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Education for All in the Digital Age: Exploring EdTech Regulatory Frameworks across Africa

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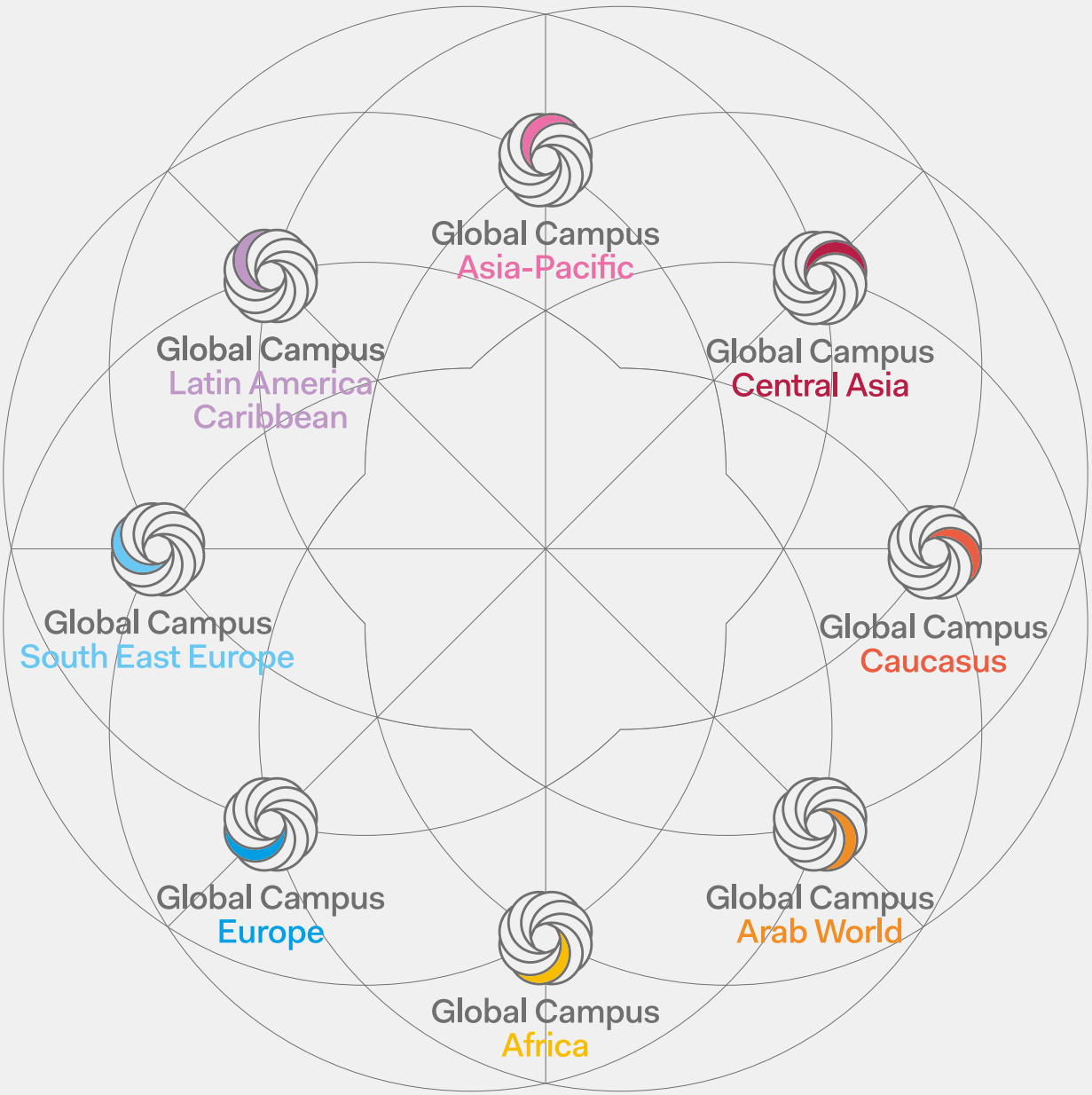
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Executive summary

