Meeting Summary Report

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the education systems globally, threatening learners' rights to education and quality learning. The UNESCO Global Education Coalition noted that the sudden school closures affected the learning of over 94% of enrolled learners from pre-primary to upper-secondary levels over 188 countries, including the Asia-Pacific region. As of December 2020, 18.2% of total enrolled learners globally were still unable to learn in a regular school setting, while countries have adopted various approaches and actions to seek and provide effective alternative learning pathways. In this unprecedented and ongoing emergency, the issues that the world has commonly faced – i.e. learning losses, ensuring learning progress, and quality learning outcomes – are vital topics of discussion among education stakeholders.

In this context, the Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific (NEQMAP) hosted its 2020 Annual Meeting under the topic 'Challenges in Monitoring Quality Education in Emergencies' between 9 and 10 December 2020 to: i) exchange updates on members' achievements, challenges, and needs in 2020; ii) to explore and strengthen the network's collaboration in monitoring the quality of education; and iii) to identify the network's target activities in 2021 and 2022.

Over 60 participants from 27 countries working in various education fields, e.g. Ministries of Education, non-profit organizations, research institutes, and universities, participated in the meeting. Due to the challenge of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the annual meeting, which is usually held in-person in Bangkok, was conducted online via the Zoom platform over the two days, from 13:00 - 15:00 BKK time each day.

Day 1- Updates from NEQMAP Secretariat

To start, the NEQMAP Secretariat shared highlights of its knowledge sharing, research and capacity building activities in 2020. NEQMAP held a total of five webinars throughout this year, including this annual meeting. The first webinar was '**Introducing NEQMAP Strategy in Strengthening the Quality of Education in Asia-Pacific'** held on 30 June, followed by **'Developing Curriculum and Assessment Systems for 21st Century Skills'** co-hosted by NEQMAP and UNICEF East Asia & Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO) as a joint dialogue on 10 September. Participating countries from Uzbekistan and Philippines at the former; Indonesia, Thailand and Hong Kong, SAR China at the latter shared their progress of reforming the education system to integrate competency-based learning and assessment.

The third webinar, held on 19 October, introduced the **NEQMAP-ACER GEM Online Course on 21st Century Skills Integration and Strategic Planning.** This three-week online course, co-organized by NEQMAP and the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) and facilitated by Dr. Claire Scoular from ACER Australia, was conducted between 9-27 November to assist member countries in Asia-Pacific region to identify potential areas of 21st Century Skills integration in the strategic planning and to improve the education system alignment for quality learning outcomes. The fourth webinar held on 25 November was organised in partnership with the Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training, the NORRAG KIX Europe, Asia-Pacific Hub,

on 'Using Data to Improve Learning: Engaging with Policy and Reform. NEQMAP on behalf of UNESCO Bangkok facilitated a panel discussion on curriculum implementation: competency-based learning and alignment curriculum. It brought together a NEQMAP member from Vietnam and a NEQMAP partner from Afghanistan to showcase their country experiences in competency-based learning and their curriculum reforms.

In addition to its work on knowledge sharing and capacity building, several NEQMAP research projects were carried out. NEQMAP finalized the publication '*Large-Scale Learning Assessments in Asia-Pacific: A Mapping of Country Policies and Practices*', a collaborative research led by the NEQMAP Secretariat and Dr. Esther Sui Chu Ho from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, which mapped the trends of learning assessment in the Asia-Pacific region using data collected from 24 countries between 2010 and 2015.

In late March, during the early phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, NEQMAP Secretariat conducted a **rapid survey** to explore how the Asia-Pacific countries responded to large-scale assessments in the pandemic. Based on the survey data and NEQMAP's inputs, the UNESCO Headquarters produced UNESCO Issue Note No. 4.3 on Managing High-Stakes Assessments and Exams and UNESCO working document on COVID-19 A Glance of National Coping Strategies on High-Stakes Examinations and Assessments, in which the overview of the current responses on high-stakes examinations in countries around the world was presented. In addition to these COVID-19 responses, NEQMAP looked at the challenges of learning assessments in crises and emergencies with our **2020 Thematic Reviews,** one on large-scale learning assessments (LSLA) and the other on school-based assessments (SBA) (more details below).

