THE POST-COVID RECOVERY IMPERATIVE:

Five Essential Leadership Lessons for Closing the Learning Gap
Introduction

CONTEXT & PURPOSE

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an unprecedented global education crisis and increased the demand to help students catch up through accelerated learning. Furthermore, pandemic-related learning losses are projected to result in US$1.6 trillion in global GDP losses by 2040, when most students affected by COVID-19 school closures will have reached the workforce.

The world economy could recover more than US$1 trillion a year in future GDP lost to the pandemic, if countries use proven ‘accelerated education’ approaches to help children catch up on lost learning - allowing governments to recover US$42 trillion over the lifetime of the young people affected.

School closures forced by COVID-19 resulted in about 1.5 billion children and youth out of school in spring 2020, from pre-primary to tertiary age. The pandemic exacerbated the already very high numbers of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) and drastically impacted student learning, with research estimating more than a year of learning loss after only a three-month school closure.

"Sirens are ringing loudly, especially on behalf of the most vulnerable. Even though it is a bleak picture, there is hope: If we act now and take new evidence-informed approaches with proven impact for accelerated education, we can make a difference!"

As governments face mounting pressure to tackle this urgent challenge with constrained budgets, understanding how other education leaders navigate these same challenges can help. The moral imperative to reach the most marginalised makes the sharing and use of this knowledge even more compelling and can contribute to strengthening education system resilience. As decision-makers consider whether to embark on accelerated education programs (AEPs), strengthen the impact of existing AEPs, or exercise greater oversight over AEPs, this evidence synthesis offers five lessons to help guide policy and implementation.

This guidance is based on a global literature review, analyses of national policies, and a novel approach to rapidly crowdsourcel published and unpublished evidence about AEPs. One hundred and thirty-six relevant sources were identified, 76% of which are grey literature. Of those explored, eight countries in Sub-Saharan Africa were selected for deeper exploration: Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, and Uganda.

This paper is intended to share lessons learned from each of these countries’ journeys, and not to promote AEPs or review the technical programming aspects of AEPs. Its lessons can be applied globally, and the data and research needs identified can help prioritise funding and research.
Lesson #1

Review the most important AEP features as a basis for improving policies

Government AEP policies are best informed by understanding what makes AEPs most effective. While successful programmes share common features, only a few features are critical for impact.

Several actors, especially the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG), have already demonstrated this point. The best available evidence reveals that effective accelerated education efforts share key features across design and implementation. Furthermore, sharing these experiences and knowledge can inform COVID-19 learning recovery. For example, it is critical to make special efforts for the hardest-to-reach learners, such as girls, refugees, and learners with disabilities or learning differences.

While accelerated education attempts to reach learners who have either fallen out of or have never enrolled in the formal system, evidence shows that programmes often unintentionally reproduce barriers to learning, while government policies to ensure enrolment and completion are rare.

### FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE ACCELERATED EDUCATION PROGRAMMES ARE AN IMPORTANT BASIS FOR POLICY ACTIONS

**PROGRAMME GOALS**
Goals focus on achieving fundamental competencies in an accelerated time frame and accessing future pathways of formal schooling, further training, or employment.

**EQUITY & INCLUSION**
Equity is promoted by design with strategies to remove barriers to enrolment and completion for the most marginalised, especially girls. Inclusion is enhanced with engagement of local community and is responsive to local needs.

**CURRICULUM & CALENDAR**
Content is aligned with national curriculum, but focused on essential learning competencies, with minimised repetition and on an accelerated timeline. Pace is age-adjusted and supports social and emotional learning. Instruction calendar allows efficient access to pathways after certification.

**ASSESSMENT & CERTIFICATION**
Learner assessment approaches promote flexibility of progression. Programme completion is marked by Ministry of Education-sanctioned certification, and enables transition to formal school, additional training, or employment.

**MONITORING, EVALUATION, & DATA COLLECTION (M&E & EMIS)**
Programme data is collected and integrated systematically into an educational management information system (EMIS). Programme effectiveness is monitored, and data is used to assess and improve policies.

