



## **Bridge International Academies**

**Response to:**

### **Bridge vs. Reality**

A study of Bridge International Academies for-Profit schooling in Kenya  
A Report by: Education International (EI) & Kenya National Union of Teachers (KNUT)

**December 2016**

## Executive Summary

Bridge International Academies is the world's largest chain of nursery and primary schools, working tirelessly to provide high quality education for every child at an affordable cost. To fulfill this mandate, Bridge partners with communities, donors and governments across the developing world. Bridge started in Kenya in 2009 with the first academy launched in Mukuru, Nairobi. In Kenya, we currently have 405 operational academies with approximately 70,000 pupils and over 6,000 staff.

As can be seen throughout this report – Bridge provides high quality education. Our pupils excel academically and in co-curriculars. The focus at Bridge is ensuring well-rounded pupils finish their primary schooling able to contribute effectively to Kenya's development. Bridge remains committed to serving families across Kenya.

This report is focused on responding to, and correcting, the Education International (EI) funded report, *"Bridge vs. Reality, a study on Bridge International Academies' for-profit schooling in Kenya and its operations in Kenya"*. The report is riddled with both factual inaccuracies as well as research bias.

In light of the report, it is important to note:

- Bridge operates in line with ministerial education policies and is guided by the regulatory framework for APBET type of schools. Bridge has substantially complied with the requirements for registration as APBET schools and is on course for registration.
- Bridge teaches the 8-4-4 curriculum. Bridge has gained recognition as a publisher and all its supplementary materials have been shared with KICD for review and evaluation with some of its ECDE materials now reviewed and conditionally approved by KICD awaiting final approval. This is contrary to the report findings that "most of the content taught is not relevant to the Kenyan curriculum objectives."
- Bridge pupils outperformed their peers in KCPE exams. For every additional year in Bridge classes, pupil's performance scores in KCPE increase by 5-10 marks. Pupils who studied at Bridge for at least five years achieved an average of 292 in 2016 KCPE, with those who studied for up to 2 years achieving an average of 264 marks
- 37% of Bridge teachers are P1 trained as opposed to the 14.3% reported by the author. Since the introduction of APBET and through rigorous adherence, Bridge has improved this from the then 16.7%, to the current 37% thus on average meeting the APBET threshold for first registration
- Bridge teacher salaries are competitive. From our market surveys, our teachers earn more than 90% of other teachers in similar low cost private schools in similar

neighborhoods, and are paid on time every month. Bridge teachers are registered for NSSF and NHIF with the Company paying its appropriate contribution. Bridge teachers are eligible for maternity/paternity, sick leave, and compassionate leave. Bridge teachers are provided continual professional development both in the classroom and in offsite training events, with all such professional development being provided free of charge. This is contrary to the report claims that Bridge “wages are not commensurate with the amount of time and effort.” Bridge teachers also get paid during holidays, unlike only 51% in other schools in their communities.

- Bridge academies are located all over the country and not in areas with “market opportunity and economic viability” as the report claims. From the remote north, with 2 Bridge schools in Marsabit County, (not 1 academy as the report claims) to Vanga in Kwale County, bordering Tanzania.
- Bridge internal data shows our parents earn a monthly income of \$136. These families consist of 2.26 children and 2.01 adults, and live on \$1.6 per person per day.
- Bridge tuition fee averages at \$6.39 per month and our community’s families have an average of 1.8 children going to school. Bridge families spend only 8% of their income on education. A family with 3 children in a Bridge school would spend up to 15% of their family income to finance education and not the 27% the report claims;
- EI previously commissioned Mr. Curtis Riep, a PhD student attending the University of Alberta in Canada to carry out research on Bridge’s operations in Uganda. His research was biased, inaccurate and unethical and he is now under investigation by the University of Alberta for unethical research practices.

## **Bridge Provides Quality Education**

Bridge believes, and with support from various peer-referenced reports, that the value of our education should be judged by our learning outcomes. This discussion around Bridge's academic approach in the EI report is purely theoretical. The authors didn't mention of any class observations in their methodology. And though they try to disguise this as a methodological advantage, in reality this means that the researchers never saw the academic model they were critiquing in action, reducing their conclusions to hearsay or ideological prejudice. That notwithstanding, despite referring to various conventional quality education definitions, the author ascribes to the inferior EI teacher-centred approach which ultimately neglects pupils' outcomes and thus falling short of the holistic discourse of quality education.

The report also ignores the Bridge pupils success in 2015 KCPE exit exam, where pupils who sat for it had a 35% higher chance of passing the primary exit exam than the national average. The author incorrectly attribute this to other schools experience and "educational experience will often include a time spent at other schools, and as will be shown below, BIA's potential selection mechanisms thus may influence the results they achieve" (p. 19).

