

ICAI follow-up: Assessing UK aid's results in education

A summary
July 2023

The Independent Commission for Aid Impact works to improve the quality of UK development assistance through robust, independent scrutiny. We provide assurance to the UK taxpayer by conducting independent reviews of the effectiveness and value for money of UK aid.

We operate independently of government, reporting to Parliament, and our mandate covers all UK official development assistance.

Individual review scores and what they mean



An adequate score means:

- Enough progress has been made in the right areas and in a sufficiently timely manner in order to address the core concerns underpinning ICAI's recommendations.



An inadequate score results from one or more of the following three factors:

- Too little has been done to address ICAI's recommendations in core areas of concern (the response is inadequate in scope).
- Actions have been taken, but they do not cover the main concerns we had when we made the recommendations (the response is insufficiently relevant).
- Actions may be relevant, but implementation has been too slow and we are not able to judge their effectiveness (the response is insufficiently implemented).

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Executive summary

ICAI's follow-up review is an important element in the scrutiny process for UK aid. It provides parliament and the public with an account of how well the government has responded to ICAI's recommendations to improve spending. It is also an opportunity for ICAI to identify issues and challenges facing the UK aid programme, which helps to inform subsequent reviews. For each of the reviews included in the follow-up, we provide a score of adequate or inadequate, illustrated by a tick or a cross.

This document is a summary focused only on the results of the follow-up of our review *Assessing UK aid's results in education*. The full follow-up report of all 2021-22 reviews, including overall conclusions from the process and details of our methodology and scoring, can be found on our website.

Findings

Assessing UK aid's results in education

Despite continued constraints on resources available for education programming, FCDO has made significant progress in addressing the recommendations from this review, and its response is judged to be adequate. FCDO has continued to play a global leadership role in supporting research on 'what works' in promoting children's learning and reaching the most marginalised, and it has been deepening its support to governments to generate and utilise data on children's learning. However, despite commitments to maintain a priority focus on girls' education, FCDO did not adequately explain exactly how a consistent focus on this issue would be operationalised across programmes. In addition, FCDO's efforts to scale up its convening role in-country have been narrowly focused on facilitating joined-up work between the Global Partnership for Education and Education Cannot Wait.



ICAI's *Assessing UK aid's results in education* review was published in June 2022, and awarded FCDO a green-amber score. The review assessed the effectiveness, equity and impact of UK aid for education, covering a portfolio of £4.4 billion in bilateral programming between 2015 and 2020, and more than £1.3 billion in multilateral spending over the same period.

The original review took place against the backdrop of notable reductions to the UK aid programme and bilateral education programmes during 2020-21. Further significant reductions to UK aid and bilateral education programmes took place in the year covered by this follow-up review, in 2021-22. While these reductions have affected UK aid's overall ambitions on education, ICAI's recommendations remain relevant, since they relate to the approach taken to implement ongoing programmes.

Table 1: ICAI's recommendations and the government response

Subject of recommendation	Government response
Future FCDO aid for education should have a greater focus on children's learning, based on evidence of 'what works' that is relevant to the context.	Accepted
FCDO should accelerate its work with partner governments to improve their ability to collect and use good data on children's learning.	Accepted

FCDO should ensure that all its aid to education maintains a consistent focus on girls in its design and implementation.	Accepted
To promote systemic change that benefits the most marginalised, FCDO should have a greater focus on dissemination and uptake of evidence of ‘what works’ for these groups.	Accepted
FCDO should enhance the convening and influencing role it often plays in partner countries to promote the impact of aid to education on learning.	Accepted

Recommendation 1: Future FCDO aid for education should have a greater focus on children’s learning, based on evidence of ‘what works’ that is relevant to the context

ICAI’s original review found that robust evidence of the impact of UK aid on learning was not available for all programmes, and that the available evidence pointed to variable levels of achievement. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should place a greater focus on education programmes achieving learning outcomes, with interventions designed around evidence of ‘what works’. FCDO accepted this recommendation and committed to focus on building consensus across the international community on ‘what works’ in education, and to support national governments to test, adapt and scale up education reforms and cost-effective interventions most likely to improve learning.

Information shared with ICAI through this follow-up review demonstrates that the UK government is making substantive contributions to generating and promoting use of evidence on ‘what works’ in improving education outcomes. Most notably, FCDO is supporting the Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel’s work to provide recommendations on education funding, and the department has launched the What Works Hub for Global Education (in pilot phase), which includes a technical assistance function supporting governments. In addition, FCDO has designed a programme called Scaling Access and Learning in Education (SCALE), which aims to test, adapt and scale up cost-effective, evidence-based education interventions to new contexts. There are, however, some questions about when the What Works Hub and SCALE programme will be fully operational and what their budgets will be.

ICAI was shown examples of this evidence already being used to improve the approach to learning in FCDO’s education programming, although a longer time period is required for these efforts to be fully effective. ICAI judges FCDO’s response to this recommendation to be adequate.

Recommendation 2: FCDO should accelerate its work with partner governments to improve their ability to collect and use good data on children’s learning

ICAI’s original review concluded that FCDO was not yet able to measure results achieved around children’s learning for all of its education programmes, and recommended that the department should deepen its work with partner governments on this challenge. In responding to this recommendation, FCDO stated that its firm focus was on supporting partner governments to recover and improve children’s foundational learning following the COVID-19 pandemic. The department also noted that it was developing a new results framework for tracking the UK’s contribution (through programming and diplomacy) to goals agreed through the G7 on education access and learning for girls.