Sub-Saharan Africa currently faces the distressing reality of being home to the highest rate of education deprivation globally, where nearly 100 million school-age children lack access to schooling. The integration of digital technologies into educational systems has displayed promise in mitigating this issue and enhancing access to education, particularly in areas affected by crises. However, alongside recognising the potential of digital technologies, it is imperative to uphold human rights, notably the right to equitable and inclusive quality education. The increasing presence of private and for-profit entities in the education sector poses a significant threat, as they push for the commodification and commercialisation of educational services. Noteworthy examples, such as the emergence of the so-called 'low-cost private schools', backed by educational technology (EdTech) companies and tech giants, illustrate this concerning trend. These entities, offering technology-centric yet profit-driven educational services, have faced criticism for inefficiency, lack of sustainability and failure to meet national standards, leading to school closures and strong backlash in countries like Uganda and Kenya. Similar concerns have arisen in West Africa, where they have faced scrutiny for their pedagogical methods. Addressing such practices and adequately regulating private sector involvement are paramount to safeguarding the right to education and ensuring its equitable access for all.

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Introduction

In today's world, education stands as a fundamental right, yet across Sub-Saharan Africa, a stark reality unfolds. Over one-fifth of primary-age children are out of school, with nearly 60% of youth between 15 and 17 lacking access to education (UNESCO Institute for Statistics n.d.). The region grapples with the highest rates of education exclusion globally, 64 million children, including 34 million girls, were reported to be out of primary school in 2020 (Klapper & Panchamia 2023). Various international instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (AU 1981, Article 17), the African Youth Charter (AU 2006, Article 13) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (AU 1990, Article 11), unequivocally assert that every individual, child and youth has the inherent right to education. These instruments require states to provide free and compulsory basic education, recognising education as not merely a privilege but a fundamental human right indispensable for personal development and the advancement of society.

Disparities in learning achievement reflect broader inequalities, especially affecting children from the poorest households who face significant disadvantages. The high costs associated with education, such as school fees, uniforms and books, act as formidable barriers for low-income households, hindering the pursuit of education for many families across Africa, which not only perpetuates the cycle of poverty but also stifles aspirations and contributes to socioeconomic disparities.

The ramifications of limited access to education extend beyond individual lives, impacting the overall trajectory of a nation's development. The lack of education not only limits employment opportunities for individuals but also hampers innovation and technological advancement, crucial drivers of economic growth. Recognising the severity of the situation, it must be emphasised that insufficient government investment further exacerbates the challenges, leaving education in Africa at a crossroads.

Amidst these challenges, EdTech solutions have emerged as promising tools to transform the education landscape in Africa (Hume-Ferkatadji 2023). Particularly notable is their role in mitigating the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, providing avenues for remote learning in underserved areas. The rapid rise of EdTech is evident, with the African e-learning market projected to reach $5.2 billion by 2028 (IMARC Group 2023).

Yet, this digital transition comes with its own set of challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the use of EdTech in Africa but has also exposed inequalities in digital access. Barriers such as internet connectivity, electricity and access to digital devices have hindered the effectiveness of e-learning initiatives, particularly in developing countries. Notably, only 1% of children living in the poorest quintiles of West and Central Africa have access to the internet, while only 5% of children and young people aged 25 years or less and just 13% in Eastern and Southern Africa have internet access at home (UNICEF 2020). In stressing that the lack of access to the internet impedes on children's right to education, the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) noted that only a few African countries have scaled up digital access and many children still do not have access to the internet and technology in Africa (ACERWC 2023).

Adequate regulation, as called by the Abidjan Principles (2019) and reminded by multiple international resolutions (UNHRC 2021; ACHPR 2019), becomes crucial also in the face of the growing influence of commercial actors in education, which stress the need for states to regulate and monitor private involvement in education to ensure it complies with human rights standards. Striking the delicate balance between technological progress and equitable and inclusive quality education requires careful consideration and concerted efforts.

The African Union (AU) has formulated a Digital Education Strategy and Implementation Plan (2023-2028) to bridge the digital gap and ensure an inclusive digital society and economy, which involves an easier access to affordable devices and internet tariffs, policies promoting digital literacy and entrepreneurship, and investments in quality eLearning solutions. Recognising that the absence of digital literacy significantly contributes to the digital divide, the strategy places emphasis on fostering digital literacy to fully harness the capabilities of new technologies in narrowing the digital gap. In this context, Africa's Agenda for Children 2040 calls upon AU's member states to ensure that, by 2040, schools provide universal access to affordable ICT devices, content and connectivity, and integrate these into teaching and curricula (ACERWC 2015).

