

Tetra Tech International Development

Independent Evaluation of the Girls' Education Challenge Phase II – Lessons Learned Study

February 2025



Tetra Tech International Development – Independent Evaluation of the Girls’ Education Challenge Phase II – Lessons Learned Study

Client Name: Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

Project Name: Independent Evaluation of the GEC Phase II

Contract Number: PO 10019

Partners:

- Research and Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre at the University of Cambridge
- Fab Inc

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February 2025

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Acknowledgements

The study team is grateful to the various partners and individuals who have contributed to this report.

Tetra Tech International Development Europe: Simon Griffiths, Programme Director; Louise Cathro, Programme Manager, and Robyn Nuttall, Assistant Programme Manager. Primary data analysis was supported by: Pierre Canet, Hannah Allroggen, and Kaarujan Kanthalingham.

Strategic Partners, Academic Partners and Experts: Members of the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, members of the Fund Manager team, and academic partners and experts for taking time to participate in key informant interviews over the course of this study to facilitate primary data collection.

Implementing Partners (IPs) and External Evaluators: for participating in focus group discussions over the course of the study to facilitate primary data collection.

Evaluation Studies Working Group (ESWG), comprising members of the Independent Evaluation team, Fund Manager and the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and an Independent Advisor, for providing their written and verbal feedback at various stages of the report.

Acronyms

AGES	Adolescent Girls Education in Somalia
AI	Artificial Intelligence
EE	External Evaluator
EGMA	Early Grade Mathematics Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EM	Evaluation Manager
FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
FM	Fund Manager
GEC I	Girls’ Education Challenge Phase I
GEC II	Girls’ Education Challenge Phase II
GEC-T	GEC Transition Window
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
GWD	Girls with Disabilities
ICAI	Independent Commission for Aid Impact
IE	Independent Evaluation
IP	Implementing Partner
IW	Innovation Window
KII	Key Informant Interview
KLQ	Key Learning Question
KMWG	Knowledge Management Working Group
LNGB	Leave No Girl Behind
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
MGCubed	Making Ghanaian Girls Great
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PbR	Payment by Results

PiP	Portfolio in Practice
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
RAPID	“Recommend, Agree, Perform, Input, and Decide” framework
RRLF	Rapid Research & Learning Fund
SCW	Step Change Window
SeGMA	Secondary Grade Math Assessment
SeGRA	Secondary Grade Reading Assessment
SOMGEP	Somali Girls Education Promotion Programme
SP	Strategic Partner
SPW	Strategic Partnership Window
SRO	Senior Responsible Owner
SWS	Structured Web Search
ToR	Terms of Reference
UKFIET	United Kingdom Forum for International Education and Training
UNGEI	United Nations Girls’ Education Initiative
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
ROSA	Regional Office of South Asia
VfM	Value for Money
WASH	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

Executive Summary

Background and objectives

This is the ninth and final study produced by the Independent Evaluation of the Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) Phase II and focuses on the lessons learned from both Phase I and Phase II of the GEC. The GEC, funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), is the largest global girls' education initiative to date, and is implemented across multiple countries with the aim of improving educational opportunities for marginalised girls.

The primary objective of this study is to assess how the GEC evolved in its approach to reaching marginalised girls and its approach to evaluation and learning. The study is framed by two overarching Key Learning Questions (KLQs) and six underlying sub-questions as follows:

KLQ 1 – How and why did the approach to reaching the most marginalised change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes and related recommendations for future education programmes?

- 1.1. How did the approach to reaching marginalised girls change at the programme level over its lifecycle?
- 1.2. What trade-offs did the programme face in the aim to reach the marginalised? (e.g. reaching the largest numbers versus the most difficult to reach; cost of reaching different groups). How and why did this change?

KLQ 2 – How and why did the approach to evaluation and learning generated by the IE, Fund Manager (FM) and Implementing Partners (IPs) change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes?

- 2.1. How did the FCDO's evaluation and learning needs change over the lifetime of the GEC programme? What were the main drivers for these changes?
- 2.2. How did the GEC's approach to evaluation and learning change over the course of the GEC to respond to the changes in evaluation and learning needs and/ or changes in the programme's operating context? And with what effect in terms of the evidence that was produced by the IE, FM and IPs?
- 2.3. How did the different approaches taken to evaluation and learning by the IE, FM and IPs over the lifecycle of the programme contribute to stakeholder audiences' understanding of the GEC's performance and impact?
- 2.4. To what extent was evaluation and learning generated by the IE, FM, and IPs during GEC I and during GEC II used by the FCDO and wider partners and stakeholders to inform decision-making in girls' education programmes and policy?

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, drawing on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data collection included 34 semi-structured key informant interviews and two focus group discussions with stakeholders from the FCDO, the FM, IPs and External Evaluators.

A structured document review was conducted to synthesise findings from key programme reports, evaluation studies, and thematic learning papers produced over the GEC's lifetime. Additionally, a structured web search was undertaken to track how GEC evidence has been used by external stakeholders.

The main limitations for the study included recall bias from stakeholders due to the retrospective nature of the study, potential social desirability bias in responses, and concerns about the study's independence given that the authors have been involved in the GEC in a variety of ways. To mitigate recall bias, interview tools included prompts for self-assessment, findings were cross-checked with secondary evidence, and institutional memory from experienced team members was leveraged. Concerns about social desirability bias were minimised as respondents had little incentive to present overly positive views, and interviews indicated openness in responses.

To address potential biases in the study's independence, measures included conducting interviews with team members who had little to no involvement in both phases of the GEC, engaging a broader range of stakeholders including IPs, and ensuring transparency in analysis through peer reviews and validation workshops. In addition, given this is a study on lessons learned, the insights from members of the independent evaluation team who have had longstanding engagement in the GEC is potentially valuable.

KLQ1: Key Findings and Lessons - GEC's approach to marginalisation

The GEC focused on marginalisation from the outset, as apparent in both the Phase I and Phase II Business Cases. The Phase I Business Case definition identified characteristics of marginalised girls who were out of school or at risk of dropping out. The definition provided flexibility for IPs to set their own selection criteria for beneficiaries, based on marginalisation in the local context.

The Challenge Fund approach encouraged flexibility and innovation from IPs. The GEC outlined key outcomes while allowing flexibility in designing interventions. IPs were able to justify their target groups and tailor interventions according to the local context. This approach acknowledged that educational marginalisation varies widely and encouraged innovative, context-specific solutions and targeting strategies. This adaptability ensured interventions were tailored to the unique challenges faced by marginalised girls across different local and country contexts.

Overall, IPs effectively reached a large number of marginalised girls, and this was strengthened over the course of the GEC. They were most successful when they engaged with national government stakeholders to identify locations where marginalised girls resided and collaborated with local or sub-national and community stakeholders including religious and community leaders, to effectively target marginalised girls within those localities.

There were some challenges in identifying and reaching marginalised girls in certain settings stemming from the challenges in availability data that either did not capture information on the marginalised or was inaccurate. The data used by IPs during the selection process for Phase I did not therefore always capture the overlapping complexities of marginalisation, meaning that IPs did not always target the 'most' marginalised. Hard-to-reach locations and socio-cultural factors also hindered efforts.

The introduction of Payment by Results (PbR) in 2013 aimed to improve accountability by linking payments to learning outcomes but, in some cases, led projects to prioritising easier-to-reach girls over the most marginalised. The introduction of PbR required projects to demonstrate measurable outcomes, including reaching a target number of girls and improving their learning outcomes. This had the unintended adverse effect of disincentivising IPs from focusing on the most marginalised and hardest to reach girls due to the higher cost per beneficiary and the greater challenges of improving their learning.

Providing in-depth support to marginalised girls incurs high costs but can nonetheless provide Value for Money. High-cost interventions targeting the most marginalised girls can result in quantifiable gains in literacy and numeracy and in girls re-joining formal schooling, thereby providing Value for Money. Higher cost interventions required for supporting the most marginalised can have unintended and intended positive spillover effects for the wider community. The spillover effects included improved vaccination rates, postponed marriages, and increased awareness of reproductive health.

There was a perceived exclusion of boys, and subsequently, the GEC faced some backlash. Whilst the projects focused their targeting on girls, in most cases, boys benefited from project activities alongside girls even if they were not the primary target. The GEC's targeted approach created perceptions of inequity, especially for boys with similar vulnerabilities. This was especially evident in cases where financial or material support was provided. These perceptions led, in some instances, to feelings of resentment and acts of resistance at the community level

Working with marginalised girls necessitated even stronger safeguarding standards and was a key priority for the GEC, particularly in Phase II. The programme's strong safeguarding standards, with a significant focus on gender-based violence and gender discrimination, ensured girls' protection and fostered community trust by addressing cultural barriers. To uphold the FCDO's Do No Harm approach, especially in conflict-affected areas, effective safeguarding measures were essential. Safeguarding processes became more robust and a stronger focus that evolved over time, especially in Phase II.

KLQ 1: Discussion and Recommendations – GEC's approach to marginalisation

Discussion

Identifying groups experiencing overlapping and complex marginalisation requires good quality, disaggregated data to identify and reach them. Programmes require good quality disaggregated data to understand how different factors intersect to marginalise a girl from education; and then inform the design of tailored strategies enabling girls and communities to overcome or mitigate for them. Data available to Implementing Partners

during the selection process for Phase I did not always capture the overlapping complexities of marginalisation or were insufficiently accurate, including due to sample sizes. This meant that identifying and subsequently targeting such 'hidden' groups was challenging.

Identifying, reaching and supporting marginalised groups incurs higher costs because of the contexts in which they live and the complex set of factors that marginalises them from education. The GEC has demonstrated the challenges of targeting, reaching and supporting marginalised groups, that often requires higher costs to support them given the individualised and tailored support required. Understanding the costs of supporting marginalised girls is an important step in assessing approaches to reaching marginalised groups that are cost effective.

PbR created an adverse incentive for programmes that hindered the focus on supporting marginalised girls who were harder to reach. The key potential risk of using payment mechanisms such as PbR as a funding mechanism was the adverse effect of undermining efforts to reach the marginalised girls and instead incentivising projects to focus on easier-to-reach populations. The removal of PbR in Phase II for the LNGB Window enabled a shift towards more innovative and inclusive strategies, emphasising the importance of addressing the intersectionality of marginalisation and the unique needs of diverse marginalised groups.

A flexible definition of marginalisation allows programmes to identify marginalised girls based on a context-specific assessment of overlapping factors. The GEC used a flexible definition of marginalisation that enabled projects to identify and target girls who were marginalised within their context. A standard definition of marginalisation applied across different country and local contexts, would not have been the most appropriate because of the complex variations in the ways girls are marginalised.

Engaging local communities and stakeholders is critical in successfully reaching and supporting marginalised girls. The GEC achieved notable successes in reaching marginalised girls, primarily through collaborative efforts with national and local stakeholders, which facilitated context-specific strategies. These successes highlight the effectiveness of tailored interventions that engage local communities in identifying and supporting the most vulnerable populations.

Taking a gendered approach in designing interventions ensures that gender social norms are considered in the support provided. Programmes that exclusively target girls in communities in which there are boys who are also highly vulnerable, risk creating perceptions of inequity and heighten the potential for acts of resistance at the community level. GEC projects that adopted an approach to addressing gender norms were successful in including boys and in understanding how attitudes and behaviours of men and boys could affect girls' education and employment opportunities.

Explicitly considering the scale of a programme's reach with the need to support marginalised groups is a critical part of the design and target-setting process. Throughout the GEC, challenges emerged in terms of balancing the scale of outreach desired with the depth of support needed for marginalised girls. The disparity between the targets set in terms of the number of girls to be reached, and the contextual and financial realities of supporting marginalised girls, highlights the need to balance programme ambitions for scale with the cost and expertise needed to support marginalised girls.

Incorporating interventions that target marginalised girls along with systemic improvements benefit all learners ensuring that no one is left behind. The programme's focus on both targeted interventions for marginalised girls and broader systemic improvements highlights the potential for inclusive educational initiatives to benefit communities as a whole.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Multi-country programmes operating across diverse contexts should establish principles for identifying marginalisation while allowing a flexible approach on how marginalisation is understood and applied across different contexts.

Recommendation 2: Programmes aiming to support marginalised girls need disaggregated data by different characteristics of marginalisation, while considering the need for sufficient sample sizes for analysis, to enable them to identify and target relevant beneficiaries.

Recommendation 3: The cost of reaching marginalised girls should be explicitly estimated at the planning stage to ensure sufficient resources are available to reach and support marginalised girls with diverse needs.

Recommendation 4: Programmes need to ensure that Payment by Results approaches incentivise outcomes that benefit the marginalised, recognising the potentially higher cost of doing so.

Recommendation 5: Programmes should adopt an approach that assesses the effects of gender social norms on education opportunities and outcomes, and design interventions with a gendered approach that also takes account of the effects on boys as well as non-marginalised girls.

Recommendation 6: Future programmes require careful consideration of the targets set for the number of beneficiaries while accounting for the type and level of resources and expertise needed to reach different groups of marginalised girls.

Recommendation 7: Programmes should be designed to include both targeted interventions to support marginalised groups along with interventions that strengthen the education system more broadly, thus benefiting all children and young people.

KLQ2: Key Findings and Lessons - GEC's approach to evaluation and learning

The GEC's evaluation approach across both phases was multi-tiered, involving project IPs, their project external evaluators (EE), the FM, Phase I Evaluation Manager (EM), and Phase II Independent Evaluation (IE). In Phase I, this approach generated project-level evidence through external evaluations commissioned by IPs. The FM was responsible for fund-level aggregation and quality assurance of project-level data, while the EM (the independent programme evaluation team in Phase I) conducted mixed-methods evaluations at the window level, drawing on primary quantitative and qualitative data as well as secondary project data and evidence. There was some initial confusion regarding roles and responsibilities between the EM and FM, particularly in the early stages of Phase I. In Phase II, the IE's (renamed from evaluation manager) role differed substantially, focusing on in-depth thematic studies drawing on analysis of quantitative evaluation data from projects along with primary qualitative case studies. In addition, a portfolio evaluation, and a Lessons Learned Study (namely this study) were undertaken. In this phase, the IE no longer played an oversight or quality assurance role for project-level evaluations that were undertaken by external evaluators.

The Phase I approach to evaluation was ambitious and focused primarily on quantitative evaluations. At the project-level, evaluations needed to fulfil two key requirements: (1) a standardised and rigorous quantitative learning assessments using comparison groups to inform PbR decisions; and (2) aggregable results at the fund level to report the number of girls supported by GEC I who had improved their learning. It demonstrated that measuring learning is feasible, even in challenging operating contexts, and ultimately fulfilled the GEC's accountability requirements. However, it was described as burdensome, particularly by some IPs and the FM.

