

10 lessons learned from two recent media articles on Bridge International Academies

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The Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (GI-ESCR) works to improve and promote transparency and accountability in the delivery of education in the context of the fast growth of private actors' involvement. As part of this work, GI-ESCR researches, monitors, and publicly shares information about the [development and impact of commercial private schools](#), including Bridge International Academies (BIA or Bridge), as one of the largest and [most debated](#) chain of commercial pre-primary and primary schools.

Several [civil society reports](#) have raised major concerns about BIA, including the quality of schools, the fees, discriminatory impacts, the labour conditions, all of which were [denied by Bridge](#). Following these publications, two extensive media reports conducted by journalists were published in the last two months:

- 'No education crisis wasted: On Bridge's "business model" in Africa', *Africa is a Country*, by Maria Hengeveld, published on 13 July 2017, available on <http://bit.ly/2unNI07>, initially published in Dutch on 16 May 2017 in the Dutch news magazine *De Correspondent*, available on <http://bit.ly/2tS3f31>
- "Can a Tech Start-Up Successfully Educate Children in the Developing World?", *New-York Times*, by Peg Tyre, published on 27 June 2017, available on <http://nyti.ms/2sUjZpm>

These two news articles stand out for the investigative rigour of publications they appear in, the depth and detail of their analysis, and the fact that they are based on original research, rather than providing a summary of different positions. They therefore allow for civil society claims to be verified against independent journalist investigations. Strikingly, not only do these articles fully corroborate [previous civil society findings](#), but they also unearth new evidence and challenges.

This brief summarises 10 key findings from these articles. Each finding is indicated by a generic heading, followed by a one summary and contextualisation sentence, and key related quotes taken from one of the two articles, with the author indicated in parenthesis.

1. Respect of national standards

Documents from the Kenyan Ministry of Education confirm that Bridge's teaching materials and curriculum **have not been approved**, and that the Ministry is taking steps to ensure **compliance of Bridge schools with Kenyan regulations, or closure**.

- "A leaked letter from the Ministry of Education reveals that a Kenyan inspection had deemed Bridge's teaching material "largely irrelevant to Kenyan teaching objectives" and that the teaching methods don't allow teachers enough room to tend to pupils with special needs." (Maria Hengeveld)
- "In August 2016, the Ministry of Education sent the company an ultimatum. Bridge was given 90 days to adapt the curriculum to Kenyan guidelines and ensure that at least half of the teachers had a diploma. If they didn't meet those requirements, Bridge was at risk of having to close down all of its schools." (Maria Hengeveld)

2. Enrolment and sustainability

BIA enrolment is decreasing, and is very far from the company's and investors' targets. This questions the narrative that Bridge is sought after by parents, responds to a demand from communities, or is needed and cannot be closed.

- "In Kenya, enrollment was growing more slowly than the founders anticipated" (Peg Tyre)

- *“By 2016, they planned to enroll more than 750,000 students, at which point they would be breaking even. By 2022, they estimated that they would educate 4.1 million students and generate \$470 million in revenue.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Bridge currently has 80,000 students enrolled, down 10,000 from last year.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“It is difficult to keep up enrollment and make the schools break even,” Conway said, “because the churn is so high.” He explained that in 2017, thousands of enrolled children were not paid up.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *At Bridge Diamond, “Some classrooms were empty. One had 15 students sitting at desks but no teacher.” (NY Times)*

3. Fees and poverty impact

As previously [documented](#), fees and other costs charged at Bridge, combined with a strict enforcement system whereby **children are expelled** for missing payments, means that either children miss schools or families miss on other essential services such as healthcare. This may also largely explain the low and declining enrolment.

- *“The poorest families simply couldn’t afford the tuition and additional payments that Bridge required.” “Bridge’s strict payment system quickly became onerous. Bridge’s business in Kenya depends on most parents making routine electronic payments by mobile phone. But slum-dwelling parents in Kenya are mostly occasional workers who rarely have a predictable income. In informal settlements around Nairobi, I visited 10 or so parents in their homes who explained the fragile finances of their lives. A sick child, an uptick in the price of corn meal or even a prolonged rainstorm can throw a family on the margins into an economic crisis. In most informal and public schools, payment terms are flexible, and the subject of protracted negotiation. Bridge says that it works with families to meet their needs. But many people told me that the school sends children home if fees are not paid. “They tell you, ‘Sit at home with your child until you get the money,’ says one parent, a vegetable seller married to an unemployed welder who has two children enrolled at a Bridge school in Nairobi’s Mathare slum. Another mother with a 9-year-old child says she found it difficult to make Bridge payments: “At times I’ve gone without eating so I can pay school fees.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Michael Conway, Bridge’s East Africa director of operations, told me when I met him in Nairobi last September, “but we know families make choices about who gets paid first. We don’t want to be the last vendor paid.”” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“You hear such sad stories,” said Juul. “Some parents took out loans to pay the tuition fees and were evicted from their homes because they were unable to make payments on time.” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“One school administrator, an academy manager, described how the pressure to ensure that parents made their payments on time was disheartening. “I didn’t realize how hard it would be to talk to parents,” he said. “They’re ill, they’re out of work, they had a fire. No one is in the house who’s making any money. How can they pay when they have no money for food?”” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Anton was fired after working for a year in the post when a quality assurance manager and a regional manager made an unannounced visit to his school and discovered three pupils attending in contravention of school fees policy. The children were registered with Bridge, but were no longer allowed to attend classes because their parents had fallen behind with the payment of tuition fees. Anton knew that he was supposed to turn pupils away if their parents had not paid. He had already had his salary docked once and was at risk of losing his job if he continued to allow those pupils to attend” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“When asked, the company does not deny that, in practice, tuition fees are higher than the promised fees of US\$4-6” (Maria Hengeveld)*

