



SCHOOLING THE POOR PROFITABLY

the innovations and deprivations of
Bridge International Academies in Uganda

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Executive Summary

New global corporate actors increasingly see the provision of education in the global South as an untapped, emergent market. As more and more functions of the state are effectively outsourced to the private sector, including the provision of education and other public services, state capacity and the will to deliver has steadily declined. As a result, generally accepted claims of poor state quality and deficiencies have increasingly opened-up 'market opportunities' for private for-profit actors, including transnational corporations, to fill the 'governance gap' in education (see Ball, 2012; Bhanji, 2008). For their part, global corporate actors develop and implement market-based 'solutions' meant to work towards solving development challenges, such as universal access to education, while at the same time laying claim to new forms of moral and social responsibility in order to legitimate their profit-oriented ventures. Proclaiming the mission of 'Knowledge for all' as its driving force, Bridge International Academies (BIA) has quickly become one of the largest education companies in the world with plans to educate 10,000,000 children throughout Africa and Asia by 2025 (BIA, 2016f)—and do so profitably.

This study investigates the operations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda where it has established 63 private for-profit schools, since February 2015, with an estimated 12,000 fee-paying customers. Bridge International Academies aims 'to be the global leader in providing education to families who live on USD2 a day per person or less' (BIA, 2016f)—and thus, challenging the long-held belief that governments, rather than corporations, should be responsible for delivering mass education. According to Bridge International Academies, 800 million primary and nursery aged pupils living in poverty around the world lack access to quality education, representing a previously 'undiscovered' USD64 billion market for low-cost schooling (BIA, n.d). Bridge International Academies, however, has devised a business model to tap into this immense market. It involves leveraging technology and data, including internet-enabled tablet e-readers and smartphones, to automate instructional and non-instructional activities involved in education service delivery – reflecting strict standardisations and cost-efficiency measures – designed to drive down costs and scale-up services rapidly. Yet, the findings of this research reveal that innovations implicated in this model for schooling the poor, profitably, also involve serious deprivations for teachers and learners.

In investigating the operations of Bridge International Academies in Uganda, this research has found that the company's profit-driven, cost-cutting, standardised, and internet-based approach to education delivery involves a number of critical shortcomings. These include the (1) neglect of legal and educational standards established by the Government of Uganda regarding the use of certified teachers, accredited curriculum, appropriate teaching methods, adequate school facilities, and proper authorisation of schools, essentially infringing upon the integrity and sovereignty of the education system in Uganda; (2) strict automation and mechanisation of all curriculum and pedagogy, involving scripted instructions readout from tablet computers (or 'teacher-computers') by predominantly unlicensed and underpaid teachers, which obstruct the very teacher-pupil relations that are conducive to learning and child development; and (3) failure to bring affordable, quality education for all as the company claims. Hence, this research provides a cautionary case study for policy makers, administrators, investors, teachers, parents, civil society, and the international community at large, for understanding what is at stake when new global corporate actors aim at schooling the world's poor, profitably.

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Biographies

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1. Introduction

Just about every program that is designed for someone else, instead of with them, fails.
Shannon May, co-founder of Bridge International Academies¹

Bridge is doing this behind our backs.
Senior Official, Ministry of Education and Sports, Republic of Uganda²

Bridge International Academies (BIA) is an education company designed for schooling the world's poor, profitably. It is a for-profit enterprise that plans '...to be the global leader in providing education to families who live on USD2 a day per person or less' (BIA, 2016f)—and thus, challenging the long-held belief that governments, rather than corporations, should be responsible for delivering mass education programs. The company has '...re-engineered the entire lifecycle of basic education, leveraging data, technology, and scale' to cut costs and expand its commercial education program to as many low-income communities as possible, with planned profitable returns for its major investors (BIA, 2016f). The first Bridge International Academy opened in 2009 in the Mukuru slum in Nairobi, Kenya. Currently, Bridge International Academies (also referred to as 'Bridge') operates more than 520 for-profit schools throughout Kenya (405), Uganda (63), Liberia (50)³, Nigeria (4), and India (4), serving approximately 120,000 pre-primary and primary aged school children. Proclaiming the mission of 'Knowledge for all' as its driving force, Bridge has announced plans to educate 10,000,000 children across a number of countries by 2025 (BIA, 2016f). However, as this research reveals,

Bridge's for-profit approach to education may actually be undermining the accessibility of *quality* education for all, while infringing upon the sovereignty of states in the global South.

Bridge International Academies is a subsidiary company of NewGlobe Schools, Inc. founded in Delaware, U.S. by Jay Kimmelman (founder and former CEO of Edusoft, a leading education software company, who studied Computer Science and Electrical Engineering at Harvard University), his wife Shannon May (a University of California, Berkeley trained anthropologist), and Phil Frei (a successful product designer who studied Mechanical Engineering at Massachusetts Institute of Technology). Linking up in Boston, the three entrepreneurs '...wondered why no one was thinking about schools in developing countries the way Starbucks thought about coffee' (BIA, 2013, p. 2). That was, as a product that could be mass-produced and sold in high-volumes, while maintaining the exact same standards and qualities across a multinational chain of suppliers. Thus, the founders of Bridge created a business plan for schooling the masses living in developing countries—known as the 'Academy-in-a-Box' model—which is based on standardised practices and methods that can be copied and duplicated across various contexts while simultaneously shedding costs associated with mass educational provisions (BIA, 2016f).

¹ Buchanan (n.d.).

² Interview.

³ <http://www.bridgeinternationalacademies.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Fact-sheet-Partnership-Schools-for-Liberia-and-Bridge.pdf>

Bridge's 'academy-in-a-box' model is designed to be replicable and scalable; it is the 'proprietary heart' of the company (Kirchgasler, 2016, p. 8). It involves a 'vertically-integrated system' (BIA, 2016f) in which the entire supply-chain is controlled and streamlined by Bridge—from academy construction to content development to teacher training to the minute-by-minute instructions that guide teacher-student interaction—it is pre-made for scaling-up. All instructional and non-instructional activities involved in running each educational establishment are standardised and automated using internet-enabled devices that represent the *modus operandi* of Bridge (BIA, 2016c; 2016f). For instance, teachers use tablet computers, referred to as 'teacher-computers'⁴, to deliver scripted instructions prepared by a central academic team, while 'Academy Managers' – the single administrative employee at each Bridge school – use smartphones with custom applications to manage the day-to-day operations of each academy. Bridge has leveraged technology to drive down the costs it takes to operate an education system, resulting in a radically standardised and mechanised form of provision. In doing so, the company claims to reduce school fees to a price-point deemed 'affordable' for the masses living in poverty (BIA, 2013, 2016f, 2016f; Interviews). Hence, the business model developed by Bridge for educating the poor is premised on affordability and scalability. By lowering the cost of its services and scaling-up rapidly, Bridge aims to benefit from economies of scale and reach profitable returns. The findings of this research, however, suggest that this model is more skewed towards profitability and scalability than affordable, quality education for all.

Two distinct 'market opportunities' have been identified by Bridge that involve schooling the world's poor, profitably: 'one previously undiscovered, and one previously non-existent' (BIA, n.d.). The first relates to the '...800 million primary and nursery aged pupils living on less than USD2 per person per day [that] lack access to quality schools' whom according to Bridge, spend an average of USD80 per year on education, resulting in a USD64 billion parent paid market (BIA, n.d.). Bridge aims to tap into this market by establishing private storefront schools in low-income communities—as it has in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria, and India—in order to sell basic education services directly to fee-paying customers. Tapping into 'previously undiscovered' education markets represents a form of unilateral intervention since Bridge enters countries on its own accord and with its own agenda to advance its enterprise. The second market opportunity identified by Bridge involves a USD179 billion publically funded charter school market for low-income countries (BIA, n.d.). This is exemplified by the Liberian Partnership for Schools program, a public-private partnership, in which Bridge has been contracted by the Liberian government to operate charter schools that are publically funded. It is the '...first large-scale publically-funded, privately operated model in Africa' (BIA, n.d.). The company claims it can manage large-scale systems like charter school programs because it has '...proved the ability for a private operator to operate at government-budget price points and scale' (BIA, n.d.). By leveraging technology to cut costs and deliver basic education at lower price-points, Bridge aims to tap into these 'previously undiscovered' and 'non-existent' markets for schooling in developing countries.

With Bridge's unique edu-business model growing at an unprecedented scale, this study is guided by the following questions: How does Bridge operate—educationally, commercially, and politically? And, who 'wins' and who 'loses' as a result of this for-profit education venture? In turn, four interlocking issues related to Bridge comprise the key topics of this study. They include:

⁴ Although not explicitly described as such by the firm in any of its public documentation, this research revealed that employees of Bridge commonly refer to tablet computers used by Bridge teachers as 'teacher-computers'.

- 1** an edu-business model that leverages new forms of technology and data utilised for instructional (i.e. teaching) and non-instructional activities (i.e. school management), including internet-enabled computer devices integrated with information and communications technology (ICT) that are designed to drive down costs and scale-up services rapidly;
- 2** transformations of governance as non-state and for-profit actors like Bridge, and their donors, participate in new forms of moral and political responsibility usually associated with the state, yet on a for-profit basis;
- 3** misplaced claims of affordability, quality, and accessibility; and
- 4** pedagogical and curricular effects of teacher-computers that involve scripted instructions readout by primarily uncertified and low-paid teachers using tablets.

