

Assessing UK aid's results in education

Results review

April 2022

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.

Overall review scores and what they mean

GREEN

Strong achievement across the board. Stands out as an area of good practice where UK aid is making a significant positive contribution.

**AMBER/
RED**

Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas, with some positive elements. An area where improvements are required for UK aid to make a positive contribution.

**GREEN/
AMBER**

Satisfactory achievement in most areas, but partial achievement in others. An area where UK aid is making a positive contribution, but could do more.

RED

Poor achievement across most areas, with urgent remedial action required in some. An area where UK aid is failing to make a positive contribution.

OGL

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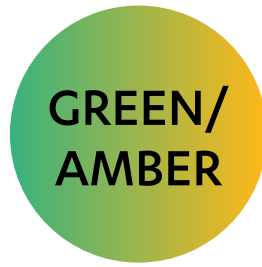
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UK aid-funded education programming in developing countries has been ambitious and mainly well implemented. However, vast challenges remain for improving the quality of education. FCDO needs to do more to ensure that spending on education results in children learning better.

The former Department for International Development, and now Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (DFID/FCDO) reports that it has gone beyond its 2015-20 corporate target on education, by supporting 15.6 million children to gain a 'decent education'. Although the methodology to calculate this figure is systematic and reasonable, it does not track learning achievements or other indicators of education quality. FCDO is working to develop an approach to tracking the quality of education it is supporting at the corporate level.

Our assessment of a sample of bilateral and multilateral education programmes supported by DFID/FCDO suggests that they have achieved their overall goals. DFID/FCDO's knowledgeable education advisers add significant value at the country level and have helped to make bilateral and multilateral programming more effective. However, a quarter of programmes with activities to support girls did not meet DFID/FCDO's expectations in this area.

DFID/FCDO has been viewed by external stakeholders as a global leader in addressing inequalities in education. It has implemented programming relevant to the needs of highly marginalised children, particularly hard-to-reach girls, children in crises and children with disabilities. However, overall results in reaching disabled children are unclear and some multi-country programmes have faced challenges. The performance of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) for marginalised girls did not meet DFID/FCDO expectations for attendance, learning and sustainability at the start of the review period but has improved since 2017 under phase 2 of the programme. DFID/FCDO has also made progress in influencing multilateral organisations to focus on the most marginalised, but there remain some areas where more progress is needed.

Vast challenges remain for improving the quality of education and learning in partner countries, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While DFID/FCDO has contributed to improvements, data limitations mean that it is not able to judge impact on learning for many of its programmes. Among the 11 programmes that did collect such data, only six achieved their learning targets for children. All of the sampled DFID/FCDO programmes made valuable use of evidence of 'what works' in education, and most programmes supported education systems strengthening effectively. While DFID/FCDO has played an important role in coordinating education sector actors and been active in influencing key partners, it has had limited impact in encouraging these actors to embrace new sources of international finance for education, which has hindered new initiatives.

The pandemic has posed major challenges for education systems and for UK-supported education programmes across the world. We found numerous examples of DFID/FCDO adapting programming to limit disruption to education. Recent reductions in UK aid to education pose a potential risk to sustaining the UK's influence on education globally.

FCDO needs to strengthen its emphasis on supporting and tracking children's learning, maintain a consistent focus on girls' education and reaching the most marginalised, continue to promote education systems strengthening, and enhance its convening and influencing role.

Individual question scores

Question 1

Effectiveness: How effective is DFID/FCDO aid to education in delivering its intended results?

GREEN/
AMBER

Question 2

Equity: To what extent are DFID/FCDO's education interventions reaching the most marginalised?

GREEN/
AMBER

Question 3

Impact: To what extent is DFID/FCDO achieving sustainable impact through its aid to education?

GREEN/
AMBER

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Executive summary

Education is a human right for everyone and realising this right has been a core focus of global development efforts over the last two decades.¹ Supported by these efforts, developing countries have rapidly expanded access to schooling over this period.

Despite this, 121 million children of primary and lower-secondary school age were not in school in 2018. There is also an urgent need to improve education quality to resolve what has been described as a ‘learning crisis’, with children attending school but learning very little in many countries around the world, due to weak education systems.² In addition, there remain huge inequalities in access to school and achievements in learning, especially for girls, in many contexts.³ These challenges have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years.

The UK government is a major donor to global education. It spent £4.4 billion on bilateral aid to education during 2015-20 and invested an estimated £1.3 billion on education through core contributions to multilateral organisations during 2015-19. In 2015, the UK committed to help at least 11 million children in the poorest countries to gain a ‘decent education’ by 2020, and to promote girls’ education.⁴

The purpose of this review is to assess the results of UK aid’s primary and lower-secondary (basic) education programming over the 2015-20 period. This work is led by the former Department for International Development (DFID), which in 2020 merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The review has a particular focus on girls’ education because this has been a government priority over the review period. It covers both bilateral and multilateral education programmes being supported by the UK.⁵

The results assessed in this review relate to the achievements of UK aid in terms of the number of children supported to gain access to school and to learn. We test the accuracy and significance of these results and assess a sample of programmes in depth. We judge DFID/FCDO’s achievements on education against the goals it has set, including in relation to reaching girls, targeting the most marginalised children and achieving sustainable impact.

This review assesses DFID/FCDO’s response to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. It also reflects on DFID/FCDO’s ability to sustain its impact on education following the recent reductions to the UK aid budget.

Effectiveness: How effective is DFID/FCDO aid to education in delivering its intended results?

DFID/FCDO estimated that, between 2015 and 2020, it supported at least 15.6 million children to gain a ‘decent education’ (see paragraph 4.6) – over half of whom were girls. DFID/FCDO calculated this figure by aggregating results across the programmes it financed, with each programme attributing a portion of the total number of children in the school system it was supporting to the UK’s assistance based on the share of resources or results it was responsible for. We judged this corporate-level results methodology to be a systematic and reasonable way to estimate the reach of UK-supported programmes, although it is likely to have resulted in an underestimate.

1 The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed in 2000, included a commitment (MDG 2) to “achieve universal primary education” by 2015. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed in 2015, included a commitment (SDG 4) to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030. SDGs, UN, accessed July 2021, [link](#).

2 *Learning poverty: children’s education in crisis*, World Bank, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

3 Large gender gaps exist in access, learning achievement and continuing education in many settings, most often at the expense of girls, although in some regions boys are at a disadvantage. *Education and gender equality*, UNESCO, accessed March 2022, [link](#).

4 *Speech: Changing world, changing aid: Where international development needs to go next. Speech by the International Development Secretary at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, focussing on the need for development to go beyond aid*, Justine Greening, July 2105, [link](#).

5 ICAI’s previous review of education, published in 2016, focused on girls, particularly those who are marginalised and disadvantaged. This current review builds on that but also assesses education results more broadly. This is not a follow-up review. *Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid’s support to marginalised girls*, ICAI, December 2016, [link](#).

This results methodology does not track learning achievements or other measures of the quality of education being supported by the UK. DFID/FCDO justified this on the basis that there were no common metrics for measuring education quality during this period and UK support had helped children to gain a better education than they otherwise would have done without UK assistance. Nevertheless, being able to track and report on the UK's aggregate results around children's learning would provide FCDO with a better measure of its support for quality, or 'decent education'. FCDO is currently working to develop such results approaches.

Our review of a sample of bilateral and multilateral education programmes supported by DFID/FCDO found that they largely met their overall expectations in delivering their planned activities effectively. However, a quarter of the programmes which targeted girls explicitly in some way did not achieve their goals, although performance seemed stronger than that previously found by ICAI.⁶

DFID/FCDO has been influential in strengthening multilateral education programming, including through being a major donor to and supporting the governance and functioning of both the Education Cannot Wait fund (ECW) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). However, one area of weaker performance has been in relation to the quality of country education sector plans supported by GPE. FCDO judged that these remain overly ambitious and unachievable in some cases.⁷

There was a strong consensus among stakeholders engaged across all six focus countries that the presence of knowledgeable and skilled UK education advisers has strengthened the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral programmes supported by the UK.

We therefore award a **green-amber** score for effectiveness.

Equity: To what extent are DFID/FCDO's education interventions reaching the most marginalised?

DFID/FCDO committed to reaching the most marginalised children through its aid to education, and identified three priority groups: children with disabilities, children affected by crises and hard-to-reach girls.

It has implemented programming relevant to their needs, especially for hard-to-reach girls, and has been seen as a global leader in this area. The centrally managed Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) has been DFID/FCDO's largest single channel for supporting marginalised girls (£565 million during 2015-20). The first phase of GEC (2012-2017) fell short of achieving DFID/FCDO's targeted levels of attendance, learning and sustainability. The second phase (2017-25) has so far been stronger around influencing systemic change, but is still not doing as well as DFID/FCDO expected on learning.

DFID/FCDO's aid to education has reached children affected by conflict and humanitarian disasters effectively through various channels. All six programmes we assessed which focused explicitly on children in crises fulfilled DFID/FCDO's implementation plans. Central to this performance is the ECW fund, which has supported 4.6 million children in conflict zones to access education since 2016.

The focus on children with disabilities has grown in DFID/FCDO programming over the review period with interventions on school infrastructure, social attitudes and teacher support. There have, however, been deficiencies in results reporting, with DFID/FCDO unable to track how many children with disabilities are being reached by education programming, and relevant centrally managed programmes have been less successful than hoped. Stakeholders also noted that the UK's focus on education for children with disabilities has recently decreased.

DFID/FCDO has also been active in influencing multilateral organisations such as GPE, ECW and the World Bank's International Development Association to develop gender strategies and supporting their implementation, although further progress is required.

6 *Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls*, ICAI, December 2016, [link](#).
7 *GPE annual review 2020*, FCDO, September 2020, [link](#).

Factors that have helped DFID/FCDO to reach the most marginalised children, and support others to do so, include employing staff with strong contextual knowledge, locally linked delivery partners, and improving internal incentives for emphasising equity.

We therefore award a **green-amber** score for equity.

Impact: To what extent is DFID/FCDO achieving sustainable impact through its aid to education?

In many developing countries, the challenges for ensuring that children learn effectively in school are significant. It is therefore important that DFID's 2018 Education policy⁸ committed the department to deepen its focus on tackling the 'learning crisis'.

Despite this strategic focus, many of the DFID/FCDO programmes we sampled were not collecting the information required to assess their impacts on children's learning. Among the 11 programmes which did track their impact on children's learning, six met DFID/FCDO's expectations. Those programmes not meeting expectations included GEC, with the evaluation of its first phase finding that significant changes in some projects' design and delivery were needed to secure the required literacy and numeracy gains.

All the programmes we reviewed used evidence on the effectiveness of education interventions in their design and/or ongoing management. DFID/FCDO has also made significant investments in expanding global research on education – a valuable public good.

The majority of programmes supported by DFID/FCDO aimed to contribute to the strengthening of national education systems in some way. We judged that all but two of these programmes achieved their systems strengthening goals, and most external stakeholders noted that DFID/FCDO had strengthened systems effectively.

Across our six assessment countries, the UK has played a significant role in convening education actors to work together more effectively and in influencing education systems strengthening. There was a strong level of coherence across UK education aid channels in these countries. However, DFID/FCDO's progress in encouraging mobilisation of new sources of international finance for education has been slow.

Since the first half of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption to education systems around the world. DFID/FCDO has taken effective action to adapt its programmes to limit the effects of COVID-19 on their impact, including through introducing a focus on community-based learning and supporting schools to reopen safely.

Major reductions in total UK aid in 2020 and 2021 have affected UK bilateral and multilateral aid to education and may pose a risk to sustaining the UK's influence on education globally.

DFID/FCDO has made positive contributions to national education systems strengthening through its programmes, coordination of development partners and use of evidence for decision making. FCDO should build on these strengths, including ensuring that programmes are aligned around learning.

We therefore award a **green-amber** score for impact.

Recommendations

We offer five recommendations to FCDO to help improve its aid to education.

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.

Recommendation 2:

FCDO should accelerate its work with partner governments to improve their ability to collect and use good data on children's learning.

Recommendation 3:

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

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.

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.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Education systems in developing countries have expanded access to schooling at a rapid rate in recent decades. Despite this progress, large numbers of children remain out of school and there is an urgent need to improve educational quality. There is a ‘learning crisis’, with many children attending school in education systems around the world learning very little.⁹ Even after several years in school, millions of students lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.¹⁰ At the end of 2019, 53% of children in low- and middle-income countries were living in ‘learning poverty’ – that is, they were unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten. In sub-Saharan Africa, this figure was closer to 90%.¹¹
- 1.2 More investment in education is needed globally.¹² However, without greater focus on education quality in school systems, no amount of investment in schooling will provide students in the developing world with what they need.¹³ The World Bank’s 2018 report on education emphasises that there is little or no association across countries between levels of spending and levels of children’s learning.¹⁴ Countries such as India have more than doubled spending on education, but their learning levels have in fact deteriorated over time. Investment in education systems needs to be reoriented to be focused on improving learning outcomes.¹⁵
- 1.3 There are also huge inequalities in access to and achievements in learning, made worse by the pandemic.¹⁶ An estimated three-quarters of primary school age children who may never start school are girls,¹⁷ and children with disabilities and those affected by conflict and crisis are also disadvantaged in their access to education. Tackling all of these problems is integral to meeting Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 – Quality Education.
- 1.4 There is no single approach to improving learning, due to the influence of many complex factors that are specific to the country context and the needs of individual children. National education sector plans designed to strengthen education systems address factors such as: teacher competence, teacher management, learning materials, the learning environment, school infrastructure, school leadership and the curriculum.¹⁸ For girls, there are many other factors that influence their ability to access and complete education, including attitudes to girls’ education, safety in school and on their journey to school and facilities for managing periods (see **Box 6**).
- 1.5 The purpose of this review is to assess the results of the work on education, particularly for girls, of the former Department for International Development (DFID), which merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in September 2020 to create the current Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). This review has a particular focus on girls’ education, which is a long-standing UK government priority.
- 1.6 This review covers DFID/FCDO’s global education portfolio since 2015, which was the start of its 2015-20 ‘results period’. In 2015, the government set a target to support at least 11 million children to gain a ‘decent education’ by 2020.¹⁹ It also committed to help 6.5 million girls in poor countries go to school.²⁰ In this results review, we assess the accuracy of the results reported against this target, assess whether DFID/FCDO education programmes are being delivered effectively, including reaching the most marginalised, and assess whether DFID/FCDO programmes are achieving sustainable impact. Our review

9 *Learning poverty: children’s education in crisis*, World Bank, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

10 *World development report 2018: Learning to realize education’s promise*, World Bank, 2018, p. 3, [link](#).

11 *Learning poverty: children’s education in crisis*, World Bank, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

12 There is a \$148 billion annual financing gap in low- and lower-middle-income countries to achieve SDG 4 from now until 2030. Additional costs due to COVID-19-related school closures risk increasing this financing gap by up to one-third, or \$30 to \$45 billion. See *Act now: reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the cost of achieving SDG 4*, UNESCO, 2020, [link](#).

13 *The rebirth of education: Schooling ain’t learning*, Lant Pritchett, 2013, [link](#).

14 *World development report 2018: Learning to realize education’s promise*, World Bank, 2018, [link](#).

15 *We need more investment in education – not just spending on “more of the same” (blog)*, RISE programme, October 2018, [link](#).

16 *SDGs*, UN, accessed July 2021, [link](#).

17 *A new generation: 25 years of efforts for gender equality in education*, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2020, p. 1, [link](#).

18 *How GPE supports teaching and learning: Policy brief*, GPE, September 2017, [link](#).

