

Process for iterative and adaptive implementation of government policy in order to utilise educational technology

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1. Introduction

In an effort to improve the national evidence base of how to improve children's learning outcomes in Jordan, the 'Evidence-Driven Results in Learning', EDRiL, initiative provides applied education research and analysis tied to the Ministry of Education's (MoE) Education Strategic Plan 2018-2022 (ESP), which is aligned with the Jordan National Human Resource Development (HRD) Strategy 2016-2025. Funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Canada (initially to May 2020), EDRiL is guided by an MoE-led Steering Committee which is responsible for defining and prioritising applied research to inform improvements in learning outcomes for all children in Jordan.

Under EDRiL, the Activating Education Technology programme was born to support the MoE in evidence-based decision-making in EdTech, in partnership with [Open Development & Education](#). The first phase of AET took place between January and May 2019. A second phase was launched in August 2019 and is expected to end in September 2020.

1.1. The purpose of the Activating Education Technology programme

The Activating Education Technology programme has three purposes:

1. To develop an evidence-based EdTech policy for Jordan, as an annexe to the [Education Strategic Plan](#);
2. To initiate the implementation of this policy (and document necessary steps for this policy-implementation process);
3. To undertake (and document) capacity-building that ensures that the policy will continue to evolve (in line with evidence on new educational needs and new technological affordances) and will continue to be implemented (project documentation).

1.2. The challenges

The Policy Implementation Process (PIP) — described in this document — needs to be mindful that the Ministry of Education has been in the process of developing a strategy for ICT in Education for several years. However, challenges lay in the ever-changing nature of technology, transforming contexts on the ground, the large number of stakeholders, and the unrealistic expectations and understandings of EdTech. Many of these challenges are common to overly theoretical policy-implementation processes that are not grounded in national conditions, including governance, policy-implementation processes and socio-economic realities. Moreover, policy development and policy implementation are seen as separate: Once the policy is developed and fully fixed, implementation takes place.

These challenges are not unique to Jordan. Time and time again, national EdTech interventions have failed to impact learning outcomes. Several themes arise from these international experiences, including:

- **Device/Tech-Centricity.** The goal of employing educational technology is to improve learning outcomes, not to employ educational technology. As a result, EdTech plays a role in a much more complex system of teacher professional development, curriculum, and assessments, all geared towards improving student learning. However, more often than not, the emphasis is made on rolling out hardware, disregarding, or even at the expense of, other aspects of the education system. This is not only reflected in schools, where computer labs are installed, divorced from the broader curriculum, and unaccompanied by adequate teacher training. It is also evident in central and local government, where EdTech is often viewed as separate from other aspects of the education system, either as a purely technical issue or a “flashy” novelty that attracts donors but does little else.
- **Unsustainable tech rollout.** Technology is expensive. It is also a recurring cost and requires significant maintenance and constant replacement of old technology for new. Despite this, however, a trend among lower-middle income countries has been to rely on one-time donations to fund large-scale device rollouts. This not only means that future students and teachers will be unable to perform the tech-supported tasks their predecessors did, but also that even those teachers who have received hardware will be less likely to use them if they don't believe they will be regularly replaced and maintained. Furthermore, the total cost of ownership (TCO) of educational technology is reported to be anything from 5-10 times more than the cost of the devices themselves. The TCO includes not only the hardware cost, but also the fees associated with training, change management, curriculum reform, and maintenance.
- **Inflexibility.** Technology evolves, as do curricula, textbooks, student and teacher's attitudes toward technology, and their socioeconomic conditions. Consequently, a one-size-fits-all, or any type of 'fixed' approach to employing EdTech is destined to become obsolete or inadequate for the Jordanian (or any other country's) context. Despite this, national EdTech strategies and policies have often lacked the flexibility to accommodate the varying and evolving contexts. They opt instead for single-model rollouts and long-term strategies with little room for changing direction.
- **Mismatch.** A common phenomenon across educational technology solutions introduced in countries is a mismatch between the intervention and local context. While technology promises to address all sorts of challenges, from student collaboration to more robust feedback, these solutions will fail if their design does not reflect a deep understanding of the nature of the local challenges. More often than not “best practice” is parachuted onto countries or schools with the expectation that it will improve learning outcomes regardless of context.
- **Overly-theoretical policy development processes.** Many countries have spent months and even years developing EdTech policies and strategies without setting foot in schools. Instead, these strategies are based on theory and general studies that are not necessarily targeted towards the development of the strategy. In many cases, the task is assigned to consultants who not only often lack contextual knowledge, but also

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do not implement the strategy themselves. Given the highly contextual nature of EdTech and education policy more broadly, theory and desk research is far from adequate to meet the needs of learners.

