Closing the Gaps: What does an Equity Agenda Look Like in Asia-Pacific?

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Abstract
Despite the most important commitments to expanding access to education in recent decades, we are far from having reached equitable education and quality lifelong learning opportunities for all. Emerging trends and complex global challenges affect developed and developing countries alike. To advance as a society, we must embrace a bold new vision that promotes access to quality learning opportunities, including technical and vocational education and training, and higher education and research. Lifelong learning includes opportunities for all, in all settings and at all levels of education. This “equity agenda” is not an abstract policy, but it is based on individual needs and our responsibility to recognize and validate educational experiences from formal, as well as non-formal and informal, learning. Our collective challenge is how to promote implementation and appropriate coordination mechanisms that embrace unity while never losing sight of diversity. UNESCO Bangkok, as the Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, is facilitating efforts to advance this universal, transformative and integrated development agenda in the context of one of the most dynamic and diverse world regions. With a focus on post-secondary education, this review assesses current trends and policy commitments to an equity agenda in the Asia-Pacific region and looks with lucidity at the key challenges that lie ahead.

Keywords Education 2030; Quality education; Equity agenda; Participatory governance

Setting the Context: Important Trends in Asia-Pacific

The year 2015 was one of renewal, marked by the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the historic Paris Agreement on climate change. Irina Bokova, the Director-General of UNESCO, remarked that “In all this, UNESCO has asserted ... the central role of education, the sciences, culture, information and communication, to meet the challenges that the world faces today” (Bokova, 24 December 2015). This commitment to the role of education as an inseparable dimension of sustainable development has particular relevance in Asia and the Pacific, one of the largest and fastest-growing world regions in history. Asia-Pacific is a dynamic region with rapidly growing economies, rich cultural heritage, ethnic and linguistic diversity, large youth populations in some sub-regions and aging populations in others and a vigorous drive
towards economic growth and social transformation. However, the Asia-Pacific region also faces significant challenges with economic disparities and inequalities, climate change and natural disasters, conflict and forced migration.

Despite unparalleled economic growth in recent decades, there are important trends that point towards the need for a renewed plan for sustainable development and participatory governance, one that ensures quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. This “equity agenda” is not an abstract policy, but it is based on individual needs and our responsibility to ensure access to quality educational experiences through formal and non-formal education systems. To further contextualize these issues, the following section explores important trends in the Asia-Pacific region to assess progress to date and make the case for a new equity agenda that is based on a vision for quality education that is universal, transformative and integrated.

**Important Trends in Asia-Pacific**

Much work has been done to explain the context of rapidly transforming societies in the Asia-Pacific region. Recent consultations have noted various trends that characterize the region, such as dramatic economic, technological and social changes; shifting demographics; and environmental degradation, with the aim to explore their implications for education (see UNESCO, 2015). The following important trends highlight some of the persistent challenges and emerging trends impacting post-secondary education in the Asia-Pacific region:

- **Rapid economic growth and widening income disparities**: Asia-Pacific’s share of gross domestic product (GDP) increased from 18% in 1980 to 31% in 2014, according to the World Bank (World Bank Database, July 2015). Within this rise is a growing middle class that is contributing to increasing demand for quality education. However, Asia-Pacific has also faced growing income inequality, which is a sign of vulnerability for sustaining economic growth. Income inequality is a significant concern that developing and many developed countries face. In 2012, the OECD noted that “Education policies that promote equity and support disadvantaged students in achieving better academic outcomes may help reduce income inequality in the future” (OECD, 2012, p1). These socioeconomic trends are of great concern, especially given the young population in the Asia-Pacific region.

- **Demographic shifts and diverse demographic patterns**: In 2015, there were 1.2 billion youth aged 15–24 years globally, 60% of whom were in Asia (United Nations Population Division, May 2015). While Asia as a whole has a large youth population, there are diverse demographic patterns. For example, India and the Philippines have a “youth bulge” and may face challenges educating the next generation of young people and providing jobs. Meanwhile, China, Japan, Republic of Korea and others have “population pillars” and are likely to have aging populations. These demographic trends underscore the need to align education policies with industrial and migration policies within the region and worldwide.
• **Student mobility and migration**: From 1995 to 2015, intraregional migration within Asia increased by 76% – from 33.7 million to 59.4 million (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed in January 2016). This is more than double the percentage increase over the same period as Europe and Africa, where internal migration increased by 34% and 17%, respectively (Figure 1).

