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# What do we really know about Bridge International Academies?

## A summary of research findings

Curtis Riep  
February 2019



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# Introduction

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Bridge International Academies (BIA) is a subsidiary company of NewGlobe Schools Inc. founded in Delaware, U.S.A. by Jay Kimmelman, his wife Shannon May, and Phil Frei. While living in San Francisco in the early 2000s and ‘working on issues related to education, innovation, and development’ these three American edu-preneurs ‘wondered why no one was thinking about schools in developing countries the way Starbucks thought about coffee’ (BIA, 2013, p. 5, 2). That was, as an international chain of franchises that sell basic education services as a mass-produced item for consumption at ‘affordable’ rates with uniform standards. Thus, the founders of BIA created a business plan for schooling millions of children living in developing economies—known as the ‘Academy-in-a-Box’ model—based on standardised practices and methods that can be replicated in various settings and scaled-up to serve a high number of fee-paying customers, at supposedly low-costs, while maintaining consistent ‘standards’ (BIA, 2016a). The first Bridge International Academy opened in 2009 in an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya. Since then, BIA has expanded its operations having ‘reached 500,000 children through hundreds of schools across Africa and India’ (BIA, 2018).

BIA is the fastest-growing chain of ‘low-fee’ schools in the world with plans ‘to be the global leader in providing education to families who live on US\$2 a day per person or less’ (BIA, 2016a). It is financially backed by a range of investors that have enabled the company to rapidly scale-up its market-based services in the Global-South. BIA investors include the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC), UK’s Department for International Development (DFID), US’ Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), Bill Gates, Zuckerberg Education Ventures, Pearson via Learn Capital, Omidyar Network, New Enterprise Associates, Khosla Ventures, LGT Impact Ventures, among others.

As the largest chain of low-cost, for-profit schools in the world, BIA has garnered increased attention from governments, aid agencies, investors, partners, researchers, and other civil society groups around the globe.

The aim of this essay is to summarise what is known about this company based on research studies conducted in local communities where it operates; informed by BIA staff, customers, and ministry officials

acquainted with the business and its activities. It reviews seven research studies on BIA, as well as supplementary and relevant literature such as company webpages and materials, which includes three studies on the operations of BIA in Liberia (Hook, 2017; Klees, 2017; Romero, Sandefur & Sandholtz, 2017), two studies in Nigeria (Härmä, 2017; Unterhalter, Robinson & Ibrahim, 2018) as well as research studies in Kenya (EI/KNUT, 2016) and Uganda (Riep & Machachek, 2016). The research findings from this body of work reveal much about the nature, quality, and impact of BIA. For this essay, the research findings are organised and discussed in relation to (1) market opportunities and state-level strategies, (2) the academy-in-a-box model, (3) affordability and accessibility concerns, (4) teacher qualifications (or lack thereof) and teaching methods, (5) misleading claims of ‘world-class education’, (6) legal contraventions, and (7) issues of sustainability, accountability, and transparency.

## 1. ‘Market opportunities’ & entry strategies

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Bridge International Academies has identified two distinct ‘market opportunities’ in which it operates in the Global-South. Firstly, according to BIA, there are ‘800 million primary and nursery aged pupils living on less than US\$2 per person per day’ that ‘lack access to quality schools’, yet spend US\$80 per year on education, resulting in a US\$64 billion parent paid market (BIA, n.d.). BIA’s business model aims to exploit this ‘massive market opportunity’ by selling basic education as a commodity to millions of children and families living in economic poverty throughout Africa and Asia. It is a business strategy referred to as the ‘fortune at the bottom of the pyramid’ (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002; Prahalad & Hart, 2002), which aims to create markets that capture populations on the lowest (and largest) end of the socio-economic pyramid. In Kenya and Uganda, for example, BIA has targeted this market opportunity by establishing private, commercially-run schools that sell ‘low-fee’ education services directly to fee-paying pupils and their families. For BIA, tapping into this market involves certain entry strategies in the countries where it seeks to operate.

