



RELIEF

Using a blended learning approach in teacher professional development and community researcher training

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In August 2017, members of the RELIEF 'Future Education' research theme co-hosted a workshop, which aimed to reveal future directions in supporting teaching and research activities of people living in Lebanon; in particular exploring the usefulness of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) and blended learning.

The workshop was co-hosted by Dr Maha Shuayb, Professor Diana Laurillard and Dr Nikolay Mintchev. Workshop participants included researchers, educators, NGO representatives and the Ministry of Education: the potential user groups of MOOCs and blended learning programmes.

The workshop explored two intended applications for these new learning technologies: citizen science training for researchers and institutions, and teacher development. Divided into two days, the workshop explored in detail the working contexts of researchers and teachers in Lebanon, what challenges they faced and the access they have (or don't have) to technology. Both days were concluded with a collaborative design exercise, wherein participants co-designed their ideal learning programme, using MOOCs and/or blended learning.

OUR AIM

Our aims for this workshop were to understand the challenges faced by community researchers and teachers working in Lebanon, and the opportunities they have to do well in their work. We also aimed to find out whether community researchers and teachers had ready

access to technologies, which could be used for training purposes. We used the final sessions to discover what kind of training programme would be valuable for community researchers and teachers in Lebanon.



Day 1: Involving communities in the research process

Dr Maha Shuayb (Director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies) opened the first session of the two-day workshop by introducing the RELIEF Centre and the question RELIEF attempts to answer: what can higher education institutions do to enable inclusive prosperity in contexts of mass displacement? She emphasised that the RELIEF Centre is concerned with both Lebanese and refugee communities, and that programmes which emerge from the Centre are intended to benefit hosts and refugees. She suggested that the educational system ought to be, and can be innovated for the benefit of everyone.

Dr Nikolay Mintchev and Hannah Sender (UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP)) introduced the participants to the IGP's citizen science approach: an approach to research which involves local people in the research process from the beginning of the project to the end. Involving the community living or working in the research site is commonly referred to as 'community research'. However, the term has been used very broadly to describe research which involves the community to any extent, often without providing high quality training and only during the data collection phase of the research project.

Dr Mintchev outlined two key elements of the community research approach: community research as a methodology which strengthens the research outcomes as a result of being informed by local people; and community research as a transformational approach wherein communities can learn new skills, shape the research to benefit the community, and empower the community to shape local decision-making. Dr Mintchev emphasised that the second element of community research is the one the IGP is most interested in, and which inspires the IGP's citizen science approach.

Ms Sender outlined how the IGP works with community researchers in London; highlighting the training programme, the involvement of community researchers in all stages of the research process, and the responsibility which community researchers take when they become members of the research team. The IGP's citizen science approach is intended to embed the research in the community, and to be of immediate and sustained benefit to the community.

Participants showed a particular interest in this notion of the community researcher as a responsible and accountable member of the research team, especially when research subjects are vulnerable. This is an issue which the London team had faced in their work, and would certainly be a dominant factor in conducting research in poorer communities in Lebanon.

The first discussion was dedicated to identifying researchers' capacities and the challenges they face. Since many of the participants had experience working as field workers, the discussion

was predominantly shaped by their working practices. Participants mentioned a couple of reoccurring challenges relating to the research team, including a **lack of coordination** between field researchers, the community and the core research team, and field researchers' **lack of voice** in determining the topic of research and the way research questions are formulated. Some field researchers complained that the topics of research were repeated, so data was continually being gathered about the same subjects, and that questions were often undermining of and insensitive to the interviewee. One participant suggested that some questions are simply not understood by interviewees.

When it came to the relations between the researchers and the community, the group mentioned several challenges which researchers faced, including **community practices** which dictate who has access to potential respondents, and when. For example, in conservative communities where the patriarch determines access to the home, the interviewer must be sensitive to these dynamics. It was also suggested that the research topic would determine who ought to be conducting interviews. For example, interviews about hygiene practices ought to be conducted by women interviewers. It was suggested that **neutrality** is difficult to maintain when there is antagonism between communities. It is difficult to gain access to a community and gain their trust, if the interviewer is seen to belong to a different community. They also reported the communities' **research fatigue and disillusionment** with research projects can be linked to communities' refusal to participate. Finally, communities' **fear and distrust of institutions** such as UN and the state means some community members will refuse to participate in research, or are inclined to answer dishonestly. This emerged as a challenge in research conducted in the Palestinian refugee camps, where distrust of institutions meant people were not inclined to register with them, or to disclose financial information.

