1ST KIX EDUCATION POLICY AND INNOVATION CONFERENCE (EPIC) DAY 2 SYNTHESIS REPORT

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The KIX EAP Hub facilitates cross-country knowledge and innovation exchange and mobilisation, learning, synthesis, and collaboration among national education stakeholders in 21 GPE partner countries in the EAP region. The Hub also offers opportunities for peer learning and exchange by means of professional development and inter-country visits.

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ABOUT KIX EDUCATION POLICY AND INNOVATION CONFERENCE (EPIC)

The first KIX Education Policy and Innovation Conference took place on 7, 14, 21, and 28 October 2021. The conference aimed to create a forum for intensifying dialogue between researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and beyond. It provided a venue for bridging the seemingly perennial gap between research, policy, and practice. In bringing together educational sector experts and institutions, the conference mobilized knowledge and provided visibility to national and regional expertise. It welcomed recent data-driven research and best practice, which addressed current national and regional challenges and provided prospective solutions.

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A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Kamila Kovyazina is an independent researcher based in the Republic of Kazakhstan, who provides data analytics and consultancy to NGOs, national ministries, and other governmental agencies on multidisciplinary issues that bridge sociology, gender, and education. One of her most recent projects was with the "PaperLab" Public Policy Research Centre, where she worked as a methodological coordinator on research looking at education inequalities and accessibility issues across the Central Asian region. In another recent project with the Applied Economics Research Centre, Kovyazina explored the barriers faced by rural women across Kazakhstan. She has been featured on various local media outlets throughout the country, bringing her expertise and advice to inform the public on education and other societal issues. She holds both a Master of Social Science and Bachelor of Arts in Regional Studies from L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Astana, Kazakhstan).

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2021, the Knowledge Exchange and Innovation Initiative (KIX) Europe, Asia, and the Pacific (EAP) hub hosted the first KIX Education Policy and Innovation Conference (EPIC). The conference aimed to create a forum for intensifying dialogue between researchers, policymakers, practitioners, donors, civil society, and the private sector from Caucasus, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and beyond, to share experiences and discuss critical changes taking place in education.

The conference took place on 7, 14, 21, and 28 October 2021. Day 1 of EPIC focused on COVID-19 Response and Digital Learning. Country representatives shared their experience in the transfer to digital learning and innovations in education policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second day of the conference focused on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, and speakers discussed access to education, barriers and limitations as well as projects aimed at mitigating the barriers.

On the third day of the conference, the focus was on Educational Assessment. EPIC participants explored problems of learning assessment and discussed how educational results could support learning and inform educational systems.

On 28 October 2021, the day was dedicated to Teaching and Learning Quality. The participants discussed the influence of instruction quality on the research and good practices regarding teacher training and development, as well as teaching and learning materials.

EPIC DAY 2

The second day of the conference was held in two blocks of two thematic sessions each. The sessions were: i) Access to Education, ii) Gender Inclusive Education in the Post-Soviet Space, iii) Policy Lessons on Inclusive Education, and iv) Inclusive Education from Policies to Practice.

Access to Education

Amélie Gagnon, Senior Programme Specialist (Development), IIEP-UNESCO, chaired the session on "Access to Education". Although access to education is a basic human right, and there is a global consensus on the importance of education for the economic growth of nations, a large proportion of children in some parts of the world still have no access to formal education. According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report, about 263 million children were out of school in 2016, [1] most of them living in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in Asia and the Pacific. The pandemic has worsened this situation: according to the World Bank forecasts, it threatens to push some 72 million more children into learning poverty [2] meaning that these children will not even learn to read or write.

However, the barriers to education are not only about access to schools or attendance. Some research shows that children in school still face barriers to quality learning. [3] According to UNICEF data, [4] around 617 million children and adolescents worldwide do not have an opportunity to achieve minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics despite two-thirds of them attending school.

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1   Global Education Monitoring Report Team, & UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2016). Leaving no one behind: How far on the way to universal primary and secondary education? https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245238

2   The World Bank. (2020, December 2). Pandemic Threatens to Push 72 Million More Children into Learning Poverty—World Bank outlines a New Vision to ensure that every child learns, everywhere. World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/12/02/pandemic-threatens-to-push-72-million-more-children-into-learning-poverty-world-bank-outlines-new-vision-to-ensure-that-every-child-learns-everywhere

3   The World Bank. (2019, January 22). The Education Crisis: Being in School Is Not the Same as Learning. World Bank. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/immersive-story/2019/01/22/pass-or-fail-how-can-the-world-do-its-homework

4   UNICEF. (2022). Education. Unicef.org; UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/education

William C. Smith (Senior Lecturer, University of Edinburgh), Antonia Voigt (Project Research Assistant, University of Edinburgh) and Batjargal Batkhuyag (Executive Director, Mongolian Education Alliance) discussed barriers to secondary education in the Asia Pacific region, with a focus on Mongolia. According to their research, causes of school dropout include informal fees to schools that are unaffordable for children from low-income families. Dropping out is also due to high levels of internal migration with the need to register at the place of residence in order to attend schools. Another barrier specific to Mongolia is that boys are traditionally seen as the labour force or parents' support, which creates gender imbalance in the country's education system.

