

Clear evidence, better decisions, more learning.

EdTech Hub Call for Expressions of Interest for at-scale research

Stage one Terms of Reference for at-scale research

Summary

EdTech Hub (https://edtechhub.org/) is a global, non-profit, research partnership supported by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), the World Bank and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Hub's goal is to empower people by giving them the evidence they need to make decisions about technology in education. Technology has the potential to help address the global learning crisis but that potential is not yet being fully realised. Policymakers and other decision-makers face a difficult choice of technology solutions, are often unclear on what works and what doesn't, and are thus obliged to make decisions based on little or no evidence.

To further expand the evidence base, EdTech Hub is launching a call for proposals for at-scale research¹ investigating EdTech's role in high-potential but low-evidence areas in low- and middle-income countries. The purpose of this call is to increase the amount of high-quality research evidence available regarding the impact of technology-based solutions to improve learning and education.

This call solicits proposals of up to £750,000 for research in Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania (multi-country studies are encouraged). Research should align with national education priorities in the relevant country(ies), be rigorous and of a quality to be published in high-impact academic journals, and include cost-effectiveness data that would make it suitable for inclusion in evidence summaries, such as future iterations of the Smart Buys paper.²

¹ By 'at-scale research', EdTech Hub means research on a project or policy that is being delivered at scale — either nationally or in several districts in a country

http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/719211603835247448/pdf/Cost-Effective-Approac hes-to-Improve-Global-Learning-What-Does-Recent-Evidence-Tell-Us-Are-Smart-Buys-for-Im proving-Learning-in-Low-and-Middle-Income-Countries.pdf

As part of its mission to improve evidence availability and uptake, EdTech Hub will be looking for researchers willing to share methodological tools and early-stage findings with the global education community. All outputs from research conducted under this call will be published on the EdTech Hub website and in appropriate academic journals. EdTech Hub will prioritise and support the dissemination of findings within communities where the research is conducted.

This call for Expressions of Interest is the first stage in the application process. Researchers who submit applications that meet the necessary criteria in this first stage will be invited to complete a full proposal (Stage 2). EdTech Hub seeks global teams led by investigators (Principal Investigators (PIs) and co-PIs) with a demonstrated track record in leading at-scale research in EdTech. Successful teams will include specialists from the country(ies) of research focus. At this first stage, short, eight-page expressions of interest are requested, indicating research questions and methodologies, team capabilities and track record of prior work, and a brief overview of engagement dissemination, ethics, and cultural sensitivity. Criteria are provided on these and related matters in the text of this call.

TimelineAvailable here This is a three-stage process, with the Expression of Interest being the first stage. Expressions of Interest will be reviewed and strong applicants will be invited to submit a full proposal (Stage 2). This will be followed b an in-depth clarification discussion of these proposals, if necessary (Stage 3)Duration of researchUp to 3 yearsFocal countriesBangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and TanzaniaValue of each studyUp to £750,000Contact detailsEmail: procurement@edtechhub.org Subject: At-Scale Research CallClarification questionsClarification questions should be submitted via email (above), and all questions received will be answered publicly here		
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Key information

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Scope of the call

Motivation for research

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — in particular, SDG4 — call for the international community to address the current international learning crisis.³ Low-income countries have made strides in expanding schooling in recent decades, but, for a variety of reasons, learning has been found to be far from adequate. In 2017, 262 million young people across the world (aged 6 to 17 years) were out of school. The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly increased this number. At a peak, 1.5 billion learners were out of school in June–July 2020 (463 million of which were estimated to not have any access to education provision at all). Lack of access to education, together with low learning levels in schools, mean that 90% of children in low-income countries (LICs) and 53% in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) cannot read proficiently by the age of 10 — a situation the World Bank has termed 'learning poverty'.⁴ Access to quality education and learning is lowest for the most disadvantaged children. This has been exacerbated by Covid-19 school closures, which have had the largest impacts on already fragile education systems and disadvantaged learners.