The workshop participants also brought up several issues related to the quality of research being conducted. They suggested that **validation** of the data becomes an issue when field researchers are unable to answer follow-up questions, and are paid per interview. One participant suggested that field researchers might falsify interview forms in order to get paid more. Some researchers fail **to assure the interviewee will be safe** to answer questions (e.g. assurance of anonymity), which leads interviewees to refrain from participating in research.

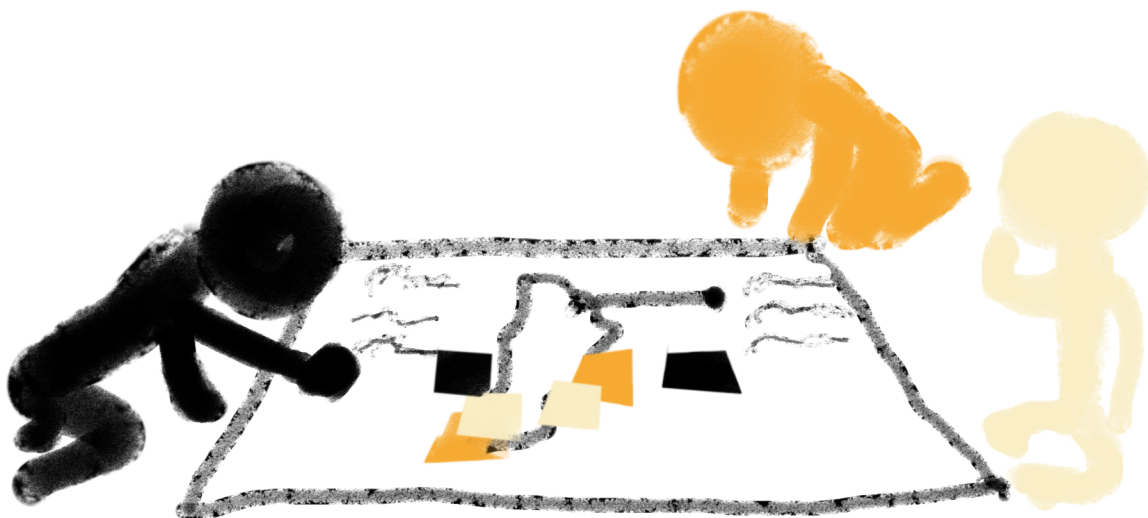
One participant suggested that there is **no 'culture of research'** in Lebanon, which means people might not understand its value. She suggested that people see research as a waste of time, and do not see a connection between research and policy-making or investment. There is often **misunderstanding the researchers' role**. Several participants suggested that field researchers were seen as mediators between the community and institutions, who were capable of fixing people's problems. Dr Shuayb mentioned a research project wherein field researchers were informed that confidentiality rules meant that they could not report instances of abuse if they were disclosed. This placed field researchers in a very difficult position, between research ethics (as they were defined by this project) and empathy.

Participants observed that field researchers' university education fails to prepare researchers properly for field work. In connection with this point, participants were asked to name the skills that researchers who conduct field work lack. These were closely related to the challenges mentioned in the previous part of the discussion; namely, communication skills (meaning communication with local people as well as with research team members), objectivity, and a clear understanding of research ethics (such as assuring anonymity, gaining informed consent etc.).

However, it became clear from the discussion that field researchers were struggling to conduct good research whilst remaining within the parameters of the research project, and that a lack of skills was not the only issue. Field researchers were handed a survey and were not encouraged to give feedback on the research topic or the questions asked; they were not trained properly before data collection; they were not supported to make important connections within the community or to learn more about the community they were approaching. Neither were they free to use alternative data collection methods. One community researcher suggested that researchers are not allowed to show flexibility in the face of rejection or avoidance of the research. She implied that this skill would help avoid tension between the researchers and the community.

It quickly became clear that field researchers were not working as 'community researchers' in the IGP's definition of the term: they are not involved in the entire research project but are treated as data collectors. They struggled to find opportunities for shaping the research according to their experiences and understanding, they were unable to challenge the research brief, they were not given the opportunity to develop new skills that would make them better researchers, and they were not involved in data analysis or in dissemination.