**TEACHER SOURCING & DEVELOPMENT**
Recruitment of teachers from the local community carries benefits, including closer family and community engagement. Teachers receive specialised AEP orientation, ongoing training and mentoring.

**PEDAGOGY**
Enrolment, retention and completion are heightened with learner-centred gender-transformative approach to pedagogy; small classes in safe spaces, teaching at the right level, and high community engagement. Learner well-being is in focus.

**TEACHER COMPENSATION**
Timely and fair compensation reduces teacher turnover. Pay rates vary by funding source and local or national regulations.

**FUNDING & BUDGETING**
Ongoing funding, even if partial, supports programme continuity. The inclusion of AEPs in national budget advances sustainability.
Lesson #2

Conduct a national assessment for strengthening AEP alignment with your national education system

Historically, AEPs have existed often separately from government systems and thus have had varying levels of success in integrating students in formal school or producing sustainable access to education. However, the AEWG 10 Principles for Effective Practice advise that AEPs should be “aligned with the national education system and relevant humanitarian architecture. Such alignment with national ministries of education (MoEs) is recommended to ensure successful student transition from AEPs to formal schools, help improve quality and effectiveness, scale AEPs to reach more children, and help increase the long-term sustainability of AEPs. Often within MoEs, AEPs fall under non-formal education (NFE) or alternative education and have varying levels of oversight or recognition.

What is alignment and why is it important for education leaders?

AEP alignment with government refers to how closely AEPs are aligned to the national education system, and existing goals, policies, and plans. At the lowest extreme, AEPs operate with few to no links to national policies, and with minimal guidance or oversight. At the highest extreme, AEPs are fully integrated into the national system, and may be directly implemented by governments on a national scale. Neither extreme is necessarily desirable, many countries typically fall somewhere in between.

This new AEP Alignment Action Matrix can help to guide national assessment and act as a basis for planning actions. To conduct this assessment, it may be helpful to form a task force to investigate the country experience to date with AEPs, their effectiveness, and scale. The possible role of AEPs needs to consider and projected OOSCY numbers, gender differences, policy frameworks needed, and other nationally relevant factors. That review and planning process may elevate a country’s readiness, or it may help it determine that AEP alignment is not appropriate at this time.

GETTING STARTED WITH THE AEP ALIGNMENT ACTION MATRIX: ASSESSING URGENCY AND READINESS ARE IMPORTANT PREPARATORY STEPS

NEED FOR GREATER ALIGNMENT IS DRIVEN BY:
- High OOSYC population
- High inequality index
- Multiple implementing partners and donors with wide variations in programmes which are ready to scale

READINESS FOR ALIGNMENT IS INCREASED BY:
- Political, social, and economic capacity
- Recognition or positioning of AEPs as national policy response to OOSCY
- Existing recognition of non-formal education or alternative education pathways

ADVANCE READINESS
Conduct situation analysis & action plan

PRIORITISE ALIGNMENT
Act swiftly to strengthen alignment along top priorities

MONITOR & REFLECT
Focus on basic education strength

CAUTIOUSLY PREPARE
Continue to monitor and advance data & EMIS integration

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Lesson #3

Define a staged approach for strengthening alignment with your national system

Before developing national action plans for improving AEPs, it can be helpful to better understand low, medium, and high positions on the alignment spectrum. Based on a comprehensive review of country experiences with AEPs, descriptions of low and high alignment along nine dimensions are provided below. Furthermore, the table below also shows how varying levels of alignment can help to support and strengthen AEPs.