Overview and general principles

This is a call for at-scale research. By 'at-scale research' EdTech Hub means research on a project or policy that is being delivered at the national level or in several districts in a country. There is no minimum timeframe for a research proposal under this call, but most proposals are expected to be for multi-year research studies, with a maximum study length of three years. Research studies can apply for up to £750,000 from EdTech Hub under this call. Research that is co-funded by other bodies is welcome as long as it meets the criteria set out in this document. EdTech Hub anticipates awarding

³ https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4

⁴ https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/learning-poverty

up to four research proposals from this call, depending on the quality of proposals received, although the start dates may be staggered.

There is huge potential for technology to be used in a way that helps address the global learning crisis which is not yet being realised. The research funded under this call will add to the global knowledge base about technology for education. It will enable EdTech Hub and the global education community to improve evidence-based advice to enable decision-makers inside and outside government to make better decisions for learning⁵ impact, particularly for the most disadvantaged learners. Funded projects will investigate the practical applications of EdTech, generate primary research, and develop recommendations to improve learning and education.

EdTech Hub has five focus topics:

- 1. Technology to support personalised learning and teaching at the right level
- 2. In-service teacher professional development, structured pedagogy, and technology
- 3. Technology to promote school participation
- 4. Girls' education and technology
- 5. Technology to advance data use and decision making in education

Alongside these five focus topics are five cross-cutting research emphases as outlined below. It is anticipated that proposals will focus on one or more of the five focus topics, and will incorporate all of the cross-cutting research emphases.

⁵ There are various ways to measure learning, and the most suitable will depend on context and dissemination needs. One internationally recognised measure is Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS). For more information see

https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/2432615 38075151093/learning-adjusted-years-of-schooling-lays-defining-a-new-macro-measure-of-ed ucation

Focus countries

Research proposals should be for studies that concentrate on and are undertaken in one of the six EdTech Hub focus countries, listed below.⁶

- Bangladesh
- Ghana
- Kenya
- Pakistan
- Sierra Leone
- Tanzania

Proposals for studies that engage with two focus countries are encouraged. Proposals for studies that compare a focus country with a non-focus country will also be considered if there is a sufficiently compelling rationale as to why this will enable the study to generate a more valuable set of results. Proposals that do not engage with any of the focus countries will not be considered. EdTech Hub may make more than one award per country, based on the quality of proposals and the thematic focus areas. Expressions of Interest should specify why a particular country has been chosen for the research proposed, including researchers' existing connections there.

Cross-cutting emphases

EdTech Hub-supported research is expected to recognise five, broad, cross-cutting emphases for understanding and assessing effectiveness within EdTech, set out below.

Cross-cutting emphasis	Associated objective	Cross-cutting research question
1. Learning outcomes	To improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of EdTech in relation to specific learning outcomes.	How can specific learning outcomes on literacy, numeracy, and socio-emotional learning outcomes be strengthened through the use of

Cross-cutting research emphases, objectives and questions

⁶ Country scans for these focus countries can be found here:

https://edtechhub.org/2020/08/11/a-rapid-scan-of-the-edtech-landscape-in-11-countries/

		technology?
2. Equity	To improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of EdTech in relation to equity.	How can equity for the most marginalised (girls, learners with disabilities), children affected by crises, and minority language learners) be improved through the use of technology?
3. Context	To improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of EdTech in relation to context.	How does context, including low infrastructure contexts, shape appropriate uses of technology, especially in reference to education systems, cultural specificity and political economy factors?
4. Cost- effectiveness	To improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of EdTech in relation to cost.	What are the most cost-effective uses of EdTech and how can these be measured and compared?
5. Scale and sustainability	To improve the evidence base regarding the effectiveness of EdTech in relation to scale and sustainability.	How can the use of technology in education be designed and implemented in a way that is scalable and sustainable?

Expressions of Interest are expected to explicitly show how these cross-cutting emphases are covered in their research plan, but not to answer every part of every cross-cutting research question.

