



A Decade of Learning

10 Lessons from 10 Years of UK's Education
Programming in Pakistan



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office



The document presents key lessons from the United Kingdom's (UK) portfolio of bilateral development assistance for education in Pakistan, which ended in March 2022. The portfolio comprised of several initiatives: The Punjab Education Sector Programme (PESP) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Education Sector Programme (KESP) were implemented in two phases, blending sector budget support and technical assistance. Alif Ailaan – a national education campaign under the Transforming Education in Pakistan (TEP) programme, Ilm Ideas, Sindh Education Non-State Actors (SENSA) programme complemented PESP and KESP by generating political support, innovation, tackling financial barriers for the poorest, and leveraging the role of private sector. Together this represents an investment of £800m over a decade.

Over the past decade, the UK's support has made notable impacts on access to basic education. Prior to the COVID pandemic, the education sector saw an additional 11.5 million children in basic and secondary education i.e. a 31% increase from around 36 million to over 48 million children between 2010-11 and 2017-18¹. Between 2014 and 2021, the UK directly supported at least 5.8 million children to gain access to a decent education across Pakistan. In Punjab, the UK support helped an additional 1.23 million children enrol in public schools, while 2.6 million children were supported to attend low-cost private and non-state schools. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), enrolment in primary and secondary schools increased by 55% between 2011 and 2018, with increases at the secondary level of above 70%.² In Sindh, the UK directly supported over 270,000 children who otherwise would not have been in school. Several initiatives such as disability-inclusive programming, girls' stipends and cash transfers were supported to increase enrolment of girls and marginalised children.

Successes extended beyond enrolment, with many improvements in the teaching ecosystem as well as learning. Both teacher and student attendance as well as content knowledge have improved, albeit still below grade-specific expectations. Learning among grade 3 students in Punjab's public schools improved. Between 2012 and 2019, the percentage of children achieving grade-level expectations in Urdu, Maths and English improved from 50-84%, 57-85% and 58-78% respectively.³ Grade 5 student learning improved by 21 percentage points in Maths and 17 percentage points in English and Science between 2018 and 2020 prior to COVID. In Punjab, the number of qualified teachers increased by 50%, following the introduction of more rigorous, merit-based teacher recruitment methods. These teachers turned up to school more regularly, with attendance improving from 92% in 2012 to 95% in 2019 (pre-Covid-19). In KP, 33,000 new teachers were recruited into the workforce. Between 2015 and 2022, teacher attendance increased from 83% to 92%.

These successes were built on a range of governance and systems-strengthening measures. These included strengthening of assessment and data systems; more robust teacher recruitment, training and induction; improved local autonomy and support through better capacitated district officials; better quality textbooks and learning resources; and public financial management improvements through stronger output-based budgeting, enhanced execution and stronger auditing.

This note highlights most notable lessons to inform broader dialogue on education policy as well UK's next generation bilateral education portfolio in Pakistan. The note draws primarily on the official development assistance (ODA) delivered bilaterally through the legacy Department for International Development (DFID) and now the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). FCDO is standing-up its new portfolio of support in education through the Data and Research in Education (DARE) programme and the Girls and Out of School: Action for Learning (GOAL) programme.⁴ This intermediary period presents an ideal opportunity to take stock of a decade of the UK's bilateral ODA support to education. The note presents following key lessons on three broad themes: systems strengthening and reform, broadening access to education, and ensuring children learn well in school.

¹ Pakistan Education Statistics, 2010/11 and 2017/18 (latest available official figures).

² Ibid

³ During COVID pandemic, however, these levels dropped by approximately 20 percentage points in every subject by 2022.

⁴ DARE has been into implementation phase for just one year and GOAL has been recently approved and announced by the UK Prime Minister.

Systems improvements must be politically palatable as well as technically sound...

Reforms should provide a technical solution to a problem in such a way that political actors can accrue credit and capital for the outcomes. This often involves demonstrating visible results within a short timeframe. Political engagement and momentum have been crucial to achieving key reforms in Punjab and KP, improving budgeting, service quality and accountability. However, there are politically-charged issues on which it can be difficult to find common ground or reconciliation with governance realities: private schools, multigrade classes, curriculum and textbook content, and teacher pay and conditions.

...but we must beware short-termism and capacity filling.