For the second consecutive year, Bridge pupils had an impressive performance in their 2016 KCPE, even better than 2015 where:

- 5 pupils scoring above 400 marks with a top score of 406 marks
- More than 25 pupils scoring above 380 marks
- More than 700 pupils scoring above 300 marks
- More than 1700 pupils scoring above 250 marks

Every additional year in a Bridge class increases a pupil performance scores in KCPE by 5-10 marks

- Average of 292 marks for pupils studying at Bridge for at least five years with nearly 3/4 of them passing.
- Average of 286 marks for pupils studying at Bridge for at least four years with nearly 3/4 of them passing.
- Average of 275 marks for pupils studying at Bridge for at least three years with 67%

- of them passing.
- Average of 264 marks for pupils studying at Bridge for at least two years with 59% of them passing.

On EGRA/EGMA, the authors relate it to possible bias in “selection mechanisms and...educational experience will often include a time spent at other schools.” There are two concerns in this statement. Firstly, as a fact, an internal Bridge study shows that on average our communities’ pupils attend at least 2.5 schools in 5 years. Simply stated, such an effect applies for all comparison schools. Secondly, these results that showed Bridge pupils gain an additional .34 standard deviation on core reading skills and an additional .51 standard deviation on maths compared to their peers in other schools were the old version. A recent study supports the earlier results and one can access them in the website. [Website](#)

Bridge Pupils are continuously assessed in every subject, on a monthly basis, in addition to midterm and end-term exams. These results are used by Academy Teachers to drive small group learning and individual tutoring decisions, using the data to drive individualized and small group instruction that is targeted to the children’s specific needs/ The section of the report that criticizes our academic approach also makes no mention of the 4,500+ textbooks provided annually to each school, all of which are included in the termly fee. The report also does not provide any information on the 40+ hours of instruction that pupils receive every week, or the 99%+ teacher attendance rate, much higher than the national average of 47% teacher attendance (World Bank, 2013). In this way, every child’s dream is supported through ensuring they achieve their full potential. Those who have had experiences with Bridge surely understands its aspirational value as the testimonials below shows.

“I would advise parents to enroll their children at Bridge, because it is a good school,” says Lister Mokeiraa, a Bridge parent in one of the academies in Kisii County. “At bridge your child will learn everything they need and get a good foundation in their education. This prepares the pupils even for higher learning. Bridge should be adopted by governments and education institutions because what you are doing is tremendous,” she continues.

“I would tell them to bring their child to Bridge because it is the best school any parent can enroll their child. I have seen how my son has improved academically,” says Mary Mutheu, another Bridge parent

Against significant odds, current and graduate Bridge pupil now feel empowered, and can confidently speak for themselves. “When I came to Bridge I found all the textbooks I would need to read. My performance also improved drastically. In the other school, teachers never used to come to class and we never had any special revisions. The KCPE revision camp is something so exciting. I never saw this happen in my previous school,” says Daniel Mungeria, a former Bridge pupil who is currently among top-ranking student at Nova Academies.

“Bridge explores the different sides of one’s knowledge. Teachers in the academy

encourage me to work hard and this keeps me glued to my future dream. Teachers also motivate us daily and this encourages me to study harder too because I wouldn't want to let my teachers down. Teachers also encourage me to work hard in Maths which is important for one to be an architect," says Geoffrey Emali, a former Bridge pupil in Bridge Karagita now in St Andrews high school USA.

Bridge teachers feel very inspired by their work and input in the pupils' performance.

"I have worked with Bridge for over two years. What I can say is that Bridge is the best organization you can work at. We are a company that is disrupting education as we were the first to use ICT in schools in Kenya. I am proud to be part of this winning team." says Teacher Alice, a Bridge teacher.

"Before I joined Bridge, I was a high school teacher. I did not feel satisfied with what I was doing. So when I heard that Bridge was recruiting in my neighborhood, I applied and they took me in. Today I teach children from low-income communities and there is no gratification higher than seeing these children's life change," says Juliann Kimani, Teacher at Bridge Academy-Muthua.

Bridge has been recognized globally for its proven, improved learning opportunities for children and for its overall technology and pedagogy innovations in the service of education in the developing world.