The funding implications tied to PbR, led both IPs and the FM to prioritise accountability, and therefore the quantitative assessment elements of the evaluation approach. As a result, resources that could have been allocated to generating qualitative analysis and insights to inform programme adaptation were often redirected toward accountability metrics, restricting some learning opportunities in GEC Phase I. Additionally, the requirement for standardisation and comparability was perceived as conflicting with the GEC's Challenge Fund model, which was designed to encourage innovation.

In Phase II, rather than emphasising a predominantly quantitative, accountability-driven approach relying on learning data for assessing outcomes, evaluation and learning stakeholders adopted a more holistic perspective. The priority shifted towards exploring the drivers and barriers that influenced the delivery of learning outcomes across different project contexts. This shift helped stakeholders understand better what worked and why, but it came at the expense of collecting data that was easily aggregable and comparable within and across different projects and geographies. The Covid-19 pandemic further reinforced this shift, as collecting data and conducting learning assessments was no longer possible.

During Phase II, the FM strengthened its approach to internal learning and adaptation and facilitating the external use and influence of GEC evidence and learning through a formalised Learning Strategy, which was reinforced by the introduction of a dedicated Learning Lead position. This approach highlighted the value of structured learning efforts for the dissemination and uptake of evidence. The increased external use of learning in Phase II, compared to Phase I, was attributed to both the diverse range of learning products developed and the GEC-specific dissemination channels, as well as the provision of dedicated learning resources.

The following key lessons were identified related to evaluation and learning:

- Introducing highly ambitious and demanding MEL mechanisms (i.e., PbR, quasi-experimental impact evaluation design) requires sufficient time for design and planning their operationalisation, and consideration of appropriateness depending on the objectives.
- In developing a large-scale, diverse global programme like the GEC, it is important to identify the evidence and learning priorities from the start and consider the trade-offs between a highly standardised evaluation approach, allowing portfolio aggregation and learning, versus adaptable project-specific evaluation designs.
- Large, multi-country, long-term programmes with a longitudinal evaluation design (like the GEC) lend themselves to additional longitudinal impact studies to assess the long-term effects of improved education on girls' lives as they progress into adulthood.
- Comparing the approach to learning taken by the GEC in Phase I and Phase II illustrates the benefit of having dedicated learning resources and a formalised Learning Strategy. If intending to inform programme adaptation, a utilisation-focused approach should be embedded at the start of a large-scale, complex global programme.
- If policy influence is an explicit aim of a programme, then dedicated resources built into the programme design enable learning and dissemination to be planned and embedded from the start. In addition, a stakeholder Use and Influence Plan is critical, together with a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan for systematically assessing the uptake and use of the global evidence base generated across the life of the GEC.

KLQ2: Discussion and Recommendations – GEC's approach to evaluation and learning

Discussion

The GEC has demonstrated that it is possible to measure learning outcomes on large scale education programmes, and that this can be done in a wide range of educational, cultural and geographic contexts. This is a major achievement of the GEC and can inform future evaluation and learning approaches.

Learning from the GEC demonstrates the importance of defining how an education programme is expected to influence broader education policy and programming, and of centring these objectives as an integral part of a programme's evaluation and learning approach. Taking a utilisation-focused approach in the design of evaluation and learning strategies to ensure that they are fit for purpose with regards to the intended use of the evidence and learning generated.

The GEC's experience shows that multi-year programmes that aim to contribute to the global evidence base on the longer-term impact of education interventions can effectively employ longitudinal impact studies. These provide the opportunity to assess and track how education and intersecting inequalities affect the lives of marginalised girls and children as they progress through early years on to adolescence and into adulthood.

The design of evaluation and learning strategies need to consider the potential tension between supporting innovation and acknowledging the potential for project failure. This requires consideration of how funding is provided, as tying funding to achieving set outcomes can undermine innovation.

Conflict sensitivity and social inclusion considerations influence the choice of the appropriate evaluation approach for education interventions addressing marginalisation. Programmes that operate in conflict or insecure settings potentially require different approaches to evaluation and learning, as seen by the removal of the requirement for comparison groups in Phase I for GEC projects operating in conflict setting. For the protection and safety of beneficiaries, these considerations should inform the design of an evaluation strategy at the start of the programme.

Operationalising complex, mixed methods approaches to evaluation requires time, collaboration, and resource planning. The lessons learned from the GEC showed that setting up a novel and complex evaluation approach needs adequate time to plan its operationalisation and a multi-stakeholder approach to the design of evaluation and learning strategies. This includes considering the feasibility and resource implications of planned evaluation and learning approaches to ensure that they not only effectively respond to the FCDO's evidence and learning priorities but are also proportionate and deliverable without over-burdening programme stakeholders.

This study has shown that investing in dedicated resources to support the dissemination and facilitation of learning helps programmes tailor and adapt learning strategies to optimise their impact. However,

programmes also need to consider both the capacity of programme IPs and the accessibility of evaluation and learning products to maximise their uptake and use.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: At the design stage, the programme-wide evaluation and learning strategies should be driven by clearly articulated evidence and learning priorities including identifying the intended users (at project, programme and strategic levels) and uses of the data collected, and the evidence and insights gained from evaluation and learning activities. This ensures that the added value of monitoring and evaluation at project and programme levels justifies the scale of the investment and potential opportunity costs and trade-offs.

Recommendation 2: At the Business Case stage, the FCDO should consider the potential benefits of investing in longitudinal impact studies for large-scale multi-year education programmes to provide long-term insights into how education and intersecting inequalities affect the lives of marginalised girls and children as they progress through adolescence and into adulthood.

Recommendation 3: When developing a programme's evaluation and learning strategies the FCDO should require a feasibility assessment to be undertaken to ensure that the programme has the resources needed to implement them. This should be completed during a programme Inception Phase with adequate time and resources dedicated to the assessment to ensure that evaluation and learning plans are realistic and deliverable and meet the evidence needs of the FCDO and wider stakeholder audiences.

Recommendation 4: All education programmes that explicitly aim to influence education programming and policy should set out key performance and measurement metrics for doing so. This study suggests that dissemination and facilitation of uptake is included in performance indicators for such programmes, to ensure that the benefits of evaluation and learning are realised and spillover to the wider education sector.

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to study

This document sets out the Lessons Learned Study for the Girls' Education Challenge Phase I (GEC I) and II (GEC II). This study has been commissioned by the UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) through the Independent Evaluation (IE) of the GEC II contract, led by Tetra Tech International Development (Tetra Tech) and took place between September 2024 and February 2025. This Lessons Learned Study is a reflective study aimed at collating and sharing lessons from both phases of the GEC programme, and the two independent evaluation contracts (i.e., GEC Phase I Evaluation Manager (EM) and GEC Phase II Independent Evaluation that supported them. These lessons aim to contribute to evidence and learning about education programmes based on the experience of the GEC – the largest global girls' education programme implemented to date.

1.1.1. Report structure

Section 1 provides background for the GEC programme and describes the context and background to the Lessons Learned Study.

Section 2 describes the research approach and methodology, including the Key Learning Questions; study design; desk-based review and primary data collection; analysis; research ethics; and limitations.

Section 3 details the lessons from the GEC's approaches to reaching the most marginalised. It is structured to provide a timeline of the GEC's conceptualisation of marginalisation across the portfolio: the changes to the GEC's approach to reaching the most marginalised, the trade-offs faced, and the related lessons.

Section 4 provides an overview of the different approaches to evaluation and learning over the life of the GEC. This is structured providing a timeline, detailing the effects of different approaches on stakeholder's understanding of GEC, and the use and uptake of evidence and learning over the GEC lifecycle.

Section 5 details reflections on the lessons learned and the potential implications of the lessons learned for future education programmes and policy.

Section 6 details recommendations for future education programmes and policy decisions.

1.2. Background (overview of GEC I and GEC II)

GEC Phase I (2012-2017)

The first phase of the GEC was a £355 million fund aiming to improve the education outcomes of up to one million marginalised girls. There were three funding windows: (1) the Step Change Window (SCW); (2) the Innovation Window (IW); and (3) the Strategic Partnerships Window (SPW). SCW and IW projects aimed to address multiple barriers to girls' education affecting individual girls, their households, communities, and schools.

Fifteen SCW projects were provided up to £30 million of funding per project to apply tried-and-tested designs to quickly and effectively increase the quality of education and the opportunities available for girls at primary and secondary school levels. They operated in nine countries: Afghanistan; Democratic Republic of the Congo; Ethiopia; Kenya; Mozambique; Sierra Leone; Somalia; Tanzania; and Zimbabwe.

Nineteen IW projects were provided up to £2 million of funding per project. They operated in 12 countries: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. These projects tested novel approaches to improving the educational outcomes of marginalised girls.

The SPW comprised four partnerships: Coca-Cola; Discovery Communications; Avanti Communications and Ericsson. These partners implemented projects in Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Myanmar, with a total budget of between £7 million and £27 million. The FCDO provided approximately half of the budget, with partners providing the other half as match funding.

GEC Phase II (2017-2024)

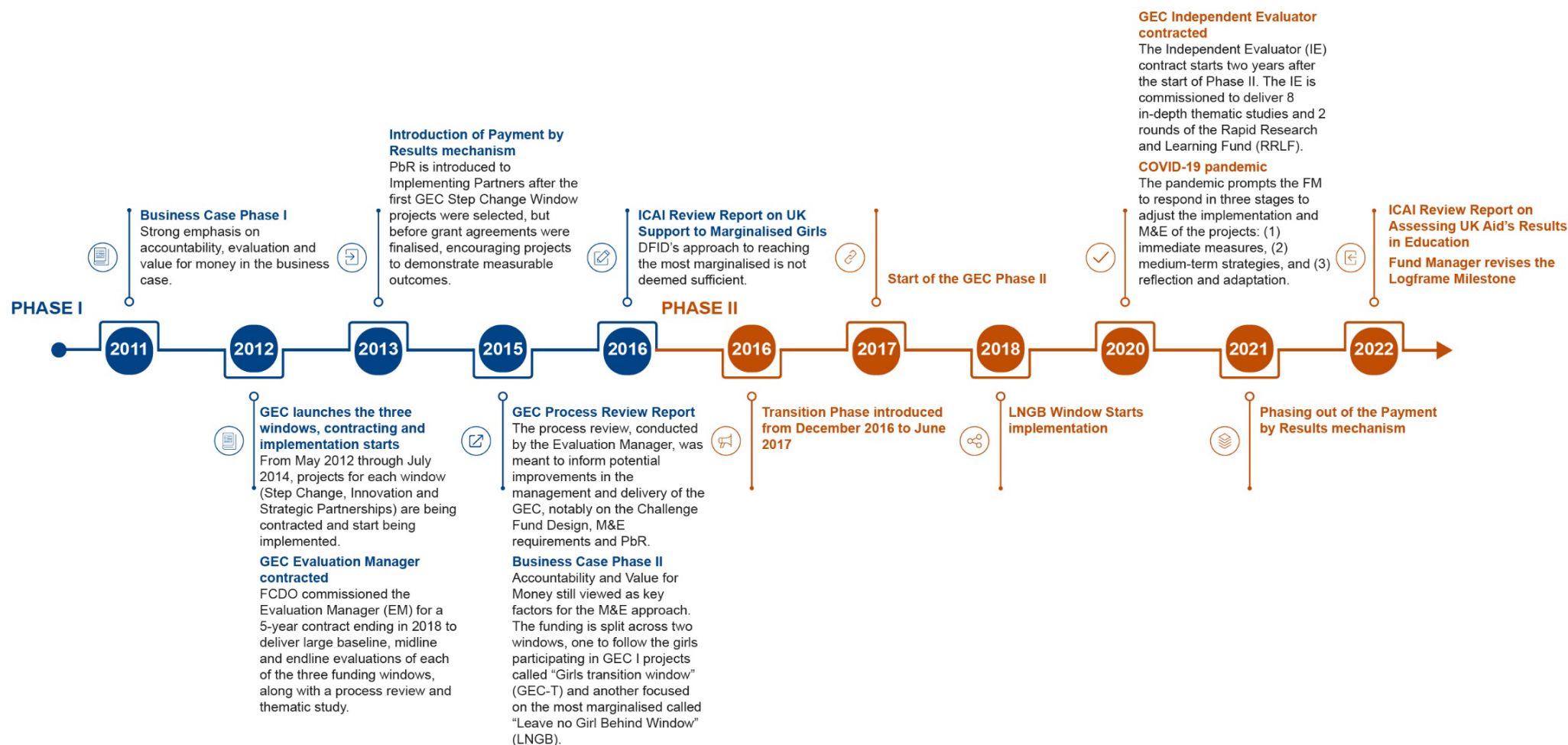
The FCDO invested a further £500 million into Phase II of the programme. This phase aimed to improve the education and lives of 1.5 million marginalised girls. GEC II was delivered through 41 projects in 17 countries, designed and delivered by Implementing Partners (IPs) and managed through a Fund Manager (FM) consortium led by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). GEC II was structured by two funding windows:

- **The GEC- Transitions (GEC-T) Window** provided continued support to 1 million marginalised girls who participated in 27 GEC Phase I projects. This helped girls transition to the next stage of education in 15 countries (Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Nepal, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe). These projects started implementing activities in mid-2017 with timeframes of between three and seven years.
- **The Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window** supported up to 500,000 highly marginalised adolescent girls who were out of school, providing them with literacy and numeracy opportunities, as well as skills relevant for life and work. The 14 LNGB projects operated in 10 countries across Africa and South Asia (Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Zimbabwe). The marginalised groups of girls targeted included girls with disabilities, girls at risk of early marriage and girls who are pregnant or have children. Projects started in late 2018 and typically lasted 9 to 12 months.

The last GEC II project ended in August 2024. In 2020, an IE of Phase II of the GEC was commissioned by the FCDO, which will end in March 2025. The purpose of the IE was to generate contextualised evidence and learning; this required the IE Team to deliver:

- Seven in-depth thematic studies designed and implemented iteratively to respond to the emerging evidence and learning needs of the FCDO and FM.
- A Rapid Research and Learning Fund (RRLF) – a ringfenced fund to commission research relevant to GEC II and the FCDO's evidence and learning priorities.
- An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of the GEC II Portfolio.
- This Lessons Learned Study covering GEC Phases I and II.