This issue was summarised by one participant, who concluded that community research can only succeed when it is embedded at the strategic level: the institution's capacity to work with community researchers must be enhanced alongside the development of community researchers' skillsets. Recognition of community research at the strategic level was seen, by this participant, as a stage prior to that in which community researchers can reverse the power dynamic, and become directors of research projects themselves.



The afternoon session was dedicated to the exploration of MOOCs and blended learning as technologies that might enhance capacities for community research. Professor Laurillard outlined the difference between MOOCs (wholly online educational programmes, which have been geared towards students with a professional background) and blended learning, which combines online/digital with face-to-face/conventional methods. It is intended to use technologies in ways which add value to the learning experience, whilst maintaining the face-to-face contact many students need.

Professor Laurillard suggested that new learning technologies might help us to address the challenge of achieving educational equity: meaning that MOOCs and blended learning could increase access to good quality education for many, and that the quality of education could be the same regardless of students' backgrounds. She suggested that new learning technologies could be used to build research skills on a large scale by applying the cascade model. The cascade model works by harnessing new technologies and resources to enhance the learning of a large group of experienced or professional adults (for example, organisations and their staff), and enabling them each to work with a small local group in order to share their learning (see Diagram 1).

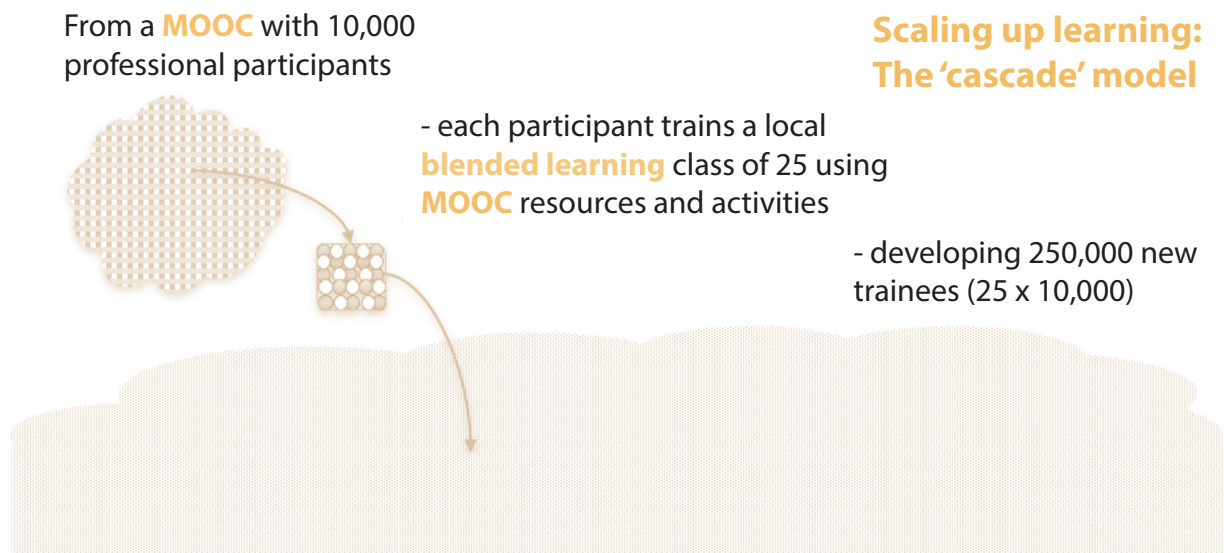


Diagram 1: Scaling up learning from a large number MOOC participants, via local groups, to even larger numbers of 'end-users' of the education

Professor Laurillard concluded by indicating that MOOCs are well-placed to be research tools. The sequence of re-runs can go through successive iterations, incorporating the ideas, outputs and experiences of previous alumni and 'research 'champions', to ensure they are always relevant to a dynamic, changing user group (see Diagram 2)

