Bridge International Academies: Delivering Quality Education at a Low Cost in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda

**Overview**

This case study explores how Bridge International Academies, a for-profit education company founded in 2008, has developed an education model that leverages technology and scale to train and support underserved communities to deliver preprimary (nursery and kindergarten) and primary-school education. Bridge International Academies builds, staffs, and operates more than 450 low-cost private schools in marginalized communities in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda.

**Key Contextual Conditions**

In Kenya, the steady decline in enrollment in public primary schools over the past decade illustrates the fact that, even with free primary education since 2003, many poor families choose to send their children to private schools. For example, the African Population and Health Research Center estimates that more than 60 percent of children in Nairobi’s urban slums attend nongovernment schools—36 percent attend private schools and 27 percent attend low-cost private schools. The remaining 37 percent attend government schools. Therefore, there is a growing need to deliver learning outcomes for children at a low cost, regardless if it is being delivered by the government or private providers. Bridge has responded to that need by (a) investing in a “learning lab” that uses technology and human capacity to monitor outcomes that are then fed back into the system and (b) developing a unique whole-school approach to tackling some of the biggest issues in education, such as teacher training and support, lesson delivery, and monitoring. In effect, Bridge has reengineered the life cycle of education delivery; it controls the entire supply chain from school construction and curriculum design to teacher training and lesson delivery. As a result, Bridge’s highly standardized “academy in a box” includes the training, processes, materials, curriculum, and tools needed by communities to open and run a privately owned, low-cost, quality school. Although Bridge initially developed and delivered its education model as a chain of low-cost private schools in Kenya, Nigeria, and Uganda, the company is now incorporating its model into free public primary schools in a pilot project in Liberia.

**Development Challenge**

Many families in Kenya and in other countries throughout the developing world are willing to spend a relatively high proportion of their income to send their children to costly private schools for what they believe to be a better education. This willingness of families to pay for private school stems from the lack of quality learning opportunities in government schools. However, data have shown that these relatively costly schools have not always offered high-quality education. There is a need for a low-cost model that provides high-quality education in both private and public school settings.
Addressing Delivery Challenges

**Project finance.** To serve the “bottom of the pyramid” with a quality product at a price point that is feasible for poor communities, even if it is not affordable for the poorest of the poor, Bridge had to focus on driving down costs at every point of its supply chain. Although initially Bridge looked for partners to outsource aspects of its business—including real estate agents and construction companies—it quickly realized that to have the quality it was looking for at the lowest cost, it was more cost-effective to execute every step in house. Retaining total control has been an important feature in how Bridge operates so efficiently and at the lowest cost possible. Today, Bridge can be seen as a conglomerate; it has its own in-house real estate agents, construction business, furniture makers, curriculum developers, software designers, customer service center, procurement process, and uniform designers. By controlling its entire supply chain, Bridge can quickly and efficiently roll out any revision or improvement to its model across all of its more than 450 academies.

**Project design.** According to Bridge cofounder Shannon May, it is far too difficult to retrofit a model after the fact. Therefore, Bridge decided to build its first academy as though it were its 100th academy. If Bridge had begun with the luxury gold-plated model, it would have been difficult to determine which pieces to remove—either because, psychologically, people come to expect them or because, pragmatically, it becomes difficult to determine which elements are superfluous. Bridge thus invested large sums of capital into research and development before its first student was even admitted. The company found that it was “imperative to continue this rigorous development process until the highest levels of academic performance and operational effectiveness are achieved so that the 1st, 100th, and 1,000th pupil receive the same level of education as the 100,000th and the 1,000,000th.” This belief has meant that for every step of the way, from when the idea was first conceived in 2008 to the recent partnership with the government of Liberia in 2016, Bridge has been thoughtful and deliberate about what its intervention would look like and how the company would function at scale.

**Leveraging technology.** Bridge has also leveraged technology and data to strengthen accountability—an element that is often absent in public schools because the information needed to make informed decisions is not available and poorly performing teachers cannot be dismissed easily, even if the approach is not without controversy. For example, at a Bridge academy, if a teacher does not show up or shows up late, Bridge headquarters is immediately notified via the teacher’s tablet. Headquarters then sends a substitute teacher. Also, lesson-pacing tracking on teacher tablets is used to inform headquarters if a teacher is spending more or less time on each task and can adjust accordingly. Additional training and support can be sent to assist underperforming teachers—or they may be dismissed. In effect, through Bridge’s use of technology, the “black box” of learning—what happens in the classroom—is no longer as opaque; Bridge is aware of what is happening within its classrooms at all times.

Lessons Learned

This case study captures lessons that may assist other implementers facing similar development and delivery challenges.

- From the beginning, Bridge has been thoughtful about what its intervention would look like and how the company would function at scale. The company built and ran its first academy as though it were its 100th academy, investing heavily in research and development from the outset to ensure that the quality of education students receive is the same no matter how large the company grows.

- Bridge puts students at the center of their model—with its students and their families as its customers—which has allowed the company to amortize investment in quality over a large number of academies. That is, Bridge uses volume to drive down costs. This approach also has enabled the company to invest heavily in research and development to create systems that produce learning outcomes.

- Bridge has found that it can both maintain quality and keep costs down by bringing every aspect of the supply chain under its own roof. This approach also has enabled Bridge to roll out any changes in its intervention across its network of more than 450 academies nearly instantaneously.
Endnotes
1. This delivery note is based on research concluded in April 2016. The author also would like to recognize the ongoing debates and controversies regarding Bridge Schools, particularly in Uganda.
3. Ibid.

References