This policy brief explores various regulatory approaches concerning the involvement of technology-driven and private/for-profit entities,

specifically in East Africa (Kenya and Uganda) and West Africa (Ghana and Liberia). It scrutinises guidelines or regulations implemented to oversee the activities of for-profit organisations providing educational services and technological solutions.

Concluding with policy recommendations tailored to diverse stakeholders, the brief aims to provide actionable insights for effective regulation in the region and measures to improve equitable access to education, including digital resources.

Problem description

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only reshaped the landscape of education but has also paved the way for education technology businesses to emerge as key players in delivering digital education solutions. In Africa, where the privatisation and commercialisation of education already represented challenges, such a shift has intensified the threat to the provision of quality and free education.

The increasing focus on profitability and business orientation in education has sparked heightened competition among schools, prompting them to balance quality education with affordability, potentially jeopardising educational standards. This commercialisation has reshaped the perception of educational institutions and the student-teacher relationship, introducing financial considerations into academic qualifications and altering traditional educational paradigms.

According to Disrupt Africa (2022), the expertise of educational entrepreneurs in technology, instructional design and business strategies has led to the development of innovative Ed-Tech products and services. However, profit motives often overshadow educational impact, prioritising financial gain over addressing the needs of marginalised communities. Such oversight can impede the widespread adoption and effectiveness of Ed-Tech tools, as highlighted by Languille (2016).

Particularly vulnerable are rural children, individuals with disabilities, migrants, refugees and girls, who risk being left even further behind in the pursuit of education. In fact, contrary to assertions, the accessibility of education through 'affordable' or 'low-fee private schools' is not as inclusive as believed, particularly evident in South Africa (Languille 2016).

While the internet has the potential to improve access to and the quality of education in Africa, the lack of widespread internet access acts as a significant impediment. The digital divide hinders the realisation of the right to education, preventing students from leveraging online educational resources and opportunities. Limited connectivity in Sub-Saharan Africa poses a significant obstacle to the advancement of education systems. Niger, for instance, has a mere 10.2% internet penetration rate (Mehou & Millogo 2022). High costs associated with bandwidth also hinder the sharing of teaching and research resources. In Chad, connectivity expenses for educational institutions soar to as high as $900 per Mbps/month, primarily due to prevailing market structures and regulatory constraints within the country (World Bank 2021).

Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that the internet and educational technology also present risks that may compromise children's rights. Several EdTech platforms have inadequate and unclear privacy policies, leaving parents and children in the dark about how their personal information is gathered, utilised and safeguarded. Consequently, there exists a risk wherein EdTech platforms may gather and distribute children's personal data without explicit consent or lacking appropriate parental consent mechanisms, potentially exposing children to privacy violations and other dangers (Singh & Power 2021). Some platforms might even trade children's personal data or monitor their online behaviours without their awareness or authorisation, putting their privacy at risk and subjecting them to targeted advertising and related risks (Kelly et al. 2019).

Notably, during the COVID-19 pandemic, governments turned to EdTech products for remote learning amid school closures. A review by Human Rights Watch (HRW) of 164 widely used EdTech products, across 11 African countries, revealed that 89% engaged in data practices endangering children's rights; these products often monitored children without consent, collecting personal data like location, activities and social connections (HRW 2022). Many platforms used tracking technologies persistently following children online. Additionally, most online learning platforms shared children's data with advertising technology (AdTech) companies, enabling targeted behavioural advertising which distorted their online experiences and risked

influencing their beliefs. HRW found that few governments checked the safety of the EdTech used in schools, exposing children to privacy risks. Some governments even mandated the use of specific EdTech products during the pandemic, depriving children of alternative means to access education and leaving them vulnerable to data exploitation. These technologies often invisibly tagged and fingerprinted children's data, making it impossible to avoid or erase without damaging the devices.

