

Demand-Driven Evidence to Improve Foundational Learning: Insights from a Stakeholder Survey Insight note

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### **Insight note**

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## 1 Introduction

The What Works Hub for Global Education aims to support the use of evidence in the design and implementation of policies and programmes for improving children's learning outcomes. To achieve this goal, a key initiative of the Hub is to produce research, evidence synthesis and knowledge translation outputs tailored to the diverse needs of stakeholders.

Building on the **synthesis and evidence translation framework** developed by Kaffenberger and Hwa (2024), we recognise that stakeholders – including governments, funders, practitioners and researchers – have varying evidence needs and uses. To better understand these needs, we conducted a survey to identify priority topics, understand the limitations of existing synthesis and evidence translation outputs, and identify gaps that the Hub is well-placed to fill.

The key objectives of the survey were:

- To identify high-priority research, synthesis and evidence translation topical areas, so that Hub outputs focus on the most pressing topics
- To explore variations in needs across different stakeholder groups, so that Hub outputs are tailored to different needs
- To understand limitations and gaps in existing outputs, so that Hub outputs are filling critical gaps.

This Insight note summarises the survey's main findings. It covers priority topics and subtopics for research, synthesis and evidence translation and compares needs across stakeholder groups. It also explores the types and uses of evidence outputs, both overall and by stakeholder groups, and identifies gaps in existing resources. These findings will guide the Hub in producing demand-driven outputs that meet the sector's needs. We also hope these findings are helpful to others conducting research and synthesis in global education by informing research and synthesis priorities and funding decisions. All of this is with a goal of developing outputs that lead to better policy, practice, and improved foundational learning outcomes for children.

## 2 Who participated in the survey?

Between July and August 2024, the What Works Hub for Global Education conducted an online survey targeting a diverse group of stakeholders in global education, including government actors, funders, practitioners and researchers.<sup>1</sup> The survey was widely distributed, including to the Hub's consortium partners,<sup>2</sup> strategic partners,<sup>3</sup> community of practice and general Hub mailing list. An explicit effort was made to distribute the survey to individuals based in the Global South. 146 respondents completed the survey, and this section describes their background and geographical focus.

The largest proportion of respondents, 38%, work with non-profit and civil society organisations (Figure 1). Members of funding organisations (including philanthropic, bilateral and multilateral organisations) and research organisations each represent about one fifth of respondents, and approximately 11% of the respondents work for government in the public sector.<sup>4</sup>



Note: Single response; N=146

To understand the survey's geographic coverage, we asked the respondents about the primary region(s) of focus for their work (Figure 2), as well as the region from which they currently physically work (Figure 3). Respondents' work focuses on:

- Africa: 80%, with particular emphasis on East and West African regions.
- Asia: 50%, with South Asia being the most common region of focus (43%).
- Europe & North America: 17%.

In terms of where respondents are physically located (Figure 3):

- Global South: 40% of respondents are based in the Global South, with the largest share in Africa, followed by Asia.
- Global North: 60% are based in the Global North, with 40% based in Europe, and 20% based in North America.

<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted through the Qualtrics platform, featured 18 questions, and was designed to take approximately 10–15 minutes.

<sup>2</sup> See the list of the What Works Hub for Global Education's consortium partners.

<sup>3</sup> See the list of the What Works Hub for Global Education's strategic partners.

<sup>4 &#</sup>x27;Others' encompasses the private sector and organisations not fitting into the above categories.





Note: Multiple response option. N=146



# Figure 3: Respondents by region(s) they currently physically work from

Note: Multiple response option. N=146

### 3 Survey Findings

### Topic priorities

The main objective of the survey was to identify high-priority topics and subtopics for research, synthesis and evidence translation. Respondents were asked to rank topics based on their relevance to supporting their work on foundational learning in low- and middle-income countries. Within each of their highest ranked topics, respondents were then asked to provide more granular insight on priorities by ranking subtopics; these are discussed in the next section.

