



SDG 4: Progress, gaps and recommendations for the UK

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Send My Friend to School Coalition



Education is a fundamental human right that has the power to transform the lives of children across the world. Quality, safe, inclusive and free public education is the cornerstone of the delivery of all SDGs: it saves lives, improves nutrition and health, reduces child, early and forced marriage, and leads to more equal, respectful, and open societies. It is critical to achieving gender justice, peace, stability and climate resilience. Yet now, more than ever, education is out of reach for hundreds of millions of children and young people globally.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further exposed existing inequalities in global education and has revealed systemic failures in the delivery of inclusive education provision.⁶⁵ Around 1.6 billion learners and 100 million educators have experienced disruptions to teaching and learning during the pandemic, and the pupils who are the most marginalised have fared the worst.⁶⁶ UNESCO estimates that up to 11 million girls will never return to school, while many more children with disabilities – who were already 2.5 times less likely to go to school than children without a disability – will not now return to school.⁶⁷ Even before the pandemic, 258 million children and young people were out of school.

65. UNICEF (2020), [COVID-19: How prepared are global education systems for future crises?](#); Save the Children (2020), [Save our Education](#)
66. UNESCO (19 March, 2021), [‘One year into Covid-19 education disruption: where do we stand?’](#) [online article, accessed June 2022]
67. UNESCO (2020), [Covid-19 Education Response: How Many Students are at Risk of Not Returning to School?](#)

Target 4.1:

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes.

More and better financing is urgently needed to deliver SDG 4. A \$148 billion annual financing gap must be plugged in low- and lower-middle-income countries if SDG 4 is to be achieved by 2030, according to UNESCO.⁶⁸ Despite this huge financing gap, which could increase by up to one third due to the global pandemic, education remains far too low on the list of donor priorities and many national budgets. Global official development assistance (ODA) to education has remained stagnant over recent years and currently sits below 2010 levels, at just 10.8%.⁶⁹

Constant crises, conflicts and emergencies are making it much harder for children and young people to access quality teaching. In places affected by crisis, for example, 75 million children and youth are in need of educational support. Conflict also exacerbates vulnerabilities: teenage pregnancy can increase by as much as 65% during an emergency while 54% of the world’s out-of-school girls are in crisis-affected countries.⁷⁰

The UK has already demonstrated commitment to education in emergencies through its support for the UN’s Education Cannot Wait (ECW) global fund, in the government’s own Get Children Learning strategy and the Girls’ Education Declaration. Yet support for education in crisis contexts

68. UNESCO (2020), [Policy Paper 41: COVID-19 is a serious threat to aid to education recovery](#)
69. UNESCO (2020), [Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education: All Means All](#); UNESCO (2017), [Policy Paper 31: Aid to education is stagnating and not going to countries most in need](#)
70. Education Cannot Wait (2020), [Winning the Human Race: 2020 Annual Results Report](#)



must be strengthened if these commitments are to be met. Moreover, international cooperation with initiatives such as ECW should be prioritised. This includes ensuring that teachers are viewed as a key priority in any emergency education response, and invested in accordingly. The UK government should make the case for teachers to be prioritised in ECW's forthcoming strategy. It should work alongside teachers, children, civil society and others to deliver an ambitious pledge at the next ECW replenishment in 2023.

Although girls' education is a Conservative Party manifesto commitment and a personal priority of Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the overall budget for girls' education has been cut by at least 25% in 2021-22 compared to 2019.⁷¹ It is estimated that 700,000 fewer girls will be supported by UK ODA for education between 2019-2022 compared to 2015-2018.⁷² Analysis shows that cuts have been worse for education programmes that focus on gender equality than those that do not.⁷³

The impact of the cuts on education programming is slowly emerging. The Small Charities Challenge Fund has been cancelled, which supported programmes educating homeless girls in Uganda, children with special educational needs in Tanzania and child labourers in Bangladesh. Elsewhere, cuts to funding for UK Aid Direct means programmes run by Children in Crossfire that focused on pre-primary education in Tanzania, plus educational projects run by Street Child in Nepal and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to get girls into school, have all been given just three months to close.⁷⁴ The Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and United Nations Population Fund have all publicly reported on the devastating impact that large-scale cuts to UK ODA is having on their women's and maternal health programming in Zambia and Haiti, respectively.⁷⁵ The knock-on effect is that girls living in acute poverty are now losing access to vital health services, including family planning, which allowed them to stay in education.