Thus, in the context of the ACERCW's draft General Comment on the Right to Education, HRW (2024) aptly recommends that states prioritise safeguarding children's privacy rights in online learning by implementing due diligence measures to ensure that the used technology protects such rights, including incorporating data privacy clauses into contracts with EdTech and establishing data protection laws for children. Additionally, HRW suggests integrating digital literacy and children's data privacy into educational curricula, offering training programmes for educational staff to enhance online safety for children. Furthermore, it emphasises the importance of involving children in policy development to ensure their best interests are primarily considered, in order to maximise the positive educational benefits of internet access and technology.

Rationale for action

The advent of digital solutions in education holds immense potential for enhancing access to schooling, particularly in marginalised regions across Africa. However, governments have struggled to provide these digital advancements and private entities and for-profit companies have stepped in, offering technology-based education but at a cost, thereby negatively impacting the basic right to equitable access to quality education. Moreover, the transition to digital learning presents its own set of challenges, including the digital divide, affordability issues and infrastructure limitations. Therefore, it is imperative to formulate and implement policies which take all these factors seriously and which not only protect fundamental human rights but also fortify the emergence of what can be termed as the 'fourth generation' of rights, encompassing the realm of digital rights.

Oxfam (2019) highlighted the potential pitfalls of delivering education through public-private partnerships (PPPs), cautioning that such initiatives, which often support private schooling, may exacerbate inequality rather than achieving widespread quality education. This concern is substantiated by a growing body of evidence indicating that education PPPs frequently fall short in serving the most vulnerable children, posing a risk of deepening societal disparities. For instance, the Global Initiative for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights raised an alarm about the unchecked growth of education privatisation in Kenya, emphasising the lack of corresponding state monitoring and regulation (Vives 2017). Efforts to address privatisation in Africa require policies such as enlarging and scrutinising the budget to secure funding for public education and ensuring robust regulation of private education providers (ActionAid 2019a). For instance, Kenya and Uganda have fallen short in fulfilling their obligations to provide free, quality public education (ActionAid 2019b).

Policy options

In the education landscape across the continent, the involvement of private entities, particularly EdTech companies, has gained significant traction. Countries such as Kenya, Uganda, Liberia and Ghana offer pertinent examples of this dynamic and related regulations, with initiatives such as Bridge International Academies (BIA) and Omega Schools standing as notable cases.

BIA as example of 'low-cost schooling'

Established in 2008, BIA has pioneered an innovative educational model that capitalises on technology and scalability to empower and uplift marginalised communities by facilitating the provision of pre-primary (nursery and kindergarten) and primary-school education. Introduced as a profit-driven

network of nursery and primary schools committed to delivering top-tier education at exceptionally low costs, BIA has expanded its footprint across several African states, including Kenya, Uganda and Liberia. The organisation, which was conceived by two Harvard graduates, devised a business model that not only attracted investors but also facilitated the education of a substantial number of children. However, BIA schools, characterised by a centralised curriculum and standardised facilities, have encountered scrutiny for being profit-oriented and their occasional operation without required permits and approvals. While the World Bank (2016) reported favourable outcomes, concerns persist regarding BIA's academic methodologies and compliance with national curriculum standards.

Within the context of Kenyan public schools, where on average, one in ten teachers was absent, and half of all schools had a teacher absenteeism (Karamperidou 2020), BIA strives to address the issue through leveraging technology to enhance teacher monitoring and accountability. The company employs technology to monitor student learning, delivering personalised digital teacher guides and lesson plans for each lesson in every subject and class on a daily basis, ensuring a customised approach to education (J-PAL, n.d.).

BIA employs a standardised curriculum across its schools, disseminating centrally produced and highly detailed lesson guides to teachers through tablet computers. These guides furnish teachers with comprehensive instructions on classroom management and pupil engagement. School administrators undergo training and regular monitoring to observe teachers twice daily, recording data on adherence to the detailed teaching plans and their interactions with students. The company utilises tablets to deliver standardised lessons and track student progress, providing teachers with real-time feedback on their performance (Perlman Robinson & Kwauk 2016).

Proponents of this approach argue that standardisation guarantees consistency, offers vital support to educators and contributes to the uniform elevation of educational quality. Nevertheless, critics contend that this rigid structure may impede student learning opportunities, erode the professional standing of teachers and stifle creativity and imagination within the classroom.

