

EMEA WEBINARS

# EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICIES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 IN THE MEDITERRANEAN: DO THEY ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES FOR A SUSTAINABLE RECOVERY?

Thursday 06 May 2021, starting at 11:00 AM CET



The panel was **moderated** by **Cristina Giner**, Correspondent, Euronews, Spain. The **panellists** were: **Prof. Rym Ayadi**, President, Euro-Mediterranean Economists Association (EMEA) and Professor at the Business School (Former CASS), City University of London; **Abdelaziz Jaouani**, Senior Human Capital Development Expert, European Training Foundation (ETF). The **discussants** were: **Mohammed Elrazzaz**, Senior Expert, Union for the Mediterranean; **Prof. Mohamed El-Shinawi**, M.D. FACS, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Egypt; **Prof. Najib Hamouti**, Head Career Centre ESITH, Morocco.

**Rapporteur:** Sara Ronco, Researcher, EMEA

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## INTRODUCTION

More than one year after the eruption of the pandemic, the impact of COVID-19 has been detrimental to economies, societies and, in particular, to education and training systems worldwide. In January 2021, globally 720 million children (41% of the student population) experienced total or partial school closure.

The Mediterranean countries were largely caught unprepared to face such an overwhelming contagion. Over the last ten to fifteen years, the countries of the region have registered an increase in education levels and attainment rates. However, this has not translated into an improvement to the labour market environment, which remains characterised by high unemployment, a large proportion of informal employment, and high rates of inactivity, particularly amongst the young and women. The region presents important gender and rural-urban dichotomies and disparities. Even though most of the countries are middle-income, they still suffer from inequalities linked to income distribution, rising poverty levels and high debt levels, which reduce their room for manoeuvre via safety nets, in order to respond to shocks.

On the 06 May, EMEA, in collaboration with the ETF and EMNES, launched a new study that provides an overview of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the Mediterranean countries, zooming in on education and training systems and policies, analysing their resilience in managing and resisting the crisis and how lessons learned can be embedded into recovery plans and long-term reform processes. It relies on data and information available as of January 2021. The study was co-funded by the European Training Foundation and is conducted during the new Torino Process.

EMEA will continue updating its EMEA Monitor, launched in May 2020, to track on a weekly basis the policy response performance of countries in Europe, the Mediterranean and Africa. The monitoring covers all policy measures used in response to the pandemic, preparedness, consequences and effectiveness. The monitor is part of a regional policy research initiative on COVID-19, launched by EMEA on 18 March 2020.

The purpose of this webinar was to present the main findings of the new study and to discuss the latest policy developments in the field of education and labour markets, taken by countries in the Mediterranean, towards a sustainable recovery path.

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## PANELLIST PRESENTATIONS



**Cristina Giner** welcomed the panellists and the participants. She recalled that the webinar launched a key question one year after the eruption of the pandemic: do the education and training policies in the Mediterranean address the challenges for a sustainable recovery? With this in mind, she introduced the panellists and invited them to start their presentations.

**Rym Ayadi** started by introducing the EMEA's new study on "Education and Training Policies in response to COVID-19: preparing for the recovery", which is accessible online, on the EMEA website. She thanked the ETF for supporting EMEA in this study and the EMNES network for providing input. The study provides an overview of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in Mediterranean countries, focussing on the COVID-19 impact and policy responses in some southern and eastern Mediterranean countries. The study aims at examining the resilience of the education and training system, based on a mutually interactive pillar system, developed last year by EMEA (preparedness and early warning system, crisis management system and crisis recovery system). Regarding the socio-economic impact and mitigation policies during the pandemic, she said that most countries adopted preventive and containment measures to contain the spread of the virus at the start of the pandemic. Many countries have seen some economic shrinkage, combined with a large decline in fiscal revenues and a trend towards more indebtedness, that children and young people will bear in the future. She stressed that some important socio-economic challenges characterised the countries analysed in the study before the crisis, which caught those countries at different stages of their reform processes (also confirmed by the ETF Torino Process assessment). Arab Mediterranean countries have seen quite some advances in education levels and human capital attainment in the years prior to the pandemic. They have tried hard to invest further in their education policies. However, this improvement has not been translated into an