Methodology

Research proposals are expected to include appropriate methodological approaches to answer research questions that take into account the five focus topics, cross-cutting emphases, and focus countries set out above. This is a call for at-scale research, and so multi-year studies are expected. Shorter and smaller studies will be considered only when justified.

EdTech Hub expects that proposals are likely to employ a mixed-methods approach. The choice of research methodology will depend on the research question, however, EdTech Hub anticipates that successful proposals are likely to include both qualitative and quantitative research. All research proposals must be grounded in empirical evidence, build on available data and literature and proposals, and demonstrate the following:

- Appropriateness (employing techniques that are capable of meeting the objectives of the study / answering the proposed research question).
- Feasibility (research can be carried out within the timeframe, budget, and other relevant logistical constraints of the research plan).
- Cost-effectiveness (research has good outcomes relative to the cost).
- Sustainability (research will be undertaken in a way that is likely to have long-term impact, and that tools, methodologies, and findings from the research will be shared and used).
- Rigour (research is strong and reliable⁷).

Each proposal must clearly set out one or more justified research question(s), and justifications for the research methods to be used. Research findings should be published in high-impact journals and be suitable for use by policymakers and practitioners. Applicants are encouraged to use a mix of methodologies capable of demonstrating causal attribution through experimental or quasi-experimental designs where possible, while also being highly sensitive to context and culture considering the priority given to marginalised children and youth. Proposals should also include plans for communication and dissemination of findings.

Given the ongoing uncertainty around travel and Covid-19 related restrictions, please be sure to provide contingency plans that take these health-related restrictions into account. Applicants who are invited to apply to the second stage of proposal preparation will be asked to provide mitigation strategies if Covid-19 restrictions continue to impact the planned research.

Research partnerships, staffing, and links to implementers

Proposals are expected to be composed of research teams led by highly-qualified Principal Investigators (PIs)⁸, and EdTech Hub encourages applicants to consider working collaboratively, including through a co-PI model. PIs should have demonstrable research capacity with a track record in

(https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/BE2_Guidance_Note_ASE_0.pdf) ⁸ The Principal Investigator (PI) is the person delegated responsible for the leadership and conduct of a research study.

⁷ For more information see the BE2 guidance on Assessing the Strength of Evidence in the Education Sector

leading at-scale research in education, and publication in high-impact, peer-reviewed academic journals. In addition to research expertise, PIs and co-investigators must have experience of working in the proposed focus country. They can be based anywhere in the world but should have strong and well-developed connections with local partners. Applications from a single entity are acceptable, however, EdTech Hub strongly encourages substantive partnership and collaborative approaches. Preference will be given to proposals that have substantive positions for researchers based within the focus country. Applications that include early-career researchers, researchers from LMICs, women researchers, and researchers from minority backgrounds will also be favourably considered. In addition, both multi-disciplinary teams and multi-stakeholder partnerships (academic, public, private or NGOs, etc.) will also be seen as advantageous for innovation and sustainability.

PIs should be researchers based in higher education institutions, research organisations, or other organisations with a credible capacity to undertake high-quality research. This means an institution that possesses an existing in-house capacity to host a grant and to carry out research that materially extends and enhances the national or international research base, and is able to demonstrate an independent capability to undertake and lead research programmes. An individual is permitted to be involved in multiple bids to this call, but cannot be the PI on more than one bid.

Expressions of Interest should identify the at-scale implementation to be the subject of the proposed research and provide an overview of the project. A more detailed collaboration plan and engagement from the implementers will be required in Stage 2 (the full proposal) of this process, for those that are invited to apply following assessment of Expressions of Interest.

Audience for research

EdTech Hub aims to invigorate the global research discussion around educational technology, and envisions that the research produced under this call will be high-calibre, and will be used to influence global evidence discussions around learning and education.