4. Teaching methodology

Independent observations [confirm](#) that the use of scripted curriculum tends to be extremely **rigid and limits interactive learning**, while the fact that is written abroad can be a source of **cultural misunderstandings**.

- *“But scripts can be confining, some teachers told me. And in some of the 20 or so Bridge classrooms I observed, pupils occasionally asked questions, but Bridge instructors ignored them. Teachers say that they are required to read the day’s script as written or risk a reprimand or eventual termination, and they do not have time to entertain questions. (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Bridge has writers in Nairobi who create the lessons that are in Kiswahili, but many lessons, to be delivered in English, are written in America. And it is challenging to develop lesson plans for teachers and children from a different culture. Misunderstandings can occur.” (Peg Tyre)*

5. Labour conditions

The articles confirm [claims](#) of **extremely poor labour** conditions, including tight contracts limiting teachers moving to other schools, long working hours, high pressure, for a low salary.

- *“Early on, the company found it difficult to retain instructors. The Stanford case study cited high teacher turnover in 2010. Bridge began requiring instructors to sign a two-year contract; if they broke it, they had to pay back the cost of their training. Teacher turnover slowed.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“Bridge teachers are discouraged from talking to the press, and their contracts remind them that they may not speak on behalf of Bridge, but some agreed to talk to me provided they were not identified.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“working at Bridge, teachers said, can disrupt a career: Instructors are required to sign an employment agreement that includes a noncompete clause that prevents them from working at other nearby schools for a year after they leave.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“On reflection, Anton says that he is relieved that he is no longer working for Bridge. He was under too much pressure to attract new pupils and the “rigid payment system” put him in uncomfortable waters with parents. Every month, about half of the parents couldn’t pay their fees on time, and would get upset with Anton when their children were, again, sent home from school. These tensions made it even more difficult to attract new customers and to persuade existing customers to bring in new ones.” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“He worked at Bridge for two and a half years before he handed in his resignation. The low salary and the heavy work load (60 hours a week, according to John) were contributing factors.” (Maria Hengeveld)*

6. Learning outcomes

New information shows that Bridge could have sought to **misrepresent the effectiveness of its schools** by providing additional tuition by foreign teachers to good pupils to pass national exams, while encouraging those with low score to repeat a year. In addition, experts confirm the mixed opinions held by [previous critics](#) on the value of Bridge’s self-assessment of its results.

- *“Another area of achievement that Bridge trumpets is the success of its students on the eighth-grade K.C.P.E. test [end of primary school exam in Kenya]. In 2015, according to Bridge, 63 percent of Bridge students who had been there for at least two years passed, compared with 49 percent of Kenyan students nationwide. But it’s unclear whether Bridge’s approach will be sustainable as the company grows. Former Bridge employees told me that in preparation for the 2015 exam, those on track to get a lower score were asked to repeat a year. The rest were taken to a residential cram school and prepped for the test by teachers who flew in from the United States.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“This [Bridge’s research showing improvement in learning outcomes] is good evidence of positive effects,” says Malkus. Both pointed out that the study’s results are complicated by Bridge’s high dropout rate: While a third of public-school students dropped out, nearly half of Bridge students left during the study and were unable to take the final assessment. “The high attrition rate should give one pause,” Malkus says, “when considering the full effect of the program.” Graham, co-editor of The Review of Economics and Statistics, says that “organizations are under a lot of pressure to do these studies and ‘prove’ their program works. Reasonable and informed people could look at the information in that report and come to widely different conclusions about the effect of Bridge on academic achievement as they measure it. It’s information, just not especially actionable information.” (Peg Tyre)*

7. Transparency and marketing

The articles demonstrate the **lack of transparency and the culture of secrecy at Bridge**, which does not hesitate to intimidate or discourage independent inquiry. This made headlines in 2016 when Bridge [orchestrated the arrest](#) of an independent PhD student researching its schools. This lack of transparency also appears in Bridge’s marketing approach. Enrolment in BIA appears to be partly or largely driven by a carefully studied marketing approach, with staff potentially misleading parents in order to reach their targets, rather than by a demand of parents, leading to important disappointments, which could also explain the low and declining enrolments. These findings confirm a [video](#) of a former BIA staff making similar claims.