If the UK government is serious about its commitment to achieving SDG 4, it must minimise the hurt caused by recent ODA cuts and urgently reinstate its 0.7% commitment. Moreover, if it is to match its support with its global ambition, the UK government should commit to increase the proportion of education ODA to 15%. It should also fulfil its commitment to a fully-funded Global Partnership for Education – ensuring the partnership reaches its \$5 billion target and that the Girls' Education Accelerator is fully funded – and play a leading role in the upcoming Education Cannot Wait replenishment campaign, with an ambitious and early pledge.

71. CGD (23 April, 2021), '[As it Assumes Leadership of the Global Education Agenda, the UK Slashes Its Own Aid to Education](#)' [online article, accessed June 2022]

72. ActionAid UK (2021), '[Written Submission to the International Development Committee inquiry on the impact of the aid cut](#)' [online document, accessed June 2022]

73. Gender and Development Network (2021), '[UK Government decisions to cut UK Aid are disproportionately falling on women and girls](#)'

74. The Guardian (13 May, 2021), '[Why is the UK slashing its international aid budget?](#)' [online podcast, access June 2022]

75. Ibid

Access to education and learning outcomes

The children in the world who have been the most marginalised and are the most resource poor are experiencing extreme learning poverty. Around 258 million children are out of school, and even when children are in school, millions are not learning.⁷⁶

The UK has made progress in driving global efforts to improve learning outcomes. Building on earlier manifesto commitments to help realise every girl's right to education, the UK government hosted the replenishment of the Global Partnership for Education and made education a central component of its G7 presidency. Notably, it introduced two ambitious global targets for improving access and learning in low- and lower-middle income countries by 2026: to get 40 million more girls into education, and to increase the number of girls who are reading by the age of 10 by a third.

To realise these global targets, the UK government sought endorsement of its Declaration on Girls' Education at the 2021 G7 summit. The targets and declaration were supported by all leaders at the summit. But progress may stagnate if the UK does not urgently work with G7 members and low- and middle-income countries to develop a tangible plan to deliver the targets and regularly report on progress. More detail should be publicly announced which sets out how G7 investment is being used (on which initiatives and countries), and how the G7 is using its influence to push for policy changes and domestic resources to ensure collective efforts are made to reach the declaration's targets. As the UK led the efforts for G7 endorsement of the declaration, it has the responsibility to continue to lead and coordinate efforts to its realisation.



Target 4.2:

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education.

Quality early childhood and pre-primary education is the foundation of a child's learning and wellbeing journey. Every stage of education that follows relies on its success. Yet, despite the proven and lifelong benefits, more than 175 million children – nearly half of all pre-primary-age children globally – are not enrolled in pre-primary education.⁷⁷ Providing universal access to pre-primary education is a reachable target, but it requires a practical and bold approach that addresses present realities. In its

76. World Bank (2019), '[Ending Learning Poverty: What Will It Take?](#)'

77. The World Bank (2021), '[The State of the Global Education Crisis: A Path to Recovery](#)'



girls' education action plan (GEAP), the FCDO's commitment to flagship research on education systems across a girl's lifetime, including her early years, is welcomed. However, faster progress and greater investment is needed to support the achievement of Target 4.2. The UK government should fund smart, proven strategies that can help low- and lower-middle-income countries to develop quality universal pre-primary education while remaining sensitive to present realities.

Target 4.a:

Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all.

Intersecting forms of discrimination continue to marginalise children, particularly girls, unaccompanied minors and children with disabilities who experience the impacts of weak education systems the most. The launch of the GEAP and the Girls' Education Declaration were welcomed, however, crucial barriers and solutions to girls' education are omitted. Much greater continuity and clarity is needed to ensure a joined-up approach that provides effective learning environments for all. For example, disability is only included as a footnote in the declaration, and sexual and reproductive health and rights are excluded from the GEAP.