It is for these reasons, among others, that such processes have failed over and over. Therefore, contemporary approaches favour adaptive and iterative processes, which focus on impact rather than inputs, such as improved learning for young people. A policy is only developed in as much as it can be implemented and lead to impact.

Note

While this project emerged out of a need to address the challenges facing Jordan's EdTech sector, these challenges are shared across the education system and are fundamentally not tech-based challenges. For this reason, we believe that lessons can be learned and successful approaches can be replicated across different aspects of education policy.

2. Key features of our approach

This section outlines a few key tenets of our approach.

2.1. Policy design is policy implementation

Successful design means successful implementation. Successful implementation, whether of a strategy, process or policy, is a key indicator of successful design. For this reason, in order to minimise the risk of failure upon implementation, the design phase is not complete without on the ground trials. Furthermore, design cannot be seen as a separate chronological phase, as it must be iterated throughout its implementation and must include implementers as well.

2.2. Education policy implementation is education leadership

Borrowing heavily from the international literature on design-based policy development, and fundamentally grounded in the idea of ‘Systems Leadership for Learning’¹ (SLL), our process is based on the following principles stemming from SLL.

2.2.1. Focus on Learning — *Systems become effective through a pervasive focus on learning*

Learning is not only the outcome which we wish to improve at the student level, but it is also the mechanism through which we hope to achieve this goal. Learning must consistently be the focus of at all levels of the system, including:

- **Student learning** — The ultimate focus for all our activity is to ensure student learning is achieved. The question of *“Will this benefit our students learning?”* is a much-repeated mantra, and guides many of the decisions we make. Consequently, this process will always seek to build evidence on what supports student learning.
- **Teacher learning** — Teachers are our main vehicles to reach students, and *“the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers”*. Our teachers need to not only be well trained but also develop habits of constant learning and improvement.
- **Professional learning** — This process is supported by members who have the skills to successfully carry it through. Explicit and deliberate focus needs to be put on the development of these skills. In contrast to teacher learning, which is directly related to the pedagogical process, professional learning refers to all other players in the educational ecosystem.

¹ B. Hassler (2019). *Systems Leadership for Learning*. [10.5281/zenodo.2626705](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2626705).

- **System learning** — Creating change in a system is complex and multilayered. As a result, explicit focus needs to be made about how the system as a whole, not only its individual components, develop and learn.
- **Process learning** — This process is a work of constant and deliberate improvement and iteration. Just as we expect the larger system to iterate and improve, so must we review and revise how this process is designed and implemented. This includes a formal, iterative evaluation of the process.

2.2.2. Conditions for Learning — *Systems must explicitly create conditions for learning*

“Every system is perfectly designed to achieve the results it gets.” Should there be hope to effect any change in the system, tools and space, whether physical, digital, or social, must be provided to allow for learning and experimentation. These conditions include, but are not limited to:

- Authority — buy-in of leaders is a must to allow for experimentation
- Physical spaces for learning and sharing knowledge
- Digital social spaces
- Tools for learning and experimentation

All these conditions must be in place in order to create a culture of systemic learning.

2.2.3. Learning Dialogue — *Learning dialogue is essential for effective change and innovation*

Learning and insights must be made explicit, discussable and transferable. This includes using tools such as questioning and generating tangible outputs that are accessible to others. This could take the form of creating transparent and accessible learning artefacts on Google Docs, or presenting findings, or even using flipboard paper to display ideas.

2.2.4. Shared Leadership — *Leadership and responsibility are shared throughout the system*

Systems are complex and multilayered, and therefore change cannot be achieved without all elements of the system ensuring that the system as a whole is geared towards learning. This also means engaging a broad set of actors in both the design and implementation processes.

2.2.5. Shared Accountability — *All aspects of the system are mutually accountable*

Evidence-based insights and transparent sharing of such insights (e.g., transparency for the learning achieved) are foregrounded.