Lastly, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) India and the People's Action for Learning (PAL) Network have started a **NEQMAP-ACER topical case study** on citizen-led assessment (CLA) in South Asia, which will conclude in the first quarter of 2021.

This introductory session helped set the stage for how NEQMAP as a network has been collaborating on good practices in assessments and curriculum review to monitor the quality of education.

Session 1: NEQMAP Thematic Reviews

This session highlighted the findings of the 2020 NEQMAP thematic reviews on large-scale learning assessments (LSLA) and school-based assessments (SBA) in crises and emergencies. The first thematic review on formative assessment and the continuity of learning in times of emergencies and crises was written and presented by **Dr. Jyoti Bawane**, Associate Professor of India Institute of Education, India, and **Dr. Ramesh Sharma**, Associate Professor of Ambedkar University Delhi, India. One of the key findings to support the continuity of learning is for education systems to provide safe space and environments for learning to support students' social and emotional learning and/or adopted flexible learning strategies. And countries tend to reshape and readjust their formative assessment strategies, such as offering a pass/fail exam, depriving students of proper feedback and progression in learning. Despite a lack of specific research on formative assessments in crises, three types of assessment tools were found to have been used under varying conditions in previous emergencies and crises: those for evaluating social and emotional learning skills, criterion-based tools for measuring literacy and numeracy skills, and digital tools (e.g. mobile applications). These assessments are mainly utilized as rapid assessment, benchmark assessment, or diagnostic assessment tool by countries in crisis.

The second thematic review was written and presented by **Dr. Carlo Magno** from the Center for Learning and Assessment Development-Asia and looked at practices and policies on high-stakes examinations, standardized

tests, and large-scale learning assessments (LSA) in times of emergencies and crises. Ministries of education typically adjust their assessment policies by adopting one or more of the following measures: rescheduling the original test date, modifying the modality, introducing safety measures, or modifying contents. For instance, due to COVID-19, the Republic of Korea postponed its College Scholastic Ability Test while Indonesia canceled itsnational examinations. Some countries, including China and Thailand, adjusted their test platforms by shifting from pen-and-paper tests to online exams. Hong Kong, SAR China and Viet Nam imposed using cleaning robots to sanitize exam areas and requiring all examinees to wear masks, respectively, as a part of their safety measures. Some recommendations for countries to better prepare and effectively manage LSA in emergencies include providing policy frameworks and specific guidelines on exam operation, an alternative delivery mode for national assessment, and suitable health and safety measures.

The two thematic reviews share some examples of responses and efforts that countries in the Asia-Pacific region have made to ensure learning continuity and to monitor learning progress, both during past crises as well as in the current pandemic.

Session 2 and 3: Concurrent Breakout Discussions and Reporting Back

To facilitate the sharing of knowledge, and ensure all participants had an opportunity to contribute, breakout group discussions were held on the theme 'Challenges in monitoring education quality in time of emergencies'. Six groups of 10-11 participants from various countries were assigned to discuss the following topics:

1. What are the key issues/challenges experienced during the pandemic to monitor the quality of education?
2. What were the responses to the above challenges – i.e. mechanisms, modalities, approaches used?
3. How would you respond differently if such circumstances occurred again in the future – i.e. plans, strategies, interventions, collaborations, research?

The discussion outcomes are based on each groups' reporting back presentation and notes. These have been compiled and categorized into four common thematic areas: 1) learning continuity and access to education, 2) integrating quality and holistic learning, 3) empowering teachers and teaching capacity, and 4) strengthening assessment and enabling innovations.

