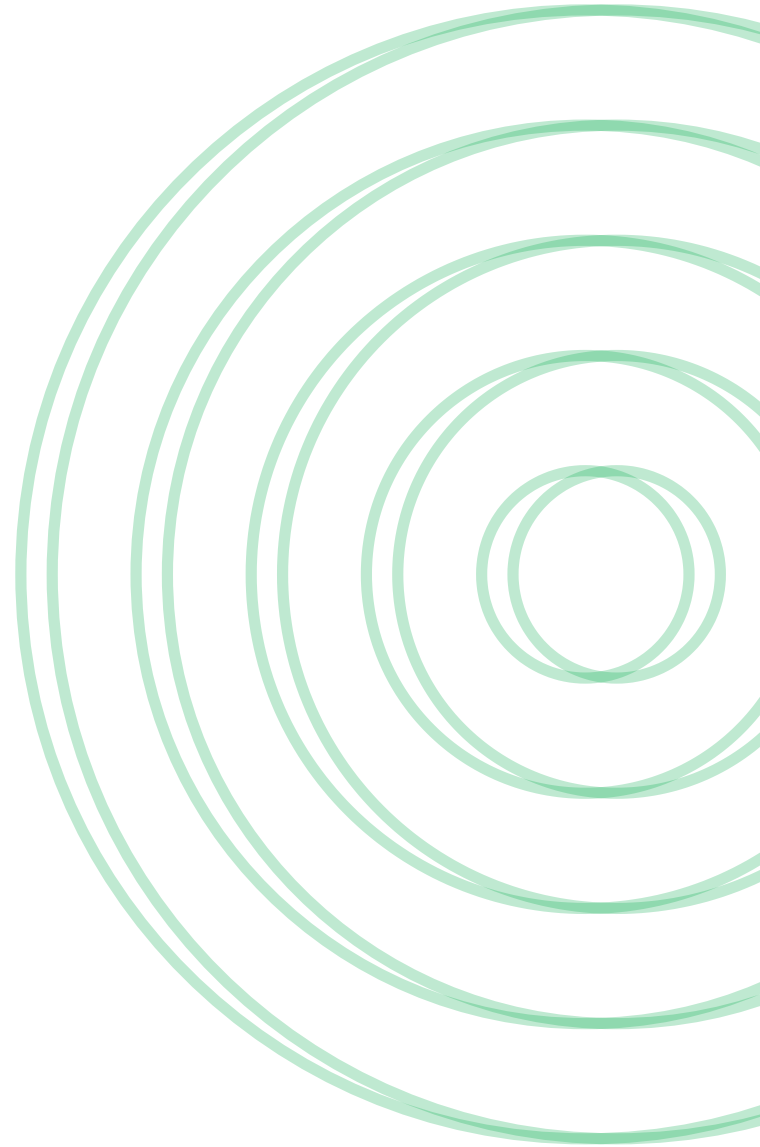


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Inequality and "E-Learning" in
COVID-Era Kosovo

Aaron Spitler
HIA Action Project
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Kosova Center for Digital Education

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I. General Overview

In policymaking circles, educational technologies have long been seen as an innovative solution for expanding learning opportunities. The argument for “edtech” embraced by decision-makers rests on the notion that learning can take place outside of the classroom. By creating high-quality educational content, these novel technologies can make a significant difference in nurturing youth development (UNICEF 2017). Additionally, many governments have taken note of the need to make certain that citizens will be equipped with the skills needed to succeed in an economy driven by technology. At a time in which digitization is the norm, officials have come to recognize the importance of edtech in preparing students of all backgrounds for the future (UNCTAD 2018). “E-learning” programs, as a result, can act as cost-effective interventions that raise educational outcomes on a macro-level scale. In short, the promise of democratizing the way in which students learn has not been lost on policymakers.