Note

Just as the challenges are not necessarily tech-specific, our approach to addressing them is not either. Many of these principles were drawn from evidence on policy-making and education reform, as we believe the challenges are fundamentally human challenges and not tech-based.

3. Core features of our approach: CIRCLE Decision-Making

It is as a response to these aforementioned challenges that the Activating EdTech process came to be. In order to combat device-centric, inflexible, centralised, unsustainable and overly theoretical approaches, we must develop a **CIRCLE** — Collaborative, Iterative, Research-based, Contextual, Learning-first **decision-making** approach. Let's unpack what we mean by each of these terms.

3.1. Collaborative

Education systems are, by design, complex, mirroring the complex process of student learning. As such, in order to properly achieve learning impact, a broad set of actors must work together *continuously*. This does not simply mean holding stakeholder meetings, and asking for input. Stakeholders must play a *continuous* and *active* role, and have this collaboration be part of business-as-usual.

3.2. Iterative

In order to adequately meet the needs of students and teachers, any intervention or strategy must be tested on the ground. Not only that, there must be a *clear mechanism* for redesigning the initiative after its initial deployments. This means that clear research questions must be determined prior to testing, and must serve the broader design of the intervention.

3.2.1. Agile Development

Agile Development, while greatly related to all the other concepts, deserves its own emphasis. Originating from the latest software development practices, Agile is characterised by quick (re)deployment of a 'minimal viable product' — an MVP. The MVP is the most basic form of the software (read: intervention) that can achieve the desired goal. This allows the developers to test basic assumptions quickly, avoiding large scale risks later on, and allowing for pivoting and redirection early on in the process. Agile methodology heavily influences our work.

3.3. Research-based

While experience does, and should, play an important role in the everyday functions of policymakers, it must be coupled with and balanced by research. The typical image 'research' might conjure up is of the secluded, elderly scholar working in a dusty office, or of a diligent computer scientist typing away at a string of numbers appearing on the screen in front of her. We, however, use the terms 'research' and 'evidence' very practically: what we need to know to make good decisions. This may take the form of a national survey, a randomised control trial,

or a metaanalysis of impact evaluations. It may also be in the form of a small-scale intervention in a single classroom, individual interviews and focus groups.

Though the form evidence and research can take may vary, one thing must be true: they must be proportionate to the research question at hand. For this reason we spend a lot of time figuring out which research questions to ask, before we begin answering them.

3.4. Contextual

While the allure of ‘global best practice’ is a tempting one, it more often than not fails to deliver learning impact. This is a well-studied occurrence, dubbed ‘isomorphic mimicry’ (Andrews, Pritchett & Woolcock, 2017), in reference to a phenomenon in the wild. The phenomenon illustrates the tendency of governments to pursue form over function; the tend to adopt practices that were successful elsewhere (form), over addressing the issues they are supposed to address directly (function).

In an effort to avoid such a phenomenon, our process must be *highly* contextual, looking inward, starting first from a deep understanding of the issue we are looking to address before looking outward.

3.5. Learning-First

Learning must be the ultimate goal of all interventions within an education system. This goal must not only be a measure of success, but also what guides the design (and redesign) of the interventions. An intervention should not begin with a (technology) solution in mind without a clear understanding of what the intended learning outcomes are and what pedagogical approaches are needed to reach it.