Methodologically, this research makes use of a qualitative, mixed-method case study approach for understanding Bridge (Berg 2001; Brady and Collier, 2010; Gerring, 2007). This approach involves a case study on the operations of Bridge *in Uganda* to examine how the company functions—educationally, commercially, and politically in this context. Primary data was collected through in-country field research in Uganda from May 13 to June 2, 2016. Over the course of this period, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a range of actors, including teachers (18 participants) and Academy Managers (7) from Bridge, Senior Officials in the Ministry of Education and Sports (4), District Education Officer (1) and District Inspectors of Schools (4) as well as parents of pupils attending Bridge (6), totaling 40 research participants⁵. All interviews were performed after informed consent. A moderate number of Bridge’s pre- and primary schools (8) were examined to ensure ‘representativeness’ and ‘internal validity’ of the findings across the chain of schools (Brady & Collier, 2010; Gerring, 2007)⁶. To avoid case selection bias, the Bridge schools analysed here are spread across a mixed sample of five districts in Central and Eastern Regions of Uganda (Wakiso, Buikwe, Jinja, Mayuge, and Iganga) and representing populations in both ‘urban slums’ and ‘peri-urban’ communities. Observations of in-class instruction were also carried out in real-time. This dual method approach of interviewing and observation was done to maximise validity through triangulating data collection methods (Berg, 2001; Schwartz-Shea, 2006). Furthermore, this research program involved extensive desk-based research that included discourse and content analysis from secondary sources including company and investor websites, brochures, press kits, marketing booklets, media articles and on-line interviews with founders of the company. A review of literature from secondary research related to the topic was also conducted.

In April of 2016, a month prior to this research, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) addressed a letter to the National Director of Bridge in Uganda instructing Bridge to ‘halt the expansion’ of its operations in the country (MoES 2016b). Upon arrival in Uganda, the first interview was at the MoES with a Senior Official in order to understand the perspective of the Ministry regarding the operations of Bridge as well as to inform and seek endorsement to carry out this research program. Ministry officials were in support of this research since concerns had been raised regarding the legality of Bridge’s operations according to the Education Act (2008) of Uganda (GoU, 2008). Hence, this field research began at a time when Bridge was under increasing pressure from the MoES in Uganda for concerns related to the setup and procedures of this private for-profit education firm.

⁵ The participant response rate was 100%. All questions were cooperatively answered by all participants.

⁶ In some cases, Bridge’s academies were closed for holidays during the time of visit (although with employees still on-site). However, a number were still operating as normal, conducting remedial lessons. For the purposes of this research, this was an advantage since teachers and Academy Managers could offer more time to share in the research.

This paper is divided into four main sections. First, it surveys the enduring legacy of the private sphere in Uganda's education system and the influence of (neo-)colonialism and neoliberalism in Uganda – and their subsequent effects on the political economy of education – in order to understand the current role played by Bridge in the country's education sector. Second, the transnational network of commercial investors, donors, and philanthropic organisations supplying Bridge with the private capital and equity necessary to scale-up rapidly will be outlined, demonstrating how global capital, linked to business and charity, are steering new privatisation projects in education in the global South. Third, the business model developed by Bridge for educating the masses living in poverty will be examined in relation to 'innovations' (i.e. new technologies, techniques, and methods of schooling) and 'deprivations' (i.e. that which is lacking, deficient, and absent from this new mode of service delivery). Fourth, the use of 'teacher-computers' will be examined in greater detail to critically understand the pedagogical foundations and curricular content implicated in this method of instruction. In the conclusion, some reflections on the current state of affairs related to the operations of Bridge in Uganda, along with implications for other states (potentially) encountering Bridge, will be discussed.

In the analysis of the Bridge model in Uganda, this research unveils the critical contradictions in Bridge's approach to schooling the poor profitably. While Bridge purports to provide 'affordable' and quality education to reach the goal of 'Knowledge for all', in practice it provides educational services that are inaccessible to the most marginalised, of quality below national standards, and driven solely by profit. This study finds that Bridge has continued to conduct operations while lacking the legal and educational licencing and monitoring requirements, ultimately infringing on Uganda's sovereignty. As the following quote from a Senior Official in the Ministry of Education and Sports aptly summarises:

Bridge International Academies came and did a presentation for some of us in the Ministry to introduce us to what they do. We liked their presentation – it was quite rosy. But the condition was they don't expand before we visit their schools as a committee. Unfortunately, we came to understand at the time of the presentation that Bridge had already opened 25 schools in the country. As we talk today there are now 63 schools they have opened without us going to see what they are first providing. And out of all the 63 schools, as a department here, we have not seen any of their schools applying for a license. They have not. A cross-section we have seen of their schools, none of them meet the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards, which were designed by this Ministry. The curriculum they are using has never been approved by the National Curriculum Development Centre. And not all of the teachers they are using are qualified or registered teachers, as they are supposed to be...If they see any gaps in our system, their job is not to come and implement what they think is right. They should come and discuss with the Ministry accordingly and not just implement what they think without us knowing. They have no right to do that. This is a sovereign state. (Interview)

2. Understanding Bridge in Uganda: The private sphere, the state and the political economy of education

Within less than one year of entering the country, Bridge has become the largest private, for-profit education company in Uganda. Yet quite concerningly, as this research demonstrates,

Bridge has operated with substantial disregard for the country's educational standards and established a majority of its schools outside of the required legal processes

for recognition and monitoring by the Ugandan government. How do we understand this rapid and extensive growth of Bridge in Uganda, despite its record of disregard for educational and legal standards? Answering this question requires a historical analysis of Uganda's political economy of education which reveals two specific processes that facilitated the emergence and rapid expansion of for-profit education companies, like Bridge, and helped them operate largely unhindered by the Ugandan state (at least initially). In particular, the interconnected processes of liberalisation and globalisation – throughout the global and local levels of analysis – help to understand Bridge in Uganda. This historical political economy analysis demonstrates how Uganda, while seeking to protect its post-independence (educational) sovereignty from the influence of other states, simultaneously opened itself up to the influence of global capital and the global education industry driven by for-profit education companies such as Bridge.

The current state of Uganda's education system is best understood historically with a focus on the roles played by the private sphere and the state in education provisions and governance. Private education in Uganda dates back to the pre-colonial, pre-state period where traditional education was taught by the family and community through day-to-day social and economic activities. Even when a formal, Western-based education system was first introduced by British missionaries in 1877 – by invitation from Kabaka Muteesa I – education provisions were solely a private affair. The British, and later French, missionaries worked closely with the Buganda Kingdom's political elites to provide highly religious and denominational education that was financed through a user fee payment system. This wholly private education system extended into the colonial period where the British Protectorate government delayed its involvement in providing and governing education⁷. This delay continued until the British colonial authorities enrolled the American-based Phelps-Stokes Commission to examine the state of education in East Africa in 1924. The Commission strongly recommended the Protectorate governments' involvement in the colonial education system and resulted in the establishment of Uganda's first Department of Education (Ssekamwa, 2000).

⁷This is largely due to the Protectorate governments' capacity being stretched at the time by an insufficient taxation base and their military operations fighting rebellions in both the Bunyoro and Buganda kingdoms (Ssekamwa, 2000).

Throughout the colonial period both private and colonial-based education was crafted in ways meant to serve the interests of the private providers and colonial authorities. Like most African colonies, Uganda's colonial education system was based around providing functionaries among the Uganda elites for the colonial administration and building the Ugandan economy around exporting primary products to serve British economic interests (MoES, 1999; Uchen-du, 1979). The British and French missionaries similarly sought to educate toward their own agendas, often competing politically for influence in Uganda's education provisions. Although education became increasingly seen as a function of the (colonial) state, private missionary educationalists sought to protect the politically and socially influential role played in educating the populations (Ssekamwa, 2000). It is apparent that, in the enduring interactions for influence between the private and state spheres in education, education in Uganda became a central site for social control and private gain for some education providers.

It was during the same period in which the colonial government first involved itself in education when the first private *for-profit* schools began to emerge in Uganda. Like the current justifications professed by Bridge to legitimise their for-profit education provisions, these initial for-profit schools were predicated on 'filling the gap' left by poor state-based education (BIA, 2013; Ssekamwa, 2000, p. 101). Also similar to the current situation with Bridge, these initial for-profit schools often operated under poor conditions, lacking qualified teachers, sufficient infrastructure and affordable user fees (Namukas & Buye, 2009; Ssekamwa, 2000). Under the 1927 Education Ordinance these schools were required to register themselves with the colonial authorities for recognised legal status. Yet despite the colonial governments' increased involvement in education provisions and governance, the Department of Education had no comprehensive policy towards private for-profit schools and a limited regulatory capacity to ensure sufficient educational standards (Namukas & Buye, 2009; Ssekamwa, 2000). The nature of the relationship between the Ugandan state and the private sphere changed with the 1952 de Bunsen Education Committee which officially recommended the inclusion of private schools to supplement state-based education provisions. This relationship was maintained through Uganda's independence in 1962.

The immediate post-colonial period in Uganda was characterised by the promotion of an 'African identity' in contradistinction to the ideas promoted by the colonial system, especially within the education sector. The newly independent governments' desire to become *fully* independent from external state influence resulted in the 1963 Education Act that brought all missionary schools under the control of the Ugandan state. However, other forms of private schools, including the for-profit sector, were left fully independent (Ssekamwa, 2000). Following the 1963 Castle Education Commission, the independence government further re-aligned the education system away from colonial influence, focusing on producing educated and skilled Africans for the independent African economy rather than as colonial subjects (Ssekamwa, 2000). The commission was a general re-claiming of the education sector, replacing the colonial education system that was operating under the 1952 de Bunsen Committee. Although it did not seek to critically reconceptualise the nature of education, like some Africanists had promoted, the Ugandan government re-fashioned the formal colonial style of education towards its own interests. However, as the Ugandan government explicitly promoted political sovereignty from colonial influence, it simultaneously began exposing itself to the influence of the external private economic spheres, including the for-profit education sector. The subsequent 1970 Education

Act went further with its active promotion of the private sphere in education by instituting school registration procedures that streamlined the establishment of private schools (Namukas & Buye, 2009; Ssekamwa, 2000; Wood, 2008).