1) Learning continuity and access to education

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic spread, school closures were imposed in many countries. One of the most common concerns is the learning loss and access to education. To address these challenges, countries adopted a multitude of alternative learning structures to provide access and ensure learning continuity, including online learning (e.g. Malaysia), flipped learning (e.g. Australia), and blended/hybrid learning (e.g. Bangladesh, Uzbekistan). To maximize students' learning capabilities at their home-based learning, countries designed and distributed digital textbooks, video and online lessons, and online knowledge platforms (e.g. India's DIKSHA platform) as resources that can allow students to fully grasp their subject matters and curriculum. Some countries also actively utilized learning and/or communication applications (e.g. WeChat and Telegram in India; WhatsApp in Indonesia and Nepal) to help students connect, engage, and easily communicate with their peers and teachers as well as send and receive class assignments and examinations. TVs and radios were also massively used as important learning tools (e.g. in India, Mongolia, Myanmar, Iran), especially targeting the students in early grades, to learn subjects in an engaging manner.

The challenge in shifting to online learning was relatively more pronounced in the primary level compared to the higher education due to selecting appropriate tools for delivering quality education in an engaging manner and necessitating adult guidance. Furthermore, although online schooling has been implemented as the primary alternative, Bangladesh for example expressed a concerned voice regarding its consequential increasing rate of dropouts. The issues of readiness, preparedness and equity are of concerns such as lacked infrastructures fromschool, unavailability of telecommunications infrastructures (e.g. TV, radio, computer/laptop, smartphone), and insufficient reliable power supplies especially in remote areas were common hindrances to education continuity that were witnessed in many countries including Malaysia, India, and Bhutan.

2) Integrating quality and holistic learning

Attention to quality learning and holistic education that include both cognitive and non-cognitive skills have been widely discussed in the educational crisis such as this current pandemic. The discontinuity of learning at a regular school setting delayed the learning progress in unprepared school systems. Countries commonly stated that such learning gaps would be more evident between public and private schools due to more flexible learning approaches and academic tools available in private schools (e.g. Mongolia). Students from migrant and underprivileged families would be more impacted due to the lack of available resources and financial burden to purchase devices (e.g. India). Countries are also concerned that the currently opaque learning gaps would become prominent once the school re-opens in the post-pandemic era (e.g. Fiji). Another challenge is promoting students' non-cognitive skills, SEL, and happiness/well-being since socialising and communicating with their peers and teachers are limited. Moreover, the issues on validity, effectiveness as well as monitoring the quality learning with absence of teachers' full attention and guidance in-person are to explore when the curriculum has yet been fully adjusted for the online mode. The varied ICT skills and digital literacy of both students and parents also prevent students from effectively partaking in the learning activities without optimal use of the available resources (e.g. Uzbekistan).

3) Empowering teachers and teaching capacity

Teacher's lack of capacity and expertise to adopt online teaching has been evident as a considerable challenge despite their high motivation and commitment (e.g. Bhutan). Teachers' insufficient capability for online teaching therefore has hindered students' distance learning. Coupled with a need to obtain new skills to teach, teachers' lacking capability of utilizing the collected data on students' academic achievement left them unable to gauge the development of students accurately (e.g. India). To move forward with improving teacher capacity, some countries stated their implementation of teacher training and teachers' communication and knowledge sharing on best practices (e.g. Australia). In the meantime, India stated that the government developed and shared teaching-learning sources to assist teachers in nurturing skills necessary for online teaching and reformed their pedagogies to provide quality education in the new educational structures.

4) Strengthening assessment and enabling innovations

Assessing the students' academic progress is especially arduous in the unprecedented teaching-learning environment. In consideration of unmet curriculum coverage from learning disruption and institutional unreadiness, countries took different assessment measures to administer this year's large-scale assessment in terms of canceling the exam or postponing (e.g. Bangladesh, Maldives, Republic of Korea) it. Those countries that chose postponement reinforced anti-virus measures prior to the exam, slightly modified the mode of

attendance and action, and operated examination on a rescheduled date in a largely similar manner to previous years. In adjusting to the online learning modality, a majority of countries shifted their assessment modality from paper-based exams to online versions. The online examination, however, raised concerns regarding scoring/grading, the familiarity of the exam among teachers and students, as well as the fear of fraud or cheating.