- IFC Inclusive Business Case Study, 2016
- Brookings Institute Millions Learning Case Study, 2016
- WISE Education Award, 2015
- Economist Award for Social and Economic Innovation, 2015
- OPIC Development Impact Award, 2015
- Fast Company World's 10 Most Innovating Companies in Education, 2015
- OECD DAC Prize for Taking Innovation to Scale – Finalist, 2015
- World Economic Forum 15 Women Changing the World in 2015 (Shannon May)
- Girl Effect Accelerator, Nike Foundation and Unreasonable Group, 2015
- World Economic Forum Social Entrepreneurs of the Year, 2014 (Jay Kimmelman and Shannon May)
- INC 25 Most Audacious Companies, 2014

In co-curricular achievements, over 200 participants in National Music festivals were from 21 Bridge International Academies, including winning first place in solo dance. Below are just some of the such achievements:



Bridge pupils regularly participate in national sports competition, including winning 6 gold medals in Taekwondo



These extra-curricular and curricular successes go a long way even after pupils' graduation.

While in secondary schools, Bridge graduates have continued to shine. For example, Josephine Nyakundi, a student at Rabun Gap in Georgia USA, since commencing school in the US has taken the academic and life skills learned at Bridge and earned all A's in her subjects, outperforming students from across the world.



Natasha Wanjiru Episcopal School Virginia Washington DC USA

Grace Kerubo, a student at St.Andrew's Florida, USA is also involved in theatre at her current school.



### **Bridge Use of Technology in Class**

Bridge teachers have significant interaction with pupils in teacher and are aided by teacher guides to ensure that the level of interaction remains high. The EI report ignores many non-Bridge studies that show enormous academic gains associated with teacher guides. In Kenya, the government is working with USAID to implement the Kenya Primary Math and Reading Initiative (PRIMR) across the whole nation. This programme is heavily reliant on teacher guides and relies on continuous assessments and data to drive instruction. The results in gold-standard evaluation show significant academic gains.

The report also ignores two other big advantages for teachers using teacher guides:

1. protects teachers' time. If teachers are not staying up late to create lessons for the next day, they have more time to help struggling pupils, to communicate with parents, to grade papers, and to improve their own subject knowledge;
2. gives administrators and teachers the ability to use data. When 500+ teachers use the same materials, a data team can quickly isolate which lessons work well and which do not; give that information to the curriculum team and adjust quickly.

The report also fails to appreciate the benefits of technology in “operational functioning such

as monitoring teachers” (p. 8). Through use of technology in administrative roles, Bridge has successfully dealt with the rampant problem of teacher absenteeism experienced in other schools. In Bridge, teacher attendance is over 99% in class. Less than 1% unauthorized teacher absence is experienced in all academies.

### **Bridge as a Low Cost Private and Community School**

Bridge is on a path to compliance and the process to register as APBET schools is already underway. Very few schools of the many thousands of APBET schools across the country have been registered. There are renewed efforts to hasten this process considering the significant role of these institutions. Bridge and other APBET schools are key players in the education sector. In their absence, the government of Kenya would be required to hire an additional 30,000 teachers to absorb all the primary school children currently schooling in such schools nationwide. This translates to Ksh 9.7 Billion annual cost to cater for the additional teachers’ salaries. In addition, 15,000 extra classrooms would have to be built to absorb these children, equivalent to Ksh 22.5 Billion upfront cost for construction.

The report further pursues its deceptive claims with an objection of Bridge efforts as a Harambee school. The author states that, “BIA advertises itself as Harambee schools... which is misleading” (p. 17), however they fail to recognize is the increased community engagement and involvement of host communities by Bridge in its operations. First, Bridge hires teachers from the community, an already clear sign of being part of the community. Also, in 2009, the Ministry wrote to Bridge with a proposal to register either with the Attorney General office or with the Ministry of Social Services, the same procedure applied to Harambee schools, while waiting for regulations on non-formal schools to be released. This situation remained the same until March 2016 when APBET regulations were gazetted. This serves as proof that the regulatory authority considers Bridge, in part, as a Harambee school. Just like any Harambee school is required by the law.

In a number of communities, parents and community members have come together to promote, support and work closely with Bridge, including working together on various community projects, from improving neighborhood security in communities like Kiambiu in Nairobi, to helping prevent neighborhood flooding by working together on raising the ground level, to providing support for children walking to school and more. These are just but a few of the many community programs and engagements that we have collaborated with or been provided by the community.

### **BIA Complies to MOEST APBET Policy**

The report discussions around Bridge existence under APBET are purely theoretical and the authors seem to not have the full background on how Bridge operates under the APBET regulatory policy framework and its intensive engagements and interactions with the Ministry. Bridge is on course to full compliance and registration, as delineated in the compliance roadmap earlier requested by the Cabinet Secretary and which progress has been reported to the Ministry on a monthly basis.