Figure 1: Timeline of key milestones



1.3. Purpose, scope and objectives

The original Terms of Reference (ToR) for this study is set out in [Annex A](#). The purpose of this study is to provide lessons for the education sector from both phases of GEC about reaching marginalised girls, and lessons about the utility of different approaches to evaluation and learning used throughout the life of the GEC. These lessons are intended to inform new and future FCDO education programmes and policies.

The study had **two objectives**:

- Identify and share lessons and recommendations from the GEC programme, specifically considering its evolution from Phase I to Phase II, on:
 - How large-scale programmes can reach marginalised girls; and
 - How to approach evaluation and learning.
- Disseminate these lessons and recommendations through accessible learning products that can be used by policymakers and programme practitioners as well as secondary stakeholders to inform the design and implementation of future education programmes and policy.

To achieve this, the study draws on programme documentation and qualitative data from a diverse range of stakeholders. This study did not involve community-level data collection. However, a document review drew from primary data collected from marginalised girls throughout both phases of the GEC and learning products, drawing on project-level evidence. This ensured that data collected from marginalised girls and their communities was represented in our analysis and used to inform the lessons presented in the study.

2. Research Design and Methods

2.1. Key Learning Questions

The Key Learning Questions for the Lessons Learned Study are:

Key Learning Question (KLQ) 1: How and why did the approach to reaching the most marginalised change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes and related recommendations for future education programmes?

- 1.1. How did the approach to reaching marginalised girls change at the programme level over its lifecycle?
- 1.2. What trade-offs did the programme face in the aim to reach the marginalised? (e.g. reaching the largest numbers versus the most difficult to reach; cost of reaching different groups.) How and why did this change?

KLQ2: How and why did the approach to evaluation and learning generated by the IE, FM and IPs change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes?

- 2.1. How did the FCDO's evaluation and learning needs change over the lifetime of the GEC programme? What were the main drivers for these changes?
- 2.2. How did the GEC's approach to evaluation and learning change over the course of the GEC to respond to the changes in evaluation and learning needs and/ or changes in the programme's operating context? And with what effect in terms of the evidence that was produced by the IE, FM and IPs?
- 2.3. How did the different approaches taken to evaluation and learning by the IE, FM and IPs over the lifecycle of the programme contribute to stakeholder audiences' understanding of the GEC's performance and impact?
- 2.4. To what extent was evaluation and learning generated by the IE, FM, and IPs during GEC I and during GEC II used by the FCDO and wider partners and stakeholders to inform decision-making in girls' education programmes and policy?

2.2. Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach and synthesised lessons from primary and secondary data and documentary sources. The study used an iterative approach to develop lessons for KLQ1 and KLQ2 and used a Study Framework as part of the design process (see [Annex B](#) for details). A **document review** of key documents from GEC I and GEC II was completed. This was used to capture findings and trends in the GEC's approaches to: reaching the most marginalised (KLQ1); and evaluation and learning (KLQ2); and to understand the evolution of the GEC including shifts in design and implementation.

Primary data collection included key informant interviews and focus group discussions with relevant stakeholders (see [Annex C](#) for details). The key informant interviews aimed to supplement the document review to add further context, address evidence gaps and the KLQs, and triangulate findings which emerged. Further details on the research approach can be found in the Study Design Note provided in [Annex D](#).

During the analysis and triangulation phase, the study team reviewed the key findings from the key informant interviews with the findings from the document review and organised this by learning question. This allowed the team to compare primary and secondary data sources, review the extent of their alignment, and synthesise findings and lessons. In addition, the team reviewed any additional secondary data shared during primary data collection. During this phase, a targeted second review of documents was conducted where it was considered necessary to add further detail and nuance to the findings. The study team also held several internal meetings and an internal reflection and emerging findings workshop on 2 December 2024 with the rest of the IE Leadership Team to draw on their insights from across both phases of the GEC and as leads on previous IE studies.

During the final **Reporting Phase**, the study team facilitated a workshop with the FCDO and former FM Learning Lead on 13 January 2025 to present the emerging findings across both the KLQs. This peer-review process was used to co-create recommendations for future programmes that are relevant and actionable. Recommendations and conclusions were further discussed during a workshop on the 3 February with the rest of the IE team.

2.3. Methods

This section sets out the key methods used during the study.

2.3.1. Desk-based review

The study team identified key themes related to KLQ1 and KLQ2 to collate and categorise information from GEC programme documents and pre-existing portfolio analysis. A full list of the documentation reviewed can be found in [Annex E](#) and [Section 6](#). A comprehensive overview of each document was completed, and the team used keyword searches relevant to each thematic domain to ensure that all relevant information was extracted. The document review was structured chronologically and tracked changes in each thematic domain over the lifecycle of the GEC. The emerging findings from the review were organised by sub-question. The output of this phase was a series of mapping and timeline products of the key changes in the GEC's approach to marginalisation and approach to evaluation and learning, including any critical programme junctures that may have informed these.

Structured web search

In addition to reviewing programme documents, the team also conducted a structured web search. This enabled the team to explore beyond the published documents in the GEC IE repository, tracking references to the GEC and their related use in documents published by broader education stakeholders. This process included developing an automated script that used keywords to search the internet and scrape relevant sources. A brief note on the use of the structured web search as part of the methodology can be found in [Annex F](#).

Artificial Intelligence pilot

The study team used an internal Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool to assist with the content analysis. The tool was trained to identify and extract relevant excerpts from selected documents, allowing us to efficiently locate information related to the themes. This approach enabled the team to work directly with quotes extracted from the documents, allowing us to perform content analysis across different themes. A brief note on the use of AI for document review can be found in [Annex G](#).

2.3.2. Primary data collection

Key informant interviews

The study team carried out a total of 34 semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with relevant stakeholders from the FCDO, FM, IE team's Southern Academic Partners and wider strategic partners in the education sector. [Annex C](#) provides a list of stakeholders who were interviewed.

The study team produced a 'question bank' organised by the key learning sub-questions and each stakeholder group were assigned priority questions from this. This ensured that interview guides were both internally consistent and tailored to each respondent's involvement in the GEC. Additionally, the duration of each KII was limited to 60 minutes. This allowed the interview to cover the most relevant topics for the study, especially when an individual was a key informant for both KLQs.

Focus group discussions

The team also conducted two focus group discussions (FGDs) with a sample of three IPs that were part of a Steering Group for the FM during Phase II and a sample of five External Evaluators (EEs) commissioned by the GEC projects.

FGD participants were selected using a convenience sample given the limited time available for the study and the high likelihood of staff turnover given the 12-year timeframe of the GEC. As such, IPs and EEs were prioritised on the basis of those known to still be involved with the GEC programme, contactable, and willing to engage with the study.

2.3.3. Analysis and triangulation

Excerpts from KII transcripts were added to the organising framework developed during the document review. The documents and interviews were then analysed qualitatively in response to the KLQs.

Primary data were added to the organising framework developed in the document review and disaggregated by stakeholders. Cross-stakeholder analysis and triangulation with the document review was then completed to update the emerging findings. Gaps were identified and, if needed, further document review or KII follow up was undertaken to address these.

2.3.4. Reporting

The study team facilitated a workshop with members of the IE team that have been involved in both phases of GEC, including the Programme Director, Technical Director, and Evaluation Lead. This presented the preliminary findings of both KLQs to facilitate discussion and recommendations. Following this the lead writer for each KLQ met individually to workshop the lessons learned. An emerging lessons workshop with the FCDO and the former GEC II FM Learning Lead was also held on 13 January 2025. This presented key emerging lessons from the draft report to obtain feedback as part of the validation process and to discuss potential recommendations.

Alongside this report, the team will produce a Learning Brief and host an online presentation to disseminate learning from this study to wider audiences beyond the FCDO. The FCDO will disseminate these learning products to additional stakeholder audiences, as the IE contract closes in March 2025.

2.4. Limitations

The key limitations in conducting the Lessons Learned Study are outlined below together with the mitigation strategies undertaken to address these limitations:

Recall bias from stakeholders: The study obtained feedback from various stakeholders, including the FM, IP and FCDO. Considerable time has elapsed since some stakeholders were involved in the GEC, and this study specifically includes retrospective questioning looking back to GEC Phase 1 (2012-2017). To mitigate this risk, potential recall/ memory bias was closely monitored during primary data collection. Prompts were included in interview tools to allow respondents to self-assess the quality of their recollection. As much as possible, evidence (including secondary evidence) was triangulated and cross-checked to mitigate the effect of potential recall/ memory bias on findings. Having multiple members of the IE team who have been involved in the GEC since the start of phase I also offered the opportunity for triangulation and challenge from the IE team members by drawing on their institutional memory.

Concern for social desirability bias: There was a concern that respondents may be hesitant to report negative perceptions of the GEC. However, given that the GEC was closing and would not be extended, there was less pressure for GEC stakeholders to present a positive bias in their responses. In addition, questions about how learning from earlier in the programme was used are more likely to be answered objectively as respondents described past events and how lessons were or were not used, rather than projecting expectations about future use. Based on the interviews, this concern was not realised as participants were generally forthcoming.

Perceived or actual lack of independence: One of the study's Key Learning Questions focuses on evaluation and learning and considers lessons learned regarding work undertaken by the IE team conducting this study. Respondents may, therefore, question the independence of the study. The data used in the study are heavily weighted towards internal GEC stakeholders, with most of the KIIs being conducted with FM and FCDO stakeholders. This further poses a risk that the study findings will not be externally verified as there is insufficient triangulation to mitigate against biases. Many of the independent evaluation team members involved in this study have considerable experience with the GEC from its outset. Their perspectives are viewed as valuable rather than constraining for informing lessons learned. In addition, we adopted risk mitigation measures, which build on the risks outlined in the Study Design Note, including:

- Most of the KIIs were conducted by IE team members who had little or no involvement in Phase I and limited or no involvement in Phase II IE – they were iteratively briefed and debriefed by the IE Programme Management Team to ensure internal learning was not lost.
- Involving a wider range of stakeholders, including IPs.
- Adopting a transparent approach to analysis and validation of findings through peer reviews and workshops.

2.4.1. Ethics

Ethical processes

Study activities fully complied with the guiding concepts and principles set out in the IE's Ethical Research and Safeguarding Framework for GEC II, the FCDO (2013) Evaluation Policy, the FCDO (2019) Ethical Guidance for Research, Evaluation and Monitoring Activities, the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and other applicable FCDO frameworks and guidance.

The scope of this report limits data collection to key informant interviews with stakeholders involved in the delivery of the GEC and other stakeholders across the broader girls' education sector. As such, the study design did not require a specific ethical framework for community-level fieldwork. All study activities included informed consent, the right to withdraw and adaptations to data collection processes where feasible to accommodate the participation of diverse groups, such as accommodations for respondents that have a disability.

Data management and access to information

Clear protocols and data storage measures were put in place to ensure the confidentiality of the data collected and to preserve the anonymity of the research participant(s). All data collected and processed for this contract was collected, stored, and processed in line with regulations set out in the UK Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (2018), and all other applicable legislation.

2.4.2. Changes to the ToR and Study Design Note

While conducting this study, the following changes to the ToR and Study Design Note were made:

1) The sub-questions for both Key Learning Questions have been revised.

The marginalisation sub-questions under KLQ1 were reframed to focus on the approach to reaching the most marginalised girls at the portfolio level. Sub-question 1.2 was revised to be clearer that the trade-offs the study should focus on are between reaching the most marginalised compared to reaching the largest number of girls and included as a precision "*reaching the largest numbers versus the most difficult to reach; cost of reaching different groups*".

- Original sub-question: What trade-offs were involved in targeting girls facing different dimensions of marginalisation? Key dimensions will include 1. whether the girls were in school or not, 2. their subgroup characteristics and 3. their wider environment.
- Revised version: What trade-offs did the programme face in the aim to reach the marginalised? (e.g. reaching the largest numbers versus the most difficult to reach; cost of reaching different groups.) How and why did this change?

The number of sub-questions for KLQ 1 has also been reduced from three to two. Sub-question 1.3 on barriers under KLQ1 was removed as it focused on project-level learning, which did not fit the portfolio-level approach taken in this study. This also avoided duplicating the broad range of project-level evaluation and learning activities that had already been completed.

The sub-questions under KLQ2 on evaluation and learning were rephrased to be more explicit about the three stakeholder groups that produced evaluation and learning products: the FM, the EM/ IE and the IPs and to clarify that the study will look at evaluation and learning activities across all three stakeholders.

Sub-question 2.3 under KLQ2 (below) was essentially merged with sub-question 2.4 because in the programme documentation and KIIs, it was not possible to meaningfully distinguish between stakeholders' *use* of evidence and their *understanding* of the GEC's performance and impact.

2) The scope of the study was broadened to include a more diverse range of voices.

The range of key informants participating in the study was widened to include Southern Academic Partners, additional Regional Education Advisors and Strategic Partners in the education sector, and project EEs. Two focus group discussions were added to capture views from the GEC's IPs and EEs. Some high-profile stakeholders were also removed due to constraints on their time and limited awareness of programme or policy-level details.

3. KLQ 1: GEC's approach to marginalisation

This section provides an overview of how the FCDO's approach to marginalisation changed over the course of the GEC and the key trade-offs that were faced in reaching the marginalised. Key changes that affected how marginalisation was defined and applied are displayed in [Figure 2](#) and discussed throughout this section.

