Author acknowledgements

The authors appreciate the contribution of all the Government of Uganda staff, particularly from the Ministry of Education and Sports, development partners and implementing NGO partners, who took the time to contribute to this research and provide very insightful information. To the Accelerated Education Working Group for the time, discussion, and supporting the multicountry research. To Ritesh Shah and Kayla Boisvert for their critical input, feedback and tireless support of the research process. To Mai Nashrallah for the document review and checks. To all the University of Auckland staff who worked behind the scenes, and lastly, to Dubai Cares for supporting this vital research.

To all those educationalists dedicated to delivering education services that cause transformational changes to the students they target: may this research provide new insights and spur your thoughts on alternatives for out-of-school children and youth and Accelerated Education Programmes.

Other acknowledgements

The ACCESS project is a collaboration between a team of researchers at the University of Auckland and the Accelerated Education Working Group (AEWG). The AEWG is made up on education partners working in accelerated education. The AEWG is part of the Inter Agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) with representation from UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, NRC, Plan, IRC, Save the Children, Education Development Centre, ECHO, and War Child Holland. Several of these organisations were represented on a task team specifically set up to support this project. Sincere appreciating is extended to Martha Hewison (chair of the AEWG), Rachel Cooper (UNICEF), Antoine Mioche (UNESCO), Rebecca Pagel (USAID), Pete Simms (Plan), Kathryn Cooper (Save the Children), Rachel Christina (EDC), Jessica Oddy (NORCAP) and Nicolas Herbecq (ECHO) who were members of this task team.

ACCESS has been generously supported by Dubai Cares under the Evidence for Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Fund.

Dubai Cares is a UAE-based global philanthropic organization that works towards providing children and youth in developing countries with access to quality education. Since its inception in 2007, the organization has successfully launched education programs reaching over 20 million beneficiaries in 60 developing countries. Dubai Cares also plays a key role in helping achieve the UN SDG4 on quality education. To learn more, please visit www.dubaicares.ae.

The Evidence for Education in Emergencies (E-Cubed) Research Fund aims to strengthen the evidence base in EIE, by supporting contextually relevant and usable research, and disseminating global public goods. Dubai Cares partnered with INEE in 2017 to design and manage this research fund. To learn more, please visit https://inee.org/evidence/e-cubed.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction  
2. Methodology  
   2.1 Specific Scope and Focus of Research  
   2.2 Summary of Data Collected and Reviewed  
      2.2.1 Limitations to the study  
   2.3 Approach to analysis  
3. Profile of Out-of-School Children and Youth in Uganda  
   3.1 Group 2: Out-of-school primary-age children  
      3.1.1 Reasons behind primary school dropout  
   3.2 Group 3: Out-of-school lower secondary age children  
      3.2.1 Reasons for secondary out-of-school learners  
   3.3 Refugee out-of-school children in Uganda  
      3.3.1 Reasons for out-of-school refugee learners  
4. Landscape of AEPs in Uganda  
   4.1 The evolution of AEPs in Uganda  
   4.2 Legislation to support Accelerated Education  
   4.3 AEPs in the wider landscape of opportunities for OOSCY  
      4.3.1 Provision and outcomes of primary and lower secondary accelerated education  
      4.3.2 Funding, implementation, and regulation of AEPS  
5. Assessing the Current State of AEP Provision  
   5.1 Availability of AEPs  
   5.2 Accessibility of AEPs  
      5.2.1 Instruction and pedagogy  
      5.2.2 AEP and learners living with disabilities  
      5.2.3 AEPS and child-headed households  
   5.3 Acceptability of AEPs  
      5.3.1 Transition to secondary education  
      5.3.2 AEPs or other alternative pathways  
   5.4 Adaptability of AEPs  
6. Understanding the Wider Contexts Influencing the Ability of AEPs to Meet the Needs of OOSCY  
   6.1 Underestimation of the scope and need for AEPs  
      6.1.1 Perception of AEPs  
   6.2 Impact of COVID-19  
   6.3 Resourcing of AEPs  
7. Conclusion & Recommendations  
   7.1 Recommendations for the AEWG  
8. Annexes  
   8.1 Annex 1: List of Interviews  
   8.2 Annex 2: List of Documents Reviewed
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACCESS</td>
<td>Accelerating Change for Children’s and Youths’ Education through Systems Strengthening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AEP</td>
<td>Accelerated education programmes</td>
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<tr>
<td>AEWG</td>
<td>Accelerated Education Working Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRRF</td>
<td>Comprehensive Refugee Response Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECW</td>
<td>Education Cannot Wait</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EMIS</td>
<td>Education Management Information System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ERP</td>
<td>Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCLUDE</td>
<td>INnovative and inCLUDive accelerated eDucation programmE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGOs</td>
<td>International nongovernmental organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoES</td>
<td>Ministry of Education and Sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCDC</td>
<td>National Curriculum Development Centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NFE</td>
<td>Nonformal education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Nongovernmental organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRC</td>
<td>Norwegian Refugee Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OOSCY</td>
<td>Out-of-school children and youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEA</td>
<td>Political economy analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLE</td>
<td>Primary Leaving Examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UCE</td>
<td>Uganda Certificate of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNEB</td>
<td>Uganda National Examination Board</td>
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</table>
Before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, nearly 258 million children and youth were out of school worldwide (UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2019). Most live in crisis-affected contexts and find themselves out of school because of conflict or disaster-induced displacement. The COVID-19 pandemic will likely increase the number of out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY), with a projected additional 24 million not returning to school as they reopen (UNESCO, 2020). Moreover, global school closures have made children fall behind their age-appropriate grades more than ever before, increasing the rate of overage children. In Uganda, COVID-19 has resulted in the most prolonged global school closure, with schools only reopening in January 2022 (Blanshe & Dahir, 2022).

Accelerated Education Programmes (AEP) are an alternative education option to help overage, OOSCY complete primary education (and in some cases junior/lower secondary school) and transition back into formal education, into technical/vocational training, or livelihoods opportunities. AEP aims to provide learners with equivalent, certified competencies for basic education using effective teaching and learning approaches that match their level of cognitive maturity. As a result, AEPs reduce the number of years in a learning cycle and allow students to complete a certified, equivalent level of education in a shortened time frame (Accelerated Education Working Group [AEWG], 2018).

In 2020, the AEWG reviewed the existing evidence base on AEPs (Shah & Choo, 2020). A key finding of the evidence review was that while there is substantial evidence on the effectiveness of AEPs in increasing access to education by overage OOSCY, as well as some evidence of how AEPs improve learning outcomes, completion, and transition, AEPs are not yet fully institutionalised and supported into a broader suite of nonformal education (NFE) opportunities for OOSCY in many contexts.

Under the Accelerating Change for Children’s and Youths’ Education through Systems Strengthening (ACCESS) research project—led by the University of Auckland in partnership with the AEWG and funded by Dubai Cares under E-Cubed—this report presents findings from the first phase of research in Uganda. Key questions this phase of the research sought to explore are:

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1 The AEWG is an interagency working group made up of partners funding and implementing accelerated education programmes globally. The AEWG is currently led by UNHCR with representation from UNICEF, UNESCO, USAID, Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Plan, the International Rescue Committee (IRC), Save the Children, Education Development Center (EDC), and War Child Holland. Its overarching goal is to strengthen the quality of AEPs through a more harmonised, standardised approach.
1. To what extent does political commitment, capacity, and will for institutionalising and integrating alternative and NFE interventions such as AEPs exist in the national education system?

2. Where are there current levers and opportunities for the AEWG to lead and support systematic change, which would better promote increased access to AEPs for learners who need them?

In Section 2 of this report, we specify the methodology used in this first phase of the research. Section 3 identifies the distinct groups of OOSCY in Uganda and assesses why they are out of school. Section 4 examines the current range of learning opportunities available to these out-of-school learners, including alternative, nonformal and informal learning opportunities provided by state and nonstate actors. Next, we locate where AEPs fit into the current NFE landscape and briefly trace their development and growth in the country to date. Further, we map out the key stakeholders involved in funding, operating, overseeing, and legislating these programmes—and with what effect. Section 5 analyses the availability, accessibility, adaptability, and acceptability of existing AEPs and other NFE options that provide equivalent, certified competencies for overaged OOSCY—the key target group for AEPs at present. Finally, Section 6 explores why this situation might exist by examining current institutional, legislative, and structural conditions within the education system and the broader national political economy. These marginalised learners’ needs are recognised, resourced and represented. In doing so, we identify key stakeholders and contextual factors that either support or hinder wider scale institutionalisation and uptake of AEPs within national education systems where there is a need. The last section of the report—Section 7—summarises the implications of these findings regarding opportunities and challenges in the AEWG engaging with national educational stakeholders to advance policy reform for overaged school learners.
SECTION 2

METHODOLOGY

In this first phase of the research, the authors applied a political economy analysis (PEA) to answer the two main questions. First, political economy approaches provide a way of situating educational interventions and programmes, such as AEPs, within the broader political, social and economic systems in which they exist (Robertson & Dale, 2015). More critical applications of PEA also emphasise the power relations and competing interests of key actors, organisations and institutions in either maintaining or disrupting the status quo with OOSCY and the causes and consequences of them remaining out of school (Novelli et al., 2014). A light-touch problem-driven framework to PEA (Harris, 2013) coupled with a power-based analysis (Acosta & Pettit, 2013) was used to explore and analyse over four successive and iterative waves of data collection:

a. The various categories of OOSCY in the country, why they are out of school, and the degree to which they are accounted for, recognised, and their needs met within existing education policies and programming at present (and why/why not);
b. The prevalence and existence of AEPs or AEP-like programmes for OOSCY, how these have evolved, and how such programmes are governed, regulated, funded and provisioned for within the broader national education systems (including an identification of key stakeholders and their interests within these functions);

c. The degree to which such programmes meet the desired needs and ambitions of various groups of OOSCY, and why that might be.

True to the problem-driven framework, the focus on OOSCY is shaped by the premise that AEPs are one solution to addressing this chronic global concern. A problem-driven framework helps us to see the issues and challenges facing AEPs beyond technical implementation issues. It helps to situate it within systems which may currently work against the programme ambitions. By foregrounding these issues, the aim is to identify entry points and then shift the institutional or regulatory frameworks governing OOSCY or the motivations and power relationships of key actors involved in thwarting change.

### 2.1 Specific Scope and Focus of Research

Within the parameters noted above, the scope and focus of the research were further refined in terms of the specific questions/topics explored and the types of programmes, geographical location, and target populations.

1. Who are the OOSCY in Uganda? Where are they? What are the reasons for them not being in school?
2. What opportunities in the education landscape exist for out-of-school children? Which programmes exist to provide education and learning for children out of school, particularly those overaged?
3. AEP are one of the programmes that exist to address education for OOSCY. Who does this programme target? Where is it implemented, and how appropriate is AEP to the needs of the OOSCY?
4. What are the current opportunities and challenges for AEPs to be more available, accessible, adaptable and acceptable to various populations of OOSCY for whom such programmes might be appropriate?
5. What institutional framework exists to address the needs of OOSCY, and how do these support AEPs?

The scope of the research was national. The research also reviewed a wide range of programmes to address this challenge at a national level.

AEPs have been one response to the educational needs of marginalised populations, disadvantaged or hard-to-reach populations, and persons affected by conflict. The research explores the evolutions of such programmes and how they have also shifted whom they primarily target and serve and whom they do not. The report highlights possibilities and interest from different education stakeholders in extending AEP provision to broader populations in light of the pandemic.
The study found that most AEPs are currently being implemented for persons whose education has been affected by conflict, especially refugees and their hosts. Therefore, the study in the later chapters focuses on refugee-hosting communities rather than nationally. A refugee-focused lens is taken to assess the current availability, accessibility, adaptability and acceptability of AEPs; however, throughout the report, there is recognition of the broader issues of the OOSCY across Uganda.