In Kenya, BIA has claimed to be a *Harambee* school, which is a community self-help approach whereby local communities join government efforts in taking responsibility for education provision and setting-up schools. Yet, this is 'misleading as the company is not a community self-help effort but rather a U.S. owned for-profit enterprise' (EI/KNUT, 2016, p. 17). By claiming to be a type of *Harambee* school, BIA seeks to avoid some of the basic requirements and standards that private schools are required to adhere to, such as following a curriculum that is approved by the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) and hiring a sufficient number of certified teachers (EI/KNUT, 2016).

In Uganda, BIA simply went ahead and established 63 schools without duly obtaining licenses nor complying with the requisite laws for establishing a private school – exhibiting both disrespect for national sovereignty and the rule of law (Riep & Machachek, 2016). In both Kenya and Uganda, the operations of BIA represent a form of unilateral foreign intervention since the company enters these sovereign jurisdictions on its own accord, without invitation, and with its own agenda to advance its commercial enterprise.

In Nigeria, BIA identified a market opening when the Lagos Ministry of Education's guidelines on private schools were changed to accommodate BIA and other low-cost providers. The guidelines were reformed to include a section on community/low-income private schools, noting that conditions for approval 'may be relaxed to give opportunity to children within the area of operation easy access to education' (Lagos Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 19).

BIA's entry into the Nigerian schooling market was further facilitated by UK Government funding from the Department for International Development (DFID) and its Developing Effective Private Education in Nigeria (DEEPEN) Innovation Fund. In 2014, BIA received £3.45 million through DEEPEN, which was 'a "start up" grant to share the risks for Bridge's entry into the Lagos market' (Unterhalter, Robinson & Ibrahim, 2018, p. 21). Additionally, \$31 million of investment linked to UK aid was disbursed to BIA via the Commonwealth Development Corporation, International Finance Corporation (UK holds shares), and DFID's Impact Investment Fund, which invested in Novastar, which in turn invested in BIA. Since 2008, BIA has received more than US\$100 million in capital investment from a range of investors to kick-start and run this multinational enterprise (Buchanan, n.d.). This highlights the fact that BIA's rapid growth and mass-production of low-cost schooling is largely investor-driven, rather than consumer-driven.



Beyond the US\$64 billion parent paid market in which BIA sells its services directly to families and children, the second market opportunity identified by Bridge involves a US\$179 billion publically funded charter school market in low-income countries (BIA, n.d.). This market venture involves partnering with governments in the Global-South to operate charter schools that are publically funded. In Liberia, BIA has become a key partner in the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) programme (recently rebranded as the Liberia Educational Advancement Plan, or LEAP), which is a public-private partnership whereby BIA has been contracted by the government to operate charter schools that are publically funded. Under this arrangement, the Liberian government owns the school infrastructure and pays teachers' salaries, while service providers such as BIA are paid through a government subsidy based on student enrolment.

Thus, BIA taps into market opportunities for the provision of schooling in the Global-South through various strategies. It is a chameleon of sorts; able to shift, change, modify, and adapt to various political and market environments to advance its enterprise. This involves misrepresenting itself as a *Harambee* school in Kenya, operating without the proper licensures in Uganda, taking advantage of relaxed regulations in Nigeria, and advertising itself as a business working in the interests of public schooling in Liberia.

