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IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN KOSOVO

EDITORIAL

“Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Pre-University Education in Kosovo: Challenges and Opportunities”

The situation created due to the Covid-19 pandemic has imposed major changes on the education system in Kosovo, in particular pre-university education. At this point, a thorough analysis of the current situation and developments is crucial to identify efficient ways to ensure adequate and quality learning. In order to understand the impact of the pandemic on pre-university education, the one-year project **Quality, Accountability and Inclusiveness in Education 2021**, funded by the European Union Office in Kosovo (EUOK) and implemented by the Kosova Education Centre (KEC), compiled a report titled *“Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic on Pre-University Education in Kosovo: Challenges and Opportunities”*. This Report identifies the challenges that pre-university education in Kosovo is facing, and it describes the framework of measures and policies developed during this time. Furthermore, the Report presents opportunities for responding in effective ways to the emerging circumstances.

In order to present the findings of the Report, on 26 October 2021 KEC organized a virtual discussion on the Zoom electronic platform. The event was attended by 51 participants including representation from the European Union Office in Kosovo, MESTI and MEDs from different municipalities in Kosovo, school principals, teachers, the author of the Report and other contributors.

The presentation of the Report focused on three main aspects: challenges, opportunities and recommendations.

Some of the **challenges** identified in the Report included the management of school personnel during the pandemic, added workload for teachers, learning losses, deepened inequalities in education - particularly among marginalized groups, the lack of a central institutional mechanism for digital education, the lack of a support system for parents/custodians with instructions on how to provide support for their children at home, insufficient psychological services in schools to address the situation, the lack of a monitoring and reporting framework for the learning process during the pandemic for purposes of accountability and quality assurance etc.

On the other hand, the Report identified a number of **opportunities**, which should be used for a more effective response to learning in the conditions of a pandemic; the understanding that technology is an efficient education instrument is key. The Report emphasized the need to re-focus education towards technology-based teaching-and-learning platforms, as a consistent educational practice in the 21st century. In general, the pandemic is seen as a good opportunity to reflect and act on new approaches that would address long-term problems in the education system in Kosovo.

One of the key **recommendations** of the Report was to supplement the legal framework to address the challenges posed by the pandemic, specifically to revise and improve advisory and support mechanisms in schools. The expeditious adoption of the strategy for digital education and the development of digital competences was also underlined. Recommendations also included the need to address learning losses, coordination among central and local levels of education management, continued support for teacher professional development, optimized school autonomy and financial aspects, the improvement of information management systems etc.

The virtual discussion, where the findings of the Report were presented, emphasized the vital role of teachers who carried the heaviest burden in education during the pandemic. Many began teaching online almost immediately after the first lockdown, despite the lack of experience or technical expertise to use the adequate platforms. The MESTI teaching-and-learning guidelines proved especially useful, specifically the sections pertaining to the use of ICT in teaching. Some teachers compiled instruction manuals on how to use the Zoom platform, which they shared with colleagues and posted on school websites. While digitalization is an undisputable need to strengthen education, more intensive networking is required among schools to share best practices. Likewise, it was suggested that education institutions should include more teachers in the design of strategies and other core documents on education, which requires better communication for better coordination of actions.

Participants agreed that more should be done to address not only the academic impact of the pandemic, but also the impact on the mental and physical wellbeing of children in pre-university education. For this purpose, suitable legal and school-based mechanisms should be established.

As regards cooperation with parents, it was suggested that the Report could be supplemented with a separate section on the involvement of parents in learning from home, due to the fundamental importance of the school-family binomial.

A central point in the discussion was the importance of continual support by international partners in cooperation with local institutions and civil society, with special emphasis on the importance of education in human capital development.

Overall, the primary challenge of pre-university education during the pandemic in Kosovo was the pervasive uncertainty of the situation and health as a priority, especially children's health.

The Report was considered to provide valuable insights on the situation of pre-university education in Kosovo in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the public discussion during which these findings were shared was very active and productive.

The change in mindset and approach of all those involved in pre-university education indicates that the way has been paved towards the adoption of more practical and productive methods of teaching and learning. The fact that teachers and students adjusted to the new situation very

quickly is encouraging, and so is the creative aspect in dealing with unprecedented difficulties, despite institutional gaps and lack of expertise.

This public discussion is a very good baseline to identify the multifaceted predicament of the education system in Kosovo in the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the fact that some of the challenges noted in the Report are pre-existing problems, the pandemic presents an opportune instance to identify new and optimal ways to address them. The Report shall therefore serve as a good diagnostic tool for the situation in pre-university education, and a good point of reference for education development moving forward.

This editorial was drafted by Bora Shpuza Kasapolli within the program "Quality, Accountability and Inclusiveness in Education 2021" implemented by the Kosova Education Center (KEC) with the support of the Office of the European Union in Kosovo. The content of this editorial will in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union Office in Kosovo.