Although less in terms of total populations, Oceania and Latin America and the Caribbean region also saw large percentage increases of intraregional migration from 1995 to 2015 (82% and 60%, respectively).

Students are also increasingly mobile both within the Asia-Pacific region and worldwide. From 1983 to 2011, there was an increase of over 300% in global tertiary mobility (Figure 2; OECD, 2014). This increase highlights the growing importance of recognition of foreign higher education qualifications. The 1983

![Figure 1. Percentage change in regional distribution of the destination of international migrants between 1995 and 2015.](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Percentage Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America and the Caribbean</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern America</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed in January 2016, adapted by UIS-AIMS, UNESCO Bangkok.
Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific and the 2011 Revised Convention were developed as a response to increasing student mobility and migration patterns within the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, technological advances have further expanded the potential of international education to reach diverse audiences within the region.

• **Technological advances**: Asia-Pacific is the most diverse world region in terms of the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (International Telecommunication Union, 2015). Between the global leaders, the Republic of Korea on the one hand and least developed countries (LDCs) in Asia-Pacific on the other, there is potential for exchange and capacity-building to promote substantial development of ICTs within the region. Recognizing this potential, the education community has a new point of departure to address fundamental gaps in affordable and quality education. Along these lines, there is now widespread consensus around the idea that online, open and flexible education are part of a core range of strategies within a variety of contexts to provide quality learning experiences (e.g. see Qingdao Declaration, May 2015; Paris Message, June 2015). To support and inform decision-making in ICT for education, there is a need to further explore the links between student learning outcomes, learning analytics and labour market dynamics. Greater integration and consolidation of ICTs with labour market information systems is now well within reach (Kuala Lumpur Declaration, August 2015). Despite recent gains and longstanding promises of ICTs in education, there are still significant and pressing equity issues and humanitarian concerns in the Asia-Pacific region that must not be overshadowed.

• **Humanitarian issues and concerns**: Development requires safe access to learning opportunities, which is a significant concern for much of the Asia-Pacific region. With some of the most fragile states in the world, the Asia-Pacific region is also the most disaster-prone, an issue that continues to impact effective education planning (UNESCO Bangkok, 2014). While facing these high risks, Asia has also proven to be remarkably resilient. Asia-Pacific was a world leader in addressing...
poverty and chronic hunger, key elements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000 to 2015. While progress has been made, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, there are a number of compounding issues and remaining concerns post 2015.

- **Remaining challenges in access and equity in education**: MDGs and the Education for All (EFA) movements represented a focused and united effort to increase access to basic education worldwide. Though diverse, the Asia-Pacific region continues to face common challenges in terms of education, for example, issues related to equity, quality and governance remain a concern (UNESCO, 2015). In particular, the region faces challenges with expanding participation beyond both ends of basic education – from early childhood care and education and post-secondary, including higher education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and non-formal opportunities for developing new skills and competencies for life and the world of work. There are also significant disparities, both between and within countries in the Asia-Pacific region, in terms of enrolment, retention, progression and learning outcomes, often on the basis of gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, language, geographical location and disability (UNESCO, 2015). The scale of these crosscutting issues is significant. To illustrate this point, there were over 34 million out-of-school adolescents¹ of lower secondary age in the Asia-Pacific region in the year 2013, which is 53% of the global total (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). Further, the UNESCO Institute for Statistics found that girls, rural children and those from poor households in the Asia-Pacific region are more likely to be out of school given related barriers they each faced (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2015). Understanding these issues, sub-regional variations and common characteristics are crucial to making an education agenda that is informed by the diverse needs of each context.

Given these trends, demand for post-secondary education is growing in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond. For example, the number of students enrolled in higher education worldwide is on track to rise from nearly 100 million in 2000 to more than 414 million in 2030 (Paris Message, June 2015) – much of this growth will take shape in Asia. Increasing demand and the massification of higher education over the past two to three decades have contributed to a significant quality dilemma (Hawkins et al., 2015).

On the one hand, increasing access to post-secondary education may contribute to economic prosperity, yet, on the other hand, suffer from a lack of quality education based on effective teaching and learning and a dramatic increase in the number of education providers throughout much of the region. Given this quality dilemma, some have asked: Have we reached the end of the current model of mass public higher education in Asia-Pacific? (Hawkins et al., 2015). This turning point at the end of EFA in 2015 has led

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¹Out-of-school adolescents are defined as: “adolescents of official lower secondary school age who are not in primary or secondary education. Adolescents in pre-primary education or non-formal education are considered out of school” (UIS, 2015, p. 1).
educators and policymakers to call for a reformulation of our collective goals – not based on access, but on a vision that embraces the full spectrum of a learning society across the life span.