The 1990's represent a critical juncture for the emergence and flourishing of the for-profit education sector in Uganda. The decade witnessed a period of exponential growth of the private sector largely as a result of two further processes that were occurring in Uganda and throughout the global political economy: economic liberalisation and globalisation. The ideas of economic liberalisation in this period, often referred to as neoliberalism, were based on the assumptions of market supremacy and state failure in market governance and prescribed free and open markets – with little to no state intervention – as the model of economic development. These ideas were promoted by the world's leading development assistance and loan actors – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and major Western donors – in the form of loan conditionalities tied to assistance funds. Such conditionalities were expressed within the IMF and World Bank's structural adjustment programs that required developing states to drastically liberalise their economies through policies involving privatisation, deregulation, and drastic reductions in state expenditures, which were mandatory in order to receive donor funding (Abrahamsen, 2000; Ferguson, 2006; Gill, 1995). Uganda signed on to such an adjustment package with the IMF and World Bank following the National Resistance Movements' overthrow of the Obote government in 1986. In an almost instantaneous fashion, Uganda proceeded on a strategy of decentralisation⁸ and privatisation of government services, including within the education sector⁹. The private sector, rather than the state, was henceforth made the engine of economic development. The Ugandan state's role was greatly minimised, creating the conditions conducive for external investment and providing minimal public services, often including cost-sharing, user fee methods of funding (Kuteesa et al, 2009). As a percentage of GDP, the government reduced its total expenditures on education from 5.1% in 1988 to 2.46% in 2000 (World Bank, 2016). Where the immediate post-independence period was characterised by Uganda re-claiming its education system, the 1990's were characterised by a retreat of the Ugandan state with private and for-profit actors increasingly playing a role in education provisions.

Concurrent with the global processes of economic liberalisation, both the idea of education as a commodity and Uganda as an education market were undergoing processes of globalisation. At the global level the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) in 1994 included and re-configured education as a tradable commodity, facilitating the growth of a multi trillion-dollar global education industry (Ball, 2012; Robertson 2003; Verger & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). Since the GATS, Uganda has been actively promoting private investment in the education sector. Other globalisation processes also helped facilitate the increased involvement of the for-profit sector in education provisions. Global calls for 'Education for All' (1990) strongly promoted universal access to education, with Uganda taking the lead in Africa in declaring Universal Primary Education (UPE) in 1997. The government's UPE policy sparked an unprecedented and massive influx of new students with enrolment increasing by 58% in the policy's first year of implementation (MoES, 1999). This rapid expansion stretched the state's capacity to provide quality education for all, further perpetuating the arguments employed by the for-profit sector, including Bridge, that the expansion of such schools is therefore necessary to reach UPE (BIA, 2016; Higgins & Rwanyange, 2005).

⁸ Uganda's decentralisation strategy consists of five hierarchical levels of Local Council administration. Education was relegated to the District Council (LC5) level. Decentralization was undertaken in education to ensure equal access across regions and improve accountability (Namukas & Buye, 2009; Wood, 2008). Decentralization was supported by the IMF and World Bank with the intent of increasing cost efficiencies and decreasing central government spending (Kuteesa et al, 2010).

⁹ The adjustment programs adopted by Uganda were further manifested in the new government's recognition of private providers as supplementary to public provisions in 1993. This directly followed the line of the Government White Paper on Education (1992), a document ideologically influenced by the IMF and World Bank (ISER, 2016).

Throughout and following the liberalisation and globalisation processes, the Ugandan government had undertaken further neoliberal-based initiatives in the education sector that assisted in embedding the private and for-profit spheres and reduced the role of the state in service provisions. To help meet the commitment of UPE, Uganda established the Education Strategic Investment Plan (ESIP) (1998-2003) and its follow-up Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) (2004-2015) to oversee the coordination of private investment actors in the now swelling, and largely underfunded, primary school sector. The Education Sector Consultative Committee (ESCC) – comprised of government representatives, donors, and private sector actors – is charged with overseeing ESSP and is an arena in which wide-ranging education policy directions and frameworks are constructed and administered. Other, similar committee-like structures composed of government and non-governmental representatives and the for-profit sphere – such as the Basic Education Working Group of which Bridge has been a member – put efforts into framing national education policy. The Ugandan government continued this cooperative relationship with the private sector when it embarked on a large-scale Public Private Partnership (PPP) approach following the government’s commitment to Universal Secondary Education and subsequent growth of enrolment in secondary schools. The PPP program commits the government to contractual relationships with the private and low-fee for-profit education providers to supplement government provisions (MoES, 2016). PPP provisions have quickly grown in scale, with 45% of secondary education students now enrolled in 879 PPP-provided schools (ISER, 2016)¹⁰. Hence, Bridge seeks out market-oriented contexts in which the political economy of education, as it is in Uganda, is malleable to scaling for-profit experimentations.

In the analysis of Bridge in Uganda a final essential dynamic to consider is state or institutional capacity. The Education Standards Agency was created in 2001 with the mandate of monitoring the licensing and quality of private schools. However, the agency lacks a significant amount of capacity for monitoring and enforcement, largely attributed to the insufficient funding it receives for its operations and the preceding structural adjustment programs that encouraged austerity in government service provisions (Wood, 2008, p. 270). The inability of the government to keep up with the monitoring of the for-profit sector’s rapid expansion, combined with the processes of further liberalisation and globalisation, created the context for Bridge to establish itself in the country and spread at the unprecedented rate at which it has since February of 2015. By 2013 about 1.4 million primary school aged children, or 16.2%, were enrolled in private schools (MoES, 2013). In total, enrolment in primary education has increased exponentially since the 1990’s with approximately 8.3 million pupils and a net enrolment rate of 93.65% in 2013 (UNESCO, 2014). This enrollment boom, combined with the 1990’s cuts to government involvement in education, set the stage for the private sphere to take a greater role in education. At the same time, a context was established for companies like Bridge to operate in an unobstructed and unaccountable manner with disregard for Uganda’s legal processes, educational standards, and ultimately, state sovereignty. Bridge’s operations, however, could not have started without the support of its notable investors.

¹⁰ Similar to the findings of this inquiry, recent research is finding that the PPP approach may be infringing on human rights in regards to accessing education (ISER, 2016).

3. Backing Bridge: Transnational investors, networks, and capital

As more and more functions of the state are effectively ‘outsourced’ to the private sphere including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and for-profit contractors in the global South, state capacity has steadily declined (Abrahamsen, 2000; Ferguson, 2006). In turn,

global capital and investment has increasingly been funneled into non-state actors to deliver public services and responsibilities typically associated with the state, such as education,

in view of generally accepted claims of poor state quality and efficiencies associated with the private sector. In spaces created by state retrenchment new ‘market opportunities’ have opened for transnational corporations to help fill the ‘governance gap’ (Bhanji, 2008; BIA, n.d.). In turn, for-profit corporations like Bridge have benefited immensely from these new governance arrangements and patterns of economic investment: with more than USD100 million currently invested in the company, Bridge has the financial backing to rapidly expand its for-profit education services in contexts that agree with its enterprising mission or not.

In 2008, the Clinton Global Initiative made an USD8 million investment into Bridge over two years, involving financial commitments from Deutsche Bank America’s Foundation, Grey Ghost Ventures and the Kellogg Foundation. That momentum continued in 2009 when the Omidyar Network, established by Pierre Omidyar (billionaire founder of eBay) invested USD1.8 million into the for-profit education company. Omidyar Network describes itself as ‘...a philanthropic investment firm dedicated to harnessing the power of markets to help people improve their lives’ (Omidyar, 2016). Beyond leading its initial investments, the Omidyar Network has participated in successive rounds of investment in 2010 and 2012. However, the total amount invested in Bridge by Omidyar is undisclosed. The investment firm states that:

Bridge International Academies is an attractive investment opportunity to Omidyar Network because it is a compelling example of a high-impact, scalable, and entrepreneurial solution that addresses one of the most urgent demands of the developing world: low-cost access to quality education. Bridge demonstrates how for-profit innovation can drive social change by employing a unique business model that can be easily replicated in other emerging markets. (GIIN, 2016)

Omidyar has said its investments in Bridge will ‘...support the company’s aggressive expansion in Kenya and beyond’ (Omidyar, 2016).

Beyond these initial investors, Bridge has attracted private equity investments from entrepreneurs involved in the growing educational technology ('Ed-Tech') industry, including Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft as well as a prolific philanthropist, invested in Bridge because he saw '...innovation in the approach and wanted to support it personally' rather than through his non-profit charity, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (Stavis & Clark, 13 March 2015). The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, invested USD10 million in Bridge through Zuckerberg Education Ventures, which is a for-profit investment arm that has invested millions of dollars in a number of ed-tech companies. It is listed as a limited liability company (LLC) and not a charitable foundation, which allows it to invest in for-profit companies, make political donations, and engage in partisan political campaigns or lobbying efforts (Cam, 5 May 2016). Zuckerberg Education Ventures was drawn to 'Bridge's innovative business model and technology' which is advertised to investors as a model that can improve learning outcomes in developing countries, while providing profitable returns to investors (Bridge, n.d.; Zuckerberg Education Ventures, 16 March 2015).

Pearson PLC, the largest education conglomerate in the world, has also invested private equity into Bridge. Pearson is a market-maker, enabler, and leader in advancing the growth of low-fee private for-profit schooling throughout Africa and Asia. In 2012, Pearson established the Pearson Affordable Learning Fund (PALF), which is a 'for-profit investment fund' that '...makes significant minority equity investments in for-profit companies to meet the growing demand for affordable education across the developing world' (PALF, 2016). Before the launch of PALF, Pearson invested in Bridge in 2010 via Learn Capital, which is a U.S. based venture capital firm focusing on ed-tech startups. Pearson is the largest limited partner of Learn Capital and Learn Capital is the largest shareholder of Bridge with a 15% stake in the company.

