ECO Educational Institute
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News from ECOEI

The 3rd Meeting of the ECO Educational Institute Board of Trustees (BoT)

The 3rd Meeting of the ECOEI BoT was held virtually via Zoom on August 12, 2020, following the 3rd Meeting of the High Level Expert Group (HLEG) of the ECOEI which was also held virtually on August 10, 2020.

The virtual BoT Meeting was hosted by H.E. Ziya Selçuk, Minister of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, and chaired by Burcu Eyisoy Dalkıran, Director-General of the EU and Foreign Relations Directorate under the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey. The meeting was attended by the respected ministers, deputy ministers, and high-level officials from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Re-

public of Iran, Republic of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, and the Republic of Turkey. Representatives from the Turkish Cypriot State were also present with observer status. The Secretary-General of ECO along with the relevant staff of the Secretariat as well as the President of ECO Science Foundation and President of ECO Cultural Institute along with their delegation have participated as well.

The BoT renominated Prof. M. Akif Kireçci as the President of the ECOEI for another term of three-years and the reappointment was approved by the Council of Ministers effective from 17 August 2020 to 16 August 2023. In addition, the BoT has reviewed and approved the Scale of Assessments and Annual Budget of the ECOEI, and the Institute's Work Program for 2020-2022.

At the meeting, the parties also discussed the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on education and the global shift towards distance education along with its challenges. The participants highlight the important role played by the ECO Educational Institute bringing in the new perspectives on education in the region by following the global trends and emphasize the significance of empowering the Institute's work. Prof. Kireçci explained that the ECOEI's Work Program for 2020-2022 has also been designed to illuminate the Institute's efforts to promote social progress and cultivate stronger ties among the members by also observing and adapting the recent changes in the education systems.

Seminar on "Teaching Excellence"

ECOEI organized a joint seminar on Teaching Excellence in cooperation with the University of Isfahan on August 5, 2020, via an online platform. Panelists included Prof. Dr. Semih Aktekin –Rector of Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University, Nevşehir, Turkey and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohammad Amiryousefi, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, I.R. Iran.

In his seminar, titled "Can We Transfer General Teaching Competencies into Higher Education: The Case of Turkey" Prof. Aktekin drew on his experience as a director at the Turkish Ministry of National Education in updating and

publishing Competency Documents in 2017. Aktekin was responsible to revise, edit, and finalize the Competency document. Aktekin argues that this document sets an important framework for the development of policies for teacher education. It is also considered to be a guide to the teachers in terms of their personal and professional development. Aktekin also shared the main details of the Teacher Competency document and his experiences during the preparation of this document.

In the second part of the seminar, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohammad Amiryousefi, University of Isfahan took the stage and gave his talk titled "Teaching Excellence: The Case of University of Isfahan." Dr. Amiryousefi discussed the developments regarding improving the teaching competencies of university academics in Iranian universities in general and at the University of Isfahan in particular. The 3-hour virtual event hosted around 50 academics and young researchers from all around the world.

Workshop on "How to Write and Publish Articles for International Journals"

ECOEI has organized a workshop on "How to Write and Publish Articles for International Journals" in cooperation with the University of Isfahan, I.R. Iran on August 19, 2020, via an online platform. Similar in scope to the workshop conducted in Baku in May 2019, the main purpose of the workshop was to improve the academic writing

skills of graduate students who pursue a Ph.D. degree in Isfahan University and introduce submission, evaluation, and publication procedures of scholarly journals to them. Prof. Dr. Ali Ekber Şahin of Hacettepe University, Ankara, conducted the workshop with the participation of around 50 academics and students. ECOEI plans to expand this event to other universities in the ECOEI region to contribute to the academic output of the young scholars in the ECOEI Member States.
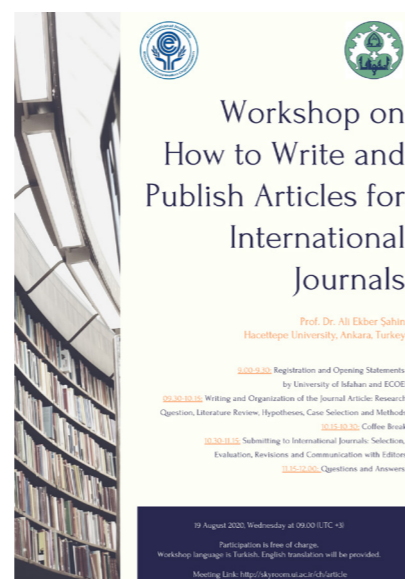
Distance Education Experience Sharing Workshop between ECO Member Countries during Covid-19 Pandemic

Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey in cooperation with the Economic Cooperation Organization Educational Institute organized a virtual workshop on Distance Education Experience Sharing between ECO Member Countries on October 14, 2020. Upon proposition by the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey, Economic Cooperation Organization Educational Institute invited technical experts, heads of departments or and general directors at the Ministries of Education of ECO member countries in order to share the experiences

and disseminate good practices among ECO countries in responding to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The workshop was attended by delegates from the Republic of Azerbaijan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Republic of Turkey, Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the Republic of Turkmenistan.

Participants have discussed the effects of the pandemic on the education system, shared and explained their respective countries' educational responses to the crises. ECO members highlighted the importance of immediate response, taking quick measures, delivering quality content, training teachers, supporting parents and students, and providing technological infrastructure. The members have also agreed that it is significant to support one and another

Education in Numbersion: Critical Thinking and Teaching

The term critical thinking in education is described as the learning process that goes beyond simple memorization of information given by thinking about and analyzing that information.[1] In the thought process, students are expected to be creative by evaluating, interpreting, questioning the given input, and developing their own arguments.

Critical thinking skills are considered crucial for students both at school and in life beyond school, yet it is unclear how critical thinking should be taught. According to Cruickshank (1986), "A major outcome of education is the development of thinking ability. It is unclear, however, whether or not, thinking can be taught"[2]. Moreover, Halx and Reybold (2006) claimed that "even though learning requires effort, critical thinking requires our full expenditure of intellectual capability."[3] Therefore, teachers as the center of education systems have a challenging task.

While gaining critical thinking skills requires an enabling platform and practice, the role of the teachers then is to provide the platform in the classroom and encourage students to practice. In order to help their students to develop critical-thinking skills, teachers should encourage student

voices, allow them to question, challenge, and take critical action, and more importantly, remain open to challenge by students[4]. By providing a classroom where students can safely develop creative ideas, use democratic means, and be sensitive and respectful to others' arguments, teachers will enable the critical-thinking process in teaching.

In the Global Competitiveness Report 2019[5], the World Economic Forum (WEF) has created 12 indicators[6] one of which is *Skills* under the component of Human Capital. The Executive Opinion Survey has been used to collect data and the 2019 edition of the Survey captured the views of 16,936 business executives in 139 economies between January and April 2019. Within the Skills pillar, WEF has calculated "Critical Thinking in Teaching" as part of the skills of future workforce. For this indicator, the data collected through the responses to the survey question "In your country, how do you assess the style of teaching? From 1 (frontal, teacher based, and focused on memorizing) to 7 (encourages creative and critical individual thinking)." Then the weighted average or most recent period available in 2018-2019 was selected as the country's score for that indicator.