The authors falsely accuses Bridge with use of foreign curriculum and that “students follow a curriculum developed in the USA” (p. 17). The report goes ahead to misguide that the curriculum content is not accredited by KICD and “there is some evidence which could suggest this mixing of educational systems” (p. 17). There are two concerns in this statement. First, the author fails to cite the reference source, only to recommend for the need for more research to support their postulation. Secondly, had the researchers worked with our central offices in Nairobi, they would have met with the in-country academic team that works to ensure the curriculum taught at our schools is compliant with the guidelines from the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and appropriate for the cultural context. Moreover, we could have shared with them part of Bridge materials that have been reviewed and approved by KICD.

It's incorrect and misleading to ignorantly surmise that teacher “recruitment practices at BIA show disregard for” (p. 18) the one-third, trained (P1) teachers APBET requirement. While these regulations were not in place until March 2016, Bridge has made tremendous efforts towards its compliance. At the time this policy was gazetted, Bridge had 16.7% teachers trained as P1 teachers. Since the introduction of APBET and through rigorous adherence, we have increased from the then 16.7% to the current 37%. Therefore in term 1 2017, 37% of all teachers in Bridge classes will be trained teachers with a minimum of P1 certificate. This path is a clear demonstration of our commitment to policy fulfillment. In addition, Bridge continues to focus only on recruiting P1 certified teachers. Those teacher but not certified are being encouraged to enroll in in-service training programmes so that at the end of three years, all of Bridge’s teachers will have P1 certification and TSC registration.

The author further asserts that Bridge having been in the market for more than 5 years and should be running as a regular school, but overlooks the fact that the APBET regulatory policy framework seeks to address the present challenges and lead to gradual realization of regulatory requirements. The fact is, APBET policy is only 6 months old and no school qualifies for that graduation. Despite several challenges in the implementation of the guidelines by the Ministry and its policy implementers at the grassroots level, and relative laxity on the part of the policy implementers, Bridge has managed to complete Public Health Inspections at 259 of its academies and almost 90 Quality Assurance Inspections. Bridge has also submitted all its materials to KICD for review, evaluation and approval for syllabus compliance and awaits a report from the Ministerial Textbook Vetting Committee (MTVC) which is set to deliberate on a preliminary report by KICD before the report can be made available to Bridge. Whilst Bridge continues to face various challenges in its path to compliance, Bridge remains committed and is exploring every avenue for engagement with regulatory stakeholders with a view to getting all its 405 academies registered.

### **Bridge Teachers Qualifications**

Contrary to the authors’ report, at least 1,916 Bridge teachers, or 37%, have at least a P1 certification and not the 14.6% the report claims (p. 28). The author misleads that such a practice “contravenes educational standards” (p. 22), while the ratio is far beyond the 30

percent required by the APBET policy upon initial registration.

The researchers misguidedly state that Bridge teachers are “not professionally trained” (P. 23) and that the short internal training is not sufficient and “impacts on the quality of teaching offered by these teachers as any teacher’s effectiveness and competencies”, (p. 25) when in fact, a Bridge classroom is significantly more interactive than the rote learning seen in the average classroom in the community. Bridge pupils do not just copy notes from the board. Instead, most of their time is spent as active participants in their own learning. They do this through writing and reading texts and stories, playing games, and participating in Maths races. Talking time is almost evenly split between pupils and teachers and pupils are encouraged to work independently and in groups.

Unfortunately, the poor research methods of this study mean that the researchers have no observation data on our classrooms or that of the classrooms of other private or public schools against which to compare them. Also, no respected pedagogy researchers or practitioners in the field were consulted as to why stronger teacher support through prepared teacher guides has been shown to work in multiple contexts and countries to close stark achievement gaps. APHRC study shows almost a third of the Kenyan teachers in government schools would score less than 40% in Mathematics knowledge assessments and other subjects that they teach in class ([APHRC, 2013](#)). This only shows the increased level of teacher inabilities even though the said teachers had been trained for 2 years in the various teacher training colleges.

The report falsely claims that “most of the training provided by BIA does not relate to content to be taught” (apart from English language), but rather to classroom management and BIA-related issues (e.g. how to use a tablet) (p. 15). These conclusions show a very limited understanding of our training and teaching methods. Had the authors engaged with the Kenyan training team, or visited our training site in Nakuru, they would have learned that apart from learning how to use Bridge technology in the classroom, teachers learn and practice the most effective teaching and classroom management methods, as well as class-specific and subject-specific skills.

