Synthesis Report
Asia-Pacific Private Online Conference
July 27, 2020
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The Global Online Learning Alliance (GOLA!) was founded in early 2020 as a safe and productive place for government officials, multilateral agencies and civil society to produce policy recommendations in response to COVID-19 and the consequences it has for education in both the immediate term for continuity and long-term for sustainability.

On July 27, GOLA! held the first online gathering specifically for leaders and officials from countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, and Indonesia. In total, this meeting brought together close to 20 leaders and officials, facilitating conversation in small groups to ensure that each participant had a voice at the digital table.

The group was joined by other global experts and GOLA! founder, and heard opening remarks from Dr. Phil Lambert and Professor Stephen Heppell.

Small group discussions at this gathering focused on learnings and the path forward for education based on the COVID-19 crisis and resulting emergency remote teaching and learning. Discussions focused on two primary questions:

- What have we learned?
- What will we do differently?

Responses and discussions reflected many themes that have been raised in other GOLA! Gatherings, with additional themes and threads unique to the Asia-Pacific experience.
Introduction: GOLA’s Reach
Dr. Phil Lambert
Opening the meeting, Dr. Lambert reminded participants of the nature of the immediate past and current situation facing education. With up to 1.5 billion students out of school globally, there has never been a time when education faced something this significant. We all find ourselves in a VUCA situation: Volatile, Unpredictable, Complex and Ambiguous.

The impact of this on students, teachers, and the entire global education community cannot be understated. More than ever before, skills and capabilities such as resilience, trust, responsibility, and hope for the future are vital. Schools and learning itself must be flexible, and open to change.

“Learning is not a place, but an activity.”

Dr. Lambert also left the group with a series of questions to be considered, including:

- How can mediums like national TV, radio, and cell phones support learning?
- What have recent changes shown us about the validity of assessment?
- If only some can access something, should no one access it?
- How will shifting funding for things like healthcare force us to re-evaluate priorities in education spending?
- How does redefining essential learning alter what should be removed or added to the curriculum?

Professor Stephen Heppell
To build on the opening remarks, Stephen Heppell focused on community, learning environments, and the inequity that has stalled the ability for edtech to be better harnessed to drive outcomes globally.

“The only way we can develop these skills is to model them, and the only way to model them is to DO THEM.”

Building an online version of a traditional classroom will never be effective. In order to support success for learners, the schools must adapt to the home environment, not the other way around. Today’s students are used to consuming media in an asynchronous way, so how might we support them in taking in knowledge and building skills that are inherently interesting to them - in their own way at their own pace?

We can truly begin to harness the power of edtech when we focus on making learning cheaper, smarter, and generally better for all. It only takes a few small things to change learning in an extraordinary way, from supporting proper lighting and CO2 levels in classrooms to adapting learning to meet the needs of learners’ households.

This is a truly exciting time for education. With the right data and the ability to make changes based on it, the future is brighter than ever.
Discussion: What have we learned?

Key Themes

- EQUITY
- COMMUNITY
- CONTENT
- PREPAREDNESS
Discussion: What have we learned? Word Cloud
Equity
The challenge of ensuring equitable access both during the COVID-19 pandemic and going forward has come up at every GOLA! gathering, and this Asia-Pacific meeting was no exception.

Gaps that prior to the pandemic may have seemed small or surmountable have been highlighted and in many cases widened by remote learning. The divide between schools and students is now greater, and assumptions about who may or may not be ‘better off’ have proven false. For instance, it has been assumed that private schools would be better able to adapt due to funding, but in fact those with tuition based funding have faced unique challenges and have not necessarily been better able to serve their students and communities. Even within local regions, access to technology varied greatly, as did schools’ ability to allocate technology to students.

There is clarity about the fact that schools that were already using technology in some capacity have been able to adapt more quickly, especially those with existing models that include some online or blended delivery.

For effective change in delivering equitable education, local leadership is key.

Community & Wellbeing
When the schools shut down, the entire community shuts down.

Schools and communities have become much closer - out of necessity - during the pandemic. Both families and educators have taken on a different set of risks, and require new and different options for supporting students. Parents need to better understand the purpose and paths of learning that their children are on, and teachers need effective ways to check for understanding in real time, and monitor student progress.

There is focus in communities as a whole on Social Emotional Learning and wellbeing and how students and teachers can be supported through the challenges and trauma being faced all over the world due to COVID-19. Teachers or parents themselves may be experiencing trauma, and may not have the tools to support children. In some cases, schools have worked with communities - including families and partners - to provide new and accessible support and tools.

Students have expressed how valuable check-ins have been not only for learning, but for wellbeing as well. It is critically important to keep in mind that for some students school is a safe space and home may not be - and vice versa.
Content & Tech
At the outset of the pandemic, teachers and schools worked quickly to find and share content that would support their curriculum. Now that the phase of emergency remote learning has transitioned into ongoing needs for online and blended learning, there is a need to go back and be selective about the content being shared and delivered.

There has been a push for change for a long time before COVID but until now it was too difficult for teachers and the system to prioritize.

Collaboration between teachers, schools, and systems has taken on a new important, especially in places where there are connections and overlap in curriculum. Edtech itself can be helpful, but the key is in the design of the technology. Does it allow for a variety of pedagogies? Can it help teachers source and deliver content without causing more work? Can it streamline and deliver valuable data? These questions continue to lead to important learnings as classrooms and systems choose the technology that will be most worthy of investment moving forward.

Increasingly during the pandemic, educators turned to social media do connect with peers, learn from how others were approaching teaching, and find people who were dealing with the same challenges both personally and professionally. This led to a lot of content and idea sharing.

Preparedness & Adaptability
The resilience of both teachers and students was an ongoing thread throughout all of the conversations focused on what was learned.