[1] Critical Thinking". The Glossary of Education Reform. Edglossary. Last modified August 29, 2013. https://www.edglossary.org/critical-thinking/
[2] Donald R. Cruickshank. "Critical Thinking Skills for Teachers". *Teacher Education Quarterly*. 13 no. 1 (1986): 82-89. Accessed October 30, 2020. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23474716
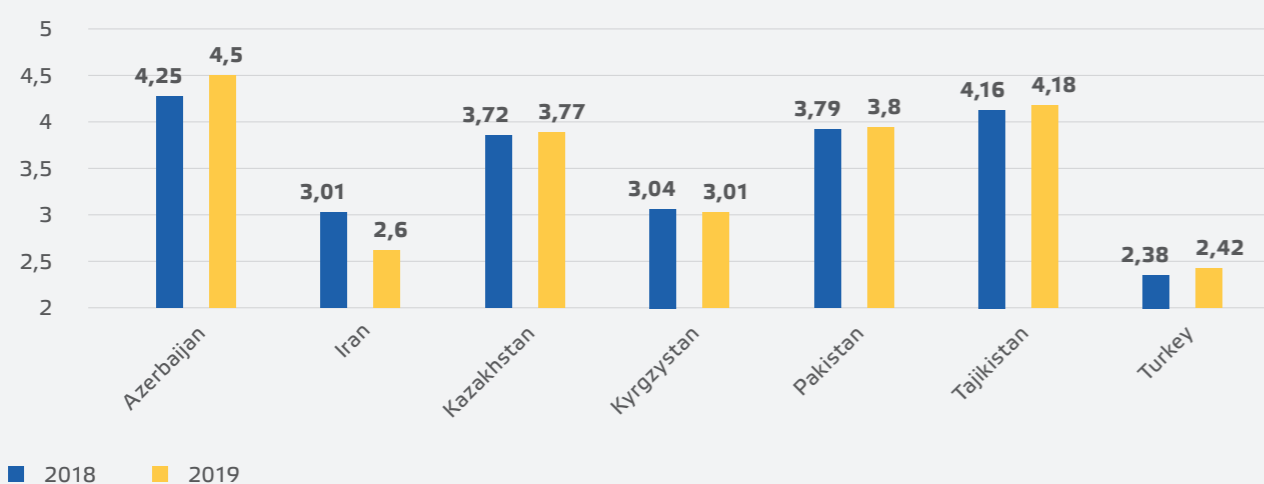[3] Mark Halx and L. Reybold. "A Pedagogy of Force: Faculty Perspectives of Critical Thinking Capacity in Undergraduate Students". *The Journal of General Education*. 54 no. 4 (2006): 293-315.
[4] J. Smyth. "Reclaiming Social Capital through Critical Teaching". *The Elementary School Journal*, vol. 100 no. 5 (2000): 491–511.
[5] Klaus Schwab. " Global Competitiveness Report". World Economic Forum. 2019. http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_TheGlobalCompetitivenessReport2019.pdf
[6] The twelve pillars are Institutions, Infrastructure, ICT Adoption, Macroeconomic Stability, Health skills, Product Market, Labor Market, Financial System, Market Size, Business Dynamism, Innovation Capability.

Critical Thinking in Teaching at ECO Countries, 1-7 (Best)

	Azerbaijan	Iran	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Pakistan	Tajikistan	Turkey
2018	4,25	3,01	3,72	3,04	3,79	4,16	2,38
2019	4,5	2,6	3,77	3,01	3,8	4,18	2,42

Source: World Economic Forum, "Global Competitiveness Report 2019", 2019.

The graph above compiles the critical thinking in teaching scores of selected ECO Countries in 2018 and 2019 based on the Global Competitiveness Report. While the majority of the ECO countries increased their scores in 2019, the overall scores are ranging from average to below average on a scale of 1-7, thus it highlights the need for action towards critical thinking in teaching. As higher education and job requirements become more competitive, complex, and technical, critical thinking skills become prominent to successfully navigate the modern world, process complex information, and excel in challenging careers[7].

Innovative Ideas for Education: Distance Education Tools

Technology is penetrating every part of our lives in an unprecedented way. Undoubtedly, the importance of the availability of technology and being able to use the technology to meet the needs of our daily lives as well as our profession has been well established in the pandemic days. The education field is also one of these professions which greatly benefits from technology. As the pandemic forced schools to shut down initially then switch to online education, technology, and online tools become imminent for distance learning.