The authors embrace the common mistake of equating teacher guides with rote teaching. Nothing could be further from the truth. One of the core reasons Bridge uses detailed teacher guides is to support teachers to create lessons that are dynamic and include scheduled time for independent work, small group instruction and peer tutoring. As part of the teacher guides prepared for each teacher, Bridge Kenya has a number of tailor-made programs that teach each individual learner according to their ability level in literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, as supported by the guide, pupils spend a significant amount of their time in a Bridge classroom practicing what they learn while being given direct feedback, during which time teachers address the needs of each learner one-on-one.

### **Teachers Benefits and Compensation**

The report claims teacher “wages were not commensurate with the amount of time and

effort” (p. 28). This is contrary to all other studies that have been conducted in comparable low-cost academies in those communities. According to our own research, conducted in various communities across the country, Bridge teachers earn 90% more than teachers in similar low-cost private schools in the same neighborhoods. In addition, our teachers are timely paid every month unlike most of the other teachers who are faced with increased uncertainty with frequent cases of untimely payments or no payment at all.

The report relates higher teacher salaries to improved pupil performance and quality. However, the author does not cite any peer-reviewed study that supports that postulation. There are numerous studies with cross-national comparisons that clearly annul any evidence that the two are correlated. Also, what is well known, and that is what Bridge embraces, is the role of support and incentive mechanisms that focusses on paying teachers based on their performance. This motivates teachers to work even harder and in turn improve quality.

Further, the report claims that “some teachers felt that the amount they were paid restricted them to living close to the school (within the informal settlements) where living conditions were unfavorable” (p. 29). Bridge recruits’ teachers from the local community. As a fact, majority of these teachers had been living in the same communities for the better part of their lives. Also, these are the same communities where our parents and pupils, plus millions of other people, reside. Such authors’ efforts to disregard and discriminate people based on their income and living “conditions” are the very reason that defines Bridge’s need to support pupils’ education for a better future.

Bridge neither offers remedial classes nor operates on Sundays as reported, “...teachers often remain behind after school hours or work hours to run remedial classes for students or they may need to come in earlier or schedule these lessons in their free time, such as on Sundays” (p. 27). It’s possible the research did not account for social desirability bias or attempt to reconfirm with other respondents. This throws in doubt the data collected.

### **Teacher Monitoring, Evaluation and Appraisal**

In Bridge, we effectively monitor class attendance. Teacher attendance starts by teachers logging into their teacher computer which time-stamps and geo-locates the teachers’ attendance. Managers can confirm such data using their smartphone, with all data compiled into a report that allows us to monitor for any teacher absenteeism and take immediate action. A report by World Bank cites at least a 47% daily rate of teacher absenteeism in government schools in Kenya (World Bank, 2013). Some of these teachers are in class with no active learning taking place. Unauthorized teacher absenteeism is at minimum in Bridge, less than 1%, and this only serves to make sure pupils are always attended to while in class. Even further to this, there are substitute teachers in every academy that are always on stand-by and report to the academy within a short notice when a need arises. These are the success stories that the researchers fails to mention. All academy managers and teachers are evaluated on a regular basis and appraised at the end of each year. They are further rewarded based on their performance.

### **Teacher job security**

The report claims that “90% of respondents expressed fears over their job security” (p. 30), stating that the main reason for such worries is following their past experiences following terminations for cases where one “did not follow rules and regulations” (p. 30).

Bridge data shows that 74% of Bridge teachers and academy managers see themselves working with Bridge for more than 5 years. Academy managers’ and teachers’ jobs are safeguarded and unlike other low-cost academies in these communities, 100% of Bridge teachers and academy managers have a binding work contract. This contract stipulates the rules that govern their working relationship with Bridge. Just like any other Company, Bridge disciplinary process, for matters involving breach of contract, are well defined in the contract, and are completely adhered to.

### **Teacher Motivation, Satisfaction and Autonomy**

The authors claim low motivation among Bridge teachers with “only one in three (35%) of the 32 teacher respondents felt that BIA was a good employer under whom they had grown professionally” (p. 31). To the contrary, Bridge internal data shows 64% of Bridge teachers enjoy teaching in Bridge classes and 100% of them would like to grow with the company, whether as a teacher or in various teacher support functions. Only 3% of these teachers were unwilling to be with Bridge in the next 2 years, a sign of healthy commitment to their work and that of the organisation.

The report claims that “despite the students’ performances being their responsibility, teachers felt that they were not given sufficient room to shape the context in which they taught” and despite their “limited involvement in the content and methodology of education delivery, teachers felt that they were not consulted in decision-making on any other aspects of school processes” (p. 33). These conclusions show a very limited understanding of our teaching methods. In addition to use of technology, Bridge teachers learn and practice the most effective teaching and classroom management methods, as well as class-specific and subject-specific skills. The feedback given by the teachers while using the tablet enables us to improve on the quality of our teacher guides and content creation from time to time. In the premise that we want our teachers to concentrate more on the content delivery and giving and getting feedback from their individual pupils, from different parts of the country, who may be struggling, or have not developed full competencies to master certain topics or concepts, the teacher is able to focus on those individual pupils during and after lessons. Also, the teacher's creativity and guide to learners is encouraged. This indirectly makes our teachers the key informers to decision-making.