There are at least three main audiences for this research:

- 1. National policymakers in LMICs: research findings and impact should be able to demonstrate effectiveness and impact at a local, regional and / or national level. This impact will serve as a larger indicator of the intervention, aimed at addressing SDG4. Research will support policymakers to understand relevant information and inspire them to take action.
- 2. **International leaders:** evidence generated through this call will be shared with these policymakers, experts, providers, and implementers worldwide to inform and improve the use of ICT for education.
- 3. **Other stakeholders:** many other stakeholders inside and outside of education will, it is expected, benefit from credible findings generated by the research under this call. These may range, for example, from the public and private sector to ministries of health and agriculture to local teacher associations, and small NGOs all trying to utilise technology for social good.

Engagement and dialogue

EdTech Hub believes that to maximise research impact, transparency is required. Thus, methodological and analytical choices need to be clear, interim findings provided, and data made available to others working in the field. Successful proposal recipients must commit to open dialogue with relevant stakeholders, and provision of materials as Global Public Goods. This will include close engagement with EdTech Hub and other Hub-funded research projects, as well as close engagement with key in-country education stakeholders. Exact engagement plans will depend on the context of the country of study. Generally speaking, research teams will :

- Engage in regular exchange with Hub management, providing quarterly reports on key aspects of the supported work (a template will be provided at a later date).
- Provide written interim findings, including plans, methods, data, and research instruments, as Global Public Goods (types of publication to be decided in collaboration with EdTech Hub).
- Attend sharing sessions with other studies commissioned by EdTech Hub, on a regular basis (about 2–4 times per year).
- Participate in occasional public events (virtual and / or in-person) hosted by EdTech Hub or co-hosted by grant recipient(s) to share plans, methods, challenges, and findings.
- Engage actively with the government in the relevant study country, and other relevant stakeholders (e.g., Local Education Group, EdTech providers and donors) throughout the lifetime of the research.

EdTech Hub expects research proposals to identify the potential impact of their research on policy and practice, and to actively consider how these can be maximised and developed. Researchers are encouraged to be innovative in the kinds of user engagement, knowledge exchange, communications, and research uptake they plan to undertake during and beyond the period of research funding.

Expressions of interest should include an initial plan for engagement and evidence uptake, a more detailed engagement plan will be required in Stage 2 (the full proposal) of this process, for those who are invited to apply following assessment of the Expressions of Interest. EdTech Hub will support engagement with research through its global and in-country networks.

Research ethics, cultural sensitivity, and risk management

Research ethics

Applicants must ensure the proposed research will be carried out to a high ethical standard. They must ensure that any potential ethical issues have been considered and explain how these will be addressed. In the context of this call, EdTech Hub expects to see in all applications how the researchers will ensure child safety at all times. EdTech Hub also expects all proposals to demonstrate cultural sensitivity in data collection, research, and dissemination.

Applicant institutions are responsible for ensuring that ethical issues relating to the research project are identified and brought to the attention of the relevant approval or regulatory body. Ethical approval to undertake the research must be granted by the relevant authority before any work requiring approval begins. Wherever necessary, appropriate consent should be obtained from or on behalf of participants or others affected by the research. Applicants should specify whether their proposed research raises any special ethical issues and whether their application has been approved by their institution's Research Ethics Committee, or other relevant authority, including compliance with regulations in the country of research.

Applicant institutions should meet the requirements of the Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2019)⁹ or equivalent local principles, standards and good practice, and must comply with formal procedures for governing good research practice, and for handling and reporting allegations of fraud or research misconduct in place.

Researchers invited to apply to Stage 2 (the full proposal) will be asked to comply with EdTech Hub's ethics and safeguarding policies.

Risk management

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Researchers funded under this call are likely to undertake work in the focus country in the course of the research project. EdTech Hub expects an assessment of any risks entailed within the research project to be outlined within the proposal. This includes risks associated with delivery of the research, financial management, and oversight / governance. Risks relating to Covid-19 and planned safeguards should be explicitly mentioned. Responsibility for duty of care rests with the host institution.

https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/the-concordat-for-researc h-integrity.aspx

Timeframe and budget

EdTech Hub expects that country research programmes funded under the call will last for up to 3 years. There is a budget ceiling for proposals, and value for money will be assessed for full proposals (at Stage 2). Awards will be made in pounds sterling (GBP) or US dollars (USD) depending on the location of the recipient. EdTech Hub expects to make four awards in total, although start dates may be staggered. If there is an insufficient number of proposals of suitably high-quality, a future call will be held.

