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POLICY BRIEF

«Ժամանակակից խորհրդարան՝ ժամանակակից Հայաստանի համար» ծրագիր

“Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia” project

ՄԱԿ-ի Չարգացման ծրագրի «Լոր Հայաստան՝ ժամանակակից խորհրդարան» ծրագիրն համահրականացվում է ՕքսեյՋեն հիմնադրամի, Մարդկային զարգացման միջազգային կենտրոնի, Ժողովրդավարության Վեսթմինսթեր հիմնադրամի հետ՝ ՀՀ Ազգային ժողովի հետ համագործակցությամբ: Ծրագիրն իրականացվում է Միացյալ Թագավորության «Լավ կառավարման հիմնադրամի» և Շվեդիայի կառավարության ֆինանսական օժանդակությամբ

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Secondary education during the state of emergency and beyond



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It was not the ballgown that made Cinderella beautiful

The COVID-19 pandemic immediately revealed the real state of secondary education in Armenia, and it appeared that overall, it was not as 'ugly', as most believed. Within a week after 16 March, 2020, when the government declared a state of emergency, about 80% of 1360 secondary schools in Armenia turned 'virtual', delivering the educational process on distance, with the use of information and communication technologies (ICT). The government was able to mobilize all the ICT and educational resources available in a rather short time, develop additional resources, and in parallel, identify technical gaps, including availability of computers or other gadgets necessary for teachers and students to engaged in distance learning.

Meanwhile, some key issues were identified, such as additional workload of teachers and students, in contrast to face-to-face education; almost identical projection of offline curricula in the online learning process; challenges teaching methodology in an online environment, including the challenges of organizing the learning of students with special needs; issues of student participation; and uncertainties and challenges regarding the feedback and assessment mechanisms, including organisation of exams. In parallel, solutions were offered as well, albeit situational and ad hoc. Suddenly, the Cinderella of the secondary education appeared at the online ball, with all her issues, and without the gifts of the fairy godmother, and overcoming her main fears and uncertainties, was able to dance, mostly thanks to the teachers.

How to get ready for the next balls: how to define the key issue?

In the early days of the pandemic, the acute need to ensure continuity of the education and to address the major needs and concerns of all the beneficiaries and stakeholders involved, seemed to shift the vector of the relevant discussions and subsequent public discourses towards one prevalent topic: 'distance learning', though it should be noted that almost all the actors share the view that what has been offered during the state of emergency is far from what one would consider to be distance learning. It is true that the education during the pandemic was indeed provided on a distance, with the use of ICT. However, in terms of the instructional design of online or e-learning, or even of distance learning, the current process cannot be defined as either.

Still, regardless of definitions, their potentially varying perceptions and the efforts to somehow categorise the current educational process, it is critical that the state authorities, and especially the government, withstand the absolutely human temptation to replace the complex question with a simpler one, because answering simple questions is much easier. Specifically, the government should be consistent in defining the key issue: *how to organize and manage secondary education, considering the characteristics of beneficiary groups during a state of emergency and/or pandemic?* It is paramount that the government consistently seeks answers to this very question, rather than to replace it with "Should secondary education be provided online or face to face?", a question that seems to gain prevalence especially within the expert community. Replacing the larger question with the latter will implicitly trap the government, the expert community and the key actors in secondary education into taking a position and therefore defend it, thus wasting administrative, expert, practical and financial resources on an auxiliary, rather than primary issue. Indeed, there is a need for developing online education in Armenia. However, first, we need to define its strategic importance within a larger context of providing secondary education, perhaps as a resource both for states of emergency and long-term development.

Current and potential issues of secondary education during and beyond the present phase of pandemic and possible responses

The subsequent strategic discussions should consider the characteristics of states of emergencies, and answer questions, such as what resources are/will be available in case of different emergencies: a pandemic, large-scale military actions, natural disasters. For instance, in the current state of emergency caused by COVID-19 pandemic, some factors key for organizing education on distance,



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such as electricity, technical equipment, high quality internet, availability and affordability of internet, have been available. But will all these be available in other emergencies?

For the recent two months it has been possible to reveal in real time the main issues of secondary education, perhaps exacerbated during the state of emergency, specifically (1) availability and affordability of internet to all the students and teachers; (2) availability of technical equipment; (3) educational practice which is largely affected by the hierarchy of communication among the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (MESCS), marz administrations, school principals and teachers, and subsequent (mis)interpretations and expectations; (4) mostly untapped opportunity of exercising academic freedom to interpret and teach subject curricula; (5) low level of digital literacy of the teachers; (6) issues of online teaching and learning methodologies, including challenges of applying relevant methodologies that consider the age, psychological and developmental characteristics of student groups; (7) issues of feedback and assessment, including organisation of exams; (8) the need for 'one window' to voice, consolidate, categorise and provide feedback to issues voiced by various stakeholders of the educational process.

After the state of emergency, responding to these issues will require a systemic approach, in line with the strategic choice of the government regarding the primary issue mentioned above. The approach and the framework of relevant activities necessary to apply it should be based on reliable evidence, on the analysis of the issues and concerns voiced during the 2020 spring semester, results of a comprehensive study of ICT use for educational purposes and relevant practices in secondary schools, and findings of the monitoring and assessment of the teacher training provided. It would help significantly to create a special task force at MESCS, comprising professionals from all relevant sectors, which will consolidate the mentioned evidence, ensure a consistent feedback loop with all the actors involved in secondary education, and draft policies and relevant activities based on the evidence and feedback of the stakeholders. The potential framework will include but will not be limited to the following issues:

- definitions, similarities and differences of instructional design, teaching and learning online and offline;
- opportunities of blended learning, and differentiated approach to organizing secondary education (for instance, depending on the number of residents in the community and the number of students at a school, the school may opt for offline teaching if all the safety measures to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 are in place);
- instructional design of online teaching and learning, the necessary inventory of resources, including social-cultural (for instance, online education relies heavily on values and behaviours characteristics of more individualist cultures, and while designing and organising online learning at the secondary level, the behaviours of more collectivistic Armenian culture should be considered), and learning and teaching methodologies;
- quality assurance mechanisms and instruments to ensure the quality of teaching and learning online;
- characteristics of student feedback in online learning environments;
- assessment policies and instruments for an in online learning environment;
- consideration of the characteristics of various groups of students, and adaptation mechanisms for online learning environments.

Perhaps when these issues, among others, will have been addressed, the Cinderella of the secondary education will be able to attend the next ball, shining in all of her beauty.

The policy brief is elaborated based on the results of the off-the-record online discussion "The response of the Armenian secondary educational system to the challenges resultant from the COVID-19 pandemic: solutions and lessons learnt", held on 02.25.2020 within the UNDP Modern Parliament for a Modern Armenia" Project. The online discussion brought together independent experts, state officials and representatives of the international development partners. The opinions expressed in this policy brief are ICHD's and do not reflect the view of the UNDP.