### NINE DIMENSIONS OF ALIGNMENT CAN GUIDE GOVERNMENT ACTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LOW ALIGNMENT</th>
<th>HIGH ALIGNMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. AEP GOALS</strong></td>
<td>Goals of AEPs standardised and enforced. Specific groups, e.g. rural girls, identified for targeting through AEPs. Pathways recognised and linkage of NFE to formal education made.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Each AEP determines goals; no consistency across AEPs or with national education system. No reference to AEPs as part of OOSCY strategy in national education sector plan or strategy.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>2. EQUITY &amp; INCLUSION</strong></td>
<td>Ministry recognises AEPs as part of overall government strategy to reach marginalised groups. Government proactively supports AEPs. Government supports specific efforts to address and remove barriers, for example: pregnancy, early marriage, transport, financial hardship, lack of school materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No equity and inclusion strategy and low awareness of existing AEPs and their focus.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. CURRICULUM &amp; CALENDAR</strong></td>
<td>AEP curriculum is consistent with national basic education curriculum, government priorities, e.g. gender transformation, and linked with formal system. Strong focus on literacy and numeracy with socio-emotional learning are common. Degree of acceleration and pace agreed with ministry. Close links to national learning indicators for each grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined by programme, pace may be set by donors. Might not use government learning indicators to help identify level.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. ASSESSMENT &amp; CERTIFICATION</strong></td>
<td>Approaches are consistent with ministry’s standards and benchmarks. Summative and formative assessments conducted. Certification and promotion requirements are formalised to allow for completion certificates and transition to formal system or other post-completion education options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined by programme; not linked to country assessment systems, benchmarking standards, or grade-level equivalencies. No learner certification by government. Promotion not linked to government standards. Perhaps no monitoring of achievement of AEP.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5. MONITORING, EVALUATION &amp; DATA COLLECTION (M&amp;E &amp; EMIS)</strong></td>
<td>M&amp;E design, priorities, and results feed into EMIS, other government systems, and OOSCY monitoring. Data on standard indicators such as enrolment, dropout, and learning outcomes are gender disaggregated and measured using EMIS definitions. Strong collaboration with government on learning agenda. Reflected in sector plans and reviews with AEP milestones part of overall national education plans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M&amp;E determined by programme and/or donors, tied to donor reporting needs and indicators, not linked to EMIS. Key data often missing. Little or no consultation with ministry or EMIS staff.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6. TEACHER SOURCING &amp; DEVELOPMENT</strong></td>
<td>Teachers may be nationally certified teachers or community members. Ministry has guidelines for training facilitators or teachers, which may differ from formal schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are volunteers from the community, with little to no prior experience, trained by AEP programme.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>7. PEDAGOGY</strong></td>
<td>Instruction is in home language with plan to transition to national language to allow transition back to formal system. Lessons from learner-centred, gender-transformative pedagogy and active.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home language. Learner-centred pedagogy and active learning techniques.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8. TEACHER COMPENSATION</strong></td>
<td>Teachers may be at least partly paid by government. Efforts to define path to becoming certified are established or under consideration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers are paid by the implementing or funding organisation based on implementer or donor guidelines.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>9. FUNDING &amp; BUDGETING</strong></td>
<td>Clear plans for project continuation exist, along with donor commitment or government assumption of costs, and roles of implementing partners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funded by donors and implementing organisations without ongoing commitment.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In South Sudan, alternative education was a deliberate response to the needs of demobilised soldiers and out-of-school children. Following independence, the government moved quickly in 2012 to recognise alternative education in its first Education Act. Practical guidance, policy and plans then followed. Recently, South Sudan started offering accelerated education at the secondary level.

Country experiences show that alignment is not a one-size-fits-all solution. Such an approach risks leaving out more children and youth unintentionally by exacerbating existing barriers. While achieving stronger alignment of AEPs with national education objectives can seem like a significant challenge, evidence shows that countries with demonstrable progress in accelerated education have taken a staged approach based on tactical prioritisation. For example, Ethiopia and South Sudan increased the alignment of AEPs with government over two decades, as this figure illustrates. When Ethiopia’s Speed School programme was introduced, clear links to the public education system were made, using national curriculum and textbooks, school facilities, and district examinations. After six years, several regional governments began providing funding, and teacher education colleges collaborated with implementing partners to train facilitators. The formal integration of the programme in the sector plan and the MoE’s institutional structure occurred more recently.

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High alignment across all dimensions is not necessarily the goal for all contexts. Experiences indicate that the highest priorities for AEP alignment with national systems are programme goals, equity and inclusion policies, curriculum and calendar, and assessment and certification. These areas are critical to helping OOSC/Y learn and transition to formal schools or other pathways.