- *“Some Bridge staff members described what they saw as a stark contrast between their hopes for Bridge and a grittier reality.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“At some Bridge schools I visited unescorted, staff members said that they would need to contact superiors if I didn’t leave.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“When he wanted to interview Bridge teachers at the start of this year as part of an assessment study, he discovered that they had apparently been “warned against speaking to visitors or researchers. Especially not about their welfare or that of the children. ”” (Maria Hengeveld)*
- *“Staff members at Diamond were eager to show the poor conditions in their school but also urged me to leave quickly.” (Peg Tyre)*
- *“It is trying to silence Kenyan critics, as shown in two leaked letters. One was addressed to the head of the national teachers’ union, the other addressed to the director of a national school association. The first was sent by Bridge’s law firm, the second by Bridge’s in-house lawyer. In both letters, the recipients are threatened with a defamation*

lawsuit if they continue to speak out against Bridge and portray it as a company that "is only interested in profit." (Maria Hengeveld)

- "The Bridge founders, Weinstein wrote, decided that every school opening thereafter would as soon as possible feature a ceremony and that every new student would be given a free month of school. Kirchgasser, who studied Bridge for his dissertation, pointed out that this often ended up putting parents in what could become a difficult situation. If a family found that they couldn't make payments, say, in the middle of the term, it was often difficult to transfer a child to a new school. "Among the families I studied, moving a child to a new school was a gamble," he said. "Public and informal schools were reluctant to take students back if their new school didn't work out" — potentially leaving a child out of school and making it difficult for a parent to work." (Peg Tyre)
- "A middle-aged teacher who provides science instruction at a Bridge school told me she was encouraged to go to the market and try to enroll the children of the fruit sellers when her teaching day was done. But it was hard to recruit new students." (Peg Tyre)
- "A former Bridge employee told me that the company's own marketing could sometimes create bad feelings among the people they wanted to serve. [...] Another former employee told me that the free tuition was confusing to many of the poorest parents. "I believe the word 'international,' combined with foreign founders, led parents to expect higher quality than in other schools," she says. "I believe they did become disillusioned. I believe many of them became disempowered when they wanted changes in their schools — like electricity, permanent structures — but that didn't happen. They definitely missed the connectedness and mutually beneficial relationships that they would find in other schools." (Peg Tyre)
- "We promised them heaven," says another former Academy Manager. John (name changed) says it was the only option, "otherwise, you lost your job." ... His pangs of conscience were the deciding factor: he felt that he was "constantly deceiving parents." (Maria Hengeveld)
- "It wasn't because Bridge had directly instructed him to "only mention the basic price to new customers and avoid mentioning additional costs, such as exam fees and uniforms." But since his salary was partly calculated on his success rates, he often told half-truths. If parents weren't happy with the strict payment arrangements and threatened to transfer their children to a school with more flexible system, John would think up an argument in an attempt to keep them, telling them for example "that there would soon be a sponsor for them who would pay the tuition fees on their behalf." (Maria Hengeveld)

8. Commercial model and data usage

BIA may use **data collected on pupils for commercial purposes** (insurance, etc.), which had already emerged in a [leaked document](#), raising fundamental concerns about data privacy, pupils and families' consent, and the sustainability of Bridge's business model – emphasising the tension between a commercial for-profit business and the public interest in education.

- "The company monitors and stores a wide range of data on subjects including teacher absenteeism, student payment history and academic achievement." (Peg Tyre)
- "May says the company may consider selling learning materials. They've been collecting data on schoolchildren and their families and might partner with microfinancing institutions to help Bridge parents get loans, as well as working as an intermediary for health-insurance plans." (Peg Tyre)
- "Justin Sandefur, an economist at the Center for Global Development in Washington and principal investigator in the Liberian schools study, told me recently that he worried that "there was no longer a governance firewall between the interests of a commercial company and the Ministry of Education, which is supposed to be advocating on what is best for Liberian children." (Peg Tyre)

9. School conditions, health and safety

Observations confirm [health and safety fears](#) in Bridge schools.

- "the school building itself was shabby and neglected. In the schoolyard, about 30 feet away from where children enter their classrooms, was a deep trench of fetid garbage and rotting bags of feces." (Peg Tyre)

10. Relationship with other schools

Bridge is critical of other schools, in particular government schools, in a way that appears to be a partial **exaggeration or a misrepresentation of the reality**.

- "Geordie Brackin, the company's energetic director of innovation, guided me to a Bridge classroom where students were using flashcards and told me that when he goes to government schools he "doesn't see flashcards, and our teachers don't report using flashcards." Brackin's observation, though, was greeted with embarrassed smiles at local public and private schools a short walk away. "Of course, people who are trained teachers, we know about flashcards," said Lilian Odhiambo, who runs a small private school in the Mathare slum." (Peg Tyre)