19 DFID/FCDO’s definition of what counted as ‘decent education’ was to include results from DFID/FCDO programmes where they were confident that: i) quality education was being provided, ii) education quality was being improved, or iii) there was no alternative education provision (for example emergency settings).

20 *Britain to help 6.5 million girls in poor countries go to school*, DFID, September 2015, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

also includes an assessment of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and recent reductions to the UK aid budget on the sustainability of the impact these programmes have achieved. It focuses on basic (primary and lower-secondary²¹) education, as this was the priority for UK aid to education set out in DFID's 2018 Education policy²² and 2013 Education position paper.²³ It covers bilateral, centrally managed, multilateral (core contributions and 'multi-bi'²⁴ programmes) and humanitarian spending. This review reflects on work carried out by the former DFID but makes recommendations for the new FCDO to take forward.

Box 1: How this report relates to the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. The following SDGs are particularly relevant for this review:



Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
– ensuring that inclusive and equitable quality education is at the heart of DFID/FCDO's commitments around education. The scope of this review is limited to basic education, rather than lifelong learning.



Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
– DFID/FCDO has made gender equality in education a focus of its aid to education over the review period.

21 Lower-secondary education is the first stage of secondary education, building on primary education, typically with a more subject-oriented curriculum. See International Standard Classification of Education ISCED 2011, UNESCO, 2012, p. 33, [link](#).

22 *Education policy 2018: Get children learning*, DFID, 2018, p. 3, [link](#).

23 *Education position paper: Improving learning, expanding opportunities*, DFID, 2013, [link](#).

24 If a donor channels aid earmarked for a sector, theme, country or region through a multilateral institution, this is reported as bilateral aid. It is also referred to as non-core multilateral aid or 'multi-bi' aid. See *Multilateral aid 2010*, OECD, 2011, p. 18, [link](#).

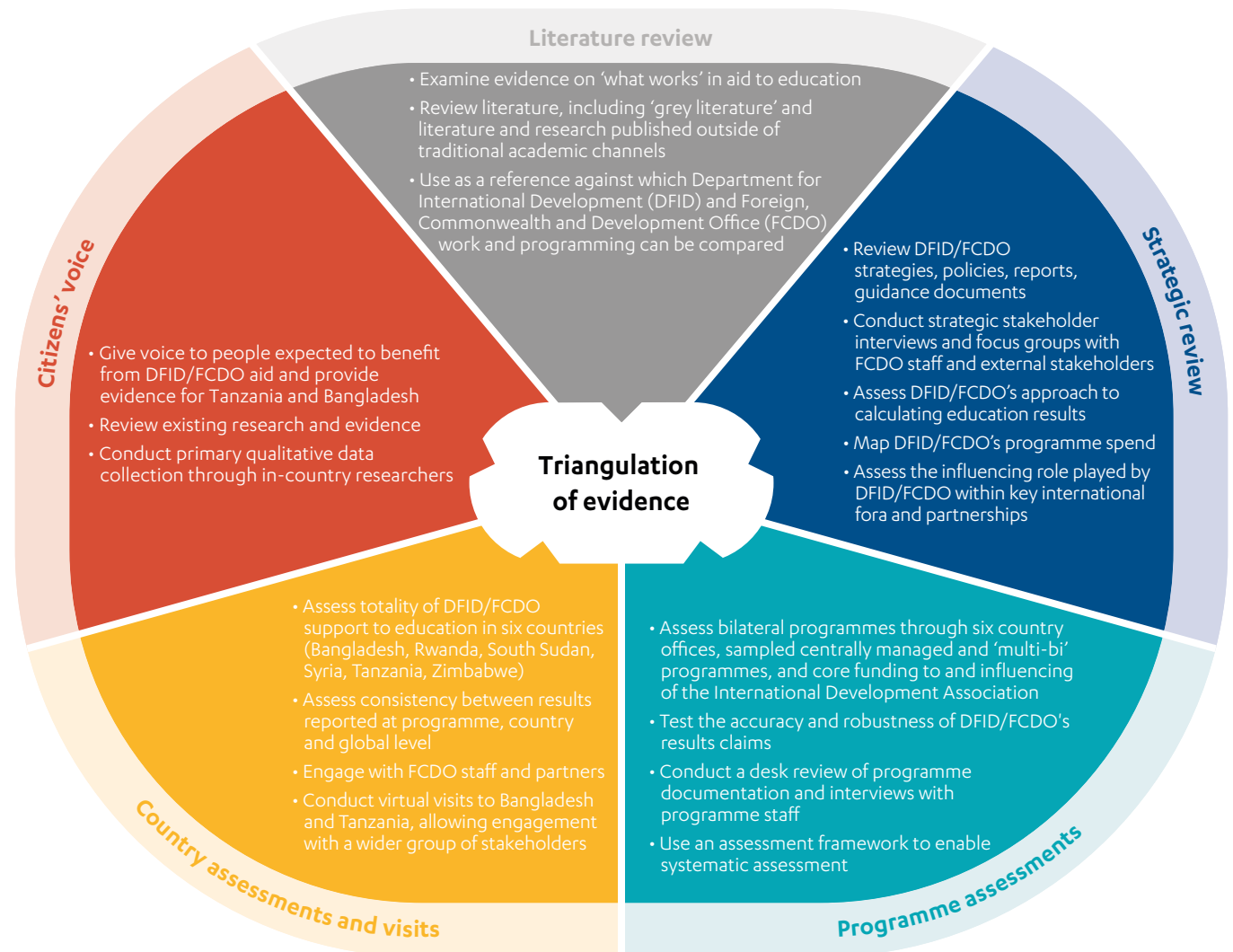
Table 1: Review questions

Review criteria and questions	Sub-questions
<p>Effectiveness: How effective is DFID/FCDO aid to education in delivering its intended results?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How accurate and robust are DFID/FCDO’s education results claims? • To what extent are DFID/FCDO education programmes achieving their intended results, particularly in relation to girls’ education? • How well does DFID/FCDO use its influence as a major multilateral funder to strengthen the quality of multilateral education programming and international education initiatives?
<p>Equity: To what extent are DFID/FCDO’s education interventions reaching the most marginalised?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are targeted DFID/FCDO interventions relevant to the needs of marginalised groups, including children with disabilities, children affected by crises and hard-to-reach girls? • How well has DFID/FCDO education support reached these target groups? • How effective is DFID/FCDO education programming in conflict-affected zones and for children displaced by humanitarian disasters?
<p>Impact: To what extent is DFID/FCDO achieving sustainable impact through its aid to education?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent are DFID/FCDO education programmes based on evidence of ‘what works’? • How well does DFID/FCDO work with partners to strengthen the quality of national education systems? • How well is DFID/FCDO aid to education helping children in partner countries (and girls in particular) to gain a ‘decent education’? • To what extent has DFID/FCDO taken action to limit the effects of COVID-19 and UK aid budget reductions on the impact of its aid to education?

2. Methodology

2.1 The review methodology included the following components, to allow for data triangulation to robustly answer the review questions.

Figure 1: Overview of methodology



2.2 **Component 1 – Literature review:** This component identified areas of consensus around 'what works' in aid to education. It examined evidence on 'what works' in terms of types of intervention (including for marginalised groups) and ways of working. The literature review was based on a synthesis of academic literature and 'grey literature' published outside traditional academic channels. It was used as a reference point for comparison of DFID/FCDO's work and programming.

2.3 **Component 2 – Strategic review:** We reviewed DFID/FCDO's relevant strategies, policies, reports, guidance documents and evaluations. We conducted strategic stakeholder interviews with FCDO staff, other bilateral donors with substantial education investments, and relevant multilateral agencies. We engaged with FCDO's education adviser cadre through focus group interviews. We also consulted with other types of stakeholders such as civil society groups and academic experts. This qualitative data was systematically analysed using an analysis grid linked to the review questions. We assessed the approach adopted by DFID/FCDO when calculating its education results. Through the desk review and interviews, we also examined the influencing role played by DFID/FCDO within key international fora and partnerships.

- 2.4 **Component 3 – Programme assessments:** We selected a sample of programmes which contributed to DFID/FCDO’s reported results for assessment:
- the largest bilateral country programme contributors for six sampled countries
 - the Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC), a major centrally managed bilateral programme
 - bilateral support to multilateral funds – the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW)
 - core contributions to the World Bank’s International Development Association (IDA).²⁵
- 2.5 These assessments involved reviewing programme documentation and conducting interviews with relevant staff. They used an assessment framework, which enabled systematic assessment against the review questions. We judged performance against DFID/FCDO’s own expectations set out in planning documents for each programme. These assessments also helped us to test the accuracy and robustness of the methodology and data that DFID/FCDO used to calculate the global results estimates.
- 2.6 **Component 4 – Country assessments and country visits:** We identified a sample of six countries (Bangladesh, Tanzania, South Sudan, Syria, Rwanda and Zimbabwe) in which to assess the totality of the UK’s contribution to education. We also used this component to assess the extent to which there is consistency between results reported at the programme, country and global levels. The assessments drew on the programme assessments, on documentation about the country context, and on evidence from interviews with additional stakeholders in each country. These included the DFID/FCDO education and results advisers and external stakeholders involved in the programmes selected. We used a country assessment template to allow systematic assessment across the countries. For two of these countries, Bangladesh and Tanzania, we conducted virtual country visits, which involved undertaking interviews remotely, because of the COVID-19 travel restrictions that were in place at the time of the review. These visits enabled us to engage in more depth with programme staff and external stakeholders than by using documents alone.
- 2.7 **Component 5 – Citizens’ voice:** For Bangladesh and Tanzania, we engaged with citizens to help ensure that the voices of those expected to benefit from UK aid to education are reflected in our findings, while providing another source of evidence to triangulate with other components of the methodology. This work was carried out through local researchers in each country, who carried out semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with pupils, parents, teachers and community leaders.

²⁵ FCDO’s core contribution to IDA is governed in a different way to bilateral programming and FCDO’s policy engagement with the World Bank is not exclusive to IDA.

Box 2: Limitations to the methodology

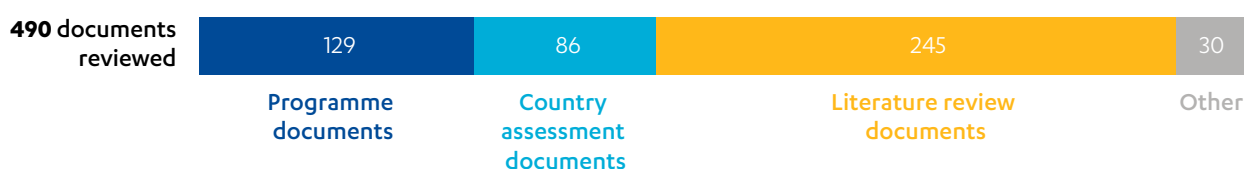
The review has examined DFID/FCDO’s work on basic education and the results of this activity. This is ambitious due to the scale and diversity of relevant basic education programming. Given this large and complex portfolio, the review has been limited in its coverage – we have only been able to examine selected countries and programmes in detail.²⁶ To mitigate against this limitation, the strategic review has considered the whole of the portfolio in scope, to enable us to report findings which can be generalised with greater confidence.

There are also some methodological constraints to assessing the extent to which DFID/FCDO programmes are based on evidence of ‘what works’. While the literature on the effectiveness of aid for education is extensive, there remain areas where evidence is weaker, for example on ‘what works’ in crisis settings, and evidence can be context-specific or contested.

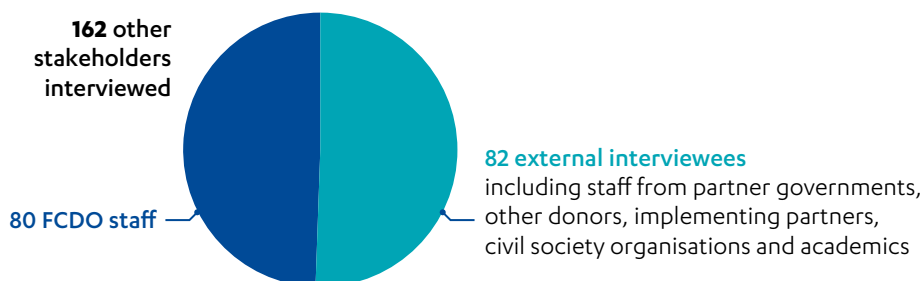
Disentangling DFID/FCDO’s impact on changes in education systems and children’s learning from the actions of other partners is challenging. DFID/FCDO has provided diverse support to governments and other organisations, which are usually investing significant volumes of their own resources, alongside a number of donors working on the same programmes. There are also a range of external factors affecting results achieved in education. Our approach to addressing this challenge was to look comprehensively at all UK spending and activity on basic education in our assessment countries, considering different documentary sources and talking to multiple different stakeholders.

- 2.8 **Sampling approach:** In sampling programmes funded by the different modalities of aid, we aimed to achieve a balance that broadly reflects the relative contributions of these different channels to DFID/FCDO’s results estimates and the diverse nature of UK aid to education.²⁷ Criteria that we used to select the countries and bilateral programmes included in our sample were: the scale of results, level of relevant spend, and range of programming and country contexts.²⁸

Figure 2: What we did



Focus group discussions and interviews with **over 500 people** expected to benefit from UK aid to education, through our citizen engagement work in Bangladesh and Tanzania

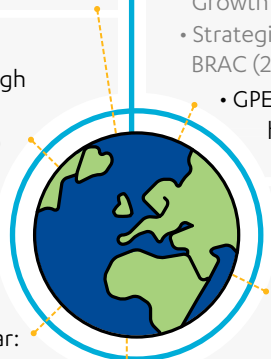
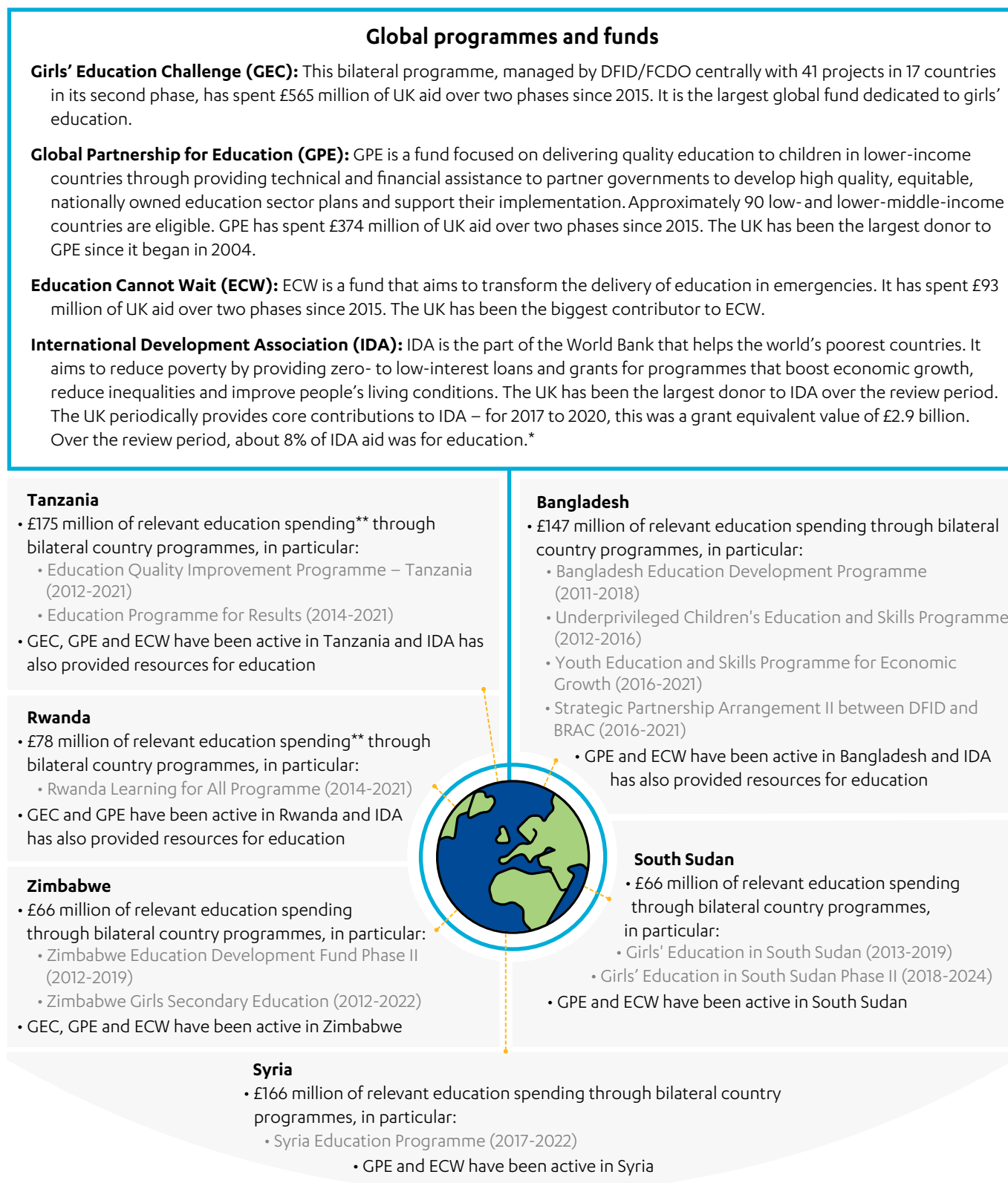


26 Three of the countries selected are from the six countries with the highest bilateral spend.

27 See our approach paper for further details on our sampling approach – *Assessing UK aid’s results in education: Approach paper*, ICAI, September 2021, p. 7-8, [link](#).