### **Bridge Teachers Outreach Program**

The author claims the teacher interviewed “described marketing as “embarrassing”, “stressful”, “irritating” and “demoralising”. This is not true. Bridge data shows 96% of teachers appreciate the community engagements responsibilities assigned to them. These teachers are from the same community where possible and are an integral part of ensuring

pupils and parents receive the services they deserve. One way that teachers interact with their pupils' parents in the context of education is during outreach to the community. This also serves to assist teachers in getting direct feedback on their pupils' progress. All teachers are trained on reaching out to the community - both in their initial on-boarding and in follow-up training and regular communications.

Last, we don't evaluate teachers based on their performance in their outreach role; it is an opportunity for them to build deep ties with pupils and parents. In the outreach period, teachers are paid for every day they work. This also means that in months like November and December, our teacher get paid, unlike other community schools where only 51% of the teachers get paid during holidays.

### **Bridge Quality Teaching Tools**

The author claims that a report on the evaluation of Bridge International Academies' lesson plans by the KICD concludes that "most of the content taught is not relevant to the Kenyan curriculum objectives" (p. 35). Bridge submitted all its teaching materials to KICD for vetting and evaluation. The materials included supplementary materials: ECDE readers, general reference & revision books from Class 5 to 8 in all subjects. We further submitted more than 10,000 teacher guides from ECDE to class 8 for all subjects and all terms of the year. The results and report of this evaluation has not been sent to us even after writing to the Director of KICD and several visits to the KICD offices and the Ministry offices. This raises serious questions on how EI would cite a report whose feedback is still not known to Bridge. Nine ECDE titles were approved with a conditional pass and our performance in KCPE in not at all a reflection of such false claims.

The author claims that "at least 46.7% of the teachers argued that following the scripted curriculum did not always work" (p. 35). To the contrary, every time the teacher computer is used to download teacher guides, our central office is able to monitor what percentage of our teachers have lessons available for that day. We also monitor when teachers start the lesson, which is all done by a simple click of the button on the teacher's' computer. Our teachers use the teacher guides that they sync every day to ensure that learning happens across the Bridge network. The guides facilitate teaching and learning in an environment which is determined by the levels and needs of the learners. EI theoretical critique on Bridge academic approach may portray that the teacher guides restrict or control the teacher, but studies have shown that teachers deliver their lessons in an interactive manner, complementing between technological innovation and delivery output in an efficient and effective way. Studies have also shown that providing all of this teacher support allows pupil learning to be maximized.

### **Bridge Classroom Structures**

The author claims the pupils recommended for "facility improvements that would help regulate temperature, as well as other comments on flooring and general cleanliness or tidiness" (p. 37). Bridge academies' buildings are safe and provide a secure learning

environment. These structures are approved by the relevant professional approval authorities in Kenya, as required by law from the building plans to the planning approvals and are certified with an occupation permit and year by year environmental audits. Our buildings are conducive learning environments because they have enough light, space, planned sanitation and are easily accessible and fenced from the standpoint of security and environmental friendliness.

### **Bridge Improves Educational Access and Equity**

The report claims Bridge expansion approach as driven by “market opportunity and economic viability” (p. 39) and “schools are concentrated in (relatively) richer southern and eastern parts of Kenya. Only one school is located in the northern part of Kenya, where the poorest areas of Kenya are.” (p. 39). Such a conclusion is misinformed. Two concerns in this statement: First, Bridge has two schools in Marsabit County and not one as mentioned. Second, it is also important to note that Bridge has not claimed to be able to serve every neighborhood in Kenya. To criticize Bridge for not serving every community puts an unfair burden on one group within a diverse education ecosystem. Bridge has no plans of taking up Government roles, but only aims at complementing the Government. As a fact, some populations are too small to support a Bridge school even when the existing options do not meet the needs of parents and local government – unless there is a government or donor partnership to support the school.