This section presents lessons learned in response to the following key learning questions:

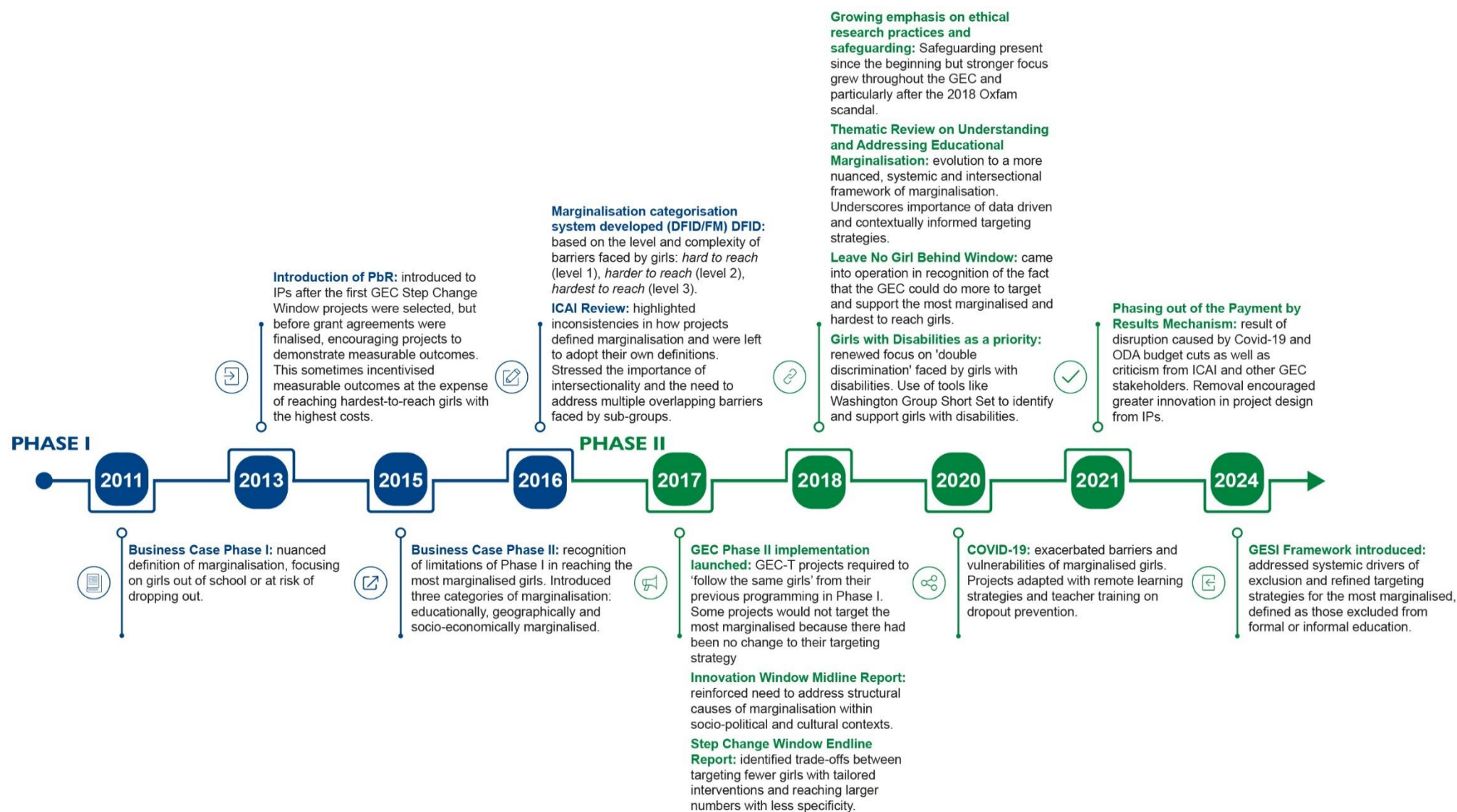
- KLQ1.1: How and why did the approach to reaching the marginalised change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes and related recommendations for future education programmes?
- KLQ1.2: What trade-offs did the programme face in the aim to reach the marginalised? (e.g., reaching the largest numbers versus the most difficult to reach; cost of reaching different groups.) How and why did this change?

The section is based on a documentary review of key documents over the lifetime of the GEC programme, focusing on the changing definitions of marginalisation, the reasons behind those changes, and the trade-offs faced by the GEC programme in the aim of reaching the marginalised. It is complemented by perspectives from KIIIs with the FM, FCDO, Strategic Partners (SPs), and two Southern Academic Partners, and FGDs with EEs and five IPs.

Summary

- There was a focus on marginalisation from the outset of the GEC, as apparent in both the Phase I and Phase II Business Cases.
- The Challenge Fund approach encouraged flexibility and innovation from IPs. This was intended to allow IPs to target different marginalised groups based on the needs within their contexts. Well-defined and deliberate criteria are beneficial in conceptualising marginalisation in a context specific manner and are crucial for effectively targeting a specific group of individuals.
- Overall, the GEC IPs were successful in reaching marginalised girls, and this was strengthened over the course of the GEC. They were most successful when they engaged with national government stakeholders to identify locations where marginalised girls reside and collaborating with local or sub-national and community stakeholders to effectively target marginalised girls within those localities.
- The GEC experience suggests that a flexible, iterative approach allows for continuous adaptation based on feedback, leading to effective cohort-based programming and gradual improvements in targeting marginalised girls over time.
- However, the focus on the marginalised from the outset of the GEC conflicted with the introduction of Payment by Results (PbR), which promoted incentives to focus on easier-to-reach girls.
- There were some challenges in identifying and reaching marginalised girls in some settings. This stemmed from the challenges in using available data that either did not capture information on the marginalised or was inaccurate. Hard-to-reach locations and socio-cultural factors also hindered efforts.
- Data used by IPs during the selection process for Phase I did not always capture the overlapping complexities of marginalisation, meaning that IPs did not always target the 'most' marginalised. Ensuring that the relevant groups are targeted and reached requires high quality and timely disaggregated data.
- The GEC's high standards for safeguarding, which included a substantive focus on gender-based violence and discrimination, provide important lessons for other programmes.
- There was a perceived exclusion of boys, and subsequently, the GEC faced some backlash. Whilst the projects focused their targeting on girls, in most cases, boys benefited from project activities alongside girls even if they were not the primary target. Future programmes should conduct a comprehensive gender analysis, including planning and mitigation strategies for perceived sensitivities.
- The cost of providing in-depth support to the most marginalised is likely to be higher. However, even high-cost interventions targeting the most marginalised girls can provide Value for Money and can result in quantifiable gains in literacy and numeracy and in girls re-joining formal schooling. Programmes need to plan for the higher costs to reap benefits both for the marginalised as well as spillover effects to other beneficiaries.
- The ambitious initial GEC targets of the number of girls to reach created tensions between the scale of the programme and the depth of support that could be provided to beneficiaries on each project.

Figure 2: Timeline of key milestones relevant to GEC's approach to reaching the marginalised



3.1. Evolution of the GEC's approach to reaching the marginalised

The approach to reaching the marginalised evolved over the course of the GEC in response to changing political, financial and contextual factors. This section outlines the changes in key definitions of marginalisation used in the GEC across Phases I and II and the reasons for these changes.

The GEC included a focus on marginalisation from the outset. The Phase I Business Case (2011, p.98) definition identified characteristics of marginalised girls who were out of school or at risk of dropping out:

“Girls of primary and secondary school age (approx. age range 6-19) who have not been enrolled or have dropped out from school (whether living in slums, remote areas, ethnic minorities, girls with disabilities, girls who become pregnant, girls affected by conflict) or are in danger of doing so.”

The definition used in the GEC I Business Case (2011) allowed flexibility for prospective IPs to define their project selection criteria and who should be targeted. A KII with an FCDO stakeholder noted that the approach to selecting projects was intended to be bottom-up. This allowed IPs to explain why the girls they selected as their target groups were relevant to their specific context. IPs consulted with Southern partners from the outset and were included in discussions during the review of Phase I proposals. This offered valuable opportunities for shared learning from an early stage and ensured that IPs were tailoring interventions to beneficiaries' immediate contexts.

The Phase I Business Case outlined criteria for countries that would be included within the GEC. This included, for example, selecting countries based on need, on absorptive capacity and the receptiveness of countries to systemic change. The GEC stated that it would spend most of its funds in target countries, all of which were high priority and included fragile and conflict-affected countries.⁵ This demonstrated a focus on marginalisation in terms of country context from the outset of the GEC. Other countries outside of the target list were also eligible for funding if they could show the potential to test new approaches in supporting marginalised girls.

The GEC Phase I Business Case (2011) set out the outcomes that the FCDO wanted to achieve and were purposefully flexible about who should be targeted and how projects should design their interventions, given the contextual variability of marginalisation. IPs' approaches to conceptualising marginalisation and targeting girls varied accordingly. IPs were given the autonomy to define who were the most marginalised based on their specific context ([Griffiths et al., 2017b](#)). This allowed IPs to target the types of marginalised girls they had previous organisational and geographic experience supporting to present a credible proposal that could be successful through the competitive Challenge Fund process.

The approach to marginalisation supported the notion that there is no 'one size fits all' with regard to girls' educational marginalisation and allowed for a context-specific approach. As noted by LINK International in an FGD for this study, IPs were encouraged to think outside the box, with no budget ceilings, fostering creativity and innovative interventions. Flexibility in how IPs defined marginalisation resulted in variable approaches to targeting across the GEC I portfolio. Each project adapted to local contexts, involving stakeholders such as community and religious leaders to identify and support beneficiaries. Some projects focused more on poverty, others on geographic criteria and some criteria for identifying minority ethnic groups ([Griffiths et al., 2015](#)). For example, CAMFED (Tanzania/ Zimbabwe) defined 'marginalised girls' as those who were “*orphans; affected by disability; and/or receiving any form of welfare*” (ibid, p93). ACTED (Afghanistan) considered all girls living within its target areas as marginalised because of the difficult conflict environment (Ibid). In conflict-affected countries such as Afghanistan and Somalia, the vast majority of girls were marginalised due to the complex interplay of socio-cultural and economic factors coupled with the destabilising effects of conflict that disrupted girls' access to education.

GEC I projects under the Innovation Window used a range of methods to select the most marginalised girls in their target communities. This included using marginalisation indices or checklists and community mapping, often with the direct involvement of local leaders ([Griffiths, S. et al, 2017b](#)). CAMFED (Zambia) developed an index presenting variables related to orphan status, household assets, hunger, education of household members, and whether the respondent had repeated a grade (ibid). The marginalisation status was then assigned based on a weighted index of these variables (ibid).

⁵ Afghanistan, Bangladesh, DR Congo, Ethiopia, India, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, Yemen, Uganda, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Rwanda.

Transition to Phase II

The GEC's approach to marginalisation evolved as lessons learned from Phase I influenced later strategies in Phase II. Efforts to address earlier criticisms of the GEC's ability to reach marginalised girls in relation to Payment by Results were recognised in the 2022 ICAI Report as well as in feedback from EEs, the FM, and Strategic Partners. In 2013, the FCDO launched Payment by Results (PbR), a program and performance mechanism for 23 of the 37 GEC projects (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017). The initiative sought to enhance accountability for the performance of Phase I projects by linking payments to measurable improvements in learning outcomes. However, in some cases, this created an adverse incentive for projects to target easier-to-reach girls who were less marginalised as projects were, therefore, more likely to be able to demonstrate these measurable improvements in learning outcomes. The effects of PbR in the GEC's approach to reaching the marginalised will be discussed further in [Section 3.2](#) and [Section 3.3](#). These stakeholders suggested that the transition period between Phase I and II provided a window of opportunity for the GEC to refine its approach to marginalisation.

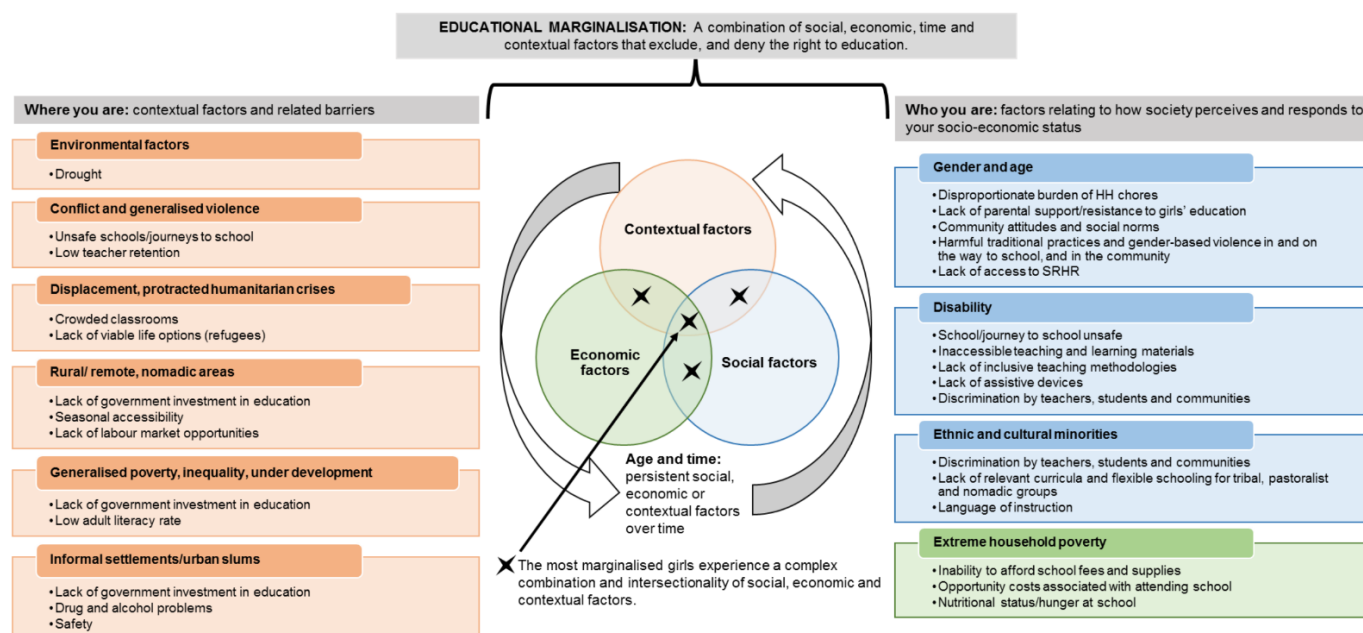
"The programme demonstrated flexibility, evolving based on ongoing feedback, particularly around safeguarding, gender and inclusion issues." (FM, KII)

"The programme developed [a] deeper understanding of marginalisation across various dimensions, enabling targeting 'hidden' girls more effectively." (FM, KII)

The lessons learned from Phase I on marginalisation and contextual specificities were incorporated into the design of Phase II ([Griffiths et al., 2016](#); [Griffiths and Bisiaux, 2017](#)). This shift demonstrated the programme's capacity to adapt. The GEC experience suggests that a flexible, iterative approach allows for continuous adaptation based on feedback, leading to effective cohort-based programming and gradual improvements in targeting marginalised girls over time.

The GEC II's approach to marginalisation was elaborated on in the FM's Marginalisation Framework. The framework provided valuable guidance to the programme as it addressed the complexities of marginalisation across different contexts (UKAID, 2016a). The development of this Marginalisation Framework was used to inform the *Phase II Business Case* (2015) (see [Figure 3](#)).

Figure 3: FM Marginalisation Framework



*The example barriers we have included here are intended to be illustrative rather than an exhaustive list due to the contextual specificity of the barriers that girls face.

