

# Global Campaign for Education

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## Briefing paper on key priority areas informed by the Strategic Plan 2023-2027

### Digital Learning

#### 1. Background

This document briefly outlines some of the tensions in aligning the expansion of digital education and the state's obligation to secure the right to education for all. The document gives special consideration to how the digitalisation of education is exacerbating inequalities within and beyond the school, and how the lack of regulation of private actors' engagement in the provision of digitalisation of education promotes old and emerging forms of commercialisation and privatisation of education.

For a country to effectively implement technology in education, “[they] need multi sectoral investment not only in electricity, infrastructure, devices, data and connectivity, but also educational content, teacher training, broader capacity development across the education sector, and research”. To address system-wide issues around teachers' capacity, promotion and career pathways, ICT competency standards for teachers should be developed and implemented, relevant to the countries' realities and needs, accompanied by pre- and in-service teacher training, pedagogical coaching, and other support mechanisms, with a focus on effective pedagogy in utilising technologies in the teaching and learning process. Digital literacy frameworks should be developed and integrated within national curricula, and teachers must be supported to develop their own digital literacy and leverage technology in sound pedagogical approaches<sup>1</sup>. Teachers and their representative unions should be involved at all levels in the design, piloting, implementations and evaluations of these tools. This is crucial for a proper identification of the problems EdTech is meant to address. The gap to achieve such a comprehensive EdTech policy demands, according to UNICEF, an estimated of at least \$1.4 trillion in funding by 2030<sup>2</sup> to cover investments related to digital learning. UNICEF has also highlighted that 68% of youth<sup>3</sup> are not on track to develop digital skills, with large disparities between high- and low-income countries, and gender gaps favouring boys, which demand gender sensitive policies on EdTech.

It is worth highlighting that the legal instruments relevant to the right to education remain fully applicable to education technology (EdTech) and digital education and therefore should inform such policies. Of particular relevance are article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,

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<sup>1</sup> UNICEF, 'Pulse Check on Digital Learning', UNICEF, New York, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/1301-how-much-does-universal-digital-learning-cost.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/reports/recovering-learning>

articles 13 and 14 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, articles 28 and 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention against Discrimination in Education of UNESCO. Under article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, everyone has the right to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

## **2. The GCE Strategic Plan (2023-2027)**

GCE is aware that the digital gap and education institutions' ability to transmit digital and critical thinking skills will more than ever become a determining factor for educational progress. In high income countries 90 % of young learners are digitally connected but in Sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, this figure is as low as 5% (UNESCO)<sup>4</sup>. These data reveal existing structural inequalities, which can only be overcome with greater and better efforts from the international community and with a series of transformations in the areas of public policy, financing, and teacher training, among others, in which schools, students, adult learners and teachers enjoy access to technology.

As the GCE Strategic Plan states, digital and technological solutions can play the role of catalysts in education reform and enable access to learning and continuity in education for students with critical barriers to access, such as those with disabilities or in emergencies. For this to be possible, it is necessary to understand that technology is not just a tool, but a market good, with an ideological and political charge aimed at getting profits from the sale of products and consolidating supply networks that also control, censor, or limit information, according to values not always aligned with human rights.

## **3. Critical challenges**

The challenges associated with EdTech require taking, critical positions on the dominant discourses that praise new technologies, without measuring their implications and limitations, such as exacerbating individualism that could weaken social interaction, solidarity and cooperation.

Inequality in access to new technologies among students is rampant and largely depend on the family's economic and social capacities and this leads to an increase of asymmetries among students<sup>5</sup>, especially affecting those living in rural areas.

GCE recognizes EdTech and digital learning as a valuable instrument, which should be incorporated into teaching work and the curriculum in general. This makes it necessary to ensure that both teachers and students have digital skills sufficient for life, work and active citizenship and the use of digital tools as an approach and exactly tool that can be used across subjects.

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<sup>4</sup> GCE Strategic Plan 2023-2027, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> Barceló, Pep. El cautiverio ideológico de las nuevas tecnologías. <https://vientosur.info/el-cautiverio-ideologico-de-las-nuevas-tecnologias/>

Teachers must have the autonomy to choose when, what, if and how they use tech in the classrooms.

This does not prevent us from identifying the ideological risk that EdTech entails, that govern the "production of truth" within digital spaces, in which digital literacies have not only reconfigured epistemological and social landscapes but also transformed identifications, allegiances, and notions of citizenship<sup>6</sup>.