28 Afghanistan was not selected as a country for assessment for this review. UK aid to Afghanistan, including aid to education, will be considered in ICAI’s upcoming country portfolio review. More information will be made available in due course on the ICAI website, [link](#).

Figure 3: DFID/FCDO education spending assessed in detail for this review



* Source: *Is the Global Partnership for Education redundant? Or is it a more progressive, democratic alternative to the World Bank?*, Center for Global Development, January 2021, [link](#).

** The term 'relevant education spending' refers to our estimate of the spending on basic education for a programme over our review period using information supplied by FCDO. This estimation is necessary because some programmes that spent money on basic education also spent money in other areas.

Note: See Annex 1 for more information on individual programmes.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that education is a fundamental human right for everyone. DFID's 2013 Education position paper reaffirms this right and states that education is "a global public good and a necessary ingredient for economic development and poverty reduction".²⁹ DFID's 2018 Education policy emphasised that education "unlocks individual potential and benefits all of society, powering sustainable development".³⁰ DFID/FCDO has viewed girls' education as a particularly "smart investment" because "the benefits are wide-ranging enough to stop poverty in its tracks between generations".³¹
- 3.2 Alongside all UN member states, in 2015 the UK adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which included a commitment to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030 (SDG 4).³² Global progress towards the targets associated with this goal – increasing access to school and improving the quality of education so that it leads to relevant and effective learning outcomes – is currently too slow. Even before the pandemic, in 2018, 59 million primary school age children and 62 million lower-secondary school age children were not in school.³³ In 2017, around 90% of children in low-income countries and 75% of children in lower-middle-income countries could not read or complete basic maths questions by the end of primary school.³⁴ There were also major inequalities in access to and achievements in learning, with disparities between rich and poor students beginning early in their lives, widening over time and being compounded by other sources of disadvantage, such as gender, disability and location. For example, between 2010 and 2019, almost half of the countries with data did not achieve gender parity in primary school completion.³⁵ These inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic, which the UN has described as a "generational catastrophe".³⁶

UK commitments and reported results

- 3.3 The UK government has made a range of commitments to global education over the last decade, especially to girls' education. DFID's 2013 *Education position paper*³⁷ outlined three priorities: to improve learning, to reach all children, and to keep girls in school. In 2015, the UK government set a target that, by 2020, it would help at least 11 million children in the poorest countries gain a 'decent education' and promote girls' education.³⁸ In 2015, the UK also committed to help 6.5 million girls in poor countries go to school.³⁹ In 2018, under the Education policy published by DFID, the UK government committed to improving quality and equity in education by focusing on three priorities: investing in good teaching, supporting system reform which delivers results in the classroom, and stepping up targeted support to poor and marginalised children.⁴⁰
- 3.4 In 2020, DFID estimated that it had supported at least 15.6 million children, over half of whom were girls, to gain a 'decent education' between 2015 and 2020.⁴¹ In May 2021, FCDO published its action plan for girls' education, in which it committed to "re-double" its efforts as a champion of education for girls.⁴² In 2021, the UK co-hosted a Global Partnership for Education replenishment summit to urge world

29 *Education position paper: Improving learning, expanding opportunities*, DFID, July 2013, [link](#).

30 *Education policy 2018: Get children learning*, DFID, 2018, p. 3, [link](#).

31 In its recent action plan for girls' education, FCDO described how educating girls leads to smaller, healthier and better educated families, increases women's earnings and allows women to play a role in shaping their countries' future. See *Every girl goes to school, stays safe, and learns: Five years of global action 2021–26*, FCDO, May 2021, p. 7-8, [link](#).

32 *The 17 goals*, UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, accessed at [link](#).

33 *Out-of-school children and youth*, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, accessed August 2021, [link](#).

34 *Education policy 2018: Get children learning*, DFID, 2018, p. 3, [link](#).

35 *The sustainable development goals report 2021*, United Nations, 2021, p. 2, [link](#).

36 *The sustainable development goals report 2021*, United Nations, 2021, p. 2, [link](#).

37 *Education position paper: Improving learning, expanding opportunities*, DFID, 2013, [link](#).

38 *UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest*, HM Treasury and DFID, November 2015, [link](#).

39 *Britain to help 6.5 million girls in poor countries go to school*, DFID, September 2015, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

40 *Education policy 2018: Get children learning*, DFID, 2018, p. 25, [link](#).

41 *DFID results estimates: 2015 to 2020*, DFID, August 2020, p. 10, [link](#).

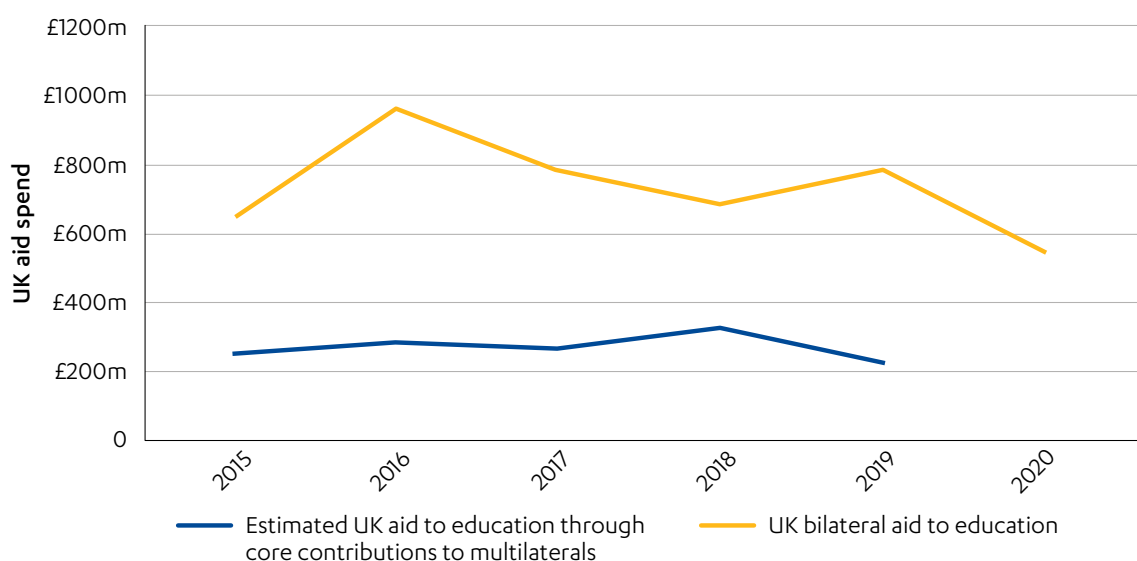
42 *Every girl goes to school, stays safe, and learns: Five years of global action 2021–26*, FCDO, May 2021, p. 7-8, [link](#).

leaders to invest in getting children into school, and girls' education was a central theme of the UK's G7 presidency in 2021.⁴³

DFID/FCDO's education portfolio

- 3.5 DFID/FCDO's education portfolio is diverse. It involves programmes supported through different channels of aid: bilateral programmes managed by DFID/FCDO in country, bilateral programmes managed centrally, 'multi-bi' programmes (where DFID/FCDO channels aid earmarked for education through a multilateral institution), and core contributions to multilateral funds. The delivery architecture for DFID/FCDO's education portfolio is complex, involving different kinds of implementing partners.
- 3.6 The UK has been a major donor to education⁴⁴ and has allocated more of its aid to basic education and to low-income countries than most other donors.⁴⁵ The UK spent £4.4 billion on bilateral aid to education between 2015 and 2020, during which time this spending fluctuated from a high of £961 million in 2016 to a low of £545 million in 2020.⁴⁶ 117 bilateral programmes spent more than £1 million on basic education between 2015 and 2021. 29 of these were centrally managed programmes, including approximately £60 million through DFID/FCDO's Research and Evidence Division. The rest were programmes managed through 26 DFID/FCDO country or regional teams. The countries in which DFID/FCDO spent the most on basic education during this period (through bilateral programmes managed by DFID/FCDO in country) included Pakistan, Nigeria, Tanzania, Syria, Ethiopia and Bangladesh.⁴⁷ Basic education received the largest share of UK aid to education over the review period (see **Figure 5**). UK aid to education through core contributions to multilateral organisations was an estimated £1.3 billion between 2015 and 2019.⁴⁸

Figure 4: Amount of UK bilateral and multilateral aid to education since 2015



Source: Statistics on International Development: Final UK aid spend 2020, FCDO, September 2021, [link](#).

Note: 2019 is the latest year with an available estimate of UK aid to education through core contributions to multilaterals.

43 G7 to boost girls' education and women's employment in recovery from COVID-19 pandemic, FCDO, 3 May 2021, [link](#).

44 Education, Donor Tracker, 2022, [link](#).

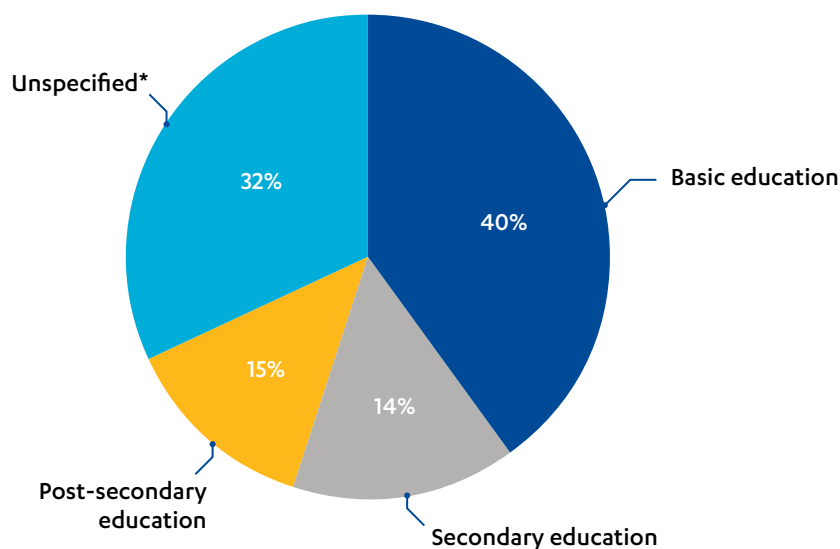
45 The data this statement is based on is up to 2018. See Which are the biggest aid donors to education?, UNESCO, 2022, [link](#).

46 Statistics on International Development: Final UK aid spend 2020, FCDO, September 2021, [link](#).

47 Based on analysis of data provided to ICAI by FCDO.

48 Statistics on international development: Final UK aid spend 2020, FCDO, September 2021, [link](#).

Figure 5: Proportion of UK bilateral aid to different levels of education between 2015 and 2020



Source: Statistics on International Development: Final UK aid spend 2020, FCDO, September 2021, Table A7, [link](#).

* Most unspecified spend consists of contributions to education multilaterals (primarily the Global Partnership for Education) and spending on management, facilities, training and research. Much of this is focused on primary education. See Education policy 2018: Get Children Learning, DFID, 2018, p. 11, [link](#).

3.7 Up until 2020,⁴⁹ DFID/FCDO did not allocate a budget specifically to girls' education. DFID/FCDO argued in its recent action plan for girls' education⁵⁰ that its focus on girls does not mean that it values boys' education less highly, and that most of its education work supports education as a whole, benefiting boys as well as girls.⁵¹ However, much of DFID/FCDO's education programming has had specific objectives for girls' education, and some has targeted groups of girls who are marginalised in education because of the way that gender can interact with other forms of disadvantage, such as extreme poverty or disability. Most notably, DFID/FCDO has spent £565 million through the centrally managed Girls' Education Challenge over the review period, which aims to support marginalised girls. In this review, we have assessed the whole of DFID/FCDO's basic education portfolio, but with a focus on how girls have been supported through general education programmes and girls' education programmes.

ICAI's previous review

3.8 ICAI's previous review of education, published in 2016, focused on marginalised and disadvantaged girls.⁵² It awarded DFID an amber-red score, noting a lack of coherence between different UK aid channels addressing girls' marginalisation in education and a loss of focus on marginalisation during the implementation of bilateral programmes managed in country. In 2018, ICAI's follow-up of the government's response to this review noted that DFID had made impressive improvements to address the shortcomings identified.⁵³ This current review is not a follow-up review. It builds on the previous review but also assesses education results more broadly.

49 FCDO allocated a specific budget of £400 million for a 'girls' education' theme for 2021-22. *UK Official Development Assistance departmental allocations 2021-22: Statement made by Dominic Raab, Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs*, UK Parliament, April 2021, [link](#).

50 *Every girl goes to school, stays safe, and learns: Five years of global action 2021-26*, FCDO, May 2021, p. 7-8, [link](#).

51 A recent systematic literature review of educational interventions' impacts on girls, regardless of whether the interventions specifically target girls, found that to improve access and learning, general interventions deliver gains for girls that are comparable to girl-targeted interventions. For example, many of the most effective interventions to improve learning for girls involve improving the pedagogy of teachers. The authors argued that girl-targeted interventions may make the most sense when addressing constraints that are unique to girls. *What we learn about girls' education from interventions that do not focus on girls*, Center for Global Development, July 2019, [link](#).

52 *Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls*, ICAI, December 2016, [link](#).

53 *ICAI follow-up of: Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls. A summary of ICAI's full follow-up review*, ICAI, June 2018, p. 1, [link](#).

4. Findings

Effectiveness: How effective is DFID/FCDO aid to education in delivering its intended results?

4.1 In this section we set out our main findings on the effectiveness of DFID/FCDO aid to education in delivering its intended results since 2015. We do this through assessing the total results reported across DFID/FCDO's education portfolio, before presenting more in-depth insights on the effectiveness of the implementation of UK aid to education. Throughout, we make judgements around whether DFID/FCDO met the scale of its own expectations, both for sampled programmes and more broadly.