Source: FM, GEC Thematic Discussion Paper (2016)

The Marginalisation Framework provided valuable guidance to the programme as it addressed the complexities of marginalisation across different contexts. The framework acknowledged that a key lesson learned from Phase I was that there was still more to be done to ensure project design considers the full complexity of educational marginalisation and can meet the needs of the marginalised girls. This was also reflected in the

Innovation Window Midline Evaluation Report (2017), which highlighted the challenge of addressing structural causes of marginalisation within varying socio-political and cultural contexts. Identifying and reaching marginalised groups was challenging for IPs due to their diverse circumstances, with a notable challenge in addressing the needs of girls with disabilities and those in domestic or bonded labour. The report found that 12 out of the 19 Phase I projects had expanded their target groups to include more markers of marginalisation ([Griffiths and Bisiaux, 2017](#)). This suggests a responsive and flexible approach as more information became available. The report also noted that the framework allowed projects to expand their target groups in response to evolving challenges, including broader markers of marginalisation such as early marriage, girls with disabilities, and girls in conflict zones (*ibid*).

The FCDO and the FM developed a categorisation system in the same year (2016a) to better understand the extent to which the portfolio was reaching marginalised girls. This involved three levels of categorisation based on the size and complexity of barriers the girls faced in each context: Level 1: *hard to reach*, Level 2: *harder to reach*, Level 3: *hardest to reach*. Both the marginalisation framework and the categorisation system were included in the *Phase II Business Case* in response to gaps in the understanding of how to define and address educational marginalisation from projects under Phase I.

Phase II

Findings from Phase I highlighted that marginalisation varies substantially across contexts and that the need to address intersectionality was logistically and financially challenging but necessary going into Phase II. The increased emphasis on intersectionality and the nuanced understanding of marginalisation was reflected in the *Phase II Business Case* ([2015](#)) covering the period 2017-2024. The Marginalisation Framework included in Annex A of the *Phase II Business Case* ([2015](#)) identified three categories of marginalisation: educational, geographic and socio-economic, with educational marginalisation conceptualised as:

“social, economic, contextual and time factors that interact, layer upon and compound each other to exclude people from opportunities to learn.” (FCDO 2015c, Annex A p.1)

Markers of ‘educational marginalisation’ included:

“low enrolment (% of girls who had never attended school at baseline), poor literacy (% of girls that had an oral reading fluency score of zero at baseline), speaking a different first language than the language of instruction, and having a primary caregiver who is unable to read or write a letter in the language of instruction.” ([Griffiths et al., 2017a, p.19](#))

One important adaptation in Phase II was the more explicit focus on the most marginalised girls who were out of school through the new Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window (UKAID, 2024). The LNGB Window sought to address the needs of the ‘*hardest to reach*’ girls, such as orphans, young mothers, girls with disabilities, and those from conflict zones, with targeted interventions that accounted for multiple layers of marginalisation (KII, FM; [UKAID, 2018](#)). The LNGB Window aimed to reach the ‘*most marginalised*’, pushing the programme a step further. This approach was, in part, made possible because PbR was no longer a requirement on the GEC. Under the FM’s categorisation system, the LNGB targeted girls who were *harder* and *hardest to reach* (*ibid*). The LNGB Phase II Call for Proposals was more prescriptive than the *Phase I Business Case* in its approach to targeting the most marginalised (or at least more marginalised than GEC Phase I and the GEC-T Window). The LNGB Call for proposals outlined that girls selected as beneficiaries by IPs should be:

“Girls who experience complex marginalisation because of their circumstances. These include orphans, married or young mothers, girls with a disability, nomadic girls, refugees, those from the poorest communities and those with no access to education.” (UKAID, 2016b, p.2)

Some of the characteristics of marginalisation outlined in the LNGB Call for Proposals are also mentioned in the definition provided in Phase I, namely girls with disabilities and young mothers. However, the LNGB further refined the definition of beneficiaries. A KII with an FCDO stakeholder noted that many LNGB beneficiaries were found outside of the National Ministries of Education remit and were largely invisible. The FM provided extensive guidance to LNGB projects on the identification of the most marginalised girls to ensure that the intended beneficiaries from highly marginalised sub-groups were being targeted (UKAID, 2019). The FM, therefore, had direct oversight of who LNGB projects were reaching, which is a shift in the approach from Phase I. Some projects made adaptations based on their baseline data in Phase I. However, as noted by an FM stakeholder, some stakeholders revisited definitions based on baseline data to align with project realities and held workshops with IPs to define and agree on evidence for marginalisation at a point that was too late in the programme cycle. The LNGB Window also placed greater emphasis

on broader outcomes beyond literacy and numeracy, such as self-esteem, confidence, social connectedness and recognising girls lived realities.

The LNGB Window emphasised 'double discrimination' faced by girls with disabilities (GWDs). Identification tools such as the Washington Group Short Set were used to help identify and support GWDs. In 2023, the GEC outlined a comprehensive approach to educating and addressing barriers faced by GWDs that aligned with the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*. The approach addressed structural, social and institutional barriers, for example, engaging communities to challenge negative stereotypes about GWDs and improving the physical accessibility of schools ([Rose, P. et al., 2023](#)). However, this approach was only introduced a year before the end of the programme, therefore limiting its impact on project delivery. Disability inclusion was substantially intensified in Phase II, ensuring that both underrepresented groups were included and that educational environments were genuinely accessible to children with disabilities, for example, beyond just adding ramps ([Singal et al., 2023](#)). There was also a strong political steer from Ministers on disability inclusion and inclusive education, so this was further emphasised in Phase II.

Phase II also included a GEC-Transitions Window, which intended to follow GEC beneficiaries from Phase I. enabling them to complete primary school and transition to either secondary education, technical vocational training or employment. As noted by an FM stakeholder, the lessons learned from Phase I helped shape more specific interventions for girls facing intersecting forms of marginalisation, such as those living in conflict-affected regions or those with disabilities. However, another FM stakeholder stressed that continuing with existing cohorts limited the ability of projects to expand their reach and address new marginalised groups, which resulted in cases of misaligned programming.

The Phase II Business Case (2015) included a focus on how factors such as conflict, displacement, ethnicity and gender norms affected the marginalisation faced by beneficiary girls. Markers of marginalisation were disaggregated into specific indicators such as poverty, language barriers, caregiver literacy, and safety concerns, reflecting a more prescriptive approach to marginalisation ([Griffiths et al., 2017](#)).

Safeguarding was an important focus of the GEC and became even more important in Phase II. The programme's high standards for safeguarding, which included a large focus on gender-based violence and discrimination, was an important success. This commitment not only ensured the protection of girls in challenging contexts but also built trust within communities, as local implementers and leaders collaborated to overcome cultural barriers and ensure the programme's relevance to local contexts (KII, FM; KII, FCDO).

"(The) programme's emphasis on safeguarding helped protect marginalised girls in challenging contexts and elevated its importance in the broader education agenda." (KII, FM)

Effective safeguarding measures are needed to address cultural and systemic factors and, above all, ensure that the FCDO's Do No Harm approach was upheld, including in conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan. An FCDO stakeholder KII noted that there was a very high bar put on safeguarding given the Haiti Oxfam events, and ministers wanted to take a firm stance on safeguarding on reputational grounds.⁶ Safeguarding on the GEC II included attention to GBV, gender discrimination and intimidation. Some FM and FCDO stakeholders noted that early programme designs did not always adequately address safeguarding, necessitating a shift in focus and resource allocation as the programme evolved. Whilst the GEC's approach to safeguarding initially faced some resistance from IPs, who viewed it as unfamiliar and Western-centric, the more stringent and innovative approaches to safeguarding provided a major source of learning for the GEC.

As highlighted in this section, the GEC has focused on marginalised girls, taking account of intersecting disadvantages. This can be differentiated from the "most marginalised", encompassing extreme forms of disadvantage including a number of overlapping characteristics, such as a girl living on the street with a disability. These girls are likely to need more individualised approaches. They also often remain invisible in data. The increased emphasis on girls with disabilities in Phase II has resulted in greater attention to collecting data on disability, demonstrating the potential for such improvements.

⁶ Oxfam GB faced a scandal in Haiti in 2018 after their staff working in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake were accused of sexual misconduct. The Haitian government subsequently banned Oxfam GB from continuing to work in the country.

3.2. Lessons from the GEC's approach to reaching the most marginalised

Overall, there is evidence to show that the GEC reached a substantial number of marginalised girls. The LNGB projects effectively reached adolescent girls who were more marginalised than their peers in the national demographic. Notably, they reached a greater percentage of older girls who were either married or mothers compared to the overall population ([Rose et al., 2023](#)). In terms of household education levels, a substantially larger proportion of household heads, both male and female, had not received any form of education, in contrast to the national average, apart from Somalia (*ibid*). LNGB projects successfully focused on the most marginalised girls, as opposed to those identified through household survey data. In nearly all instances, IPs reported that they collaborated with national stakeholders to pinpoint the areas for project implementation, utilising available data to enhance targeting efforts (*ibid*). The IE Value for Money Study ([2024](#)) also provides evidence to show that girls supported by LNGB projects were more marginalised than the average population. It highlights that the LNGB case study girls were marginalised across various indicators, suggesting that their circumstances were more challenging than those of the general population ([Colquhoun et al., 2024](#)). It also notes that household heads involved in LNGB projects were, on average, 6% poorer than those in GEC-T projects, further illustrating the increased marginalisation of the LNGB beneficiaries (*ibid*).

The FCDO's initial aim to foster flexibility and innovation and find new ways of reaching and supporting the most marginalised conflicted with the introduction of PbR in Phase I, which promoted incentives to focus on easier-to-reach girls. PbR was introduced by the FCDO following the selection of the first round of projects for the GEC Step Change Window but before grant agreements were finalised. Projects were consequently tied to their initial target group definitions, which limited their ability to adapt to emerging evidence on harder-to-reach sub-groups that had not been available during the application stage (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017; [ICAI, 2016](#)). PbR in the GEC was introduced based on the principles of risk sharing, encouraging innovation and transparency. The introduction of PbR required projects to demonstrate measurable outcomes, including reaching a target number of girls and improving their learning outcomes. This had the unintended adverse effect of disincentivising IPs from focusing on the most marginalised and hardest to reach girls due to the higher cost per beneficiary and the greater challenges of improving their learning. Widespread criticism from the 2016 *ICAI Report*, as well as feedback from EEs, the FM and Strategic Partners, encouraged a change in the approach to PbR in Phase II. The adverse effects of the PbR mechanisms are discussed further in the section on tensions below.

One of the challenges in identifying and reaching marginalised girls is related to insufficient or inaccurate data. Data available to IPs during the selection process for Phase I did not always capture the overlapping complexities of marginalisation, meaning that IPs were not always able to identify the 'most' marginalised' ([Griffiths, S. et al., 2015](#)). Education data and management systems tended to be weak in tracking out-of-school children and adolescents ([Rose, P. et al., 2023](#)). Most projects had to rely on existing, national level data which often do not collect data that are sufficiently disaggregated for different population groups, or where they do, do not adequately report on the data needed to identify marginalised populations. A stakeholder from the FM noted that an early reliance on existing data sets, including household surveys, revealed inconsistencies in identifying and tracking marginalised girls.

"Somalia projects failed to factor in clan-based marginalisation in early phases, missing opportunities for more nuanced targeting" (FGD, IP).

"Within Kampala, projects ticked the box for GWDs but missed the opportunity to reach more marginalised groups in rural areas" (FGD, IP).

At baseline, GEC projects were encouraged to collect data from a representative sample of their target population so that results could be disaggregated by group and context. GEC project proposals and baseline surveys subsequently outlined numerous barriers facing a homogenous population of girls but in many cases did not include specific analysis of marginalised groups who may experience multiple barriers and to different degrees. ([UKAID, 2018](#)).

In some projects there was a perceived exclusion of boys. Whilst the projects focused on girls, in most cases, boys benefited from project activities alongside girls even if they were not the primary target. Findings from a review of project quarterly monitoring reports revealed that a third of GEC projects had stakeholders who felt uncomfortable with the exclusion of boys and noted that boys, particularly those with similar vulnerabilities, often felt left out of interventions (FCDO, 2015b). This was especially evident in cases where financial or material support was provided (FCDO, 2015b; UKAID, 2016a). The *Step Change Window Midline Evaluation Report* ([2017](#)) further observed that the GEC's targeted approach created perceptions of inequity, especially for boys with similar vulnerabilities, and led, in some instances, to feelings of resentment and acts of resistance at the community level (KII, FM).

Some projects paid attention to the intersecting vulnerabilities of both boys and girls and made adaptations accordingly. For example, CSU Uganda adapted its interventions to include boys with disabilities as beneficiaries during Phase II (UKAID, 2018). Some projects recognised the importance of involving men and boys in shifting patriarchal norms. ACTED in Pakistan engaged men and boys in awareness sessions to promote girls' education and mitigate patriarchal norms (ibid; UKAID, 2022a; Singal et al., 2023). Community-level improvements in attitudes towards gender equity in education were achieved through partnerships with trusted local organisations, which helped build community legitimacy and trust (UKAID, 2022a).

3.3. Potential tensions faced in reaching the most marginalised and going to scale

“Trade-offs are inevitable, achieving scale should not compromise support for most marginalised.” (KII, FCDO)

“An early lack of clarity in metrics caused misalignment of incentives, favouring quick wins over systemic change” (KII, FCDO)

The GEC's initial target in Phase I of reaching one million girls created tensions between ambitions for the scale of the programme and the depth of support needed to reach the marginalised beneficiaries in each project. The aim to achieve scale contrasted with the GEC's initial focus on innovation and the willingness to experiment with new approaches to targeting the marginalised (Griffiths et al, 2016). At the start of the GEC there was a policy commitment by the FCDO to reach one million marginalised girls and to improve their educational outcomes. In some cases, this emphasis on reaching target numbers from FCDO, particularly for the Step Change Window in which projects were not actively encouraged to try innovative approaches but rather tried and tested designs, compromised the depth of project activities for the most marginalised. For example, some projects aimed at supporting girls with disabilities, installed ramps, and provided transport for girls with physical disabilities but did not focus on girls with cognitive disabilities, whose outcomes were more difficult to measure, and so were less likely to contribute to quantitative targets. The extent of support for marginalised girls from minority groups, for example, from ethnic or caste minorities, was also sometimes limited because their numbers were too small to enable the achievement of quantitative targets on a number of girls reached.

An early lesson learned of the LNGB Window in Phase II was the difficulty of reaching the most marginalised in the numbers targeted by FCDO. Ambitious initial targets set by FCDO were scaled back. This was due to challenges across GEC projects in reaching the marginalised, particularly those working in difficult contexts such as Ethiopia and Afghanistan. The FCDO realised that the budget was insufficient to reach 550,000 marginalised girls, and it was unlikely to be possible to reach the target. According to an FCDO stakeholder, the target of reaching 15% of girls with disabilities also posed a challenge, as it was not possible to identify this proportion of girls within the projects.