Beyond forward-looking workforce preparedness, proponents of educational technologies have also seen its potential to address long-standing inequalities. Specifically, it is seen as a way that children who are underserved and underresourced can receive an education of value. Instruction via tablet or laptop, in other words, can have an enormous impact on those who may not have access to schooling (World Bank 2019). Furthermore, this mode of teaching can be informal and personalized, allowing educators to tailor their lessons to the circumstances of their students. In practice, policymakers view edtech as a way of reducing the likelihood that learners in their countries get left behind (UNESCO 2015). Admittedly, educational technologies themselves are not a panacea to the problem of inequality in education. Even so, the fact remains that these tools could be used by teachers to close the “gap” between students of means and those who do not always have support.

II. Issue Implications

Kosovo was just one of the many countries who turned to “e-learning” amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as policymakers saw the value of these programs while schools were closed. Televised instructional lessons and online learning portals were some of the pedagogical tools used to help Kosovar youth navigate this “new normal.” Yet these initiatives faced a slew of challenges, many of which can be traced back to a lack of forethought from leaders in government. Experts have noted that officials throughout the country had neither the resources nor the expertise to “digitize” the public-serving school system during the crisis (Mehmeti 2021). Unsurprisingly, the absence of planning may have exacerbated “learning loss” among students in Kosovo, increasing the likelihood that they would fall further behind their peers in the region (Trupia and Madhi 2021). Edtech, while appealing in the abstract, failed to deliver on its myriad benefits when put into practice.

Children of all backgrounds in Kosovo had mixed experiences with programs for “e-learning” offered by officials in the country. However, those from the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities were thrust into a situation that was far from optimal. For instance, a number of municipalities throughout the country did not have plans to support these learners, reinforcing their sense of marginalization that existed long before the pandemic (Sylhasi 2021). Issues in expanding the accessibility and availability of “e-learning” went beyond the choices of decision-makers. Insufficient technological resources, as well as substandard connectivity rates, were significant barriers to distance learning that were not effectively addressed (Mehmeti and Jasharaj 2020). Altogether, these challenges dissuaded students from participating in these programs, which in turn pushed many out of schools in the process. As a result, disparities between learners from these communities and their peers of other ethnicities widened over the course of the crisis.

III. Question Statement

Looking at the Kosovar context, what general observations can be drawn from assessing “e-learning” programs launched for Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?

IV. Guiding Methodology

In order to tackle this question, the researcher sought to speak with stakeholders from sectors familiar with the state of education in Kosovo. A purposive sampling strategy was used to build the initial participant base. Individuals were contacted based on their expertise related to “e-learning,” as well as their connections to the communities at the center of this project. A total of 20 individuals were chosen for interviews, representing actors ranging from non-profit organizations to international donor groups. The format of these sessions was semi-structured in that the researcher relied on questions prepared before each discussion but also allowed the participant to guide the conversation. Each session, which varied in length from 30 minutes to 1 hour, was recorded and transcribed. Once the collection of data was complete, the researcher then turned their attention to analysis. Transcripts were coded to identify a set of themes which emerged from the interviews.

V. Research Findings

A. Theme #1: Insufficient Government Action

Many participants mentioned how the response from the government to help students in these communities was lacking. Interviewees acknowledged that the pandemic was unprecedented, as officials were forced to adapt to a situation no one anticipated. However, the plan to bring classes online advocated by leaders in Pristina was

under-developed, evidenced by the slew of issues which arose during implementation. Some educators based in Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities noted that officials did not prepare to deliver devices to households. Others familiar with the situation noted that numerous areas had “e-infrastructure” that was lacking, making it difficult to guarantee that all children could fully participate in lessons. Ultimately, the *ad hoc* manner in which “e-learning” programs were proposed placed considerable strain on local institutions. According to participants, the absence of clear and reliable support from policymakers exacerbated the problem. Learners from these communities were unable to receive an education due in part to the disorganization of decision-makers in the capital. Greater coordination between central authorities and all relevant stakeholders could have made a significant difference.