2.2 Summary of Data Collected and Reviewed

Two main sources of data were used for this research. The first one was secondary data. The researcher conducted a desk study and critically reviewed several documents on education provision in Uganda. These documents included national reports from the Government of Uganda, the National Development Plan, the Education Sector Strategic Plan, the Human Capital Plan, and the Education and Sports Annual Performance report; and other key government policies and documents. The documents and reference material included statistics from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics, such as the Census data, National Household Survey and the Demographic Household survey. A range of research reports, analyses and academic articles about OOSCY in Uganda specifically and globally were also reviewed and were obtained either through literature searches undertaken by the research team or documents obtained from key informants. Table 1 shows the number of documents reviewed by type for this research.

Table 1
Number of Documents Reviewed by Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Document Type</th>
<th># of documents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policies and legislation</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies and plans (e.g., education sector plans, refugee response plans, education strategy)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programme documentation (e.g., programme evaluations, project overviews, research studies)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional primary data were also obtained through key informant interviews (KIIs) within Uganda. These included representatives from the Government of Uganda, development partners and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Each of these organisations plays a critical role in providing services to OOSCY. For this report, the authors sought information from various sources, including the government as a central policy maker; the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), and development partners who provide most external funding for AEPs; and international NGOs (INGOs), who implement the majority of AEPs. The AEP Taskforce and AEWG also provided critical information and insight into the political economy of AE in Uganda. Table 2 shows the number of participants by interviewee type and interviewee level.
Table 2
Number of Participants by Interviewee Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Type</th>
<th>Regional</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AE Funder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral donor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilateral funder</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE Regulator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiautonomous</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE Coordinator²</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN body</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE Implementer³</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INGO</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local NGO/CBO</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>16</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A complete list of documents reviewed and stakeholders interviewed is provided in Annexes 1 and 2.

2.2.1 Limitations to the study

It is worth noting that there is a limitation on the secondary data used. The statistics data were frequently incomplete, outdated, or not representative due to a lack of systemised data collection. That is especially true because, given the COVID-19 situation, not much data have been collected in the past 2 years. Furthermore, the statistics on OOSCY collected for this study have also not considered the current enrolments or status of OOSCY considering COVID-19. Furthermore, due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was impossible to conduct KIIs or focus group discussions (FGDs) with OOSCY to understand better why many OOSCY remain out of school, even when there are opportunities for reentry.

¹ In Uganda, coordinators are seconded from government and UN bodies, and hold a dual role.
² Many of the INGOs and the local NGO operate both nationally and subnationally, but individuals spoken to were all based in Kampala and working in the national office.
2.3 Approach to analysis

Data for this study were collected through a review of existing documents available online or shared by various stakeholders. The documents included strategic papers, previous research and studies, and meeting notes. In addition to desk review, the researcher interviewed several critical stakeholders as listed above and collated the information shared according to the categories of the report focus areas.

The information reviewed from the documents was used to answer the research’s key questions. Related questions were asked across the board to partners like NGOs. Interviewing various people enabled the researcher to validate some responses recognising a similar pattern. For example, interviewing government partners helped answer questions relating to policy, while questions relating to direct implementation were targeted at INGOs and NGOs.

Notwithstanding, there were still limitations in triangulating the quantitative and qualitative data. For example, due to the shortcomings of national statistical data, it was challenging to triangulate some of the figures and statements made by the interviewees. However, as all KIIs were asked the same questions, it was possible to compare responses. In addition, in some instances, some interviewees shared key documents.
SECTION 3

PROFILE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN UGANDA

This section explores the characteristics of the OOSCY population in Uganda and their barriers to being in school. The focus is given to populations of interest and relevance to AEPs—namely adolescents and youth aged 10 to 18 who either have never entered formal education or have missed significant amounts of their education and are considered too far overage to enter into formal education. Our analysis of the out-of-school population is informed by a typology—initially developed by Lewin (2007) and then taken up by UNICEF and UIS (2015)—of the five dimensions of educational exclusion:
• **Group 1**: Preprimary-aged out-of-school children
• **Group 2**: Primary-aged out-of-school children
• **Group 3**: Lower secondary aged out-of-school children
• **Group 4**: Learners at risk of dropping out of primary school
• **Group 5**: Learners at risk of dropping out of lower secondary school

AEPs typically target students in Groups 2 and 3—learners who are already out of school and are of primary or lower secondary age—to provide a pathway for those overage to reenter formal education. UNICEF’s framework (UNICEF & UIS, 2015) for Groups 2 and 3 further delineates those out-of-school children into three subgroups:

a. **Visible out-of-school children**: These are out-of-school children typically accounted for in official figures based on information collected from Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) or other government databases. These are typically students who are school leavers rather than those who have never entered into school at all.

b. **Semi-invisible out-of-school children**: These are either learners who attend school infrequently or learners who may no longer be attending school but are still counted as enrolled because their dropout status was never registered; or children who never enrolled in school but for whom information can be obtained from national birth-registration records, household IDs or other civil records.

c. **Invisible out-of-school children**: These are children not recorded in any government, administrative or school record and are often the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children in society.

Lastly, it is essential to note that UNICEF’s framework acknowledges that, in some contexts, OOSCY may be participating in some form of learning which is not officially recognised or does not result in a qualification. This includes literacy programmes, life-skills training, nonformal vocational training, rural development education, religious education, and cultural/traditional education. While they should be counted as OOSCY in official figures, “participation in non-formal education ... is different from no exposure to school at all and should be reported separately when analysing data on out-of-school children” (UNICEF & UIS, 2015, p. 15).

### 3.1 Group 2: Out-of-school primary-age children

For context, education in Uganda is guided and regulated by The Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post Primary) Act of 2008. This defines four levels of education: (a) preprimary education; (b) primary education, which is 7 years in length; (c) postprimary education and training; and (d) tertiary and university education. In Uganda, primary education consists of 7 years, followed by 4 years of lower secondary school and 2 years of upper secondary school (Kan & Klasen, 2020). The Universal Primary Education (UPE) Act of 1997 decreed that primary education was free for all (Provide and Equip, 2021). Consequently, primary school enrolment...
went from 2.5 million in 1996 to 8.2 million in 2015 (RTI International, 2018). According to the most recent UIS (2020) statistics, the percentage of primary-school-aged children enrolled in primary education stands at 96% as of 2013.

However, despite the high uptake in gross enrolment, many children remain out of school. As the following section will outline, there are challenges to determining the total number of out-of-school primary-aged children. According to the National Household Survey (NHS) and Education and Sports Sector Analysis (ESSA, 2017)4 EMIS, 154,422, or 2% of the eligible child population in Uganda (excluding refugees) between 6–12 years, are out of school. Furthermore, 4.6% of female youth compared to 2.9% of males had never attended school. However, this varies significantly from the UIS (n.d.) statistics, suggesting that as many as 328,897, or 14% of primary-school-aged children, are out of school. However, these contrasting figures indicate that it is challenging to obtain reliable data on OOSCY in Uganda, which could be due to the lack of a centralised database.

As highlighted earlier, 96% of primary-school-aged children are enrolled in primary school. However, only 35% of girls and 36% of boys are persistent to the last grade of primary school (UIS, 2021). Moreover, only around half of the children in Primary 6 reached the expected literacy and numeracy assessments in 2015 (MoES, 2018). Subsequently, of those that reach Primary 7, the completion rate is between 61%–69.6%, and the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) has a pass rate of 89% (AE Task Team Uganda, 2021). This indicates that many children and youth who start primary school do not complete, contributing to the number of OOSCY, despite a high universal primary enrolment rate. The following section will unpack why many primary-school-aged children drop out of the school system.

3.1.1. Reasons behind primary school dropout

This section outlines five main reasons primary-school-aged children are out of school or drop out of the school system.

Firstly, in Uganda, the primary school entry age is 6 years, with an expected completion time of 7 years. Children are expected to complete primary school at between 12- and 13-years old. However, there is no upper age limit for UPE. As one KII highlighted:

Education is a right. There is no limit on age so that everyone can access education. The constitution has no limit. “Aged” men and women can even do Primary 7 at 60 years.

(N.8, AE regulator, governmental)

The KII outlines that as there is no upper age limit on enrolment in primary school, many primary-school-aged children may be presently out of school; however, they may reenrol at a later date or when they would be considered, by global standards, as “overage.” The scale of overaged children within the primary school system is illustrated below, courtesy of RTI International (2018). The table highlights that grade-specific enrolment rates are higher than 100% since a significant number of children and youth that enrol are not of the “appropriate age.” Most children do not start school at 6 years of age (Moyi, 2011). It also highlights that although there is high enrolment

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in the lower grades, there is a reduction in the number of enrolled students as the grades progress. The majority of the population, who are of the appropriate age, are underenrolled in the higher levels. According to Kan and Klasen’s (2020) study, most children in the upper primary school grades are at least 4 years behind, with many falling into the 15–21 age category.

**Figure 1**
Enrolment with population overlay

![Population and enrolment diagram](image)

Source: Graphed by RTI from enrollment data sourced from the EMIS 2013 (Ministry of Education 2014) and, for population, World Bank’s EdStats system data ([http://datatopics.worldbank.org/education/wDataQuery/QFull.aspx](http://datatopics.worldbank.org/education/wDataQuery/QFull.aspx)).


However, whilst it is encouraging that the older the children become, the more likely they are to enrol in school (Kuno et al., 2021), overage enrolment in Uganda has been associated with higher dropout rates, increasing to 20% in the first years of UPE, typically after students have completed first or second grade (Kan & Klasen, 2020). Whilst there is not a significant amount of data as to why older children and youth drop out of school, Kuno et al. (2021) suggest that older children are more liked to leave due to economic pressures, mainly if they are growing up in socioeconomically deprived areas and families.

A second reason for primary-school-aged children being out of school, or dropping out of school, is location. According to the UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE, n.d.) statistics, the number of 9–12-year-olds who have never attended school varies greatly, from 5% in Kampala to 53% in Karamoja, a historically underserved and conflict-affected region. Furthermore, only 19% of primary school children are considered overage in Kampala, the capital city, compared to 56% in West Nile and 54% in Karamoja, also socioeconomically deprived and rural areas. Again, this suggests that location has a critical role in equitable access to education. Indeed, the primary school completion rate in rural locations stands at 38% compared to 64% in urban areas (WIDE, n.d.).

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5 The WIDE database brings together data from Demographic and Health Surveys, Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, other national household surveys and learning.
Thirdly, a family’s composition and income considerably impact enrolment and retention. Evidence suggests that a household head’s level of education and a mother’s level of education are good predictors of whether a child will enrol in school or not (Kan & Klasen, 2020). Likewise, the higher the caregiver’s level of education, the more likely a child will enrol in school (Kan & Klasen, 2020). Furthermore, although primary school is free, numerous costs are still associated with attending school. These include uniforms, examination fees, building funds (that go to the construction of housing for teachers), school materials, food that each child is required to donate to the school and school lunches. Parents may also have to contribute towards teachers’ pay in schools with teachers who are not yet confirmed on the government’s payroll (Atim et al., 2019). For low-income families, the additional costs of schooling are significant, particularly if families have multiple children, if children are coming from a single-parent household, or if a family experiences loss of the primary caregiver (Atim et al., 2019). The WIDE (n.d.) data demonstrate that 21% of primary school children from the poorest households in Uganda are out of school compared to 7% of the wealthiest households. These statistics outline that out-of-school primary school children’s statistics correlate with wealth. As many families have limited resources, with 70% of the population living on less than US$3.20 a day (WIDE, n.d.), families must be strategic when investing in schooling for their children. Poverty, therefore, is a crucial barrier to learning.

