Background

The rapid growth of digital economies throughout Asia and the Pacific continues to challenge the role of traditional higher education systems. Higher education institutions in the region struggle to remain relevant by developing flexible lifelong learning strategies. Mobile learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and blended learning are a means to unlock the potential of higher education. This includes ICT as a means to ensure equitable access to quality education and promote flexible lifelong learning pathways.

Alongside these trends and prospects are concerns about the gap in ICT usage that may cause more serious social polarisation in the future. ICT should improve and diversify learning pathways, improve quality, and further reach out to, attract and retain those who are currently excluded from conventional higher education systems or at risk of being vulnerable and marginalized. There is a growing awareness that a rethink is necessary of how to build local capacities in developing and deploying relevant ICT solutions, planning national ICT in education policies and strategies, and monitoring and evaluating the impact of ICT for achieving SDG 4. This includes digital innovations to strengthen higher education systems, disseminate knowledge, provide access to information, promote quality and deliver effective learning and services more efficiently. For example, ICT-enabled innovations can promote access to appropriate technology and necessary infrastructure to facilitate a learning environment at home and in conflict zones and remote areas, particularly for girls, women, vulnerable boys and youth, and other marginalized groups. These issues are especially timely for the Asia and Pacific region.

Promoting ICT-driven Innovation in Higher Education in Asia-Pacific

With generous support from the Shenzhen Funds-in-Trust and the International Centre for Higher Education Innovation under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHEI), UNESCO launched a two-year project on ICT-driven innovation from 2016-2018 to explore the role of blended learning and MOOCs in

---

1 See 2017 Qingdao Statement
2 See Asia-Pacific Regional Strategy on Using ICT to Facilitate the Achievement of Education 2030
improving teaching and learning and strengthening institutional governance.\(^3\) During the project, a new self-assessment framework on blended learning for quality higher education was piloted in Cambodia and Sri Lanka (see [Blended Learning for Quality Higher Education](#)). A second component of the project focused on the role of MOOCs in Asia-Pacific.

To consolidate lessons learned from the SFIT project UNESCO Bangkok, together with ICHEI will organize a **Regional Consultation on ICT-Driven Innovation in Higher Education in Asia-Pacific**. The regional consultation will be hosted by ICHEI, Southern University of Science and Technology (SUSTech) and UNESCO Bangkok from 24-25 September 2019 in Shenzhen, China with technical assistance and expertise from the Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The main purpose of the meeting is to consolidate lessons learned and prepare a joint policy brief on ICT-driven innovation in higher education in Asia-Pacific.

**Policy brief: ICT-driven innovation for inclusive, quality higher education in Asia-Pacific**

In 2018 with support from the SFIT project, delegates and stakeholders from nearly 30 countries were hosted by UNESCO and ICHEI for the **Asia-Pacific Regional Seminar on MOOCs for Higher Education: Seizing Digital Opportunities to Achieve SDG4** (11-12 June 2018). As a result, three important areas of work were identified to accelerate progress in Asia-Pacific:

1. **Network development**: The need to launch an Asia-Pacific Network on MOOCs to achieve SDG4 – UNESCO agreed to prepare a new open network to promote information sharing and technical assistance to countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region, including national MOOC platforms;

2. **Policy brief**: During the 2018 regional seminar, stakeholders further agreed on the need to take stock of how ICTs (and MOOCs in particular) are used to expand access and promote quality higher education in Asia-Pacific, including how courses contribute to lifelong learning.

3. **Launch the International Institute of Online Education (IIOE)**: The IIOE project was initiated by ICHEI in the context of ICT’s potential to address the quality-equity tensions of higher education. The idea is to use the blended learning mode to offer customized online programmes to universities to meet the local demands for higher education and improve youth employment. IIOE will provide a quality degree programme, cooperating with local partner universities for its implementation and accreditation. The quality assurance system and university ownership serve to assure its success.

As a result of the SFIT project and collaboration, a draft research framework was developed based on five levels of need. Together with insights from UPM and regional partners, these five levels of analysis will contribute to a forthcoming policy brief on ICT-driven innovation for inclusive, quality higher education in Asia-Pacific.

---

The analysis and forthcoming policy brief is based on five levels:

a) **Policy measures:** At national and institutional levels, strengthening the evidence base for policy development and data-driven monitoring and evaluation is critical to achieve SDG4. In the 2018 seminar, policymakers explored the challenges of developing and sustaining strategies on MOOCs for higher education, including how to leverage insights to promote innovation and effective governance.

b) **Enablers/platforms:** National platforms for MOOCs have spread throughout Asia and the Pacific. As mentioned, a network of national MOOC platforms is emerging to share lessons learned, including how to develop and localize new knowledge. National representatives have shared strategies to promote local knowledge to ensure equitable access to quality higher education and training with new commitments needed to develop and sustain a regional MOOCs network.

c) **Institutional/training providers:** Inclusive learning environments are necessary to thrive in today’s digital world. However, traditional boundaries between learning environments at higher education institutions are being blurred by other formal, non-formal and informal education and training pathways. How expected learning outcomes are defined and assessed in the context of higher education remains an open debate, including about the relevance of MOOCs and role of higher education institutions overall. Higher education leaders shared strategies and practical experiences on how to drive institutional change to support next generation learners.

d) **Youth and adult learners:** A truly learner-centred experience is fundamental to quality higher education. How students perceive these needs and the changing role of higher education institutions was explored (i.e. student insights on how/if learning is responsive and relevant for individual learners and society for sustainable development).

e) **Partnerships:** Multi-sectoral engagement, including with EdTech providers, is key to sustainability and innovation. Such partnerships must be based on strategies that cut across formal, non-formal and informal sectors at regional and national levels. How these partnerships are managed in the context of higher education is critical for further research and development.

To assess progress of the SFIT project and identify the way forward for ICT-driven innovation in Asia-Pacific, the regional consultation facilitated by UNESCO, ICHEI and UPM will gather experts and key stakeholder groups to compile recommendations for future action.
Meeting Objectives

1. Identify innovative ICT policies and practices in Asia-Pacific based on five levels – policy measures; enablers/platforms; institutional/training providers; youth and adult learners; and partnerships, including across sectors
2. Set key priorities for further research and capacity building on ICT-driven innovation in higher education and related SDG4 targets in the Asia-Pacific region
3. Introduce the IIOE project, encourage involvement based on the partnership among UNESCO, ICHEI and HEIs, and collect feedback from multiple stakeholders
4. Building on the SFIT project, review and finalize the joint policy brief on ICT-driven innovation for inclusive, quality higher education in Asia-Pacific

Expected Outcomes

1. Joint policy brief that focuses on emerging strategies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, and strengthens institutional governance through ICT-driven innovation in Asia Pacific
2. Development of a regional action plan for research on ICT-driven innovation in higher education and related SDG4 targets in Asia Pacific (SDG4.3 and SDG4.4)

Meeting Dates

24-25 September 2019

Venue

Venue TBC in Shenzhen, China

Logistics and agenda forthcoming

Forthcoming

For further information, please contact:

Section for Educational Innovation and Skills Development (EISD), UNESCO Asia-Pacific Regional Bureau for Education: eisd.bgk@unesco.org

International Centre for Higher Education Innovation under the auspices of UNESCO (ICHEI): appo@ichei.org