	94,18	93,31	95,72	97,86
Somalia	1,63	1,76	1,88	2	2,2	2,29	3
Sudan	24,64	26,61	14,1	18	22	25,4	27,6
Syrian Arab Republic	28,09	29,98	31,87	34,25	35,8	37,1	39
Tunisia	46,16	46,5	49,6	55,5	64,19	66,7	69,8
United Arab Emirates	90,4	90,5	90,6	94,82	98,45	99,15	100
Yemen	22,55	24,09	24,58	26,72	27,8	29,1	30
Arab States	-	38,2	41,7	47,2	50,9	54,6	-
Word	-	41,1	43,9	46,3	49	51,4	-

Source: ITU – ALECSO Observatory estimates

In countries using distance education, students with disabilities face obstacles due to the lack of the needed assistive tools and devices that can help them join online courses. To improve accessibility, some countries have developed tools and resources, including audio and video narration in sign language and simplified text, and other assistive devices, but these tools are not always affordable.

According to the World Health Organization, the number of people living with some form of disability in the Arab countries is estimated at 40 million, more than half of whom are children and adolescents (i.e., over 20 million are of school age). In some countries, disability reaches record levels, much higher than the global average.

Promoting digital accessibility and providing assistive technology tools for students with disabilities remain a key challenge for middle- and low-income countries. An ITU study on “ICT Accessibility for

Persons with Disabilities and Persons with Specific Needs” (2014-2017) recommends that ICT be leveraged as a means of promoting the education and employment of persons with disabilities and as an enabling and empowering tool for social and economic development and for achieving an independent life.

COVID-19 has revealed significant shortcomings in the use of ICT for distance learning, especially for people with special needs, and mainly in developing countries. Among the main challenges to be addressed in this regard are the absence of legally binding regulations, the lack of the needed funds, and the low awareness of existing access facilitation services which themselves need to be further developed.

ALECSO’s initiatives in response to school closure and education disruption

ALECSO has worked to reduce educational gaps, by supporting actions and initiatives designed for priority countries and for the neediest regions and social groups (persons with disabilities, refugees and displaced persons...). It has sought to promote equitable opportunities for quality education, and to make available the needed technical, human and financial resources.

In response to the COVID-19 school closures and to ensure instructional continuity in the Arab countries, ALECSO has undertaken initiatives designed to :

- Contribute to developing alternative technology-based solutions to maintain continuity of learning;
- Enhance Open Education and e-learning in response to education disruption during crises, by making use of the Arab OER Hub and ALECSO’s online platform.
- Organize teacher-training courses on the use of online tools and platforms and on the production and provision of online educational content.

As part of the implementation of these initiatives, the following actions were undertaken :

- Signing a cooperation agreement, on June 14, 2021, with the Nouakchott region to provide Baccalaureate students in Mauritania with support and revision classes via the Internet;
- Supporting Arab States’ efforts in response to education disruption, in cooperation with “Millennium@EDU SUSTAINABLE EDUCATION”, “JP - Inspiring Knowledge” and “Intel”. In this regard, 1000 computers were offered to Mauritania and Comoros to help students in both countries to continue learning through online educational platforms.
- Conducting two training sessions : the first on Open Educational Resources; the second on synchronous learning methods using the *ClassIn* platform.
- Launching e-learning platforms in Djibouti and Comoros for 100,000 students, and in Lebanon and Mauritania for 200,000 students.

Conclusion

The field study carried out by the ALECSO Observatory and the analysis of data and indicators available for 2020 and the preceding (pre-pandemic) years show that the closure of schools and universities, which has affected millions of children and youth in the Arab countries and around the world, has certainly been one of the most challenges problems caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, given its direct and significant impact on an entire generation of students. It follows that, for many Arab countries, Goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Agenda, (*“ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”*) has become even more difficult to achieve by 2030 and even beyond.

The study also indicates that alternative methods of learning, such as online educational platforms, are not available for all students, especially those from low- and middle-income countries who have less opportunities to access distance education, to make up for lost learning, and to attend schools having sufficient resources to ensure a proper learning process and an adequate educational attainment.

Data and indicators reveal that the rising number of dropouts in 2020 will exacerbate the existing levels of illiteracy in several Arab countries. During the period 2014-2020, the illiteracy rate in the Arab world stood at about 25%. Given the repercussions of the pandemic on education, this rate is quite unlikely to be reduced in the coming years.

Furthermore, postponing or canceling assessment exams in several countries could result in low levels of educational attainment. A UIS study conducted in 2018 (i.e. before the pandemic) indicates that *“an estimated 53% of children at or near the end of primary school age are not yet able to read a short, age-appropriate story with comprehension.”* With the postponement or cancellation of exams, and in the absence of any effective response actions, this percentage can hardly be expected to go down.

Recommendations

- Organizing a high-level conference (heads of state) at the headquarters of the League of Arab States to examine the current situation and come out with decisions to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and promote the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 4 on quality education;
- Planning for an inclusive school reopening:
The needs of the most marginalized children should be included in school reopening plans, and adequate health measures should be provided for students with special needs. School reopening should be accompanied with assessments to identify learning gaps and develop remedial education programs;
- Developing new ways and solutions in response to the learning crisis, and working on addressing learning losses and preventing dropouts, especially among marginalized groups;
- Supporting the teaching profession and promoting teacher preparedness:
Teachers are the cornerstone of the education process and play a frontline role in achieving learning goals and ensuring instructional continuity during school closures;
- Strengthening data collection in order to better monitor the situation, by providing technical support to Arab countries that lack the data and indicators needed to follow up the implementation of SDG4;
- Coordinating with key stakeholders, including those in the health sector :
To ensure safe school reopening, measures might be required to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, by using the available information and drawing on other countries' experiences.



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