New Enterprise Associates (NEA), '...one of the world's largest venture capital firms with over USD13 billion in committed capital' is another major investor in Bridge (Sakoda, 13 November 2012). Jon Sakoda, a partner at NEA, claims that:

Today's education crisis calls for more than politics and policy changes, but for revitalization and re-imagination of our education system for the 21st century. At New Enterprise Associates (NEA), we see a unique opportunity to invest in entrepreneurship and technology in this education crisis and believe that now is the time for our industry to step up and do its part...We see amazing opportunity in this education crisis. And, after all, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.
(Sakoda, 13 November 2012)

Furthermore, NEA suggests that '...low-cost bandwidth around the world has made it possible for anyone with an Internet connection to pursue a world-class education' (Sakoda, 13 November 2012)—which effectively articulates the Bridge model of internet-based education advertised as 'world-class education' (BIA, 2016f).

Bridge has attracted further investment from national governments in the United Kingdom and United States. The U.S. government has provided capital to Bridge in the form of a USD10 million long-term loan made by the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC).

The Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), the U.S. Government's development finance institution, mobilises private capital to help solve critical development challenges and in doing so, advances U.S. foreign policy. Because OPIC works with the U.S. private sector, it helps U.S. businesses gain footholds in emerging markets, catalysing revenues, jobs and growth opportunities both at home and abroad. OPIC achieves its mission by providing investors with financing, political risk insurance, and support for private equity funds. (OPIC, 2016)

By investing in U.S. businesses, such as Bridge, that aim to tackle global 'development challenges', OPIC aims to advance American economic and political interests abroad.

The British government has provided both financial and technical assistance to Bridge. In 2012, the U.K.'s Department for International Development (DFID) established a new Impact Fund – a 13-year project worth £75 million – to '...invest in enterprises which serve the poor as consumers, suppliers or employees' (CDC, 7 June 2016). The Impact Fund is managed by CDC, which is 'DFID's principal mechanism for leveraging private sector investment in poor countries' (DFID, n.d., p. 20). The first investment made by DFID's Impact Fund was a £15 million investment in Novastar, which in turn was used to invest in Bridge. According to DFID, 'Novastar seeks to develop fully commercial businesses that adapt and deploy innovative business models to profitably serve proven demand for basic goods and services' (DFID, 2016). In January, 2014 it was announced that CDC would provide an additional USD6 million equity investment to support the expansion of Bridge in other viable markets in Africa (CDC, 21 January 2014). The UK investments in Bridge have also raised concerns about the use of public taxpayer money to subsidise the operations of private corporations that aim to profit from the privatisation of basic services sold to the world's poor (Curtis, 2015).

Aside from the for-profit private sphere and governmental bodies investing in Bridge, the world's leading international financial and development assistance institutions have taken an interest. Congruent with the World Bank's history of promoting the private sphere in educational provisions, in January 2014 the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC) announced a USD10 million investment into Bridge (IFC, 2016). According to the IFC, '...the capital will be used to expand the network of schools in Kenya and enter 3 new markets' including Uganda (IFC, 2016). In addition to providing long term capital investment, the IFC and World Bank '...can use its reach and experience in emerging markets to assist the company in analysing expansion targets, selecting appropriate markets and supporting market entry' as well as 'navigating regulations and government policies in new markets' (IFC, 2016). The co-founder of Bridge, Shannon May, said the firm partnered with the IFC and World Bank '...because it can play a large role in engaging government leadership in discussing issues that are key to our business' (Kayser et al., 2014 p. 51). The World Bank, therefore, uses both its economic and political capital to help meet the interests of Bridge.

Bridge has received equity from a host of other private investment firms as well. Khosla Ventures, one such equity provider, seeks to invest in '...large problems that are amenable to technology solutions' (Khosla, 2016). LGT Impact Ventures, a venture philanthropist firm, has provided Bridge with an initial investment of USD200,000 (LGT, 2016). Bridge has also received equity from PanAfrican Investments, an investment company in the U.S. focusing on business oppor-

tunities in sub-Saharan Africa. Rethink Education, an investment firm providing equity to business ventures that aim to remake education through technology, as well as Pershing Square Foundation, a private foundation investing in social enterprises, are two other major investors supporting the growth of Bridge through capital financing (BIA, 2016b).

Bridge is backed by an interconnected, yet multifaceted, network of venture capitalists, entrepreneurs, philanthropic foundations, international financial institutions, and government agencies; representing an ensemble of actors with jointly aligned interests and activities. These shared interests and initiatives have awarded Bridge the financial and political capital to profit from the provisions of social goods. Bridge, and the actors that constitute it, represent and participate in a form of 'philanthrocapitalism' (Edwards, 2008). This particular form of 'philanthropy' involves business logics and strategic capital investments, coupled with new forms of 'giving' or 'social impact' pursuits, that provide access into new for-profit markets and the commercialisation of essential services in the global South—a model considered by these actors to be the basis for social change and development. As DFID claims, companies like Bridge are meant to '...generate and measure both a social and a financial return' (DFID, 2016). In the process, distinctions between philanthropy and business, commerce and charity, become increasingly blurred, resulting in education corporations like Bridge '...taking on the moral responsibilities normally associated with the state' (Mundy et al., 2016, p. 541). Hence, Bridge is assuming the moral responsibility of bringing basic education services to those living in poverty, whether it is desired and requested or not, on a mercantile and for-profit basis.

4. Schooling the poor profitably: Innovations & Deprivations

Populations living in poverty in the global South are increasingly seen by multinational firms as new sources of revenue that provide an immense, yet largely untapped, market opportunity.

By creating 'pro-poor' markets that target the masses living on less than USD2 per day, firms aim to expand the reach (and presumed benefits) of global capitalist markets into new geographies, communities, and sectors of life. In doing so, corporate actors purport to 'do good', while doing good financially, by establishing new forms of 'inclusive capitalism' (Prahalad & Hart, 2002, p. 1). From this perspective, profitable markets oriented towards social impacts are seen as the 'solution' to challenges in the global South, such as a lack of quality education for all.

For their part, Bridge claims that 800 million primary and nursery aged pupils living on less than USD2 per day suffer from ‘...a huge gap between the education offered and the needs of the population’ (BIA, 2013, p. 4). However, according to Bridge, families living in poverty spend on average USD80 per year on education for their children—representing a USD64 billion parent paid market (BIA, n.d.). For Bridge, this is a discernable and viable market opportunity previously left undiscovered.

Prior to Bridge International Academies, no one had put together a viable business model that demonstrated that educating the world’s largest market was possible.

Bridge International Academies was founded from day one on the premise of this massive market opportunity, knowing that to achieve success, we would need to achieve a scale never before seen in education, and at a speed that makes most people dizzy. (BIA, 2016f)

By scaling-up services rapidly and selling basic education as a commodity to millions of children throughout Africa and Asia, Bridge aims to tap into this ‘massive market opportunity’.

Bridge, therefore, epitomises a type of business strategy referred to as ‘the fortune at the bottom of the pyramid’ (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Prahalad & Hart, 2002). ‘Bottom of the Pyramid’ (BoP) strategies aim to create markets that capture the population on the lowest (and largest) end of the socioeconomic pyramid. However, firms like Bridge wishing to tap into the BoP require a business model based on rapidly developing economies of scale, which in turn, can lower the costs of goods and/or services to a price-point deemed ‘affordable’ for the masses living in poverty. As Bridge co-founder Shannon May clarifies:

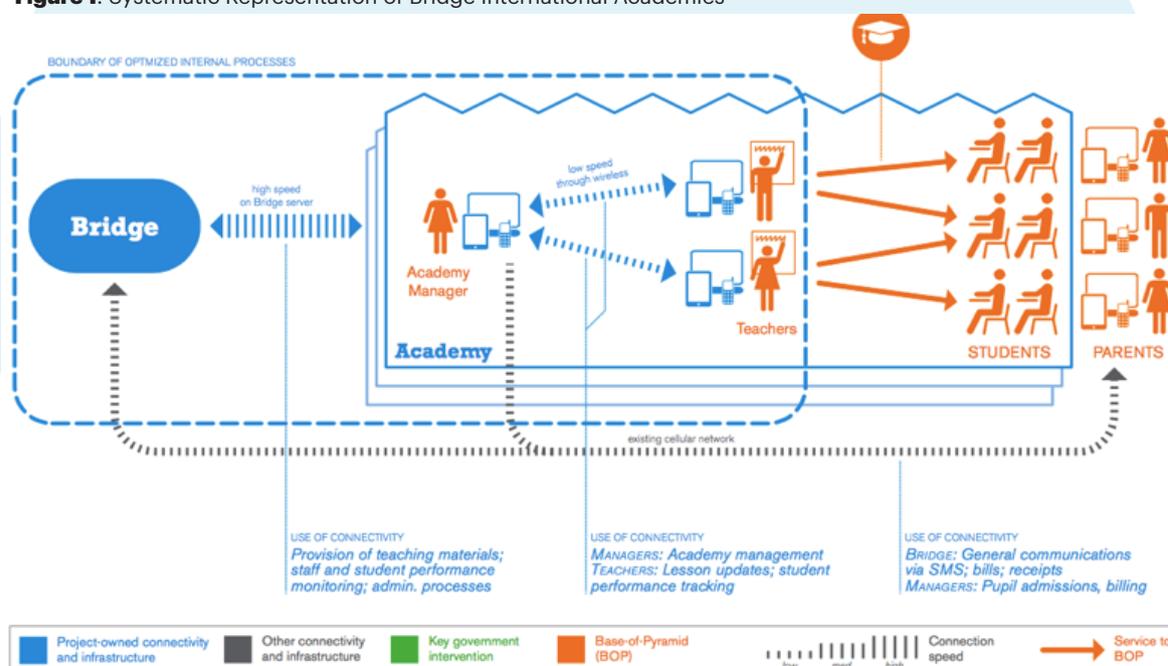
If you want to serve the truly poor, families living below the poverty line, you have to come up with a service at a very low price-point that’s actually accessible. That also means you’re going to have to have a very large business – a very big volume – so that it can work. (WISE Channel [Interviewer] and Shannon May [Interviewee], 17 July 2014)

Such economies of scale require a highly standardised model that runs on optimal efficiency and cost-effectiveness. In turn, Bridge has developed a mass education service delivery model based on standardisations that are designed to reduce costs, referred to as the ‘Academy-in-a-Box’ model. This model has re-engineered the whole lifecycle of basic education, using real-time data, technology, and rapid operational expansion to drive down costs and reach scalability (BIA, 2016f).

