

15 Egypt: K-12 Egyptian Knowledge Bank study portal and new form of assessment

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Type of intervention: governmental (led by the Ministry of Education and Technical Education)

Website: <https://study.ekb.eg>

General description

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, all schools across Egypt were shut down starting 15 March 2020. As of 19 March 2020, the Ministry of Education and Technical Education (MOETE) announced the launch of a new study portal, an offshoot of the existing Egyptian Knowledge Bank (EKB), that would provide all students from K-12 access to all their lessons via interactive videos, games and presentations. Meanwhile, MOETE partnered with Edmodo to provide teachers a platform to communicate with their students, and to allow teachers to hold virtual classrooms.

Prior to 19 March, the [EKB](#) catered mostly to Secondary One and Secondary Two (Grades 10 and 11) students, together with higher education researchers and students. The K-9 student body had only a handful of resources that were not well curated on the EKB. Now, and starting on 19 March, they had every single lesson in their curriculum mapped to the new study portal. The new study portal grouped all the scattered material together on the original EKB platform and organised them by grade level and lesson title.

On 26 March 2020, the Minister of Education announced that for Grades 3-9, the traditional end-of-year exams determining whether students can move to the next grade would be replaced with end-of-year research projects that were due on 1 May. Grades 10 and 11 had already shifted to electronic testing, on the tablets provided by the ministry, as part of the reform (for Years 10 and 11), and the complete transformation (known as Education 2.0 for K-2) that had already been taking place since 2018. Grade 12 students (the last cohort to be tested using paper and pencil) were scheduled to sit for their exam physically under extreme precautions for COVID-19.

The fact that the end-of-year exams had been replaced with research projects was not a mere logistical solution due to the COVID-19 situation; it was actually part of the ministry's vision of Education 2.0 and an opportunity to expand it to more grade levels. For the first time, the parents and students of the Egyptian public school system were exposed to the idea that exams are not the only means of assessment, and that learning could be measured in ways other than memorising material then sitting for a test to reproduce them on paper. The research projects also required students use their knowledge and skills from various disciplines and subjects: Arabic, maths, social studies and science – another new concept for most Egyptian students and families.

Education continuity was thus ensured by significantly expanding the bank of educational resources to cover the entire curriculum in all grade levels by providing teachers and students with a communication platform, and by changing the final exam of Grades 3-9 to an end-of-year multidisciplinary research project.

Main problems addressed

The main problem addressed by this initiative was the provision of education continuity beyond the school closure on 15 March. The study portal, together with the change in the type of assessment, allowed for learning continuity and assessment despite the school closures.

The initiative was particularly interesting because it introduced new concepts to Egyptian students and families. First and foremost, it introduced the concept of assessing students' learning via other means than final exams. Second, it promoted a multidisciplinary approach to learning by combining several disciplines and skills in the end-of-year research project. The COVID-19 crisis allowed for the acceleration of an ongoing reform process trying to move Egyptian education away from its strong emphasis on memorisation and teaching to the test to promote teaching and learning for understanding, including understanding the connections between the knowledge acquired in different subjects.

Mobilising and developing resources

While the new study portal and the new form of assessments from Grades 3-9 were in response to the COVID-19 situation, they could build on both the existing EKB and on the Education 2.0 vision of transforming the school system in Egypt to one of learning and teaching for understanding. All end-of-year exams are now either done electronically (Grades 10 and 11) or rely on a multidisciplinary project rather than a test (Grades 3-8).

Some new resources needed to be developed:

- A new sub-portal of the EKB catering to grade levels that were not previously strongly represented on that platform was developed in four days. It includes a multitude of resources including videos, as well as interactive games and presentations all mapped to the lessons in the curriculum. Most of these resources were already on the EKB, but were not organised by grade level nor matched to the existing lessons in the curriculum. Now they are.