Fourthly, gender impacts school enrolment and dropout rates for primary-school-aged children. Gender norms and limited financial means have resulted in many locations where families are more likely to support boys’ education than girls’ (Atim et al., 2019). Early marriage also impacts school enrolment, with 35% of girls dropping out of school due to early marriage, with 10% of girls nationally married before the age of 18 (Robinson, 2018). Furthermore, in Karamoja, the less educated a girl is, the higher the bride price, contributing to a higher number of out-of-school girls (Faughnan, 2016).

Teenage pregnancy also curtails primary-completion rates (as a reminder, as outlined, many girls in primary school are adolescents due to overage enrolment). The average teenage pregnancy rate is 24%, but this varies significantly, with 34% of girls from the poorest households pregnant compared to 16% of teenagers from wealthier backgrounds (Faughnan, 2016). Although pregnant parents can attend primary school in Uganda, going back to school is not an option for many young parents, particularly girls, as childcare is unavailable; as one KII noted:

> The girls want to go to school, but they are concerned about who to leave their children with. We have taken some to school with their children. (N.16, AE implementer, national-level NGO)

To address the challenge for girls to return to school, there are initiatives underway that specifically target out-of-school girls. For example, the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) has worked with district education leaders in some areas. FAWE has recently established a “second-chance education” programme, which includes vocational training for girls who have been out of school for conflict, early marriage, and lack of financial support (Owente, 2022). However, some providers argue that going back into the formal primary or secondary system is not the best fit for young mothers. As one KII shared:

> Skilling is easier than going back to school. Especially for young women, the vulnerable or those who are married. Many schools reject them after childbirth, even if the government has the policy to allow them to return to school. Vocational education is a quick fix and takes about 3 months. (N.16, AE implementer, national-level NGO)
This suggests that stakeholders consider it is challenging even where there is support for young mothers to get back into the formal system.

In summary, whilst UPE has made primary education accessible to more students, socioeconomic reasons prevent many children from staying in the school system. This, in turn, impacts secondary-education transition rates and increases the number of OOSCY of secondary school age.

### 3.2 Group 3: Out-of-school lower secondary age children

The multiple barriers outlined in the previous section that impede primary-completion rates impact the transition to secondary school.

For context, the secondary-education cycle in Uganda lasts for 6 standard progress years, including 4 years for ordinary secondary level (lower secondary) and 2 for advanced secondary level (higher secondary) (Japan International Cooperation Agency & International Development Center of Japan, 2012). These two levels are also known as the ordinary and advanced levels, respectively (Hassan & Macha, 2020).

At present, secondary education in Uganda is not compulsory. Only learners who achieve specific grades in each of the four primary school-leaving core subjects can study free in public schools. In 2007, Uganda launched “Universal Secondary Education,” an initiative that provided grants to secondary schools to reduce the financial burden on the student, increasing access to secondary education for economically vulnerable families and communities (O’Donoghue et al., 2018). This intervention was needed due to the increased number of children graduating from primary school due to UPE, launched in 1997 (O’Donoghue et al., 2018). In such schools, students are automatically promoted but, to proceed from lower secondary to upper secondary, they need to pass national “Ordinary Level” exams administered by the Uganda National Examination Board or UNEB (Huylebroeck & Titeca, 2015). To support more learners who complete upper secondary, in 2012, the government introduced the Universal Post O Level Education and Training programme, which also extended free upper secondary education to those who had completed elementary education (Hassan & Macha, 2020).

Since the introduction of Universal Secondary Education, enrolment has increased by an average of 6% annually—growing from 954,000 students enrolled in 2007 to around 1.5 million in 2017 (World Bank, 2020). Furthermore, similar to discrepancies at the primary level, enrolment and transition rates vary considerably between girls and boys at the secondary level. As Muhangi (2019, p. 86) noted, “In 2016, the enrolment rate for boys was 29% compared to 25% for girls (i.e., 4% lower than that for boys), and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) was 86%.” However, despite the introduction of the Universal Secondary Education plan, secondary school remains out of reach for millions of children; and compared to other countries in the region, the rate of growth remains low compared to 25% in Kenya and 16% in Rwanda (World Bank, 2020). Further, the enrolment rate at the secondary level in Uganda has stagnated since 2007, measuring only an average of 28% in 2017, well below the rates in neighbouring countries.

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The Demographic Household Survey indicated that at the secondary-education level in 2016, 2.8 million (51.5%) children of secondary-school age (13–18 years, from secondary level Senior 1–Senior 6) were out of school. On average, 27% of lower secondary adolescents were out of school (WIDE, n.d.). The lower secondary completion rate, similar to the primary level, also indicates a low completion rate. Combining the percentage of young people aged 3–5 years above lower secondary graduation age and young people aged 15–24 years, only 25% of girls and 28% of boys completed lower secondary school (WIDE, n.d.). Of students who completed lower secondary, 57% (girls, 54%; boys, 61%) transition to upper secondary school (WIDE, n.d.). Net “survival rates” at lower secondary are equally low, with less than 20% of students enrolled in Senior 1 completing the entire secondary-education cycle (MoES, 2018).

### 3.2.1 Reasons for secondary out-of-school learners

As the first section on out-of-school primary-aged children indicated, many children in Uganda do not enrol in primary school at 6 years of age, which negatively impacts retention rates. Consequently, many children of lower secondary school age are likely to be out of school. However, there are additional and overlapping reasons for OOSCY of this age group.

Firstly, at the end of the seventh grade of primary school, students sit for the mandatory PLE administered by the UNEB (Hassan & Macha, 2020). As the previous section highlighted, the completion rates of primary school remain dismally low. Furthermore, if students do not pass their PLE or receive a low grade, they do not qualify for a government-funded secondary position under the Universal Secondary Education programme (Hassan & Macha, 2020). As the previous section outlined, many families, particularly in rural and low-income settings, would struggle to cover the cost of secondary schooling without governmental support. However, even though Universal Secondary Education has led to a higher number of children and youth being able to attend secondary education, the government subsidy only covers tuition (approximately US$15 per child per term) and teachers’ salaries, whilst the additional costs such as uniforms, books, stationery, optional school meals and other costs levied by the individual schools are paid by parents (O’Donoghue et al., 2018). Poverty, again, is a factor that impedes education transition and contributes to school dropout.

Secondly, similar to primary enrolment and completion rates, there are wide disparities according to location. For example, in Lango and Karamoja, two northern subregions, just 10% of the relevant age group attended secondary schools (Hassan & Macha, 2020). Again, this indicates that, similar to primary-school-age dropouts, children and youth growing up in rural and underserved areas are more likely to be out of school.

Thirdly, like primary education enrolment and completion rates, girls’ secondary education experience is characterised by lower access, high dropout and low transition rates compared to boys (Muhangi, 2019). According to a study conducted in the West Nile region of Uganda in 2014, the main explanation for school dropout was financial reasons, followed by pregnancy (Stoebenau et al., 2015), which was the main reason for 12% of girls who had dropped out of school (Stoebenau et al., 2015). Marriage, feeling unsafe in school, and poor access to sanitary protection are other causes (Stoebenau et al., 2015). Excessive housework and lack of parental support were also cited as
reasons for school dropout, emphasising the impact families have on enabling girls to continue their education (Stoebenau et al., 2015). As will be discussed further, these disparities are exacerbated in refugee-hosting districts.

### 3.3 Refugee out-of-school children in Uganda

Throughout 2016 and 2017, Uganda was affected by three parallel emergencies from South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Burundi. Today, with over 1.1 million refugees, Uganda hosts the most significant number of refugees in Africa and is one of the top five refugee-hosting countries globally. At least 61% of the refugee population are children under 18 (MoES, 2018).

Fortunately, the Government of Uganda’s supportive policies and frameworks aim to ensure that refugee children and children within host communities in refugee-hosting districts have access to quality education. These include the Government of Uganda’s Refugee Policy, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Fund (CRRF) (which will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.2), the Education Response Plan for Refugees and Host Communities (ERP) (MoES, 2018) and UPE Act, 1997. Furthermore, The Refugees Act 2006 states in Section 29 that:

1) A recognized refugee shall, subject to this Act, the OAU convention and the Geneva convention … e) receive at least the same treatment accorded to aliens generally in similar circumstances relating to … iii) education, other than elementary education for which refugees must receive the same treatment as nationals, and in particular, regarding access to particular studies, the recognition of foreign certificates, diplomas and degrees and the remission of fees and charges.

However, although the Government of Uganda aims to provide refugees with the same rights to education afforded to Ugandan learners, in practice, this proves challenging. Nearly half of all refugee children remain out of school. Among the primary- and secondary-school-aged refugee population in the 12 refugee-hosting districts, 225,000 children aged 6–18 years old are out of school (which accounts for 45.8% of the total primary- and secondary-school-aged children) (Provide and Equip, 2021). Data also show that 15.5% of the enrolled primary learners are overaged, i.e., above the specific age for the class, which is due to children who have missed school due to conflict, displacement, and other significant disruptions. According to the 2019 ESSA report, most out-of-school refugees are from South Sudan.

Notably, many displaced children have already spent prolonged periods outside school, which is one of the reasons refugee children may be out of school in Uganda. For example, even before the conflict in South Sudan erupted in 2013, the country had some of the world’s worst education indicators, along with some of the broadest gender disparities in school attendance: the latest estimates show the primary-completion rate was only 30% for girls and almost double at 58% for boys, while the lower secondary rates were 8% and 24%, respectively. These low rates have carried over as South Sudanese students have been displaced to Uganda.

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7 INCLUDE (INnovative and inCLUsive accelerated eDucation programmE for refugee and host-community children)—Baseline report.
8 As mentioned, there is not upper age limit for primary school in Uganda. This presents a challenge to AEP, as these programmes are often designed on the premise of children and youth being considered overage for the formal primary education system (Oddy, 2019a).
The second-largest displaced group arriving in Uganda in 2018 came from the DRC, with the majority from Ituri province and North Kivu (Karstad, 2018). Similar to South Sudan, the DRC education system faces severe challenges. A USAID (2022) report found that “3.5 million children of primary school age are not in school, and of those who do attend, 44 percent start school late, after the age of six” (para. 1). For those in primary school, learning levels are abysmal: an early grade reading assessment showed that 68% of students in Grades 3 and 4 could not read a single simple text word. “National data indicate that only 67 percent of children who enter first grade will complete sixth grade. Of those who reach 6th grade, only 75% will pass the exit exam” (para. 1).

Thus, forcibly displaced students entering the Ugandan school system from DRC and South Sudan will likely have fragmented education experiences. Many would not have the prior formal education background to enter the school system at an age-appropriate level.

The challenges outlined contribute to the low transition and completion rates from primary education to secondary for refugee students. Only 9% of refugees aged 21–23 years completed secondary education compared to 27% among their host-community counterparts (World Bank, 2018). The low completion rates were reportedly a consequence of the delayed entry into a given level of education, high dropout or repetition rates, late completion, or a combination of these factors (World Bank, 2018).

Support for refugees in Uganda focuses on providing preprimary and primary education, with 76%, or 254,442, of school-aged refugee children enrolled in primary schools by the end of 2019, with the proportion of boys and girls 54% and 46% respectively (Obita, 2020). Despite the progress and achievements made in primary education and establishing a comprehensive primary AEP curriculum, access to secondary education for refugee and host communities, especially girls, remains a critical gap across refugee-hosting districts in Uganda. Only around 11% of refugees and 18% of host-community secondary-school-age adolescents and youth are enrolled in secondary schools compared to the national average of 27% (Obita, 2020).