What types of models for education are needed to unlock the potential of the next generation of learners? Who is not being served and why? (Reimers, 16 October 2015). These questions call for not only expansion in terms of access but also improvement of lifelong learning systems so that learners can equip themselves with relevant skills that can be developed and adapted to navigate changes across their life span. The following section outlines significant policy developments towards quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Introducing Education 2030: A Bold New Agenda for Lifelong Learning

Given these important trends and remaining challenges, what does a post-2015 equity agenda look like in education? In short, this new agenda builds on historic achievements. There is a long history of inclusive education beginning in the seventeenth century with Jan Amos Comenius, a Czech philosopher, pedagogue and theologian who lived from 1592 to 1670. Comenius was one of the earliest champions of universal education and lifelong learning (Reimers, 16 October 2015). Centuries later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 10 December 1948, which was the direct result of the catastrophic experiences of the Second World War. For the first time, the Declaration of Human Rights enshrined basic human rights, including the universal right of education for all.

Nearing the turn of the century, our collective goals for equity in education expanded further. The Faure report (1972) and Learning: The treasure within, known as the Delors report (1996), contributed to the establishment of lifelong learning as a global paradigm in education (Elfert, 2015). The Delors report put into context the future of lifelong learning. It included four pillars as the foundation of learning: (1) learning to know – balancing general knowledge with in-depth work; (2) learning to do – developing skills and competencies that enable people to deal with a variety of situations; (3) learning to live together – developing an understanding of others and their historical perspectives, cultural traditions and spiritual values; and (4) learning to be – learning to exercise greater independence and judgement combined with a strong sense of personal responsibility (Delors et al., 1996). Together, this education philosophy represented what the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century called a “necessary utopia” of education (Delors et al., 1996). On the policy front, these ideas continued to take shape in the form of increasing government support for quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all (Table 1).

The EFA movement began in the Asia-Pacific region in 1990 in Jomtien, Thailand, and concluded in Incheon, Republic of Korea, with the launch of Education 2030, a new vision for education beyond 2015. Building on these historic commitments, heads of states,
government leaders, UN high-level representatives and civil society representatives met in New York from 25 to 27 September 2015, at the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly, for the adoption of 17 new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4 focuses on quality education: “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, p. 18).

Unlike previous commitments such as EFA and the MDGs, the international community instead decided to pursue one single global education goal. This shift means that leadership can no longer be about sustaining efforts from past commitments, but instead requires a disruption and innovation in efforts to make education systems not only more accessible but more relevant (Reimers, 16 October 2015). SDG 4 pushes beyond getting every young person in school and achieving gender parity; the Education 2030 agenda is about educating all students so that they can develop skills and dispositions to drive sustainable development.

To advance Goal 4 in the context of the 17 SDGs, the Education 2030 Framework for Action was adopted and launched at a special high-level meeting alongside the 38th session of the General Conference of UNESCO in November 2015. There are seven targets with three primary means of implementation (Table 2). Further, the Framework for Action proposed a set of 43 thematic indicators to measure progress at multiple levels of engagement – from local to global (Education 2030 – Framework for Action, 2015). Together, these aspirations represent an ambitious sustainable development agenda crafted with broad and deep stakeholder engagement and UNESCO’s active involvement. As mentioned, for the first time, this vision and agenda for education was integrated with the international community’s broader agenda for sustainable development.

Ban Ki-moon, United Nation’s Secretary-General, underlined the point that the 17 global goals for sustainable development “[encompass] a universal, transformative and integrated agenda that heralds an historic turning point for our world” (Ban Ki-moon, 2 August 2015). These three principles are elaborated below in the context of their contributions to the Education 2030 agenda.

(1) **Universal:** The sustainable development agenda is universal in that the goals and targets involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike (United

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### Table 1. Global policy commitments towards lifelong learning opportunities for all