- A new platform allowing teachers and students to communicate was established within ten days thanks to a partnership with Edmodo: it allows each teacher to communicate with students in their classes in a private and collective manner, either through its virtual classroom feature or through written communication – and allows students and teachers to communicate in a secure environment.
- New guidelines for the end-of-year assessments for students in Grades 3-8.

Fostering effective use and learning

One strong incentive for students and families to use the resources and continue to learn lay in the fact that end-of-year assessments were maintained, even though their format changed. Students had to work on their research projects using the study materials available on the new EKB study portal – also getting teachers and parents involved in the process. Teachers were provided with guidance on the Edmodo platform, and the level of interactivity of the resources on the EKB helped facilitate their role with the students. Also, the Ministry of Education made sure to communicate every change that was introduced clearly on the ministry's social media pages and on the various TV networks.

Implementing challenges

Speed of execution. A first implementation challenge related to the lack of time. The new portal was set up in four long days, which required continuous work from the EKB team and the support of partners of the MOETE. The same was true with the Edmodo website, which had to be put in place very quickly. This implied that some imperfections had to be addressed after the launch of the new platforms. For example, there were a couple of glitches on the Edmodo website where the students were supposed to create their accounts to submit their research projects, but they were addressed right away.

Supporting the use of the platforms. A second implementation challenge was the lack of teachers' and students' habits to use platforms. Beyond communications with teachers and families, the MOETE set up hotlines for complaints and troubleshooting. This feedback loop allowed it to improve and assess the offered services.

Changing the assessment mindset. A greater challenge was having parents and families accept the concept of assessment through a research project. One solution that had come through the social media channels was to end the year without any form of assessment, and to have the MOETE come up with a formula that would calculate an end-of-year grade for students without the final assessment. This was discarded by the minister, who insisted that no student would move up a grade without being assessed. Another challenge was that most of the students were not familiar with what research entails; what citing references or plagiarism is. There was a whole new lexicon that students, parents and, in some cases, teachers, had to understand.

Addressing the digital gap. Finally, there was an additional challenge for those families who were unable to submit their projects on line; the MOETE provided learning materials through TV channels. Students were also given the option of submitting hard copies of the research projects physically in schools.

Monitoring success

By the first week of May, the new portal had around 80 million page views, while Edmodo had a total of 15 million students registered, 1.2 million teachers and 1 million parents, with around 2.5 million virtual classrooms held. Both the study portal and the Edmodo websites allow for continuous monitoring of their users.

By the 15 May deadline, 15 million research projects were submitted.

Adaptability to new contexts

This solution was implemented across Egypt for the entire population of Grade 3-9 students (around 17.5 million students). This is clearly a solution that can be implemented at scale.

In terms of the study portal, this solution could be considered for any context that deals with a large number of students who have access to the Internet, or who could be supported to get online access. In Egypt, the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, for example, offered students free data SIM cards.

Using the research project as a tool for assessment could be implemented even in the absence of access to the Internet.

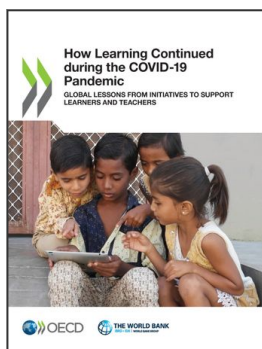
While these solutions were implemented in response to the school closures due to COVID-19, they are solutions that can and will outlive the crisis in Egypt. In fact, these solutions expedited the vision behind the ongoing transformation of education in Egypt.

Box 15.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

1. Make use of existing resources and existing expertise.
2. Do not function in emergency mode only, but propose solutions that serve your overall strategic vision for the future of your education system.
3. Be ready to troubleshoot any problems that arise along the way.
4. Offer solutions that are accessible and implementable by all students.
5. Make use of existing partnerships.
6. Collaborate with other sectors and government entities to come up with the best and most affordable solution for students.
7. Do not compromise on the students' learning.

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