3.3.1 Reasons for out-of-school refugee learners

Refugee children and youth, similar to marginalised Ugandan learners, remain out of school at primary and secondary school age, due to logistical, structural and community challenges. Firstly, even though schools are located in settlements, many learners have to travel considerable distances due to the size of the refugee-hosting areas. Additionally, learners feel unsafe travelling to and from school due to road safety (Oddy, 2019a), concerns around walking in the dark (Schalit, 2018), sexual abuse and gender-related violence (Oddy, 2019a; Schalit, 2018, p. 25). Once in school, students often do not have money for food, causing hunger and diminishing students’ ability to concentrate in class (Schalit, 2018).
Secondly, many refugee children and youth have multiple responsibilities. Many children and youth live in child-headed households and may be raising siblings or their own children (Oddy, 2019a). Responsibilities such as caregiving and supporting a family financially make school attendance challenging and leave little time for school work (Oddy, 2019a). Thirdly, the school can be an unwelcoming environment. Due to large class sizes in refugee-hosting districts, the quality of teaching and learning can be compromised. Furthermore, Schalit’s (2018) study found that conflicts and bullying in school can be far-reaching for students. “Student respondents indicated that bullying could make them uncomfortable in school, resulting in challenges focusing during class” (p. 29), with the potential for bullying and tribal conflicts leading to students dropping out of school. Finally, Schalit’s study found that boys’ education was valued amongst some South Sudanese communities over girls. One study found that girls perceived that their families and communities deprioritised their education due to an expectation that girls should have multiple roles, picking up domestic chores and seeking external income through participating in the informal sector (Oddy, 2019a). Consequently, additional work reduces the opportunity to participate in school.

In summary, this is not an exhaustive list of reasons refugee learners are out of school. However, it offers critical insight into some barriers to enrolment and retention within schools. More examples of why education remains inaccessible for many displaced learners shall arise as the paper progresses.
SECTION 4
LANDSCAPE OF AEPS IN UGANDA

In this section, we briefly outline efforts that have been made to date in Uganda to create alternative education pathways for the groups of OOSCY identified in the previous section, namely primary-aged, secondary-aged, and refugee children and youth who are overage for their grade. This section is broken into two parts.

The first section provides an overview of accelerated and alternative education, categorised as NFE in Uganda. Then, the section discusses how AEPS and AEP-like programmes have come about as a solution to the needs of OOSCY in Uganda.

The second section explores the key actors involved in the country’s funding, operation, and regulation of AEPS. Based on interviews and documentation review, we also indicate how well these actors are carrying out these roles effectively and equitably and the constraints to their work.

4.1 The evolution of AEPS in Uganda

AEPS sit into a broader landscape of nonformal and alternative pathways for learning in Uganda. The Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education at the MoES is responsible for NFE (led by the assistant commissioner of inclusive and nonformal education). NFE in Uganda is defined as AEPS provided to children and adolescents who cannot access the traditional formal education pathway for distinct reasons, such as being a caregiver, forcibly displaced, or disabled. In addition, NFE programmes target disadvantaged communities, where schooling must co-exist with other demands and constraints placed upon children and adolescents, including labour and childcare.

AEPS are considered one type of NFE in Uganda. According to the national draft AEP guidelines:

AE is aimed at ensuring a flexible, age-appropriate programme that promotes access to education in an accelerated timeframe for disadvantaged groups: overage, out-of-school children, adolescents, and youth who missed out or had their education interrupted due to poverty, marginalisation, conflict, crisis, or other constraints. AEPS are designed to reduce and remove the barriers to accessing education, leading to learners dropping out or never enrolling in school. In addition, AE recognises that older learners learn faster than younger learners and have broader background knowledge and prior experiences to draw upon in the learning process; hence, the accelerated curriculum allows them to catch up and complete an essential primary or lower secondary level education and
sit for the Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) or Uganda Certificate of Education (UCE) examinations. (Talamoi & Asiega, 2021)

Prior to the current AEP model in Uganda, there have been numerous opportunities for OOSCY to gain valuable skills, acquire an equivalent certification, and transit to the formal system. As one KII outlines:

These programmes existed before, for example, in northern Uganda after the Lords Resistance Army conflict, in Karamoja for the pastoralist community and the Rakai district corridor during the period when HIV was extremely high, and children were left orphaned by the AIDS scourge, especially among the fishing community. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level, INGO)

Various partners have been working on AEP-like programmes since the 1990s in hard-to-reach areas, conflict areas, and refugee-hosting districts where overaged out-of-school children exist. Some of the programmes that existed include:

- **Alternative Basic Education for Karamojong (ABEK)**. ABEK was launched in 1998 as an alternative education programme that allowed pastoralist communities to attain primary education with a sensitive approach to their culture. In 1997, when universal secondary education was launched, Karamoja only had 25% school enrolments. Moreover, education was not popular due to a colonial history that created a negative perception of education and a negative attitude towards education. ABEK enabled pastoralist children to study for 4 years and then transit to the formal system in Primary 5. Some of the challenges in ABEK included the use of unqualified teachers (since they were from the community); poor, irregular school attendance; lack of resources to cover other operational costs even though the government covered teachers; donor fatigue; and corruption and security issues, especially for the girls once they reached adolescence.

- **Basic Education for Urban Poverty Area (BEUPA)**. BEUPA was introduced in 1997 to cater for out-of-school children of primary-school age in poor urban areas of Kampala. The curriculum comprised both reading and numeracy and some skills education.

- **The Complementary Opportunity for Primary Education (COPE)**. Funded by UNICEF, aimed at supporting education in poorly performing districts, COPE was initiated in 1995 and by 1996 had 30 centres operational. COPE targeted children between the ages of 8 and 14 years who had never been to formal school; were disadvantaged in some way, such as orphans, the rural poor, and street children; and girls kept at home (MoES & UNICEF, 1998). It used the UPE school curriculum to facilitate student transfers to UPE schools (Huntington, 2008).

- **Empowering Life Skills Education (ELSE)**. ELSE was implemented by Action Aid in 2001 in one district to address OOSCY. It condensed the curriculum for the first five primary levels into 3 years and offered a flexible-delivery approach.

Not all the programmes described above were accelerated programmes. Some were NFE programmes providing an alternative education to those communities. Each programme had a targeted population group and was for a specific period. For example, ABEK focused explicitly on the pastoralist community of Karamoja and BEUPA on the urban out-of-school youth. Both
had different donors, partners, and project-like implementation models. Each had a curriculum adapted from the national curriculum and was developed with the bilateral donor and government. Each programme established learning centres, and the anticipation was to hand these over to the government for sustainability purposes (Hoppers, 2008).

With the introduction of UPE in 1997, which removed fees for primary education, many of these programmes were phased out, although, as the KII explains, there were many reasons why the programmes ended:

Some of these programmes ended as they attained their purpose. For example, those targeting districts with a high dropout ended when the dropout rate declined. However, for some projects, the donors just withdrew. Funding just stopped, and the government continued to do a bit. (N.8, AE regulator, national-level, government official)

The KII extract suggests that many of the programmes finished due to completing their purpose. However, their words also indicate some sustainability issues relating to NFE as programmes were disbanded. It suggests that if programmes are entirely reliant on external funding, this can impact the sustainability of programmes.

Critical reflection on the previous AEP models informed the development of a new iteration of AE in Uganda. In 2018, the AEWG facilitated a workshop in Kampala, where participants from MoES and INGOs reflected on these earlier NFE programmes and AEPs. In the workshop, participants reflected that the previous AEP curriculum did not provide a clear syllabus for inexperienced teachers to follow. Secondly, the previous AEP models did not include an explicit course to ensure learners have sufficient early literacy or numeracy skills. Additionally, the multiple language needs of the target population were not addressed. Fourthly, student textbooks for AE were not available, and teachers used standard textbooks and guides, picking sections from the various grades. Finally, participants reflected that teachers often struggled to translate the existing curriculum into clear lessons that use child-centred methodology. Consequently, many children were not learning (AEWG, 2018).

However, as a consequence, and perhaps indicative of the successes of earlier programmes, a series of policies and practices embedded in education legislation in Uganda highlight that nonformal pathways, in particular, AEP, are seen as a credible and critical intervention for disenfranchised groups.

4.2 Legislation to support Accelerated Education

With a backdrop of a long history of piecemeal NFE provision, a series of policies passed over the past 15 years have cemented AEPs as a viable educational pathway in Uganda. This includes the Sixth Schedule of Uganda’s Education Act 2008, section 49 and the Sixth Schedule, which

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49. NFE centres. (1) There shall be nonformal education centres as the Permanent Secretary, chief administrative officer or town clerk may identify for purposes of nonformal education. (2) The existing centres specified in the Sixth Schedule are formally recognised under this Act as nonformal education centres.

10 Sixth Schedule: EXISTING CENTRES. 1. Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja (ABEK); 2. Basic Education for Urban Poverty Area (BEUAPA); 3. Complementary Opportunity for Primary Education (COPE); 4. Child-centred Alternation, Non-formal Community Based Education (CHANCE); and 5. Accelerated programmes for the conflict areas
recognise AEPs as NFE mandated to provide alternative education opportunities for disadvantaged out-of-school youth in crisis-affected areas. In addition, AEPs were incorporated into the Education Act in 2020 (De Capri, 2022).

In particular, AEPs have become a critical component of Uganda’s response to the refugee population. Uganda’s policies have long been lauded as some of the most welcoming and progressive towards refugees. The application of the CRRF, which began in 2017, provided an impetus for whole-of-government ownership and leadership of the refugee response in Uganda. The CRRF provided an unprecedented and novel national arrangement, allowing humanitarian and development actors to come together to improve coordination for the support of refugees and host communities (MoES, 2018). Furthermore, the CRRF was also part of an “enabling policy environment including The Refugees Act 2006 and the Refugee Regulations 2010 … This entails a paradigm shift from a mainly humanitarian focus to developing integrated services for the long term” (De Capri, 2022).

As a result, the first multiyear ERP was developed (MoES, 2018). AEP is included in the ERP, designed within the Education Sector Strategic Plan (2017–2020). Under Objective 1, there is a clear entry point for providing quality education to refugees and host communities. The ERP has been developed through government and development partner efforts. An ERP steering committee is chaired by the permanent secretary, MoES and co-chaired by a development partner’s representative. The Secretariat coordinates partners delivering education interventions in refugee settlements aligned to the ERP. One of the areas in the ERP is the focus on accelerated education in refugee-hosting districts. The ERP is donor-funded and was used as a tool to fundraise for additional resources to address the refugee situation. The second version of ERP 2021/22–2024/25 is currently in development.

Unlike the programmes developed in the 1990s, when each was developed by the various agencies in collaboration with the government, the current AEP implementation is guided by the National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDC). NCDC has developed AE guidelines, curriculum, and principles with implementing partners. The establishment of the AE task team has informed this collaborative process, which, alongside key INGOs, included a representative from the Department of Special Needs and Inclusive Education at the MoES. Developing the guidelines and subsequent documents has been a lengthy process, as Figure 2 indicates.

In brief, an AE workshop was held to build consensus and shared understanding of AEP amongst critical stakeholders (AEWG, 2018). As a result, a task force was formed in 2019, consisting of 16 stakeholders who have been pivotal in shaping AE in Uganda (Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC] & AEWG, 2022).
Figure 2
Process of Developing AE Guidelines


Following this workshop, between 2018–2020, partners and stakeholders worked on guidelines for AEP to harmonise and provide a framework to monitor standards (NRC & AEWG, 2022; Talamoi & Asiega, 2021). In 2020, the Task Team worked with the NCDC to train and roll out the AE curriculum. This included developing a guidance note on transition, supporting the preparation of teaching guides and textbooks, harmonising placement tests, harmonising teachers’ salaries, and sharing good practices (Talamoi & Asiega, 2021). Notwithstanding, several key policy documents have remained in the draft stage for many years. For example, the NFE policy is still a draft to date; however, as one government official explained:

The national inclusive education policy is drafted and approved by the Ministry of Top Management. It will be approved by Parliament soon. (N.8, AE regulator, governmental)

This suggests optimism that jointly developed documents will be approved, such as many products and guidelines stemming from the AE Task Team. Building on the lessons learned from earlier NFE approaches, the MoES and AE Task Team have taken the lead in harmonising AEPs to ensure that the curriculum, models, and approaches are comprehensive and uniform across implementing agencies. There is a high appreciation for how far Uganda has gone in the harmonisation process and the strong coordination amongst partners.