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improvement in labour market outcomes. For governments, it has been hard to channel safety nets, particularly to those working informally. Due to the lack of manoeuvrability, the region had an economic policy response well below the global average. She then moved to the analysis of the education and training systems in the countries studied. All countries were caught largely unprepared to face this huge shock. Around 80% of the world student population, comprising around 1.3 billion children and young people in 138 countries, were affected by some school closure. Governments tried to minimise the effects of school closures by moving to a partial or specific local closure strategy. She stressed that school closures were dramatic because they are crucial for low-income families to access food and to address structural inequalities, exacerbating poverty and enhancing inequality. The majority of countries tried to deal with the pandemic by moving lessons to a digital platform, but digital preparedness was generally low. The study provides an assessment of the education and training system resilience, applying the model for resilience developed last year. The three-pillar system reveals a gloomy system. She stressed that all the countries were weakly prepared for such a shock in terms of their education and training system. Some structural and societal problems further deteriorated and were hampered by the pandemic, undermining government efforts to build a functioning, blended education and training system. Crisis management was also weak. In most cases, emergency protocols were not well structured and the management of the pandemic has relied mainly on closing and opening schools, depending on the epidemiological situation during the pandemic. Furthermore, it was not possible to find any specific measures for managing the training sector. In terms of recovery, she said that the study didn't find any financial planning to mobilise resources to this specific sector, stressing the need to think seriously on how to mobilise financial resources to deal with certain pandemics or other external shocks in the future. The study also shows a lack of plans to reorganising the educational and training sector, empowering infrastructures - either physical or digital or both - and increasing collaboration with the private sector. She invited the audience to read the study since it contains a deeper analysis of the three dimensions of resilience. She concluded by reporting some main policy recommendations, which could help the process of reforms in the countries analysed: (1) develop a system for assessing and monitoring schools, students, and teachers' preparedness and the psychological effects; (2) reforming the professional development of teachers and follow up on the capacity of students and teachers to absorb the shock over time, starting by giving incentives to the private sector for their involvement and also the development of public-private sector partnerships with civil society (NGOs), for developing new methods and business models to deliver training activities and education; (3) develop certain protocols with a standardised method that could be implemented straight away and apply this to all the countries (not only in some regions) in terms of crisis management. She concluded by stressing the importance of building a coherent public-private sector partnership in order to create the capacity to finance the sector, thereby enhancing the capacity of a country to implement online platforms and develop various elements.

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**Abdelaziz Jaouani** wanted to provide a general overview of human capital development and young people in the southern and eastern Mediterranean region, as presented in the ETF Torino Process 2018-2020 report (whose executive summary was included in the EMEA study presented previously). He started by explaining that the European Training Foundation (ETF) is a technical EU agency operating in human capital development, with a focus on vocational education and training from a lifelong learning perspective, and working in the SEMED region (Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, Western Balkans and Turkey, Eastern Europe, Central Asia). He then moved on to talk about the Torino Process, the flagship publication of the ETF inspired by the EU Copenhagen process, about monitoring human capital development and skills systems and their performance in all partner countries. It is a participatory process that started in 2010, currently in its fifth round. He explained that human capital and youth relationships are linked by the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system and an informal system of learning. The learning system and labour market are linked; and this link is critical for the transition from school to work and from work to work. This interaction is not optimal in the SEMED region. It is complicated and often leads to unemployment (human capital that is not used but looking for a job) as well as youth migration, youth inactivity and NEETs (not in employment nor in education or training system). The ETF analysis approach aims to look at the socio-economic condition and issues, comparing them with the policy responses and analysing any gaps. He said that SEMED countries are different in several aspects, from one to the other, but they are all exposed to some critical global transformation (technological and digital change, globalisation, market integration, connectivity, climate change, demographic shifts). He continued by saying that the socio-economic context in the region presents many issues. Some demographic issues are related to the fact that the population is mainly composed of young people and, on one side, there is a high brain drain rate, whilst on the other side there is a large inflow of refugees, typically low skilled workers. Some economic issues that he mentioned are the significant informal sector, the amount of low skilled job creation and jobless growth. Some labour market issues he stressed are that 2/3rds of the working-age population are unemployed or inactive, only 1 out of 4 women are in the labour market and 1/3rd of young people are NEET. Moving to education and skills related issues, he underlined the inverse correlation between education and employment and poor matching services, due to the lack of skills anticipation mechanisms and poor public employment services (PESs). Based on the issues identified, the ETF report highlights three main human capital challenges that the SEMED region will urgently need to address: (1) under-utilisation of human capital hampers growth and job creation; (2) social exclusion and gender gap creates a substantial loss of human capital potential for socio-economic prosperity; (3) insufficient preparedness in anticipating and addressing future skills demand. He concluded by illustrating some main priorities for action provided by the study: (1) building a strong skills partnership for better resilience (public-private sector partnership); (2) establish a life-long learning (LLL) culture to ensure digitalisation transition (create LLL career guidance); (3) skills provision should ease the labour market transition; (4) data for better skills anticipation and matching and for monitoring labour market outcomes.