The presence as well as diversity of barriers to quality education inevitably lead to educational inequalities. Learning results and performance depend on many influencing factors, ranging from parental involvement in the child's education or the family's social capital to the quality of the school buildings.[5]

During the session, researchers from the Public Foundation "PaperLab" presented the "Index of Inequality of Access to High-quality Secondary Education in Central Asian Countries" that helps evaluate the gap between the possibilities of students in different regions of the CA countries. In order to make the Index more informative and adapt it to the conditions of the countries, focus group discussions and expert interviews were conducted and bottlenecks identified in the countries of the region. A factor specific for Central Asia is the high birth rates in the countries after gaining independence, hence the social infrastructure no longer meets the needs of the population. In this regard, the Index considers the quality of school buildings, lack of toilets inside schools, qualifications of teachers, number of shifts, number of students per computer, and other indicators.

Zhaslan Nurbayev (Associate Professor, Gumilyov Eurasian National University) shared his research findings on the topic of inequality between students of rural and urban schools in Kazakhstan. PISA results show that children in urban areas outperform their peers in rural schools by about one academic year. According to the presenter, fieldwork conducted from 2018 to 2020 showed inequitable funding of schools in rural and urban areas, which led to under-resourcing of rural schools. In addition, problems in rural schools are often related to problems in the rural regions in general, including lack of internet infrastructure and slow internet speeds. Because of the limited rural capacities, teachers in rural schools have lower qualifications, which also affects the learning performance.

As shown by the presenters, access to education means not only school attendance, but also access to learning resources, quality content, and qualified and motivated teachers. In this regard, the concept of access to education needs to be operationalized in a broader sense.

When evaluating access to education, situations in different regions should be viewed over time and in context. In countries where enrolment is low, more attention should be paid to funding the construction of school buildings, professional development of teachers, and advocacy for the importance of education. Where enrolment is high, the focus should be placed on the conditions in school buildings and the content of education.

International comparative studies are useful for understanding the factors that influence academic performance. Yet these studies should not be used for the education quality ranking of countries, regions or areas within countries as this causes insecurities rather than solves problems. Given that education is not only about academic success, research should be conducted to assess other human success indicators: happiness levels, life satisfaction, mindfulness, civic engagement, etc.

Gender Inclusive Education in the Post-Soviet Space

The session on "Gender-Inclusive Education in the Post-Soviet Space" was chaired by Carole Faucher (Professor, University of Edinburgh). In the post-Soviet space, universal secondary education is part of the Soviet legacy, actually ensuring an equal access to schools for both boys and girls. Yet, there are still a number of not-so-obvious obstacles that affect girls' learning performance and their prospects for education after school. Thus, some Tajik girls drop out of school after the 9th grade due to early marriages. The proportion of marriages with girls aged 15-19 years is 44% in Tajikistan.[6] Compared to boys, girls are more often involved in domestic work,[7] which limits their time for learning outside of school.

Karlygash Kabatova (Researcher, and Founder of Uyatemes. kz) and Lyubov Dorozhkina (National Consultant, UNFPA Kazakhstan) talked about the role of sexuality education in ensuring gender equality and education. Young girls bear the main risks of sexual ignorance as unplanned pregnancies can lead to early marriages and consequently narrow their life prospects, leading to their economic dependence on spouses and potential poverty; they also cause the loss of parental family support, expulsion from the family, and loss of "marital" attractiveness. Karlygash Kabatova's research

5 Turunen, M., Toyinbo, O., Putus, T., Nevalainen, A., Shaughnessy, R., & Haverinen-Shaughnessy, U. (2014). Indoor environmental quality in school buildings, and the health and wellbeing of students. International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health, 217(7), 733–739. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijheh.2014.03.002

6 Agency for Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. (2018). Demographic Yearbook of the Republic of Tajikistan. https://stat.ww.tj/publications/June2019/demographic-yearbook-2018.pdf

7 Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (n.d.). https://stat.gov.kz/api/getFile/?docId=ESTAT267785

shows low levels of sexuality education in Kazakhstan, even among adults, and low public awareness about STD transmission and prevention measures. At the same time, people misunderstand the goals of sexuality education and oppose the introduction of sexuality education classes in schools.