Driven by a focus on supporting the most marginalised girls and reaching quantitative targets, IPs in Phase I often did not always consider scalability at the start of implementation. FM stakeholders noted that many effective projects were not always scalable due to their cost or complexity. While an FCDO stakeholder commented that there needs to be a focus on anchoring interventions in government systems to ensure long-term scalability. An FM stakeholder also noted that many initiatives were too resource-intensive for government adoption. Whilst scalability was considered by FCDO and the FM as part of the GEC's approach, discussions between the FM and IPs as to how programmes were designed to ensure scalability were insufficient during the design stage.

PbR in Phase I created a tension between focusing on those who were easier to reach and achieving the quantifiable targets required by PbR. This was particularly a challenge for smaller NGOs, which faced difficulties meeting the stringent reporting and financial scrutiny required by PbR because of their limited financial reserves and capacity constraints (KII, FM). Several IPs reported that there were cases in which there had been pressure from their headquarters to focus on short term solutions as they were concerned about the risk of non-payment (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017). PbR thereby created perverse incentives that hindered a focus on the most marginalised (ibid).

“The initial PbR framework created challenges in aligning funding mechanisms with the realities of engaging deeply marginalised girls” (KII, FM).

Due to the PbR financing model, there was a tendency for IPs to target girls who were likely to achieve better learning results rather than those most marginalised who would require extra support and, therefore, necessitate higher costs to improve their learning outcomes. PbR also resulted in projects becoming more risk-averse, meaning that opportunities to use new approaches to addressing multiple barriers were potentially lost. This was a point raised

repeatedly in KII with FM stakeholders who corroborated the findings of the 2016 *ICAI report*, highlighting that the pressure on projects from PbR to prioritise beneficiary reach and measurable outcomes was often at odds with addressing the most marginalised groups. This included focusing on girls more likely to achieve learning outcomes easily and discouraging work with profoundly marginalised groups.

“PbR sometimes created a dissonance between achieving deeper impact for marginalised groups and meeting quantitative targets” (KII, FM).

The *Step Change Window Midline and Endline Evaluation Reports* highlighted an inherent tension between focusing interventions on fewer highly marginalised girls versus reaching a larger number of girls with less tailored (and therefore less costly) support. In some cases, the focus on PbR caused projects to concentrate too much on improving numeracy and literacy outcomes. This focus sometimes overlooked other important goals, such as educating the community about the benefits of girls' education and helping girls to build their self-esteem and confidence. (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017).

The lessons learned from the unintended effect of promoting a focus on quantitative targets encouraged FCDO to find a new approach to funding mechanisms. The removal of PbR was also a result of disruption caused by Covid-19 and ODA budget cuts.

“The goal of reaching the most marginalised competed with other priorities, including a focus on low unit costs, ambitious beneficiary targets and FCDO's desire to test payment-by-results approaches. This suggests that some of the processes FCDO uses to ensure accountability for results and value for money may work against reaching the most marginalised.” (ICAI, 2022)

The shift away from PbR encouraged greater innovation and targeting of the most marginalised, which proved critical in achieving long-term, scalable outcomes, according to an FCDO stakeholder. The 2022 ICAI Report suggested that the GEC moved away from PbR following criticisms from IPs, the FM, and projects' external evaluation reports. This demonstrates an acknowledgement of the challenges in achieving equity under the PbR system in Phase I and the willingness of the GEC to address challenges like this.

GEC evidence shows that supporting the most marginalised costs more, given the complexities associated with supporting the hardest-to-reach girls (Colquhoun et al., 2024; Singal et al., 2023). The nature of marginalisation intensified challenges and demanded substantial resources, particularly in the case of highly marginalised girls who may live in geographically challenging contexts or conflict zones or who require highly individualised support. For example, the LNGB Adolescent Girls Education in Somalia (AGES) project implemented by CARE faced challenges due to prolonged droughts and flooding, which caused large-scale displacement and made accessing marginalised girls in rural areas and camps for internally displaced persons particularly difficult (Foundation for Development Management, 2021). Some projects with higher unit costs were included in the GEC portfolio where they could justify these higher costs when reaching the most marginalised, such as girls with disabilities.

Even high-cost interventions that target the most marginalised can result in quantifiable gains in literacy and numeracy and in girls re-joining formal schooling, thereby providing value for money. The benefits greatly exceeded the costs of educating the most marginalised girls in the case study countries of Ethiopia, Malawi and Nepal (Colquhoun et al., 2024). In Ethiopia and Malawi, the costs of supporting out-of-school girls through LNGB projects were 2.5 to 10 times higher than the cost of educating girls in regular government or mainstream schools (ibid). The higher costs reflected the marginalised nature of beneficiaries and the breadth and intensity of support provided. Over half of the project costs were for extra-curricular activities such as life-skills, safeguarding, transitioning to further education and work and community sensitisation. The girls were from particularly disadvantaged communities, many never having been to school and were young mothers or had disabilities (ibid). The study found that projects substantially raised literacy and numeracy levels (albeit starting from a lower base), thus showing value for money (ibid). In Malawi and Nepal, learning gains equated to five additional years of schooling, with transition rates reaching 72% for girls aged 10–14 (ibid).

There is evidence that whilst the GEC focused its interventions on the marginalised, all children could benefit from these programmes (Singal et al., 2023; Rose et al., 2023). Projects reaching the most marginalised also strengthened government systems and policies that benefited all children. The twin-track approach adopted by GEC projects addressed system-wide barriers together with providing targeted support, benefiting all girls, not just the most marginalised. For instance, improving the broader school infrastructure, such as water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, supported education access and equity for all learners, not just girls with disabilities (Singal et al., 2023). Similarly, community awareness sessions that focused on the benefits of education for the most marginalised

girls, including those belonging to ethnic minority groups and young mothers, shifted gender and social norms around education for all girls, not just those participating in GEC projects (ibid).

Higher cost interventions required for supporting the most marginalised can have unintended and intended positive spillover effects for the wider community. The spillover effects included improved vaccination rates, postponed marriages, and increased awareness of reproductive health. In the Excelling Against the Odds project in Ethiopia (Child Hope UK), improved vaccination rates contributed to as much as 8% of the overall benefits of the project, while girls reported greater knowledge about family planning, leading to a decrease in early marriages ([Colquhoun et al., 2024](#)). Although the primary focus of GEC projects was on the most marginalised girls, the interventions also involved boys and families. In Ghana, the Making Ghanaian Girls Great (MGCubed) project encouraged boys to assume household responsibilities, thereby challenging harmful gender norms and fostering equitable domestic roles ([One South, 2021](#); [Singal et al., 2023](#)). These programs not only helped marginalised girls but also encouraged positive changes in the community by involving boys and families. Ultimately, such inclusive efforts can lead to a fairer community that benefits everyone, supporting sustainable development and social inclusion.

4. KLQ 2: Evaluation and learning

This section details the evolution of the GEC's approach to evaluation and learning over the course of Phases I and II and the lessons learned from these approaches. In doing so, it responds to Key Learning Question 2: *'How and why did the approach to evaluation and learning generated by the IE, FM and IPs change over the life of the GEC? What are the lessons learned from these changes?'*

This section first presents a timeline summarising the critical milestones that informed changes to the evaluation and learning needs of the FCDO and the programme's responses to these. These changes are then detailed to orient the reader on the evolution of the GEC's approach to evaluation and learning throughout its life. The section then explores the programme's approach to evaluation specifically, how project- and fund-level evaluations changed, as well as key informants' responses to these changes followed by a summary of lessons learned from them. Finally, this section presents the changes in the GEC's approach to internal learning and programme adaptation and the collation and sharing of lessons for external stakeholders, respectively, including evidence of both of these groups' use of the evaluation and learning evidence generated by the programme.

Summary

When it started in 2012, the GEC was a new, large and ambitious programme for the FCDO, and evaluation and learning played a critical role in ensuring its success. Given the size and scale of the GEC programme, accountability was a key driving factor for the programme's approach to evaluation and learning. The introduction of PbR responded to the need for accountability and drove a standardised, quantitative approach to impact evaluation in Phase I. This included an explicit aim to measure girls' learning, moving beyond the focus at the time in the education sector on access to education.

Three main stakeholders delivered the GEC evaluation and learning activities:

1. An **EM** in Phase I responsible for mixed methods impact evaluations using a quasi-experimental approach at the window level conducting baseline, midline and endline evaluations and a process evaluation and thematic study; and an **IE** in Phase II responsible for conducting seven in-depth thematic studies, a portfolio evaluation, this Lessons Learned Study, and managing a Rapid Research and Learning Fund (RRLF).
2. The GEC project **IPs** commissioned **EEs** to design and implement mixed methods impact evaluations using quasi-experimental approaches.
3. The **GEC FM** was responsible for specification, quality assurance and aggregation of project-level evaluation data and reports.

The Phase I approach to evaluation was ambitious, primarily adopting a quantitative approach. It proved that measuring learning is possible, even in difficult operating contexts. The approach ultimately served GEC's accountability requirements. However, it was described as burdensome, especially for IPs and the FM.

The demand for quantitative learning data and the funding consequences attached to the findings of this data as a result of PbR meant that the accountability focus was prioritised by both the IPs and the FM. Resources that could have been used to generate more qualitative insights and learning for programme adaptation were often diverted to focus on accountability metrics, limiting some potential for learning in GEC Phase I.

In Phase II, the same three groups were involved in delivering evaluation and learning activities. The main shift in evaluation and learning priorities between Phase I and Phase II was the shift from learning outcomes and a highly quantitative and accountability-focused approach to a more holistic approach to understanding how and why learning did and did not happen in different project contexts.

As such, there was a shift away from standardisation towards project-specific evaluation. This shift helped stakeholders understand better what worked and why, but it came at the expense of collecting data that was easily aggregable and comparable within and across different projects and geographies. The Covid-19 pandemic further reinforced this shift, as collecting data and conducting learning assessments was no longer possible.

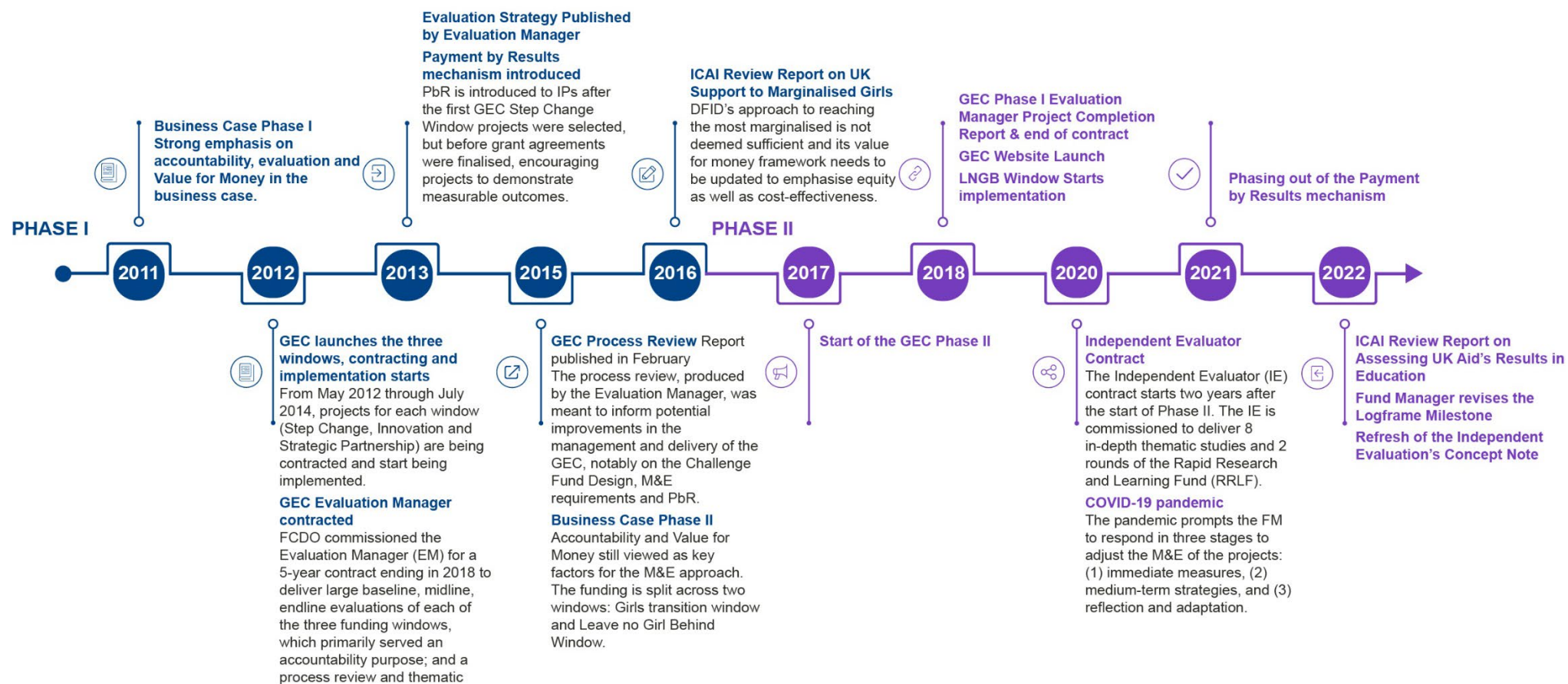
Additionally, a formalised learning and dissemination strategy, accompanied by a dedicated Learning Lead position, bolstered GEC's internal learning and external influence throughout Phase II, demonstrating the importance of such measures for the dissemination and uptake of lessons. The variety of products produced, as well as having

GEC-specific dissemination channels were both credited with a greater level of use of learning in Phase II compared to Phase I.

The following **key lessons** were identified related to evaluation and learning:

- Introducing highly ambitious and demanding monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) mechanisms (i.e., PbR, quasi-experimental impact evaluation design) requires sufficient time for design and planning their operationalisation, and consideration of appropriateness depending on the objectives.
- In developing a large-scale, diverse global programme like the GEC, it is important to identify the evidence and learning priorities from the start and consider the trade-offs between a highly standardised evaluation approach, allowing portfolio aggregation and learning, versus adaptable project-specific evaluation designs.
- Large, multi-country, long-term programmes with a longitudinal evaluation design (like the GEC) lend themselves to additional longitudinal impact studies to assess the long-term effects of improved education on girls' lives as they progress into adulthood.
- Comparing the approach to learning taken by the GEC in Phase I and II illustrates the benefit of having dedicated learning resources and a formalised learning strategy. If intending to inform programme adaptation, a utilisation-focused approach should be embedded at the start of a large-scale, complex global programme.
- If policy influence is an explicit aim of a programme, then dedicated resources should be built into the programme design to drive learning and dissemination efforts forward. In addition, a stakeholder Use and Influence Plan is critical, together with a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan for systematically assessing the uptake and use of the global evidence base generated across the life of the GEC.