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Commitments</th>
<th>Host city/country</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td><em>World Conference on Education for All</em> – EFA addressed basic learning needs for all</td>
<td>Jomtien, Thailand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td><em>World Education Forum</em> – EFA/MDG advanced commitments to education for all children, youth and adults</td>
<td>Dakar, Senegal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>World Education Forum</em> – Introduced a new agenda on quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all</td>
<td>Incheon, Republic of Korea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td><em>UN Summit</em> – Adoption of the post-2015 development agenda aligned education and global development through 2030</td>
<td>New York, USA</td>
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*Source: Author’s Table*
In the context of education, SDG 4 raises the bar and aims to ensure universal access to quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. This includes addressing all forms of exclusion, disparities and inequalities in access and participation, including gender equality and ensuring access to responsive, resilient, safe, supportive and secure learning environments (Incheon Declaration, 2015). Universality also means it is necessary to provide opportunities to access quality higher education and TVET for all learners, including older adults while paying particular attention to vulnerable groups. Quality education must inherently be supported by robust quality assurance measures and appropriate regulation to provide pathways for student success and recognition of their certificates, diplomas, degrees and qualifications and a range of non-formal learning activities such as Massive Open Online Courses (Paris Message, June 2015). In this sense, universal means ensuring access for all lifelong learners and effectively recognizing diverse modes of learning.

### Table 2. Targets for education 2030

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Means of implementation**

4a. Infrastructure: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child-, disability- and gender-sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all

4b. Scholarships: By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small-island developing states and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries

4c. Teachers: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small-island developing states

**Source:** Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015)
Transformative: Acknowledging that the EFA and MDG movements are unfinished, the Education 2030 agenda builds on past progress and argues for a more transformative agenda beyond basic education: “Inclusion and equity in and through education is the cornerstone of a transformative education agenda” (Incheon Declaration, 2015, par. 7). Targets 4.3–4.7 and the means of implementation (4a, 4b and 4c) explicitly involve a transformative agenda for post-secondary education (Table 2). In response, the international community has called for higher education to be transformed to be able to deliver change in scale and speed of response, drawing on the potential of digital technologies within a humanistic framework (Paris Message, June 2015). The policy commitment to transform higher education through digital platforms represents an essential component of the global response, while being sensitive to systemic and cultural diversity in ICTs and education systems.

Integrated: As highlighted, Education 2030 builds on the progress of EFA and MDGs while ensuring that education is fully integrated with the UN sustainable development agenda. This integrated approach links education with other SDGs. This also presents complex coordination challenges that must be resolved (see next section). SDG 4 aims to integrate formal, informal and non-formal learning with the aim to promote flexible pathways that allow learners to validate and accredit prior learning, regardless of the setting. Because this ambitious vision is integrated with broader development goals, education and lifelong learning becomes an important enabler for sustainable development.

The Education 2030 vision is not without its challenges and potential pitfalls. Before exploring how to advance such an agenda, key guiding questions regarding implementation and coordination are outlined below.

Coordination Challenges and Issues to be Addressed

Education 2030 is the result of a multi-layered consultation process from 2012 to 2015 (Naidoo, 2015). Despite the scale of stakeholder engagement throughout the planning process, a number of key questions remain related to funding, participatory governance, measurement and evaluation and accountability. As a public good, Education 2030 recognizes the central role of the government. Public funding, for example, is critical to both initial and ongoing investment in areas such as network infrastructure, faculty development, quality assurance and regulation mechanisms and to convene stakeholders (Paris Message, June 2015). Financial stewardship hinges on other guiding principles such as transparency and participatory governance, elements of the Education 2030 agenda which have not been fully articulated. The previous EFA and MDG movements raised additional governance and coordination challenges to learn from, including:

- variable engagement of key stakeholders at country and sub-regional levels, e.g. private sector interest groups and regional bodies such as the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEMOE), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC);
resource constraints limiting strategic focus and convening capacity;
limited engagement of EFA co-convenors, e.g. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and World Bank; and
weak linkages with other sectors, e.g. child protection, social protection, health, water, sanitation, etc. (Connal, 2015).

Underscoring the coordination challenges at multiple levels, there is widespread acknowledgement that collectively we face new challenges, but also that the fundamental issue is an old one – there is limited practical understanding of what partnership means in practice. For example, there are multiple mechanisms for coordination, fragmented donor interventions and relatively low demand from Member States for coherence. However, during the November 2015 Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030, delegates acknowledged the need to establish stronger national coordination mechanisms for SDG 4, including linking to overall SDG coordination as well as the need to strengthen intergovernmental cooperation to foster synergies, and identify gaps to implementing and monitoring SDG 4 (APMED2030, November 2015).

Focused and effective actions to address these challenges include making education pluralistic, removing barriers to equal opportunities and ensuring access for those who are disadvantaged and/or marginalized (Bangkok Statement, 2014). In doing so, Member States have committed to addressing all forms of exclusion, especially gender inequality, in accessing quality education and lifelong learning opportunities, including in conflict and crisis situations and other vulnerable circumstances. The following concluding section outlines key principles for how to advance this new equity agenda.