Broadband technology is essential to the academy-in-a-box model developed by Bridge. Simply understood as internet-enabled ICT, broadband technology is utilised by Bridge to integrate a systematised and standardised model made up of smartphones and tablet computers, equipped with customised mobile applications and internet connectivity, which enable teachers and administrators to perform all matters related to instruction, operations, and management. Instructional activities (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, lessons) as well as non-instructional

activities (e.g. admissions, accountancy, administration) are enacted through computer devices connected to broadband internet. Hence, internet-enabled devices are used to run the ‘entire company from start to finish’ including all aspects related to teaching, tracking and assessing pupils, communicating with parents, collecting fees, and the management and evaluation of each academy (BIA, 2013, p. 11). For example, on the instructional side, pre-programmed curriculum is centrally developed by Bridge at headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts and Nairobi, Kenya, and sent electronically to each school site using web-enabled smartphones that transfer curriculum to tablet e-readers¹¹, also referred to as ‘teacher-computers’ (which are further discussed in the next section), that distribute knowledge and information to pupils. As one Academy Manager from Bridge described, the ‘...scripted content is sent through smartphones and then synched with the teacher-computers each day so teachers can read the lessons in class’ (Interview). Within this new model of learning students do not have access to a computer or the internet in class, but rather internet-enabled devices are used to transmit scripted lessons readout by teachers to the students. Bridge’s use of broadband technology is meant to reduce operating costs and facilitate rapid expansion in order to reach more customers at the bottom of the pyramid.

Figure 1: Systematic Representation of Bridge International Academies



Source: Kayser, O., L. Klarsfeld, and S. Brossard. (2014, September). The Broadband Effect: Enhancing Market-based Solutions for the Base of the Pyramid. Inter-American Development Bank.

According to Bridge, broadband technology used to support instructors has eliminated the need for professionally trained and certified teachers. Yet, the absence of certified teachers and presence of new technologies in Bridge’s model reflects a corporate strategy that is concerned less with innovation and quality in education and more about cutting costs and increasing rates of profitability. Since teachers are the most capital-intensive aspect of any education system, Bridge is able to drastically reduce operating costs and benefit from economies of scale by employing unqualified teachers and paying them severely low wages. One Academy Manager explained:

¹¹ Tablets used by Bridge are produced by Nook Media LLC, a subsidiary of Barnes & Noble, which shares some major investors with Bridge, including Bill Gates and Pearson.

Teachers at Bridge are facilitators because the content is prepared and they are just there to read it to the pupils, following the script 100%. And it's emphasised that scripts are followed 100%. So at Bridge it is not mandatory that teachers be licensed. (Interview)

'Learning facilitators,' as Bridge refers to its teachers, only require the equivalent of a Senior 4 level education and fluency in English. Based on consultations with Bridge teachers and Academy Managers this researcher found that, of 8 Bridge academies in Uganda, 80-90% of its teachers (or 'learning facilitators') are indeed unlicensed. This employment of uncertified and unlicensed 'teachers' is an infringement on Uganda's educational and legal standards.

Similar to nearly all developing and developed states who have formally recognized requirements for teacher registration and licencing, the Education Act (2008) of Uganda states that: 'No person shall teach in any public or private school of any description unless he or she is registered as a teacher or licensed to teach under this Act' (GoU, 2008, p. 17). As a senior official at the Ministry of Education explained, regarding the operations of Bridge:

If there is a school which is using teachers who are not professional teachers, who are not trained teachers and they are teaching our children, then they are doing it illegally... A teacher should be qualified and registered by the Ministry. If he or she is not, then that teacher is illegal to stand in any class and the owners of the school stand a very big risk if such a person ever made a mistake with any child. (Interview)

By hiring unlicensed and unregistered teachers – a clear violation of the Education Act in Uganda – Bridge is able to drastically reduce operating costs by paying its frontline employees severely low wages. According to research participants, monthly salaries provided to Bridge teachers in Uganda range from Ush 130,000 (or USD39) at the nursery and lower primary levels up to Ush 180,000 (or USD54) at the upper primary levels. By comparison, public primary school teachers who are on the *lowest* end of the pay scale receive at least Ush 279,000 (or USD84) per month (Nalugo, 6 August 2014). At this rate, teachers at Bridge receive the equivalent of approximately Ush 6,000 (USD1.80) to Ush 8,600 (USD2.50) per day for their services – essentially making them a part of the bottom of the pyramid market in which Bridge professes to serve.

Bridge's particularly low teacher pay rates are affecting the very livelihoods of its teachers. Many of the Bridge teachers that participated in this research expressed the daily struggles of providing for themselves and their families. One Bridge teacher complained that:

The salary they are giving us is very little. Remember we are in an urban area. We rent and everything is costly. When you compare the money we are getting, you find we cannot even manage to buy a pair of trousers. (Interview)

Similarly, another Bridge teacher stated:

According to standards of living here, our salaries are not enough. We receive no accommodation. Some of us have responsibilities and other people we are responsible for but with the pay they are giving us we are finding it very difficult to sustain ourselves. (Interview)

Subsequently, a number of Academy Managers that participated in this research pointed out that the turnover rate for teachers at Bridge schools is 'very high' (Interview).

Teachers at Bridge schools also lack the employee benefits that registered and licensed teachers receive in the public school system¹². This lack of basic benefits, such as healthcare, supplements the financial strain already felt by Bridge teachers. One such teacher summarised the situation:

When you are sick, teachers are not insured. So first we go to a pharmacy to see if maybe we can find some medicine that can help because maybe you can't afford to go to the hospital because our salary is so low. (Interview)

Furthermore, Bridge employees lack any form of job security. According to one teacher:

We don't have job security. They can even terminate you over a simple matter. If someone calls 'customer care' in Kenya about a teacher, those people can terminate you very easily. For Bridge, they say 'better we lose a teacher, than lose a pupil.' (Interview)

Hence, the work of teachers is valued significantly less by Bridge than most education providers, since the role of the teacher has been effectively replaced by new forms of technology.

Interviews with Bridge teachers also revealed that the company undertakes additional measures to cut back on teacher costs while also securing free labour. Such measures include a refusal to pay teachers for certain extracurricular responsibilities. As one Bridge teacher shared:

We also do community outreach during the holidays but we are not paid. It is a form of marketing they make us do. We go ahead and emphasise to parents that they must send their pupils to us; so we talk about the benefits of the child studying at Bridge. But we don't get paid to do that. (Interview)

In this particular instance, a Bridge teacher was unpaid for essentially advertising (or what Bridge refers to as 'community outreach') the company to the community. Using teachers as unpaid advertisers, combined with their remarkably low pay and lack of employee benefits, is a clear case of exploitation of labour in the global South, but premised as making a social impact. For these reasons, as some research participants indicated, there have been cases of resistance demonstrated by Bridge teachers in Uganda in the form of teacher strikes (Interviews).

Beyond the work of teachers, Bridge also uses technology to automate the non-instructional activities of Academy Managers through internet-enabled devices and ICT. These activities include, for example, academy administration, payroll management, and academy monitoring. As stated by the company:

¹² The only employee benefit provided to Bridge teachers is the ability to enroll one of the teachers' children at a Bridge school at no cost.

Using technology and data, Bridge drives enormous efficiencies both in terms of the overhead costs required to run an academy and in terms of increasing the quality of the output. For example, at the academy level, a Bridge International Academy has only one employee involved in management – the Academy Manager. The vast majority of non-instructional activities that an Academy Manager would normally have to deal with (billing, payments, expense management, payroll processing, prospective admissions, and more) are all automated and centralised through a combination of our Academy Manager’s smartphone application and our Teachers’ tablet application, all interconnected to a custom backend ERP [enterprise resource planning system]. (BIA, 2016f)

A Bridge Academy Manager in Uganda further explained that ‘...*all* school operations are run using a smartphone’ (Interview [emphasis added]). Smartphones are used by Academy Managers to admit new students, track student performance, monitor teachers, manage finances, and collect school fees through custom mobile applications, which are set-up to automate each administrative task (BIA, 2016e). For example, Bridge uses a mobile money system (known as M-Pesa) that allows parents to pay school fees by transferring money via text message. Academy Managers can then use smartphones to:

...instantly track students who have not yet paid school fees. It shows who has paid and who has not. I can then call parents directly with a simple tap of the phone, which has all of the parent’s contact information on it, so I can tell them to pay for their child’s school fees (Academy Manager, Interview).

Hence, all teaching and managerial components of Bridge’s schooling services are automated, mechanised, and systematised. As Jay Kimmelman, a co-founder of Bridge claims: ‘We’ve systematised every aspect of how you run a school. How you manage it. How you interact with parents. How you teach. How you check on school managers, and how you support them’ (Olopade, 12 November 2013). Although technological innovation can be used to reduce administrative burdens, it opens up new issues and dangers regarding data security, confidentiality, and social control.

The physical structures that make up each academy-in-a-box are not nearly as innovative as the technology put in place for instructional and managerial activities. The cheap and rapid construction of Bridge schools results in school buildings that often do not meet the Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards established by the MoES. One Academy Manager expressed that:

The structures they set up are a problem. We have lost many good parents because of the poor structures. There is no security. They should modernise the facilities like they do with the technology...The money they use to buy these computers can be used to buy bricks to build proper walls. (Interview)

All classrooms and offices are made of bricks up to window level and the rest of the building, including the roof, are assembled using iron sheets. Wire mesh is used in place of windows and school bags hang from nails hammered into wooden poles outside each classroom. One

Academy Manager at Bridge referred to these facilities as ‘chicken-coops for kids’ (Interview). Yet, despite these poor conditions, Bridge brands itself as ‘International’; implying and also explicitly marketing the idea of high, ‘world-class’ standards (BIA, 2016f). In regards to Bridge, a District Inspector of Schools in Uganda explained that:

When you look at the nature of the structures, they are uniform but very, very simple. But they have written on them ‘International’. And people here know something ‘international’ must be something fantastic, something wonderful! But now people are saying: ‘are these really international schools?’ Because our schools are even better than them. So what type of international school is this? Its not international standards because, in fact, they are actually below our national standards. So that word ‘International’ they are using is a problem. It has caused a lot of question marks and people are having a lot of doubts. (Interview)

The physical appearance of each Bridge classroom represents not only the standardised academy-in-a-box model but also the profit motivation behind cutting costs in relation to school construction.