Figure 4: Timeline of key milestones for GEC's approach to evaluation and learning



4.1. The purpose of evaluation and learning throughout GEC

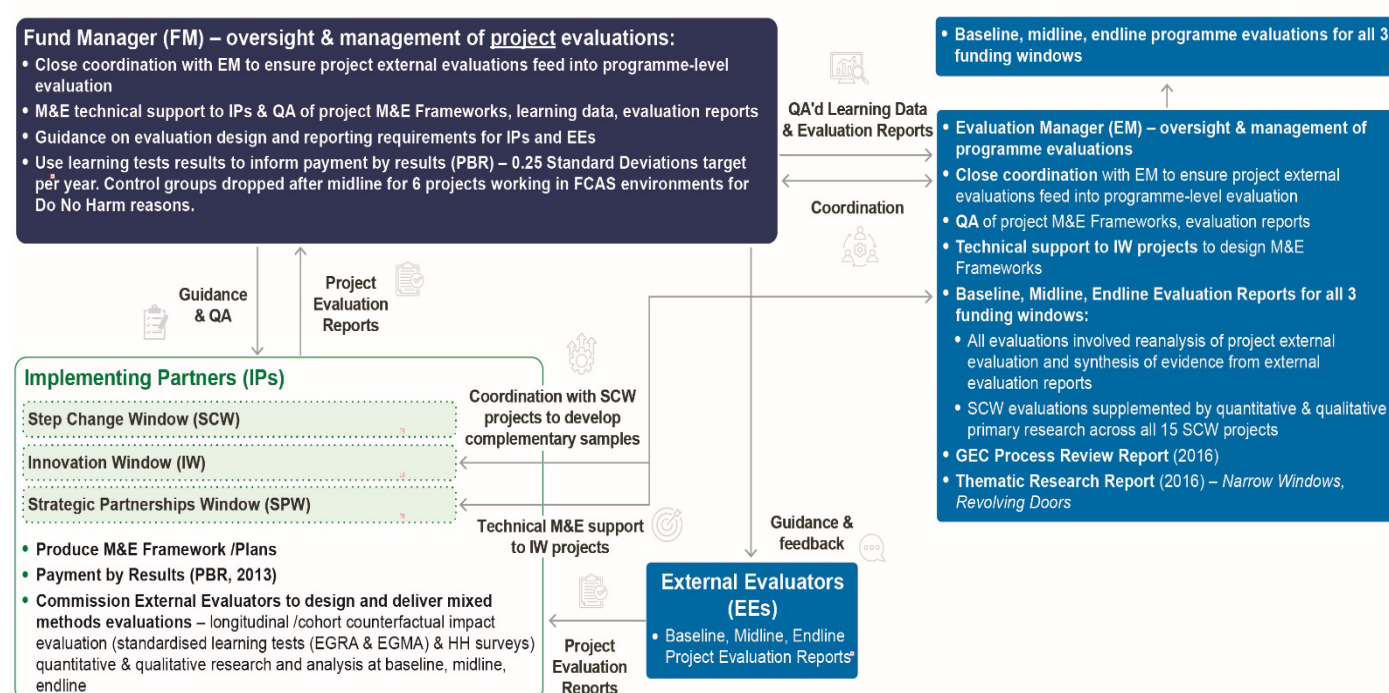
This section provides an overview of how the FCDO's evaluation and learning needs changed over the course of the GEC and how the GEC FM, Phase I EM, Phase II IE and IPs responded to these changing needs. Key changes are displayed in [Figure 4](#) and summarised in text throughout this section.

Phase I

When the GEC started in 2012, it was a new, large, and ambitious programme for the FCDO, and evaluation and learning played a critical role in ensuring its success. The GEC I Business Case, published in 2011, placed a strong emphasis on evaluation, citing the programme's size and complexity as the justification for requiring demonstrable results and value for money (VfM) to both FCDO and the British taxpayer. The Business Case set out to include a learning component with a focus on the dissemination of learning to drive broader policy changes in the girls' education sector among partners and broader stakeholders by sharing "what works" in girls' education. (FCDO, 2011).

To fulfil these accountability and learning requirements, the EM, FM and the project IPs all had evaluation and learning responsibilities. The primary activities undertaken by these three stakeholders, and what they indicate about the FCDO's evaluation and learning needs in Phase I are set out below in [Figure 5](#).

Figure 5: Phase I evaluation roles and approach



In 2012, the EM was hired to assess the impact of the GEC I projects and generate evidence on what works and did not work (Coffey International Development, 2013). The EM conducted comprehensive baseline, midline and endline evaluations of the three GEC I funding windows: (1) Step Change Window; (2) Innovation Window; and (3) Strategic Partnerships Window. These evaluation activities responded to the FCDO's need for accountability by offering window-level assessments of the programme's contribution to the GEC I outcomes. In doing so, the evidence generated by the EM was also expected to contribute to the broader global evidence base on girls' education, while the primary focus within the education sector to date had been on girls' access to education. GEC I responded to a shift in the FCDO's priorities in the education sector to measure learning outcomes for marginalised girls, aligning with the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals.

The EM was also tasked with designing a 10-year longitudinal study to identify the GEC's long-term benefits, demonstrating the FCDO's interest in understanding what worked, not only through the lifetime of the GEC but also what the longer-term effects of the GEC's interventions were on beneficiary girls. However, this study was ultimately not carried out due to funding constraints.

In addition, the EM conducted a Process Review in 2016 to identify potential improvements in the programme's management and implementation. The commissioning of this review indicates the FCDO's intentions for programmes to learn and adapt based on evidence generated by the EM during Phase I. Finally, the FCDO tasked the EM with providing M&E support to the FM and IPs (Coffey International Development, 2013).

IPs were responsible for commissioning EEs to design and implement mixed-methods project evaluations, including longitudinal and cohort-based counterfactual impact assessments. These evaluations incorporated standardised learning tests – predominantly using Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and Early Grade Maths Assessments (EGMA) – household surveys, and a combination of quantitative and qualitative research and analysis. It should be noted that the need for comparison groups was revised for projects that were being implemented in fragile and conflict-affected settings, on ethical grounds.

The FM performed a coordination role across the different GEC stakeholders and was responsible for project data specification, quality assurance and aggregation. The FM also set out to ensure that the project quantitative data was compatible and useful for GEC programme evaluation purposes. In 2013, the FCDO introduced PbR, a programme and performance mechanism for 23 out of the 37 GEC projects (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017). It aimed to further drive accountability for the performance of Phase I projects, by tying payments to quantitative improvements in learning outcomes. The FM was responsible for using learning test results from projects' external evaluations to inform PbR decisions. The use of learning tests as a key metric to determine GEC PbR decisions also reflected the need for the GEC to robustly demonstrate girls' learning outcomes and contribute to the global evidence gap on learning.

GEC Transition Phase

While Phase I was originally due to end in 2016, the FM was granted a contract extension to avoid a gap in implementation, and as such continued into 2017.

A key programme decision at this point was that Phase II implementation would continue to support the same girls that it had supported through the three windows in Phase I under the newly named GEC-Transitions (GEC-T) Window. It comprised of 27 projects, selected from 37 GEC Phase I projects, located in 15 countries ([FCDO, 2017](#)).

Alongside the GEC-T, a new Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) Window was created to focus specifically on the most marginalised girls and launched in 2018.

These changes in the funding windows drove a change in the programme's evaluation and learning needs. As the goals of the programme were reoriented to girls' transition, the GEC needed to measure girls' transition across different school phases, technical or vocational training or employment, which was not originally required at the start of Phase I. It also focused more on measuring and validating the sustainability of GEC-T projects within their MEL Frameworks. Extending projects into GEC II allowed the FCDO to make sure that the current cohort of girls continued their education, supporting them in completing primary school and transitioning to secondary education and beyond.

The EM contract was initially extended to 2017 to align with the FM contract (FCDO, 2015a). However, procurement delays resulted in the retender of the programme evaluation contract, and the IE contract started in January 2020, resulting in a 2-year gap in the provision of independent evaluation in Phase II.

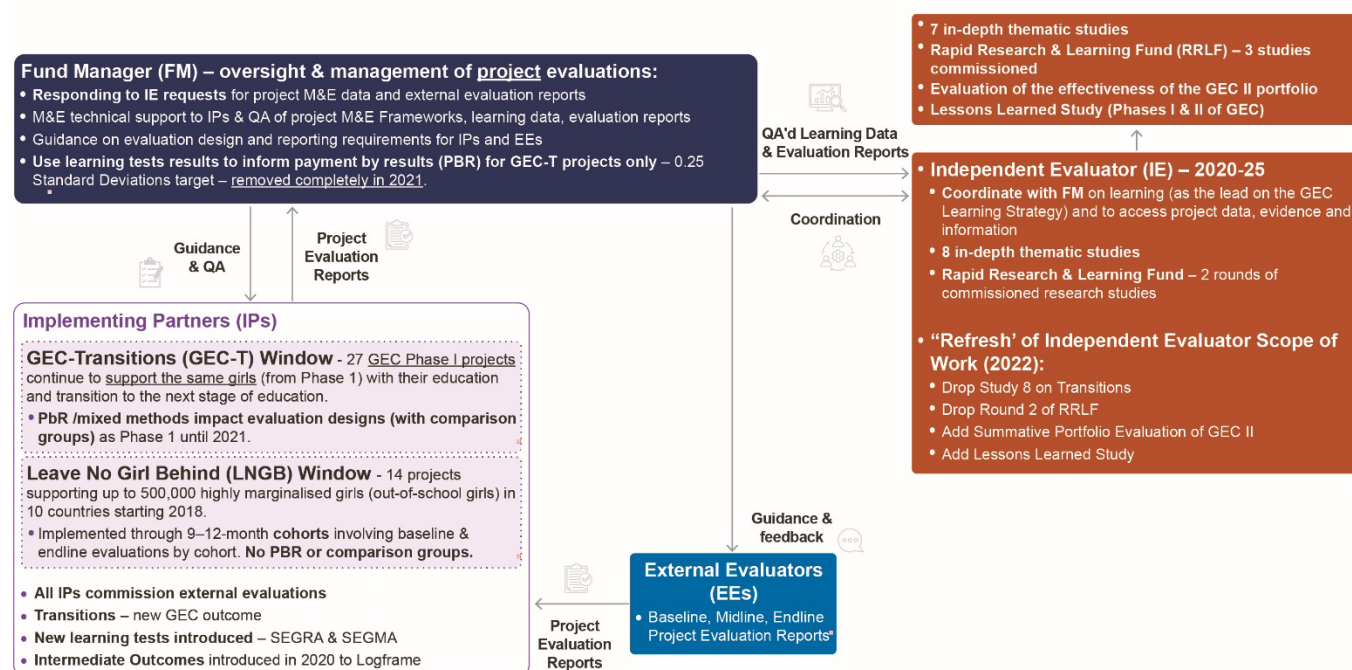
Phase II

The GEC II Business Case highlighted the need to increase the programme's focus on programme learning. Specifically, the business case emphasized the importance of understanding *how* girls were learning and how projects had an impact, beyond the evaluation requirements. It also placed a stronger emphasis on quality assurance, dissemination and overall knowledge management than in the GEC I Business Case ([FCDO, 2015b](#)).

The FCDO Annual Reviews in 2017 and 2019 continued to highlight the need for more qualitative data to explore the processes of change and the interplay of various factors in girls' lives. The reviews also emphasised the need for subgroup analysis as vital for addressing the diverse needs of marginalised populations. This represented a clear shift in Phase II toward integrating more qualitative evidence to gain deeper insights into how girls were learning and the factors influencing their progress, rather than a predominant focus on the extent of their learning as emphasized in the original quantitative approach of Phase I. Furthermore, this allowed IPs to better understand their interventions and to improve internal uptake of learning. The GEC II Business Case ([2015b](#)) also emphasized a need for the uptake of learning by wider partners, as there was an acknowledgment that this did not happen sufficiently in Phase I.

In response to these changes in the FCDO's evaluation and learning needs, there were several notable shifts in the FM, IP/ EE and IE's evaluation activities in Phase II, compared to Phase I, summarised below in *Figure 6*.

Figure 6: Phase II evaluation roles and approach



The IE was contracted in January 2020 for a 5-and-a-half-year period. Initially, the IE proposed to conduct eight in-depth thematic studies to gain a deeper understanding of how different approaches and settings could influence girls' learning outcomes. The IE was also tasked to oversee and manage the delivery of two rounds of research studies through the RRLF that would enhance GEC stakeholders' understanding of the education of marginalised girls.

In 2022, the scope of the IE's work was refreshed and revised to better align with the FCDO's emerging evidence and learning priorities. This included discontinuing Study 8 on Transitions and the second round of the RRLF, and conducting a new Summative Portfolio Evaluation of GEC II, and this Lessons Learned Study.

In Phase II, IPs operated under two distinct windows, each with specific evaluation and learning priorities.

The GEC-T Window, consisting of 27 Phase I projects, continued supporting the same group of girls and maintained a PbR approach until 2021 when the FCDO decided to cease using the PbR mechanism for the GEC. Initially, GEC-T projects were required to commission external evaluations using mixed-methods impact evaluation designs, including comparison groups, where logistically and ethically appropriate to do so. In contrast, the LNGB Window, which began implementation in 2018, was not required to adopt PbR or use comparison groups, as these tools were deemed unsuitable for reaching the most marginalised girls targeted by LNGB projects. Instead, evaluations were commissioned at baseline and endline for multiple cohorts.

As in Phase I, all IPs had to commission external evaluations. Transitions was introduced as a new GEC outcome to capture the number of girls successfully transitioning across all GEC II projects. New learning tests were rolled out for girls in secondary school i.e., Secondary Grade Reading Assessments (SeGRA) and Secondary Grade Maths Assessments (SeGMA) and Intermediate Outcomes were introduced in the GEC II Logframe in 2020 to better capture projects' progress towards their learning outcomes.