## 2. 'Academy-in-a-Box' model

Everywhere that BIA operates, the system of teaching and learning is the same. BIA has developed an 'Academy-in-a-Box' model that is transplanted and replicated from one context to another. Representing the 'proprietary heart' of the company (Kirchgasler, 2016, p. 8), the academy-in-a-box model is a 'vertically-integrated system' (BIA, 2016a) in which the entire supply-chain is streamlined by BIA—from academy construction to advertising materials to curricula content to teacher training to pedagogy—it is a pre-fabricated model designed for replication and rapid scalability. Within this academy-in-a-box model all instructional (e.g. curriculum, pedagogy, lessons) and non-instructional activities (e.g. admissions, accountancy, administration) are standardised

and automated using internet-enabled devices. On the instructional side, pre-programmed curriculum is developed by BIA at corporate headquarters abroad and then sent electronically to each school site using web-enabled smartphones that transfer curriculum to tablet e-readers, which is then read out verbatim, word-for-word, to students by unqualified staff referred to as 'Learning Facilitators'. Meanwhile, 'Academy Managers' – the single administrative employee at each BIA establishment – utilise smartphones with custom applications to manage the day-to-day operations of each academy, such as student tracking and assessing, communicating with parents, collecting fees, and the management and evaluation of each academy. In turn, the BIA model has leveraged technology to drive down operating costs, resulting in a profoundly standardised, automated, and mechanised form of provision that is strikingly similar from one context to another (Riep & Machacek, 2016; EI/KNUT, 2016). This model has drawn 'clear parallels with fast-food chains' that involve 'mass-production methods to provide an identical product fairly cheaply across numerous outlets' (Härmä, 2017, p. 9). Thus, local context and the diverse learning needs of students are not taken into account in this model. BIA claims this approach allows the company to reduce school fees to a price-point deemed 'affordable' for the masses living in poverty—and by lowering the cost of its services and scaling-up rapidly, BIA aims to benefit from economies of scale and maximise profitable returns. Findings from multiple research studies, however, suggest this model is geared more towards profitability and scalability, rather than accessible, quality education for all (EI/KNUT, 2016; Härmä, 2015; Riep & Machacek, 2016).

### 3. Is it really affordable and accessible for all?

With a mission to bring 'Knowledge for All', BIA plans 'to be the global leader in providing education to families who live on US\$2 a day per person or less' (BIA, 2016a). However, research findings reveal that BIA's for-profit approach involves fundamental barriers that undermine accessibility among the poor. Widely claimed by the company to charge only \$6 per month, in reality, the total costs are much higher. BIA says it

is an 'affordable' option for all children 'regardless of their family's income' (BIA, 2016a), however, the fees charged are out of reach for the most economically disadvantaged.

In-country studies have found that fees charged by BIA differ slightly according to class-level and location but 'the \$6 per month figure cited is neither accurate nor all-inclusive' (Härmä, 2017, p. 26). In Kenya it was calculated that the total costs to send one child to a BIA school, on average, is US\$17.25 per month, or more than US\$207 per school year (EI/KNUT, 2016). In Uganda, it was determined that BIA costs, per school year, ranged from US\$129 (for Nursery), US\$143 (for Primary 1, 2, 3) and US\$152 (for Primary 4, 5) (Riep & Machacek, 2016). At these rates, it was estimated that families with an *average* household income in Uganda would have to pay approximately 46 – 55% of their total household income to send two children to a BIA school (Riep & Machacek, 2016). This is clearly not affordable or sustainable when other basic necessities such as food, housing, and healthcare must also be budgeted for and covered by families. Research in Nigeria found that BIA fees are approximately US\$129.91 per year per child (Härmä, 2017), and thus, it was concluded by two separate studies in the country that 'children attending BIA schools were not from very poor backgrounds' (Unterhalter et al., 2018, p. 45). Thus, the claim that BIA is affordable for the aspirational poor living on \$2 per day is highly misplaced, inappropriate, and irresponsible given the economic vulnerability of this population.

BIA also enforces strict policies around payments, which oftentimes result in suspensions for students unable to pay on-time. In Kenya, 58% of BIA pupils reported having been suspended from school due to payment delays (EI/KNUT, 2016). In Nigeria, it was reported that children unable to pay fees are separated from classmates and not permitted to sit exams or receive report cards, which is known as the 'Not Allowed in Class' policy intended to pressure parents to pay fees (Unterhalter et al., 2018). As Unterhalter et al. (2018) point out 'the undermining of children's health and wellbeing through the humiliations of separation, being sent home, or not receiving a report card, mitigate against provision of quality education and strategies of inclusion' (p. 50).