Adedoyin Adebolarinwa (ADA University) discussed "Gender Equity: The imperative of girl child education as a critical component of nation-building". She noted that gender inequality in Azerbaijan manifests in the process of enrolment in universities. Girls are less likely to enrol or to be admitted. They prefer to apply for typically "female" faculties, such as pedagogy and psychology. In her work, the researcher calls for greater focus on girls' education, because education affects womens' health as well as the education of their children, hence better educated women are a prerequisite for higher quality of the country's human capital. In addition, women are key educators of the younger generation, and this can contribute to nation building in Azerbaijan.

Anna Mikhalchenko, Head of the Department of Economics and Management, Ukrainian Engineering and Pedagogical Academy (Bakhmut), presented on "Overcoming Gender Inequality as one of the conditions for shaping human development". In her presentation, the speaker shared several arguments which underscored the importance of gender equality as a precondition for attaining higher social status as well as for the economic growth of countries.

As it follows from the presentations of the speakers, in post-Soviet countries, gender inequality is reflected not so much in school attendance rates but in the perception of the value of education and further prospects after school. Girls perceive their role exclusively as that of mothers and wives, which affects their learning process. Schools primarily encourage girls to succeed in subjects and activities that are perceived as traditionally 'female': language, literature, history, handicrafts, etc. These practices at the school level limit further life choices for girls.

There is also another side to the gender imbalance in education. For example, PISA findings in Kazakhstan show that girls there overperform boys. Potential reasons may be the same as in Mongolia where in rural areas boys are perceived primarily as domestic helpers, but there could also be other reasons.

Future research on gender disparities should focus on how the learning process is different for girls and boys, on the instruction of teachers, and availability of gendered approaches.

Policy Lessons on Inclusive Education

Andie Reynolds (Programme Director, University of Edinburgh) chaired the session on "Policy Lessons on Inclusive Education" where speakers discussed providing quality opportunities for different groups of students. It is noteworthy that there is currently a narrow and a broad definition of inclusive education.[8] There is often a difference between how inclusion in education is understood internationally, nationally, and regionally within a country,[9] which also has to do with funding capacities as well as possibilities for implementation in the given realities and with available resources.

The narrow definition of inclusion deals with special education only. Thus, inclusive education policy is focused on making schools accessible and barrier-free for children with disabilities; designing school spaces to meet the interests of children with special needs, adapting the curricula for different needs, instructing teachers and other pedagogical personnel working in schools on how to communicate with parents, etc.

The broad definition of inclusion concerns all marginalized groups in the education process, including girls in developing countries, members of diasporas and ethnic minorities, or children of labour migrants in both the recipient and donor countries.

The first two speakers discussed inclusive education in its broader sense.

Lana Jurko (Executive Director, Network of Education Policy Centres) emphasized that "all" means all in inclusion and education, and presented findings from the Central and Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report 2021.

She noted progress in inclusive education of children with disabilities. At the same time, she identified a contradiction: despite two-thirds of the countries officially including children from various marginalized groups in the definition of inclusion, in most countries special educational needs only apply to children with disabilities. Thus, many students who need support in education do not receive any. The speaker shared a striking example of the Roma children - an ethnic group compactly living in some Eastern European countries - whose opportunities are limited due to the low income of their parents, segregation, and underestimation of the importance of education in their communities.

Ivana Ceneric, a researcher from the Centre for Education Policy, presented a comparative report for Albania, Bosnia and

8 Haug, P. (2017). Understanding Inclusive education: Ideals and Reality. Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research, 19(3), 206–217. https://doi.org/10.1080/15017419.2016.1224778

9 Hardy, I., & Woodcock, S. (2015). Inclusive education policies: discourses of difference, diversity and deficit. International Journal of Inclusive Education, 19(2), 141–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2014.908965

Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, and Turkey, and discussed the need for policies targeting children at risk of dropping out from school. In the studied countries, these are mainly children from ethnic minorities or rural populations, children with disabilities, and children from families with low socioeconomic status. Ivana Cenerić noted that even though most of the countries officially declare equity and equality as basic principles of education, barriers are still high for students at risk of dropping out of school. Policies need to be developed to support different groups at risk, train teachers for working with different vulnerable groups, and adapt the curricula to the needs of different groups.

Sergiy Londar, Director of the State Scientific Institute of Educational Analytics, presented on the development of inclusive education in Ukraine. According to official data, the number of children with special educational needs in schools has increased tenfold from two thousand to twenty-five thousand over the past six years. There is a growing number of schools that provide an inclusive environment, and a growing number of teaching assistants. Another measure to ensure inclusion in education is to create a network of Inclusive Resource Centres that provide counselling and methodological support for teachers and schools, as well as psychological support for parents and children with special educational needs.

In general, inclusive education should not be seen as a separate field of education, but rather as equal access to education for all students. At the same time, equal access is not only about creating spaces for students with disabilities, because this should be a basic minimum requirement, but also about developing educational curricula for children with different educational needs and different backgrounds.