Figure 2: A typical Bridge International Academy classroom in Eastern, Uganda.



Figure 3: Bridge International Academy, 6-classroom structure in Eastern, Uganda.

Cost-cutting techniques employed by Bridge are purportedly designed to make the company's educational services 'affordable' for youth in Uganda living in poverty. Although fees charged by Bridge can vary slightly from one branch to another, the table below shows the typical costs a customer in Uganda would expect to pay.

Table 1: Fees (in USh) for Bridge International Academies in Uganda

	Nursery	Primary 1, 2, 3	Primary 4, 5
Admission fee	10,000	10,000	10,000
Annual fees (3 terms per year)	250,500	286,200	315,900
Compulsory uniform fees (expected to be 15% of total revenue)	26,000(girls) 24,000 (boys)	37,000 (girls) 40,000 (boys)	37,000 (girls) 40,000 (boys)
Optional lunch services per year (contracted to outside vendors but potential for 10% revenue share)	150,000	150,000	150,000
Total fees paid annually ¹³ (including lunch costs)	435,500 / USD129	484,700 / USD143	514,400 / USD152
(excluding lunch costs)	285,500 / USD84	334,700 / USD99	364,000 / USD108

Source: Data retrieved and compiled based on visits at Bridge Academy locations in Uganda.

¹³Calculations do not include hidden costs associated with Bridge's mobile money payment system. Parents with children attending Bridge who participated in this research commonly complained that: 'Paying in instalments through mobile money is very expensive because every time we pay Bridge with mobile money we are also charged extra fees to do that.' The cost to make a mobile payment varies but a conservative estimate is USh500 per transaction. It is common for parents of Bridge pupils to make 15 to 30 pay instalments over the course of the year using mobile money, resulting in additional costs ranging from USh7,500 to 15,000 (US\$2.20 to 4.40).

At these rates, for-profit services sold by Bridge are neither affordable nor accessible for the most economically disadvantaged pupils in Uganda. For example, in the Eastern Region where one-third (21 out of 63) of Bridge's academies in the country are located, the average annual household income (in terms of real income) is US\$1.872 million (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2014). In turn, families in these communities with an average household income would have to expend approximately 23 – 27% (including lunch) or 15 – 19% (excluding lunch) of their earnings just to send one (1) child to a Bridge school for one year. On average, however, households in Uganda classified as 'poor' consist of 6.1 persons, which suggests that these families have multiple children to send to school. In turn, households with two (2) children, for example, would have to expend 46 – 55% (including lunch) or 30 – 39% (excluding lunch) of their total household income on school fees at Bridge. Therefore, the claim that Bridge provides schooling that is affordable for all learners is misplaced given that its basic education services are not affordable for households with an average income, let alone those most affected by poverty. User fees charged by Bridge undoubtedly act as a barrier to its claim that it is bringing 'knowledge for all' to impoverished populations '...regardless of their family's income' (BIA, 2016f).

A Uganda child of low class cannot afford what Bridge is charging. The majority of pupils not going to school in Uganda are those who are not able to afford to pay for any type of schooling. So any intervener who would like to provide education to the low class cannot charge a fee. (MoES official, Interview)

Multiple studies have indicated that user fees are an obstruction to the achievement of the global mandate of 'Education for All' (Klees, 2008; Tomasevski, 2003). This was largely recognised over a decade ago when many user-fee policies were largely overturned across the global South, leading to massive increases in school enrolment (including in Uganda) (Watkins, 2000). Acknowledging these findings, United Nations bodies have repeatedly condemned the application of user fees and for-profit approaches for universalising access to basic education. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Kishore Singh, has announced that:

The costs associated with private schools are exacerbating inequality in societies as poor and marginalised groups are often excluded from going to them... The state is both guarantor and regulator of education which is a fundamental human right and a noble cause. Provision of basic education free of costs is not only a core obligation of states, it is also a moral imperative. (UN, 27 October 2014)

The charging of user fees by Bridge and other low-fee for-profit education providers, therefore, obstructs efforts meant to universalise access to quality education, while also exacerbating inequality in societies. As the findings of this research have shown, user fees charged by Bridge are not affordable for the populations they purport to be serving.

Many students that enrol into a Bridge school are forced to leave if school and exam fees are not paid on time in full. One parent with a child enrolled at Bridge explained that:

...when we get money we send her to school. But when we have no money she has to stay at home because we can't pay the school fees. We don't have money right now so she hasn't been in school for weeks. (Interview)

Fees, therefore, are the primary reason identified by Academy Managers, teachers, and parents for high student dropout rates at Bridge (Interviews). Based on a cross sample of Bridge Academies in Uganda, dropout rates can range from as low as 10% and as high as 60%. As one Academy Manager explained: 'Initially, I had 215 pupils enrolled but they went on dropping because of school fees. So after they dropped we were left with 128 that sat for exams' (Interview). Hence, fee-paying forms of commercialised learning for the poor involve a distinct and obvious structural inequity: user fees, which deny access to those already marginalised by poverty.

New technologies and innovations that constitute the academy-in-a-box model aim to drive down costs, facilitate rapid expansion, and produce 'world-class' education that is claimed to be affordable, and hence, accessible for *all* children living in poverty (BIA, 2016a; 2016d; 2016e). However, the commercial model of education rolled-out by Bridge also involves contradictions and deprivations for both employees and clients. Pupils living in poverty are expected to pay unaffordable fees to receive an education – with lessons developed from outside of their cultural context – from poorly paid and, oftentimes, uncertified teachers. Furthermore, the use of tablet e-readers for delivering scripted lessons to students strictly limit teacher-pupil interaction, to the detriment of the child's development, within sub-standard learning environments marketed as 'International.'

5. 'Teacher-computers' and their (dis)contents

As described in the previous section, Bridge has made use of internet-enabled devices to re-engineer how basic education is delivered to the bottom of the pyramid. This particular strategy is based on the use of 'teacher-computers' that link up tablet computers with low-paid, and oftentimes underqualified, individuals that together transmit scripted instructions to pupils.

Teacher-computers represent not only the company's most 'innovative' and entrepreneurial effort towards education standardisation, calibration, and economies of scale, but also the most problematic, given that it has fundamentally altered the nature and practice of education itself.

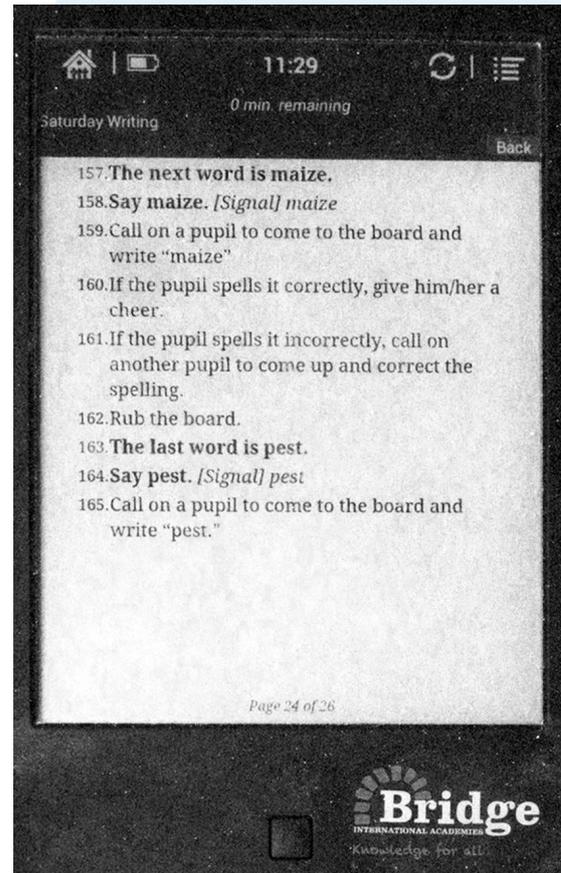
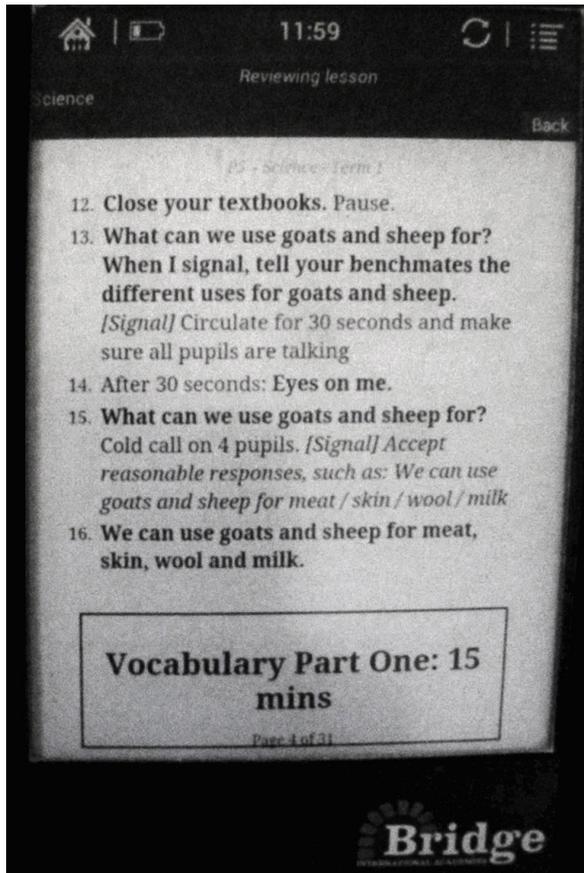
This section will look more closely at the use of teacher-computers and their implications on curriculum, pedagogy, and teacher-pupil interaction. In doing so, the focus is on the educational experience of teachers and learners at Bridge.