Taking Action: How do We Advance an Equity Agenda in Asia-Pacific?

There are many equity-related issues to unpack within the commitment to a universal, transformative and integrated plan to ensure quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. For example, these issues are especially complex for LDCs and small-island developing states (SIDS) in the Asia-Pacific region, which often face severe structural and sustainability challenges. As of December 2015, 12 of 48 (25%) LDCs worldwide were in the Asia-Pacific region (United Nations, 2015a). The following points are core elements of an approach to advancing a new equity agenda throughout all countries in Asia and the Pacific.

- **Recognize quality education as a universal right**: First, advancing an equity agenda throughout the region means quality education must be recognized as a universal right. Education is a fundamental human right and an enabling right that is intertwined with other human rights. Therefore, a post-2015 equity agenda must take a proactive stance to reaffirm “the right to education and its interrelation with other human rights” (Incheon Declaration, May 2015, par. 2). Education 2030 is inspired by a humanistic vision for lifelong learning and sustainable development based on human rights and dignity, social justice, inclusion, protection, diversity and
shared responsibility and accountability. In that regard, quality education is our collective responsibility (Kim, 25 November 2015).

• **Improve learning outcomes**: Second, the new equity agenda is about improving learning outcomes, including recognizing the central role of qualified, empowered, motivated and supported teachers and educators. The Bangkok Statement in 2014 articulated the interconnection between quality teaching and learning outcomes: “quality learning is a priority for the region and teachers are central to quality learning” (Bangkok Statement, 2014). Advancing a new equity agenda must be rooted in the integration of learning and living in all contexts – family, formal education, non-formal learning and on-the-job training – which take place in diverse contexts and through diverse modes of delivery.

• **Strengthen international quality assurance and recognition systems**: Quality assurance and recognition of learning outcomes across multiple and flexible setting at all ages and all education levels are significant and related issues, which support and validate learning. The Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education (the 2011 Revised Convention) includes basic principles such as making appropriate arrangements for the assessment and recognition of qualifications that are transparent, coherent, reliable, fair, timely and non-discriminatory (i.e. basic principles related to the assessment of qualifications). The 2011 Revised Convention provides a framework for countries in the Asia-Pacific region to facilitate recognition of higher education qualifications and learning through non-traditional modes, such as through open and distance learning.

• **Seize digital opportunities in education**: Third, is to seize digital opportunities in education – to embrace ICTs and digital media to advance the Education 2030 agenda for quality education for all (Qingdao Declaration, 2015). The Qingdao Declaration is the first global declaration on ICT in education. This declaration is crucial given that ICTs are recognized as an indispensable driver of sustainable development (WTIS, 2015). Digital technologies, including mobile learning, must be harnessed to strengthen post-secondary education in support of quality lifelong learning and effective service provision. The Qingdao Declaration recommends leveraging ICTs to fully deliver on commitments in Education 2030. The aim is to “improve and diversify learning pathways, improve quality, and further reach vulnerable and underserved groups” (Qingdao Declaration, 2015, par. 11). The Qingdao Declaration also recognized that quality education depends on appropriate use and institutional governance of ICTs.

• **Improve domestic and external financing for education**: In terms of accountability, monitoring and evaluating financing for the new equity agenda are key issues. Education 2030 and the emphasis on lifelong learning require new plans for investment. Governments in the Asia-Pacific region will need to rethink funding priorities to ensure balanced education planning and effective lifelong learning opportunities. As mentioned, participatory governance and funding mechanisms have not yet been articulated in detail. Nevertheless, ensuring sufficient investment to support holistic development of lifelong learning systems is fundamental to providing equitable learning opportunities. Although government is the primary
provider for efficient, equitable and sustainable financing of lifelong learning, funding may also come from innovative financing strategies.

To advance an equity agenda that is well financed, Member States must adhere or exceed the benchmarks and means of implementation laid out in the Incheon Declaration (May 2015) and the Framework for Action – allocating at least 4–6% of GDP and/or 15–20% of total public expenditure to education (Table 2). Further, 0.7% of gross national product for official development assistance was set to support and engage developing countries. The volume of official development assistance flows for scholarships by sector and type of study programme are also crucial investments to monitor. Scholarships are often vital for continuing education, yet policymakers reported that most of this aid benefits upper middle-income countries (Incheon Declaration, May 2015). Scholarship programmes and other forms of support should be structured to build capacity within LDCs and SIDS, which are among the most vulnerable and marginalized states in the Asia-Pacific region.