The UK government reported that it achieved its commitments on the number of children (and girls in particular) supported to gain a 'decent education' between 2015 and 2020

4.2 As part of its Single Departmental Plan results framework,⁵⁴ DFID/FCDO estimated that, between 2015 and 2020, it supported at least 15.6 million children to gain a 'decent education'.⁵⁵ This exceeded the 2015 commitment of at least 11 million children. Of these 15.6 million children, for those results that could be disaggregated by gender, over 50% were girls,⁵⁶ which exceeded the commitment DFID made in 2015.⁵⁷

4.3 Bilateral programmes managed by DFID/FCDO in country contributed 11.9 million children to these results. Central DFID teams contributed 2.4 million children to these results through centrally managed and 'multi-bi' programmes (although, as noted in **Figure 6**, DFID discounted 0.9 million because of the risk of 'double-counting'). The biggest contributions to this figure for centrally managed and 'multi-bi' programmes came from DFID/FCDO's support to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) (1.2 million children), Education Cannot Wait (ECW) (0.5 million children) and the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) (0.6 million children).⁵⁸ DFID/FCDO's core contributions to multilateral organisations contributed 2.2 million children to these results. Of these, 1.3 million were attributed to DFID/FCDO's support to the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA).^{59,60}

54 This single departmental plan results framework consisted of indicators covering a number of priority areas. Results estimates are figures that were collated from a set of DFID programme results to provide an indication of DFID's activity at an organisational level.

55 *DFID results estimates: 2015 to 2020*, DFID, August 2020, p. 10, [link](#). Table 5 of the results tables gives further detail on the breakdown of these results by country, gender and level of fragility.

56 Over 95% of these results were disaggregated by gender.

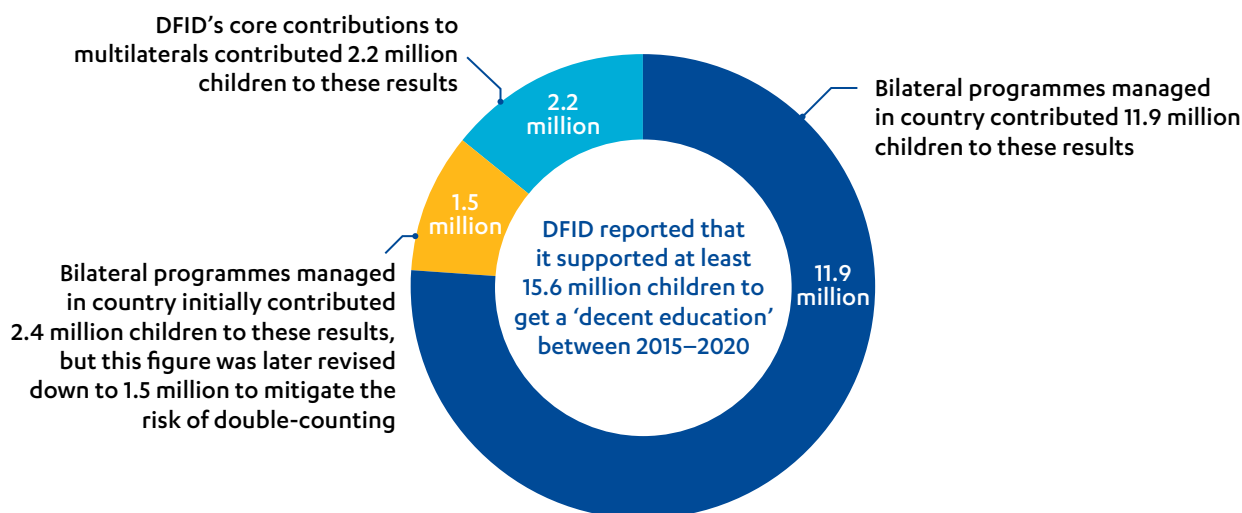
57 *Britain to help 6.5 million girls in poor countries go to school*, DFID, September 2015, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

58 For GEC, girls who would not be in school without the GEC project contributed in full to the numbers reached globally. For girls supported by GEC who were already in school, DFID estimated the percentage of the girls' education that GEC was responsible for, based on the programme's contribution to their learning, according to the independent evaluation.

59 IDA spending on education in each country was divided by the cost per child of education in that country, resulting in an estimate of the number of children supported in education through IDA in each year. DFID used the highest yearly figure in the DFID results period and claimed a percentage relative to its financial contribution to IDA (13% for the 2017-20 period).

60 These results add up to more than the reported 15.6 million children because FCDO made adjustments to avoid the risk of 'double-counting' children.

Figure 6: The breakdown of DFID's results estimates between 2015 and 2020



DFID/FCDO's corporate-level results estimation process has been systematic and consistently applied, but may have underestimated the number of children supported in education

4.4 DFID/FCDO's estimate that it supported at least 15.6 million children to gain a 'decent education' is based on aggregating results across each of DFID/FCDO's programmes between 2015 and 2020. It tracks the number of children that were supported in school for at least a year. Where DFID/FCDO was providing at least approximately 75% of funding, all children were counted.⁶¹ Where, as is common, DFID/FCDO only provided a proportion of the support for the education of a group of children (measured on the basis of funding shares, data on children's learning or other relevant data), then only this proportion of the total number of children was attributed to the UK's support. The figure that emerges from this methodology was referred to by DFID/FCDO as the full-time equivalent number, which it uses so as not to overestimate the number of children supported.

4.5 We reviewed this results estimation methodology as it was applied to the sampled programmes and countries. DFID/FCDO used a reasonable methodology and provided staff with clear guidance to promote consistency in applying it. Results estimation across these programmes and countries was consistent with this methodology. DFID/FCDO had thorough systems for quality assurance of the reported results and avoided 'double-counting' (such as children being claimed as fully supported by one programme and the same children being claimed as partially supported by another programme). This cautious approach to 'double-counting' was the one area where we were not convinced by the accuracy of the results estimation process. In practice, 0.9 million multilateral results (from ECW and GPE) were discounted because they were reported in countries where DFID/FCDO also had bilateral programmes. This was not necessary in cases where both channels could have 'claimed' a proportion of results based on their funding contributions, making the 15.6 million result an approximate underestimate (see **Figure 6**).

FCDO is not yet able to measure or report on its contribution to improving children's learning globally, but is working to improve measurement in order to do so

4.6 The phrase 'decent education', adopted in the government's 2015 manifesto, was in practice understood by officials to mean the provision of quality education. At the time, there was no consensus on comparable global metrics for quality education. DFID/FCDO's working definition of what counted as quality or 'decent education' included results from programmes where they were confident that: i) quality education was being provided, ii) education quality was being improved, or iii) there was no alternative education provision (for example emergency settings). The results target for the number

61 DFID results estimates: Methodology notes, DFID, November 2018, p. 15-20, [link](#).

of children supported to gain a 'decent education' is therefore an indicator of how many children were reached with better-quality education than they would otherwise have received, rather than a measure of how many children were supported to learn effectively. DFID/FCDO has stated that all its education programmes have included a focus on improving the quality of education to raise learning levels. All of the programmes and areas of spending that we assessed were supporting quality improvements. However, DFID/FCDO's reporting of its education results against its Single Departmental Plan results framework⁶² did not include information on the quality of education.

- 4.7 Robust evidence of impact on learning is not available for all programmes, although DFID/FCDO is supporting the generation of this evidence (see paragraphs 4.50-4.55 for more detail).
- 4.8 This approach also does not generally capture UK aid's support beyond its financial contribution, including support to education system reform and building the evidence base for effective education interventions. Indeed, for the countries and programming that we assessed, we found good evidence of DFID/FCDO's wider contributions to capacity building and systems-level reforms. We describe DFID/FCDO's impact on systems strengthening within our findings on impact (see paragraphs 4.61-4.62).
- 4.9 In future, FCDO is planning that its results reporting will be related to the education commitments and targets agreed by the G7 in May 2021, including ensuring that more girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries are in school and learn to read.⁶³ FCDO staff told us that they are working to find the best ways to measure progress towards these commitments, but that the approach was not yet agreed (see paragraph 4.53). Measuring learning would provide a better measure of how many children DFID/FCDO has supported to gain a quality education.

DFID/FCDO bilateral and multilateral aid to education has been well implemented over the review period

- 4.10 We assessed whether a sample of UK aid-funded education programmes have delivered their planned activities effectively.⁶⁴ We judged that all but one out of 18 met the scale of DFID/FCDO's own broad expectations, as set out in programme plans, for what they would do to support education. We note that DFID/FCDO's expectations for its programmes were ambitious, and therefore meeting them indicates a good level of performance. For example, the first phase of GEC aimed to ensure that up to one million marginalised girls completed a full cycle of primary or secondary education.⁶⁵ We were unable to judge the effectiveness of DFID/FCDO's contribution to IDA for education overall due to insufficient reporting as this support is for all IDA's activity in various sectors.⁶⁶

62 *DFID results estimates: 2015 to 2020*, DFID, August 2020, p. 10, [link](#).

63 *G7 to boost girls' education and women's employment in recovery from COVID-19 pandemic*, FCDO, 3 May 2021, [link](#).

64 We recognise that programmes adapt over time, and we have therefore assessed performance against the scale of the expectations DFID/FCDO set for itself, rather than the exact expectations.

65 DFID's business case for the first phase of GEC stated that it would "allocate funding to projects that will enable approximately 650,000 marginalised girls to complete a full six year cycle of primary school or approximately 1 million marginalised girls to complete three years of junior secondary school". See *Girls' Education Challenge business case*, DFID, June 2012, [link](#).

66 The upcoming ICAI IDA review does not focus on education, but does include insights around IDA's overall effectiveness.

Box 3: Examples of strong bilateral country programme implementation

Strategic Partnership Agreement II between DFID and BRAC, Bangladesh (£222 million; 2016-2021)

This programme aimed to improve access to quality basic services, including education for the poorest, most marginalised people in Bangladesh. The programme exceeded its targets for education. Students from Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) schools achieved a higher pass rate at in the Primary Education Completion Examination, compared to the national average. The programme overall achieved or exceeded expectations against targets for the number of children enrolled and graduating from BRAC schools and attendance rates. The programme also introduced additional expectations around delivering education to the most disadvantaged groups.

Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme, Bangladesh (£25 million; 2012-2016)

The programme exceeded its target for ensuring access to school, providing both general and vocational education for children from urban slums. It supported over 44,000 children.

Girls' Education South Sudan Programme Phase 2 (£70 million; 2018-2024)

In 2019, this programme exceeded its targets for the number of girls it supported in education, reaching nearly 400,000 girls. The programme also exceeded its targets for providing grants to improve the learning environment (for example through providing toilets, educational materials and equipment). It supported 4,300 primary and nearly 200 secondary schools. The programme also performed well against objectives for improving teaching quality.

The majority of programmes included specific expectations for supporting girls' education, such as the number of girls reached or support for specific activities, although these were not always met

- 4.11 Most external stakeholders spoke very highly about DFID/FCDO's success in targeting and supporting girls. For all but one of the programmes that we assessed, DFID/FCDO had set specific expectations for activities targeting girls. Another programme had insufficient information for us to make a judgement. Of the remaining 16 programmes, 12 met the scale of these expectations.
- 4.12 For the bilateral education programmes in our sample, ten out of 13 met their expectations for girls' education (one did not set such expectations). These expectations varied across programmes and included targets relating to the number of girls attending, developing gender-sensitive approaches to teaching and action to make the learning environment more suitable to the needs of girls. This is an improvement on the situation we found in our 2016 review of support for marginalised girls' education, which judged that only eight out of the 19 bilateral programmes assessed met DFID's own expectations around girls' education.⁶⁷ While performance for girls has improved, given the priority attached to girls' education by DFID/FCDO over the review period, we would expect more consistently good performance.
- 4.13 The bilateral country programmes that we assessed performed particularly well in improving the teaching and learning environment for girls, including making education safer and more accessible, and through increasing the gender-responsiveness and inclusiveness of teaching practices. For example, Rwanda's Learning for All Programme (£96 million; 2015-2023) and the Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania (£89 million; 2012-2021) both introduced gender-sensitive approaches to teaching, leading to more gender-balanced interactions between teachers and pupils (see **Box 4**).
- 4.14 Performance of targeted support for girls was insufficient overall for two of the older bilateral country programmes that we assessed. In the Bangladesh Education Development Programme (£115 million; 2011-2018), the girls' education action plan developed under the programme was not implemented effectively. Stakeholders suggested that this may have been due to insufficient commitment from government partners to ensure implementation, monitoring and learning. For the Education Quality

⁶⁷ Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls, ICAI, December 2016, [link](#).

Improvement Programme in Tanzania (EQUIP-T) (see **Box 4**), a secondary school preparedness programme and school clubs designed to support girls were not as successfully implemented as anticipated. Some FCDO staff and external stakeholders felt that further efforts were needed to understand girls' needs and the barriers to their education and to develop more targeted activity.

Box 4: For DFID's Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania, the level of achievement for girls was not in line with DFID's original expectations

At its outset, DFID/FCDO expected that the programme would provide better-quality education, especially for girls, and support 27,500 more girls to make the transition from primary to secondary school. Activities aimed at addressing barriers to girls' education fell short of DFID/FCDO's expectations. The secondary school preparedness intervention was not implemented beyond the pilot stage. School clubs became a key approach to tackling barriers for girls in education, but achievement also fell short of expectations, with only about half of schools in the regions where the programme was originally operating having active clubs. The independent evaluation of EQUIP-T did find some evidence that the programme contributed to larger learning gains for girls compared to boys through training for teachers on gender-responsive approaches to teaching.

- 4.15 For GEC, DFID/FCDO's expectations have not been met. In the first phase (£355 million; 2012- 2017), performance fell short of DFID/FCDO's own expectations for girls' attendance and learning and the sustainability of activities supported. Factors hindering performance included projects not understanding which barriers were the most critical in preventing girls from improving their learning or the scale of the needs of the marginalised girls they aimed to reach. The second phase of GEC (£500 million; 2017-2025) has been stronger, including the approach to using the experience of the programme to influence systemic change (see paragraphs 4.34-4.35 for more detail). However, DFID/FCDO's own expectations have not been met for learning or achieving projects' shorter-term goals and the number of the most marginalised girls targeted has been substantially reduced.⁶⁸
- 4.16 The overall performance for girls was lower than expected in partner countries supported by GPE, the largest multilateral partnership programme designed to improve the quality of education systems (£374 million since 2015). DFID/FCDO has recognised that the level of ambition for girls within GPE needs to increase (see paragraph 4.39).

