

10 lessons learned from three recent media articles on Bridge International Academies

GI-ESCR brief – February 2018

The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) works to improve and promote transparency and accountability in the delivery of education in the context of the fast growth of private actors' involvement. As part of this work, GI-ESCR researches, monitors, and publicly shares information about the [development and impact of commercial private schools](#), including Bridge International Academies (BIA or Bridge), as one of the largest and [most debated](#) chain of commercial pre-primary and primary schools.

Several [civil society reports](#) have raised major concerns about BIA, including the quality of schools, the fees, discriminatory impacts, the labour conditions, all of which were [denied by Bridge](#). Following these publications, three extensive media reports conducted by journalists were published in the last eight months:

- 'The controversial Silicon Valley-funded quest to educate the world's poorest kids', *Quartz*, by Jenny Anderson, published on 22 January 2018, available on <http://bit.ly/2stfUum>
- 'No education crisis wasted: On Bridge's "business model" in Africa', *Africa is a Country*, by Maria Hengeveld, published on 13 July 2017, available on <http://bit.ly/2unNl07>, initially published in Dutch on 16 May 2017 in the Dutch news magazine *De Correspondent*, available on <http://bit.ly/2tS3f31>
- "Can a Tech Start-Up Successfully Educate Children in the Developing World?", *New-York Times*, by Peg Tyre, published on 27 June 2017, available on <http://nyti.ms/2sUjZpm>

These three news articles stand out for the investigative rigour of publications they appear in, the depth and detail of their analysis, and the fact that they are based on original research, rather than providing a summary of different positions. They therefore allow for civil society claims to be verified against independent journalist investigations. Strikingly, not only do these articles fully corroborate [previous civil society findings](#), but they also unearth new evidence and challenges.

This brief summarises 10 key findings from these articles. Each finding is indicated by a generic heading, followed by a one summary and contextualisation sentence, and key related quotes taken from one of the three articles, with the author indicated in parenthesis.

1. Respect for national standards

Both the Kenyan and Ugandan governments have taken action against BIA for failing to comply with the minimum requirements to operate schools, including using an **unapproved curriculum, unqualified teachers and inappropriate learning facilities**. The respective authorities are taking steps to ensure **compliance of Bridge schools with national regulations, or closure**.

- "A leaked letter from the Ministry of Education reveals that a Kenyan inspection had deemed Bridge's teaching material "largely irrelevant to Kenyan teaching objectives" and that the teaching methods don't allow teachers enough room to tend to pupils with special needs." (Maria Hengeveld)
- "In August 2016, the Ministry of Education sent the company an ultimatum. Bridge was given 90 days to adapt the curriculum to Kenyan guidelines and ensure that at least half of the teachers had a diploma. If they didn't meet those requirements, Bridge was at risk of having to close down all of its schools." (Maria Hengeveld)
- "Meanwhile, for more than two years, Bridge has been mired in a legal battle about certification of some of its schools. In February 2017, a Kenyan high court in Busia County [upheld a decision](#) to [close 10 of 12 schools](#) in the

region for failing to employ enough trained and registered teachers and managers and inappropriate facilities. [In Uganda](#), a High Court of Kampala also ruled that Bridge schools should be closed, [citing concerns about](#) unlicensed schools, unqualified teachers and an unapproved curriculum, as well as inadequate latrines.” (Jenny Anderson)

- “[UK Parliament’s International Development] Committee members [questioned May](#) on...why Bridge has “strained” relations with so many of the countries in which it operates...” (Jenny Anderson)

2. Enrolment and sustainability

BIA enrolment is decreasing, and is very far from the company’s and investors’ targets. This questions the narrative that Bridge is sought after by parents, responds to a demand from communities, or is needed and cannot be closed.