As the number and diversity of digital tools are increasing, it may be difficult to choose the best tool that meets the educational needs of the students. While some of these software, applications, and web-based tools are free of charge with limited features, some others are costly. Major factors to consider that could help to narrow down the list are the purpose of the tool, cost-effectiveness, individual or collaborative lecture styles, user-friendliness, feedback and practice opportunities, and contribution to higher-order thinking skills.

The first step of the distance education process is to identify the right tools that will help you to **create materials and content** for the lecture. Some examples of these tools are *VoiceThread*, *Pressbook*, *Canva*, and *Prezi*. With *VoiceThread*, instructors can create, share, and comment on images, Microsoft PowerPoint presentations, videos, audio files, documents, and PDFs using a microphone, webcam, text, phone, and audio-file upload. *Pressbooks* is an open-source content management system based on WordPress, designed for creating books and exporting content in many formats for ebooks, webbooks, or print. *Canva* is a free graphic de-

sign platform that allows users to create social media graphics, presentations, posters, and other visual content. *Prezi* is a cloud-based presentation preparation platform where you can prepare animations and visually enriched presentations. Prezi's interface is very easy to use for professional purposes quickly.

Moreover, some platforms allow users to access free images and music to be used in different content. *Pexels* is one of these platforms for free photos and videos. It can be easily downloaded and used. *Pixabay* is also a free-to-use website with internationally unlicensed content for photography, illustrations, vector graphics, filming, and music sharing. *Bensound* haas music that can be used free of charge and you can search for music by filtering by category. *Freemusicarchive* has a very large music archive, is another platform to download and use music for free.

The next step in the distance education process is finding the right tool to **conduct the lecture and present your materials** successfully. One of the platforms that are widely used in distance learning is *Zoom*, an efficient and easy-to-use video conferencing tool, allows sharing high-quality audio and video, offers the option to easily add "content" to meetings with annotation tools, breakout rooms, whiteboard tools, and download meeting recordings as MP4 files. *Google Meet* includes features such as messaging, video sending, and voice calling in addition to video calls. By sharing your screen, you can show participants content such as documents and slides. *Microsoft Teams* is another hub that provides a chat-based workspace for team chats, calls, meetings, and private messages in Office 365. Groups created with Microsoft Teams can simultaneously make video and audio calls with each other, share documents and view notes centrally. *BigBlueButton* is also an open source web confer-

encing software developed to facilitate distance education and workflow, transmit live audio and video. Moreover, *BigBlueButton*, with its many practical and advanced features integrated, can be used to conference in a live virtual environment for those who want to give private lessons and for other purposes. The *Perculus* system allows you to share video and audio using the camera and microphone of your mobile or desktop device. Since *Perculus* management interfaces are very useful and simple, it provides convenience such as starting live sessions and inviting participants. It also has features such as working on your documents and making presentations.

The final step of the distance education journey is to determine **measurement and evaluation** tools for improvements and a healthy **feedback** network between students and the lecturer. For that purpose, *Piazza* offers an online problem-solving place where students can ask, answer, and research questions under the guidance of their instructors. On the *Piazza*, students collaborate to find answers to questions posed by any students or instructors. Instructors can also collaborate on answers in their field. *Google Docs*, on the other hand, offers many features such as a presentation preparation program, a survey program, a web-based word processor, and a spreadsheet program and also allows many people to edit the documents you create online at the same time and see the edits made simultaneously. Another tool for after-class activities is an exercise is a *Top Hat*, a student response system, and a comprehensive teaching platform that instructors can use to create an active learning environment for their students inside and outside the classroom with interactive slides, questions, customized content, videos, discussions, and questionnaires. Students can participate through smartphones, tablets, or laptops. *Quizlet* is also an online application that allows students to practice

[7] "Critical Thinking". The Glossary of Education Reform. Edglossary. Last modified August 29, 2013. https://www.edglossary.org/critical-thinking/.