In contrast, BIA's website reveals that the global average fee for attending their community schools in Africa stands at approximately $8USD per month. These costs may seem relatively modest, but must be added to others such as food costs for each day spent at school, annual admission fees, exam fees and the cost of the required uniform. Students and their families grapple with financial constraints that hinder their ability to afford this cost.

BIA asserts that every child deserves access to a high-quality education; however, critics contend that it prioritises profit over educational integrity. The company's 'academy in a box' technology claims to equip communities with the necessary training, processes, materials, curriculum and tools to establish and operate privately owned, low-cost, quality schools. Civil society organisations have urged compliance with government orders and emphasised the importance of respecting the right to education, sparking controversy over BIA's business model and its interactions with investors and government authorities (GI-ESCR 2017).

BIA has faced criticism for non-compliance with education standards in both Kenya and Uganda. In response, they have taken regulatory measures to address concerns surrounding the company's operations.

Kenya's approach

In Kenya, where formal primary schools are categorised as public or registered private, BIA has operated unregistered community schools, contravening the Basic Education Act. In the meantime, the Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET) policy, enacted in 2009, was designed to acknowledge and support non-formal schools addressing the educational needs of underprivileged children, particularly girls, hailing from rural areas, urban poor communities and those with disabilities. These children face barriers to accessing formal education due to financial constraints. BIA has leveraged these guidelines to seek school registration in Kenya, albeit falling within the private school category.

Furthermore, in 2013, the government amended the Basic Education Act, resulting in guaranteeing free and compulsory education for all Kenyan children aged 3 to 18. The Act establishes a uniform curriculum for schools nationwide, ensuring a consistent quality of education irrespective of geographical location. Additionally, the Act introduced regulations for private schools, aiming to ensure that they adhere to the same rigorous standards as public schools. In 2016, the Kenyan Ministry of Education set a deadline for BIA to comply with guidelines, highlighting its non-compliance. In 2018, a Kenyan court upheld the closure of some

BIA schools for failure to meet standards but allowed them to remain open until the end of the school term, directing the counties to secure placement for affected students in public schools.

Uganda's approach

The government holds the responsibility to regulate private providers, monitor compliance with educational outcomes and ensure adherence to standards outlined in the 2009 Basic Requirements and Minimum Standards Indicators for Education Institutions (BRMS) guidelines. Technical reports raised concerns about BIA's materials hindering teacher-pupil interaction and sanitation issues (EI 2016a; Musinguzi 2018). Reported accusations of employing unqualified teachers, violating Ugandan laws and operating without the state's proper oversight further fuelled controversy. Amid these concerns, the Ugandan government announced its intent to close BIA schools. A 2016 High Court judgment suggested the company may have operated illegally, leading to the government's order to close the schools for non-compliance with safety, licensing and legal standards (Bridge International Academy (K) Ltd v Attorney General 2016).

Liberia's approach

Despite facing criticism for its practices, BIA was invited to collaborate with the Liberian public school system under the Ministry of Education through the Partnership Schools for Liberia (PSL) programme in 2016, which aimed at improving access and quality in education by transitioning public schools into private management. This initiative involved entrusting the management of 93 randomly selected public schools to private providers, marking a shift towards PPPs in the Liberian education sector (Pilling 2021). However, the outcomes were not entirely positive, as a study commissioned by the Liberian government revealed alarming deficiencies (Romero, Sandefur & Sandholtz 2017). The learning gains in schools managed by BIA were found to be extremely low and unsustainable, accompanied by a notable increase in dropout rates.

Nonetheless, in addition to independent assessments that found only marginal improvements, the Weah administration officially embraced the programme in 2019 by rebranding it to the Liberia Education Advancement Program (LEAP) and increasing the number of schools to 487. In the initial phase, eight private providers were selected to assume control of the 93 public schools, representing 8.6% of all public schools. Over the subsequent years, four of these providers withdrew due to insufficient funds. Among the remaining companies, BIA has emerged as the predominant manager, currently overseeing approximately 75% (360 schools) of all LEAP schools, up from its initial 23 schools (Duoe 2023).