- **Promote responsible and participatory governance**: Along these lines, participatory governance and stakeholder engagement is a crucial component for effective implementation of a new equity agenda. Responsible and participatory governance is part of the foundation for accountable and responsive education systems. To eliminate corruption, malpractice and inequalities and promote access to quality lifelong learning, the right to participation and active engagement of stakeholders are necessary but enduring challenges to sustainable development. To support participatory governance and monitoring, UNESCO’s role is to strengthen Member States’ capacities, especially among vulnerable states. Currently, four principles have been proposed as part of partnership management and evaluation systems: (1) financial resources to be mobilized coherently; (2) policy directions for Education 2030 are strategic and evidence-based; (3) sector plans are integrated with national sustainable development policy and practice; and (4) monitoring systems are harmonized to optimize data use (Connal, 2015). Although good practices exist (Table 3), an enhanced regional coordination mechanism remains underdeveloped.

During the Asia-Pacific Meeting on Education 2030 (APMED2030, November 2015), a shared results logic was proposed to coordinate mechanisms such as capacity-building, research and knowledge management systems and accountability structures. Elements of the strategy included a sub-regional focus on identifying areas for bilateral technical cooperation – that is, country-to-country cooperation within sub-regions of Asia and the Pacific (e.g. SEAMEO, SAARC). Further, these capacity-building efforts should be guided by rigorous country-level needs assessments conceptualized within overall SDG capacity-building frameworks. To sustain such a management platform for cooperation, it must be dynamic and responsive to emerging concerns such as disaster risk reduction and must have a strong feedback loop for improving quality and relevance of information (Connal, 2015).

UNESCO, as the specialized UN agency for education and lead agency for Education 2030, is in a unique position to forge innovative partnerships and bring together stakeholders from all corners of society, government, private sector, civil society organizations and academic researchers, to leverage support for the necessary policy innovations and
programmatic efforts. Creative partnerships can build bridges across economic, social and geographic dimensions to implement a universal, transformative and integrated approach. As discussed, developing and institutionalizing robust accountability structures, including coordinating performance standards, are key issues that remain unclear. Without participatory approaches to governance and meaningful engagement with all sectors of society, the agenda to ensure quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all will be hollow.

In cooperation with the World Education Forum and its co-convenors\textsuperscript{2}, UNESCO will lead and coordinate the Education 2030 agenda, advance advocacy efforts to sustain political commitment, facilitate dialogue, share knowledge, set standards and support monitoring towards SDG 4 education targets. Functioning as a focal point for education within the overall SDG structure, the new equity agenda will also be aligned with all SDGs. Nevertheless, open questions and significant barriers on the path towards Education 2030 remain, which the academic and research community are well-positioned to address. These questions include the following:

- What role can traditional higher education and TVET institutions play in the new lifelong learning agenda?
- How can emerging economic and education powers support cooperation across the Asia-Pacific region, including in partnership with LDCs and SIDS?
- Given the significant cultural, political and economic diversity within the Asia-Pacific region, what types of financing mechanisms for education are needed to promote inclusive and sustainable development?
- And last, how will quality education contribute to the 16 other SDGs?

\textsuperscript{2}Education 2030 co-convenors: UNESCO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, UN Women and the World Bank.

### Table 3. Examples of “good practice” partnerships at country level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partnership example</th>
<th>Leadership</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literacy for Life Skills and Entrepreneurship in Indonesia (LLSE – NMHFAI) guiding the development of networking and partnership across sectors</td>
<td>Coordinating 5 ministries, Governors of 33 provinces, CSO partners, UNESCO National Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School-Children Initiative (OOSCI) in eight provinces in Vietnam</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Training, UNICEF Hanoi, UIS</td>
</tr>
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</table>

\textsuperscript{Source:} Connal, 2015
The world today faces a wave of global challenges and we cannot feel secure and achieve our collective goals while these threats persist. Education is a fundamental pathway to save humanity from these challenges. Given the global and interconnected nature of the issues, no country can address them alone—it requires a collective effort. Similarly, education is no longer a national agenda, but one that calls for nations to come together to address these transnational concerns. To support this, UNESCO will strive to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all. Irina Bokova summarized UNESCO’s support for sustainable development and the next equity agenda in education: “The progress we have achieved must help us look with lucidity at the challenges that still lie ahead” (Bokova, 24 December 2015). As a global public good, quality education requires a bold new agenda for collaboration beyond national boundaries.

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