Previously there was no curriculum, and some partners were using NRC’s curriculum. There was no guidance on implementing AEPs, yet such programmes had been around since the 1980s. Now guidelines have been developed, and stakeholders for the EiE working group and AE Task team. (N.1, AE coordinator, regional-level UN body staff)
As this section has outlined, there have been significant steps toward coordinating and consolidating AEPs in Uganda. Institutional coordination has been significant to the progression of AE in Uganda. Partners highlighted the importance of relationships, collaboration, and dedicated expertise to drive sustainable and harmonised AE. Furthermore, it has led to other developments, such as Kenya and Somalia drawing upon the good practices in coordination structures and ways of working seen in Uganda (Talamoi & Asiega, 2021).

### 4.3 AEPs in the wider landscape of opportunities for OOSCY

Having explored the growth and evolution of AEPs in the country, we now focus on current AEP or AEP-like programmes functioning in Uganda. At present, the AEP provision targets conflict-affected children (host and refugees) and provides learning opportunities, protection, and psychosocial support. In addition, these services are provided to overaged children and those who have been out of school for more than 2 years. This section aims to explore the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders involved in running, funding, regulating, and overseeing AEPs in the country, historically and at present. As part of this, we also explore how this structure might support/hinder opportunities for AEPs to function effectively at present.

#### 4.3.1 Provision and outcomes of primary and lower secondary accelerated education

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the primary school curriculum in Uganda is 7 years. The primary AEP condenses the primary school curriculum into three levels (3 years), allowing overage learners to catch up. Learners in AEPs either transition back into formal primary school based on their completed levels and, if they are the right age for the correct grade, complete all three levels and sit for the PLE and transition into formal secondary education, vocational programmes, or livelihoods. As Table 3 highlights, there are multiple reentry points into the formal education system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AE level</th>
<th>Grade equivalent</th>
<th>Grade at reintegration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AE Level 1</td>
<td>Primary Grades 1 to 3 (P1 to P3)</td>
<td>Reintegrate into P4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE Level 2</td>
<td>Primary Grades 4 and 5 (P4 and P5)</td>
<td>Reintegrate into P6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AE Level 3</td>
<td>Primary Grades 6 and 7 (P6 and P7)</td>
<td>Reintegrate into lower secondary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3
Reentry Points for Formal Education
However, whilst Table 3 illustrates there are multiple reentry points, transition rates from AEP to formal education (primary and secondary) were recorded to be extremely low (32%, n=2,971) (Provide and Equip, 2021). Of the transitions, 74% were to primary schools, 13% to secondary schools, 12% to AEP higher levels and 1% to vocational. The transition rate of female learners from AEP into secondary schools was meagre, only about 2 out of 10 learners. This meagre transition rate for female learners contrasts starkly with the wishes and aspirations of many young women (Provide and Equip, 2021). In 2018, Save the Children conducted participatory consultations with AEP learners and found that 100% of girls in Rhino and Adjumani said they would prefer to stay in AEP after completing their level. All wanted to attend secondary education (Oddy, 2019a). Female AEP learners’ poor transition rate can be attributed to having fewer secondary and vocational schools in the settlements and host communities, as well as issues of school-based, gender-based violence; early marriage; engagement in the informal market; as well as childcare commitments, all of which were noted in the consultations (Provide and Equip, 2021).

War Child Canada developed the curriculum for lower secondary with the support of NCDC, which was first tested by 169 learners and 12 teachers in Adjumani before it launched in October 2019 (Obita, 2020). Since the inception of the lower secondary AEP curriculum, Windle International Uganda and Finn Church Aid have also started to implement AEP secondary intervention in Imvepi, Rhino and Kyaka II refugee-hosting districts (Oddy, 2022). In addition, the AEP guidelines (that align with the AEWG 10 Principles for Effective Practice guidelines), developed by the AE Task Team in Uganda (and subject to approval), have also been updated to include the lower secondary AE provision (Obita, 2020).

The lower secondary AE curriculum covers the lower secondary education curriculum from Senior 1 to Senior 4 with eight examinable subjects (maths, English, biology, chemistry, physics, geography, history and religious education), plus three nonexaminable subjects (counselling, physical education, and social health). It is condensed into 2 years (Obita, 2020). At the end of the lower secondary AEP, learners sit the same UCE examinations and will receive the UNEB Certificate (Obita, 2020). In addition, there is provision for transition to traditional secondary schools and higher secondary and vocational training (Obita, 2020). The target age for lower secondary AE is 19–25 (Oddy, 2022). Learners have to be at least 19 to enrol for secondary, and no more than 24. Older earners can be considered in exceptional circumstances (Oddy, 2022).

Table 4 lists several current primary and lower secondary AEPs provided in Karamoja and the 12 refugee-hosting districts. Currently, several NGOs are implementing primary AEPs in the 12 recognised refugee-hosting districts and Karamoja, the northeastern part of Uganda. In addition, there are several individual organisations and consortiums involved in the implementation. One such consortium is the Education Consortium which came together in 2018 and, in the beginning, consisted of four INGOs with global and national expertise in education: Finn Church Aid, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), War Child Holland, and Save the Children as consortium-lead. Later, Humanity & Inclusion was added to the consortium due to its specialist skills in inclusive education for children with disabilities. Finally, under the funding from EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO) and Education Cannot Wait (ECW), a consortium to implement INCLUDE (INnovative and inCLUsive accelerated eDucation programmE) was formed. This included the following implementers: Finn Church Aid, War Child Holland, NRC, Save the Children, and Humanity & Inclusion. INCLUDE comprises several AEP primary and secondary education projects in the refugee settlements.

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1 Draft Tracer Study Report, 2019, which was conducted in three districts of Arua, Yumbe and Moyo.

2 The information above is based on what documentation was available or shared, however, this is not an exhaustive list of all partners implementing AE in Uganda. Notwithstanding, their programmes provide a snapshot of how AE is implemented.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of AEP</th>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Funder</th>
<th>Implementer</th>
<th>Settlement/district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INCLUDE (INnovative and inCLUsive accelerated eDucation programme for refugee and host-community children)</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>ECW &amp; ECHO</td>
<td>Finn Church Aid</td>
<td>Imvepi &amp; Rhino Settlement in Terego &amp; Madi Okollo District, West Nile (only secondary)—31/12/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Kyaka II Settlement in Kyegegwa District, Western Uganda (both secondary and primary)—31/12/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Save the Children International</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bidi Bidi Settlement in Yumbe District (primary only)—31/12/2021</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Humanity and Inclusion (HI)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Imvepi &amp; Rhino Settlement in Terego &amp; Madi Okollo District, West Nile—31/12/2021, 31/12/2022</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Nakivale Settlement in Isingiro District, Western Uganda—31/12/2021, 31/12/2023</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Oruchinga Settlement in Isingiro District, Western Uganda—30/6/2024</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Kyangwali Settlement in Kikuube District in South West Omugo/ Rhino Settlement in Terego &amp; Madi Okollo District, West Nile—31/12/2021, 31/12/2022</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can’t Wait to Learn (CWTL)</td>
<td>War Child Holland</td>
<td>West Nile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthening Education System Bridging Learning Loss</td>
<td>30/03/2024</td>
<td>Norwegian Embassy/ NRC</td>
<td>Save the Children International</td>
<td>Karamoja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Securing the future of South Sudan refugees, including Vulnerable children</td>
<td>31/12/2023</td>
<td>Well Spring Canada</td>
<td>War Child Canada</td>
<td>Adjumani Settlement, West Nile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of AEP</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Funder</td>
<td>Implementer</td>
<td>Settlement/district</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased access to essential skills and formal &amp; nonformal education pathways for Refugees &amp; Host adolescents in and out of school in Nakivale in Isigiro through Integrated Education</td>
<td>31/12/2022</td>
<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>War Child Canada</td>
<td>Nakivale in Isigiro District, Western Uganda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrate Child Youth Development</td>
<td>31/12/2025</td>
<td>USAID</td>
<td>Education Development Centre</td>
<td>Isingiro, Kyenjojo &amp; Bukwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting Second Chance Education for Vulnerable and Marginalised Adolescent Girls and Young Women (Pro-SEVU) Project.</td>
<td>31/12/2025</td>
<td>UN WOMEN, Spotlight Initiative, Swedish Embassy ENABLE</td>
<td>FAWE</td>
<td>14 districts in Karamoja, Teso, Bukedea, Acholi and Rwenzori region. The districts have high prevalence rates of school-drop out for girls, including: Moroto, Pader, Amuria, and Kasese districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of AEP</td>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Funder</td>
<td>Implementer</td>
<td>Settlement/district</td>
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<tr>
<td>The BRiCE/Education for Life Project</td>
<td>(2018–2022)</td>
<td>INTPA</td>
<td>Oxfam IBIS-led consortium</td>
<td>The BRiCE/Education for Life Project is a 4-year intervention implemented in the Palabek Refugee Settlement, Northern Uganda, and Greater Kapoeta, Torit, Ikwotos, and Juba, South Sudan. A consortium led by Oxfam IBIS manages the project, Education International, Oxfam Novib, Oxfam South Sudan, Oxfam in Uganda, AVSI (both in Uganda and South Sudan), Community Development Initiatives, Columbia Global Centres, Uganda National Teachers’ Union, Forum for African Women Educationists Uganda, and the Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education (LGIHE). Within the consortium, LGIHE leads the teachers’ professional development work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Secondary Education</td>
<td>Windle Trust</td>
<td>Windle Trust International</td>
<td>Windle International Uganda (WIU) implements AEP for primary and (lower) secondary school learners. The primary programme started in 2016, while the secondary intervention began in 2020. WIU also supports other partners who implement AEP in the Adjumani refugee camp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the refugee settlements, most AEP Centres are set up alongside a primary school. AEP Centres are hosted by the community or government-led schools and are occasionally standalone.

As discussed in the previous section on OOSCY, an estimated 2 million children (200,000 primary, 1.6 million secondary, and over 200,000 refugees at primary and secondary levels) are out of school. While AEPs are an option to provide basic education to OOSCY, currently, AEPs implemented by all the partners only reach an estimated 22,350 learners (10,625 female and 11,725 males). According to a KII, the figure from preliminary results since school reopened after COVID-19 closures are estimated at 11,000 (AE funder, national-level UN body staff). AEPs are reaching a minute percentage of the total OOSCY as the above programmes predominantly focus on refugees and therefore do not address the broader number of Ugandan OOSCY.

4.3.2 Funding, implementation, and regulation of AEPS

According to the World Bank (2020), Uganda’s current budget expenditure on education is among the lowest in the region. During the last 5 years, education expenditure as a share of the national budget declined in Uganda, reaching 10% in 2019/20, while the average for Sub-Saharan Africa is 16% and has been steadily increasing over the same period (World Bank, 2020). In addition, funding for AEPs is off-budget, which means AEPs are not financed or budgeted for within government budgets or held in government institutional accounts. Instead, AEPs are entirely funded by development agencies, prioritising refugee communities in the 12 refugee-hosting districts. Funders to AEPs include ECHO, ECW, NRC and UNICEF, as listed in Table 4.

Whilst the Government of Uganda, to date, has not included AEPs within its educational budget, the regulation of AE is firmly embedded within the Department for Special Needs and Inclusive Education under the MoES. The department focuses on learners with disabilities and special needs and those requiring exceptional support and modification of the traditional school setting. Hence the department also covers inclusive education, reaching those who require a modification to curricular and teaching methods to participate in learning and address barriers to their participation in learning and development. In addition, the department addresses education for refugees and those in hard-to-reach areas. Hence the department covers NFE, special schools for children with special needs and alternative education such as the AEPs. The department’s mandate is quite broad, with lean human resources and no specific resources for AEPs.