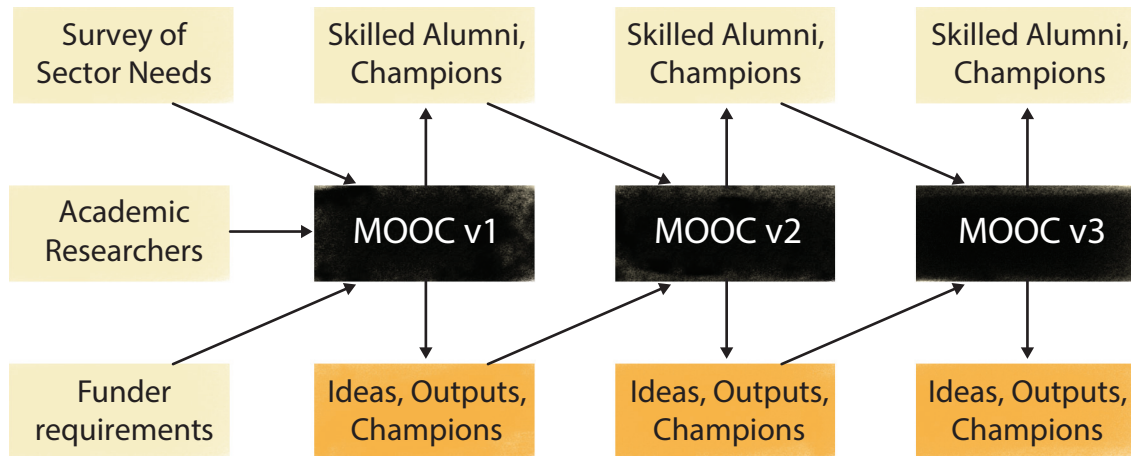


Diagram 2: Showing how each MOOC can be updated in later runs, using the contributions of the successive cohorts of alumni

Workshop participants were challenged to co-design a course for training community researchers. They covered aspects of the course such as content, hours per week, length of course and certification. The participants agreed that blended learning is preferable to wholly online learning, so that students can learn from one another's experiences, ask questions and receive and give feedback, and practice skills in person. Some participants suggested that the users would prefer to discuss the content due to cultural preferences for this mode of learning. They suggested that courses ought to be no more than five hours per week, so that people can work at the same time as taking a course. They agreed that courses should be in Arabic, and could also be available in English.

The participants were in unanimous agreement that a certificate of achievement is an important incentive for potential participants: there has to be a certificate to give credibility to the course. The course must be credible to and valued by organisations. The course organisers will need to advocate for the course: proving its value to research institutions and other relevant organisations.

Although the content of the course was less discussed than its management and credibility, one group did suggest that the course should demonstrate how being a community researcher can be of benefit to the individual and the individual's wider community.



Day 2: Supporting teacher development

Dr Maha Shuayb opened the first session of the second day, giving a concise and pertinent insight into educational inequalities in Lebanon, as seen in the division between first and second shifts at Lebanese public schools, between formal and informal education, and between public and private education. In the past three years, the Lebanese government has taken important steps to increase the number of Syrian refugee students in Lebanese public schools. However, the quality of education and of the learning environment is markedly different between the first and second (non-Lebanese students') shifts. Teachers are under immense pressure to work longer hours, and to cope with more vulnerable students.

This being said, the quality of education in Lebanon varies according to a number of factors, not only refugee status. Dr Shuayb stressed that the purpose of this workshop is not only to think about education for non-Lebanese students, second shift students or informal education, but to think about education in the round.

One workshop participant informed the group that the education system is based on the curriculum, and that now the Ministry of Education is focused on differentiated learning (learning for students with different backgrounds and educational needs).

Another participant pointed out that if there is to be any change in education, it has to be through the teacher, and that we have to change who the 'teacher' is; that is, their identity as a professional person. Many people, we were informed, go into the profession because it is considered convenient when one wants to have a family, or when other options are closed to them. Many teacher training programmes fail to talk about teacher identity.

An early-career teacher reminded the group that both students and teachers come from turbulent backgrounds.

She also suggested that many teachers are inflexible to innovation or attempts to transition to other ways of teaching, particularly interactive teaching. This chimed with the experiences and opinions of others in the workshop, who reported that teachers struggle to embrace student-centred approaches to teaching. This might be linked to the problem of a lack of motivation and professional identity. Teachers are underpaid, overworked and under-appreciated. It is easy to see why a teacher would not want to spend additional hours learning a new approach to teaching, when he or she is overburdened and her efforts are not appreciated or recognised.

The participants identified many challenges faced by teachers in Lebanon, including having a diverse student cohort with different vulnerabilities, and high student numbers. Teachers in

Lebanon have long working days: around 50% of teachers (this percentage might be understating the number) work first and second shifts. Thus, training is considered an additional burden. Teachers also lack the psycho-social support that they might need to cope with challenging working contexts.