This has been HARD for teachers. The impact is significant and ongoing.

This is deeply interconnected with many of the other themes, and is the essence of why any sort of remote learning was able to be delivered in some regions. Regardless of how prepared teachers and systems may be now, one of the key learnings from the past few months is that the future remains unpredictable, and we can only do our best to navigate it in a way the serves students, teachers, and communities.
Discussion: What will we do differently now?

Key Themes

- Assessment
- Community
- Modelling
- Professional Development
- Infrastructure
- Partnerships
Discussion: What will we do differently now? Word Cloud
Assessment & Professional Development
All across the world - and certainly as part of this conversation - teachers, students, and systems are feeling the need for assessments to be different. From cancellations of region-wide testing, altered admission criteria for post secondary institutions, and a changing need for teachers to assess understanding in real time, assessment is one thing that almost everyone will do differently moving forward.

This ‘new world’ assessment is likely to have a much more significant focus on on-going understanding, demonstrating skill development over knowledge base or memorization, and a more significant focus on research and project based learning.

Delivery and content of PD must be adaptable, flexible, and meet not only skills needs but mental health and wellness needs of teachers, too.

Beyond shifts in summative and formative student assessment, the ways that systems and leaders assess professional development (PD) must also adapt. Some of the emerging ideas highlight the potential to have students involved in teacher PD, to model the delivery of PD and Professional Learning in the ways that students will receive their content, and to ensure that teachers have the unique skills that they need to engage students in online and blended environments.

Modelling
Along with both assessment and PD that have improved the way that students are learning, many discussed the need for teachers as well as community members - including parents - to model the skills, development, and flexibility that will be vital for students moving forward.

Beyond that need, it was noted that ‘lighthouse’ schools, or those who were modelling the best teaching and learning practices with edtech and otherwise, have often fared best during the pandemic in terms of enabling teaching and learning.

As we look to the future, these lighthouse schools that lead the way for others will also change - the way they are set up, evaluated, and acknowledged will need to be different.

We all need some key global examples so that we can build on them for the next time something major happens.
Discussion: What will we do differently now?

**Infrastructure & Partnerships**
This conversation was no exception to the trend of recognizing inequity in education. As noted in the ‘What we learned’ conversation, the pandemic has highlighted gaps in access for students, and significant inequities in the ways that education can be delivered. Infrastructure in terms of electricity, WiFi, and accessibility of devices varies widely even within regions, and schools and systems are sometimes at a loss in addressing these gaps for communities.

One way to address these gaps has been to partner with corporations and companies who can help with providing access - whether they are large telecom companies, or a neighbourhood business that already has WiFi. Looking to the future, partnerships for schools and education systems will be approached differently to benefit communities and enable infrastructure development that has education and equity for learners at its heart. There is also an opportunity to look to global carriers for support in distributing devices, tools, and content to learners, thereby leveraging existing systems of delivery and connectivity.

Also arising were new ideas for how existing infrastructure might be adapted and used to deliver education. This could include local television and radio stations supporting the deployment of teaching.

**Community**
More than ever, the relationships between schools and communities is evolving. To ensure that the bonds and pathways created out of necessity during the pandemic remain strong and continue to provide benefit for learners, leaders, teachers and parents, a different approach is necessary.

Ensuring community involvement and agency in terms of both the planning and delivery of education is now vital. When education needs to flex to address external demands, it is important that parents and others outside of the school system understand what **WHAT**, **HOW**, and **WHY** of education delivery so that they can support learners when traditional classroom models are not available.

The very definition of community can now have more global connectivity in ways that were not possible before. The option to bring experts into a classroom from virtually anywhere in the world expands what is available to students, and can also support communities who may not have local knowledge or skills available to plan for and navigate both current and future states.

The need to give the community more agency over local education, and build relationships that are deeper and stronger will be reflected in local approaches and in some cases policies, organizational formation, and ideally even funding models as the path forward is mapped.

**How might we build NEW infrastructure in such a way that it centers the needs of ALL community members?**
There are many commonalities with the topics discussed by leaders in the Asia-Pacific region, and those arising from conversations that GOLA! has facilitated in other parts of the world. In every country and region there are unique challenges as well, and as a global community there is a lot that we can learn from one another.

As was reflected by each of the expert speakers and many of the participants, successfully navigating this time and what comes next requires a great deal of resiliency and flexibility. Through all of the conversations, the thread of both teachers’ and students’ resilience, flexibility, and capacity to navigate change shone through, but so did the understanding that we collectively have asked a LOT of educators, community members, and systems in the past 6 months. This does not come without risks to both individuals, and systems as a whole - there can only be so much flexibility before something begins to break.

Finding new ways to engage communities, ensure that students’ voices are heard in all elements of planning and participation, and supporting the well-being and mental health of learners and teachers are all topics where focus, funding, and creativity are needed.

There are great opportunities emerging from the challenges that have been faced globally to learn, adjust, and continue to adapt to ensure that every system and every individual within are supported. Creativity when it comes to partnerships and expertise will be deeply important for supporting teaching and learning. Modelling the skills that students will need - including the continued development of resiliency and flexibility - will help show learners and colleagues what is required, and that everyone has the capacity to get through tough challenges - and to ask for the support that they need to help them do so.

Our collective responsibility for shaping the future has never been more important, and the opportunities to work together regionally and globally for the betterment of education as a whole means that the future is bright. Within challenge there is always opportunity for growth, and at GOLA! we will continue to encourage connection, to enable growth, and to support the needed conversations that guide us all toward an interconnected, balanced, and equitable future for education.
From everyone on the GOLA! team, thank you.

Your active participation, candid conversations, and insightful ideas are what drive us. Together, we can all serve as lighthouses for education moving forward, and be the catalysts for change in our systems, and globally.

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