In addition to school fees, BIA is unlikely to reach the most marginalised since the company establishes schools in areas that are already saturated by other school providers, instead of going where the need is greatest. BIA builds schools in locations where they are expected to be commercially viable enterprises. This tends to be in urban or peri-urban communities, rather than more remote and marginalised locations where

schooling is absent or limited. Research conducted in Nigeria found that BIA schools are 'located in areas where there were already large numbers of schools, close by, both public and private' (Unterhalter et al., 2018, p. 45). This is also the case in other contexts where BIA operates. Also in Nigeria, it was determined that 'Thirty-three out of 37 (89%) children in interviewed households changed to BIA from another private school; of the remaining four BIA-enrolled children, two were young enough that they have never been to any other school while only two changed from government schools' (Härmä, 2017, p. 20). Thus, as Härmä (2017) points out, 'When international development partners such as UK DFID provide grants to this corporation, what they are doing is subsidising school choice for the lower-middle-class, not reaching the poorest as is DFID's stated aim' (p. 6).

Findings from research studies in Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria therefore contradict the claim that BIA services are affordable for families living on \$2 per day. In reality, BIA is not serving the most economically disadvantaged children in these countries as it claims. There are more accessible options already in these communities including cheaper private schools and government schools; more expensive private schools are also found in areas where BIA operates (Härmä, 2017; Unterhalter et al., 2018). These findings suggest that BIA is setting up commercial academies in markets that are already saturated, rather than in locations where schooling is non-existent or in short supply. Schools established by BIA, therefore, are serving to support differentiated schooling options among the lower-middle classes who can afford to pay (a condition for profitable returns), rather than increasing access to education among the poor and most marginalised, as it claims, since the returns would be far less profitable.

Beyond fees, another barrier to accessibility reported in the literature is the issue of student selection. In Kenya, it was reported that past performance and discipline records for students were used as a criterion for admission (EI/KNUT, 2016). BIA managers and teachers in Kenya verified that placement/entry tests were administered to new students in classes 1 – 8, and 37.5% of teachers interviewed admitted to having explained to parents and children with low test scores that they would be better-off in a different school. It was also reported by BIA teachers in Kenya that children with disabilities or special needs were generally not admitted since BIA is not able to support these students (EI/KNUT, 2016, p. 45-46).

## 4. Qualified teachers replaced by 'teacher-computers'

Universally, teachers are considered to be a significant, if not the most significant, in-school factor in the provision of quality education. Independent research studies on BIA in Kenya, Uganda, and Nigeria have all come to the same conclusion, however, that the majority of 'teachers' employed by BIA are not qualified to teach. In Kenya, more than 71% of teachers surveyed were 'unqualified to teach due to lack of qualifications' and of these, approximately 43% were Form 4 Leavers (meaning they did not complete High School) (EI/KNUT, 2016, p. 23). In Uganda, it was estimated that more than 80% of teachers were unlicensed, and therefore, not qualified to teach (Riep & Machacek, 2016, p. 19). Likewise, in Nigeria 'BIA teachers were unqualified' or only 'had a small amount of training' (Unterhalter et al., 2019, p. 44, 45). BIA's practice of employing unqualified and unlicensed teachers is a clear violation of the educational and legal standards in each of these countries where the firm operates.