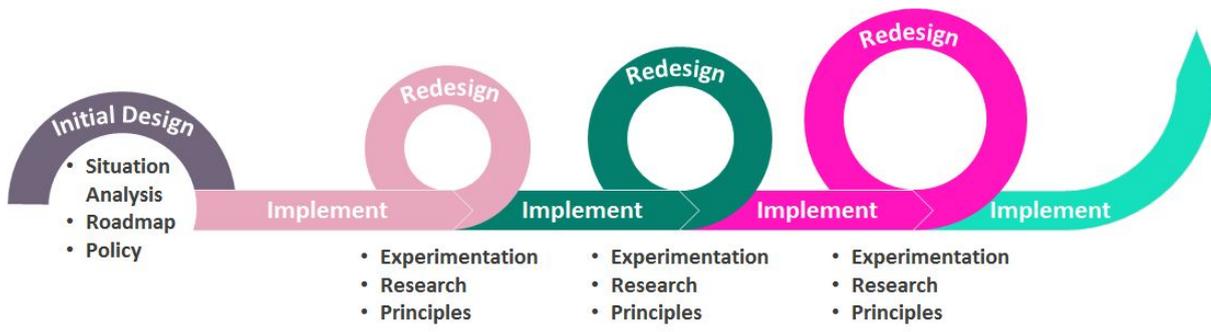
3.6. Decision-Making

Decision-making is often associated with high-level officials, signing off on multi-million dollar initiatives. ‘Decision-making power’ is thought to be in the hands of ministers and department heads. In reality, however, countless decisions that affect student learning are made every day by individuals at all levels. These decisions include deciding who should be involved in committees, to editing documents, to determining intervention success factors, to emailing coworkers. Given the impact these might have on children’s learning, it is essential that these decisions be well-informed.

However, given the large number of these decisions, it is impossible to monitor each and every one of them. Therefore, these Agile, iterative, evidence-based decisions must be part of regular working habits.

We’ve illustrated the CIRCLe Decision-Making approach in the figure below.

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4. Our process

While the principles mentioned in the previous section guide our work, they have manifested in an iterative process suitable for the context of EdTech in Jordan. While this process might not be suitable for all contexts, many of these elements can be replicated to support other policy areas in other areas. This process is heavily influenced by agile management practices, even borrowing some of its terminology. Below we have grouped the main activities that formulate our process. Each of these activities will be accompanied by a set of toolkits to support its implementation.

4.1. Assembling the coaching team

4.1.1. What does the coaching team do?

The coaching team is responsible for enabling the project team to do their work effectively. The function of the coaching team includes offering appropriate inputs, monitoring the process, carrying it forward, coordinating vertically and horizontally, tracking progress towards targets, intervening with appropriate capacity building, and addressing bottlenecks. Importantly, the coaching team has a 'scrum master' function, keeping the project team free of distractions.

4.1.2. What qualities should coaching team members have?

The coaching team needs to be able to fulfil the above functions. The members of the coaching team — between them should have an appropriate blend of facilitation experience, agile experience, relevant socio-cultural experiences, as well as subject matter expertise.

4.2. Assembling the project team

4.2.1. What does the project team do?

The project team is the team that is responsible for carrying out the task at hand, in Activating EdTech's case, it is designing and testing Jordan's EdTech Strategy. The project team will produce the desired outputs, conduct primary and secondary research, analyse the results and incorporate it into the desired output.

With time, members of the project team become part of the coaching team, enabling its continuation and sustainability.

4.2.2. Who should be on the project team?

The project team should include as broad a set of actors as necessary. Based on the principle of scalability through diffusion, we believe that all things being equal, inclusion is preferable to exclusion to ensure buy-in. The coaching team should conduct a stakeholder mapping

exercise to identify the members. Helpful tools and instructions for which will be included in subsequent toolboxes.

Using a traditional stakeholder mapping matrix analysis, participants on the project team should be in the *"Key Player"* and *"Meet Their Needs"* categories relative to the issue this process is meant to tackle (i.e., EdTech). These two categories pertain to people who can strongly influence the issue at hand.

4.3. Sprints

4.3.1. What is a Sprint and what is it for?

Taken from the techniques and terminologies of agile development, a Sprint is categorised as a short, intense period of work. Sprint duration can be anything between a single day and a two week, but should not exceed a month. Each Sprint should have a well-defined goal or set of goals agreed upon by the participants. The goal should include a set of outputs that must be completed within the agreed upon period.

4.3.2. Who should participate in a Sprint?

The entire project team.

4.4. Walking Periods

4.4.1. What do we mean by Walking Period?

In contrast with the Sprints, Walking Periods are 'slower', less intense periods of work between consequent Sprints. While typically during a Sprint all the time and efforts of team members are dedicated to the project, project work may be one of many competing priorities of team members, and typically take up fewer hours per week.

4.4.2. What changes during a Walking Period?

In addition to a slower pace of work, Walking Periods often involve working in smaller groups, or 'Squads' and 'Chapters', agreed upon during the Sprints. The activities conducted during each walking period are decided upon by the project team during each preceding Sprint.

4.4.3. What should one keep in mind?

Given that during the walking periods, the broader team is disbanded. Consequently, digital and physical techniques, tools and habits for collaboration become increasingly important.