Critically, the majority of these interviewees made clear that the lack of action from the government predated the pandemic. To these individuals, the crisis only magnified the need to assist these communities, particularly in the field of education. Training issues and resource shortages were just some of the challenges confronting Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian learners. Participants were quick to identify how many of these students were grappling with socio-economic insecurity, as their families did not have the support to make sure their children could take part in “e-learning.” Due to these obstacles, many charged that officials could have done more to secure the right of education for these learners, placing responsibility on those in Pristina for these shortcomings. When thinking about the future, the consensus was that the digitization of learning must account for the needs of all groups in order to be effective. Concrete steps must be taken to address the structural inequalities that affected these vulnerable communities. Without adopting this approach, participants warned that the promise of “e-learning” would remain unfulfilled in Kosovo.

B. Theme #2: Inefficient Resource Allocation

An equally significant number of interview participants highlighted that device “gaps” proved to be a barrier to distance learning. Specifically, many took note of how policymakers driving the shift to “e-learning” seemed to operate with the assumption that students would have access to a device. Initiatives were launched to collect and distribute resources at the onset of the pandemic, designed to put tablets or laptops in the hands of those most in need. Even so, the allocation of these devices was not without its share of problems. For instance, participants shared that only a slight difference was made for households with multiple children, as instructional lessons were often running simultaneously throughout the school day. These issues, in turn, placed a burden onto parents and guardians who were attempting to navigate their families through a period of uncertainty. Looking back, participants believe that officials at all levels of government should have been more intentional in their attempt to bring all students online. Improving the way in which devices were dispensed could have made “e-learning” more accessible.

Interviewees who held these views also warned that disparities in resources would not disappear with the end of the pandemic. Many were aware that policymakers today are interested in integrating technology into the classroom, drafting strategies for “e-learning” that draw on lessons learned over the course of the crisis. Those spearheading these efforts, according to participants, believe that this mode of instruction can make education more personalized and dynamic for youth in Kosovo. However, realities on the ground may prevent that vision for change from being realized. For students who do not have means, the benefits touted by proponents of “e-learning” are hypothetical. Without guaranteeing that all children have the necessary equipment, interviewees expressed that outcomes between groups would almost certainly widen in the future. Given these challenges, many who held these opinions cautioned that advocates for investing in educational technologies should temper their

expectations. Racing to revamp the system of education in Kosovo, in the eyes of these participants, would result in students who are struggling to get by falling further behind their peers.

C. Theme #3: Inadequate Technical Training

Finally, several interviewees highlighted how the absence of training for students from these communities should not be overlooked. According to these individuals, learners were often unfamiliar with educational technologies. The transition to learning from home, in turn, caught many unprepared. Without much in the way of guidance, participants felt that students were less likely to engage with “e-learning.” Some went as far as correlating the absence of support with an uptick in dropouts from these communities. Although there a host of reasons as to why students did not attend classes, interviewees were in agreement that digital illiteracy among youth cannot be ruled out as inconsequential. Officials, in the eyes of these speakers, crafted their interventions on the assumption that youth would intuitively know how to use edtech. “Digital natives,” in other words, were effectively deprioritized when it came to implementing skill-building programs for virtual learning purposes. Altogether, this expectation may have increased the degree of “learning loss” seen in these groups, the impact of which may not be understood by policymakers for years to come.

Speakers were also aware that teachers struggled to adapt to the realities of “e-learning.” Educators overhauled their curricula after schools were closed, with many receiving little instruction from administrators on how to navigate this process. In fact, some interviewees posited that teachers were more overwhelmed by “e-learning” than their students. Trainings were made available to familiarize teachers with the basics of these programs, and participants credited the government and its partners for taking action. Even so, responses suggest that these programs were “too little, too late.” Not only were instructors not given

enough time to absorb how technologies could enhance their work with learners. They also were not equipped with the know-how required to help students address issues they encountered when logging in for lessons. In short, those who expressed these views took issue with how there was not an infrastructure in place to support educators throughout the pandemic. Interventions to bolster their skills could have ensured that instructors, as well as their students, would not have “fallen through the cracks” of Kosovo’s education system.