A second set of alignment policies helps to ensure AEP effectiveness and quality as related to monitoring and teaching. A third set of options, while also important, is related less directly to transition outcomes and can be more difficult to achieve. Consequently, they could be pursued in working towards longer-term sustainability when AEPs are not guided solely by donor or external funding cycles.

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Lesson #4
Design and rollout policy actions to strengthen alignment in stages

Specific policy actions can be taken for each of the nine areas of alignment, starting with the top priority areas.

### ALIGNMENT PRIORITIES AND COUNTRY EXAMPLES
**GUIDE POLICY ACTIONS TO STRENGTHEN AEPs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Example(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. AEP GOALS</td>
<td>South Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. EQUITY &amp; INCLUSION</td>
<td>South Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CURRICULUM &amp; CALENDAR</td>
<td>South Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ASSESSMENT &amp; CERTIFICATION</td>
<td>Liberia, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, South Sudan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. MONITORING, EVALUATION &amp; DATA COLLECTION (M&amp;E &amp; EMIS)</td>
<td>South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Uganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. TEACHER SOURCING &amp; DEVELOPMENT</td>
<td>Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. PEDAGOGY</td>
<td>Nigeria, Liberia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. TEACHER COMPENSATION</td>
<td>South Sudan, Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. FUNDING &amp; BUDGETING</td>
<td>Ethiopia, Sierra Leone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lesson #5

Involve a broad range of actors to accelerate your goals throughout the process

GOVERNMENTS ARE NOT ALONE: PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS TAKE MANY FORMS AND ARE ESSENTIAL FOR SUCCESS

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NATIONAL & LOCAL MINISTRIES OF EDUCATION

- Conduct self-assessment and develop action plan along the dimensions described with the support of a working group.
- Integrate OOSCY data in EMIS and annual budgeting and planning processes.
- Invest in processes to embed best available evidence in guidelines and policies and share across relevant ministries.

ACADEMIC & RESEARCH ORGANISATIONS

- Prioritise further research in gap areas, such as learning differences, socio-emotional learning, costing data, financing models and progression to formal education, training, or employment.
- Capture COVID-19-related changes made to AEPs, and the subsequent effect on outcomes, to provide decision-makers with insights from other contexts.
- Amplify reports from forthcoming research. (1)

IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY PARTNERS/NGOS

- Raise public awareness about the role of AEPs in reducing OOSCY.
- Adopt proven key features of effective programmes and share experiences to elevate programme learning with government and donors.
- Increase consistency of reporting through common data collection templates, as promoted by AEWG toolkit.

TEACHERS, SCHOOL LEADERS & TEACHER ORGANISATIONS

- Consider innovative pathways between formal and non-formal teacher recruitment and development.
- Collaborate on AEP in-service and pre-service development for both teachers/facilitators and school leaders.
- Elevate frontline experiences to contribute insights from AEP classrooms and transfer as relevant to formal education.

DONORS INCLUDING PRIVATE FOUNDATIONS, MULTILATERALS, BILATERALS, AND BUSINESSES

- Amplify and leverage best-available evidence in organisational strategy and funding decisions.
- Generate funding incentives to encourage integration of key features in programme design and evidence sharing.
- Introduce incentives to foster more locally-led research.

PARENTS, COMMUNITY, & GENERAL PUBLIC

- Advocate for effective strategies to reach the most vulnerable through AEPs.
- Engage locally with AEP efforts for community children and youth.
- Heighten citizen-led assessment among AEPs to strengthen transparency and accountability for learning outcomes.

(1) These include but are not limited to: Project ACCESS political economy analyses and barriers to institutionalization of AEPs in Nigeria, Uganda, Jordan, Colombia, Pakistan and UNICEF/AEWG study «Impact of COVID-19 on accelerated and alternative education programs»; as well as emerging work from Associates for Change AE and girls’ programs in Ghana, Nigeria and the AEWG Accelerated Education in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda with attention to gender.