Education systems strengthening requires the long-haul and a holistic, clear-sighted view on what is needed to reform the system's architecture. For reforms to be sustained, they should be able to survive political transitions, loss of political engagement, and the removal of external funding and technical assistance, to be replaced with sustainable domestic financing and in-house expertise. Reform is what is left after external supports are no longer in place.

Improving education finance requires more than just allocating larger budgets.

This is not to say that increasing education budgets and spend is not crucially important, especially considering the number of children still out of school and learning less than expected. Increases in provincial education budgets were a success of PESP and KESP. Punjab increased its education budget by 40% in real terms between 2012 and 2021. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's government increased the share of its annual budget on education from 13.5% in 2014 to 16.6% in 2021. However, A greater focus on outputs, efficiency and accountability through robust public financial management (PFM) is required to ensure education finance delivers results.

Monitoring matters – but we must measure what we value.

Over the last decade, Pakistan's education sector has become a data-rich environment, particularly in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Among the most important system-strengthening successes of PESP and KESP have been the development of independent, robust and sustained education system monitoring apparatus and routines. However, improvements can still be made in the generation, sharing and – more importantly – the analysis and use of data. For this, an increased focus on outcomes data, not just input and administrative data, is required.

'Going the last mile' to reach all children will be expensive...

Huge gains in enrolment have been made over the last decade: over ten million more children were in basic education before COVID struck than in 2010-11. However, too many – approximately 20 million – children are still not enrolled, due to a range of social, cultural or environmental challenges. Boys are still favoured over girls; there are too few accessible secondary schools for girls within a distance parents feel comfortable allowing their daughters to travel; or social stigma can prevent those with disabilities or from religious minorities from attending school. To reach these children will be more expensive than previous access initiatives. KESP estimated the cost per percentage point of improvement in the net enrolment rate for primary and secondary levels increasing by 50% and 54% respectively between 2014 to 2022.

...so opportunities lie in supporting government to work with non-state providers to improve access.

Nearly half - 47% - of students in basic education (pre-primary through upper secondary) are in some form of non-state or private school (including madrassahs). Availability of private schools often reduces the distances children have to travel to school, which is a factor highly valued by parents – particularly for girls. Private and non-state actors can provide significant advantages in terms of reaching marginalised children. However, maintaining and managing a minimum standard of quality is a more difficult prospect, particularly standalone schools not part of a network. Governments must work with the whole spectrum of low-cost and non-state schools, and should frame policies and implementation modalities so that collaboration ensures minimum standards of quality while also helping to achieve increased enrolment

Improved learning outcomes requires thorough understanding and application of pedagogy in everyday classes...

Learning levels have improved, notwithstanding a persistent gender gap, variation in performance improvements by age-grade and location, and the detrimental effects of COVID-19: World Bank estimates children could lose nearly a full year's worth of learning due to COVID school closures. These gains are built upon better quality inputs to the system, with the quantity, quality and attendance of teachers in particular having improved. Nevertheless, if learning outcomes are to continue to improve and all children are to reach grade-related expectations, then teachers must know how to deploy their training to deliver tangible pedagogical behaviour change in the classrooms on a daily basis, in the form of teaching at the level of the students' understanding, increased time-on-task, effective questioning techniques and personalised feedback. This will be particularly important to help children catch-up, following the learning losses caused by extended COVID-19 enforced disruptions. The potential of the huge investments in teacher training programmes will only be realised if that training is made manifest in classrooms.

...for which, school leaders hold the key...

To ensure better pedagogy is applied every day in every classroom in every school, the role of school leaders is crucial. School leaders should be supported to become instructional leaders – not just administrators. Clearer responsibilities and expectations of, training and development for, and pathways to, school leadership are required.

and quality assessment is crucial...

Assessment is key, not just to measure learning but to create a feedback loop to improve it. Pakistan's patchwork of assessments and assessment bodies makes it difficult to understand true levels of learning, or to make meaningful comparisons between locations and groups. Other constraints to assessment include a lack of specialised, technical psychometric skills (item writing, sampling, test procedures) and core analytical expertise (report writing, comparative analysis); and weak dissemination of results and analysis to primary stakeholders (particularly teacher trainers, textbook developers and policy makers).

...but while EdTech holds huge promise, this may lie mostly in indirect support to education.

Educational technology's potential was catalysed by COVID-19 disruptions. However, market dynamics and risks of market-failure may prevent it from becoming a truly effective tool to address education equity. But ed-tech's greatest potential may not lie in children using it directly at all, but in facilitating the learning process through the training of teachers and improving system administration.