Figure 1.1 – Selected quotes from interview sessions

On the state of Kosovo’s education system prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

“Government and the whole of society was not prepared for switching immediately to online learning.”

On how long-standing social inequities were not overlooked by government “e-learning” interventions:

“The quick change to online learning couldn’t address the structural inequality that existed for these communities.”

On the extended implications of resource “gaps” that emerged during the transition to virtual learning:

“These children do not have the materials to learn and be equal with their peers.”

On how connectivity rates in Kosovo obscure the degree of digital illiteracy found in the country:

“The fact that you have access to the Internet does not mean you know how to navigate the Internet.”

On what policymakers interested in education should take away from the pandemic:

“We cannot have a successful digitalization process without addressing the needs of specific people like the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians.”

Figure 1.2 - Venn diagram of common issues

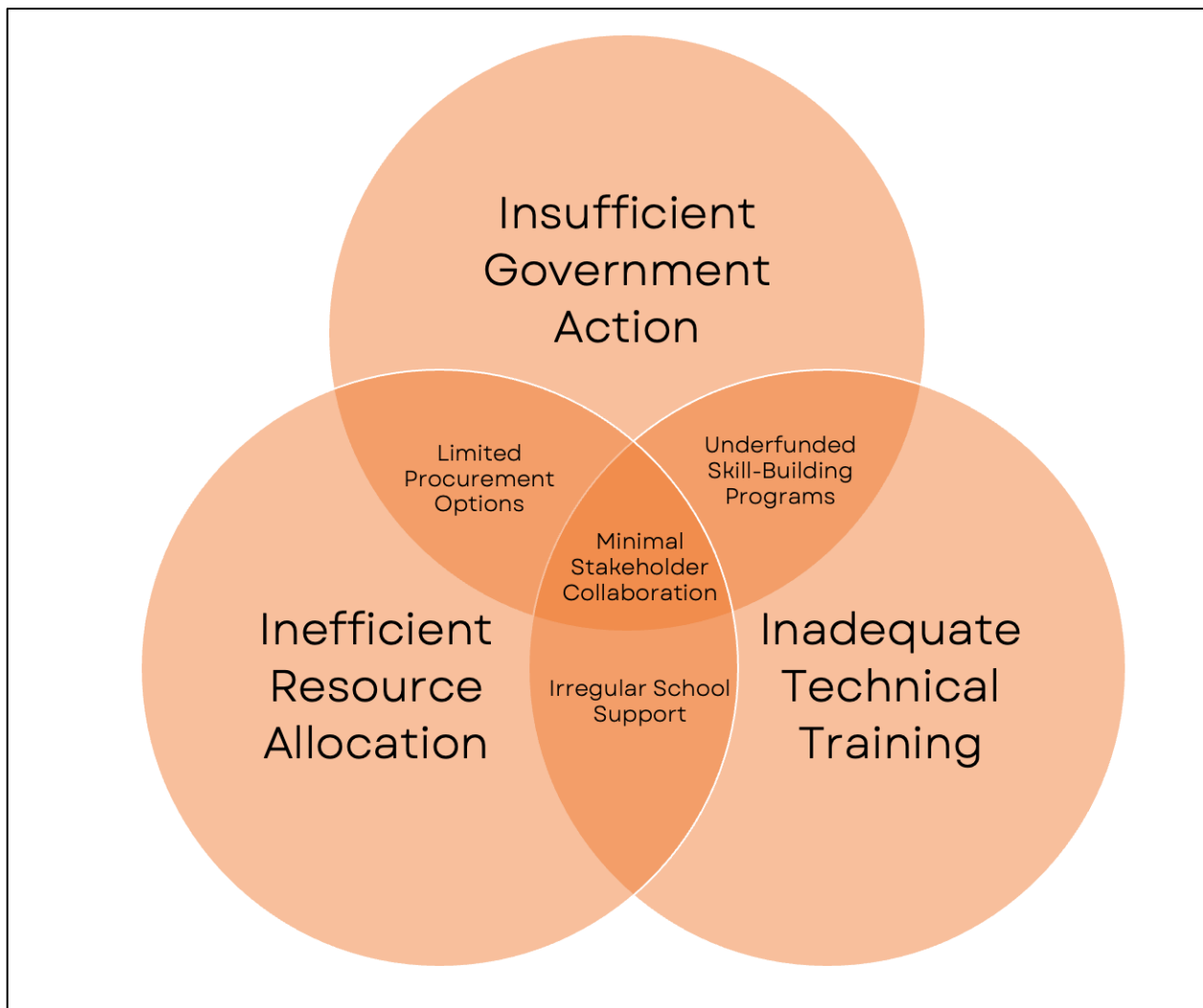
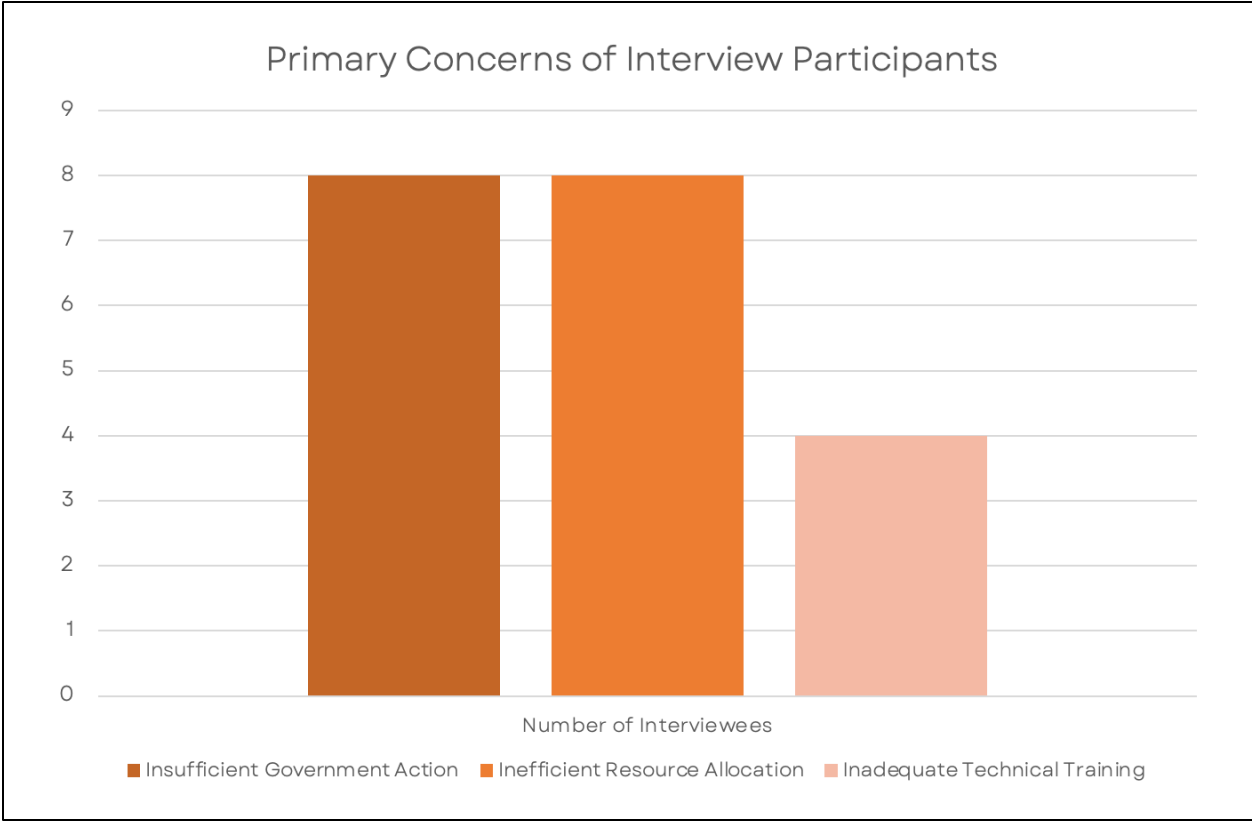