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## DISCUSSANTS COMMENTS

**Mohammed Elrazzaz** started by congratulating the ETF and EMEA for their released studies. He wanted to begin by appreciating the methodology used by the EMEA study in the analysis of resilience via the three pillars of preparedness and early warning system, crisis management and crisis recovery system. Beyond this, he said that the reports open our eyes to some important facts regarding the serious deficiencies and gaps that made the education and training system in the Arab Mediterranean countries far from resilient. The situation on the ground could be even worse if one considered the possibility of further complications linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. He said these fragilities emerge when education is already pressed to adapt to other disruptions (i.e., technological and moral). The region suffers from a very high level of structural unemployment, particularly amongst women, young people and vulnerable communities, with a huge problematic informal economy, leading to a severe brain drain and gender gap. Furthermore, he stressed that poor education leads young graduates to face a new reality, where they don't have the necessary skills (unlearning process). The poor connection between academia and the labour market is compromising the entire system. COVID-19 has further aggravated the precarious socio-economic reality and exposed all the vulnerabilities the systems have. The labour market and education and training sectors are amongst the key priorities of the UfM Secretariat. Regional cooperation efforts in the field of higher education, research and innovation, and vocational training and mobility, play a very important role in achieving a positive agenda for young people in the Mediterranean. They potentially increase employability, promote intercultural dialogue and prevent extremism, gender violence etc. The higher education and research sector contributes to the overall development agenda, particularly goal number four of the SDGs "Ensure inclusive and equitable education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" and reduces the NEETs' population. The report confirms the UfM strategic objectives on higher education and research, including strengthening the contribution of the UfM Secretariat to regional dialogue in the field, including mobility and vocational education and training systems; skilling up learning opportunities in the Euro-Mediterranean environment, fostering regional initiatives and projects in the area of the school-to-work transition and contributing to the 2017 Ministerial Declaration on strengthening higher education research and innovation. He wanted to highlight that the joint statement of the UfM member states, coming out from the 25th anniversary of the Barcelona Process, agreed to focus on five areas of priority over the coming years, three of which are connected to higher education, research and skill development: sustainable economic and human development; social inclusiveness and equality as an essential element in socio-economic development; and digital transformation. Moreover, he said that, in May 2021, the UfM will launch the progress reports on regional integration, containing an entire chapter dedicated to higher education and research, including policy recommendations. He stressed that EMEA and Prof. Rym Ayadi, in particular, were amongst the architects of this report. He concluded by hoping that the recommendations raised by the EMEA and ETF reports will be taken into account by the region, for building a long-term plan for the education and training system.

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**Mohamed El-Shinawi** started by appreciating the reports launched by this webinar, hoping that countries in the Mediterranean region will benefit from them. He wanted to focus on the Egyptian response to the crisis in the higher education system. He started by providing some figures related to the Higher Education System in Egypt, which accounts for more than 3.2 million students, 122,000 teaching staff and 600,000 postgraduate students (27 public universities, 29 private universities, 157 private higher institutes and 11 private middle institutes). When the pandemic struck, they needed to adapt fast. The key challenges faced at the very beginning of the pandemic were: the sudden closure of all higher education institutes, technical challenges in maintaining the education process despite the closure, dealing with any illness for the staff or students, finding good processes to maintain and guarantee the continuation of the ongoing research work and dealing with international students staying in the countries or going back to their country of origin. He said there are some key challenges that they are currently facing: financing higher education institutes, keeping international student mobility, retaining research cooperation, especially internationally, maintaining online education and its quality. One of the problems faced by the countries was approving full online degrees. That said, there is an online education committee under the Ministry of Higher Education and Research which has started working on hybrid education solutions. The technical university opted for three days in presence and two online, whilst for humanities and other specialities there are three days online and two in presence. He said the Ministry set up different committees to deal with COVID-19 consequences (Committee for the preparation of University Hospitals, Committee for COVID-19 Research, Higher Committee for Viruses). Moreover, in cooperation with the Ministry of Communication, the Ministry of Higher Education started building partnerships with the private sector (telecoms companies) to improve internet capacity, communication platforms and to maintain the University platform and support online education and exams. He said that they were cooperating with many international organisations.