Although the department does not directly fund AEPs, the perception from government representatives and implementing partners is that they have played a key role in creating an environment for AEPs to be implemented in Uganda. Some of the critical roles played by the MoES is the coordination and spearheading of the Education Response Plan and AEPs. The government fully supports the partners’ work on AEPs within the 12 refugee-hosting districts. Although the contribution by the government cannot be easily expressed financially, it is worth noting that human resources and time are dedicated to AEPs by the government. The government has

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supported the development of the AEP guidelines, supervision and monitoring of AEPs. At the local district level, the planning and integration of the ERP are done at the district level, and AEP schools are hosted or attached to government schools. Therefore, it is evident that there is some support and goodwill for the AEPs.

An example is the government’s key role in developing the first ERP. At the government’s invitation, ECW was endorsed to provide funding to the ERP programmes. The ECW project emphasised the harmonisation of AEPs based on the AEWG 10 Principles for Effective Practice, thereby ensuring that the AEPs in Uganda are reflective of globally agreed-on good practices (De Capri, 2022). At the local government level, the district leadership plays a vital role in the day-to-day supervision and monitoring of AEP centres. However, district officials are understaffed, overwhelmed with other duties, and poorly facilitated to engage adequately in AEP activities.

Financing AEP

In addition to the INCLUDE consortium mentioned above, AEPs in Uganda are also financed independently outside the consortiums by several education partners, including UNHCR, UNICEF, UNESCO, NRC, Plan International, IRC, Windle International, AVSI, Save the Children, War Child Holland, Finn Church Aid and War Child Canada (Oddy, 2022). Like many past NFE projects that development partners have funded, there is a hope that the government will begin to take on some of the costs of running AEP centres, such as paying teachers’ salaries. However, at the same time, there is a concern that donors may suddenly stop resourcing projects, and this would affect the delivery of the programme. One KII government stakeholder noted that it is essential for partners to work in partnership with the government and phase out slowly (N.8, AE regulator, governmental). Another government stakeholder echoed this and stressed that partners should not just leave; they should continue to work with the government or leave in a phased manner (slowly). They suggested that partners stop paying teachers and then stop buying materials (N.8, AE regulator, national-level government official). Such an approach would allow the government to take over a programme slowly. However, it was not evident that any discussions are currently taking place between the development partners and government about funding.

Although there is financing for AEPs in refugee-hosting districts, it is worth noting that the demand for AEPs exceeds what is currently available. For example, one implementer explains, “Many of the classrooms have a high enrolment with up to 200 children in a class that should have 83” (N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO). Therefore, the financing for AEPs is insufficient to cover the refugee and host populations, let alone other OOSCY.

Regulation of AEPs

Currently, the government’s approach is that children out of school have opportunities to enter (or reenter) school, obtain other relevant NFE, or join the job market as unskilled labour. Alongside the MoES, the critical strategy document and mobilisation tool is the ERP which embeds the AEPs for refugees.
INGOs are led in collaboration with the 12 refugee-hosting-districts leadership (mainly the district education officers) responsible for monitoring AEP centres, including tracking enrolment, retention, completion and learning achievements. There are also efforts being made by UNICEF and the INGOs to ensure the ERP is integrated into the district plans, therefore giving more responsibility for the monitoring to the local government. However, a review of the current ERP shows that this is not entirely effective due to understaffing and lack of facilitation of district officials.

In conclusion, although much progress has been made in integrating AEPs into the national system, such as the development of the curriculum by the NCDC, the location of AEPs at government schools, and the supervision and oversight by the district education officers, a lot of the activities remain donor-funded, often run by not-for-profit organisations or NGOs and independent of the financing from the government. Therefore, the ownership and hence scalability and sustainability of AEPs are questionable.
In this section, we assess the extent to which AEPs operate in the country at present to support the objective of education for all children and youth. We use Tomaševski 4As framework (2001), which assesses the degree to which education provision is available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable to particular groups of learners. This framework helps us understand if AEPs meet the needs/demand of OOSCY.

By design of the current programmes, AEPs are mainly for refugees and those in districts hosting refugees. However, as shown in Sections 3–4, AEPs only reach a proportion of the overage OOSCY who may benefit from them; the current reach is approximately 22,000 students enrolled in AEPs. This is from an estimated 225,000 children in refugee-hosting districts and 2,000,000 nationally.

The extent to which AEPs are reaching and enrolling learners and supporting them to achieve their objectives of completing the equivalent of primary/basic education, obtaining a certificate,
and transitioning back to formal schools, is related to challenges to the availability, accessibility, acceptability, and adaptability of these programmes, as described in this section.

5.1 Availability of AEPs

Since AEPs are intended to reach OOSCY in crisis-affected areas and are hinged on the ERP, AEPs are not available to the majority of OOSCY. According to KIIs and FGDs, alongside the ERP (MoES, 2018; Provide and Equip, 2021), most AEPs are in the refugee-hosting districts. However, some KIIs suggest that accessibility is skewed towards providing education to the refugees even within these districts. For example, one national-level stakeholder commented that about 90% of the students are refugees in refugee-hosting areas. The division is slightly different in towns, with 70% of refugees and 30% from the host area (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff). From their example, it should not be surprising that most AEP students in refugee-hosting areas are from refugee backgrounds, especially if the schools are in the settlements and not in the towns, as this is where most refugees live. However, another key stakeholder noted that AEPs should also be made available in Kampala and other urban districts that host refugees, like Arua District, where there are still many refugees, as well as in mountainous, hard-to-reach and conflict areas. (N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO). The challenges to their suggestion for a wider rollout of AEPs are discussed in more detail in Section 6.2; however, it can be assumed that at present, there is a lack of AEPs in non-refugee hosting areas. As mentioned, only 22,350 learners (10,625 females and 11,725 males) were enrolled in all the AEPs by the third term of 2019.14

The AEP is considered a response just for refugees because there are concerns that more children would opt for AEPs, even if formal primary education was available, due to the perceived higher quality, shorter timeframes, and fewer costs associated with studying in a donor-supported AE centre. This is discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.

5.2 Accessibility of AEPs

Where AEPs are available, some factors both hinder and promote the accessibility of those programmes. Children and youth seeking to access AEPs are not a homogenous group. In analysing whether AEPs are accessible, this section will outline some challenges faced by different groups.

Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the majority of the AEPs have centres physically located and attached to existing government or community schools, predominantly in refugee-hosting or conflict-affected districts. One INGO representative explained the rationale behind embedding AEPs in existing schools:

This prevents the schools from being “white elephants” by attaching them to existing schools where facilities can also be shared. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

Attaching or embedding AEPs within existing schools within refugee-hosting districts reduces the costs of constructing new classrooms, facilitates reintegration into the formal education system, and makes them easily accessible. Furthermore, by the pooling of resources that AEPs, with their external funding, bring, more learners can benefit from materials such as stationery, furniture, textbooks and other scholastic materials included in project funding (Oddy, 2019a, 2022). Because AEPs are located in schools in refugee-hosting districts, they are very accessible to refugees living in those areas. As a result, project implementors cite that AEPs are in high demand. As one key informant noted,

> There are high enrolments. One class should have at least 83 students, but some have 200 students. (N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO)

Having 200 students within a class might suggest accessibility, but it also indicates that quality and individualised teaching and learning approaches are significantly compromised. Furthermore, when it comes to deciding the language of instruction for primary AEPs, having such large classes can prove challenging.

### 5.2.1 Instruction and pedagogy

One challenge to accessibility is the language of instruction in AEPs. Uganda is a multilingual country, and schools in Uganda follow an explicit language policy formulated in the White Paper of 1996 and then adapted and implemented through the curriculum reforms rolled out in 2007 (Hicks & Maina, 2018). The curriculum states that children in nursery and Primary 1–3 should be taught in their first or home language (L1) (Hicks & Maina, 2018). Primary 4 should be seen as a transition year in which children move gradually from learning the local language to learning English. This policy is now well established and accepted across Uganda; however, this becomes complicated in multilingual and refugee-hosting areas.

Recent arrivals of refugee children from South Sudan belong to the Kakwa and Pojulu ethnic groups from Central Equatoria and the Madi and Lotuko groups from Eastern Equatoria, with up to 10 different languages spoken by the refugees. In addition, there are host communities that also speak Madi and Kakwa. However, refugees do not necessarily arrive in areas with a matching language of instruction. For example, many refugee children have been previously taught a mixture of Arabic and their home language (Hicks & Maina, 2018). Thus, they struggle to transition to Uganda’s English language curriculum (from Primary 4 onwards) or the local language used as a language of instruction when different from their own. Children from the DRC also have a mix of languages, with many speaking Swahili or Lingala as a first language, depending on the area of origin. However, they have been taught in a combination of these two languages, with French as the international language for upper primary, thus increasing the incompatibility with the languages they meet in school (Hicks & Maina, 2018).

Pedagogically, AEPs are designed to include learners who have never attended school. However, in designing AEPs, there is often an assumption that learners are already fluent in the language of instruction within the class, which makes condensing a curriculum feasible. The multilingual
language situation in refugee-hosting districts was described as extraordinarily complex, with over 19 different languages represented by significant numbers of speakers (Hicks & Maina, 2018). AE implementors have sought to mitigate this by recruiting teaching assistants from various language groups to support classroom instruction (N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO). However, some participants felt that this was not enough. One KII noted:

A language-bridging programme is needed more than just the focus on AEPs—acceleration to learning a language. (N.14, AE coordinator, national-level UN body staff)

Language may or may not affect the transition between levels and the eligibility of Level 3 students to sit the PLE and transition to post-AEP vocational or secondary school options. The unique diversity in language amongst refugee and host communities in Uganda highlights the need to contextualise acceleration rates as a universal approach to condensing 3 years into 1 may not be an accessible model in contexts where students are still learning the language of instruction.

### 5.2.2 AEP and learners living with disabilities

A second area that challenges accessibility is considering how inclusive AEPs are for learners with disabilities. Within the ERP (Provide and Equip, 2021), there was limited data on children with disabilities attending AEPs, highlighting the need for AE partners to improve their monitoring and evaluation practices to capture equity markers. However, it can be assumed that there are disparities in enrolment between learners living with disabilities and those without. For example, most schools in Uganda that often house AEPs are not designed to support learners living with disabilities and accessibility needs. According to the VENA Report (October 2020), 1,219 primary schools received supportive devices. However, only 15 schools complied with Education in Emergencies (EiE) national minimum infrastructure-accessibility standards, such as ramps and adapted latrines, although 261 schools had improved accessibility (ERP Refugee Database, Term 3, 2019). In addition, students often travel significant distances by foot to attend school, which is an additional challenge, particularly for students with physical and visual impairments.

Furthermore, whilst the report noted that there has been an improvement in recent years on accessibility for learners with disabilities, findings from KIIs, FGD respondents, and the ERP (2021) report indicated that discrimination remains (Provide and Equip, 2021). This includes stigmatisation/fear of abuse from peers; negative attitudes from peers, teachers, and communities; poor health conditions; lack of specific schools for some persons with disabilities, like the blind and those with speech impairment; lack of Special Needs Education (SNE) teachers for persons with specific disabilities; and a lack of assistive devices. A needs assessment of out-of-school children in Palbek settlement revealed that 16% of nonenrolment or dropout cases are children with physical and mental disabilities. These children experience multiple forms of exclusion, such as physical, social, economic, and attitudinal barriers (AVSI, 2018, as cited in Oddy, 2019a).
5.2.3 AEPS and child-headed households

Thirdly, many AEP learners are unaccompanied and separated in child-headed households and are young parents (Oddy, 2019a). However, emerging evidence indicates that some AEPS are accessible for young parents. In a study conducted in 2019, 83% of the teacher focus groups stated that AEPS welcomed child mothers, highlighting that AEPS offer some of the most marginalised children a second chance at education. Notwithstanding, 100% of teachers stated that girls were most at risk of not completing an AEP due to early marriage, pregnancy, cultural beliefs that place a higher value on boys’ education than girls, and the perceived risk of exposure to sexual exploitation and abuse through the school environment. This corroborated accounts/observations shared by children and families (Oddy, 2019a). Unless targeted interventions address these issues, the girls’ education attainment gap will remain (Oddy, 2019a).