Figure 1.3 – Graphical representation of thematic categories



VI. Initial Analysis

Project participants took note of two key issues when describing the gradual rollout of “e-learning” programs for these vulnerable communities. Many highlighted how interventions proposed by the government were underdeveloped. The rush to “bring schools online,” according to these individuals, produced a host of issues that affected those most in need. Additionally, the dearth of resources available to these learners was cause for concern among numerous interviewees. Laptops, tablets, and even smartphones were often in short supply as students transitioned to learning from home. Taken together, these comments draw attention to how policymakers adjusted to the realities of the “new normal.” Strategic planning, in other words, was seen as secondary to immediate solutions.

While the efforts of officials in Pristina made a difference, they also underlined how stakeholders in the field of education lacked a vision for ensuring that learning was a possibility for all individuals irrespective of their background.

Shortcomings in how teachers were, or were not, trained for “e-learning” were also on the minds of interviewees for this project. Although it was not their primary concern, insufficient preparation was seen as a major reason why Kosovar educators struggled to make the switch to distance education. The insights provided by participants shed light onto why this adjustment proved to be a significant challenge. Those who held these views not only felt that teachers were unsure about how edtech could be incorporated into their work. They also indicated that this process might have overwhelmed educators, as they were expected to maximize their time with learners at a moment of uncertainty. All told, training deficiencies had a tangible effect on how teachers operated during the pandemic years. This reality meant that they were unprepared to use “e-learning” as a way to reach students who were no longer found in the classroom.

VII. Policy Recommendations

Looking ahead, measures can be implemented to make sure that the mistakes of the pandemic are not repeated. Stakeholders in all sectors, especially those in government and civil society, can take action to secure the right of education for all learners. These interventions, categorized by actor, include the following suggestions:

Government Actors

Policy Solutions

- 1. Improve internal coordination among relevant agencies whose work relates to the provision of educational services*
- 2. Ensure adequate funding is devoted to digital skill-building and resource procurement in strategies for digitizing the educational sector*
- 3. Guarantee meaningful participation of key figures representing vulnerable groups, such as the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities, in policymaking practices related to digital education*

Relevant Actors

- Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI)*
- Ministry of Economy (MOE)*
- Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sporty (MCYS)*

International Partners

Policy Solutions

- 1. Strengthen collaboration with education-focused agencies in the central government interested in digital learning as they set “post-COVID” strategic goals*
- 2. Create funding reserves that will go towards securing “e-learning” equipment that can be shared with Kosovar schools, particularly those in underserved areas*
- 3. Sponsor training sessions focused on digital skill-building for interested teachers, specifically targeting Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian educators*

Relevant Actors

- *United States Agency for International Development (USAID)*
- *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)*
- *HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation*

Civil Society Organizations

Policy Solutions

1. *Increase advocacy efforts centered on ensuring equity issues are addressed in strategic plans regarding virtual learning advanced by government officials*
2. *Engage in awareness-raising activities for the general public focused on how “e-learning” programs should be made accessible to under-served students*
3. *Connect with international actors in the education space to increase the likelihood that equity concerns are part of their “post-COVID” agendas*