through learning tools and games. *Quizlet* can educate students with Flashcards through a variety of games and quizzes. *Edpuzzle* is another free virtual classroom application that provides video editing, adding voice notes to videos, narrating with your voice. *Kahoot* is also a popular and fun platform for gamified training that can be prepared in categories such as quiz, discussion, and questionnaire. *Kahoot* can be connected with computers, tablets, or mobile devices as well. *Mentimeter* is a great tool that allows you to get real-time feedback in presentations, making presentations in which the audience mostly passively participate. Lastly, there are also platforms that allow you to record and save screens such as OBS Studio, a program with which you can save the screenshot as a video, *FonePaw Screen Recorder*, which can record not only the full screen of your computer, but also a specific area or an application interface as well as

record audio and webcam while recording, and *ScreenApp.io*, which allows taking screen recordings without the need for an additional application on the computer and can record the screen with options such as the entire screen, application window or Chrome tab.

Digital technology has become an indispensable part of teaching and learning with the global switch to distance education gradually. When integrated into teaching in an informed way, digital education tools could contribute to better achievement in learning. Accordingly, teachers need to increase their digital competencies and keep up with the new technology and digital culture in order to enhance students' learning through digital tools and encouraging them to use them out of class as well.

Future Events and Opportunities

2020: As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to affect the education systems and interrupt educational opportunities around the world, many top universities like Stanford, Yale, MIT, Harvard, Oxfords offer free online courses on a variety of topics from language, philosophy, and literature to physics, design and computer science. Here's a list of 1.500 online courses free of access: https://www.openculture.com/freeonlinecourses.

January 20, 2021: ECO Cultural Institute, in cooperation with Allame Tabataba'i University, will organize the 1st Symposium of the Rectors of the ECO Universities virtually on January 20, 2021, with an aim to bring together academic experiences and to enhance cultural-scientific cooperation among the universities in the region.

February 2021: The 38th Iran Book of the Year Award, organized by the Secretariat of the Islamic Republic of Iran, will be held in February 2021. The Award Committee released the call for the event and invited all scholars, writers, translators, and publishers to nominate books for consideration. The aim of the award is to select and introduce worthwhile international books and honor their authors, editors, and translators for elevating the general knowledge and culture and developing public scholarship/readership with the Islamic and Iranian written heritage.

March 2021: Program calendar of the Farabi Exchange program has been announced through the program website (https://farabi.yok.gov.tr/Sayfalar/DuyuruDetay.aspx?-did=279). The exchange advertisements will be announced in Higher Education Institutions on 1-15 March 2020.

April 2021: ECO Educational Institute, in cooperation with the University of Applied Sciences and Technology, Iran and OSTIM Technical University, Turkey, will organize an online training seminars on creating online and distance education course for instructors and facilitators in order to enhance the knowledge and skills of capacities on the design, development and delivery of e-learning.
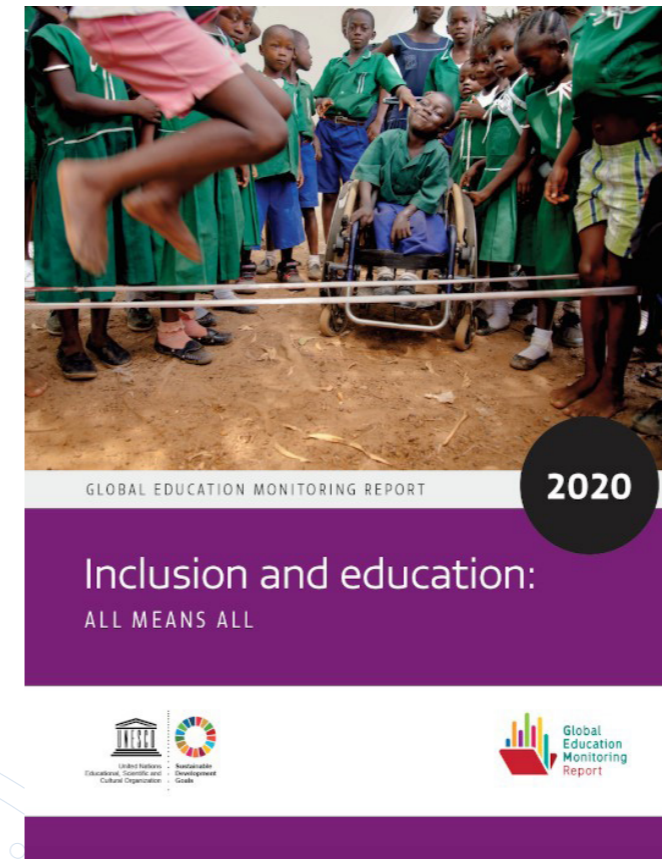
Education News Around the World

