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Democratising education: Q&A with Shannon May – The Guardian

The [Guardian Media Network](#) travelled to Mauritius for Omidyar Network's annual [ON Baraza](#). The event gathers Omidyar Network's Africa-based and Africa-focused partner organisations to share insights around innovation, entrepreneurship and leadership.

Shannon May spoke to us about the inspiration for Bridge International Academies and the role of technology in helping to democratise education.

Can you tell us a bit about Bridge International Academies?

Bridge International Academies is the world's largest private provider of nursery and primary education for families living on \$2 a day or less. Our current operations are in Kenya. We currently have 214 academies that offer both nursery and primary school within the same facility. We serve 60,000 children, six days a week. We teach Monday through Saturday. We estimate that by March 2014, we will be serving around 100,000 children.

What were your reasons for founding Bridge International Academies? Where did the idea come from?

The original idea actually occurred in China when I was working on my PhD on development. I was working on an eco-system project to totally re-organise this group of nine villages into a carbon neutral eco-city. I was there for 18 months. But as part of the government plan to allow me to do my work, unbeknown to me, I had become the village's primary school teacher for the entire time I was there. So I had to teach English to all of the children every day. So while I was working on this environment sustainability city plan and doing all sorts of analysis on the household economies of those living in the village, I was also teaching children.

It soon became clear that no matter what the programme was going to do, whether it was successful or not, it really wouldn't matter for the people that lived there. Because the real fundamental problem, was that 90% of the population was functionally illiterate and they didn't have basic algebra skills.

Through my interviews, I discovered that very few of the families understood if they were making or losing money. They didn't possess the skills to do that sort of time-sensitive accounting over a long period of time. It wasn't that they were less intelligent; it was because they were poorly educated. And every morning I would see that in the village school where the teachers didn't show up, came unprepared or drunk. There was a total lack of accountability around what a teacher is meant to do.

Jay (the other co-founder) and I started to explore if this was just a rural China problem or a China problem, but unfortunately, we discovered that it's a global problem, mostly in developing countries where you have radical failure of existing service providers to deliver a quality basic education. Particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa you find abysmal education performance rates. Even in Kenya, only around 50% of children pass the end of class 8 examination. So about half the country is failing this test every year. Children are in school but they are not learning. This is the problem that Bridge was started to solve. We want to democratise education and knowledge, so that it's not just children from middle-class or wealthy families that have access to exceptional education.

On your website, you talk about an 'academy-in-a-box model'. What do you mean by this?

The reason it is called an 'academy-in-a-box' is because all of our academies are the same. All of the systems across the schools are the same. This is how we are able to ensure that every child receives the same high-quality teaching irrespective of the academy's location. To run hundreds of schools requires a tremendous amount of systematisation and standardisation. This is part of the science of what we do. We create the systems that enable each one of the current 214 academies to operate like the others. We leverage a tremendous amount of technology to ensure that the academies are run in an incredibly cost-effective and lean way. One of our investors actually lists us as a technology enabled service company.

We only have one non-teaching staff at our academies and this is how we keep our costs down. We don't have secretaries, assistants, bursars or treasurers. Everything that another school, whether high cost or low cost, would need to do to support 600 or 100 students we can do with one person as we have put all of those other functions into custom developed software that is run on an android device. So everything from billing history and payment history is managed and accessible from the phone. Payments for all pre-approved vendors and the process for pre-approving vendors, is all done through another software app that we have developed. All our payments are cashless. So there is no treasurer at the school. Everything gets paid in through mobile money or direct bank transfers – everything gets paid out the same way. All summaries for teacher audits and record keeping are also put into the smartphone. This helps make schools more transparent.

Finally, what is next for Bridge International Academies?

We will keep growing in Kenya. We will open another 150 academies in 2014. We will between double and triple

the amount of children we are serving. Similarly, we will double or triple our workforce so we will have a little more than 3000 staff employed in Kenya by the end of this year and between 4000-5000 by 2014. In 2014, we will also be expanding across the African continent, and move into our second and third countries. We are currently hiring for key people to join us on that adventure.

Dr. Shannon May is the co-founder of [Bridge International Academies](#)

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