The report falsely reports that Bridge fees estimates to “three times higher than BIA’s claims” (p. 40) to the average \$6 monthly fees reported in the media. The authors state “research shows that tuition fees alone range between USD6.40-USD10.57, with an average of USD7.31-USD8.43 for a student spending all of primary school at BIA (including two years of ECD). This is a lie. Bridge has 3 years of ECD and the actual fees is as shown in the table below:

Fees		Minimum (lowest class)	Maximum (highest class)	Minimum (Academy-wise )	Maximum (Academy-wise )
Bridge fees	actual	\$5.00	\$9.90	\$5.80	\$8.90

Unlike other schools, these costs cover all textbooks’ costs (not just essential ones-as the author claims), classwork exercise books, homework books and tuition.

The author compares the cost of a Bridge uniform to the results from an outdated study without making effort to adjust the uniform fees for inflation. “According to Evans, Kremer and Ngatia (2009) in a study in Busia, Western Kenya, school uniforms cost between

USD4.33 and USD7.33 (KSh. 325 and KSh. 550) for girls and between USD5.40 and USD7.33 (KSh. 405 and KSh. 550) for boys.” Adjusting this 2009 data to 2016, the average cost of boys uniform could be \$7.14 and \$7.79 for the girls. That is much higher than the cost of a Bridge uniform.

We would like to challenge the author to refer to various articles on unaffordability of school uniform in both government and private schools in Kenya, which is well known to many. Depending on the locational situation and the “brand name”, hidden costs in educating a child per year at a public school can range anything from \$30 and above! There are reports of public schools charging up to \$200 for just admitting a class 1 child, in certain Kenyan urban communities, based on internal field research data.

The case is no different in private and low-cost schools. Based on our internal research, the termly tuition fee in other low-cost schools averages at \$29.82. Bridge’s termly fees, on the other hand, averages at \$19.17. This means that Bridge fees are cheaper than more than 40% of other low-cost academies. While the author recognizes the affordable tuition fees charged, they go ahead to term such fees as unaffordable without comparing the said fees with those charged in other options available to these parents. Based on that weakness, the author’s conclusions hold no ground. Not surprisingly, 75% of families are actively searching for a better academic alternative based on Bridge internal data.

The author claims “It is advertised BIA policy to select the brightest students..” (p. 45). Bridge admits all children but makes use of placement exams to determine where the pupil, especially those coming from a different school, falls in education level. This practice is done everywhere in public or private schools. Whether this is a best practice or not, this is an assessment tool that correctly determines the appropriate class level a pupil should be placed. We use entry exams or else we end up spending more times in remedial classes for all pupils to be at par. Until beginning of this year, when the government restricted the placement exams for those pupils being enrolled in class 1, this practice was not considered a punitive measure to repeat a pupil who has transferred to our academy. It is value added to the enhancement of pupils’ growth academically. Should there be a ministerial policy or guideline of not practicing it, then we do not have any option but to comply, for the interest of our learners.

Also, Bridge’s feeding program is optional - this includes both breakfast and lunch. A parent can choose to pack the meal for their child or pay to enable their child to eat from school. Bridge also engages the parents on best possible ways to help them clear their fees with minimal interruptions.

The author misleads that Bridge is extorting the parents and that “overall, 58% of parents participating in the research indicated that they struggled to pay the fees” (p. 48) with “borrowing money from friends and relatives as noted by 64 per cent of the parents interviewed” (p. 50). Also, “37% of the parents found it very difficult to pay at least one basic living cost, due to school fees” (p. 51). Most importantly, what the report ignores is the fact

that there are almost 70,000 pupils currently attending Bridge classes in Kenya. These parents have consciously made this decision and could only continually keep doing it because they can afford.

Using accurate fees and household income it is possible to demonstrate how affordable Bridge fees are. Based on our internal research, families living in Bridge communities earn an average income of \$136 a month. These families consist of 2.26 children and 2.01 adults, meaning that these families live on \$1.6 per person per day. As earlier mentioned, Bridge fee averages at \$6.39 per month. These families have an average of 1.8 children going to school and that would mean the families spend only approximately 8% of their income on education. Even for families with 3 children in a Bridge school, that the author uses for analysis, they would spend up to 15% of their family income to have all the children attend school. This is contrary to the 27% (p. 49) that the author reported.

The authors report was purposely misleading and while considering the \$1.25 per capita and 5 family members, they fail to use the adult and children ratio of expenditure. This ultimately over estimates the monthly family income to \$190.63 (p. 49), only for them to later contest their wrong figures with Concern Worldwide data (p. 79) whose estimate data is significantly in line with our income data.

Furthermore, the EI report makes no mention of the 12,000 full scholarships provided through Bridge for the neediest pupils in our communities. This raises significant doubts whether the researcher really talked to our pupils as claimed. Almost 1 in every 5 Bridge pupils is a beneficiary of the scholarship – talking to 20 or more pupils (p. 11) without a mention of the financial support strongly suggests the sampling methodology used was biased.