4.5. (Micro)experiments

4.5.1. What are (micro)experiments?

As implied by the name, (micro)experiments are small, deliberate experiments that aim to answer specific questions that support the design and implementation of the project. (micro)experiments are comparable to other methods of iterative management such as the PDSA (Plan, Do, Study, Act) cycle used in 'Improvement Science', or 'Deming Cycle' used in Six-Sigma practices. The use of the term (Micro)experiment, however, emphasizes the deliberate nature of the activity and implies with it the rigour and specificity of the scientific method.

4.5.2. Why are they 'micro'?

While robust, national studies have their place in policymaking and in this process as well, more often than not, the time and money are not available to conduct them. Furthermore, they are not always necessary — no need to use a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Very often important design and implementation questions can be answered through simple, specific tests.

4.6. Contextual capability building: objective-focussed, work-based

4.6.1. What does that mean?

Our approach to capability building aims at balancing local ownership with external expertise, and flexibility with sustainability. Through providing "*just-in-time*" small-scale professional development, we ensure that work is completed by local stakeholders, who are supported by external expertise as needed.

4.6.2. What does that look like in practice?

Rather than listing a series of skills that need to be learned and providing training materials, these courses and training materials are provided *as needed* during the course of process itself. As the team is tackling the collective goal, skill gaps will be filled within the local context.

4.7. Developing common understandings

4.7.1. Why?

Education and policy-making are littered with jargon and ambiguous concepts. Phrases like "*design thinking*," "*learning*", "*innovation*", "*strategy*" and "*policymaking*" can carry very different

meanings depending on the speaker. Quite often these concepts are thrown around with very little consensus on their meaning and implications. These varying understandings are compounded when they are guiding decision making at high levels. For this reason, these concepts must be explicitly brought to the surface so that a common understanding can be reached. This issue is not unique to umbrella terms like “*innovation*”, but is also raised when addressing visions, missions, principles, and other statements with implications that reach further than the speaker.

4.7.2. What does that look like?

In line with our fourth principle “*learning dialogue*”, this is done by making learning explicit through open discussion of implications and the creation of learning artefacts and outputs by the project team.

5. Questions that you can ask

5.1. Frequently asked questions

Based on our experience thus far, we have accumulated several questions that are repeatedly asked by policymakers and implementers alike.

5.1.1. Question: Aren't Wifi and hardware prerequisites for digital learning?

Not necessarily, and they might even come in the way of learning, this is because:

1. It can steer limited resources away from more important elements of Edtech and education, most important of which is Teacher Professional Development.
2. It can undermine the development of a tech-agnostic learning model.
3. There are countless connectivity and hardware models that could be adopted based on the learning model, not vice-versa.

5.1.2. Question: How are we implementing a strategy if it isn't ready yet?

Our strategy *is* designing through implementation. While traditionally implementation comes after design, with AET, we're more cyclical, implementing segments of the strategy as we design them. Traditionally, implementation comes *after* design.

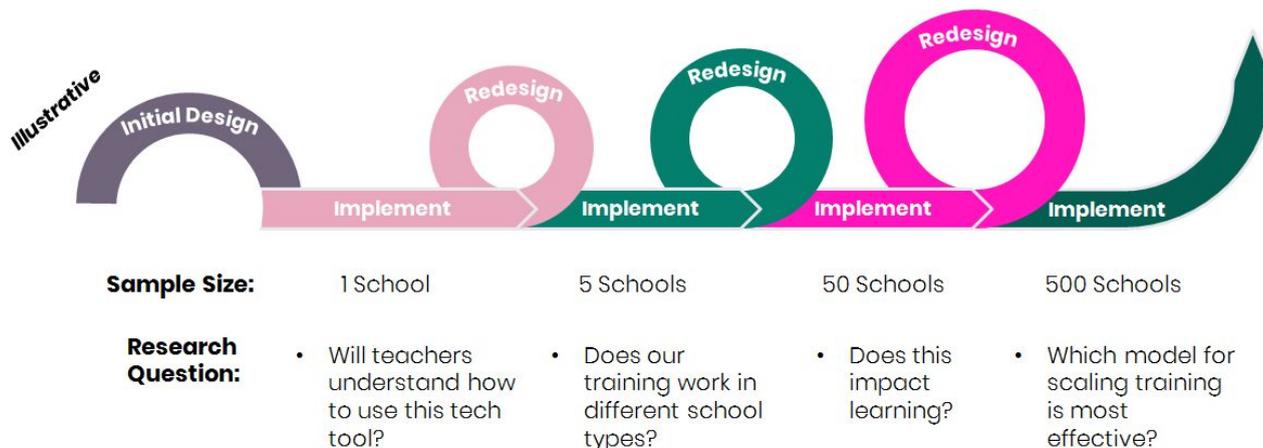


This process, however, is cyclical.