BIA employs uncertified teachers and pays them severely low wages in order to drastically reduce operating costs. In Uganda, it was revealed that BIA teachers receive US\$1.80 to US\$2.50 per day for their labour (Riep & Machacek, 2016)—effectively rendering them workers living in poverty. Similarly, in Kenya, BIA teacher salaries range from approximately US\$88.80 to US\$118.50 per month, while their contracts demand 59-65 hours of work per week (EI/KNUT, 2016). As multiple research studies illustrate, teachers employed at BIA lack job security, basic health benefits, and the right to organise in formal labour associations (EI/KNUT, 2016; Riep & Machacek, 2016). Yet, they are expected to work extended hours on school days, on weekends and evenings, which also includes advertising for BIA, without pay, in local communities where they live (EI/KNUT, 2016).

BIA presumes it does not require certified teachers since all aspects of instruction and pedagogy are automated and delivered through 'teacher-computers'. Teacher-computers are mobile electronic devices, or e-book readers, from which underqualified and underpaid teachers read out scripted lesson plans to pupils. These scripted lessons include 'step-by-step instructions explaining what teachers should do and say during any

given moment of a class' (BIA, 2016b). BIA's method of teaching is based on teacher-computers, which command teachers what to say, what to do, what to teach, and how to teach it. In Uganda, a BIA employee explained that 'teacher-computers are our basic support; they are what make us teachers at Bridge. So without them there is nothing like a teacher at Bridge' (Riep & Machacek, 2016, p. 26). Research interviews with ministerial officials and school inspectors where BIA operates, and who are familiar with this approach, describe this method of teaching as 'robotic', 'too controlling', 'disabling the teachers from using their creativity and innovativeness', 'neocolonial' and representing a form of 'slavery' (EI/KNUT, 2016; Riep & Machacek, 2016).

Rather than hire professionally-trained and certified teachers, the company has established its own Bridge International Training Institutes where it provides, on average, three-week teacher-training programmes where the focus is training new recruits how to operate the teacher-computers and deliver lessons plans using this approach, how to manage classrooms, and how to market/advertise BIA in local communities (EI/KNUT, 2016; Riep & Machacek, 2016). This training differs tremendously from what future educators receive in accredited Teacher Colleges and Universities in African states, and elsewhere. Therefore, BIA's teacher-training programs are not recognised by any educational authorities, anywhere.

Furthermore, curriculum delivered using 'teacher-computers' was found to not be approved by the proper national authorities, such as the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development and National Curriculum Development Centre in Uganda, which is a violation of legal requirements in both countries (EI/KNUT, 2016; Riep & Machacek, 2016). For example, a report on the evaluation of BIA lesson plans by the KICD concluded that 'most of the content taught is not relevant to the Kenyan curriculum objectives' (EI/KNUT, 2016, p. 35). In Uganda, a Ministry official explained in an interview that 'it is a major breach of the law for [BIA] to go outside the curriculum that is approved in this land' (Riep & Machacek, 2016, p. 30). Reflecting teachers' concerns about the curriculum and 'teacher-computers' used in BIA classrooms, it was revealed that 47.6% of teachers interviewed in Kenya did not always follow the scripts on the e-reader (EI/KNUT, 2016, p. 35). This is even more acute given that more than 70% of BIA's teaching staff in Kenya lack the qualifications to teach (EI/KNUT, 2016).

Thus, as research studies have repeatedly highlighted, teaching methods that depend on underpaid and unqualified 'learning facilitators' who receive minimal training and simply readout curriculum that has not been



approved, represents a serious set of issues related to the quality of teaching and learning in BIA classrooms.

## 5. Is it really 'world-class education'?

BIA advertise their low-cost schools to parents, governments, investors, and civil society as 'world-class education', which is an audacious claim to make since they have been found to not meet the basic requirements and educational standards in countries where they operate. Furthermore, unqualified staff are required to follow scripted lesson plans word-for-word, presumably because the company lacks confidence that the staff they hire have the proficiency to teach otherwise. Curriculum used by BIA has also been found to be 'not relevant', unsanctioned, and out of sync with national standards and objectives. Moreover, semi-permanent structures poorly built from cheap materials and lacking basic facilities have also been reported by the Ugandan Ministry of Education as demonstrating 'poor hygiene and sanitation which put the life and safety of the school children in danger'. Yet, despite these well-documented shortcomings, BIA still widely promotes itself as a provider of 'world-class education'.