When renewing the programme, the Liberian ministry pledged to enhance its monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, ensuring consistent standards across the participating providers (Senah 2018). The proposed plan included implementing a robust performance framework centred on key standards, such as 'teacher professional development, school leadership training and enhancement, and school monitoring including classroom observation'. Under LEAP, providers must adhere to a set of Minimum Quality Standards encompassing various areas, including pre-service training, ongoing professional development, student health and cost per student. Failure to meet these standards would prompt the ministry's notification to providers, who have 60 days to appeal with evidence or rectify the issue and demonstrate improvement. Additionally, providers are evaluated under Key Performance Indicators, with literacy and numeracy assessments serving as the core indicators to gauge learning outcome improvements, while extending reporting requirements to other indicators such as teacher and student retention, student-teacher ratios and enrolment and progression data by age, grade and gender, in order to ensure transparency and oversight.

However, concerns have arisen regarding the efficacy and sustainability of outsourcing education to private entities. Critics argue that relying heavily on tablet-based curriculum developed by academics located thousands of miles away proves impractical, especially in regions like Liberia where internet and electricity access are limited (Duoe 2023).

More recent randomised controlled trial (RCT) studies by Romero and Sandefur (2020; 2022) confirmed the mixed results: while noting a modest improvement in children's reading skills, with an increase of approximately 2.2 words per minute, the RCT highlighted concerning trends. Dropout rates had surged by over half and fewer children were progressing to secondary school. They also underscored BIA failure to address instances of sexual abuse. Furthermore, LEAP faces criticism for various shortcomings, including incidents of student expulsion by private operators and potential exclusion of students from schools due to class size limitations.

The Liberian Coalition for Transparency and Accountability in Education (COTAE 2023) identified fundamental flaws within LEAP and its monitoring.

Key concerns included a lack of accountability, transparency and meaningful engagement with stakeholders. Financial transparency remained elusive, with no accessible data on BIA's operations and expenditures in Liberia. The absence of independent audits and detailed financial reporting further compounds transparency issues, leaving uncertainties about the allocation and utilisation of resources within LEAP and affiliated schools. Additionally, the treatment of teachers and education staff raised questions about adherence to the rule of law.

Ghana's approach

In the rest of West Africa, parallels with educational dynamics in the East are evident. Notably, Ghana stands out with the emergence of Omega Schools, established in 2008 by Professor James Tooley and Ken Donkoh as pioneers in affordable private schooling. With innovative approaches such as the daily fee model, these schools have rapidly expanded to over 30 establishments in Kasoa and nearby regions (Rising Academies 2020), accommodating approximately 11,000 students within their initial three years of operation (Riep 2014).

Each student contributes 1.50 Cedis (equivalent to US$0.75) per day towards attendance, entitling them to a comprehensive package inclusive of textbooks, exercise materials and access to digital resources like computers and tablets (Riep 2014). This 'Pay As You Learn' (PAYL) business model, coupled with minimal operational expenses, facilitated Omega Schools' financial equilibrium in 2011, underscoring both its economic viability and scalability (Stanfield 2012). Further research indicates that the daily fee structure may not be universally accessible to economically disadvantaged families, thereby perpetuating exclusion within the educational sphere (Ohba, Ohara & Okitsu 2021).

Moreover, Omega Schools operate within a regulatory framework characterised by flexibility (BBC 2013), prompting concerns regarding governmental oversight. The Ghanaian Government's purported lack of awareness regarding Omega Schools exacerbates these apprehensions (Right to Education Initiative 2015). Education unions and international bodies have advocated for a regulatory review to align private schools, like Omega Schools, with the overarching objective of providing free, compulsory, and quality basic education for all (EI 2016b). Detractors have also raised concerns regarding the employment of under-qualified instructors at diminished wages, potentially compromising educational standards (Modern Ghana 2018). Omega Schools have faced scrutiny for their standardised lesson plans and recruitment of young, inexperienced teachers straight out of secondary school (Riep 2015).

Of equal concern is the involvement of multinational corporations such as Pearson in Omega Schools, raising questions about whether investments prioritise educational enhancement or profit motives. The recent acquisition of Omega Schools by Rising Academies amplifies these apprehensions (Rising Academies 2020).