DFID/FCDO has been influential in strengthening multilateral education programming and international education initiatives at a global level

- 4.17 DFID/FCDO has been a leading donor on education globally over the review period, in terms of both financing and policy leadership. The range of bilateral and multilateral channels that DFID/FCDO has used as part of its education portfolio is a strength. Working through multilateral channels has given DFID/FCDO an opportunity to leverage additional funds globally to support girls' education. It has also increased the reach of DFID/FCDO's influence, beyond the countries where it works bilaterally.
- 4.18 Our assessments of support to ECW, GPE and IDA show that UK aid has played a strong role in coordinating their activity and influencing their performance at a global level. DFID/FCDO has been a key driver in building ECW's capability to provide education in emergencies and protracted crises during 2015-20, combining its roles as chair and major financial contributor with providing strong technical support to its functioning centrally. DFID/FCDO has also played an active role in GPE's governance, including through the head of DFID/FCDO's Children, Youth and Education Department sitting on the board. DFID/FCDO has influenced IDA to increase its focus on inclusive education, quality and learning. In addition, through contributions to trust funds and other World Bank activities linked to IDA's education

⁶⁸ DFID's original target of reaching 500,000 highly marginalised adolescent girls through the 'Leave No Girl Behind' window of the second phase of GEC was reduced to 190,000.

portfolio, DFID/FCDO has funded technical assistance which has supported implementation of IDA's evolving policy commitments on education.⁶⁹

There are some areas where multilateral education programming that DFID/FCDO has supported has not met DFID/FCDO's own expectations, particularly around the quality of education sector plans that GPE supports and coherence between GPE and ECW

- 4.19 GPE's theory of change assumes that the national education sector plans which it supports countries to develop and deliver will lead to impact around improved and equitable learning.⁷⁰ However, these plans, which are a key building block in strengthening education systems, continue to be overly ambitious and unachievable. Improvements to the extent that these plans were assessed as achievable have not met DFID/FCDO's expectations.⁷¹ The recent independent evaluation of GPE also concluded that its effectiveness around education sector plan implementation and its subsequent contribution to more effective and efficient education systems remains a challenge.⁷²
- 4.20 Internal and external stakeholders also pointed out that there is a lack of coherence between the multilateral programmes that DFID/FCDO has supported, including competition between ECW and GPE in support for education in crisis situations. They thought that FCDO should have a stronger role in addressing this.

The presence of knowledgeable education advisers has enabled the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral channels in partner countries, supported by investment in evidence building

- 4.21 Both internal and external stakeholders, including in the six countries we assessed, recognised DFID/FCDO's contribution to education as being high-quality. They frequently referred to the technical expertise of its staff and its strong reputation for research and using evidence. They also commonly noted that the in-country presence of highly knowledgeable education advisers, with good understanding of the local political economy, enabled DFID/FCDO to be effective in influencing partner governments and donors and supporting capacity building for system reforms. One senior FCDO stakeholder summed this up, describing "staff with fantastic relationships of trust and confidence with ministers in partner countries that help leverage the financial help given".
- 4.22 We also found that DFID/FCDO in-country staff have helped to promote the effectiveness of the investment it makes in the multilateral programmes that we assessed. As well as shaping GPE's work globally, DFID/FCDO has often had a highly influential direct role in GPE in the countries where it has an education adviser. This is either through DFID/FCDO being the grant or coordinating agent⁷³ for GPE programming, or because it designs bilateral programmes to work alongside GPE.
- 4.23 In Zimbabwe, for example, where DFID/FCDO has acted as coordinating agent for GPE, in-country education staff engaged with stakeholders including donors, government and civil society organisations to facilitate constructive sector dialogue. They helped to galvanise activity on the priorities of the education sector plan. In Tanzania, external stakeholders told us that DFID/FCDO has played a substantial role in aligning GPE with other donor and national government investment in education, which among other things has contributed to improvements in education information management systems, learning assessments and plans for teachers' continuing professional development. We heard similar stories in Bangladesh, South Sudan and Syria.

69 The foreign secretary recently stated that the World Bank has committed to closing learning gaps and improving learning outcomes for girls in 20 IDA countries thanks to the UK's engagement in the negotiations around the most recent IDA replenishment. *20th replenishment of International Development Association – Statement made on 22 February 2022*, Elizabeth Truss – Secretary of state for foreign, commonwealth and development Affairs, [link](#).

70 *GPE theory of change*, GPE, November 2017, [link](#).

71 *GPE annual review 2020*, FCDO, September 2020, [link](#).

72 *Independent summative evaluation of the Global Partnership for Education 2020: Final report*, MDF Training & Consultancy, May 2020, p. 5, [link](#).

73 The term 'coordinating agency' is used by GPE to refer to country-level partners who support the government with the coordination of education sector policy dialogue. 'Grant agent' is the term used to refer to any GPE partner assigned to receive GPE grant funds, either on behalf of a partner country or for specific programmes. Grant agents must work closely with government and other partners to ensure that grant-funded programmes are well designed, effectively implemented and aligned with overall education sector plans, policies and systems.

- 4.24 Of the three assessed countries that received IDA funding for education during the review period,⁷⁴ DFID/FCDO's efforts to influence relevant programmes were particularly successful in Rwanda and Tanzania, but less so in Bangladesh. In Tanzania, a range of external stakeholders noted that DFID/FCDO had influenced the success of the multi-donor Education Programme for Results, particularly through funding independent verification of results and technical assistance to strengthen government systems. In this way, DFID/FCDO has positively influenced the effectiveness of GPE and World Bank IDA money channelled through this programme, as well as DFID/FCDO's bilateral funding to it. While the World Bank has expertise in basic education, they are relatively new partners in the sector in Rwanda, and FCDO has been key in leading and coordinating IDA spend.

Box 5: Strengthening aid to education in Bangladesh via in-country presence

UK aid has supported the multi-partner⁷⁵ Bangladesh Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-3) to improve access to school and drive up the quality of learning, including for marginalised children. It was supported by DFID bilaterally via the Bangladesh Education Development Programme (BEDP, £115 million; 2011-2018) as well as multilaterally through the UK's contributions to IDA and GPE. DFID/FCDO staff co-chaired two PEDP-3 technical working groups on quality and inclusion, and influenced other donors supporting the programme through chairing the formal donor education consortium. Through these and other roles, DFID/FCDO staff were influential in shaping the success of the programme. In particular, DFID/FCDO staff used their expert understanding of marginalisation issues to advocate for addressing the challenges faced by children with disabilities. As a result, BEDP under PEDP-3 enrolled 96,000 children with disabilities, constructed infrastructure to help them access school and improved the learning environment for them.

Conclusions on effectiveness

- 4.25 DFID/FCDO's estimation of its results on the number of children it supported to gain a 'decent education' across its education portfolio was systematic and reasonable. The figure produced represents an estimate of how many children were supported to go to school and get a better-quality education than they otherwise would have done. However, DFID/FCDO is not yet able to measure its aggregate results around children's learning globally, which would provide a better measure of how many children it had supported to gain a quality or 'decent education'. We return to the need for FCDO to better measure learning in the section of our findings on impact.
- 4.26 DFID/FCDO bilateral and multilateral aid to education has been well implemented over the review period. The presence of knowledgeable and politically informed DFID/FCDO education advisers in partner countries has contributed to the effectiveness of bilateral and multilateral channels, supported by investment in evidence building. Its programmes have met the ambitious expectations that it set for itself. However, not all programmes have done as much as DFID/FCDO set out to do for girls. In particular, for two of the older bilateral programmes, some interventions for girls were not sustained. DFID/FCDO has been influential in strengthening the quality of multilateral education programming but one area where multilateral performance has not met DFID/FCDO's own expectations is around the quality of education sector plans supported by GPE. We therefore award a **green-amber** score for effectiveness.

⁷⁴ Bangladesh, Rwanda and Tanzania.

⁷⁵ Other development partners involved in PEDP-3 included the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank's IDA, the EU, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Swedish International Development Agency, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, UNICEF and GPE.

Equity: To what extent are DFID/FCDO's education interventions reaching the most marginalised?

4.27 In this section we set out our main findings on the extent to which DFID/FCDO aid to education has reached the most marginalised children since 2015. Throughout, we make judgements around whether DFID/FCDO met the scale of its own expectations on support for marginalised children, either for particular programmes or more broadly.

DFID/FCDO has committed to reaching the most marginalised children, has implemented programming relevant to their needs (especially for marginalised girls) and has been seen as a global leader in this area

4.28 Over the review period, DFID/FCDO has been seen by external stakeholders as a global leader on addressing inequalities in education, especially for marginalised girls. DFID's 2013 Education position paper⁷⁶ identified reaching marginalised children as a priority. However, the previous ICAI review on marginalised girls' education, which covered the period between 2011 and 2015, identified the lack of a clear strategic approach on UK support for marginalised girls' education, creating challenges for promoting coherence and complementarity across the various strands of DFID's work.⁷⁷ DFID's response to this recommendation was positive. In particular, its 2018 Education policy provided a clearer direction for education programming to focus on marginalised groups,⁷⁸ particularly hard-to-reach girls, children with disabilities and children affected by crises.⁷⁹ DFID/FCDO staff thought that this had led to an organisational shift in the extent to which the department's education programmes aimed to take marginalisation into account during their design and implementation.

4.29 Our high-level review of DFID/FCDO programming found that, of those programmes that had spent at least £1 million on basic education since 2015, 80% had some element of targeted activity for girls, 36% for children with disabilities and 43% for children affected by crisis or conflict. For the programmes that we assessed in detail, activities targeting children with disabilities most commonly included support to staff around identifying and meeting the specific needs of these children. For example, the Syria Education Programme (£63 million; 2017-2022) trained school staff to identify children's physical and learning needs and provide tailored support. Other relevant activities included making school infrastructure more physically accessible and communicating information on the value of education. For the assessed programmes, activities addressing the needs of marginalised girls included training on gender-sensitive teaching, promoting school-level policies for making education more suited to girls' needs, addressing financial constraints and tackling negative perceptions about the value of education. For example, the Learning for All programme in Rwanda included support for girls' education policy development. The Girls' Education in South Sudan programme (£61 million; 2013-2021) included a behaviour change communications campaign to promote knowledge about the value of education for girls.

76 Education position paper: Improving learning, expanding opportunities, DFID, 2013, [link](#).

77 Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls, ICAI, December 2016, [link](#).

78 ICAI follow-up of: Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls. A summary of ICAI's full follow-up review, ICAI, June 2018, p. 1, [link](#).

79 Education policy 2018: Get children learning, DFID, 2018, [link](#).

Box 6: The barriers to education for marginalised groups

Our literature review⁸⁰ documented the barriers to education faced by the marginalised groups that DFID/FCDO has prioritised. Through our citizens' voice research, we heard from children experiencing some of these barriers.

For **hard-to-reach girls**, common barriers include a lack of safety on the way to and within school (in particular from gender-based violence), inadequate menstrual hygiene management facilities in schools, attitudes to gender roles, unsupportive views from the community and poverty.

“ One of my friends wants to study, but her parents said, ‘What would a girl do after studying?’ and forced her to get married. She is only 16. ”

Secondary school pupil, Bangladesh

“ There are some chores that only we girls do such as cooking tea for staff and cleaning the classrooms. Even at home these types of chores are only done by girls. ”

Secondary school pupil, Tanzania

“ Sometimes I miss school because I am on my period and I could not go school because I know the toilets are in very poor condition and so I decide to stay at home. ”

Secondary school pupil, Tanzania

“ Many girls have got pregnant because they live far [from school] and walk on foot, so they become vulnerable. ”

Secondary school pupil, Tanzania

“ Nowadays, Eve teasing* happens less than earlier, but when we have exams or extra classes, we leave our school late, and it happens sometimes. We ignore it, but when it became harsh, we try to get support from some senior passer-by. ”

Secondary school pupil, Bangladesh

* Eve teasing is a euphemism used for public sexual harassment or sexual assault of women by men.

For **children with disabilities**, common barriers include inaccessible school infrastructure and transport, attitudes towards educating children with disabilities and curricula and approaches to teaching that are not adapted to their needs.

“ There are a few parents who have disabled children who tend to hide them and would not let them come to school. ”

Secondary school pupil, Tanzania

“ There are some children that treat [children with disabilities] poorly. They despise them. ”

Primary school pupil, Tanzania

“ It is tough for those with disabilities because they are obliged to use motorcycle drivers [to get to school]. ”

Secondary school pupil, Tanzania

“ Disabled children are also treated the same but facilities to support them to study and move around are missing. ”

Primary school pupil, Tanzania

For **children affected by crises**, common barriers include destruction of infrastructure and the disruption of education services, insecurity, psychological trauma, medical needs and poverty.

DFID/FCDO has been successful in reaching highly marginalised children through its aid to education, although we cannot determine the scale of success globally for children with disabilities

- 4.30 For children affected by crises, all six programmes assessed that targeted this group met DFID/FCDO's expectations. DFID/FCDO judged that its support to ECW for education in emergency situations has been implemented as planned. Since its inception in 2016, the fund has reached an estimated 4.6 million children and adolescents in conflict-affected countries and countries hosting large numbers of refugees, including Syria, Chad, Bangladesh and Uganda. In Syria, the bilateral Syria Education Programme has exceeded DFID/FCDO's expectations and is on track to reach nearly 500,000 children. Under the first phase of GEC, three-quarters of girls reached were in fragile and conflict-affected states, including Afghanistan and Somalia. In Somalia, GEC is addressing educational barriers for girls in conflict-affected areas including the burden of household chores, early marriage and a 'no return to education' policy for pregnant girls. Feedback was generally positive from both internal and external stakeholders on DFID/FCDO's work in conflict-affected zones.
- 4.31 For children with disabilities, of the 11 programmes that we assessed where DFID/FCDO programme plans outlined expectations around children with disabilities, eight met the scale of these expectations. Six of the programmes that we sampled had no expectations around children with disabilities and for one, we had insufficient information to make a judgement. However, while DFID/FCDO has tracked and reported on how many girls it has reached globally (at least 8.2 million girls), and how many of the children reached lived in fragile states (10.8 million children, including 3.6 million living in extremely fragile states⁸¹), it has not tracked and reported on its aggregate reach for children with disabilities.⁸²
- 4.32 Our country assessments and citizens' voice research also provided clear examples of where DFID/FCDO has reached highly marginalised children. For example, the ECW Bangladesh Multi-Year Resilience Programme has provided support to Rohingya children in refugee camps. GEC has also supported many marginalised girls, but it has fallen short of DFID/FCDO's ambitions on reaching the most marginalised.⁸³ The reach of the GEC 'Leave No Girl Behind' funding window was scaled back dramatically, from an original expectation of 500,000 to 190,000 marginalised girls, in part due to DFID/FCDO realising the cost of meaningfully supporting the most marginalised.

The performance of GEC in supporting marginalised girls has improved since its first phase, including on influencing systemic change

- 4.33 DFID intended that the first phase of GEC (which ran between 2011 and 2017) should have a transformative effect, leveraging support for marginalised girls' education from other donors and country governments, and demonstrating sustainability, particularly through working with governments. In our previous ICAI review on marginalised girls' education we concluded that for this first phase of GEC, impact was generally limited to the girls who were reached directly, rather than via changes to education systems, and that little attention was given to the sustainability of the interventions.⁸⁴ This first phase was also weak on using GEC learning to influence policy and programme decisions, both across DFID and with wider stakeholders.
- 4.34 For the second phase of GEC (2017-2025), DFID expected that projects would focus on securing buy-in from national stakeholders, including partner governments, to addressing educational challenges for marginalised girls. The ICAI follow-up of our previous review in 2018⁸⁵ found that the GEC fund manager had increased GEC's country-based capacity and that DFID had created new regional adviser positions

81 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) characterises fragility as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacities of the state, system and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks. In recognition of fragility's inherent complexity, the OECD introduced its multidimensional fragility framework which captures the diversity of those contexts affected by fragility, measuring it on a spectrum of intensity across five dimensions: economic, environmental, political, security and societal. The categories of fragility are defined using numerical thresholds. See *States of fragility*, OECD, 2020, [link](#).

82 *DFID results estimates: 2015 to 2020*, DFID, August 2020, p. 10, [link](#).

83 DFID defined the target girls for this 'Leave No Girl Behind' funding window as "hardest to reach because of a complex combination of context, social and economic factors and may require bespoke interventions tailored to an individual".

84 *ICAI follow-up of: Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls. A summary of ICAI's full follow-up review*, ICAI, June 2018, p. 1, [link](#).