Relevant Actors

- *Kosova Education Center (KEC)*
- *Kosova Center for Digital Education (KCDE)*
- *Roma Versitas Kosovo*

VIII. Future Directions

The key takeaways of this white paper could be a “springboard” for further research on Kosovar “e-learning” programs. For instance, it would be worthwhile to explore what the future looks like for these initiatives beyond the pandemic, especially for learners who faced barriers to participation during the crisis. In speaking with interviewees, it is no question that this type of instruction received unprecedented attention from education officials in Pristina. Those interested in technology, as well as positioning Kosovo as a leader in the field, expressed an eagerness to include edtech in their strategies for digitization. However, their approach can exclude groups on the margins of society, minimizing how inequities in access prevented many students from using “e-learning” in any capacity. Researchers should look into the causes of this disconnect. Critically, projects would answer the question of whether distance education has the potential to improve outcomes for youth across the board.

It would also be insightful to investigate how other dimensions of inequality will shape Kosovo’s pursuit of digital transformation. Participants made it clear that communities serving Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students had neither the resources nor capacity to take advantage of “e-learning.” While important, these were only two of the issues impacting the rollout of programs in these communities. Irregular access to wireless services was a notable issue, as was the apparent scarcity of culturally-appropriate content for enrolled learners. Above all, families that grappled with economic insecurity did not have the opportunity to turn their attention towards register their children in programs for “e-learning.” With these issues in mind, research should look into how plans for digitization will address the needs of all individuals in Kosovo. Policymakers have viewed this as a priority, yet it is crucial that they consider how their plans will benefit citizens irrespective of their background.

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Appendix 1.1 – List of interview questions

- 1. In general, did Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students have much experience with “e-learning” programs prior to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic?*
- 2. In general, do you believe that “e-learning” programs launched during the COVID-19 pandemic were accessible to Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students?*
- 3. In your opinion, do you believe that “e-learning” programs launched during the COVID-19 pandemic were mindful of the challenges facing Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students?*
- 4. Looking to the future, do you believe that “e-learning” programs could be improved to meet the needs of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students?*
- 5. Looking to the future, what would you like policymakers interested in digitizing education to know about the experiences of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian students during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Appendix 1.2 – List of project participants

- 1. Muhamet Arifi – Executive Director, Balkan Sunflowers*

2. *Avni Mustafa – Executive Director, Roma Versitas Kosovo*
3. *Bekim Syla – Director, Roma, Ashkalia Documentation Centre (RADC)*
4. *Orhan Butic – Education Manager, Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians (VoRAE)*
5. *Osman Osmani – Executive Director, Nevo Koncepti*
6. *Fridon Lala – former Head of Development, Kosova Center for Digital Education (KCDE)*
7. *Petrit Tahiri – Executive Director, Kosova Education Center (KEC)*
8. *Pajtim Zeqiri – Program Officer, Terre des hommes (Tdh)*
9. *Marije Vuksani – Program Officer, Terre des hommes (Tdh)*
10. *Dukagjin Nishiqi – Project Manager, Syri I Vizionit (SiV)*
11. *Emrah Cermjani – Executive Director, Roma in Action (RIA)*
12. *Arif Kadriu – Program Manager, Solidar Suisse in Kosovo*
13. *Francesco Trupia – Policy Analyst, Kosovo Foundation for Open Society (KFOS)*
14. *Berat Thaqi – Program Director, Bethany Christian Services (BCS) Kosovo*
15. *Fiona Shahini – Researcher, Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) Kosovo*
16. *Vjosa Rogova-Damoni – Senior Project Officer, Council of Europe (COE) Office in Pristina*
17. *Minavere Fejzullahu – Program Coordinator, Caritas Kosova*
18. *Alina Jashari – Staff Member, Caritas Kosova*
19. *Cordelia Lafferty – Communities Protection Officer, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)*
20. *Fatmir Menekshe – Executive Director, NGO “Durmish Aslano”*