The Ministry of Higher Education collaborated with the World Bank on a paper on Egypt's Higher Education Policy Note: Employability and Relevance of Higher Education Graduates and organised a webinar series to share good international practice on higher education policies. He mentioned that they would open three or four new universities and new technological universities (Tus). He concluded by saying that the research system was very active and that Egypt is developing two vaccines. He ended by saying that, despite several challenges, they were able to develop plans to complete the educational process in order to confront the COVID-19 crisis, thanks also to the quick response of the Egyptian Higher Education Ministry and international cooperation. Finally, he encouraged scientific research to research the COVID-19 virus.

**Prof. Najib Hamouti** started by introducing the Institutes that represented the ESITH, a graduate school in Casablanca, providing training and education for engineering, production management and logistics, which historically represented the engineering textile industry in

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Morocco. Morocco was badly hit by the pandemic, resulting in a loss of at least one million jobs and, given 60% of Moroccan jobs are informal, therefore they are not tracked, representing one of the significant challenges. Beyond tourism, also amongst the most affected sectors in the country are the agricultural, retail and construction sectors, with unemployment rates ranging from 9% to 11%. Beyond the job losses, he stressed an increase in “underemployment” (low salary). SMEs represent more than 80% of the Moroccan economy and they were severely affected by the pandemic. Moving to the ESITH response, he said they stopped all activity in March 2020. The reaction to the pandemic was taken on three levels. The first was about the management of the college's infrastructure; they formed a task force team to deal with all the security protocols. The second task force was concerned with providing continuity of education when students are not on campus. They found out that one of the products they had scarcely used before, Microsoft Teams, became a key tool for providing lectures and staying in touch with students locked in, to ensure their psychological health. Trainers and teachers were also trained to use new tools. The third task force was dealing with students who graduated, helping them look for jobs and not losing hope, digitising services, purchasing professional zoom subscriptions to continue coaching services. Concluding, he said they have planned the reopening with clear rules (i.e. fragmented, small classes, half online and half in-person lessons). The institutions he represents have a lot of autonomy and the capacity to decide and implement decisions fast (they are the product of a partnership between the government and the private sector). Finally, he said that they will continue to adopt the hybrid system for years to come.

## POLLS AND Q/A

### Polls

1) How did the education system perform in response to the challenges during the pandemic?

- High level school closures - 30%
- Adapted fast using digital platforms - 40%
- Very poorly - 30%

2) How do you see the education and training system post COVID-19?

- More investment in digital education/training systems - 64%
- More private-public sector partnership and increasing education/training quality - 36%
- Less investment in public education - 0%



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### Q/A

- *Egypt plans to reduce rural-urban gaps mainly linked to the digital divide?*  
**Mr. Mohamed El-Shinawi** said that the Ministry of Education contacted the Ministry of Communication immediately to adopt new strategies, working both in improving infrastructures and reaching rural areas, also involving the private sector to make special offers and unique SIM cards for students all over the country. For the long term, they are discussing further measures to implement reaching rural areas more effectively.
  
- *According to a recent study from the World Bank a child born in the Middle East and North Africa will reach, as an adult, only 57% of the productive capacity that he/she could have accumulated by having benefitted from a completed education and perfect health. How can governments in the MENA region reduce the gap in productive capacity? Can social dialogue play an important role in improving the resilience of education and training systems during the period of the health crisis?*  
**Prof. Najib Hamouti** said that governments are asked to respond quickly via dialogue with other governments and social society. He stressed the need to coordinate efforts, pushing partnership with private sectors.
  
- *What will be the role of the UfM in the recovery process?*  
**Mohamed El-Shinawi** said that they had mobilised all the resources since day one of the pandemic, to make sure that any response to COVID-19 will be inclusive, responsible and sustainable. Particularly on the UfM website, it is possible to look at specific responses and initiatives taken by the UfM education and training department.
  
- *What is the follow-up of the evaluation of the Torino Process?*  
**Mohammed Elrazzaz** said that they are sharing the results with all countries in the SEMED region (13 July 2021), asking them whether they agree with recommendations and how they see the best way to implement these recommendations.