85 *ICAI follow-up of: Accessing, staying and succeeding in basic education – UK aid's support to marginalised girls. A summary of ICAI's full follow-up review*, ICAI, June 2018, [link](#).

to help ensure that GEC learning informed wider policy and programming, and that GEC and DFID's bilateral programming was more coherent.

- 4.35 For this review period, in all three of our six assessment countries where GEC has been operational, we found evidence of GEC projects influencing other DFID/FCDO programming and the activity of governments and other stakeholders. For example, in Zimbabwe, GEC project implementers engaged regularly with DFID/FCDO as well as with other stakeholders in sector coordination groups. Facilitated by FCDO, GEC implementers also brought in technical advice to the Ministry of Education on the country's COVID-19 catch-up strategy and had learning materials for self-study that they produced during the pandemic approved by the Ministry for use on a larger scale. FCDO and external stakeholders confirmed that the way in which GEC has been operating in supporting national education systems has improved over the review period. However, weaknesses remain, including in putting in place a system for planning and tracking progress on implementing activities to promote lasting change.

DFID/FCDO's focus on children with disabilities in its programming has grown over the review period, although ministerial focus on this issue has declined

- 4.36 The 2018 ICAI review on DFID's approach to disability in development assessed DFID's work in five sectors, including education. It found that education was the most advanced of these sectors in terms of the likely effectiveness of programming in addressing disability inclusion aims.⁸⁶ In this review, across the programming that we assessed, the degree of focus on children with disability varied, but there were examples of strong focus in this area (see **Box 7**) and we observed a trend of increasing focus on children with disabilities in this programming.

Box 7: The Phase II Education Development Fund for Zimbabwe (£59 million; 2012-2019) had a strong focus on children with disabilities

This programme trained over 80,000 Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education personnel to understand and support education of children with disabilities. It sensitised 28,790 community members to send their children with disabilities to school. It also provided more funding to special schools serving children with more complex needs.

- 4.37 However, our interviews with internal and external stakeholders indicated a more cautious narrative on DFID/FCDO's progress on addressing disability in education. While some felt that there has been a continued interest in children with disabilities over the review period, a larger number felt that this has seen reduced prioritisation by UK ministers. For example, a few civil society stakeholders suggested that the UK government could have been more active in using the 2021 G7 summit and the most recent GPE replenishment to promote the educational needs of children with disabilities. In addition, centrally managed disability programming has not been as successful as hoped.

“ We have students with mild disabilities but can't enrol students who need special care because they need specialised support that our teachers are not trained to provide. However, we do accept students with physical disabilities because they can learn easily, they just need some assistance. ”

Headteacher, Bangladesh

4.38 Many internal and external stakeholders conceded that addressing educational inequalities for children with disabilities in developing countries is challenging, given that these children face significant barriers and there is a lack of data to support efforts to identify and address their needs. For example, in Tanzania, stakeholders within and outside FCDO were clear that DFID/FCDO has emphasised the importance of inclusion of disabled children, highlighting relevant DFID-funded technical assistance and the successful production of an inclusive education strategy by the Tanzanian government. However, they also commonly acknowledged that this area is “work in progress”, due to the scale of the challenge and given resource constraints.

DFID/FCDO has made progress in influencing multilateral organisations to focus on the most marginalised, but more progress is needed

4.39 FCDO staff told us that DFID/FCDO has been pushing GPE to do more on gender equality and that some progress has been made. GPE reported that its implementation grants approved between 2016 and 2020 allocated 30% of funds, or \$640 million, to activities specifically promoting equity, gender equality and inclusion, with \$147 million allocated to activities exclusively promoting gender equality.⁸⁷ However, the recent independent Summative Evaluation of GPE⁸⁸ concluded that the operationalisation of GPE’s own internal gender equality strategies and plans, in particular at the country level, is only at an early stage. Similarly, FCDO has itself judged that the level of ambition of GPE investments to improve the inclusion and learning of marginalised children, especially girls and children with disabilities, still needs to increase.

4.40 Internal and external stakeholders informed us that DFID/FCDO has helped to promote a recent shift among donors towards focusing more on education in emergencies, including through its influential role in establishing and promoting ECW. We also found that DFID/FCDO has supported the development of ECW’s institutional strategy, and that in-country staff have supported the tailoring of ECW in different country contexts. However, our country assessments in Bangladesh, South Sudan and Syria presented more mixed evidence of the success of ECW on the ground, particularly in Syria where there are weaknesses in its coherence with wider education programming. At the end of the first phase of DFID support to ECW (implemented between 2016 and 2019), DFID/FCDO concluded that, despite the support it had provided around gender (including for the development of ECW’s Gender Strategy), ECW still needs to enhance its focus on inclusion and gender equality in programming.

4.41 DFID/FCDO’s substantial contributions to IDA⁸⁹ have ensured influencing power. DFID/FCDO is recognised by other donors as a strong advocate for inclusive education and a focus on learning outcomes. FCDO staff thought that the increased focus on education and marginalised groups in successive IDA replenishments can be partly attributed to DFID/FCDO influence.

A number of aspects of the way DFID/FCDO has worked have enabled programmes to reach marginalised groups

4.42 One factor that has helped DFID/FCDO to reach highly marginalised children has been effective partnership with implementing partners who already had good community outreach to the most marginalised. For example, GEC projects run by Camfed in Tanzania have been highly relevant to the needs of marginalised girls, including through providing social support and guidance, informed by the way Camfed draws on the understanding of local people in implementing its projects. For example, Camfed supports some young women who have completed school to work as ‘learner guides’ in their communities, providing peer support and a link between home and school.

4.43 Other factors enabling DFID/FCDO to reach marginalised children include having staff in country with good contextual knowledge, as well as having effective internal mechanisms to promote equity in programming, including equity now being a key component of value for money assessments.

87 Results report 2021: Final results report on GPE’s 2016-2020 strategy, GPE, 2021, p. 36, [link](#).

88 Independent summative evaluation of the Global Partnership for Education 2020: Final report, MDF Training & Consultancy, May 2020, p. 5, [link](#).

89 The UK periodically provides core contributions to IDA – for 2017 to 2020, this was a grant equivalent value of £2.888 billion. Over the review period, about 8% of IDA aid was for education. See *Is the Global Partnership for Education redundant? Or is it a more progressive, democratic alternative to the World Bank?*, Center for Global Development, January 2021, [link](#).

Conclusions on equity

- 4.44 DFID/FCDO has had some success in reaching highly marginalised children through its aid to education, although we cannot determine the scale of overall success for reaching children with disabilities. DFID/FCDO is seen as a global leader in using its aid to provide education for marginalised girls.
- 4.45 The performance of GEC in supporting marginalised girls has improved since the first phase of GEC, including around influencing systemic change. DFID/FCDO's aid to education has reached children affected by conflict and humanitarian disasters effectively through various channels. Its focus on children with disabilities in its programming has grown over the review period.
- 4.46 DFID/FCDO has made progress in influencing multilateral organisations to focus on the most marginalised, but more progress is needed. In particular, GPE's level of ambition in promoting the inclusion and learning of the most marginalised still needs to increase. We therefore award a **green-amber** score for equity.

Impact: To what extent is DFID/FCDO achieving sustainable impact through its aid to education?

- 4.47 In this section we set out our main findings on the extent to which DFID/FCDO has achieved sustainable impact through its aid to education since 2015. While the section on our findings around effectiveness considered whether programming has been implemented as intended to support children to gain an education, this section considers the extent to which it has made a difference to children's progress in learning. DFID/FCDO's approach to promoting sustainable impact through its aid to education involves support for developing teachers' skills, efforts to build capacity and strengthen education systems, as well as the generation of evidence to promote best practice. However, sustainable impact will require continued resourcing beyond DFID/FCDO programmes, from governments and others, therefore this section also looks at how effectively the UK has leveraged resources for education from others. Finally, it presents some reflections on how the UK has responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the implications of budget reductions for aid to education for sustaining the impact that DFID/FCDO has achieved. Throughout, we make judgements around whether DFID/FCDO met the scale of its own expectations in planning documents, either for particular programmes or more broadly.

The challenge of the 'learning crisis' that DFID/FCDO has aimed to address is substantial

- 4.48 At the current rate of progress, it would take at least 40 years to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 target on learning.⁹⁰ Many education systems in developing countries where DFID/FCDO supports education persistently deliver poor learning for children. In 2019, over half of children in low- and middle-income countries were living in 'learning poverty' – that is, they were unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten (closer to 90% in sub-Saharan Africa).⁹¹
- 4.49 Common factors contributing to the significant challenge of improving children's learning include under-investment in education systems, weak capacity for governing and managing education reforms, poor teaching quality resulting from teachers not being appropriately trained, supported, managed or motivated, and curricula that are not well suited to the varying needs and potential of children.⁹²

90 *Result report 2021 – Final results report on GPE's 2016-2020 strategy*, GPE, 2021, p. 34, [link](#).

91 *Learning poverty: children's education in crisis*, World Bank, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

92 The literature review is available on the ICAI website, [link](#).

Box 8: While DFID/FCDO has contributed to improvements, the quality of education in Tanzanian schools remains poor

DFID/FCDO has made substantial contributions to supporting improvements to education quality in Tanzania (see **Box 9**). However, education quality in Tanzania remained poor, even before the pandemic. One-fifth of primary schools in Tanzania have a pupil-teacher ratio of over 75. Teacher absenteeism is at 43%. There is a chronic lack of textbooks and infrastructure. Corporal punishment and sexual violence are a significant risk in and around schools. Looking at children's learning attainment, only 5% of children in Grade II (approximately age seven) can read with comprehension, with the situation particularly bad for girls – who have lower rates of passing exams and transitioning to secondary school than boys – and for children with disabilities.⁹³

In Tanzania, our citizens' voice fieldwork with teachers, parents and children provided further evidence that the quality of education is poor. School facilities and equipment were consistently described as inadequate. Many children reportedly did not eat throughout the school day. Most headteachers indicated that teachers at their school did not have the adequate training, materials and facilities to do their work properly. Many teachers reported that they did not feel supported to keep developing or receive necessary training to teach in line with curriculum changes. In the schools that we visited, we observed very high pupil-teacher ratios and parents told us that children's learning was poor.

“ Our children do not have enough learning materials, including textbooks. The school environment is unsuitable because our children do not have lunch and stay hungry. ”

Parent

“ We are about 600 students in total, roughly 300 boys and 300 girls. So, how can 300 girls use only three toilets? This is the main reason why I sometimes miss coming to school and especially when I am on my periods or if I have diarrhoea. ”

Secondary school student

“ Parents don't value schools much nowadays because we see students who completed school are coming back home with no skills at all to help us out of poverty. They are in fact equal to the ones who have never been to school. ”

Parent

Despite DFID/FCDO's strategic commitment during the review period to improving learning, we found that many programmes lacked clear evidence on whether they had an impact on children's progress in learning

- 4.50 Seven of the programmes that we assessed did not gather enough information on impact on learning for us to make a judgement on whether DFID/FCDO's expectations had been met. The evaluation of the Punjab Education Support Programme II (£437 million; 2013-2022), concluded that there is some evidence of improvements in children's learning but the available data is insufficient to draw firm conclusions.⁹⁴ At the country level where we carried out assessments of DFID/FCDO's aid to education, data on children's learning is sparse.⁹⁵
- 4.51 A key reason why many programmes lacked clear evidence on whether they had an impact on children's learning, such as their ability to reach a specific standard in reading and maths, is that DFID/FCDO is often

93 *Shule bora (quality school) business case*, DFID, undated, p. 2, [link](#).

94 This programme was not one of the programmes we selected for assessment, but it has been the UK's largest bilateral programme to support education over the review period. See *Performance evaluation of the Punjab education sector programme (PESP2): Final evaluation report*, e-PACT, April 2021, [link](#).

95 We used [UNESCO UIS database](#) to extract data for our six assessment countries. The data on reading and mathematics attainment across countries and time is extremely sparse.

reliant on weak local learning assessment systems to provide this data. DFID/FCDO programmes have tried to gather such evidence or support governments to do so.

- 4.52 Despite this overall picture, there were some programmes that produced excellent evidence on learning impacts. For example, individual GEC projects commissioned independent baseline, midline and endline data collection on children’s literacy and numeracy learning with groups of children who received support and compared this with data for those that did not receive support. This enabled them to quantify the impact on children’s learning and measure the difference that the project made. The evaluation of the Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania similarly produced quantitative estimates of the programme’s impact on pupil learning in literacy and numeracy.
- 4.53 In its 2018 *Education policy*, DFID committed to “introduce a new headline indicator on whether children are learning, which will be reported across our portfolio, and new approaches to ensure all relevant programmes are measuring teaching quality”. These indicators and approaches are not yet in place as they are under development. In future, FCDO is planning to have results reporting aligned to the education commitments agreed by the G7 international partners in May 2021, including around children’s learning.
- 4.54 DFID/FCDO staff described how they have been working to support further generation of evidence on children’s learning, including through building capacity in government systems for tracking learning where possible. For example, in Tanzania, DFID/FCDO has used technical assistance to support impressive (and institutionalised) improvements in education data availability and quality, including a high-quality sample-based assessment of children’s learning. DFID/FCDO has also been working to support the global system to use comparable learning data.
- 4.55 DFID/FCDO has supported its multilateral partners to improve data on learning. DFID/FCDO staff strongly argued for a shift to a focus on learning outcomes in IDA education work and noted that this advocacy had contributed to a change in the IDA Results Measurement System education indicator from one around teacher recruitment to one around learning. Similarly, GPE recognises the need for data on children’s learning and has supported an increase in the proportion of its partner countries that have put in place a quality learning assessment system over the review period.

The available evidence points to mixed achievement of impact on learning through UK aid

- 4.56 Among the 11 DFID/FCDO programmes which gathered evidence on learning outcomes, only six achieved expected learning impacts. An example is the Youth Education and Skills Programme for Economic Growth (£26 million; 2016-2021) which provided ‘second-chance’ education for poor urban children in Bangladesh who were not in school. The evidence collected by this programme suggested that its students’ scores in reading and writing competencies were much higher than those achieved by children in government primary schools. Similarly, we found evidence that children supported in school in Bangladesh through the Strategic Partnership Agreement II between DFID and BRAC (£222 million; 2016-2021) achieved a higher literacy rate than comparison groups.
- 4.57 The programmes, which tracked learning outcomes, but failed to deliver expected impacts, included GEC. Neither phase of the programme has met DFID/FCDO’s targets on the numbers of marginalised girls supported to improve their learning, although performance has been stronger for the second phase, which is still in progress. In the first phase, 820,000 girls met set literacy and numeracy learning targets, against a revised target of 1,048,407. The independent evaluation of this phase of GEC⁹⁶ concluded that significant changes in some project designs and delivery processes – especially a refocusing of activities to increase the intensity of their impact on learning – were required in order to achieve the literacy and numeracy gains that marginalised girls needed to progress with their education. As a further example, for the third phase of Bangladesh’s Primary Education Development Programme (which was funded by the Bangladeshi government and development partners, including by DFID), learning outcomes in language and maths remained very low by the end of the programme, and in

fact declined over the programme period. Interventions on improved management, infrastructure and materials, as well as more contact hours with children, did not translate into better learning for students. FCDO staff related this to ongoing systemic challenges, including the quality of teaching.