For analysis, we grouped the respondents in two categories: those who ranked each topic among their top three priorities (shown in Figure 4) and those who ranked it below the top three. This allows us to report the percentage of respondents who considered each topic to be a 'high priority', which is defined as the topic being within their top three priorities.<sup>5</sup>

The highest priority topic for respondents is 'implementation quality and/or government delivery mechanisms', with 56% of the respondents ranking it among their top three priorities. 45% of respondents ranked 'teachers and bureaucrats in education delivery' in their top three, closely followed by 'scaling evidence-based interventions' (44%).

The next group of closely ranked topics includes 'classroom-level curricula, materials, and/or pedagogy', which 38% of respondents placed in the top three, and 'equity, access, and readiness to learn', ranked in their top three by 37% of respondents. 'Assessment and data use' and 'the role of political and community stakeholders in education systems' come next, with both topics ranked in the top three by 32% of respondents. The lowest ranked priority is 'use of technology and/ or remote learning' with only 15% of the respondents ranking it among their top three priorities.

To further analyse the topic priorities, we disaggregated by stakeholder groups to understand different needs and priorities across groups (Figure 5). Some topics received similar rankings across stakeholder groups. For instance, 'implementation quality and/or government delivery mechanisms' is consistently ranked as a high priority by all four stakeholder groups. Meanwhile, 'use of technology and/or remote learning' is ranked as a low priority across all groups.

Some priorities, however, varied substantially by stakeholder group. For example, 'scaling evidence-based interventions' is prioritised by respondents from non-profits/civil society organisations, governments and funding organisations, but it is ranked as a low priority by academics. On the other hand, 'equity, access, and readiness to learn' is a priority topic for academics but it is ranked relatively low by all other stakeholders.

5 We used different approaches to aggregate responses for ranking, including sorting by the highest-ranked option, sorting by the top two and top four ranked options, calculating the average ranking, and using weighted mean rankings. The results across these methods were broadly consistent, providing confidence in the robustness of the findings.

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# Figure 4: Highest priority topics for research and synthesis: % of respondents who ranked topic among top three priorities



Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'Please rank the following research, synthesis, and evidence translation topical areas in order of priority for supporting your work related to foundational learning in low- and middle-income countries, with 1 being the highest priority and 8 being the lowest priority.' N=146

#### Figure 5: Highest priority topics for research and synthesis by stakeholder groups: % of respondents from each group who ranked topic in top three priorities



Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'Please rank the following research, synthesis, and evidence translation topical areas in order of priority for supporting your work related to foundational learning in low- and middle-income countries, with 1 being the highest priority and 8 being the lowest priority.' Topic labels are shortened to fit the graph. Refer to Appendix 1 for full details.

## Subtopic priorities

To gather a more granular understanding of topical priorities, the survey asked respondents to rank a set of subtopics for each of their top priority topical areas.<sup>6</sup> As with the topical priority rankings, respondents were presented with a set of subtopics and asked to rank them in order of priority for supporting their work related to foundational learning in low- and middle-income countries. This section examines the subtopic priorities within the top four topics identified in the analysis above (Figure 6) and what proportion ranked each subtopic in their top three.

# Topic 1: Implementation quality and/or government delivery mechanisms:

- Top ranked priorities: 'approaches for measuring implementation (eg measuring take-up, fidelity)' (83%); 'improving fidelity of implementation of education programmes and reforms' (80%).
- Lowest ranked: 'market mechanisms in improving education' (13%).

#### Topic 2: Teachers and bureaucrats in education delivery:

- Top ranked priorities: 'pre-service teacher education and training' (85%). This was followed by 'in-service teacher training and professional development including coaching, professional learning communities' (78%) and 'teacher career structures and allocation' (77%).
- Lowest ranked: 'facilitating the middle tier of the bureaucracy' (52%).

#### **Topic 3: Scaling evidence-based interventions:**

- Top ranked priorities: 'designing evidence-based interventions intentionally for scale' (95%) and 'adaptations of evidence-based interventions proven effective at scale' (92%). 'Methods for iteratively adapting interventions as they are scaled (eg A/B testing)' was also highly ranked (77%).
- Lowest ranked: 'diffusion of innovations to teaching and learning' (31%).