A comparative look on the regulatory approaches

In examining the four cited countries' responses to the growing influence of EdTech, particularly within the context of private entities offering low-fee schooling, distinctive approaches are observed. **Liberia**, for instance, opted to renew its PPP programme beyond the initial phase. Conversely, **Ghana** opted not to amend its Education Act to regulate such schools directly but instead emulated the strategy of its West African counterpart by initiating a PPP pilot programme as part of its 2030 Strategic Education Plan (Ministry of Education of Ghana 2018). **Kenya**, on the other hand, introduced a new framework named Alternative Provision of Basic Education and Training (APBET) Policy (2009) regulating non-state education providers, including for-profit entities, to improve access to quality basic education and training services, particularly targeting underserved communities. It also encourages the use of e-learning technologies for open and distant education. This framework is further supported by the Registration Guidelines (2016) which set standards for curriculum, teaching methods, learner welfare and assessment protocols, ensuring the effective operationalisation of the policy (Ministry of Education of Kenya 2009 & 2015). Meanwhile, **Uganda** has taken a comprehensive approach by establishing the Digital Education Standards and Guidelines in 2021 to provide additional direction and support for policies and procedures concerning effective digital education delivery, including the outsourcing of content development to commercial entities, addressing potential risks associated with the process (Ministry of Education and Sports of Uganda 2021).

The following table provides a summary of these approaches:

States	Approach
Ghana	No change in the regulatory framework. Incorporation of a PPP pilot programme into Strategic Education Plan (2018-2030)
Kenya	Implementation of APBET framework for underserved communities
Liberia	Renewal of PPP programme post-pilot phase under the name 'Liberia Education Advancement Program' and introduction of Minimum Quality Standards
Uganda	Establishment of 2021 Digital Education Standards and Guidelines

The escalating dependence on EdTech products also poses inherent risks to the educational process. Central among these concerns is the potential exposure of personal and academic information to unauthorised entities, stemming from inadequate security measures, human errors or malicious cyber-attacks.

On a more optimistic note, PPPs hold the promise of catalysing the evolution of teaching methods, curricula and educational technologies. Embracing technology in pedagogy can enhance learning outcomes and retention in primary education (Bandyopadhyay & Sharma 2022). Nevertheless, it is crucial to tread carefully and consider the motivations of EdTech companies.

To mitigate risks and preserve the cultural and pedagogical heritage of public education systems in Africa, a nuanced approach is necessary. Integrating traditional teaching methods and values into the framework of new technological advancements can help strike a balance. Achieving cultural sensitivity requires active involvement of local communities and educators in the decision-making process, ensuring that the adopted pedagogical methods align with the unique context of education in Africa (UNESCO International Institute for Capacity-Building in Africa 2022).

Policy recommendations

Given that many African countries are still in the process of establishing regulatory frameworks to support the digitalisation of education, especially in the context of EdTech, recommendations are firstly directed towards national governments. The emphasis is on ensuring adherence to human rights standards, the quality of digital education and the improvement of internet accessibility.

Secondly, to address the issue of regional policy inconsistency, recommendations are directed towards regional actors such as the AU and the ACERWC. Thirdly, further recommendations are elaborated for the private sector, in particular EdTech companies. Fourthly, as the outlined challenges clearly underscore the need for international cooperation, recommendations are proposed for international development agencies, donors and foreign governments.

For African governments

Policy measures to ensure quality digital education in compliance with human rights standards:

- Conduct regular evaluations of digital education programmes to assess their effectiveness, identify areas for improvement and ensure alignment with national standards.
- Implementing periodic audits and assessments to ensure compliance with human rights standards, including the right to education, freedom of expression and privacy rights.
- Enforce accountability measures for educational institutions and technology providers, mandating the upholding of human rights principles and ethical standards in the development and implementation of digital learning solutions.

Policy measures to enhance the internet accessibility in education:

- Formulate legislative frameworks prioritising widespread internet access in primary and secondary schools as a key public policy objective.
- Remove barriers to entry for internet service providers (ISPs) by simplifying licensing procedures and encouraging infrastructure sharing arrangements to lower the cost of internet access and improve service quality.
- Provide economic incentives and assistance to enhance connectivity in remote or underserved schools, empowering communities to establish and manage community networks independently for alternative connectivity solutions.
- Identify and address the barriers hindering the effectiveness of universal service funds in bridging the coverage and usage gaps, and develop mechanisms to encourage the allocation of funds, prioritising the education sector.
- Support the development of low bandwidth or offline EdTech tools, to ensure access to those without regular connectivity, and encourage tools that can be accessed using mobile devices.
- Encourage the creation of open educational resources (OER) freely accessible and adaptable to diverse learning needs.