In summary, primary AEPS, in general, are accessible; however, there is a clear need for targeted support for different marginalised groups. Notwithstanding, many children perceived AEPS to be of higher quality and more inclusive, and appreciated the flexible timetable which allows for part-time work (Oddy, 2019a). Furthermore, as highlighted by the INGO, most notably for learners, there are no financial costs associated with AE. The length of time is shortened, resulting in little incentive to transition back into the formal primary school system (Oddy, 2019a).

5.3 Acceptability of AEPS

AEPS are acceptable to the government (at all levels), offering an opportunity to the refugee populations who have undergone conflict, are overaged and who have missed out on education. The curriculum is developed and approved by government agencies. They are also acceptable to the local government responsible for implementing education at the local level. Notwithstanding, although there is supportive legislation for AE, there is a concern that it could challenge the traditional primary education model if AE were expanded more widely. As one interviewee explained:

AEP is convenient. The normal system you do 7 years, AEP is 3 years and exam, and in the fourth year you join secondary. Some children will take the short cut. (N.4, AE regulator, government)

The concern that students will elect to “take a shortcut” indicates a need for more clarity on whom AEPS are targeting. However, action is underway to clarify the aims and scope of AE in Uganda. For example, In February 2022, the AE Task Team held a workshop on the AEP guidelines. This was a welcome step in harmonising and standardising AE provisions across Uganda. Furthermore, the progress made by the AEWG has highlighted the importance of institutional coordination and how the MoES’s engagement and participation in this has led to a robust and harmonised approach to AE.
However, a few areas still need clarification to enable AEPs to be widely accepted. For example, there is no district-level budget, yet the district officials are heavily engaged in the programme. The Uganda National Examinations Board [UNEB] requires a candidate to have done 4 years of secondary before doing the final exam (and yet under AEP, they would have done 2 years only); however, this is currently being reviewed. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

The statement suggests that barriers still need to be addressed within Ugandan education frameworks and policies. However, previous sections of this report have highlighted comprehensive legislation supporting AEPs; adjustments, such as UNEB requirements, need to be made before lower secondary AEP is accepted. Nevertheless, promisingly, the extract indicates that a review is underway.

The collaborative nature of the AEP curriculum design process, in partnership with multiple stakeholders and the NCDC, is another indication that it is an accepted model by key government stakeholders in Uganda. As one KII explained:

The process and content of the curriculum were very good. The harmonisation process enabled us to discuss what the content should be. The standardisation helped us understand whom we should enrol in AEPs and the process for equating. Cluster coordination also brings the education working group at the district level on board, including the government counterparts. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

As a result of that input, the curriculum and the AEP package of services comprises abridged versions of the national curriculum, life-skills teaching, and psychosocial support and protection services that are mainly geared towards refugee students. 15 In addition, there are guidelines for AEPs, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), and other measures for monitoring AEP. This ensures standardisation and close supervision. Furthermore, the curriculum has also gone through technical reviews by multiple stakeholders to ensure its relevance. As a result, there is wide acceptance by government stakeholders, INGOs, and external donors of the current primary and lower secondary AEP model.

5.3.1 Transition to secondary education

One of the primary stated goals of AE in Uganda is a return to formal education. For many AE learners, especially those completing primary AE, the objective is to return to formal secondary schooling. However, low transition rates back into formal education, especially secondary, suggests that the goal of transitioning may not be the appropriate goal or at least is hindered by factors in the broader context in which AEPs are situated. One of the reasons for low transition rates is that there are fewer secondary and vocational schools in the settlements and host communities, affecting the transition from AEP into secondary (Provide and Equip, 2021).

Some stakeholders attributed the low transition to formal education to financial barriers. As highlighted by one INGO staff member,

Some students do not want to transition because, in the AEPs, the fees are covered, the examination costs are covered, the equating of certificates costs are covered, the AEPs focus on protection and mothers are given support for the home (mat, porridge, and toys). (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

In addition, because there are limited post-AEP opportunities and students do not participate in employment, there is a risk of social exclusion. The Exploring Transition study (Oddy, 2019b) recommends exploration and prioritisation of post-AEP pathways, including access to secondary and accredited vocational training. Relatedly, some AEP learners consider themselves too old and opt to join income-generating activities (Provide and Equip, 2021), given that facilities are not there.

Furthermore, for all students, there are hidden costs to transition. Administratively, there are minimum standards set by the examination and admission bodies for the transition from AEP to formal education and entry into secondary AEPs. Obtaining previous qualifications, equating, and translating results is costly. There have, however, been developments in this area with ECW funding. There is an effort to standardise the process among the concerned bodies, namely the examination body (UNEB), the funders and the school. For some refugees, where conflict still exists in their home country, it is not easy to obtain or get timely responses to education references and verification by Ugandan authorities.

For female AE learners, in particular, the poor transition rate can be attributed to having fewer secondary and vocational schools in the settlements and host communities, as well as issues of school-based, gender-based violence, early marriage, and engagement in the informal market, as well as childcare commitments, all of which were noted in the consultations (Provide and Equip, 2021).

5.3.2 AEPs or other alternative pathways

Despite AEPs being largely accepted as an alternative response to meet the needs of OOSCY, mainly of refugees, some partners have noted that vocational education may be a more viable option for engaging OOSCY. As one KII noted:

AEP is one option, but there are other options. For example, vocational skills training. It is more viable. Students can be taken directly to vocational institutions and attached to local artisans, especially those 18–24 years, while those 10–18 years can go through AEP. However, the choice between AEP or vocational depends on funding and the interest of the refugee community. (N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO)

While few studies have documented vocation-education pathways for OOSCY in Uganda, some evidence suggests that many children prefer secondary education. For example, a study highlighted that almost 100% of boys and girls stated that post AEP, they want to transition to
secondary education (Oddy, 2019a). However, all children, teachers and parents highlighted that this is “near impossible” in the settlements due to the lack of secondary schools and few INGOs supporting the postprimary opportunities (Oddy, 2019a). Recently, a lower secondary AEP has been established. Whilst there is no evidence to date (due to the nascent stage of the programme) of the acceptability of lower secondary with regard to transition to senior high school or university level, due to the way that it was jointly developed, it can be assumed that it will be widely accepted.

5.4 Adaptability of AEPs

The AEP has been specifically developed for learners who would otherwise find it challenging to enrol and complete primary school, and, thus, it aims to be a flexible and adaptable model. For example, War Child Canada highlighted that almost all lower secondary AEP learners are parents with young children requiring early childhood education within its programmes. Consequently, students’ access to childcare provisions will be critical to continuing their education (Oddy, 2022).

In terms of adaptability, the primary curriculum was developed first in a participatory manner and is now being implemented in AEP centres by multiple partners. Similarly, just as the lower secondary curriculum was developed closely with the NCDC and War Child Canada, it is currently being piloted by several different partners with expansion plans.

However, some individuals felt the AEP curriculum could be contextualised further to suit different communities.

AEP needs to be contextualised further; for example, a fisherman integrates AEP learning into their lifestyle; Karamoja with its mobile community and refugees require protection and psychosocial support. The learning context can be generic and specific. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

There is a lack of evidence of whether AEPs suit the needs of the different marginalised communities which it intends to serve. For example, a study in 2019 by Save the Children highlighted that, within its AEP centres, most students were from unaccompanied and separated households (Oddy, 2019a). While it was promising that children from a particular marginalised group were included, other children, such as those with disabilities, continue to be underrepresented in education programming and research. This raises questions around accessibility, and AEP providers also need to reflect on whether the current models are adaptable to a range of intersecting learner needs.
SECTION 6

UNDERSTANDING THE WIDER CONTEXTS
INFLUENCING THE ABILITY OF AEPS TO
MEET THE NEEDS OF OOSCY

Considering what has been discussed in previous sections, this section explains why AEPS might not be as available, acceptable, adaptable and accessible to OOSCY as they could or should be. Within this analysis, we situate AEPS within the broader political economy of education in Uganda. We explore how AEPS are constrained by resourcing and decision making around the needs of OOSCY, as well as the levels of political ownership and will which exist for ensuring the right to quality education for recognised groups of OOSCY.

6.1 Underestimation of the scope and need for AEPS

One of the main drivers of the low availability of AEPS is that stakeholders, the government in particular, underestimate the need for AEPS. This is for three main reasons. First, AEPS are perceived as an appropriate educational response for refugees but not Ugandan nationals. Therefore, AEPS are only provided in refugee-hosting districts, and out-of-school Ugandans do not have access to a similar alternative pathway. Second, there is a poor understanding of the numbers and profiles of OOSCY, and third, the numbers of OOSCY and the number of those overage have dramatically increased due to COVID-19.

6.1.1 Perception of AEPS

The research shows that the expansion of AEPS beyond refugee-hosting districts is currently not planned for. The government’s pathways for out-of-school Ugandan nationals prioritise informal skills development as a viable option to attain skills and establish an income-generation activity.

Some stakeholders think that the MoES should open AEP admissions beyond the refugee-hosting districts to address out-of-school children. However, it is still unclear if this is a feasible option. As one key informant noted:

There is still a lot of awareness-raising and advocacy needed. However, government can expand AEPS, and donors should support if the government decides on targeted groups.

(N.11, AE implementer, national-level INGO)
The KII interview suggests some hesitancy on the part of the government to expand AEPs, and that more advocacy is needed to raise awareness of AEPs’ impact. Furthermore, there needs to be an increased collaboration with external partners for AEPs to be extended (and financed) beyond refugee-hosting areas to other marginalised groups. However, other stakeholders perceive that recently, AEPs have been viewed more positively by the government. As one national implementor noted:

> Currently, with COVID-19, there has been more buy-in from the government and over time, the district has accepted the programme. However, they are afraid of learners moving to AEP instead of doing many years in primary and secondary. With AEP, you can do even 5 years instead of 11. Therefore, there is a need to capture sufficient evidence before enrolling a student. (N.3, AE implementor, national-level INGO staff)

The KII indicates that without sufficient data that demonstrates the impact and success outcomes of AEP, there remains resistance to the rollout of the model more widely. Furthermore, AEP significantly reduces the average time that students in Uganda take to progress through the traditional system, which, from the KII, appears to have led to a degree of resistance. However, as the next section will outline in more detail, in the wake of COVID-19 school closures, there is a growing recognition by key stakeholders that the AEP is a feasible and in-demand model.

### 6.2 Impact of COVID-19

All schools in Uganda were closed for 2 years due to the outbreak of COVID-19, reopening on the 10th of January 2022. Whilst there has been much focus on the learning-loss associated with school closures, it is critical to note that many students would have also lost family members, may have been ill themselves and may be living with or supporting those living with long-COVID effects. In addition, there is the unacknowledged and unknown psychosocial impact of school closures globally. Furthermore, the financial impact of COVID-19 may have exacerbated poverty levels, pushing more students towards AEPs.

Emerging statistics indicate that the pandemic aggravated an already significant problem in Uganda—that many children and youth are overage for their grades. For example, 39% of P1 children surveyed in August 2021 were 8 years old, compared to 33% in 2018. The right age for P1 is 6–7 years (Uwezo Uganda, 2021). This increase in overage students suggests a population that may benefit significantly from AEPs, if they drop out of school due to being overage.