School-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) is deeply damaging to children's physical and mental health, as well as their learning outcomes, and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence. The Safe Schools Declaration is an important tool in combating SRGBV (and other forms of violence in and around schools, including attacks on schools). The UK government's commitment to rally international support for the declaration is welcomed but this support needs to be tangibly put into action.

Linking education with gender-responsive health and protection services is crucial. Tackling complex gender barriers to education requires coordinated investment and interventions across sectors – including water, sanitation and hygiene, child and social protection, gender-based violence, comprehensive sexuality education, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. The government must do more across its policies to promote a holistic approach that includes these sectors.

Target 4.c:

By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially LDCs and small island developing states (SIDS).

The FCDO's GEAP commits to investing in teachers, recognising that "having competent, creative, and well supported teachers is one of the most impactful and cost-effective ways to get girls learning"⁷⁸. Moreover, the strategy commits to "[taking] a fresh look at how to train, recruit, and motivate teachers"⁷⁹. This focus is welcome.

Delivering the UK government's ambitions on global education, including those set out in the 2019 manifesto and G7 Girls' Education Declaration, in addition to SDG 4 more broadly, means prioritising the world's teachers. Qualified, well-trained, properly resourced, respected and decently paid teachers are critical to securing high-quality, inclusive education⁸⁰. Despite this, a lack of qualified teachers represents one of the greatest barriers to universal primary and secondary education in low- and lower-middle income countries, and too often teachers are poorly trained and resourced.⁸¹

The funding committed to the Global Partnership for Education in 2021 will help to train up to 2.2 million teachers should the partnership become fully funded.⁸² However, in 2015 UNESCO estimated that 69 million new, qualified teachers needed to be recruited to achieve SDG 4.⁸³ In sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated that 15 million teachers need recruiting by 2030, while several countries in the region will need to increase teacher recruitment by over 15% per year.⁸⁴

To support the recruitment, retention and training of teachers, the UK government should champion and support low- and lower-middle income countries to increase domestic resource mobilisation by improving education's share of public financing to benchmarks agreed in the Incheon Declaration. Policies should be adopted that improve education's share of national budgets, increase the size of the public budget overall through progressive tax bases, reduce debt servicing and resist austerity.

78. FCDO (2021), [Policy Paper: Every girls goes to school, stays safe, and learns: five years of global action](#)

79. Ibid

80. Send My Friend to School (2022), [All My Friends Need Teachers](#)

81. Ibid

82. Global Partnership for Education (2021), [Raise Your Hand: a case for investment](#)

83. UIS (2016), [The world needs almost 69 million new teachers by 2030 to reach the 2030 education goals](#)

84. International Taskforce on Teachers for Education (2021), [Closing the gap: Ensuring there are enough qualified and supported teachers in sub-Saharan Africa](#)



The UK government cannot achieve its agenda on inclusive education without leading and championing investment in good teaching. Supporting low- and lower-middle income countries to recruit, train and retain teachers, and invest in their safety and working conditions, is one of the most efficient and effective routes to quality, inclusive education for all children, particularly girls and children with disabilities. The FCDO should therefore introduce a new strategy on global teacher policy that addresses this need.

To achieve SDG 4, the UK government should:

1. Urgently reinstate the commitment to 0.7% and the budget spent on global education, and increase education's share of UK ODA to 15%.
2. Make a large, ambitious, multi-year pledge to Education Cannot Wait and ensure that the UK remains one of the fund's largest financial supporters.
3. Make commitments to gender-transformative education; increase investment in evidence-based approaches and solutions that have gender equality and inclusive education as primary objectives within formal and non-formal education.
4. Put gender equality at the heart of its education policies and programming, including supporting training for teachers on gender equality in the classroom, and prioritising areas with large gender gaps and higher rates of gender-based violence, child and early marriage and low rates of sexual and reproductive health services.
5. Fund smart, proven strategies that can help low- and lower-middle-income countries to develop quality, universal, pre-primary education.
6. Introduce a new strategy on global teacher policy that delivers on the recommendations in Send My Friend to School's report All My Friends Need Teachers, supporting the recruitment, training and retention of teachers in low- and lower-middle-income countries.