

Winter School in Education and Technology 2021

Building a resilient education system in Uruguay

Concept note

The crisis caused by the COVID pandemic has resulted in one of the greatest social disruptions of the past century. The world has had to face a challenge for which it was not prepared for. Its systems collapsed, which showed its great vulnerability as it tried to adapt to the new context. The provision of essential services has not always been equitable, affecting basic functions of the systems, such as ensuring inclusion and equity. The very concept of humanity was challenged.

This reality cuts across education and emerges not only during a pandemic, but also in other adverse contexts, such as natural disasters, armed conflicts, political crises or mass migrations. This results in a scenario that is as paradoxical as it is unfavourable: education systems become saturated or fail to provide answers at a time when education itself is essential for tackling the crisis. This complex situation is also an opportunity to look to the future and envisage an education system capable of dealing with both anticipated and emerging challenges.

Like other countries, Uruguay is faced with the challenge of creating a resilient education system that can cope with changes while maintaining its basic functions, structure and identity, as well as its capacity for organization, learning and adaptation. This makes it necessary to agree on the minimum essentials for the operation of the education system, innovate, contribute new rules, devise alternative indicators and put in place clear scaffolding for reactivating more complex functions as soon as possible. This effort involves recovering previous elements and reviewing the education policies, services and resources, the institutional configuration of schools, the relationships among the different stakeholders in the community and the specific skills to strengthen their interaction, knowledge building and welfare.

The value of resilience depends on the particularity of each threat and the specific system in a certain context and time frame. Although the convergent analysis of multiple adverse scenarios for the education system would call for a systematic, multidimensional and complex exercise, some limitations to adaptation to adversity can be identified on the basis of the recent situation caused by the COVID pandemic. Among them: i) the territorialization of teaching and learning within the confines of the school premises as an almost exclusive place where the school's material and intellectual resources are concentrated and its stakeholders meet; ii) the prevalence of synchronous, face-to-face communication within a defined, limited time frame, and iii) a lack of clarity as to the role of families and other stakeholders in the education effort. These features differ from those of digital culture, which grew exponentially during the pandemic, grounded in the deterritorialization of space through virtuality and remote



communication – both synchronous and asynchronous – with plenty of permanently available digital resources.

Uruguay responded to the adverse context with a blended education proposal implemented jointly by the National Administration of Public Education (ANEP) and Plan Ceibal. This was possible thanks to the Plan's pre-existing digital infrastructure, educational resources and pedagogical services universally available to the whole public system of primary and lower-secondary education. Some of the elements of Plan Ceibal – such as the PCs delivered to students or its educational platform, which became one of the most visited sites in Uruguay after face-to-face lessons were put on hold – played a key role in sustaining blended education. Some services were adapted with improvements, such as the provision of specific teacher training and the integration of videoconferencing to the CREA learning platform. Other benefits, such as the provision of internet connection, which had been focused on education centres, called for mitigation strategies, with agreements with internet providers on giving access to online educational resources without the cost of data consumption. Uruguay has major advantages, such as its high internet penetration – greater than 85% – and the leadership of a public utility (ANTEL) in the country's telecommunications market.

With the significance of learning for building resilience as a premise, Uruguay has the opportunity to think about how to move forward more systematically in the design of an education system with an even greater potential for adaptation to adverse scenarios. The journey towards transformational change may involve adapting the education system to a distributed, networked school, with digital support as a major component, accompanied by the development of a combination of capacities and skills among the stakeholders of the education community.

Some preliminary ideas may include the need to develop specific policies, protocols and resources to facilitate a blended education adapted to different settings, with proposed activities suited to the experiences, expectations, emerging knowledge and possibilities of the students, particularly those from the more underprivileged backgrounds. This will make it necessary to think about how to devise a blended education curriculum geared to the relevant spaces and contemplating the key role of schools as places for meeting, socializing and promoting learning. The strategies should therefore consider feasibility on the basis of the particular conditions, depending on age groups and socio-educational contexts, after a suitable diagnosis.

It would also be necessary to strengthen digital learning ecosystems to increase their diversity and adaptation in relation to infrastructure and connectivity, logistical and organizational capacities, including the use of data for monitoring and feedback. It will also be essential to innovate and to strengthen learning modalities through the development of change-orientated leadership and teacher training strategies, together with accessible, safe and motivating content for students. It is important to analyze the relevance of incorporating digital skills – essential for safe, responsible access to learning resources and full integration into an increasingly digital culture – into compulsory education.

Finally, there is the challenge of combining the building of relevant knowledge – which may include minimal content and knowledge related to the health emergency – with



social and emotional learning, the key to promoting the welfare of all the education community, particularly when stress and uncertainty are on the rise. It is necessary to consider specific proposals for vulnerable groups more exposed to threats and with fewer resources and less support in adverse situations. It is crucial to promote creativity, empathy and optimism, as well as adaptation skills and emotional resilience. The development of a resilient education system will improve the students' ability to overcome adversity and barriers that hinder the building of knowledge and is essential for promoting educational equity, welfare and social mobility.

The Winter School, organized by Ceibal Foundation, proposes the following questions to promote reflection and analysis:

1. How do you build the resilience of complex systems with a balance between stability and change?
2. How do you produce and escalate an innovative digital ecosystem for the development of a resilient blended education system?
3. What strategies is the international community adopting to integrate digital skills and ecosystems into its education systems?
4. What are Uruguay's challenges and opportunities when it comes to building a resilient education system? What should be included or prioritized?
5. How do you design a curriculum for blended education in Uruguay? What should be included or prioritized?
6. What teacher training is necessary to integrate a blended curriculum and make the Uruguayan education system more resilient?
7. How do you promote social and emotional learning among the stakeholders of the education community, in particular the most disadvantaged, to help them through adverse situations?
8. What should be the priority research topics in building a resilient education system in Uruguay?