- “In Kenya, enrollment was growing more slowly than the founders anticipated” (Peg Tyre)
- “By 2016, they planned to enroll more than 750,000 students, at which point they would be breaking even. By 2022, they estimated that they would educate 4.1 million students and generate \$470 million in revenue.” (Peg Tyre)
- “Bridge currently has 80,000 students enrolled, down 100,000 from last year.” (Peg Tyre)
- “It is difficult to keep up enrollment and make the schools break even,” Conway said, “because the churn is so high.” He explained that in 2017, thousands of enrolled children were not paid up.” (Peg Tyre)
- At Bridge Diamond, “Some classrooms were empty. One had 15 students sitting at desks but no teacher.” (Peg Tyre)
- “Bridge will need to keep expanding if it wants to become a sustainable business; it is currently [losing about \\$12 million a year](#).” (Jenny Anderson)
- “As a result of the uncertainty surrounding Bridge, Kenyan enrollment has fallen, from 100,000 in 2015 to 80,000 in 2017.” (Jenny Anderson)
- “The [Bridge] program needs to get considerably cheaper, and a cheaper version of the program hasn’t been tested,” Sandefur said. “It’s worth piloting and testing a version of the program under real-world budget constraints.” (Jenny Anderson)
- “If Bridge wants to operate at scale, and pursue more public-private partnerships, it seems incumbent upon it to show not only independent evidence that it can produce learning gains, but also that it can do that at a reasonable cost.” (Jenny Anderson)

3. Fees and poverty impact

As previously [documented](#), fees and other costs charged at Bridge, combined with a strict enforcement system whereby **children are expelled** for missing payments, means that either children miss schools or families miss on other essential services such as healthcare. This may also largely explain the low and declining enrolment.

- “The poorest families simply couldn’t afford the tuition and additional payments that Bridge required.” “Bridge’s strict payment system quickly became onerous. Bridge’s business in Kenya depends on most parents making routine electronic payments by mobile phone. But slum-dwelling parents in Kenya are mostly occasional workers who rarely have a predictable income. In informal settlements around Nairobi, I visited 10 or so parents in their homes who explained the fragile finances of their lives. A sick child, an uptick in the price of corn meal or even a prolonged rainstorm can throw a family on the margins into an economic crisis. In most informal and public schools, payment terms are flexible, and the subject of protracted negotiation. Bridge says that it works with families to meet their needs. But many people told me that the school sends children home if fees are not paid. “They tell you, ‘Sit at home with your child until you get the money,’ says one parent, a vegetable seller married to an unemployed welder who has two children enrolled at a Bridge school in Nairobi’s Mathare slum. Another mother with a 9-year-old child says she found it difficult to make Bridge payments: “At times I’ve gone without eating so I can pay school fees.” (Peg Tyre)
- “Michael Conway, Bridge’s East Africa director of operations, told me when I met him in Nairobi last September, “but we know families make choices about who gets paid first. We don’t want to be the last vendor paid.”” (Peg Tyre)
- “You hear such sad stories,” said Juul. “Some parents took out loans to pay the tuition fees and were evicted from their homes because they were unable to make payments on time.” (Maria Hengeveld)
- “One school administrator, an academy manager, described how the pressure to ensure that parents made their payments on time was disheartening. “I didn’t realize how hard it would be to talk to parents,” he said. “They’re ill, they’re out of work, they had a fire. No one is in the house who’s making any money. How can they pay when they have no money for food?”” (Peg Tyre)
- “Anton was fired after working for a year in the post when a quality assurance manager and a regional manager made an unannounced visit to his school and discovered three pupils attending in contravention of school fees policy. The children were registered with Bridge, but were no longer allowed to attend classes because their parents had fallen behind with the payment of tuition fees. Anton knew that he was supposed to turn pupils away if their

parents had not paid. He had already had his salary docked once and was at risk of losing his job if he continued to allow those pupils to attend” (Maria Hengeveld)

- “When asked, the company does not deny that, in practice, tuition fees are higher than the promised fees of US\$4-6” (Maria Hengeveld)

4. Teaching methodology

Independent observations [confirm](#) that the use of scripted curriculum tends to be extremely **rigid and limits interactive learning**, while the fact that is written abroad can be a source of **cultural misunderstandings**.