'Allowing truly fair, balanced and open assessment of learning outcomes would help to understand whether a scripted and standardised approach can truly mean "world class education" despite teachers being minimally qualified', explains Härmä (2017, p. 31). To this end, however, BIA has largely failed. In 2013, BIA released a study entitled *The Bridge Effect: Comparison of Bridge Pupils to Peers at Nearby Schools*, which proclaimed significant learning gains for BIA pupils compared to public school counterparts. Problematically, however, this study was not based on randomised controlled testing, but rather BIA selected which schools would be included in the sample. Also, the number of pupils initially assessed in 2011 that participated again in 2012 dropped significantly from more than 2000 pupils to 1359, which begs the question: were these pupils who were 'failing'? Were these pupils who were unable to pay? Or both? As renowned statistician Harvey Goldstein has pointed out

in his detailed analysis of BIA's findings, some adjustment for the 'ability to pay' is necessary since families have to pay to send their children to BIA. Yet, this home-background factor is not accounted for in this study. More recently, in Liberia, the company has reportedly been reluctant to let publically-funded, BIA-run schools participate in learning evaluations, 'suggesting that they may not be as proud and as open about what they do and what they achieve, as they often claim' (Härmä, 2017, p. 31). BIA did eventually agree to a randomised controlled test in Liberia, however, serious doubts have also been cast on the findings of this analysis. Steven Klees (2017) points out that students' pretest scores were notably absent when calculating the impact of BIA's treatment, and when they are considered, the learning gains reported by BIA are sizably reduced. Other important factors were also not controlled for which could explain BIA's impact on test scores. For instance, BIA was allowed to increase the hours devoted to schooling each week by 70% and class sizes were capped at 45 pupils instead of 65, which were both unique treatments granted to BIA, but not other participating schools involved in the RCT (Klees, 2017). Moreover, BIA was allowed 'to push excess pupils and under-performing teachers onto other government schools' (Romero, Sandefur & Sandholtz, 2017, p. 2). Indeed, Romero et al. (2017) found that 74% of teachers in BIA schools at baseline had been let go and the company had first pick, before other contractors, to choose from new teacher-training graduates. Such preferential treatment is certainly not conducive to fair nor balanced evaluation.

If any potential learning gains are to be reasonably claimed by BIA schools, an evaluation that factors in the 'ability to pay' and other important related background factors such as parental education, and socioeconomic status must be taken seriously into account, as well as the extended school days and class size differences. At this point, no such testing has been done. Yet, BIA still claims to provide 'world-class education' to prospective customers, investors, and partners despite the absence of any credible indications even though serious flaws and violations involving substandard teaching practices, inferior school facilities, and unauthorised curriculum have been reported, time and time again. Commenting on BIA schools in Uganda, one School Inspector observed: 'what type of 'international' school is this? It's not international standards because, in fact, they are actually below our national standards' (Riep & Machacek, 2016, p. 22).

## 6. Illegal Operations

It has been determined by education authorities in Uganda and Kenya that BIA was operating illegally in both these countries. These verdicts have also been upheld by the High Courts in both Uganda and Kenya when they were challenged by BIA. In Kenya, a series of directives in 2016 from the Busia County Education Board and Busia County Director of Education ordered BIA to close its schools in the county 'due to non-compliance of Basic Education and Learning Institution Registration Requirements as per the Basic Education Act 2013' (BIA v. County Education Board, 2016). Education authorities in Busia provided BIA an opportunity to apply for registration and demonstrate compliance with the requirements of registration, which BIA 'either ignored or failed to comply' with (*BIA v. County Education Board*, 2016). BIA filed for a judicial review in the High Court of Kenya to overturn the rulings in Busia, but to no avail. The decision was upheld to close ten BIA schools in Busia, which were found to be 'operating unlawfully' (*BIA v. County Education Board*, 2016).

