The Accelerated Education Working Group

Directions- March 2018

Background on the AEWG and this document

It is recognized that Accelerated Education programmes (AEP) are being employed with greater scope and scale as one of several solutions to the intractable issues of attracting and retaining out of school and overage learners within the formal education system. Yet, widespread variation exists in how AEPs are planned, implemented and approached, with little or no overarching objectives, guidance, standards or indicators for what effective AE provision looks like. In response to this, late in 2014, UNHCR invited a small number of education partners who support, fund and/or implement AEPs to form a working group known as the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG).

The AEWG, now in its fourth year, meets bi-annually to develop work plans that are implemented throughout the year around a set of strategic objectives and activities that work towards the vision of more harmonised, standardised approaches to AE provision.

This document summarises discussions of the AEWG at its February 2018 meeting, taking stock of the groups' activities to date and articulating priorities for the coming 2-3 years.

A conceptual framework for Accelerated Education

Developing and disseminating tools and guidance

A key task for the AEWG in its first three years, was to develop and agree on a common understanding of:
- the function AEPs should serve in relation to the formal education system;
- the learners AEPs should target;
- the elements and key dimensions of quality AEP provision;
- how AEPs might be measured in terms of their effectiveness and outcomes.

One of the first tasks the AEWG undertook was to develop a shared definition of AE as well as definitions for other programmes for out of school learners. A decision tree to support where AEPs are an appropriate response (and where they are not) was also developed.

This work laid the foundation for the development of the 10 Principles for Effective Practice for AE provision. These Principles were the product of an iterative development process which spanned over two years. Initially, Save the Children identified an original set of 20 AE Principles through a review of AE literature and an evaluation of an AEP in South Sudan.   The AEWG reviewed the draft principles in early 2016, and made significant modifications, reducing and re-ordering the principles. The AEWG then completed a review of existing donor agency, national, and NGO policy and

guidance on AEPs, and produced an accompanying Guide to the Principles. Following an extensive process of gathering expert and field reviews of the Principles and guidance, and completion of four separate case studies where the relevance, appropriateness and utility of the Principles were tested in AEPs in Kenya, Afghanistan and Sierra Leonne, the Principles and guidance were further modified prior to their final release in October 2017.

With the launch of the 10 Principles for Effective Practice, and the accompanying Guide to the Principles, definitions, decision tree and checklist the AEWG developed a conceptual framework for AE. This conceptual framework aims to support the harmonisation of AEPs globally, ultimately leading to improvements in AEP quality and better outcomes for out of school children and youth.

Strengthening the evidence base

Concurrent to this work, has been a focus on building an evidence base on what works and why within effective AEPs.   Several streams of work by the working group, and partners, has been undertaken towards this aim.   USAID, for example, supported completion of two separate reviews. The first, exploring how accelerated learning is approached found that the focus in AEPs is often on the acceleration of curriculum rather than engagement with accelerated learning theory.   That withstanding, the review also noted that some of the key principles of accelerated learning theory—such as a learner-focussed pedagogy, flexible learning opportunities, attention to social emotional learning, increased time on task, and community engagement—were present in many AEPs.   Many of these elements are reflected in the Principles which subsequently took shape.

Another review, also commissioned by USAID, aimed to better understand the landscape of AE programming in conflict and crisis affected contexts through a systematic review of academic, grey literature and programme evaluations.   The review found that the evidence base for AEP effectiveness is markedly thin. A fundamental challenge is that there is a very wide variety of what constitutes an AEP. This has made it difficult to carry out research and evaluations across multiple projects. It also means that there is significant variability in the intensity and quality of implementation of various components of AEPs. The review strongly recommended that standard programme guidance be developed, a task that has since been accomplished through the development of the conceptual framework and release of the AEWG tools and guidance. The review also noted that an evidence base using evaluation, research and tracer studies was also needed to help researchers, practitioners, and policy makers understand the effectiveness of AE. As part of this, the review found that at that time, very few programmes were systematically collecting and reporting data on improved access to education (including enrolment, completion, and dropout), select learning outcomes, and transition to school or work—all key objectives for AE programing.   A separate meta-evaluation commissioned by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) confirmed that a key challenge for AEPs is post-programme tracking of outcomes for students, despite the fact that it is known that reintegration into the formal schooling system is a significant challenge for many.