- “But scripts can be confining, some teachers told me. And in some of the 20 or so Bridge classrooms I observed, pupils occasionally asked questions, but Bridge instructors ignored them. Teachers say that they are required to read the day’s script as written or risk a reprimand or eventual termination, and they do not have time to entertain questions. (Peg Tyre)
- “Bridge has writers in Nairobi who create the lessons that are in Kiswahili, but many lessons, to be delivered in English, are written in America. And it is challenging to develop lesson plans for teachers and children from a different culture. Misunderstandings can occur.” (Peg Tyre)
- “The teacher reads from tablets, including Kindle Nooks and other varieties, verbatim, offering instructions about when kids should open their books, close them, stand up, cheer, or work.” (Jenny Anderson)
- “Bridge teachers’ fidelity to the scripts mean they have little agency... it makes for a classroom that can be oddly lacking in human connection. When O’Malley and I leave the grade two classroom where he was taking notes, he mentions the teacher we have been watching is one of the best in the school. I am surprised. The teacher read the script well, and smiled often. But does that make a good teacher?” (Jenny Anderson)
- “If it is too detailed and demands too much in fidelity to the script, it can’t lead to creativity on the part of the teacher,” Crouch said. He offered reading comprehension as an example. To develop and check for comprehension, “you need teachers who can converse with students in an open-ended way. By definition you cannot do that with scripting. It is mathematically impossible.” (Jenny Anderson)
- But Longe worries that kids also need critical thinking skills that won’t come from scripted classes. “I don’t think someone who is reading from scripted text can teach critical thinking,” he says. “You can’t teach what you don’t have.” (Jenny Anderson)
- “If we truly want to leap forward in education, we need to move beyond traditional scripted lessons.” (Jenny Anderson)
- “But Quartz’s visits to schools in Nigeria, Nairobi and Liberia found teachers sticking to scripts, which are tailored to each country’s national curriculum, with few students raising their hands to request more information or clarification. It does not seem that teachers are encouraged to veer off-script: their evaluations—a short one at least once a day, and a longer one each week—address how closely they follow the guide.” (Jenny Anderson)
- Research shows that [motivation](#) is a crucial factor in successful learning; kids who see [education as its own reward](#) have a big advantage over time. Horn flags the issue in the same blog post. “There is one big problem that I saw that I am not sure if Bridge worries about because parents don’t: children did not seem to be enjoying school,” he writes.
- “There’s rigorous evidence on the impact of teachers’ guides in the early years, but there is limited research beyond grade three or four,” said Piper, from RTI. “I can’t think of any rigorous studies in developing countries.”

5. Labour conditions

The articles confirm [claims](#) of **extremely poor labour** conditions, including tight contracts limiting teachers moving to other schools, long working hours, high pressure, for a low salary.

- “Early on, the company found it difficult to retain instructors. The Stanford case study cited high teacher turnover in 2010. Bridge began requiring instructors to sign a two-year contract; if they broke it, they had to pay back the cost of their training. Teacher turnover slowed.” (Peg Tyre)
- “Bridge teachers are discouraged from talking to the press, and their contracts remind them that they may not speak on behalf of Bridge, but some agreed to talk to me provided they were not identified.” (Peg Tyre)
- “working at Bridge, teachers said, can disrupt a career: Instructors are required to sign an employment agreement that includes a noncompete clause that prevents them from working at other nearby schools for a year after they leave.” (Peg Tyre)
- “On reflection, Anton says that he is relieved that he is no longer working for Bridge. He was under too much pressure to attract new pupils and the “rigid payment system” put him in uncomfortable waters with parents. Every month, about half of the parents couldn’t pay their fees on time, and would get upset with Anton when their children were, again, sent home from school. These tensions made it even more difficult to attract new customers and to persuade existing customers to bring in new ones.” (Maria Hengeveld)

- *“He worked at Bridge for two and a half years before he handed in his resignation. The low salary and the heavy work load (60 hours a week, according to John) were contributing factors.” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“But it is unclear whether teachers will stay with a system that gives them so little freedom, especially when they have longer days and are paid less than they might earn at a government school” (Jenny Anderson)*

6. Learning outcomes

New information shows that Bridge could have sought to **misrepresent the effectiveness of its schools** by providing additional tuition by foreign teachers to good pupils to pass national exams, while encouraging those with low score to repeat a year. In addition, experts confirm the mixed opinions held by [previous critics](#) on the value of Bridge’s self-assessment of its results.