DFID/FCDO has used available evidence in its programming effectively and this has helped to increase the impact of its aid on children’s learning

4.58 We found that DFID/FCDO has used available evidence on ‘what works’ in supporting children to learn effectively for decision making in its programming. All of the programmes that we assessed used such evidence, either in their development and/or on an ongoing basis, applying evidence to adapt programming. For example, the ‘Healing Classrooms’ approach used in the Syria Education Programme for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support is based on action research and field testing.⁹⁷ As another example, DFID/FCDO education staff in Tanzania engaged well with different strands of evidence and learning (see **Box 9**). Overall, internal and external stakeholders were mostly positive about DFID/FCDO’s use of evidence. FCDO staff described the ways in which the use of evidence on ‘what works’ has been promoted effectively within DFID/FCDO, including through high-level championing of the use of evidence, quality assurance of programmes’ Business Cases and central support on programme development.

Box 9: FCDO-funded research is informing education systems strengthening in Tanzania

The Education Programme for Results in Tanzania (£104 million; 2014-2021) has been incentivising and supporting the Ministry of Education to set up a School Quality Assurance unit that mentors teachers to improve the quality of their teaching. The FCDO-funded Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme (see paragraph 4.59), which is generating evidence in Tanzania, is evaluating this School Quality Assurance. RISE researchers have presented their findings and recommendations to the Tanzanian government and donors, and this has informed the further development of the School Quality Assurance unit. Findings that have informed this development include the need to:

- strengthen follow-up as part of the School Quality Assurance process so that teachers can be regularly mentored in implementing recommendations
- improve School Quality Assurance tools for measuring teacher quality through classroom observations.

One donor staff member that we interviewed told us that:

“RISE research is part of conversations. They have presented ... in front of the senior management in government. The issues raised are really taken on board.”

The new FCDO bilateral country education programme (Shule Bora – Quality Education, £89 million; 2020-2026) has used evidence from the independent evaluation of DFID’s Education Quality Improvement Programme in Tanzania (EQUIP-T), and lessons from the programme more broadly, to influence the approach to teacher Continuing Professional Development nationally. The approach developed through EQUIP-T has been written into national policy and FCDO is now supporting the development of a plan to implement it.

DFID/FCDO has been at the forefront globally in generating evidence to inform education programming, although gaps remain and the evidence needs to be made more usable

4.59 We found that DFID/FCDO has invested significantly in building evidence on ‘what works’ in education over the review period. We estimate that DFID/FCDO spent £60 million through its Research Department on education between 2015 and 2021. For example, its Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) programme (£38 million; 2014-2025), which is generating evidence in seven countries, aims to

⁹⁷ In the context of sudden-onset and chronic crises, as well as contexts of post-crisis and state fragility, the Healing Classrooms approach is designed to develop and strengthen the role that schools and particularly teachers play in promoting the psychosocial recovery and well-being of children and youth. See *Creating healing classrooms*, Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, accessed January 2022, [link](#).

change the way that education policymakers and practitioners understand how education systems work, so as to help them to make more impactful decisions around education reform. The findings from RISE, however, have not yet been synthesised to make them readily usable by policymakers and relevance will depend on the specific context.⁹⁸

4.60 Another particularly significant contribution from DFID/FCDO to promoting the use of evidence in the education sector has been its partnership with the World Bank to review and assess the evidence on ‘what works’ for improving learning in low- and middle-income countries and synthesise it into a useable format for policymakers.⁹⁹ FCDO staff were mostly positive about the usefulness of this ‘smart buys’ research, which they told us has been used to help facilitate policy discussions at the country level on ‘what works’, including when advising governments. Some external stakeholders and FCDO staff indicated caution around its use, because of concerns that it is not relevant to all contexts, including emergency contexts. FCDO staff were, however, aware of the importance of considering the local context when using evidence and the importance of locally generated evidence in developing and adapting programming. This ‘smart buys’ research also found that significant evidence gaps still exist, for example around ‘what works’ in education in emergencies and for children with disabilities, as well as around methods to implement in-service teacher training successfully, all of which have been important parts of DFID/FCDO’s programming over the review period.¹⁰⁰

We found good evidence that DFID/FCDO has made important contributions to strengthening national education systems

4.61 DFID’s 2018 *Education policy* refers to ‘backing system reform’ as one of its three priorities. Supporting national education systems increases the sustainable impact of aid because national governments are the primary channel for sustaining improvements over the long term.^{101,102} DFID/FCDO has worked well with partners to strengthen the quality of national education systems, with most internal and external stakeholders noting that this had been a clear priority of the UK. We judged that most of the education programmes that we assessed (11 of the 13 for which we were able to make a judgement) met the scale of DFID/FCDO’s own expectations around strengthening the quality of national education systems. Many of the programmes that we assessed worked with and through partner governments, and this has helped with likely sustainability. However, our analysis of publicly available data¹⁰³ describes an increasingly complex picture with different kinds of organisations involved in delivering UK aid support to national education systems. It shows that the extent to which DFID/FCDO has directly used partner government systems for its aid to education has declined over the review period.

4.62 One important example of DFID/FCDO working more indirectly to support national education systems is the flagship GEC programme. GEC is a competitive grant fund to harness the expertise and capacity of non-state actors to provide schooling for disadvantaged girls and build evidence about ways to address barriers to education. Since it does not directly support national education systems, it relies on influencing national or local education policies as a means to achieve sustainable impact. The way in which GEC has done this has improved over the review period (see paragraphs 4.35 to 4.37).

98 Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning, Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020, [link](#).

99 Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning, Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020, [link](#).

100 Cost-effective approaches to improve global learning, Global Education Evidence Advisory Panel, 2020, [link](#).

101 The Paris Declaration and other results of the High-level forums on aid effectiveness embodied a broad consensus on what needed to be done to produce better development results. Its principles include fostering recipient countries’ ownership of development policies and strategies, maximising donors’ coordination and harmonisation, improving aid transparency and mutual accountability of donors and recipients. See *The high level fora on aid effectiveness: A history*, OECD, accessed February 2022, [link](#).

102 Use of government systems has been promoted by international aid reform processes to support government ownership, to help strengthen systems and to promote the sustainability of impact.

103 For GPEX data, see Table 4 at [link](#). For CRS data, see [link](#).

Box 10: DFID/FCDO has used technical assistance to strengthen national education systems

The **Learning for All programme in Rwanda** has included technical assistance focused on systems strengthening. For example, the technical assistance component of the programme:

- worked with the Rwandan Ministry of Education to support the development of a girls' education policy, which drew attention to inequalities in access and performance. This contributed to the increased emphasis placed on girls' education in Rwanda.
- developed a Comprehensive Assessment Management Information System, which was well received by Rwandan education officials. It is now being used for monitoring the catch-up programme in all schools after COVID-19 school closures, allowing the government to identify schools and learners most in need of remedial learning.

The **Education Programme for Results in Tanzania** (£104 million; 2014-2021) has incentivised the Tanzanian government to prioritise some specific reforms, including through FCDO-funded technical assistance. Stakeholders, including from government, implementing partners, FCDO and other donors, agreed that DFID/FCDO has used technical assistance effectively in strengthening the national system. For example, this technical assistance:

- supported the creation of a robust, digitised education monitoring and information system and provided capacity building at different levels around data collection and making informed decisions using data.
- helped set up a School Quality Assurance unit under the Ministry of Education that visits schools, supporting and mentoring teachers to improve the quality of their teaching.
- helped to increase the reliability of government funding to schools.

DFID/FCDO has often played a convening and influencing role in partner countries around education systems strengthening, which has promoted the effectiveness of UK aid to education, improved its coherence and amplified its impact

4.63 By working to improve the coherence of aid to education in partner countries, DFID/FCDO has amplified the impact of all this aid. We found evidence across our six assessment countries that the UK has played a significant convening and influencing role around education. We also found a strong level of coherence across UK education aid channels in these countries. Many internal and external stakeholders felt that DFID/FCDO in-country education advisers were key to the contribution made by UK aid, enabled by their technical expertise, understanding of the political economy, strong relationships and a willingness to actively support multilateral investments alongside bilateral education programming.

4.64 One of the ways that DFID/FCDO has undertaken such convening is through operating as the coordinating agent for GPE in partner countries. This has enabled it to have significant influence on governments and on donor coordination for national education systems strengthening in partner countries (see paragraphs 4.22-4.33). DFID/FCDO was a key stakeholder in both influencing and supporting GPE in the countries that we assessed. For example, while acting as coordinating agent for GPE in Ghana, DFID/FCDO supported the government to create its education sector plan, which has reportedly “provided a guiding light” as it is being used as a reference point for guiding the engagement of different stakeholders. Globally, GPE has met most of DFID/FCDO's expectations, although crucially not in relation to influencing governments to improve the quality of these education sector plans, which remain overly ambitious and unachievable.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, recent evaluations of GPE have found that the programme has generally only made modest contributions to sector plan implementation.^{105,106} While we found many examples where DFID/FCDO has promoted the effectiveness of these plans and their implementation, some interviewees from other development partners urged FCDO to be more active at the country level in all partner countries in ensuring that GPE meets expectations for delivery.

104 GPE annual review 2020, FCDO, September 2020, [link](#).

105 GPE country-level evaluations - Final synthesis report, ITAD, April 2020, [link](#).

106 Independent summative evaluation of the Global Partnership for Education 2020: Final report, MDF Training & Consultancy, May 2020, p. 5, [link](#).

DFID/FCDO's progress on encouraging greater investment in education by national governments, donors and development finance institutions has been slow

4.65 The volume of domestic spending on education increased between 2015 and 2019 (based on data for 61 countries), although this level is still insufficient to achieve SDG 4.¹⁰⁷ In its 2018 *Education policy*, DFID confirmed its commitment to encouraging greater investment in education by national governments, other donors and development finance institutions.¹⁰⁸ DFID/FCDO has worked with other donors on a range of mechanisms to mobilise investment, including the International Financing Facility for Education (IFFEd), which aims to use donor support (including £300 million from the UK) to enable multilateral development banks to increase their concessional finance to education by \$10 billion. However, progress on IFFEd and other mechanisms has been slow and the funding gap has been exacerbated by the pandemic.¹⁰⁹ Fundraising for IFFEd is being relaunched in 2022 and the UK remains committed in principle. The DFID/FCDO pilot Quality Education India Development Impact Bond is currently being implemented and evaluated.¹¹⁰ DFID/FCDO has also committed £30 million to a UNICEF-hosted education outcome fund targeting improvements in learning in Sierra Leone and Ghana. In 2021, the girls' education action plan confirmed that DFID/FCDO will continue to press for more and better targeted international education finance.¹¹¹

COVID-19 has been a severe setback for education in the countries that DFID/FCDO has supported, and DFID/FCDO has adapted its programmes in response

- 4.66 COVID-19 has severely impacted educational reach and quality. At its peak, school closures affected 1.6 billion children in 188 countries, with over one billion of these children living in low- and middle-income countries, with the world's poorest children disproportionately affected. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schooling is, according to the UN, a "generational catastrophe".
- 4.67 We found that DFID/FCDO has taken effective action to limit the effects of COVID-19 on the impact of its aid to education (although these impacts will unavoidably still be severe). Strategic-level documents from FCDO provided several examples of DFID/FCDO adapting its interventions to provide relevant support during the crisis. Across the programmes that we assessed, DFID/FCDO, partner and implementer actions were often successful in adapting programmes. These adaptations included support for home learning (including through using radio and telephone for lessons and developing self-study materials) and the safe reopening of schools. For example, ECW mobilised a dedicated funding window to provide grants to ECW-supported countries dealing with COVID-19, including for distance learning, mental health support, access to water and communication on COVID-19 safety. DFID/FCDO also commonly supported effective coordination across international and national responses.

107 *Results report 2021: Final results report on GPE's 2016-2020 strategy*, GPE, 2021, [link](#).

108 *Education policy 2018: Get children learning*, DFID, 2018, p. 3, [link](#).

109 At a time when education will require more investment to recover from the effects of the pandemic, education financing finds itself in a 'triple shock' – national education spending is likely to stagnate, family spending is likely to drop, and external financing could deteriorate. See *Protecting education finance from COVID-19's triple funding shock*, *World Bank blogs*, Samer Al-Samarrai, 2021, [link](#).

110 *Quality education India development impact bond: A case study produced as part of the FCDO DIBs evaluation*, Ecorys and FCDO, 2021, [link](#).

111 *Every girl goes to school, stays safe, and learns: Five years of global action 2021–26*, FCDO, May 2021, p. 7-8, [link](#).

Box 11: Evidence of the impacts of COVID-19 on education from our citizens' voice work

Through our citizens' voice research we heard about the effects of the pandemic on schools:

“ Our performance was worse during the pandemic since we had to join online classes and sometimes the electricity would cut or the internet would go down. Face-to-face classes are more effective than online classes. Additionally, some of our teachers left during the pandemic and we are now short of teachers. ”

Student, Bangladesh

“ Our performance has become poor because, during the lockdown, we did not study. When the school re-opened, we had forgotten everything. ”

Student, Tanzania

Teachers also mentioned that some children did not return to school after closures due to safety concerns or because they had begun working or had become pregnant and dropped out of school as a result.

Budget reductions to UK aid to education (and supporting sectors) pose a risk to FCDO retaining its ability to protect the impact it has achieved

- 4.68 Significant reductions to the UK aid budget were made in 2020 due to the impact of COVID-19 on the UK economy (£0.7 billion)¹¹² and in 2021 due to the government's decision to reduce the aid spending target from 0.7% to 0.5% of UK gross national income (an estimated £3.5 billion).¹¹³
- 4.69 FCDO has not supplied us with sufficient information on the budget reductions to allow us to gain a comprehensive overview of their nature across the whole portfolio, although we do have an overview of their scale for both bilateral and multilateral channels. We cannot, therefore, assess what types of programmes have been particularly affected, or where, across the bilateral portfolio. It is clear from the information we have that budget reductions in aid to education have been significant, and that they have often fallen on bilateral education programming rather than multilateral programming.¹¹⁴
- 4.70 Bilateral aid to education fell from £789 million in 2019 to £545 million in 2020 – a 31% reduction.¹¹⁵ For 2021, FCDO advised us that it is currently forecasting £421 million of spending on education, although this was an estimate taken at a point in time and subject to change.
- 4.71 In terms of multilateral channels of support for education, the approach to future spending commitments has been more mixed. The UK government reduced its commitment to the most recent replenishment of IDA (the largest provider of concessional finance for education) by 54%¹¹⁶ or an estimated \$1.8 billion over three years.^{117, 118} There have been no changes to UK funding to ECW. The UK pledged £430 million in funding to GPE during 2021-25, an increase compared to its previous pledge, but lower than had been expected by many.
- 4.72 DFID/FCDO reported to us that, in the context of these reductions, it had made efforts to ensure that a robust approach to fast-paced decisions around the future of education programmes was taken, as well as to minimise overall budget reductions in this priority area. However, we were not able to verify this claim.

112 *Statistics on international development: Final UK aid spend 2020*, FCDO, September 2021, [link](#).

113 *The UK's reduction in aid spending*, IFS, April 2021, [link](#).

114 Our literature review (available on the ICAI website, [link](#)) concluded that the literature is inconclusive on whether either bilateral or multilateral aid is more effective overall and noted that the relative effectiveness of aid channels may vary across sectors, donors and recipient countries.

115 *Annual report and accounts: 2020-21*, FCDO, September 2021, p. 256, [link](#).

116 *20th replenishment of International Development Association – Statement made on 22 February 2022*, Elizabeth Truss – Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, [link](#).

117 *Donors fail to hit expectation for IDA20 despite record \$93B haul*, Devex, December 2021, [link](#).