Furthermore, COVID-19 may have exacerbated the number of students out of school. There were disparities between marginalised groups that dropped out compared to nonmarginalised groups. As Uwezo Uganda (2021) outlined in their study,

> Among 4–16-year-old children who had dropped out of school, those with vision, walking and memory difficulties were a more significant proportion compared to those in the general population. For example, 5.8% of 4–16-year children who reported to have dropped out had vision difficulties compared to 3.8% of children with vision difficulty in the general population. This indicates that such children need education and health interventions to participate in and complete their basic education. (para. 3)
Emerging data from numerous studies, including the FAWE Uganda Chapter (2021) report, has shown that girls aged 10–24 years seeking antenatal services increased by 22%. Among girls aged 10–14 years, pregnancies increased by 366.5% in 2020. Although the MoES has guidelines that allow pregnant girls to return to school, there could be a surge in the number of young mothers seeking AEPs (FAWE Uganda Chapter, 2021). One stakeholder indicated that the pregnancy rates are higher than reported and may be up to 300% for girls aged 10–14 years. Additionally, many schools (particularly private schools) were forced to close permanently during the pandemic. As a result, over 3,000 elementary and nearly 1,000 high schools are expected to permanently close (Gudel, 2022). Consequently, more students may need AEPs.

During the 2 years of school closures, AEP implementors integrated a wide range of adaptations to support learning. This included setting up small learning circles, developing home-learning packages, and using SMS and radio (Oddy, 2022). Notwithstanding, as the MoES representative to the AE Task Team noted, condensing the already condensed curriculum with home-learning content has been particularly challenging (Oddy, 2022).

In light of the complex challenges facing AE learners, the MoES representative to the AE Task Team outlined ongoing actions to support AEP learners as schools reopen in January 2022. These adaptations included:

1. Instructional time for all AEP learners will be extended once schools resume.
2. AE learners will stay on track with their corresponding formal school system counterparts and transition accordingly.
3. The ministry will identify all previously trained NFE teachers and engage them again (government proposal).
4. Teachers/instructors will be reoriented for multigrade adaptation skills.
5. AEP providers will submit AEP home-learning and post-COVID-19 plans for harmonisation.
6. With partners supporting AEP and other NFE programmes, the department plans to conduct radio/TV sensitisation programmes to increase the opportunity for all overage out-of-school learners.
7. Teachers will be trained in handling and teaching condensed content.
8. Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities in schools should be prioritised because COVID-19 numbers are bound to surge.
9. Learners, families, and communities will be informed, consulted, engaged, and accountable.
10. Approval of the AE guidelines will be prioritised and an ongoing process. The guidelines have been so far presented at three levels and approved. The following critical level is the Education Sector Consultative Committee (ESCC).

Finally, to date, there is a lack of evidence regarding how school closures have specifically impacted AEPs; however, based on general trends, it can be assumed that they have exacerbated the need for AEPs and disproportionality impacted already disadvantaged groups, which are targeted for AEPs.
6.3 Resourcing of AEPs

The second major challenge to the availability and accessibility of AEPs is funding. As highlighted earlier in the report, financing for AEPs is currently off-budget, with the vast majority of funding support from development partners who work through implementing partners. However, the funding of AEPs must be understood within the wider political economy of education financing in Uganda. In general, education funding in Uganda has decreased in recent years. A report by Action Aid, published in 2020, highlighted that to finance SDG 4, the UN recommends that at least 15%–20% of the budget goes to education, or 4%–6% of GDP. However, in 2019–2020, only 10.9% of Uganda’s budget share (and 2.4% of GDP) went to education (Action Aid, 2020). The authors of this report are not privy to the reasons behind the decrease in funding in recent years; however, Action Aid’s (2020) report indicates that Uganda needs to find new ways to increase its public spending capacity urgently: this is increasingly important given that debt servicing is draining critical revenues, with this standing at 13% in 2020. In a landscape where education funding, on the whole, is shrinking, it can be assumed, on the part of the government, that taking on the financing of AEPs is not feasible.

However, as a consequence of the lack of centralised financing for AEPs, the ERP shows that only a proportion of those who require AEPs in refugee-hosting districts benefit from AEPs (MoES, 2018). Therefore, given the limited resources, the availability of AEPs is hampered. The sustainability or continuity of these programmes is also questionable because the AEP activities are not integrated into the national budget. Although 42% of the AEP centres are within government schools, critical costs like most teachers’ salaries and learning materials are donor-funded (MoES, 2018). However, it would be prudent to assume that the Government of Uganda does not contribute towards refugee education. As Schalit (2018) noted, there are significant indirect costs of Uganda’s refugee population such as land and ecosystem loss, in addition to energy and water consumption.

In addition to the lack of government funding for AEPs, the lack of teachers is another major resource challenge to sustainability. One of the critical resources for AE provision concerns the availability of qualified teachers. In refugee-hosting areas, teacher attrition is high (Oddy, 2019a). Teaching conditions, including remuneration and benefits, need to improve to retain staff (Oddy, 2019a). In addition, pay is one of the most frequently identified challenges across all sites related to the physical infrastructure and classroom environment. Poorly constructed classrooms, and lack of desks and WASH facilities were detrimental to an enabling AEP environment (Oddy, 2019a).

In recent years, there have been increased resources supported by the AE Task Team to improve teaching and learning in AEPs. For example, Oxfam IBIS partnered with Luigi Giussani Institute of Higher Education, a teacher-training specialist college, for the BRICE-funded consortium’s teacher professional development (TPD) component and Uganda National Teachers Union (UNATO), with other consortium members contributing (Oddy, 2022). In designing the TPD, the consortium tried to look at the global best practice and take it to the project level. The TPD developed builds on the Teachers in Crisis Contexts contextualised for East Africa. FAWE wrote the modules on gender, protection, and the Teacher’s Code of Conduct. The TPD is accredited and counts toward two thirds of college credit. The modules are also new to the teachers who train the AE teachers. They
will continue to train all teachers who come to the college, which will result in many teachers beyond those working on AEPs being trained in the methodology (Oddy, 2022). It was noted that, in Uganda, most teachers are not members of the union, particularly those working during emergencies. Oxfam IBIS noted that collaborating with UNATO has been vital in advocating for teachers who work in refugee camps to be paid the same as teachers in government schools. As a result, in 2020, the salaries were increased, and teachers were paid more. However, this does not extend to refugee teachers who are not on the government payroll (Oddy, 2022).

Notwithstanding, 2 years of school closures have hugely impacted Uganda’s teaching profession. It has been reported that many teachers left the profession during the pandemic (Gudel, 2022). There is no data available to indicate how the shortage of teachers specifically impacts AEPs; however, it can be assumed there is a need for more resources to be put towards recruiting, training and retaining teachers in or coming to the profession.
SECTION 7
CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

In this final section, we reflect upon the key findings discussed in Sections 3 through 6 and make recommendations for the AEWG and national stakeholders working in AE to address and overcome obstacles or bottlenecks in the funding, regulation, and provision of AEPs to meet the needs and demands of OOSCY.

Uganda has a well-established and well-coordinated approach to AE, with partners working in consortiums to streamline practices and develop sector-wide standards. The impact of COVID-19 has highlighted the key roles that communities have in supporting AEPs. The range of initiatives across the partners has meant AE learners have access to some education, despite country-wide school closures. In addition, the development of the AE guidelines stemming from the AEWG Workshop in 2018 demonstrated a wide range of stakeholders’ commitments to delivering high-quality AE responses.
Some key trends emerge from this study. Firstly, the OOSCY problem is not only a refugee problem. It is an issue that affects all children in Uganda. Currently, most AEPs only cater to OOSCY in refugee-hosting districts, therefore not giving the opportunity of a pathway to all OOSCY in the country who may wish to enrol (only about 20,000 of the 2 million OOSCY are being reached). In addition, only a proportion of those who require AEPs in refugee-hosting districts benefits from AEPs, affecting their availability.

The AEP needs to be reorientated towards a wider OOSCY population while offering contextualised approaches to support the diverse range of students who may need AEPs. There is also an opportunity to expand AEPs to nationals within the settlement districts and refugees in the urban and Kampala setting, which is currently not provided. Notwithstanding, challenges exist in the expansion of AEPs. As outlined in the study, concerns have been raised that a broader rollout of AEPs could result in more students opting to follow this model of education, as opposed to the traditional, formal primary and secondary education routes. Additionally, there would be considerable costs in implementing AEPs for a broader population. Yet, there is still an unmet need in existing AEP coverage, and, to date, AEPs rely exclusively on external funding. For AEPs to be sustainable and not vulnerable to external decisions regarding funding, further dialogue between development partners and the Government of Uganda is needed to explore possibilities for the government to absorb costs such as construction, teacher recruitment and capitation grants for secondary school access.

Secondly, although INGO partners have widely embraced AEPs, there are still evidence gaps regarding the efficiency of programmes. For example, the low transition rate from AEP back into the formal or secondary level suggests that whilst AEP is a model for some; it still does not meet the needs of all OOSCY. More needs to be done to ensure AEPs are gender-responsive, linguistically relevant and inclusive of children with a wide range of disabilities. The evidence suggests that the AEP needs to be contextualised further for marginalised groups to ensure that it is inclusive and equity-centred. Nevertheless, the introduction of the lower secondary AEP offers an exciting opportunity for learners to transition and continue their educational journeys, and may serve as a model both nationally and internationally.

Thirdly, in light of Uganda’s 2-year school closures, many more students may now be considered overage and eligible for AEP. Furthermore, for AEP learners, school closures may have adversely impacted their already disjointed education pathway. All partners noted a wide range of adaptations to support learning in light of national school closures, and many of these practices could be continued as schools have resumed. Increasing academic and nonacademic support may be needed to ensure that children and youth do not drop out of the system once again.

7.1 Recommendations for the AEWG

Through the AE Task Team, which the AEWG has continuously worked with and supported, there are many opportunities to engage with crucial education stakeholders regarding AEP.

Recommendation 1: Increase research and evidence on the need for and impact of primary and lower secondary AEPs for marginalised groups. AEPs are positioned as a viable route for traditionally excluded groups. However, disaggregated data are scarce on the numbers
and rates of OOSCY (especially post-COVID-19 school closures) and the enrolment, transition and completion rates of young parents, caregivers, children with disabilities, and those that transitioned from French or Arabic education systems. For the case for AEP expansion to be made, further data would be needed.

**Recommendation 2:** In conjunction with the MoES, the AE Task Team in Uganda, the AEWG should seek funding to pilot innovative approaches and adaptations to the AEP model. The AE Task Team and the AEWG have long collaborated as new opportunities arise, such as the World Bank’s funding of secondary education and the development of the second draft of the ERP; there are multiple opportunities to participate and inform the new iterations of AE policies and practices. Due to the significant amount of investment in AEPs and Uganda’s enabling institutional coordination mechanisms and buy-in, there are possibilities to pilot test approaches that could support young people’s AEP experience. For example, **language-bridging programmes** are needed to ensure that the multilingual, multiethnic AEP cohorts have the language skills necessary to complete the AEP curriculum. Additionally, **there could be opportunities to provide more vocational skills within the AE curriculum** given the financial constraints for further education; having skills creates an avenue for opportunities in job creation.

**Recommendation 3:** Expansion of AEPs. The AEWG, AE Task Team should continue to explore the possibility of supporting the MoES to roll out AEPs to other groups of marginalised and disadvantaged learners. In the wake of COVID-19, there may be more opportunities to initiate this. Furthermore, this could be an opportunity for the MoES to build AEPs into its annual budget.
### 8.1 Annex 1: List of Interviews

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8.2 Annex 2: List of Documents Reviewed

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The Education (Pre-primary, Primary and Post-primary) Act 2008.


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