# Topic 4: Classroom–level curricula, materials, and/or pedagogy:

- Top ranked in priority: 'improving teaching quality' (eg effective pedagogy, cognitive psychology of learning) (85%) and 'improving quality of instructional and learning materials' (81%).
- Lowest ranked: 'measuring cost and cost-effectiveness of instructional and learning materials' (25%).

These findings point to a few key priorities. Respondents expressed a clear need for research and synthesis on measuring implementation and improving implementation fidelity, which are linked because measurement can facilitate improvements to implementation. These areas also relate to methods for iteratively adapting interventions, which likewise requires strong measurement to

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were asked to rank subtopics for each of their top four topical priorities. We focused subtopic ranking in this way to avoid the survey fatigue and lower completion rate that would likely result from asking respondents to rank subtopics for all topical areas.

inform adaptations. Designing and adapting for implementation at scale is another theme prioritised by respondents.

On teachers and teaching, improving teaching quality through both pre-service and in-service training emerged as a common theme. This is tightly linked to improved instructional materials, another expressed priority.

#### Figure 6: Highest priority subtopics within each of the top four topics: % of respondents who ranked subtopic in top three priorities





- and training In-service teacher training and
- professional development
- Teacher career structures and allocation
- Facilitating the middle tier of the bureaucracy





Designing evidence-based interventions for scale

Adaptations of interventions proven effective at scale

Methods for iteratively adapting interventions as they are scaled (eg A/B testing)

Diffusion of innovations to teaching and learning



Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'Within the topic of (one of four highest-rated topics from Q1 above), please rank the following subtopics in order of priority for supporting your work related to foundational learning in lowand middle-income countries, with 1 being highest priority.' Subtopic labels are shortened to fit the graph. Refer to Appendix 1 for full wording.

# Preferences for types of synthesis and evidence translation outputs and uses

The survey next asked respondents about their preferences and use of synthesis and evidence translation outputs in order to better understand how these outputs support their professional work.

Respondents were asked to rank various types of synthesis and evidence translation outputs in order of priority for their professional use (Figure 7). The top three prioritised research and evidence synthesis outputs are:

- Practical guidance to inform the design and implementation of a programme (64% ranked it in their top three).
- Examples of where and how evidence-based programmes have scaled up successfully (59% ranked it in their top three).
- Formal synthesis of the latest academic evidence (54% ranked it in their top three).

These are quite different types of outputs, suggesting meaningfully different needs across respondents. For instance, practical guidance might suggest a need to produce 'how-to guides' for designing programmes based on implementer experiences and expertise. Examples of scaled programmes would lend to case study methods and outputs, while formal synthesis requires formal methods to provide systematic findings from the literature and would likely result in an academic oriented output.

'Practical guidance to inform design and implementation...' emerged as a top priority for all stakeholder groups (Figure 9, Appendix 2). However, for other output types there are notable differences across groups. 'Examples of successful scale-ups' were highly prioritised by all stakeholder groups except government stakeholders, who ranked this as their lowest priority. 'Formal synthesis of the latest academic evidence' was prioritised by most groups but ranked second-to-last by funders.

The survey also asked respondents to identify the main ways in which they use research and synthesis outputs for their professional work (multiple choice question, Figure 8). The most common uses include:

- To build my own knowledge or expertise on a topic (86% ranked it in top three)
- To communicate evidence to stakeholders (75% ranked it in top three)
- To inform the design of new policies, programmes, or initiatives (71% ranked it in top three).

The uses of research and synthesis outputs were found to be largely consistent across stakeholder groups.

Figure 7: Priorities for synthesis and evidence translation outputs: % of respondents who ranked it in top three



Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'Please rank the following types of synthesis and evidence translation in order of priority for use in your professional work.' N=146

# Figure 8: Top uses of synthesis and evidence translation outputs: % of respondents who ranked it in top three



Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'In your professional role, what are the main ways you use research, synthesis, and evidence translation outputs?' Multiple response option, N=146

## 4 | Limitations of current synthesis outputs

Respondents were asked to share the shortcomings and limitations they have experienced with existing synthesis and evidence translation efforts or outputs. This was posed as an open-ended question in the survey, allowing respondents to freely express their views in their own words. A total of 83 respondents provided answers to this open-ended question. Analysis of their responses revealed three main categories.