In this context, a majority of countries administered online examinations in which google forms and emails are predominantly utilized as the means (e.g. Viet Nam, Indonesia, Bhutan). In addition, Nepal took a combined approach in terms of executing various modalities of examination for grade 10 in tandem with in-class examination for grade 11 and 12. Other examination types were also adopted by some countries, including oral assessment and portfolio assessment in Australia where schools evaluate students' academic achievement by looking at the students' collection of works (e.g. written assessments, presentation).

Day 2: Updates on Members' Activities Report

Session 1: Members' Presentations

The second day of the annual meeting focused on two activities: updates on NEQMAP members' activities and a breakout session during which members were distributed to six groups to reflect on the current challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and propose activities within the Network's three core pillars of knowledge sharing, capacity development and research that NEQMAP can offer to its members and activities that members can engage with the Network. The first session presented updates by three Network members from South Asia and the Pacific as well as an update (learning experiences) from two representatives from Malaysia and Brunei participating in the NEQMAP-ACER online learning course on 21st Century Skills integration to the planning and strategy in education systems.

1.1 Key Findings from ASER 2020 Survey and Report

Nimisha Kapoor, from the Annual Status of Education Research (ASER) Centre in India, presented the findings of its household survey of children aged 5-16 conducted in September 2020. For the first time, the survey was adapted to a phone-based format because of the pandemic. The survey (study) focused on the provision of access and the engagement of students to different types of remote learning opportunities. Some of the key findings of the survey were highlighted:

- A higher proportion of younger children (aged 6 – 10) are not enrolled in schools, compared to the 2018 report.
- Higher levels of education of parents implies more opportunity to support children's learning based on the survey result of more contacts with schools/teachers than the less educated ones.
- 75 percent of children reported that they have received some form of support at home during the reference week, with elder siblings also playing a critical role in addition to parents.
- WhatsApp emerged as the most common medium with 74.2 percent of all schools surveyed using WhatsApp to share learning materials/activities with learners/parents.

ASER India also concluded that it is crucial to closely monitor return to school to minimize school dropout rates and closely monitor learning loss. Secondly, given the engagement and support of parents, siblings and family members shown during the pandemic, it will be important to redesign traditional teaching and learning mechanisms to family support. Thirdly, when the pandemic and its restrictions are over, an in-depth assessment

of the digital contents that have been created needs to be made to what type of contents worked and what impacts the contents had on children's learning. Finally, special efforts must be made ensure that no child is left behind in the learning process by addressing the equity and inclusion issues that come about because of the digital divide (access issues).

1.2 Strengthening Assessment, Evaluation, And Capacities in South Asia And Beyond by ACER in India

Anannya Chakraborty, from the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) India, shared information on her organization's projects in South Asia and Africa, including: **i) educational research for early and school education** such as sector review of the K-12 education system in India, improve Grade 8 School Education Examination in Nepal (basic education completion level), **ii) assessment reform** in Nepal and Bhutan, and **iii) capacity building in assessment, program evaluation and educational reviews** such as evaluation of education programme in Zambia: the Catch-Up programme and the Zambian Girls 2030 programme to contribute to gender equity and remedial education.

ACER highlighted some lessons learned from their projects, including that there is a lack of special skills and time for intensive capacity building for state-level assessments by officials responsible for implementing such assessments. Secondly, a re-orientation of stakeholder mindset is required to enhance low-stakes assessments. Thirdly, awareness needs to be created regarding the importance of the different stages of reliable assessments and there is the need to relate assessment data to other indices such as parent's level of income. Lastly, collaboration between education stakeholders is required for meaningful education reforms in assessment to take place and such reforms must include guidelines which cover inclusion.

In regards to challenges posed by COVID-19, ACER India recommended to provide intensive training of research staff to deliver online workshops effectively and ensure the continuity of capacity building projects, support to fieldwork partners in observing COVID-19 protocols during field visits, maintain regular communication with partners and stakeholders, and follow government advisories in the different countries, and report the impact of COVID-19 on educational reviews and reports.