In Uganda, BIA schools mushroomed 'without any consultation or authorisation from the Ministry' (BIA v. Attorney General, 2018). The company was operating schools illegally because they did not obtain any provisional or other license to establish such schools, nor did they comply with the necessary laws governing basic education provision, including submitting to statutory supervision by the government (*BIA v. Attorney General*, 2018). As ministerial officials in Uganda have stated, 'Bridge is doing this behind our backs' (Riep & Machacek, 2016, p. 5). In turn, the High Court of Uganda ruled that BIA's 'conduct of coming to Uganda at pleasure, start[ing] schools all over the country without any registration with any conformity to relevant government department speaks to a high level of reckless disregard of national institutions set up to ensure qualitative education in the country' (*BIA v. Attorney General*, 2018). Thus, the Ministry of Education and High Court of Uganda both ruled that BIA was operating illegally in the country. Consequently, BIA has been prohibited from opening any other schools in the country. Despite these rulings, BIA still operates in Uganda. These court-ordered injunctions against BIA have been corroborated by research findings in both Uganda and Kenya (Riep & Machacek, 2016; EI/KNUT, 2016).

## 7. Sustainability, Accountability & Transparency Issues

At this point, the sustainability of BIA as a durable and long-lasting provider is difficult to forecast, given that much of the company's financial data is not publically released, and it is still in the trial-and-error stages of development in many of the states where it operates. Fiscally, we know that philanthropic funding and start-up investments are not a sustainable source of resources. The sustainability of BIA is based on the degree to which it can grow and secure a steady flow of profitable returns. In terms of growth, BIA has proven a model that is replicable and scalable (1 new school opening every 2.5 days at peak capacity, so it claims). However, regulations designed to uphold quality education at national and local levels that restrict unfettered expansion, and possibly increase overhead costs, will reduce the rapid scalability and thus profitability and sustainability of BIA. The stability of BIA schools in Kenya and Uganda have already seriously faltered due to court orders which have been put in place to stop the expansion of the company since it was operating unlawfully. Such legal problems will certainly hamper the growth and stability of the enterprise. In terms of cost-effectiveness, the BIA model has also been doubted in Liberia where it was self-reported that (in order to provide proof of concept) the company was spending ~\$1,050 per student (later revised down to \$663) compared to the majority of other providers, which were spending \$57 to \$72 per student (Romero et al., 2017).

Regarding the issue of accountability, BIA employs a type of 'managerial accountability' which involves routine performance inspections at schools by BIA staff as well as tracking staff attendance and student performance. 'BIA also holds teachers and administrators accountable through the tracking of teachers via smartphone, and through the transferring of teachers out of BIA schools if repeatedly absent or "neglectful of duties"' (Hook, 2017, p. 25). However, Härmä (2017) points out that BIA 'does not appear to be pushing forward standards of accountability' and that 'BIA appears to be accountable to parents in a purely binary way: parents can choose to pay the fees and use the school, or they can withdraw the child' (p. 31). As an accountability measure, BIA must also comply with the basic requirements and minimum standards outlined in government regulations. As already discussed, however, BIA has failed to do this in

various settings and situations (EI/KNUT, 2016; Riep & Machacek, 2016). Meanwhile, in other contexts the regulatory standards have been relaxed for BIA, or not as strictly enforced, suggesting weak oversight of quality in BIA schools (Unterhalter et al., 2018).