5.1.3. Question: How will this scale if we're just running experiments?

We are scaling as we are running experiments. Experiments are meant to answer specific questions. With each iteration, our sample size will increase, our questions will change until eventually, we reach a national level.



5.1.4. Question: Shouldn't we accept all pilots coming in, as some pilots are better than none?

No. Some pilots can negatively impact learning, as they derail student learning, or undermine already well established (and more impactful) teaching methods. Pilots should not be used to attract donor funding, or for PR opportunities.

Appendix: Systems Leadership for Learning

For details about Systems Leadership for Learning, see B. Hassler (2019). *Systems Leadership for Learning*. [10.5281/zenodo.2626705](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2626705).

The Systems Leadership for Learning (SLL) approach

The five principles:

- P1. **Systems become effective through a pervasive focus on learning.** Everyone is a learner; learning is relevant to, and focuses on, all aspects of the system; learning is reflective and reflexive (*"multi-loop"*).
- P2. **Systems must explicitly create the conditions for learning.** Creating physical and digital social spaces that stimulate and celebrate learning is necessary to enable a pervasive focus on learning; *"creating conditions"* means creating conditions for both self and others, throughout the system and beyond.
- P3. **Learning dialogue is essential for effective change and innovation.** Learning and insights are made explicit, discussable and transferable; *"making explicit"* includes tools (such as questioning), as well as generating tangible outputs that are accessible to others.
- P4. **Leadership and responsibility are shared throughout the system.** Responsibility includes the responsibility for maintaining the focus on learning and programme change accordingly; maintaining the focus on learning keeps the system lean by discarding elements not to do with learning.
- P5. **All aspects of the system are mutually accountable.** Evidence-based insights and transparent sharing of such insights (e.g., transparency for the learning achieved) are foregrounded.

The three aspects:

- A1. **Equity, gender, and inclusion are foregrounded.** As an approach for international education development and cooperation, SLL includes an explicit focus on equity, including socio-economic status, gender and disability, within the wider framework of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Sustainable Development Goals.
- A2. **Digital processes and digital technology** will inevitably operate in some parts of the system. All five principles must recognise this, and pay attention to how digital processes and technologies need to be utilised to achieve project goals; for example using digital processes to create transparency (systems accountability), promote (digitally mediated) dialogue and participation, and consider how 'digital' creates conditions for shared learning ('open education / content / data', 'distributed learning', Principles for Digital Development, etc).

A3. **The impact of complex systems is unpredictable.** Processes must be broken down into defined sub-processes and iterations, allowing reflective and reflexive learning (multi-loop learning, the principle of incremental improvement, DBIR: Design-based Implementation Research, agile retrospective). Insights are allowed to effect change (adaptive, evidence-based management).

Colophon

Activating EdTech is part of the Jordanian Ministry of Education EDRIL programme, funded by DFID and the Canadian Government, and supported by the Queen Rania Foundation.

Activating EdTech is supported by Open Development & Education (<https://opendeved.net>) through a contract with the Queen Rania Foundation.

The Queen Rania Foundation had initially contacted the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education over the OER4Schools programme (www.oer4schools.org), which led to an ongoing dialogue between the Queen Rania Foundation and Björn Haßler. With the arrival of the EDRIL programme at QRF, an opportunity for an educational technology-focussed programme arose, which Abdullah Khalayleh and Björn Haßler took forward. This led to the inception of Activating EdTech in December 2018, followed by the first sprint in spring 2019. The Activating EdTech programme is supported by Eliane Metni (Open Development & Education / IEA Lebanon), Reema Abed (Queen Rania Foundation) and Nour Al Awamleh (Queen Rania Foundation).