1.3 Samoa's National Response Plan to COVID-19

Dr Karoline Afamasaga-Fuata'I, from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) of Samoa, presented Samoa's national education response plan to COVID-19. Faced with the pandemic, Samoa had to develop and implement a national response plan to ensure learning continuity. MESC through a budget support reallocation of funds, UNICEF Catalytic Funds and funds from UNESCO and Vodafone has developed a multimodal learning strategy for students, Zoom Pilot Initiative, Moodle Pilot Initiative and Online Professional Development materials for teachers. The purposes are to provide access to quality education, improve infrastructure to support teaching and learning in a digital environment, and deliver capacity building programs for teachers on using ICT in learning environments.

MESC had also shared some of the challenges that were encountered in designing and implementing the national response plans. These include the high cost of infrastructure (equipment, devices, laptops etc.) and related services (TV airtime, radio airtime, internet connectivity, Moodle, and Software licenses etc.), the challenge of the MESC and schools sustaining the COVID-19 initiatives, and the lack of capacity and technical skills by the Ministry to ensure resource development for ECE, primary and secondary levels.

1.4 Sharing Experiences from NEQMAP-ACER's Online Learning Course on 21st Century Skills

Despite the COVID-19 challenge, this year's capacity building activity was first time shifted from in-person mode and offered in an online platform for countries in the Asia-Pacific region. NEQMAP-ACER's Online Learning Course on 21st Century Skill integration and strategic planning was attended by 17 country teams (3-5 officials per team) in the Asia-Pacific. The participants represented various national education authorities/departments/institutes in assessment, curriculum and pedagogy. For the annual meeting, NEQMAP invited several representatives to share their feedback, insights and experiences gained from the course.

First, Regina Joseph Cyril of the Ministry of Education of Malaysia shared that Malaysia already has a 21st century skills framework which is known as the 4C and 1V (creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and values and ethics). However, the course has enabled the team to identify the need to align 21st century skills through curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. As part of the course, Malaysia conducted a needs analysis (10 steps), auditing (heat mapping), and developed a strategic plan to ensure alignment. The team appreciated the well-designed nature of the course, the good explanations offered by the course instructor and the support materials that were provided.

Next, Noelda Iryani BT HJ Trip from the Ministry of Education, Brunei Darussalam, also shared their commitment to quality education that incorporates 21st century skills. The heat mapping exercise from the course was useful to identify how to integrate 21st century skills. Given that the MOE has identified literacy and numeracy as its priority, the team noted that the key is to develop a 21st century skills framework and align the skills across curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Finally, Dr. Claire Scoular, the course instructor from ACER Australia, added a final remark on the overall course reflection. Some key observations include a pronounced disconnect between policy documents and implementation (resource constraint), lack of knowledge and skills of what constitutes 21st century skills (need to build capacity) and that of all three learning components: assessment, curriculum and pedagogy, the pedagogical component struggles most due to lack of evidence and best practices.

Session 2 and 3: Breakout Discussions and Reporting Back – NEQMAP's three-pillar activities

Participants were once again split into six breakout groups where they could share thoughts on what activities the Network can offer its members and how members can contribute to and engage with the Network. These discussions were centered around NEQMAP's three core pillars of knowledge sharing, capacity development and research & analysis.

Knowledge Sharing

The groups proposed that the Network should be very proactive in sourcing and sharing online resources that are publicly available from member countries and the global community regarding examinations, assessments, research etc. as well as intensifying the sharing of case studies and country experiences as prepared by Network members. The Network should also put a strategic plan in place for monitoring

education quality and learning as while as sharing updates in a timely manner to Network members. Finally, they were equally of the opinion that the Network should ensure continuous and long-term engagement (planning and organizing events that occur frequently) rather than just for organizing a single annual event of 2 to 3 days.