The participants then identified skills gaps, which could be tackled by teacher development programmes. These included techniques for mitigating bullying, classroom management (particularly for high numbers of students and a diverse student cohort) and how to conduct needs analysis for new students. They suggested that teachers in Lebanon are unfamiliar with interactive and student-centred learning approaches, which could be of benefit to both teachers and students. One participant suggested that some teachers lack understanding of how activities align with learning objectives, and how to plan lessons accordingly.

Teachers' wellbeing was also a subject of discussion. Participants suggested that teachers could be given training in reflective practice and strategies for personal resilience. One participant suggested that learning how to be creative with limited resources would be of immense benefit for teachers working in under-resourced schools.

Professor Laurillard began the second session by reflecting on the similarities between the situation for teachers in Lebanon and in the UK: teachers in the UK also struggle to maintain a strong sense of professional identity, with too many hours and over-full classrooms. Professor Laurillard suggested that although they cannot fix all challenges faced by teachers, MOOCs and blended learning might be useful technologies for enabling teachers to thrive in their professions.

Having outlined MOOCs and blended learning for the participants, then challenged the group to design two MOOCs or blended learning courses for teacher development in Lebanon. She suggested that the courses need not be targeted only to teachers, but could also be aimed at policy-makers, to improve their understanding of the educational sector.

The first group suggested that a good blended learning course for teacher development would focus on classroom management. It would ask for 4 hours per week of work, and would take the following weekly pattern: face-to-face > online > online > face-to-face > face-to-face > online. The course would be offered in both English and Arabic. Interestingly, participants would be able to work towards either a certificate of achievement or a certificate of participation, depending on the level of learning and assessment.

The second group designed two blended learning course. They titled the first Classroom management for diverse populations. The course would be aimed at teachers, and would cover different aspects of diversity, including age, skills/capabilities, nationality, challenging circumstances, and faith. The course would run for 4-5 weeks, for 3 hours per week. 60% would be online and 40% would be face-to-face. The participants would all work towards a certificate of achievement.

The group suggested that this course could be the introductory course in a series of courses on education and diversity, where additional modules would focus on one aspect of diversity.

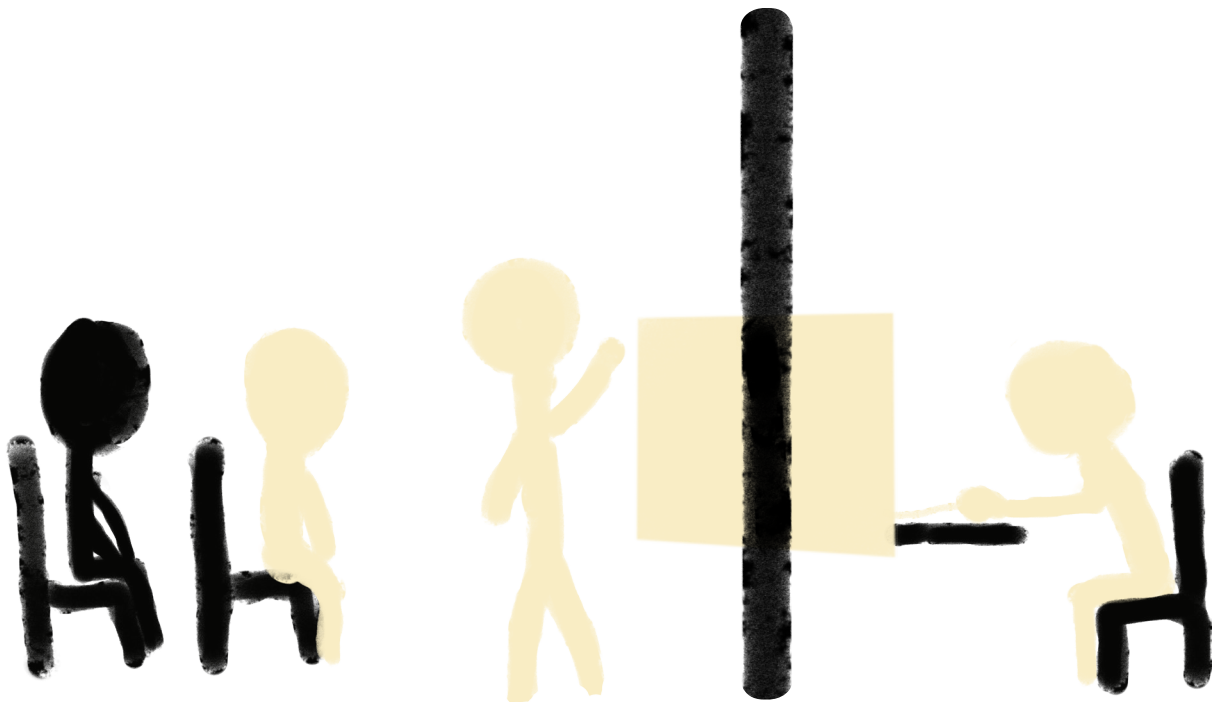
The second blended learning course was titled Teacher Identity. The course would also be aimed at teachers, and would cover two key subjects: 'who are we as teachers,' and 'teachers as agents of change.' The intention of the course is to inspire teachers, to understand themselves as a