- *“Another area of achievement that Bridge trumpets is the success of its students on the eighth-grade K.C.P.E. test [end of primary school exam in Kenya]. In 2015, according to Bridge, 63 percent of Bridge students who had been there for at least two years passed, compared with 49 percent of Kenyan students nationwide. But it’s unclear whether Bridge’s approach will be sustainable as the company grows. Former Bridge employees told me that in preparation for the 2015 exam, those on track to get a lower score were asked to repeat a year. The rest were taken to a residential cram school and prepped for the test by teachers who flew in from the United States.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“This [Bridge’s research showing improvement in learning outcomes] is good evidence of positive effects,” says Malkus. Both pointed out that the study’s results are complicated by Bridge’s high dropout rate: While a third of public-school students dropped out, nearly half of Bridge students left during the study and were unable to take the final assessment. “The high attrition rate should give one pause,” Malkus says, “when considering the full effect of the program.” Graham, co-editor of The Review of Economics and Statistics, says that “organizations are under a lot of pressure to do these studies and ‘prove’ their program works. Reasonable and informed people could look at the information in that report and come to widely different conclusions about the effect of Bridge on academic achievement as they measure it. It’s information, just not especially actionable information.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“The [evidence for learning gains disappears](#) once you control for the socio-economic background of the children in Bridge schools,” says David Archer” (Jenny Anderson)*

7. Transparency and marketing

The articles demonstrate the **lack of transparency and the culture of secrecy at Bridge**, which does not hesitate to intimidate or discourage independent inquiry. This made headlines in 2016 when Bridge [orchestrated the arrest](#) of an independent PhD student researching its schools. This lack of transparency also appears in Bridge’s marketing approach. Enrolment in BIA appears to be partly or largely driven by a carefully studied marketing approach, with staff potentially misleading parents in order to reach their targets, rather than by a demand of parents, leading to important disappointments, which could also explain the low and declining enrolments. These findings confirm a [video](#) of a former BIA staff making similar claims.

- *“Some Bridge staff members described what they saw as a stark contrast between their hopes for Bridge and a grittier reality.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“At some Bridge schools I visited unescorted, staff members said that they would need to contact superiors if I didn’t leave.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“When he wanted to interview Bridge teachers at the start of this year as part of an assessment study, he discovered that they had apparently been “warned against speaking to visitors or researchers. Especially not about their welfare or that of the children. ”” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“Staff members at Diamond were eager to show the poor conditions in their school but also urged me to leave quickly.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“It is trying to silence Kenyan critics, as shown in two leaked letters. One was addressed to the head of the national teachers’ union, the other addressed to the director of a national school association. The first was sent by Bridge’s law firm, the second by Bridge’s in-house lawyer. In both letters, the recipients are threatened with a defamation lawsuit if they continue to speak out against Bridge and portray it as a company that “is only interested in profit.” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“The Bridge founders, Weinstein wrote, decided that every school opening thereafter would as soon as possible feature a ceremony and that every new student would be given a free month of school. Kirchgasser, who studied Bridge for his dissertation, pointed out that this often ended up putting parents in what could become a difficult situation. If a family found that they couldn’t make payments, say, in the middle of the term, it was often difficult to transfer a child to a new school. “Among the families I studied, moving a child to a new school was a gamble,” he said. “Public and informal schools were reluctant to take students back if their new school didn’t work out” — potentially leaving a child out of school and making it difficult for a parent to work.” (Peg Tyre)*