118 The overall financing for IDA, from all donors, grew.

- 4.73 Of the ten programmes we assessed that are ongoing or had anticipated a ‘follow-up’ programme or extension, six experienced reductions to their anticipated budgets for 2021-22, of which five were bilateral country programmes and one was the second phase of GEC. In five of our six assessment countries, bilateral education programming was subject to budget reductions in 2021-22.
- 4.74 UK aid budget reductions in other sectors, such as sexual and reproductive health – which have been significant¹¹⁹ – are likely to have had a knock-on impact on girls’ access to and attainment in education, as investing in this area can reduce adolescent pregnancy and early marriage, which often act as barriers to girls’ education.¹²⁰
- 4.75 Some strategic stakeholders, both within FCDO and externally from other development partners, questioned whether the UK would retain its influence on education, both globally and in partner countries, given the reductions to UK aid to education. In its 2021 Spending Review, the government committed to “increase funding supporting women and girls, including to help many more girls receive a quality education”.¹²¹ However, it is unclear what this will mean in practice for FCDO spending on education.
- 4.76 In the context of the budget reductions and the merger of DFID with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, a ‘Strategic Workforce Planning’ exercise is currently underway. In light of this, many FCDO staff thought that FCDO needs to retain its cadre of education advisers in order to be effective.

Conclusions on impact

- 4.77 Vast challenges remain for improving the quality of education and learning in partner countries, especially in the context of the pandemic. Despite DFID/FCDO’s strategic commitment during the review period to improving learning, we found that some programmes lacked clear evidence on whether they had made an impact on children’s learning. Of those programmes that did, just under half did not achieve their expected impact on learning.
- 4.78 DFID/FCDO has made positive contributions to promoting sustainable improvements to education through efforts around coordination of development partners, use of evidence and support for systems strengthening. FCDO should build on these strengths. These contributions have not always translated into the expected improvements to children’s learning, although this finding should be seen in the context of the large scale of the challenges within and outside education systems that influence learning and the relatively small scale of DFID/FCDO’s spending compared to total education spending.
- 4.79 Despite the urgency of the need for investment to address the ‘learning crisis’, DFID/FCDO’s progress on encouraging greater use of international finance for education has been slow. In the context of these challenges, UK aid to education has experienced significant budget reductions, which pose a risk to FCDO retaining its influence on education, both globally and in partner countries. We therefore award a **green-amber** score for impact.

119 *Just the numbers: Impact of UK sexual and reproductive health funding for family planning, fiscal year 2021–2022*, Guttmacher Institute, October 2021, [link](#).

120 *12 years of quality education: How investing in sexual and reproductive health and rights helps keep girls in school*, UK all-party parliamentary group on population, development and reproductive health, June 2021, [link](#).

121 *Autumn budget and spending review 2021: A stronger economy for the British people*, HM Treasury, October 2021, [link](#).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

- 5.1 DFID/FCDO's approach to estimating the number of children it has supported in education has been systematic and reasonable, and most likely underestimates this total due to conservative elements of the methodology. The figure produced represents an estimate of how many children were supported to go to school and get a better-quality education than they otherwise would have done. However, DFID/FCDO is not yet able to measure its aggregate results around children's learning globally, which would provide a better measure of how many children it had supported to gain a quality or 'decent education'. It is currently working on developing such metrics.
- 5.2 DFID/FCDO set itself high expectations for its education programmes. Over the review period programmes have been implemented effectively, although one-quarter of programmes have not done as much as DFID/FCDO had expected for girls. DFID/FCDO has been influential in strengthening the quality of multilateral education programming, although there are some weaknesses in its coherence and effectiveness which FCDO needs to do more to address.
- 5.3 DFID/FCDO has implemented programming relevant to the needs of marginalised groups, especially marginalised girls. It has successfully reached highly marginalised children. The performance of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) for marginalised girls has improved since the first phase, although weaknesses remain around progress in influencing national governments to take up the evidence from the programme. DFID/FCDO is not able to report on the reach of its programmes supporting children with disabilities, and relevant centrally managed programmes have been less successful than hoped.
- 5.4 DFID/FCDO has made progress in influencing multilateral organisations to focus on the most marginalised. However, more progress is needed on securing more ambitious action from GPE and ECW on gender.
- 5.5 DFID/FCDO expert staff have often played a convening and influencing role in partner countries around education systems strengthening and have supported the coherence of spending on education. DFID/FCDO has also been at the forefront globally in generating and using evidence to inform education programming. This work to promote the use of evidence on 'what works' is valued by partners and will have helped to maximise the sustainable impact of DFID/FCDO's aid to education.
- 5.6 Vast challenges remain for improving the quality of education and learning in partner countries, especially in light of the pandemic. While UK aid to education has contributed well to education systems strengthening over the review period, the quality of education in many partner countries remains very poor, with the majority of children unable to read and understand a simple text by the age of ten. Robust evidence of the difference that DFID/FCDO programmes are making to learning is not available for all programmes, although DFID/FCDO has been supporting the generation of such evidence. What evidence is available points to mixed achievement of impact on learning. Globally, more investment is needed to address the scale of the challenge, and DFID/FCDO could have done more to leverage additional education funding from other sources, but funding will not be enough. FCDO needs to build on its strengths in supporting the capacity of national education systems to ensure that all of the spending on education in partner countries, not just its own, translates into improved learning. In light of this, shortcomings in the quality of national education sector plans supported by GPE, over which DFID/FCDO has had considerable influence, are concerning.
- 5.7 In the context of the UK's objective to provide global leadership on tackling the learning crisis, UK aid to education has experienced significant budget reductions. This poses a risk to FCDO sustaining its influence on education globally and its ability to mobilise investment in education from others.

Recommendations

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.

Problem statements:

- Robust evidence on impact on learning is not available for all programmes.
- The available evidence points to mixed achievement.
- Vast challenges remain for improving the quality of education and learning globally, especially given the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The evidence on what improvements are required to improve children's learning is often inadequate, contested, or not synthesised into a usable format for policymakers.

Recommendation 2:

FCDO should accelerate its work with partner governments to improve their ability to collect and use good data on children's learning.

Problem statements:

- FCDO is not yet able to measure its results around children's learning for all of its programmes or globally.
- The results reported at the aggregate level across DFID/FCDO's education portfolio do not measure how many children DFID/FCDO has supported to improve their learning.

Recommendation 3:

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

Problem statements:

- Some programmes have had insufficient focus on girls.
- Not all programmes have achieved as much as DFID/FCDO expected for girls.

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.

Problem statements:

- GEC lacks a well-functioning system for planning and tracking progress on implementing activities to promote lasting change beyond the girls that are directly supported.
- For GEC, budget reductions are likely to affect the quality of dissemination of learning, reducing the impact of this extensive evidence gathering in the future.

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.

Problem statements:

- Some weaknesses remain in the coherence of UK aid to education, particularly around competition between Education Cannot Wait and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).
- Many of the education sector plans that GPE has supported are overly ambitious and poorly implemented, which mitigates against the impact of UK aid to education.
- Budget reductions to UK aid to education have been very significant and, along with potential restructuring to staff, pose a risk to FCDO retaining its influence on education globally and improving education quality in partner countries.

Annex 1: Details of the DFID/FCDO education spending assessed in detail for this review

Support to global funds		
Global Partnership for Education (GPE)	GPE is a fund focused on providing quality education to children in lower-income countries. It does this through providing technical and financial assistance to partner governments to develop high-quality, equitable, nationally owned education sector plans and support their implementation. Approximately 90 low- and lower-middle-income countries are eligible. GPE has spent £374 million of UK aid over two phases since 2015. The UK has been the largest donor to GPE since it began in 2004.	
Education Cannot Wait (ECW)	ECW is a fund that aims to transform the delivery of education in emergencies. The UK has been the biggest contributor to ECW. ECW has spent £93 million of UK aid over two phases since 2015 (£34 million in 2016-17 and £59 million in 2019-20), and the UK has committed a further £31 million by the end of 2023. For Phase 1, DFID expected that the fund would strengthen systems and improve coordination for education in emergencies. For Phase 2, DFID expected that its funding would support 600,000 children with quality education and psychosocial support in safe learning environments. DFID also expected that national and international systems would be strengthened to deliver education for children in crises and global evidence on ‘what works’ would be produced.	
International Development Association (IDA)	IDA is the part of the World Bank that helps the world’s poorest countries. It aims to reduce poverty by providing zero- to low-interest loans and grants for programmes that boost economic growth, reduce inequalities and improve people’s living conditions. The UK has been the largest donor to IDA over the review period. The UK periodically provides core contributions to IDA – for 2017 to 2020, this was a grant equivalent value of £2.9 billion. Over the review period, about 8% of IDA aid was for education. ¹²²	
Centrally managed bilateral programmes		
Girls’ Education Challenge (GEC)	Phase 1: £355 million, 2012-2017 Phase 2: £500 million, 2017-2025	This bilateral programme, managed by DFID/FCDO centrally with 41 projects in 17 countries in its second phase, has spent £565 million of UK aid over two phases since 2015. It is the largest global fund dedicated to girls’ education. In its first phase, DFID expected that GEC would help up to 1 million of the world’s poorest girls to have an opportunity to improve their lives through education by funding projects through non-state organisations. In its second phase, DFID expected that it would enable up to 1 million marginalised girls (already supported through Phase 1) to continue to learn. A further 500,000 highly marginalised adolescent girls, who were out of school, would also be targeted to gain skills. In addition, GEC aimed to deepen global understanding of ‘what works’ for girls’ education.

¹²² Is the Global Partnership for Education Redundant? Or Is It a More Progressive, Democratic Alternative to the World Bank?, Center for Global Development, January 2021, [link](#).

Bilateral country programmes

	Dates	Budget (and our estimate of spending on education over the review period)	Programme description and expectations (at the design stage)
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Bangladesh

Bangladesh Education Development Programme	2011-2018	£115 million (£31 million)	Under this programme, DFID aimed to provide funding towards improvements in the quality of the education received by the 16.5 million Bangladeshi children attending primary school. The programme set out to address inequity. In particular, it was designed to achieve the following aims: investment in school infrastructure, training of primary school teachers, delivery of textbooks, financial support to the poorest and most disadvantaged students.
Underprivileged Children's Education and Skills Programme	2012-2016	£25 million (£11 million)	This programme set out to support education, skills and employment opportunities for poor marginalised urban children in Bangladesh. The programme provided funds to the Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP), a Bangladeshi non-governmental organisation providing education to children who have either dropped out or never enrolled in school. The funding aimed to ensure that underprivileged children were provided with quality general and technical education, skills development, employment support and rights awareness. The expected education outcomes of the programme at the design stage included: 38,000 children to graduate from Grade V (50% girls), 34,500 children to graduate from Grade VIII (50% girls), and 23,000 children to graduate from technical schools (45% girls).
Youth Education and Skills Programme for Economic Growth	2016-2021	£26 million (£18 million)	This project set out to ensure that underprivileged youth, especially females, had improved opportunities for higher education and formal employment. It was divided into five components: education, skills development, employment placement, community mobilisation and organisational sustainability. Under the education component, delivered by UCEP, DFID set out to support children (particularly girls) who had dropped out of school and were living in poor disadvantaged communities and slums to re-enter the education system. Over 26,500 children were to receive shortened, condensed schooling over four years.

Strategic Partnership Arrangement II between DFID and BRAC	2016-2021	£222 million (£63 million)	This strategic partnership arrangement between DFID and BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) aimed to provide support to BRAC's development programmes to improve access to quality basic services (health, education, water and sanitation), help the poorest, most marginalised people in Bangladesh graduate from extreme poverty, support inclusive growth and help build effective formal and informal institutions. This constituted un-earmarked funding to BRAC's development programmes, including in education. The expected results from UK support were to help over 950,000 children (600,000 girls) gain a 'decent education'.
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Rwanda

Rwanda Learning for All Programme	2015-2021	£96 million (£71 million)	This programme aimed to realise improved learning outcomes and more equitable access to primary and secondary education for boys and girls in Rwanda. The expected outcomes from the programme were to: increase the percentage of children reaching minimum learning standards in numeracy and literacy at primary level, increase attendance rates, and reduce drop-out rates.
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South Sudan

Girls' Education in South Sudan (GESS)	Phase I: 2013-2019 Phase II: 2018-2024	Phase I £61 million (£44 million) Phase II £70 million (£17 million)	GESS was designed to transform opportunities for access to education for girls. The support would be integrated with complementary livelihood and resilience-building interventions targeting adolescent girls up to the age of 18. The programme was designed to deliver mitigation interventions for sexual and gender-based violence, child marriage and failure to complete both primary and secondary levels of education. Phase II aimed to support up to 200,000 girls in primary and secondary schools to continue and complete their education. Under Phase II, the expectation was to: increase girls' participation in schooling through enhanced household and community awareness of the benefits of girls' education, deliver a community-based school improvement programme through partnership with state governments and local organisations, increase the quality of education to ensure that children, especially girls, learn effectively, and increase knowledge and evidence of 'what works' for promoting girls' education during protracted crisis and conflict.
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Syria

Syria Education Programme	2018-2022	£85 million (£49 million)	This programme aimed to provide access to safe, inclusive, and quality learning opportunities to children in Syria, while strengthening education actors to manage education effectively. Interventions included: stipend payments to teachers and education staff, implementation of a teacher payment and attendance monitoring system, capacity building of education authorities and non-governmental organisations, and quality education and psychosocial support activities. The project aimed to foster resilience and quality learning outcomes for up to 300,000 children (50% girls) with a target of 50% achieving improved basic learning outcomes.
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Tanzania

Education Quality Improvement Programme – Tanzania	2012-2021	£90 million (£74 million))	This programme aimed to support the improvement of the quality of education in primary schools in Tanzania and to increase the number of children, particularly girls, able to transfer to secondary education. It was designed to deliver teacher training, management and leadership training, capacity building of council education officers and officials, improved data and targeted measures to support girls' transition. The stated expected outcomes of this programme were: improved teaching of early-grade reading and numeracy in 2,000 schools, resulting in an additional 230,000 eight-to-ten-year-old children able to read with comprehension, more time on task for 1 million primary school children, resulting in an extra 55,000 children passing their end of primary school examinations, and 27,500 more girls able to make the transition to secondary schools.
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Education Programme for Results	2014-2021	£104 million (£95 million)	DFID provided funding alongside other donors to provide financial support to a government transformation project in the country. The delivery plan aimed to address failing schools, poor student learning outcomes and major systemic problems in primary and lower-secondary schools. The overarching objective was to improve education quality at primary and lower-secondary levels, measured through increases in the average reading speed and numeracy levels of primary Grade 2 students and end of primary and lower-secondary school examination pass rates. Expected outcomes included: full and regular releases of finance for education quality improvement, delivery of activities, including the Student Teacher Enrichment Programme and School Incentive Grant scheme, more equitable teacher distribution, reducing disparities between and within local governments, more timely and accurate data that drives accountability and performance, and improved early-grade learning competencies in reading and numeracy and more robust and reliable examination results.
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Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe Education Development Fund Phase II	2012-2019	£59 million (£35 million)	Support to this programme aimed to improve equitable access to good-quality primary and secondary education for all children in the country by providing the education sector with technical and financial support. The stated outcome of the programme was: "Strengthened scope and quality of educational services enhances equitable access, retention and achievement, with a focus on vocationally relevant skills and with special attention to the needs of vulnerable and out-of-school young people." DFID set itself targets around: primary school completion rates, achievement at Grade 2 in English and mathematics, primary and secondary school exam pass rates, enrolment rates in secondary school, gender parity in enrolment, and percentage of children out of school.
Zimbabwe Girls Secondary Education	2012-2022	40 million (£22 million)	This programme supported a multi-donor fund, which had targets relating to school grants, quality of teaching and learning and out-of-school young people. It also aimed to halt the decline in participation by girls in secondary school through bursaries, with some complementary inputs ensuring community engagement.



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