Regular reports, including interim and financial reports, will be expected as part of the award. Any underspend must be refunded to EdTech Hub.

Eligibility

Research proposals must fall within the five focus topics and countries outlined above in order to be considered. They must clearly demonstrate the potential for impact — that is, high potential for the research findings to inform decision-making processes. Projects must carefully consider how the potential impacts of their research on policy and practice can be maximised and developed, and proposals which challenge existing policy and practice assumptions are welcomed. Applicants must clearly describe the gap in the existing body of evidence on EdTech that their research would fill, and present a clear dissemination plan that addresses how the evidence generated through this research could be used by decision-makers. The EdTech Hub team will work closely with selected applicants to support and enable dissemination opportunities within and across countries, and globally. The outputs will be reviewed according to EdTech Hub's peer review and quality assurance process.

All research funded through this call should align with the following principles:

 Projects must involve robust empirical research, in line with the Building Evidence in Education (BE2) guidance on education research.¹⁰

¹⁰ For information about criteria used by EdTech Hub in assessing rigour of evidence, please see the Guidance Note on Assessing the Strength of Evidence in the Education Sector (https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/BE2_Guidance_Note_ASE_0.pdf) and

- Projects must demonstrate a commitment to actively engage with discussion and debate with EdTech Hub and other key stakeholders and share methodological tools and early-stage findings as Global Public Goods.¹¹
- Projects must have the ability and willingness to adapt and iterate methodology as appropriate.
- Projects must obtain and share relevant and reliable cost-effectiveness data, and conduct cost-effectiveness analysis.
- Projects must align with national education priorities and be on a topic linked directly with major government reform.¹²

All proposals must be accompanied by a declaration of bid viability. Any individual or organisation that works for, or is a partner of, EdTech Hub must review EdTech Hub's Conflict of Interest Policy and complete a declaration form. When reviewing this material, any involvement in shaping, preparing or assessing the call should be declared, along with all work for EdTech Hub to-date.

The following eligibility criteria apply to research project proposals and will be used to assess the suitability of applications.

Essential criteria

- Explicitly aligns with one or more of the five focus topics.
- Explicitly aligns with all cross-cutting emphases.
- Focused on projects in Bangladesh, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.
- Applications must be in English and follow the template provided, including length guidance.
- CVs must be attached for each named individual in the Expression of Interest.

on Cost Measurement

⁽https://www.edu-links.org/sites/default/files/media/file/BE2%20cost%20measurement%20gui dance%20note%20final.pdf).

¹¹ Global Public Goods are envisioned broadly as freely available goods which have benefits that are global in scope.

¹² EdTechHub has an active engagement team and can facilitate connections to government systems where needed.

The applying organisation, its key personnel, or key personnel in this proposal have *not* been suspended, debarred, sanctioned, or otherwise identified as ineligible to receive taxpayer funds by the government of the United Kingdom, any UN organisation or the World Bank Group or any other international organisation. Before contracting all individuals and organisations may be asked to demonstrate that they have taken sufficient action to address any instances of corruption, fraud, modern slavery, or sexual harassment.

Funding and eligible expenses

All grants will be made to the institution hosting the PI, which will be responsible for the disbursement of funds to co-investigators at other institutions, and programme reporting requirements. Funding will be provided in either GBP or USD.

Research funding can cover the time of researchers, administrators, communications professionals (e.g., editing and typesetting), travel expenses, subsistence, accommodation, and consumables necessary for high-quality research (based on receipts). Expenses may also be used for conferences, dissemination, and consumables such as purchase of specialist software (not readily available at the institutions involved), datasets, photocopies, microfilms etc., and any other minor items that will be used up during the course of the award, reasonable overheads will also be covered through this funding, which will cover the Full Economic Cost of the work planned.