### Insufficient implementation details, contextual adaptation and practical guidance

One of the most recurring concerns raised by the respondents was the lack of practical details on programme implementation in typical outputs. Respondents noted that available evidence often omits essential information on programme structure, dosage (eg frequency and intensity of training), and specific examples. This makes it difficult to understand how to replicate or scale interventions effectively. Examples from respondents include:

> 'Insufficient detail on intervention delivery (e.g., dosage of teacher training and coaching, dosage of TaRL, etc).' 'Lack of practical guidance on design and implementation of programs.'

This lack of implementation detail is compounded by a scarcity of context-relevant insights, especially for regions in the Global South. Respondents felt that much of the existing research lacks insights on adaptation to local contexts:



'Insufficient explanation of what about a particular context was essential or non-essential for driving particular results.'

Additionally, some respondents pointed out the limited availability of cost-related data, especially regarding cost-effectiveness:



'Lack of data on cost-effectiveness, and where it exists, often a narrow focus on learning outcomes, missing equity aspects.'

# Limited types of evidence and scattered evidence sources

In a second category of responses, respondents indicated that existing synthesis efforts are often narrow in scope, primarily relying on specific types of evidence like quantitative data or impact studies. They emphasised the need to have a more comprehensive approach to evidence, particularly in areas where qualitative insights and context-specific data are crucial.



'Most of evidence [taken up is] generated through RCTs, which sometimes lack narratives on what countries' context require.'

Some respondents also felt the need for a consolidated, go-to platform where policymakers, practitioners and stakeholders can easily access synthesised evidence. Currently, evidence is scattered across multiple sources, making it difficult to locate comprehensive and actionable research inputs.



'No "go to" place to obtain synthesis. Few are translated into clear products.'

# Limited use and uptake by policymakers and practitioners

Many respondents noted that evidence synthesis outputs are often too academic or complex, making them difficult to use by varied audiences such as policymakers, practitioners, and implementers. Respondents expressed a need for simplified, actionable knowledge translation outputs:

> 'They are geared toward academics and not researchers working with policymakers and practitioners.'

'Impenetrable language and use of jargon. Lengthy outputs which limit review by the time poor.'

'Often some of these research pieces are over-complicated, not inclusive of politicaleconomic context, and don't consider factors of sustainability.'

Some emphasised the need to engage (more) with policymakers. Respondents reported that often the evidence is disconnected from the practical needs and experiences of implementers, policymakers and practitioners, reducing their potential to influence real-world decision-making and policy formation:

'Creating the motivation in senior government leaders in driving evidence-based reforms and sustaining them in the long run; creating spaces where they can not only access evidence, but also discuss them and apply them in practice while having guidance and support.'

### 5 The way ahead

The What Works Hub for Global Education research, synthesis and evidence translation plans align closely with many of the priorities identified in this survey. Moving forward, we will further incorporate these results into our planning to ensure our efforts remain demand-driven and responsive to the needs of the education sector.

The top three priorities identified in the survey, 'implementation quality and/ or government delivery mechanisms', 'teachers and bureaucrats in education delivery', and 'scaling evidence-based interventions' are already deeply integrated into the Hub's ongoing priorities.<sup>7</sup> Areas such as pre-service teacher training and support, which emerged as a significant sub-priority under 'teachers and bureaucrats...', may require greater attention. Findings like these will be taken into consideration in future synthesis plans.

In addition, many of our planned output types reflect the expressed priorities and needs highlighted by the survey.<sup>8</sup> For instance, we are developing innovative evidence synthesis approaches such as 'Core Components Synthesis', which identifies the essential elements of successful interventions to inform design of new programmes. Furthermore, 'Implementation Insight Notes' will provide detailed descriptions and examples of how programmes have been successfully implemented at scale, informed by real-world implementation experiences. We are also advancing formal evidence aggregation initiatives, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses, alongside building robust evidence databases to further support the education sector. These output types and others will be further developed based on the findings from this survey, with particular attention to ensuring outputs meet the distinct needs of different stakeholder groups.