Traditional education conveyed by technology, especially when it rather than encouraging limits critical thinking, can potentially increase power imbalances within and beyond the classroom <sup>7</sup>. As the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education Professor Boly Berry stresses, the introduction of digital education may enhance education or jeopardise it, depending on the context and policy measures accompanying that process. In fact, according to her report, in today's increasingly digital world, what counts from a right to education perspective is not so much the introduction of machines and programmes to "deliver" education, but the pursuit of comprehensive digital education to empower people with the digital competencies to participate in all dimensions of human life (civil, cultural, economic, political, and social) actively and freely and to become active citizens<sup>8</sup>.

The tools of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in education continue to be a contested issue, in several senses related to the teaching profession:

- The future of work: many AI tools seek to replace current functions in education, which raises questions around the work, responsibilities and status of teachers as well as education support personnel.
- The role of the profession: if these tools seek to provide solutions, who defined the problem? The profession needs to be involved in the design, piloting and evaluation of AI tools.
- Reasserting professional agency and autonomy: teachers need to be trusted, trained and supported to make decisions around the use of AI in education.
- Defending education as a social and relational endeavour: the interaction between student and the teacher is paramount and a precondition for quality education.
- Data: Ensuring data protection and security on and offline of users, and privacy of both students and teachers.

Finally, the relationship between technology, digitization and education inevitably involves the relationship with non-state actors and especially with corporations and companies doing business with information technology. Education International has denounced that the "turn" towards "online training" and "emergency distance learning" has given exacerbated power to commercial providers of educational technologies, to sell their products and encourage schools,

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<sup>6</sup> Darvin, Ron. (2017). *Language, Ideology, and Critical Digital Literacy*. University of British Columbia - Vancouver

<sup>7</sup> *Revista de la Escuela de Ciencias de la Educación*. 2022, Año 18 2(17), 109-123. Julio a diciembre. Cruz Picón, P.E. y Hernández Correa, L.J. *Tecnología, educación y poder: una dominante correlación desde el Estado Moderno*.

<sup>8</sup> Bolly Barry, parag. 22-36

teachers, and parents to use them, also resorting to copyright laws that are not always fit for teaching and create harmful barriers to the professional freedom and teachers' autonomy<sup>9</sup>.

As IE affirms, EdTech is a fast-growing industry. Not everywhere, however. A recent COVID-19 UNICEF report<sup>10</sup> reveals that at least 463 million students have been cut off from education as they have no means to access remote schooling or remote schooling cannot be offered. At the same time, the global EdTech market size is expected to grow by 18% per year reaching a 2027 market size of USD 285.2 billion<sup>11</sup>.

#### 4. Way forward

GCE should promote advocacy actions to facilitate access to EdTech so that the technological offer adapts to different cultural contexts, age groups, and especially so that it accompanies and reinforces individual and collective learning. GCE is also called to advocate for data protection and user's security in education processes and EdTech should aim to support face-to-face teaching and the fundamental role played by teachers in promoting critical thinking and developing students' knowledge, abilities, talents, and skills.

Access to technology does not mean increasing its cost or privatising its enjoyment. EdTech should be part of a public strategy, which includes all levels and modalities of education as part of an education sector plan. State is responsible for incorporating appropriate technology into free, inclusive, and quality public education systems that are responsive to cyberbullying and it is also responsible for securing data privacy and protection for both students and teachers, as part of their wellbeing. Likewise, it must promote its adaptation to diverse populations and encourage its use by women, people with disabilities and marginalised groups. For this, teacher training is crucial since no digital learning is called upon to replace their work. Calling states to account on these obligations is part of GCE's job.

The qualification of technology only as a tool does ignore the economic and power political structures behind the introduction of technology as well as the multiple inequalities that emerge in terms of which actors benefit from the design, commercialisation and use of technology. To be more specific, GCE acknowledges that "while the lack of technological devices and skills to use technology dominate in countries of the Global South, the development of technology and its commercialization, as well as the perpetuation of colonial practices to make low-income

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<sup>9</sup> Blikstein, P., & Blikstein, I. (2021). Do Educational Technologies Have Politics? A Semiotic Analysis of the Discourse of Educational Technologies and Artificial Intelligence in Education. In *Algorithmic Rights and Protections for Children*. <https://doi.org/10.1162/ba67f642.646d0673>.

<sup>10</sup>

United Nations Children's Fund, "Covid-19: Are children able to continue learning during school closures? A global analysis of the potential reach of remote learning policies using data from 100 countries." UNICEF, New York, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Education International. Teaching with Tech: The role of education unions in shaping the future. Summary. Survey Report by Christina Colclough. January 2021.

economies dependent on the technology developed in wealthy economies, prevail in policy debates in the Global North”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Perez Murcia, L.E. (2022). Global Campaign for Education: SDG4 Spotlight Report. Mimeo. Johannesburg.