Regarding on the contributions that members can make to the Network, the groups discussed the need for members to contribute to this pillar in two ways. First, members should share knowledge resources (published materials, research findings, country responses, best practices, capacity building success stories, PISA experiences etc.) on a regular basis and in a timely manner with the Network for publication and/or dissemination to all Network members. Secondly, the groups also agreed that members should be very proactive in informing the Network of knowledge sharing opportunities (activities and events) in their various countries to ensure broader publicity by the Network.

Capacity Development

Regarding capacity development, the groups came up with five ways that NEQMAP can be of support the capacity develop of members and member countries. First, the Network should provide capacity development through webinar series and/or workshops to parents so they should be able to provide maximum support and guidance to at home for online and offline learning. Additionally, a similar capacity development should be provided to teachers regarding transitioning online and remote teaching and learning. Secondly, the Network should provide capacity building on perspectives around learning and assessments in times of emergencies or crises and play a critical role in sharing best practices on how to administer high stakes exams in times of emergencies/pandemics. This capacity building should especially include strengthening the ability of teachers to address the learning loss resulting from school closures. Thirdly, the Network should provide its members with capacity building on preparing and organizing capacity building events and activities such as workshops, seminars, trainings etc. Fourthly, the Network should support member countries in helping teachers effectively deliver on learning outcomes. This support should be provided at all levels with a special focus on monitoring the outcomes of remote learning and online teaching. Lastly, the Network should play an active role in building the capacity of members and member countries in conducting disaster/crisis risk assessments and designing risk management strategies and measures.

On the other hand, members agreed that members can contribute to the activities of the Network in two ways. First, members can prepare and organize capacity building events and activities especially those which focus on positive experiences and strategies that worked as well as strategies that did not and why they did not work. Members should keep the Network informed of any capacity building events or activities they or their countries are organizing to ensure that such events/activities are widely disseminated and publicized by the Network. Secondly, Network members should undertake to actively attend/participate at all capacity building events organized by the Network and ensure that such events are well publicized within their networks in their respective countries.

Research & Analysis

The groups shared four ways that the Network can lead in terms of research and analysis. First, the Network should identify research agendas that can be supported (e.g., current reforms in online assessment) and consider funding small scale relevant research and amplify the need for improved financing at the national, regional, or global level. Secondly, the Network should support countries

undertake cross country research especially focusing on what kind of support do teachers need more, innovative programs on second chance learning, approaches to addressing learning loss and online learning, developing common assessment tools for measuring learning outcomes and robust SBA and LSA guidelines for members.

Thirdly, given limited resources, examine the different challenges experienced such as the nature and extent of exclusion taking place in countries, expenditure towards education during COVID times, implementation of 21st century skills, and studies/surveys on educational response of different stakeholders specifically in Asia-Pacific towards COVID-19. Lastly, the Network should conduct a needs analysis survey of different countries and an analysis of national, regional, and global data.

On the other hand, members agreed that members can contribute to the activities of the Network in two ways. First, members should conduct research, write up articles on country experiences (case studies, surveys, best practices, and lessons learned) and submit to the Network for publication. Secondly, members should exploit the possibility of collaborative research by forming cross- country teams which could conduct secondary data analysis and examine the response of different countries to COVID-19.

Conclusion

The two-day NEQMAP annual meeting offered members and participants in the Asia-Pacific the opportunity to review theirs and the Network's activities under the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussions shed light on practical examples and responses to these challenges. Participating members and countries highlighted several key issues and challenges, including: i) ensuring learning continuity by integrating and developing alternative learning approaches (i.e. technology-based education), ii) improving access to education to ensure equity and preparedness, iii) integrating quality and holistic learning by refining curriculum policies and strategies (i.e. integrating competency-based learning, iv) strengthening teacher capacities (such as investing more in ICT skills and blended teaching and training), and v) developing alternative flexible assessments and strengthening formative assessment capacities to cope with emergency situations.

The discussions reaffirm, despite the current challenges, the strength of our network and the various opportunities that we have, including: i) reinforcing the Network's accountability for more resilient education systems, ii) strengthening our monitoring approaches and tools for inclusive quality education, iii) aligning our common education goals to SDG4 through collaborative efforts.