This follow-up review concluded that FCDO has significant work underway which has the potential to address the concerns behind ICAI’s recommendation. This includes work with UNESCO to develop a common approach to measuring learning proficiency to be used by the international community, and its results framework, which it is putting in place (August 2023) to track the UK’s contribution to the G7 goals on access and learning. FCDO also reported that of a sample of 20 programmes, 18 had learning outcome indicators while the other two had indicators connected to improving learning assessment systems.

In June 2022, FCDO announced the Data for Foundational Learning initiative, which aims to support country partners to generate more and regular data on children's learning levels, and to use these data to drive better policy decisions and reforms. This four-year programme began in February 2023 and is working closely with the SCALE and What Works Hub programmes to support wider efforts to scale up the most cost-effective interventions to improve learning. Overall, ICAI judges FCDO's response to this recommendation to be adequate.

Recommendation 3: FCDO should ensure that all its aid to education maintains a consistent focus on girls in its design and implementation

ICAI's original review concluded that, despite the UK government's numerous commitments to promote girls' education, some of the programmes reviewed had an insufficient focus on girls, and not all programmes achieved their targeted results for supporting girls. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should ensure that all of its aid to education maintains a consistent focus on girls. FCDO accepted this recommendation and committed to redouble its efforts to ensure all girls are supported to go to school and learn, launch a new *Women and girls strategy* giving priority to girls' education, restore funding to girls' education, and establish a new centre of expertise for education.

Additional budget reductions to UK bilateral aid programmes were announced in 2022-23, after accelerating ODA spend by other government departments on supporting refugees and asylum seekers in the UK forced FCDO to 'pause' all ODA spending. As a result, the government reneged on its commitment to restore funding to girls' education programming. Some progress has nevertheless been made in this area, including the production of an internal policy note on marginalised girls by the Girls' Education Department to advise the overseas network to deliver on relevant objectives for girls' education, and continuing work to develop and implement programmes which include a focus on girls (such as SCALE, the What Works Hub and the EdTech Hub).

However, during this follow-up, FCDO did not adequately describe 'how' it would ensure a consistent focus on girls across its programmes. Given this, plus the fact that relevant new programmes are yet to be launched and the new *Women and girls strategy* merely restated existing commitments on girls' education, we judge the response to this recommendation to be inadequate.

Recommendation 4: To promote systemic change that benefits the most marginalised, FCDO should have a greater focus on dissemination and uptake of evidence of 'what works' for these groups

ICAI's original review concluded that DFID/FCDO's education programmes had largely been relevant to the needs of marginalised groups, especially marginalised girls. However, it also noted that budget reductions were likely to reduce the ability of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) – DFID/FCDO's largest single channel for supporting marginalised girls – and other programmes to disseminate evidence from their programmes. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should place a greater emphasis on disseminating and promoting uptake of evidence of 'what works' to support marginalised groups to access quality education. FCDO accepted this recommendation, and stated that it would do so through its EdTech Hub, Education Research in Conflict and Protracted Crisis programme and the GEC.

Since then, the department has worked to generate, disseminate and ensure uptake of evidence on 'what works' for marginalised children through its programmes. In particular, since the review, the GEC is demonstrating tangible progress on implementing its learning and evidence uptake strategy, including through producing thematic briefs and blogs, organising events to discuss key lessons from its work, and disseminating and promoting uptake of programme evidence in Kenya, Pakistan and Nepal.

Although the recent nature of these activities means it is still too early to gauge their impact on improving education outcomes for the most marginalised, ICAI judges that FCDO action in this area is valuable and is an adequate response to its recommendation.

Recommendation 5: FCDO should enhance the convening and influencing role it often plays in partner countries to promote the impact of aid to education on learning

ICAI's original review found a strong level of coherence across the UK's channels for providing aid to education, but noted that there has been a lack of coherence between the multilateral programmes that DFID/FCDO supported. Two multilateral programmes it funded in crisis contexts, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), were found to be in competition with each other. ICAI was also concerned that budget reductions and potential departmental restructures could lead to a decline in FCDO's influence on improving education quality in partner countries. ICAI therefore recommended that FCDO should enhance its convening and influencing role on education in partner countries. FCDO accepted this recommendation and noted that it was already providing additional support to its country-based education advisers to enhance the UK's influence over funding from other sources. The department also committed to securing better coordination and coherence between GPE and ECW, both at headquarters and country level.

This follow-up review found that FCDO is already supporting greater coherence in the work of ECW and GPE, with strong country-level examples identified in Afghanistan, Myanmar, South Sudan and Syria. In addition, FCDO has been using learning sessions to strengthen the capabilities of its own staff to influence these multilateral institutions.

However, it is not clear what FCDO is doing to support convening and influencing at the country level beyond supporting improved collaboration between GPE and ECW. Given that FCDO is spending less of its own bilateral resources on education, there is a valuable opportunity for education advisers to be supporting improved coherence of education funding. ICAI therefore judges FCDO's response to this recommendation to be inadequate.

Conclusion

The last few years have seen major reductions in UK aid to education. Education programming has also faced significant challenges in responding to the disruption caused to education systems by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this challenging context, FCDO has made some progress in developing interventions to benefit learning, supporting the generation of evidence on learning outcomes and promoting quality education for marginalised groups. At the same time, FCDO needs to target girls more consistently with its programming and more effectively support coherence of education programmes across delivery channels in-country. Overall, ICAI judges FCDO's response to this review to be adequate and it will not be returning for a further follow-up.



This document can be downloaded from www.icaei.independent.gov.uk.

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