We have never been advocates of private, parent-financed education simply to “make” parents pay. Bridge is committed to ensuring every child learns and achieves his or her full potential. Bridge is responding to the world’s education crisis with effective and affordable solutions, working with parents, donors, and governments to create high-performing schools. If one day every child in the world has the option of going to a publicly-financed, high-performing school, no one will be celebrating louder than the people who work at Bridge.

### **Biased Research Design and Methodology**

In addition to the many factual errors in the report that we have pointed out above it is also clear that the study authors were driven by sponsor and confirmation bias. The primary authors, Education International and KNUT, falsely claim to be an independent body “driven by the philosophy that all providers of education need to be adequately scrutinized.” While Bridge encourages such scrutiny, that should be in the interest of a positive cause. Far from engendering constructive debate, this report is neither independent nor contains independent facts. The authors appear to have been guided by a pervasive confirmation

bias. EI is the same institution that sponsored a biased, false attack report on Bridge Uganda through Curtis Riep, a PhD student whose work is currently being investigated by his university for carrying out unethical research.

Why has the report only focused on Bridge when there are thousands of other private school providers in the market? The latest schools' census conducted in 2014 by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology shows there are 15,443 privately-owned early childhood and development (ECD) centers and 7,742 private primary schools in Kenya, with an annual growth rate of 12% ([KICD, 2014](#)). Bridge internal data shows there are more than 2,236 low cost, APBET schools in the communities we serve. These are schools charging up to \$20 dollars per month as tuition fees.

The report is also hampered by sponsor bias. Despite thousands of private and public schools in Kenya the report does not mention why Bridge was exclusively picked for this case study “to find out if BIA fulfills its own claims or not by looking at the facts” (p. 9) or even try to describe the sampling methodology used, if any? The author goes ahead to mention that there were no intentions to “systematically compare Bridge to other ... schools.” (P. 9). In addition, the questionnaire used in the study was not provided for reference. Hence, we do suspect for additional acquiescence, wording and leading questions bias. With those and many more, the study falls short of a scientific case study, which calls for “investigation within its real-life context and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” ([Yin, 1984](#))

Most importantly, this report is not peer reviewed, and while the author claims to have referenced to a “collection of secondary data such as newspaper articles, speeches, magazines and blogs, (p. 10) none of the various peer reviewed and professionally vetted reports that document successful Bridge innovations which help children learn at scale was considered. While KNUT, an affiliate institution to EI, is mandated with the safeguarding of teachers' interests, one wonders what role they play on school regulation. Secondly, the Uwezo 2015 report clearly documents that teachers' inabilities and absenteeism are the key factors negatively impacting on the quality of education in Kenya (Uwezo Kenya, 2015). If they were in pursuit for a worthy cause, much of their efforts would be dedicated to addressing these shortcomings. The author ought to have demonstrated their role in monitoring other similar reports ever produced as proof of independence.

### **Breach of Research Ethics**

The report also potentially breaches research ethics. In their report, the authors claims their study involved full disclosure and “informed consent was requested from each and every single informant through signed consent” (p. 12). However, copies of the informed consent used were missing in the appendix for reference. The researchers also state they spoke to children during their research, and it is unclear if the researchers adequately explained the purpose of their research or the funders behind it to any of the respondents they claim to have spoken to. If the authors did not disclose the underlying conflict of interest between

their research and who was funding it, the research would be invalid.

Furthermore, none of Bridge Academy Managers or teachers at the locations mentioned have reported the possession of such consents or study altogether. These respondents could only have shared their information with a promise for an improvement in the current Bridge efforts to provide even better service to their pupils in class or their working conditions, as opposed to the search for facts to investigate Bridge claims, as purported by the authors in their research design. That objective ought to have been clearly included in the consent. If the authors still believe in their independence as claimed, we demand them to share the informed consent used in this exercise.

The researcher further willingly breached the research ethics through failure to seek a formal notification with Bridge management of their work. This is contrary to the standard ethical research practice. As an organisation, Bridge is always more than willing to be engaged and studied, but that can only be achieved through the cooperation and support of all stakeholders rather than resorting to illegal and unethical means in their efforts to acquire information on our operations. The fact that the researchers did not approach Bridge is further evidence of their treacherous aims.

## **Conclusion**

Bridge being one of the world's most innovative education organization is the only reason Education International has continually targeted its operations through social media, print media, conferences and radio ads. Reports falling short of facts, like this one, also similar to an earlier version released in Uganda just a few months back, should demonstrate academic rigour and be based on facts, not ideologically driven and unethical.