In terms of transparency, BIA has repeatedly demonstrated gaps. Firstly, parents of BIA pupils have reported a lack of transparency concerning the operations of the company. For instance, in Nigeria a 'parent had to resort to what s/he described as "covert means" of finding out more about the teachers at the school, by going to the school saying s/he was seeking employment as a teacher, just to find out what level of (minimum) qualifications the company expects of its staff (Härmä, 2017, p. 25). Other parents, but also regulators and school inspectors, have also reported that BIA has denied them access to information on what is taught in school because it is 'stored' in the teacher-computers (EI/KNUT, 2016; Härmä, 2017; Riep & Machacek, 2016). This lack of transparency regarding what is taught, how, and by whom is simply unacceptable. The Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE) also found that BIA was 'not recruited through transparent and competitive procurement processes' (2017, p. 6) in the case of the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) programme, which is especially problematic since this partnership involves transferring mass amounts of public money into the pockets of transnational corporations. Furthermore, in both Uganda and Kenya, BIA has established school chains without applying for statutory supervision—and thus, was found to be operating covertly and unlawfully. There are also several reported cases of external researchers having encountered difficulties and distress caused by BIA while doing field research on or related to the firm (Härmä, 2017; Riep & Machacek, 2016). BIA has gone as far as plotting against this report's author to have him arrested and questioned by Ugandan police on account of allegations that were fully dismissed by authorities as unjustified and predatory. Evidently, BIA does not have a track record of openness, transparency, and responsible conduct, but rather, the opposite.

## Concluding remarks

The purpose of this essay was to summarise the key themes, findings, and conclusions drawn from several research studies regarding the operations of Bridge International Academies. In doing so, this body of research represents multiple data sources that investigate BIA, across various settings, which reveal a deeper understanding about the nature, quality, and impact of this company. Research findings discussed in this paper refute much of the marketing and promotional materials and statements made by BIA that suggest it provides 'world-class education' that is sustainable, affordable, and accessible for all. Instead, serious issues have been raised about the substandard teaching methods and facilities, acts of regulatory non-compliance, and other profit-maximising practices that are performed (unlawfully, it has been found) in highly-sensitive areas involving the education of vulnerable youth. This information is significant for governments, educational authorities, aid agencies, investors, partners, teachers, parents, researchers, and other civil society groups with an interest in what is at stake.

In future, further attention ought to be given to the fluctuating methods and modes of operation employed by BIA in order to maintain growth and profitability in contexts of uncertainty. Attempts by BIA to shift from less stable models of delivery that involve establishing standalone chains of for-profit schools across many different jurisdictions (requiring mass enrolment of students, staff recruitment and training, licensures to operate, purchasing considerable amounts of land and constructing buildings) toward public-private partnerships with government and ministries of education, represent more secure and profitable market opportunities for BIA. Yet, with more risk to the public. Take, for example, the 'Partnership Schools for Liberia' initiative, which is a publically-funded, privately-operated charter school market-making programme in which the core responsibilities of the Liberian state to provide 'public' education have been privatised and outsourced to transnationally-configured private for-profit firms such as BIA. We must critically ask: who 'wins' and who 'loses' in such arrangements? Furthermore, as Official Development Assistance (ODA) is increasingly funneled to non-state actors like BIA, new market-making schemes are created that guarantee returns for investors by transferring tax-payer funded aid into the hands of corporations and individuals. Making matters even more problematic is that development



assistance provided to BIA is not reaching the poorest and most marginalised youth in the countries where it operates, as multiple research studies have clarified, and instead is exacerbating inequality by supporting market-based forms of education delivery.

Although this essay highlights an important body of work regarding BIA, further research is still required to monitor the ongoing developments, operations, and transgressions of this multinational enterprise. With more than \$100 million in capital investment, BIA will continue to seek new market opportunities in educational contexts – through unilateral interventions, expansionist strategies, and partnerships – that are amenable to its commercial interests. Local, national, regional, and global actors and governing bodies ought to be aware of the methods, logics, and impact of BIA, and related enterprises, in turn to safeguard free quality public education and prevent business pursuits that prioritise profits before students and teachers.

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# What do we really know about Bridge International Academies?

A summary of research findings

Curtis Riep  
February 2019



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