With these issues in mind, the AEWG has made steps towards building the evidence base on effective AE programming. Part of this involved, testing the utility and relevance of the principles in the field testing described earlier. This research validated the utility of the Principles, and provides a basis for more rigorous assessments of AEP effectiveness and costs. In 2017, the AEWG developed a Learning Agenda for Accelerated Education. This agenda specifies key research questions to test various components of the conceptual framework and to help evaluate the value for money (VfM) of AEPs in chronically underfunded and/or fragile education systems with significant numbers of out of school children and youth.
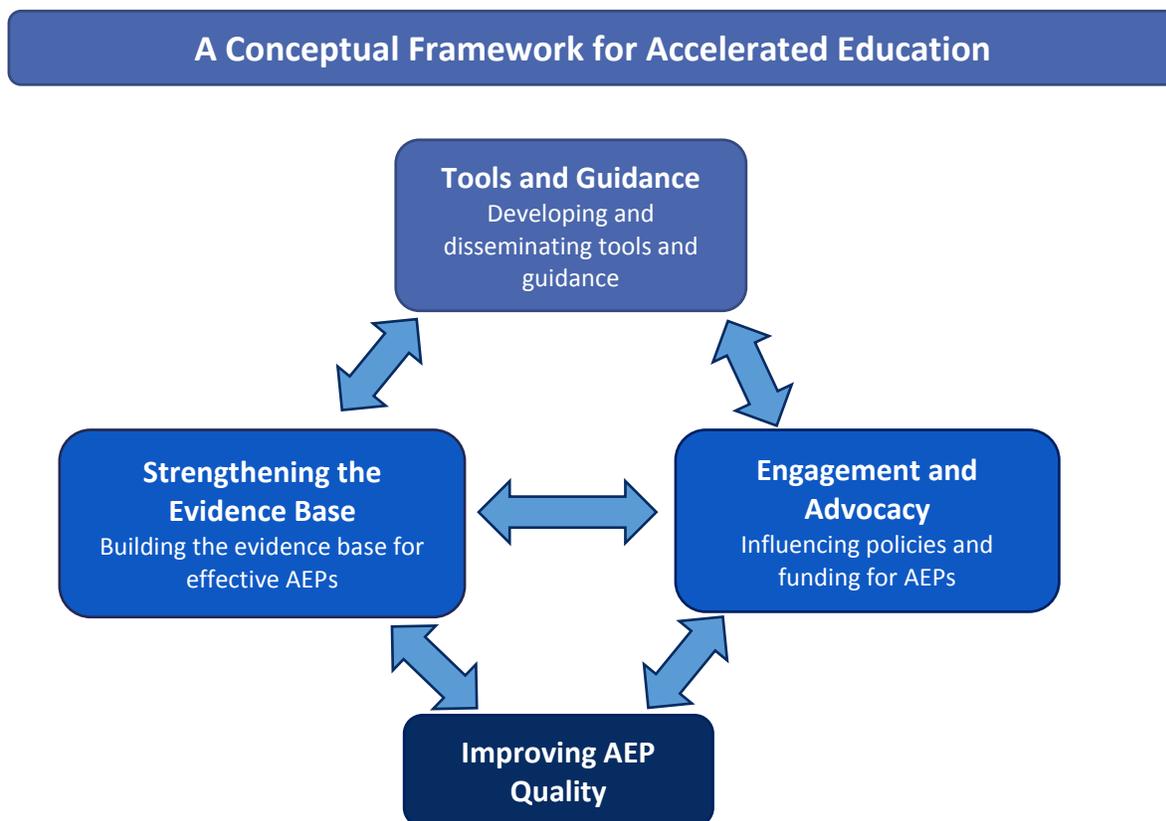
Engagement and advocacy

Since inception, the AEWG has also committed to engaging and advocating for AEPs within national policy, donor strategies, and programmatic responses to address the issue of out of school, over-aged learners.   This engagement has taken several forms, including regular presentations at academic conferences such as UKFIET and CIES in successive years, the development and roll out of an orientation to AE workshop for policy makers and programme teams, and increasing the AEWG's web presence by ensuring that its work is featured on both the ECCN and INEE sites. Alongside

this, the AEWG developed a [short animation](#) highlighting its work.   In September 2017, the AEWG held an official [launch](#) of their tools and guidance, which was livestreamed and attended by over 100 individuals[1].

Concurrent to the outreach related work, has been a recognition of the need to assess and understand the needs for advocacy and engagement with donors and Ministries. This work comes out of the field testing of the Principles which suggested an important role for both parties in supporting programming which was aligned and harmonised with the conceptual framework for AEPs.   The AEWG has been working to catalogue the presence and recognition of AE within national education strategic plans and policies, as well as ascertaining the degree to which AE is a programmatic focus area prioritised by donors in contexts with high numbers of out of school learners.   While still in progress, this work has identified some key gaps and issues for the AEWG to take forward in coming years.

The relationship between these three streams of work is represented in the diagram below.