Our aim is that the findings from this survey serve as a resource for others in the sector as well, guiding research and synthesis priorities and supporting production of outputs that are relevant, actionable, accessible and impactful.

7 See, for instance, the What Works Hub for Global Education's **implementation science framework**; and https://www.wwhge. org/resources/implementation-matters-generalising-treatment-effects-in-education/ 8 See Kaffenberger and Hwa, 2024, for more details.

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## 7 Appendix 1. Topics and subtopics in survey

Full list of topics in research, synthesis and evidence translation:

- Classroom-level curricula, materials, and/or pedagogy
- Use of technology and/or remote learning
- Equity, access, and readiness to learn
- Assessment and data use
- Teachers and bureaucrats in education delivery
- The role of political and community stakeholders in education systems
- Implementation quality and/or government delivery mechanisms
- Scaling evidence-based interventions

Within the topic of implementation quality and/or government delivery mechanisms, detailed list of subtopics:

- Improving fidelity of implementation of education programmes and reforms
- Approaches for measuring implementation (eg measuring take-up, fidelity)
- Cost-effectiveness of government delivery of foundational learning programmes (eg frameworks for measuring cost, budget analysis, cost-effectiveness analysis)
- Market mechanisms in improving education (eg outcome-based financing, dynamics of public schools and low-cost private schools)
- Iterative approaches to improve programme quality (eg adaptive testing; monitoring, evaluation, and learning at scale)

Within the topic of teachers and bureaucrats in education delivery, detailed list of subtopics:

- Teacher career structures and allocation (eg attracting and retaining teachers, equitable allocations of teacher across geographies, performance incentives)
- Pre-service teacher education and training
- In-service teacher training and professional development including coaching, professional learning communities
- Facilitating the middle tier of the bureaucracy to support improvements to foundational learning

Within the topic of scaling evidence-based interventions, detailed list of subtopics:

- Designing evidence-based interventions intentionally for scale
- Adaptations of evidence-based interventions proven effective at scale
- Methods for iteratively adapting interventions as they are scaled (eg A/B testing, adaptive experimental approaches)
- Diffusion of innovations to teaching and learning

Within the topic of classroom-level curricula, materials, and/or pedagogy, detailed list of subtopics:

- Improving quality of instructional and learning materials
- Measuring cost and cost effectiveness of instructional and learning materials; low-cost procurement
- Improving quality of prescribed curriculum; national curriculum reform
- Maximising children's instructional time on task (eg classroom time management, teacher workload)
- Improving teaching quality (eg effective pedagogy, cognitive psychology of learning)

Full list of output types for research, synthesis and evidence translation:

- Formal synthesis of the latest academic evidence
- Principles to inform high-level policy advice and policy plans
- Practical guidance to inform design and implementation of a programme
- Examples of where and how evidence-based programmes have scaled up successfully
- Examples of where and how evidence-based programmes have failed to scale up successfully and analysis of the root causes of the failure
- Interactive data visualisations and exploratory tools to inform evidence-based design or implementation of programmes

Full list of ways of using research, synthesis, and evidence translation outputs (Multiple choice question)

- To build my own knowledge or expertise on a topic
- For training and/or capacity building of my colleagues
- For training and/or capacity building of partners external to my organisation
- For advocacy efforts to influence funders/donors
- For advocacy efforts to influence policy or government decisionmakers
- To make funding decisions on programmes or research
- To communicate evidence to stakeholders
- To inform my own or my organisation's research agenda or identify gaps in the evidence base
- To evaluate or modify existing policies, programmes, or initiatives
- To inform the design of new policies, programmes, or initiatives

## 7 Appendix 2

#### Figure 9: Priority synthesis and evidence translation outputs by stakeholder groups: % of respondents who ranked it in top three









Note: Respondents were asked the question: 'Please rank the following types of synthesis and evidence translation in order of priority for use in your professional work.' Topic labels are shortened to fit the graph. Refer to Appendix 1 for full wording.



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