- “A middle-aged teacher who provides science instruction at a Bridge school told me she was encouraged to go to the market and try to enroll the children of the fruit sellers when her teaching day was done. But it was hard to recruit new students.” (Peg Tyre)
- “A former Bridge employee told me that the company’s own marketing could sometimes create bad feelings among the people they wanted to serve. [...] Another former employee told me that the free tuition was confusing to many of the poorest parents. “I believe the word ‘international,’ combined with foreign founders, led parents to expect higher quality than in other schools,” she says. “I believe they did become disillusioned. I believe many of them became disempowered when they wanted changes in their schools — like electricity, permanent structures — but that didn’t happen. They definitely missed the connectedness and mutually beneficial relationships that they would find in other schools.”” (Peg Tyre)
- ““We promised them heaven,” says another former Academy Manager. John (name changed) says it was the only option, “otherwise, you lost your job.” ... His pangs of conscience were the deciding factor: he felt that he was “constantly deceiving parents.”” (Maria Hengeveld)
- “It wasn’t because Bridge had directly instructed him to “only mention the basic price to new customers and avoid mentioning additional costs, such as exam fees and uniforms.” But since his salary was partly calculated on his success rates, he often told half-truths. If parents weren’t happy with the strict payment arrangements and threatened to transfer their children to a school with more flexible system, John would think up an argument in an attempt to keep them, telling them for example “that there would soon be a sponsor for them who would pay the tuition fees on their behalf.”” (Maria Hengeveld)
- Committee members [questioned May](#) on why Bridge calls itself a “social enterprise” when it is structured to provide a return to investors; on why Bridge has “strained” relations with so many of the countries in which it operates; and why it was “hostile” to independent assessment.
- After the inquiry, Stephen Twigg, chairman of the UK parliament’s international development committee, [wrote in a letter](#) to the (now former) minister for international development, “The evidence received during this inquiry raises serious questions about Bridge’s relationships with governments, transparency and sustainability.”
- “In Liberia, the government wanted to have an independent evaluation of the PSL to see if it worked, and if public schools could learn from innovations the operators brought; Bridge resisted the prospect. “Bridge actively opposed the [assessment] at the beginning of year one because they thought it would be too difficult to demonstrate impact in the first year,” says Sandefur, one of the lead authors of the independent report assessing the PSL’s impact.” (Jenny Anderson)
- Of the nearly 40 people I spoke to about Bridge, everyone who was not an employee or investor in Bridge said that the company had an inherently confrontational culture. Bridge bristles at questions that other organizations seem happy to answer, from evidence on scripting to how it characterizes its tablets (guides, not scripts). The tone of its answers ranges from combative to patronizing. And at times, their responses seem misleading. It insisted that it did not ask for the same funding the other operators got from the Liberian government, but multiple sources told Quartz it tried hard to do just that. (Bridge apologized for the error.) (Jenny Anderson)

8. Commercial model and data usage

BIA may use **data collected on pupils for commercial purposes** (insurance, etc.), which had already emerged in a [leaked document](#), raising fundamental concerns about data privacy, pupils and families’ consent, and the sustainability of Bridge’s business model – emphasizing the tension between a commercial for-profit business and the public interest in education.

- “The company monitors and stores a wide range of data on subjects including teacher absenteeism, student payment history and academic achievement.” (Peg Tyre)
- “May says the company may consider selling learning materials. They’ve been collecting data on schoolchildren and their families and might partner with microfinancing institutions to help Bridge parents get loans, as well as working as an intermediary for health-insurance plans.” (Peg Tyre)
- “Justin Sandefur, an economist at the Center for Global Development in Washington and principal investigator in the Liberian schools study, told me recently that he worried that “there was no longer a governance firewall between the interests of a commercial company and the Ministry of Education, which is supposed to be advocating on what is best for Liberian children.” (Peg Tyre)
- Investors were told the company could generate [an internal rate of return](#), a measure of profitability, of 20%; an IPO would provide a potential exit.
- Committee members [questioned May](#) on why Bridge calls itself a “social enterprise” when it is structured to provide a return to investors;

9. School conditions, health and safety

Observations confirm [health and safety fears](#) in Bridge schools.

- *“the school building itself was shabby and neglected. In the schoolyard, about 30 feet away from where children enter their classrooms, was a deep trench of fetid garbage and rotting bags of feces.” (Peg Tyre)*

10. Relationship with other schools

Bridge is critical of other schools, in particular government schools, in a way that appears to be a partial **exaggeration or a misrepresentation of the reality.**

- *“Geordie Brackin, the company’s energetic director of innovation, guided me to a Bridge classroom where students were using flashcards and told me that when he goes to government schools he “doesn’t see flashcards, and our teachers don’t report using flashcards.” Brackin’s observation, though, was greeted with embarrassed smiles at local public and private schools a short walk away. “Of course, people who are trained teachers, we know about flashcards,” said Lilian Odhiambo, who runs a small private school in the Mathare slum.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Bridge chose not to use more than 50% of the teachers it was given in Liberia, saying that many were illiterate and couldn’t read the lesson plans. Those teachers reverted to the country’s education ministry, which then decided whether to reassign them to other schools. That complicates the idea of a public-private partnership, in which operators are meant to work within the existing system. “If these are the worst teachers and they are out of your school but in a school nearby, are you bringing up your quality at the cost of the other public schools?” asked Horn from Ark. If so, that is not a fair outcome for students, and does not improve the system.” (Jenny Anderson)*