

# In Whose Interest?

## The UK's role in privatising education around the world

The UK is one of the world's leading education funders, with a strong record of supporting public education. However, in recent years the UK has been increasingly supporting the inclusion of private actors in education, at home and abroad. It has been facilitating a shift in the nature of education from a right to a commodity and creating parallel systems with worrying implications for educational equality, quality and accountability. With 262 million children and young people out of school around the world, the need to put pupils before profit and recommit to realising the right to education for all is of paramount importance.

### The UK's role

The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) is supporting public-private partnerships (PPPs) and low-fee private schools (LFPS) as a means of addressing the global education crisis in a number of countries around the world, including in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Pakistan. Citing a lack of provision and poor quality in the public system, DFID is actively supporting parallel systems instead of investing in public education. Examples of this support include the funding of private school chains such as Bridge International Academies and a recent investment of £68.6m in a PPP in the Punjab (Pakistan) to support the low-cost private school sector.<sup>1</sup> Through its private investment arm, CDC, DFID has also supported companies running high-fee, elite private schools such as GEMS Education.

DFID also supports research and educational reform promoting private education through grants to the World Bank's Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), the Centre for Education Innovations and the British development consultancy Adam Smith International (ASI). ASI, which has received over £35m from DFID for education work since 2016, offers governments advice on "root and branch reform" of their education systems, and specifically promotes and advises on LFPS and PPPs.<sup>2</sup>

DFID is exploring new mechanisms for leveraging private investment into education, the Education Outcomes Fund, which would channel funds exclusively to the non-state sector, and the International Finance Facility for Education.

### The problems of privatisation

**Equality** - Privatisation in education has been found to lead to economic, geographic, social and disability-related inequalities. Fees, both for tuition and other 'hidden' costs, are a central barrier to access for the poorest and most marginalised children. A 2016 study of a DFID-supported PPP in Uganda found that all the schools were charging non-tuition fees, including compulsory boarding fees in some cases, and that most schools were not physically accessible to disabled children.<sup>3</sup> A 2018 study of a DFID-supported PPP in Pakistan found that "very few children in the PPP schools were previously out-of-school". Evidence also points to private schools failing to reach underserved rural areas because it is less profitable than setting up in urban areas.<sup>4</sup>

**Quality** - Unqualified and poorly paid teachers are widespread across LFPS, and private providers often draw on a narrow, rigid approach to education focused overwhelmingly on outcomes in standardised assessments. This is most starkly demonstrated in the highly scripted 'school-in-a-box' model used by Omega Schools and Bridge International Academies. This narrow approach could be intensified by the International Finance Facility for Education and the Education Outcomes Fund. The results-based financing built into these models incentivises schools and teachers to focus exclusively on quantitatively defined outcomes, such as test scores, thereby narrowing the curriculum.

**Undermining public education** - Privatisation undermines the capacity of governments to deliver public education systems, and can enable governments to shirk their duty to deliver the right to education for all children. It can draw wealthier students away from public schools, leaving the poorest students in an under-funded and devalued public system. Moreover, Bridge Academies was found to take this phenomenon one step further in its work as part of the Partnership Schools Liberia (PSL) programme, where the company was found to “push excess pupils and under-performing teachers onto other government schools.”<sup>5</sup>

**Transparency and accountability** - The UN has warned that LFPS have grown faster than governments can handle, and that the rapid expansion of private chains is a particular cause for concern. In countries where DFID supports private education, private actors have been accused of corruption, misrepresentation and the routine violation of government agreements. More generally, the involvement of private actors in education reduces transparency and replaces accountability ‘down’ - to children, parents and communities - with accountability ‘up’ - to investors and shareholders.

## A Global Shift - at home and abroad

England’s school system has undergone a radical transformation since 2010 through the dramatic expansion of academies. There are now more than 8,000 academies educating nearly 3.8 million pupils.<sup>6</sup> The trend in England’s increasingly academised landscape is for consolidation of academy schools into larger groups or chains known as multi academy trusts (MATs). There are more than 450 MATs which run five or more schools.

The academy programme was championed as improving school performance by increasing school autonomy and competition between schools. It has not worked: there is no evidence that academies perform better than other state funded schools and plenty which shows the opposite. As with privatisation overseas, academisation has further caused problems of equality, transparency and accountability, and undermined public education.

## Getting it right

Instead of supporting private actors’ involvement in education, the government should continue and step up its support for the public sector in the countries where it works. This must include support for strengthening progressive taxation systems, working with countries to ensure that public education systems have the funding they need to provide quality, inclusive, free public education for all.

<sup>1</sup>Department for International Development, Punjab Education Support Programme II: Business Case and Summary, September 2017.

<sup>2</sup>Parliamentary answer, 16 January 2019, [bit.ly/2UDyoGj](http://bit.ly/2UDyoGj).

<sup>3</sup>ISER, A Threat or Opportunity? Public-Private Partnerships in Education In Uganda, p.20 and p.24

<sup>4</sup>M. Afridi, Equity and Quality in an Education Public-Private Partnership, Oxfam, 2018, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>M. Romero et al., Can Outsourcing Improve Liberia’s Schools?, Washington DC, Center for Global Development, September 2017, p.2.

<sup>6</sup>Department of Education, Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018, Statistical Publication, 28 June 2018, p.4.

## Recommendations

The right to education must not be exploited by private actors who see profits where they should see potential. Rather than undermine the efforts of public educators and systems, DFID should support the real, meaningful and sustainable delivery of education for all. To do so, the UK Government should:

1. Continue and expand upon the commitment made in Article 12 of the European Parliament resolution of 13 November 2018 on EU development assistance in the field of education (2018/2081(INI)) to “not use ODA to support private, commercial education establishments, which do not uphold the Union’s principles and values” after Brexit.
2. Retract stated support for PPPs and LFPS in *Get Children Learning*.
3. Commit to phasing out all support for for-profit education providers in the global south by 2025, and in the meantime support strong regulatory human rights based frameworks for private providers and financing.
4. Use DFID’s influential position internationally to encourage multilaterals to abandon privatisation and adopt a public education approach.
5. Commit to focussing on supporting domestic resource mobilisation and, in particular, progressive taxation to fund public education. This includes a strong focus on tax justice, a commitment to closing tax loopholes, and the championing of these approaches in global fora.
6. End the academy and free school programme in England and ensure that all state-funded schools are democratically accountable to parents and local communities. In addition, all state-funded schools to be subject to the same regulatory framework covering pupil admissions and exclusions, curriculum, governance and staff pay and conditions, overseen by elected local authorities.
7. Refrain from participating in the Education Outcomes Fund and use its influence on the global stage to persuade other donors to do the same.

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