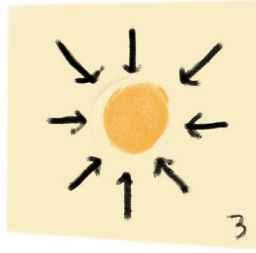
valuable resource. The course would be short - 2-3 weeks - and would be offered in Arabic. The participants would work towards a certificate of achievement.

This session inspired a conversation about how teachers might manage their professional development, taking into consideration the existing demands on their time. It might be possible to design a range of short courses which enable teachers to add to their expertise as-and-when they feel able to, and which allow pre-planning for professional development through the year. By adding together short courses, the teacher might be able to work towards a diploma.

In the final hour, workshop participants discussed the availability of technology. Whilst many teachers might be able to access technology every day, others working in remote areas, with limited connectivity and resources, would struggle to access online courses. That being said, if content was made downloadable, so that teachers could study offline the majority of the time, then participants agreed it would be possible for most teachers to access blended learning courses and MOOCs.

Before the workshop closed, one participant raised an important point: any designer of a MOOC or blended learning course needs to think about advocacy. Teachers, their employers and policy-makers need to understand the value that the courses can bring to education. Without advocacy, it is unlikely that teachers would be motivated to take the courses.





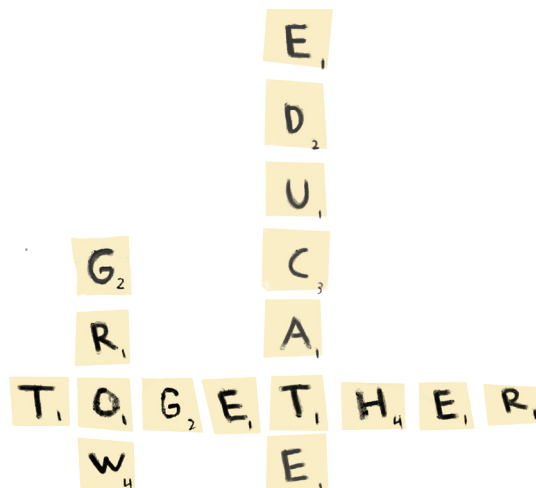
Conclusion and outcomes

The input from the workshop participants gave the RELIEF Centre team invaluable insight into the challenges faced by researchers and teachers in Lebanon. Their impression of the environment in which researchers and teachers work, and the skills which they feel they lack, have provided the team with a deeper understanding of the role higher education institutions can play to support these groups. The team has also been able to gauge interest in community research and teacher development: what kinds of support would be valued and how they ought to be designed.

The RELIEF team has, in turn, been able to share with NGO staff, teachers, field researchers, the Ministry of Education and UN staff, the programmes which the RELIEF Centre aims to implement. The notions of blended learning and community research were met with interest, and several participants showed particular interest in the educational design methodologies introduced by Professor Laurillard.

Having explored the possibility of utilising digital learning platforms to train community researchers and those working in the education sector, the conveners were encouraged to take forward the participants' outline learning programmes. During the RELIEF programme, the team will develop these outlines to deliver at least two MOOCs or blended learning courses.

The workshop conveners found that although the term 'community research' was used in Lebanon, it was not synonymous with the 'citizen science' approach used at the UCL Institute for Global Prosperity (IGP), where citizen science is a transformational approach to research wherein communities can learn new skills, shape the research to benefit the community, and empower the community to shape local decision-making. It was concluded that the roles of 'community researchers', or citizen scientists, could be redefined according to this transformational approach. This would enable more people living and working in Lebanon to shape knowledge-generation about their local areas, and thus to contribute to policy-making at the local, national and possibly international levels.





Working together for prosperity
and inclusive growth

**We are grateful for the thoughts and comments
of the workshop participants:**

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