For the AU

Recommendations to support the AU digital education strategy (2023-2028) and implementation plan:

- Work towards harmonising regulations and standards across African countries to create a conducive environment for EdTech innovation and investment.
- Collaborate with key bodies of international organisations, such as UNESCO and UNICEF, to develop common standards and frameworks for evaluating and accrediting EdTech products and services.
- Facilitate collaboration and knowledge exchange between African countries to share best practices and successful models for implementing digital education initiatives.

For the ACERWC

Recommendations for its (in progress) draft General Comment on the Right to Education:

- Recognise access to the internet and digital literacy as fundamental components for the exercise of the right to education by children and its realisation in the 21st century.
- Encourage states to take all appropriate measures to ensure affordable and accessible internet services for all students.
- Urge states to address challenges faced by underserved communities, by implementing strategies for better internet and ICT access in schools.

For the private sector, notably EdTech companies

- Provide clear and transparent privacy policies, ensuring that data collected from children is minimal and necessary for educational purposes only, protecting children's personal information from unauthorised access, misuse or exploitation.
- Ensure adherence to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNHRC 2011) by respecting and implementing them diligently.
- Develop and promote low-bandwidth solutions that can be accessed easily even in areas with poor internet connectivity, ensuring that children in remote or rural areas can still benefit from digital education.
- Ensure that quality digital education solutions are accessible to all children, regardless of socio-economic status, geographical location, physical abilities or any other factor that may create barriers to access.
- Adhere to ethical practices and avoid exploiting vulnerable populations, such as children and families with limited access to educational resources.
- Demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility by integrating ethical principles, sustainability practices and community engagement into the operations.

For international development agencies, donors, foreign governments

Strategies for more international cooperation (particularly with the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation, inter alia) and knowledge transfer to bridge the digital gap in education in Africa:

- Provide technical and specialised support in identifying requisite actions at the national level for the formulation and execution of a comprehensive public policy aimed at mitigating the digital divide.
- Provide expertise in assessing key indicators such as connectivity rates, proficiency in digital skills and educational achievements to guide evidence-driven decision-making and facilitating necessary adjustments.
- Establish joint research initiatives to address specific challenges in the implementation of EdTech across the five sub-regions of Africa.
- Deliver training programmes and capacity-building initiatives for educators, administrators and policymakers to adeptly integrate technology into educational frameworks.
- Collaborate with local governments to establish frameworks for monitoring and assessing the impact of EdTech interventions on learning outcomes, educational accessibility and digital literacy.
- Extend support towards initiatives promoting the adaptation of Open Educational Resources (OER) to suit diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of equitable access to inclusive and quality education in the digital age, the elimination of barriers stands as a paramount objective. Central to this goal are the implementation of robust regulations governing educational businesses and bridging the digital gap, including by improving infrastructures and accessibility.

Digital education possesses immense potential to revolutionise learning experiences across Africa, provided it is meticulously regulated, managed and implemented. Private actors, notably EdTech companies, offer solutions that can be harnessed by national governments either independently or through PPPs, thereby elevating the quality of public education.

In the context of 'low-cost schooling', the diverse approaches adopted by the reviewed African states, while differing in essence, all necessitate thorough and regular assessment to ensure adherence to international human rights normative standards and principles. While collaboration with private entities can inject innovation and resources into education systems, concerns loom regarding equity, accountability and the commodification of learning.

Safeguarding against the privatisation of education, where profit motives may overshadow educational imperatives, demands vigilant oversight and transparent contractual agreements. Furthermore, the reliance on PPPs should not absolve governments of their responsibility to provide equitable and inclusive quality education for all citizens, regardless of socio-economic status.

Accordingly, efforts to enhance internet accessibility should be accompanied by policy measures to promote digital literacy and ensure inclusive participation. African states must prioritise infrastructure development and regulatory frameworks aligned with continental strategies to effectively bridge the digital divide.

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