Funding exclusions

Research funding cannot be used for activities which discriminate against any group on the basis of age, gender reassignment, disability, race, colour, ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation, pregnancy and maternity, religion or beliefs, on gifts, or in illegal activities. EdTech Hub cannot fund fines, interest payments, or unspecified risk premiums. Additionally, this call will not fund any costs that are outside of the FCDO's eligibility guidance.¹³ These include:

- Fundraising from the UK government or fundraising generally (except when agreed).
- Fines, compensation payments or debts.
- Things that are already paid for (e.g., if your rent is already funded, we don't contribute 'notional rent', if you already have computers we will not contribute to wear and tear costs).
- Advocacy that isn't part of the project objectives or deliverables.

Proposals which duplicate work already supported by EdTech Hub, FCDO, World Bank or partners will not be funded. See our <u>Clarification Questions</u> for more information.

Decision-making process and assessment criteria

Decision-making process

Expressions of Interest received through this call will be assessed by a review panel of experts, using the assessment criteria set out below. Successful applicants will then be invited to prepare and submit a fuller proposal (Stage 2) setting out research proposal plans in more detail. These will be assessed by a second review panel. Successful researchers will then be invited into a discussion with EdTech Hub to discuss any outstanding questions and finalise their research plan.

¹³

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_dat a/file/888316/Eligible-Cost-Policy-28May2020.pdf

Assessment criteria

Proposals will be assessed according to the following criteria:

Review Criteria		Percentage weighting
1.	 Context, relevance, and priorities of research questions Relevance of research question(s) to EdTech Hub priorities and aims (including five focus topics and cross-cutting emphases). In-country and global demand for research on the selected topic. Relevance of the research in the given geographical context and with special attention to marginalised children and youth. Relevance to local, national, and international stakeholders, with consideration of policy windows for change. Potential for credible and scalable impact. Significant contribution to the research evidence and innovation in EdTech in LMIC contexts. 	25%
2.	 Research design and methodology Quality, rationale, and appropriateness of the research design as related to the research question(s). Rigour of the methodology Sufficient attention to marginalised population(s), with diversity by gender, language minority, disability, etc. 	25%
3.	 Organisational and individual capabilities PI and co-PI experience and reputation in the fields of education, technology, and other relevant fields. Expertise, relevance, and composition of the research team, including both international, regional, and national researchers. Track record of team members to produce publications in highly-regarded, peer-reviewed journals. Diversity in team members, including researchers from LMICs, gender-mix, and minority ethnic groups. 	25%

4.	1. 2. 3.	 influence will be achieved nationally in the country of research and globally. Demonstrated commitment to engagement and dialogue to the field and multiple stakeholders, including the EdTech Hub. Capability to disseminate culturally relevant, context-sensitive, and impactful research findings which can move forward the field of EdTech. Demonstrated approach to producing sustainability of findings and impact, including cost-effectiveness. 	15%
5.	1. 2. 3.	rch ethics and cultural sensitivity Use of relevant ethics approval frameworks and proper consideration of safeguarding. Understanding of relevant approvals for research in relevant countries. Demonstrate cultural appropriateness of data collection, analytic methods, research tools / instruments and analysis. Is the dissemination strategy culturally relevant, context-sensitive, and appropriate?	10%

Criteria Scoring

The proposals for each of the criteria will be marked against the following scoring table:

Description
Outstanding — provides an outstanding response to the review criteria
Excellent — provides an excellent response to the review criteria
Very good — provides a very good response to the review criteria
Satisfactory — provides a satisfactory response to the review criteria
Poor — provides a poor response to the review criteria
Unsatisfactory — provides no response to the review criteria

How to apply

Expression of Interest submission

The application process involves submitting an initial Expression of Interest that demonstrates adherence to the eligibility and review criteria outlined above. Please note the expression of interest is in a Google Form format. To fill out this form, respondents need to be signed in to a Google Account.

Timeline

The timeline is available on the Call for Expressions of Interest page.

Contact

For queries: procurement@edtechhub.org (Subject: At Scale Research Call).