2020-2021: Within the scope of the measures taken in higher education institutions regarding the Coronavirus (COVID-19), the calls for the 2020-2021 academic year Mevlana Exchange Program and the Project-Based International Exchange Program were canceled considering the existing risks. The full details of the decision can be reached through https://mevlana.yok.gov.tr/Sayfalar/DuyuruDetay.aspx?did=107.

June 23, 2020: UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Report, "Inclusion and Education: All means all" is launched. The fourth of the GEM Report series focuses on the inclusion of socially, economically, and culturally discriminated and disadvantaged children in the education system. The report addresses the educational needs of the marginalized groups who suffered even more during the Covid-19 crisis. The report is accessible online at https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/report/2020/inclusion.

June 27, 2020: Tajikistan's University of Science and Technology will be built in Khujand, the capital of Tajikistan's Sughd Province. The university is part of the 20-year plan for education and development of sciences (2020-2040) and it will offer 20 disciplines (in-class and online) in 68 classrooms, 8 laboratories, 20 specialized rooms, 5 large halls, a library, a restaurant, and a dormitory.

June-August, 2020: Allameh Tabatabai University of Tehran, Tashkent University of Oriental Studies, and Iran Cultural Center in Uzbekistan in cooperation with Saadi Foundation held a virtual training course for teachers of Persian language and literature. The 20 session course started its first session in 2018 and included listening, writing, reading, speaking, and grammar skills along with Persian language testing methods. Allameh Tabatabai University and Sa'adi Foundation also hosted a pedagogical webinar on "Teaching Persian to Speakers of Other Languages" in cooperation with the Tashkent State University on August 4, 2020.

August 2020: Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Turkey launched a website called "I have an idea for distance education" (http://uzaktanegitimebirfikrimvar.meb.gov.tr/) in order to include the opinions of and received feedback from parents, teachers, and students as well. Through this website, the Ministry will be able to evaluate people's opinions about distance education.

August 23, 2020: The digital library of the Turkmenistan President was launched on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the status of permanent neutrality of Turkmenistan. The library holds translation of Turkmenistan president's books into 20 languages. The library's website also hosts an online exhibition on the same occasion and displays all Turkmenistan's achievements in the fields of energy, transportation, commerce, education, healthcare, sports, agriculture, culture, and others.

September 2020: The Ministry of Education and Science of Tajikistan began the registration of Tajik students who study at foreign universities and cannot leave due to the suspension of air traffic. While the final decision has not been made, it is not yet known when the flights will be organized for those students.

October 28, 2020: A new book "Communicating Science. A global perspective" has been released by Australian National University Press. The book documents the global emergence of modern science communication. It has 40 chapters, 108 authors, and covers 39 countries. The book covers all regions and all cultures from Europe, Asia, and the Americas, including ECO Member Countries Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan. The chapter on Pakistan entitled; "Pakistan: Changing Landscape of Science Communication" has been co-authored by Prof. Dr. Manzoor Hussain Soomro, President of ECOSF and Engr. Khalil Raza, Scientific Officer ECOSF. Online access to the book is available at https://pressfiles.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n6484/html/cover.xhtml?referer=&page=0#.

November-December, 2020: The University of Isfahan hold the Fourth International Conference on Rumi between November 9 – December 15, 2020, virtually. The conference pays attention to International Research on Rumi in such areas as Turkey and Asia Minor, Far-east: Japan and China, Balkan, Europe, and America. In the end, all research outputs including books, articles, journals, and dissertations are appreciated and rewarded.