A Conceptual Framework for Accelerated Education

Tools and Guidance
Developing and disseminating tools and guidance

Strengthening the Evidence Base
Building the evidence base for effective AEPs

Engagement and Advocacy
Influencing policies and funding for AEPs

Improving AEP Quality

Current Opportunities and challenges for Accelerated Education

To date, the AEWG has made significant investment and effort in developing a conceptual framework for what constitutes best practice in AE. This focus has meant significant attention to a longer-term desire to improve programme quality in design and implementation.

The AEWG acknowledges that efforts must now shift to ensuring that the tools and guidance are being introduced and utilised in the field—supporting efforts to build the capacity for AE implementing partners. In the coming period, members of the AEWG will take responsibility for ensuring this occurs within their own organisations and with national, regional and international partners they work alongside. At the same time, key gaps that remain in the guidance

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[1] Forty Eight people representing thirty two organizations attended the launch and over seventy participants followed a live webcast of the event from over thirty countries.

(discussed in more detail below) will continue to be developed. The AEWG will be mindful of not duplicating efforts already undertaken by others to support quality education provision in challenging contexts, but identify how such guidance might be adapted to the specificities of the needs of AE learners and programmes.

A key finding of the case studies completed last year were the significant barriers AEPs faced in working towards some of the Principles of Effective Practice in the absence of a supportive policy environment. Initial work that has been done by the AEWG on the national policy contexts for AE has found that often, such programmes are unacknowledged, misunderstood or poorly supported within education strategies and plans. This creates a tension for AEPs which seek alignment with national systems and programme design and delivery approaches that are sufficiently flexible and adaptable to the needs of out of school learners.

Strategically, this means that the AEWG, must engage more directly with national policy makers and key donors who are, or have the potential, to shape the structural conditions within which AEPs operate. The Sustainable Development Goals and the increasing prioritization this has given to children left behind by the Education for All/Millennium Development Goal agenda, alongside the current focus on the education of record numbers of displaced children and youth provide excellent opportunities to ensure that AEPs are considered as an appropriate response to these challenges. At the same time, the AEWG recognises that they may not be in a position, both in terms of capacity and role/function to directly shape the system within which AEPs operate but individually, and collectively the AEWG may be able to have influence if engagement is both strategic and focussed in nature. Some examples of how the AEWG have already been able to do so are evident from recent engagements in Mali and Uganda. The AEWG believes that it must learn from and publicise the successes of these efforts, and work to strategically identify and engage with national, regional, and global policymakers and donors as opportunities arise moving forward. Already, some of this work has begun by researching the current priorities, agendas, and interests of key donors within education in emergencies (EiE). Moving forward, the AEWG sees engagement and uptake of the conceptual framework which it has developed as a key priority.

Finally, there is an important need to build the evidence base, alongside and in tandem with the production and refinement of the tools and guidance. It is firmly believed that the evidence base on what works, what doesn't and why with AEPs, should continue to determine where the AEWG invests its energies in relation to supporting improvements in programme quality and shaping advocacy and engagement efforts. The AEWG also believes urgent attention must be given to ensuring that key outcomes of AE programming, in terms of improving access, retention, completion and post-completion transitions to formal education or other pathways, are better and more systematically captured. This is in response to several challenges at present. Firstly, an AEWG mapping of 62 AEPs globally found that only 33% had plans to be evaluated, limiting the ability for the AEWG to generate a robust evidence base for advocacy and quality improvement purposes. Secondly, other current or upcoming evaluations by AEWG members about their AEPs remains unknown, suggesting a gap in knowledge management in terms of evidence gathering and collation. Thirdly, more than half of these programmes have not yet engaged with the Principles, suggesting an ongoing need for these to figure more specifically in programme design, learning and refinement processes. Finally, while the AEWG has developed a formative checklist to accompany the Principles and guidance, it has not yet been widely utilised in shaping programme quality assurance and monitoring processes, a key aim of its initial development.

The AEWG believes that to strengthen the evidence base, it is important that a more common approach to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness to AEPs needs to be developed. Additionally, and within this, the working group believes it will be important to assess which components (or inputs) within AEPs yield greatest successes within identified programme outcomes. These inputs should be in part, driven by programmatic responses to the four main domains (learners, teachers, programme management, and alignment to Ministry and donor frameworks) within the Principles. Finally, the AEWG welcomes and hopes to capitalise on new EiE research platforms that have or are planned on being set up by Dubai Cares/INEE, DFID, and USAID. This will be done by cultivating and maintaining relationships with academic partners whom the AEWG hopes to collaborate with to generate evidence against the Learning Agenda in the coming period. Alongside all of this is a need for stronger coordination and sharing of research and evaluation activities, within a strong knowledge management platform.