Teacher-computers represent the device, the instrument, the tool, 'the thing' that delivers knowledge and instruction – in some form or another – to Bridge pupils. All curricular activities and processes related to instruction are developed by Bridge in Boston and Nairobi '... by the world's leading education experts' (BIA, 2016e) which, in turn, are encoded, packaged, and distributed to pupils using internet-enabled devices (i.e. the teacher-computers). As the company claims:

On the instructional side, Bridge invests in hiring world leaders in education to develop comprehensive teacher guidelines and training programs. Again, because of our highly efficient delivery mechanism (marrying talented individuals from each community with technology, scripted instruction, rigorous training, and data-driven oversight), Bridge is able to bring some of the world's greatest instruction and pedagogical thinking into every classroom in every village and slum in the world (BIA, 2016b).

Every aspect of the curriculum is developed by Bridge outside of Uganda, yet the company claims that content is 'based on government standards' in terms of 'scope and sequence' (BIA, 2016e). It is standardised and converted into scripted lessons that are sent electronically to computer devices, across social and political borders into the Ugandan context, where it is read out to the class using tablet e-readers, or teacher-computers. These scripted lessons include '...step-by-step instructions explaining what teachers should do and say during any given moment of a class' (BIA, 2016e). Bridge, therefore, defines 'world-class' education as scripted instructions designed in Boston and recited word-for-word to children across sub-Saharan Africa.

Teacher-computers are integral apparatuses within this service delivery model that instruct teachers what to say, what to do, what to teach, and how to teach it. As one Bridge teacher shared '...teacher-computers are our basic support; they are what make us teachers at Bridge. So without them there is nothing like a teacher at Bridge' (Interview). Bridge's model of instruction that is deeply reliant on teacher-computers has rendered pedagogy automated, mechanised, and computerised. As another teacher at Bridge explained: 'We just click and teach the pupils. Tap here and teach the pupils. Just like that, following the scripts' (Interview). Below are examples of scripted lessons delivered by and through teacher-computers.



Scripted curriculum delivered by teacher-computers is distinctly rigid and controlled. It resembles a formula for ‘teaching’ based on technical-reductionism in which every moment and activity related to instruction is pre-programmed, paced, sequenced, and fixed according to the scripture of the tablet. As illustrated in the examples above, data-enabled devices instruct teachers when to ‘Pause’ when to ‘Circulate for 30 seconds’ when to ‘Rub the board’ and when to tell pupils to ‘Close your textbooks.’ A Senior Official in the MoES expressed serious concern with the teaching methods employed by Bridge, stating that:

A problem arises when that modern approach of teaching using the computer is designed to say when to clean the blackboard, when to stand up, when to sit down: it’s like a robot. That robot-style of teaching is likely to cause problems for a learner whose brain is not acculturated according to the robot. (Interview)

It is what could be referred to as a type of *techagogy*: a technology-directed form of pedagogy in which instruction is led by machines. In this approach, technology takes on new and concerning measures of social control. In Bridge classrooms, the *techagogy* employed through teacher-computers requires teachers and pupils to ‘follow the scripts 100%’ (Bridge Teacher, Interview). In the words of one Bridge teacher, ‘...the technology controls us’ (Interview).

Relations of power and control, therefore, are enacted through the use of teacher-computers which strictly regulate what is taught and how. For Bridge, the dual role of creating and acting upon lesson plans (i.e. schemes of work) is no longer handled by professionally-trained and autonomous teachers following national curriculum, but rather structured according to the external rules, procedures, and technology designed by this transnational corporation. In turn, the agency of a teacher to act within this educational reality is bound by externally-devised tools that control what and how to teach. One District Inspector of Schools who had inspected Bridge's teaching methods, observed that:

Teacher-computers are too controlling because the teacher is not allowed to use his or her creativity. From my years inspecting and supervising teachers, you find that some teachers are better than others because of their innovativeness and creativity. But these aspects of teaching are not involved in the scenario of Bridge because you have to follow what is on the computer. (Interview)

In doing so, teacher-computers structure not only *what* is taught, but also *how* it is taught. Crucially however, *how* something is taught, in turn, effects *what* is taught (and also what is *not* taught).

For their part, teacher-computers are important tools for *framing* pedagogic discourse, which relates to how knowledge is communicated within educational settings (Bernstein, 1996). Framing is about the

...selection of knowledge, its sequencing, its pacing, the criteria of selection, and the social/educational interactions that communicate that knowledge—implicating both *how* meaning is communicated and who has the control over what happens in the classroom discourse. (Au, 2012, p. 43)

Therefore, '...framing refers to the controls on communication in local, interactional pedagogic relations' (Bernstein, 1996, p. 26). Given that all curricula used by Bridge (including what is taught and how) involves strict framing, formulated at corporate headquarters outside of Uganda, the local interactions that communicate knowledge in the classroom are regulated and constrained by external forces and their tools of curricular control. However, the form in which knowledge and skills are presented, and how they are communicated, also impacts what is taught (and not taught). As a result, the use of teacher-computers can have unintended consequences for what pupils learn. Commenting on the teaching practices of Bridge, for example, a Senior Official in the MoES eloquently pointed out that:

...there is also the issue of creativity – we must train the children to have creativity and this gift of creativity must also be seen through the teacher. So if a child cannot see a teacher being creative you can't teach the capacity for the child to create. (Interview)

By framing each moment, phrase, and aspect of pedagogic discourse and interaction through the use of teacher-computers, pedagogy takes on a robotised form that involves implicit (or 'hidden') lessons that are taught and not taught to pupils, such as creativity and critical thinking.

Curricula and pedagogy embedded in the Bridge model involve radical standardisations and calibrations, which are designed to be replicable and scalable across various settings. Standardised curriculum – that is scripted, packaged, compartmentalised, and delivered uniformly across the chain – fits congruently with the academy-in-a-box model developed by Bridge that leverages technology and data to maximise cost-efficiencies and economies of scale. Yet, this method of curriculum is proven to be problematic given the limitations imposed by pre-programmed scripts that inadequately respond to the diverse needs, requirements, and realities of learners in various contexts and situations. This is reflected in the following statement by a District Education Officer regarding the practices of Bridge:

There are gaps in the curriculum; in the way they manage the curriculum because every child is different. You cannot expect every child of Buwenge to be at the exact same attainment level as every child in Bugembe. These environments are different. They have disabled the teachers from using their creativity and innovativeness. Teacher aids and materials used in class must fit the locality; the needs of the children in that local context. It is too dogmatic the way that Bridge operates. They don't change anything. The notes are the same. The examples are the same. So they don't cater to the needs of the children. (Interview)

These 'gaps in the curriculum' suggest a systematic failure, in terms of curricular design, since rigid standardisations fail to effectively respond to the local realities, experiences, and needs of learners, and their various attainment levels, while also disabling creativity and innovativeness in the classroom. Furthermore, Bridge teachers explained that rigid scripts dictated by Bridge can impede student engagement with the learning material, since they do not allow adequate time and opportunity for students to interject or ask questions. As a result, many students have been left to "struggle silently" (Bridge Teacher, Interview).

Teacher-computers, therefore, are pedagogic tools which raise new concerns regarding the accessibility of knowledge in learning environments established by Bridge. By framing, pacing, selecting, regimenting, and distributing knowledge (of a certain type), teacher-computers structure the form in which knowledge is communicated, and hence, made accessible; these devices are what convey and transfer knowledge. However, if the computer device itself is the knowledge-bearer, how accessible is 'the knowledge'? For example, as one Bridge teacher explained: 'Sometimes the computer freezes and time keeps running so the lesson is lost along the way' (Interview). Any technical glitch, therefore, can cause a blackout and disrupt the distribution of knowledge in Bridge classrooms.

Since all aspects of instruction and pedagogy are controlled and automated through the use of teacher-computers, Bridge assumes it does not require professionally-trained or certified teachers. Instead the company has established its own Bridge International Training Institutes where it provides three-week teacher-training programmes for new recruits. Here, prospective teachers are 'moulded' by Bridge and trained '...how to use the tools, the technology, how to deliver lessons, and how to handle children' (Bridge Teacher, Interview). Bridge's teacher-training programme '...is basically about teaching using computer technology', as one Bridge teacher described, adding that '...we don't make our own lesson plans or schemes of work, all

of this is delivered through the computer tablets. So we are trained how to use these computers to teach' (Interview). Concerning Bridge's approach to the training and preparation of its teachers, a District Inspector of Schools in Uganda expressed that:

We want people to particularly think *how* to teach rather than just spoon-feed the children through these computer scripts. You must go to a Teachers College to learn how to teach and then you can create lesson plans that connect you, the teacher, to the pupils. If someone just brings an iPad and everything is already there, then that person is not prepared to teach. (Interview)

Bridge claims, on the other hand, that by linking up community members with tablet computers containing scripted instruction, '...we're giving our pupils access to the types of teachers they would never be able to afford' (BIA, 2016e). The company, therefore, markets the 'Bridge' brand as qualitatively superior to what would be found by those in poor villages and slums, reflecting the company's power-laden and Western-biased discourse.