In addition, inclusive education requires a system of social and psychological support for children with different special needs. Often children from socially vulnerable families cannot fully show their abilities because they do not have a system of support at home. The system of support is necessary to equalize the educational process and build the capacity of socially and psychologically deprived children.

Inclusive Education from Policies to Practice

The final session on "Inclusive Education from Policies to Practice" was chaired by Darkhan Bilyalov, Rector of the Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University. The discussion focused on specific measures and practices of Central Asia and Eastern Europe countries for inclusion of students with different educational needs.

Zarina Norova, head of the Department of Teaching Methods in Preschool and Secondary General Education Institutions at the Republican Institute of Advanced Training and Retraining of Employees in the field of education (RIPKPRO), presented

on challenges of teaching the Tajik language to children from ethnic minorities. As Tajik is the main language of instruction in schools of Tajikistan, teaching ethnic minority children may be less effective, which increases the risk of their marginalization and exclusion in the Tajik society. The speaker noted the proven effectiveness of mother-tongue-based multilingual education, which should start from the preschool age. The project has been piloted since 2018 with a number of trainings for trainers conducted in different regions of the country, and the trainers can further disseminate their knowledge to other teachers. The main principle of the method is gradual transition from teaching children in their native language to teaching them in Tajik. For this purpose, teachers should have the skills to teach children from ethnic minorities as well as the knowledge of the minority language. The project will continue in the coming years.

Aleksandr Ivanov (Director, Education Initiatives Support Fund) shared the experience of his KIX EAP Learning Cycle team's study on the feasibility of scaling innovative elements of a preschool education project in Kyrgyzstan. The duration of the project differed from previous preschool programs and lasted for a year, or 480 hours. Specialized materials and trainings were developed for teacher training and mentoring and post-training advisory support components were added. Another innovative element of the project was using standardized tools for student performance monitoring and evaluation. The speaker also noted that the project included a component for inclusive education, which helped 33 schools in Kyrgyzstan welcome children with special educational needs.

UNICEF experts Ghazala Syed and Anindita Nugroho focused on the need to develop gender-responsive ECE programming. The researchers proposed five programming domains to use gender-responsive approaches, including education budgeting, personnel training and development, content development, family and community involvement in children's education, and education quality evaluation. Gender-responsive budgeting should promote equal distribution of funding to involve children of different genders alike. Development of gender-responsive content of education aims to eliminate gender stereotypes and distortion. Teacher training and professional development should respect the principles of gender balance and ensure gender-sensitive behaviours of the teachers. Gender sensitivity in the family and community involvement means supporting the professional development of working mothers and encouraging active parenting by fathers. Finally, education quality evaluation should be gender-sensitive.

Jutaro Sakamoto and Sarah Fuller from UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office shared their research findings on the topic of "Reshaping education pathways in Roma settlements: Exploring the potential to address inequality through quality, inclusive education". Regression analysis of

the MICS6 survey identified key barriers to learning for Roma children. These included the low level of parents' education, living in isolated places, socioeconomic status of the families, and exploitation of child labour. Despite the crucial role of the family in the education of Roma children, their physical attendance at schools has a significant impact on the development of their life skills. Roma children should have the opportunity to enrol and attend schools at an early age and not be excluded from them at older ages.

During the session, speakers responded to questions about access to education and disparities discussed in previous sessions, deliberating on policies and measures for the inclusion of different groups of learners in the educational process.

Experience shows that for effective intervention it is important to first identify specific target groups with special educational needs in each country. Then policies should be developed for integration and adaptation of each group to learning at the secondary level.

In addition, since the family plays a key role in the quality of children's education, it is important to raise awareness among parents and communicate about the importance of education in general and especially for girls, ethnic minorities, and children with disabilities.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of Day 2 showed that most education experts agree on the importance of social inclusion and gender equality for the common good. Yet individual studies - for example, those conducted in Asia-Pacific and Mongolia - show that the concept of gender equality should be considered from different perspectives. The right to education may be limited for both girls and boys depending on cultural norms in a particular country.

The report on girls' access to higher education in Azerbaijan and the report on inequality in Central Asian countries both emphasize the relationship between girls' academic performance in school and their prospects in life. There is a possibility that their understanding of the limitations and lack of prospects in the chosen path or simply continuing their studies at the university determines the choice of certain academic strategies.

Finally, the reports on inclusion show that there is an ongoing debate on how broad or narrow the definition of inclusive education should be. For many countries, inclusion in a broad sense and the development of policies to maximize the inclusion of vulnerable minorities in the effective educational process is a secondary task that follows the provision of quality education to most of the general population. Systematic work is needed to change the perception of inclusion and the prevailing narratives about education as an investment in the human capital. Education is a need in today's world, and every child, regardless of their ethnicity, development, or gender, has a right to education.

The main conclusion of the second day of EPIC is that education should not be perceived as a privilege.

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