Key Pillars and Priorities

The key pillars and priorities of the AEWG for the current period are:

1. **Shaping quality AE provision: through increased engagement and uptake of the tools and guidance;**

2. **Supporting engagement and uptake for effective AE provision: within policy priorities, objectives, and actions of relevant national Ministries and key donors.**

3. **Strengthening the evidence base around effective AE provision: identifying the components within this and working towards a 'value for money' case for AEPs;**

In light of the above priorities, the AEWG will continue to develop an annual work plan and regularly review its key objectives against activities planned or completed. Additionally, and as this work evolves, the original goal of the AEWG—which is *'to strengthen the quality of Accelerated Education programming through a more harmonised, standardised approach'*—will need to be revisited. The AEWG will also continue to assess its constituent membership to determine whether its current structure, approach and skill set matches the groups' objectives. Specific to each of the priorities noted above, the following are key activities the AEWG will focus on in the coming period

Shaping quality AE provision:
With the official launch of the Principles and accompanying guidance, the AEWG intends to focus its energies on ensuring its effective dissemination and utilisation at a field-level. The intent is to continue to find opportunities to introduce the AEWG's conceptual framework to national policy makers, donors and implementing partners through member-facilitated workshops such as the recent AE workshop in Uganda which introduced the conceptual framework to support the development of AE Guidelines for the Refugee response.

Recognising, however, that these materials may appear piecemeal in the absence of an overarching framework, the AEWG will develop an M&E Framework under a broader 'toolkit'. This toolkit would help to orient field staff to the various tools which the AEWG has produced and explain how, when and why they can be used in programme design, delivery, evaluation and refinement. Concurrent to this, the AEWG will work to further strengthen support and guidance to teachers of AEPs. It is currently working in partnership with Teachers College Colombia to adapt the existing Teachers in Crisis and Conflict (TiCC) training materials to the specificities of AEPs. The AEWG also recognises that as increasing numbers of programmes utilise existing guidance materials, it is likely these will need to be adapted based on feedback that is provided by field staff and implementing partners.

Outside of the increased engagement and utilisation of these materials with field-based staff, will be concurrent efforts to raise awareness of the AEWG guidance at regional and global meetings of key EiE actors. A particularly important target audience is the Education Cluster, both globally and nationally. The AEWG will seek to engage more closely with the Education Cluster in the forthcoming period.

Supporting engagement and uptake for effective AE provision: Systems-level engagement
In the medium-term, the AEWG wants donors and governments to recognise AE as an important component of humanitarian, early-recovery and development programming. To do so, the AEWG believes it must provide these stakeholders with evidence that: (a) there is a need for AEPs within particular contexts, and (b) AEPs are an effective and efficient response within this context for out of school children and youth, in terms of both ensuring access and supporting learning. Ideally, this evidence would be provided through a robust value for money framework, which requires sufficient data within and across a number of contexts for the purposes of generalisability and extrapolation. Given that this evidence is not yet available, the aim is for the AEWG to set in place conditions for this to eventually occur.

Immediately, the AEWG would like to work towards developing an M&E framework for AEPs to then adapt to their programme design, but with a set of common indicators and outcome statements that could feed into a broader-scale value for money assessment.   In the absence of the 'hard data' available from such a framework however, the AEWG will focus on developing an investment and policy case for AEPs with the data currently at hand. The investment case will focus on identifying the scope of the problem regarding out of school children and youth, and articulate ways in which AE is a cost-effective, inclusive and equitable response. The policy case will focus on a similar set of concerns, but also stress the ways in which national governments can take a lead in regulating non/informal education provision through the more systematic recognition and inclusion of AE within its strategies and policy actions.   The AEWG recognises that these cases will need to be adapted to particular contexts and groups of stakeholders, but also, that having some core advocacy messages about AEPs moving forward is critical. The AEWG hopes to in the coming years to engage more strongly with bilateral donors such as USAID, DFID, NORAD; private philanthropic donors/foundations such as Dubai Cares, Reach out to Asia (ROTA), Stromme, Educate a Child, and Porticus; and multilateral pooled funds and entities such as the Education Cluster, Education Cannot Wait (ECW) and the Global Partnership for Education (GPE).

Strengthening the evidence base

Developing a value for money case for AE is seen as a critical missing component of the evidence base at present. At the same time, however, the AEWG will continue to support and nurture existing and new research partnerships.   In the short to medium term, opportunities for collaborating and seeking joint research ventures with academic partners will continue. The AEWG, through its constituent members will also seek to work more closely with their M&E teams to explore how aspects of its Learning Agenda might be explored through project and programme evaluations.   The AEWG sees itself having a key role in managing knowledge that is being generated from current and upcoming AEP evaluations, but will need to rely on its networks to share both key evaluation questions and key findings with the group.   The AEWG will also work towards supporting increased learning and collaboration between those conducting research and evaluation activities, and those implementing AEPs to ensure that findings serve a formative purpose moving forward.