In contradistinction to the claim that Bridge is 'giving' pupils access to a superior 'type of teacher', in the words of one District Inspector of Schools, teacher-computers used by Bridge effectively '...destroys the relationship between the teacher and the child' (Interview). Technology cannot replace genuine teacher-pupil interactions, which is especially acute when dealing with early childhood education. John Dewey, the influential thinker of education, claims '...the reality of education is found in the personal and face-to-face contact of teacher and child' and the '...conditions that underlie and regulate this contact dominate the educational situation' (1901, p. 338). Hence, technological conditions that regulate teacher-pupil interactions, such as teacher-computers, 'dominate the educational situation' in Bridge classrooms. However, the results of an unprecedented global study on the effects of technology on education by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) found:

...no appreciable improvements in student achievement in reading, mathematics or science in the countries that had invested heavily in ICT for education. And perhaps the most disappointing finding of the report is that technology is of little help in bridging the skills divide between advantaged and disadvantaged students. (OECD, 2015, p. 3)

Hence, the use of teacher-computers and ICT in the Bridge model is unlikely to Bridge the learning gaps in communities where it operates. But rather, as the OECD study reveals, '...building deep, conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking requires intensive teacher-student interactions, and technology sometimes distracts from this valuable human engagement' (OECD, 2015, p. 3).

In contrast to the educational standards established in the country, curriculum used by Bridge is not accredited by the National Curriculum Development Centre in Uganda. A Senior Official with the MoES, aware of the social and developmental importance of education, described the gravity of the situation, by stating:

Curriculum that is approved by the National Curriculum Development Centre reflects our values, our norms, our beliefs and is aware of the Ugandan human

being. But the curriculum that is used by Bridge is not approved by the National Curriculum Development Centre...It is a major breach of the law for [Bridge] to go outside the curriculum that is approved in this land. (Interview)

Bridge teachers and Academy Managers have described the curriculum as 'mixed' in that it draws from both Uganda national curriculum but also an 'international curriculum' (Interviews). For instance, one Bridge teacher explained that, '...in primary 3, for the case of Social Studies, it is more international; they ask more international questions like questions which are not applicable to primary 3 children in Uganda' (Interview). The relevance and alignment of Bridge's curriculum to Uganda's national curriculum was frequently called into question by Bridge teachers, managers, and parents during the course of this research. As one Bridge teacher shared:

When we asked a Bridge official who visited our academy if the work we are giving is part of the Uganda curriculum, he said 'yes' but we cannot check for ourselves because we don't even have access to a copy of the national curriculum, nothing is here, so we cannot compare.

Curriculum that does not align with national standards represents a serious challenge for learners intending to sit for national exams such as the Primary Level Examination (PLE) in Uganda, which is necessary to pass in order to move onto secondary education. Bridge teachers, managers, and District Inspectors of Schools frequently raised this issue in relation to the curriculum used by Bridge. As one Bridge Academy Manager expressly remarked:

The real teachers I have here who have trained in colleges and taught in other schools for some years, they come and tell me 'this is nothing...whatever we are teaching here this is not helping our pupils to prepare themselves for PLE and this is not helping our pupils to be able to compete with other pupils who are being taught using the other methods'...I will not sit idle no more. I have to speak out about it...they are sending things that are irrelevant, that are wasting pupil's time. Children don't learn things, they don't have notes, they don't know where to read from. And you expect that child to sit for PLE? No, I don't think so. We are only leaving our pupils' futures up to fate. Something needs to change. (Interview)

Hence, in the analysis of Bridge's use of teacher-computers, both the technical device (in relation to pedagogy) and its contents (in relation to curriculum) reveal a number of serious implications for teachers and learners.

Teacher-computers employed by Bridge embody processes that facilitate the commodification and marketisation of education at the bottom of the pyramid by lowering operational costs and increasing standardisations. In practice, they reflect a form of control—over what is taught, how it is taught, and how it is learned. They severely undermine both teacher-pupil interactions and the legal standards established by the government of Uganda regarding schoolteachers. And they serve the corporate interests of profit-making, rather than the right to quality education. Teacher-computers, therefore, are the epitome of the Bridge approach to education in Uganda.

6. Closing remarks, closing Bridge

Shannon May, co-founder of Bridge, once claimed that programs designed *for* someone else, rather than with their collaboration, are ultimately set to fail (Buchanan, n.d.). In what can now be seen as a foreshadowing of recent events with Bridge in Uganda, May's proclamations are insightful. In just over a year of operating in the country – first opening in February 2015 and rapidly expanding to 63 schools – the company has been ordered by Janet Museveni, Minister of Education and Sports, to halt its operations and indefinitely close down its schools. Noticing the *failure of Bridge to bring affordable, quality education, to hire trained and licensed teachers, and to abide by basic educational requirements and legal standards*, the Ugandan government began to take steps towards confronting Bridge. By April 2016 the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry released a letter of concern regarding the 'legality' of Bridge schools in violation of the Education Act of 2008, citing 'quality of the infrastructure, teacher issues, methodology, curriculum, etc.' (MoES 2016b). The letter instructed the company to

...halt the expansion of the Bridge International Academies forthwith, until the Ministry establishes that these schools and those yet to open later are in conformity with our Basic Requirements and Legal Standards. (MoES 2016b)

Following the decision by a District Inspector of Schools three months later on July 11th, all Bridge schools in Jinja District were ordered to close. The District Inspector's report mentioned the company's failure to 'recruit qualified teachers, secure licenses [and provide] appropriate infrastructure' (EI, 29 July 2016). That same day, Member of Parliament Margaret Rwabushaija, also the National Chairperson for the Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATU), raised the same concerns in Parliament (EI, 29 July 2016). Finally, on August 11th, Minister Museveni had ordered the closure of all Bridge academies in Uganda for the company's failure to meet the country's educational and legal standards, effectively shutting down the largest chain of commercial private schools in the country. The company is currently contesting the government's decision in the country's High Court.

Prior to this research, no independent study had been conducted on Bridge's operations in Uganda. The findings of this research, which are indebted to the collaboration of the research participants – including Bridge teachers and Academy Managers, district school inspectors and officials in the MoES – fully corroborate the initial findings of the Ministry's Permanent Secretary, the observations of the District Inspector of Schools and the conclusions made by the Ministry for the closure of Bridge academies.

In investigating Bridge's operations in Uganda, this research has found that the company's profit-driven, low-cost, and academy-in-a-box approach to educating the poor contradicts the moral and human rights-based imperative of providing quality universal education. The quality of education the company does provide, relative to the country's educational standards, is greatly compromised by the lengths it is willing to go in order to drive down its operating costs and achieve economies of scale for profit. Classrooms have been constructed poorly, untrained

and underpaid teachers merely read off a curriculum that is designed by someone else, and the role of teacher-computers threatens the very teacher-pupil relationships that are conducive to learning and child development. These methods employed by the company, for cost-effectiveness and profitability, are in clear violation of Uganda's educational standards. As concerning is Bridge's apparent disregard for the country's legal integrity and state sovereignty. The company has entered Uganda and quickly expanded its business operations, on its own accord and by its own terms, while avoiding the proper legal processes, as if operating in a state of exception or colonial territory. In defense of the country's educational sovereignty, a Senior Official in the MoES proclaimed that:

If [Bridge] comes here thinking they can make profits from education, then they should come and open exceptional schools and not provide education in this substandard way and expect to get profit. It's not fair. It's neocolonialism. It's slavery. (Interview)

Although the Bridge approach for schooling the poor, profitably, is marketed as 'innovative' it also involves serious deprivations for teachers and learners alike. The educational, commercial, and political operations of this transnational for-profit education company represent a form of neocolonialism in Uganda, and its education system. Hence, the operations of Bridge in Uganda provide a cautionary case study for investors and states (potentially) working with the company.

7. Epilogue

On May 30, 2016 an interview with the National Director and a Regional Manager of Bridge in Uganda was planned for the purpose of understanding the operations of Bridge in Uganda, from the perspective of its senior management, with full disclosure as to the identity and intentions of the researcher. However, events at this meeting took a drastic and unexpected turn that would have serious implications. At a café in Kampala, at a date, time, and location prearranged according to the requests of Bridge, this researcher (Curtis Riep) sat down with the National Director and Regional Manager of Bridge. Moments after the National Director and Regional Manager arrived, and before any research questions could be asked, a police detective in civilian clothes and two police officers in militarised uniforms approached the table. The police ordered that I accompany them to a police station for questioning related to criminal allegations made against me by Bridge International Academies for (1) criminal trespassing and (2) impersonation. Escorted by police, I was taken into custody for criminal allegations made by Bridge. In the police car, a lawyer who worked for Bridge also accompanied us to the police station where I was informed about a 'wanted advertisement' printed in the New Vision newspaper on May 24, claiming that I was 'wanted by the police'. The notice encouraged the public to immediately report my whereabouts to police. Following the events, it was found that Bridge paid for the wanted ad and had it printed in the national newspaper, and that it was not mandated by the Ugandan police authorities whatsoever. The allegations made against me by Bridge are completely false, have been proven to be false, and recognised by the Ugandan authorities to be false.

In response to the allegation of criminal trespassing, I explained to police authorities that my research involved full-disclosure and informed consent, having called each Bridge school ahead of my visit to seek permission to visit the school, explain the purpose of my visit, and confirm the availability of Academy Managers and teachers for consultation. In the event that an Academy Manager did not answer my call I explained that I would approach the school with care and state clearly at the onset who I was and why I was there. Before conducting and recording interviews, taking photographs, observing lessons, or reviewing school materials, informed consent was established. At every Bridge school I visited I was welcomed warmly by the Academy Manager or senior staff person on site. The second allegation made by Bridge accused me of impersonating an employee of Bridge named 'Michael.' This accusation was also proven to be false after Ugandan authorities investigated the matter. Visitor books from Bridge schools were collected by police authorities to determine if I had identified as someone other than myself at schools where I had visited, which I clearly had not. The closest admission of any wrongdoing on the part of Bridge came two weeks after the incident when the new Head of Public Relations at Bridge clarified in an email to an international journalist investigating the matter that: 'Regarding Curtis Riep, I went back and confirmed that there were no signed visitor books under a different name' (G. Brown-Martin, personal communication, 14 June 2016). By this time the Uganda authorities had already cleared this researcher of any wrongdoing as both allegations brought forth by Bridge were dropped the next day on May 31, 2016. The lengths at which it seemed Bridge was willing to go to affect the outcome of this research convinced me to leave Uganda, two weeks prematurely, for my well-being and security.

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