The FM continued to play a critical role in overseeing and managing project evaluations in Phase II. This included responding to IE requests for M&E data and external evaluation reports, providing technical support to IPs, and ensuring quality assurance of M&E frameworks, learning data, and evaluation reports. Additionally, the FM offered guidance on evaluation design and reporting requirements for IPs and EEs. For GEC-T projects, the FM used learning test results to inform PbR to ensure accountability and performance-based funding. The FM was also responsible for leading the Learning Strategy with the IE feeding in evidence from its evaluation activities and supporting communication and dissemination of the learning generated. The FM also played a larger role in

dissemination, by reflecting on how monitoring and evaluations data and reports could be used to develop a wide range of learning products tailored to wider audiences.

The FM produced a Learning Strategy in 2020 to guide the communication, dissemination and use of evidence and learning generated by all stakeholders delivering GEC II. The Learning Strategy set out a new array of learning products and activities that the GEC could conduct and provided an action plan. It recognised that the creation of learning products was only part of the strategy, and that communication and dissemination should be considered an equal priority in the implementation of the Learning Strategy (UKAID, 2020a). The need for a new learning approach was again stressed in April 2022, when the ICAI released the *Assessing UK Aid's Results in Education Report* which highlighted the shortcomings of the GEC with regards to dissemination and the use of learning. The report underscored the importance of working with partner governments to strengthen their data collection and utilization capabilities. It also highlighted the need for greater focus on disseminating and applying evidence of "what works".

Another important development in Phase II was the initial modification and eventual phase-out of the PbR mechanism in 2021. The FCDO and the FM recognised that the punitive "downside" mechanism of the PbR, where projects could receive less money than originally anticipated if they did not meet targets, could have more negative consequences than positive ones, especially on smaller IPs (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017). Therefore, 'downside' was removed altogether for Phase II, only leaving an 'upside' bonus for projects performing particularly well. In addition, PbR was adapted for high-risk environments, shifting from payments by outcome to payments by output. Eventually, the PbR mechanism was removed altogether in 2021.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected the delivery of projects and made evaluation and learning efforts, notably data collection, complicated or infeasible. In response to the impact of Covid-19, the requirement for projects to conduct quantitative learning assessments data through EGRA/ EGMA and SeGRA/ SeGMA, was dropped by the FCDO and FM. Measuring learning outcomes was problematic in the context of school closures and projects needing to pivot to alternative modes of educational support ([Rose, P. et al., 2021](#)). Comparisons of learning after schools reopened would have been problematic due to the inability to implement their programmes as originally intended. Even so, analysis was undertaken that identified the extent of learning loss to the extent possible ([Tetra Tech, 2022](#)). It was also agreed that some projects would not need to conduct their endline evaluations during this period, and instead collect reflective evaluative data on the intended and unintended outcomes of the projects (UKAID, 2020b; UKAID, 2020c).

The reduction in ODA during this period and the consequent reduction in project budgets also heightened the need for an increased focus on VfM and sustainability ([FCDO, 2021](#)). In 2020, following the ODA budgetary cuts, a Strategic Review of the finance function was commissioned, and FCDO and the FM recognised that categorising key GEC themes into activities and sub-activities would provide more intuitive and value for money analysis on how GEC funding was being spent. The reduction in the FM's budget also meant that the FM evaluation team was reduced in size, which necessitated that certain tasks were deprioritised, as set out in the FM PCR report (UKAID, 2024):

- 1) The massive data sets generated by External Evaluators were not systematically cleaned by the FM and uploaded to the data archive.
- 2) The analysis of data sets was limited by the availability of FM evaluation expertise as it had greatly reduced.
- 3) The Independent Evaluator had fewer people to support them with accessing projects and evaluation data.
- 4) Projects had fewer people to support them with their evaluations.
- 5) Lastly, the RRLF, managed by the IE team, was closed in 2023.

4.2. The GEC's approach to evaluation

This section presents reflections on, and lessons learned from, the GEC's approach to evaluation over its 12-year implementation period. It first summarises who was involved in the evaluation and the respective roles of GEC stakeholder groups, and then focuses on project-level and fund-level evaluation activities in turn, before offering lessons related to these reflections.

4.2.1. Evaluation roles and responsibilities throughout the programme

There was some initial confusion over roles and responsibilities between the EM and FM, especially in the earlier stages of Phase I. Specifically, interviewees from the FM and FCDO involved in the programme during this

time cited that while the focus of the FM and the EM were clear, with the former being focused on project-level evaluation and the latter on programme-level evaluation, the precise delineation between the FM and EM responsibilities and interactions with the projects' IPs was not clear (KII, FCDO, FM). The duplication of learning assessments – with the projects' EEs and the EM both conducting learning assessments and interacting directly was one of the main contributing factors to this confusion (KII, FCDO, FM). A compounding factor was also reported to be the size of the MEL teams, which led to confusion in communication about the role of team members as well as the teams that they were in (KII, FM). The Process Review, delivered by the EM during Phase I found that the absence of an inception Phase affected many different parts of GEC's delivery, and suggested that *"there was no time to discuss and agree definitions and methodologies for PbR, think through and develop M&E requirements, and communicate these requirements to potential grantees at the application stage. This resulted in confusion for applicants and grantees from the start that had knock-on effects throughout the commissioning and baseline process"* demonstrating that clarity over evaluation and learning roles and responsibilities also affected IPs and EEs, and not only the EM and FM teams.

There was consistent agreement among stakeholders that the EM and FM roles became more clearly defined as Phase I progressed, reportedly driven by a close working relationship between the FM MEL and EM teams and a collaborative approach to problem solving. This process was reportedly driven by the FM and EM. While the FCDO's expectations about what was needed in terms of evaluation and learning were clear and consistent, one respondent reported that the FM and EM teams *"were left to work out the most sensible split between these things"* (KII, FM). Respondents suggested that the FCDO learned throughout the process about the expected roles of the FM and EM, and that the initial lack of clarity over responsibilities was reflective of the novelty of the GEC's innovative evaluation approach and therefore a lack of internal experience and learning across all three stakeholders meant that a more prescriptive and planned approach determining roles and responsibilities did not happen (KII, FCDO, FM). One respondent from Phase II noted that it was also difficult to establish and clearly define roles between the IE team and FM MEL team when the IE contract started in 2020, especially without a dedicated inception phase to clarify roles and responsibilities but noted that these became clearer over time (KII, FM).

4.2.2. Project-level evaluation

Phase I

There were two key needs from project-level evaluation in Phase I: a standardised and robust design to be able to justify PbR decision-making, and the need to aggregate results at the fund-level to be able to report how many girls supported by the GEC had improved their learning (see section 4.2). These two requirements meant that project-level evaluations played a critical role in the overall evaluation and learning requirements of the GEC. As such, each project was required to commission an EE, and task them with assessing learning at baseline, midline and endline stages of the project. Standard deviation variances from these assessments would then feed directly into PbR metrics and, for 15 out of 37 GEC funded projects, would dictate both upward and downward payment revisions (Holden, J. and Patch, J., 2017).

Feedback from the FCDO and FM respondents was critical of this approach. Three specific challenges were raised:

- 1) The need for standardisation and comparability across the portfolio was seen by some respondents as contradictory to the set-up of GEC as a Challenge Fund.** The GEC was set up to be a Challenge Fund that encouraged innovation and attracted proposals from novel development actors. However, once launched, the requirement for quasi-experimental evaluation design (i.e. using comparison groups to measure project impact above and beyond what have happened anyway); and the need to report on how many girls were being reached and benefited from improved learning across the fund drove a need for standardised learning tests both within and across GEC projects (KII, FM). Respondents interviewed suggested that a more prescriptive approach to programme design and implementation, and a greater requirement for comparability and standardisation in programming approach would have better leant itself to the standardised and aggregable data that was required by the FCDO for PbR, and that there was a tension between the Challenge Fund model as set up, and the insights that FCDO requested into cost-effectiveness and learning outcome gains, which would have been easier to measure at portfolio level with greater similarity between projects.
- 2) While projects were guided to take mixed methods evaluation approaches (i.e., using qualitative and quantitative research methods), the heavy focus on quantitative metrics and the effort required to collect and analyse the quantitative data meant that project-level evaluations prioritised quantitative research over qualitative research.** The quantitative data collection for project baseline, midline and endline evaluations

was described by respondents as labour-intensive and onerous. The demanding nature of this approach, coupled with the consequence of the data for PbR decisions and impact on project budgets is cited as having driven the prioritisation of quantitative data collection at the expense of qualitative data collection and analysis at the project level.

- 3) There was substantial variation in the capacity of the EEs commissioned by IPs to undertake the evaluations, and in IP's capacity to manage EEs.** This was raised by stakeholders from the FM and FGDs with IPs and EEs. Specifically, respondents suggested that having expertise within both IP and EE teams that appreciated how and why evaluation is important and can or should be used; and who is able to advocate for the uptake of evaluation findings for project adaptation and drive a culture of learning was critically important to the success of evaluations at the project level. Additionally, respondents reported substantial variation in the MEL capacity of the IPs, and as a result their ability to manage EE contracts. (KII, FM; FGD, EE). Part of the contributing factor for both of these issues was that projects also had large differences in budgets ringfenced for evaluation (FGD, EE).

Phase II

As noted in [Section 4.1](#) above, the approach to project-level evaluation changed substantially in Phase II. The Phase II evaluation design included measurement of intermediate outcomes and girls' transition, and in 2022 the evaluation and learning assessment requirements changed from quasi-experimental designs at the project level to a more nuanced approach incorporating four lines of evidence (UKAID, 2022b). This shift was partly driven by Covid-19's impact on data collection capabilities (FGD, EE).

Phase II also saw the introduction of the LNGB window, which specifically targeted out-of-school girls in 10 countries. Due to the hard-to-reach nature of the girls that the LNGB targeted, there was no PbR mechanism for this Window, and the decision was also taken not to require a quasi-experimental evaluation approach using comparison groups, both on the grounds of it being ethically contentious to do so and difficult to implement (KII, FM).

These changes had the following effects on the three challenges faced in Phase I, detailed above:

- 1) FGD participants from IPs and EEs emphasised their appreciation of the FM's flexibility in Phase II,** citing the removal of the requirements for a quasi-experimental evaluation design and use of comparison groups; technical support for the development of new learning assessments; and flexibility in developing sampling strategies and respondent selection. This again speaks to some of the tension between project-level and portfolio-level insights: the approach taken to evaluation in Phase II was better suited for project-level learning, while it made aggregation challenging and limited portfolio-level insights into learning outcomes (see more in [Section 4.2.3](#) below).
- 2) There was a greater focus on qualitative evidence in Phase II compared to Phase I.** The relaxing of standardised testing requirements, as a result of data collection constraints during the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with the removal of PbR led to more individualised and project-specific evaluation approaches throughout Phase II and a greater focus on qualitative research, and project-level learning as explained in [Section 4.1](#) (KII, FCDO).
- 3) IPs' and EE's MEL capacity was reported to be much greater at the beginning of Phase II, having increased through Phase I.** Specific examples of this cited in KIIs were EEs' skills strengthening, especially in participatory analysis, qualitative analysis and conceptualising disability, as well as a greater initiative in suggesting approaches to evaluation and data collection (KII, FM).
- 4) Another reflection on Phase II shared by IPs and EEs was the high turnover of FM staff created additional work for the IPs and EEs, and that staff gaps and lack of handovers led to the duplication of efforts.**
- 5) Lastly, the shift to measuring transition was difficult, especially for girls that left school.** Transition was not found to be linear, making 'success' difficult to conceptualise (FGD, EE). In addition, out-of-school girls were difficult to track, with the IE's study on the aggregate impact of GEC-T projects between baseline and midline finding an attrition rate at portfolio level of 41% between baseline and midline, with project-level attrition rates varying from 2-75% ([Poli, F. et al., 2021](#)).

4.2.3. Fund-level aggregation of project evaluations

The FM provided quality assurance for project level evaluations and led the aggregation and synthesis of project level evaluation data for two key purposes: (1) to inform PbR decisions; and (2) to be able to report on the programme's

performance at the fund level, in particular the total number of girls benefiting from improved learning over the course of the programme.

The GEC's approach to evaluation demonstrated that a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods could be applied in challenging contexts across a global portfolio. In Phase I and early Phase II, mixed methods impact evaluations were implemented across the GEC portfolio. The need to use these as a source of evidence to inform PbR decision also meant that standardised learning assessments were used across the portfolio, ensuring robust, aggregable results and a strong body of evidence on learning levels. The project-level evaluations had rich data, large sample sizes, triangulation across lots of different tools, quasi-experimental designs, longitudinal panel surveys over multiple rounds. The key critique from FM respondents on this process was that it was labour intensive, but ultimately respondents from the FCDO and FM felt that the approach fulfilled the FCDO's need for a robust evaluation approach to reliably account for the GEC's performance (KII FM, FCDO).

Project IPs' approaches to evaluation became more heterogeneous throughout the programme, which made the aggregation of results difficult. Firstly, LNGB projects were implemented on a cohort basis, with the intention that comparisons of findings from baseline and endline evaluations would inform project adaptation for the next cohort (KII, FM). Each project though had different cohort lengths and evaluation timelines, creating an aggregation challenge. Additionally, some GEC-T projects that were implemented in fragile and conflict-affected states were permitted to discontinue data collection from comparison groups on ethical grounds. Later in Phase II, the constraints of data collection activities due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the removal of the PbR mechanism entirely from the programme ultimately led to the removal of the requirement for a quasi-experimental evaluation approach in 2021.

Another challenge with aggregation in Phase II related to the learning assessments conducted by the projects. While these were standardised, with SEGRA and SEGMA being used across all projects, the IE's Study on the aggregate impact of GEC-T projects found that:

"The GEC-T does not easily lend itself to aggregating project-level data to assess the overall impact of the portfolio and to compare performance across different girls, interventions and contexts – projects used different targeting and sampling strategies; undertook bespoke adaptations of learning assessments; and used different ways of tracking girls" ([Poli, F. et al., 2021, p43](#)).

As such, one key feature of the Phase II approach, which was not designed for aggregation, has been the challenge of conducting quantitative analysis of outcome data at the portfolio level ([Poli, F. et al., 2021, p43](#)).

4.2.4. Fund level evaluation

Phase I

The EM in Phase I was commissioned to provide window-level mixed methods impact evaluations comprised at baseline, midline and endline stages of the programme ([Section 4.3.1](#)). The EM also provided additional studies i.e., a Process Review and Thematic Study. The evaluations provided quantitative impact evaluations, that proved that approaches to evaluation and learning assessment could be applied across different contexts, which was a key aim of the GEC.

There were several challenges reported with this approach from stakeholder interviews. The first is that some of the learning assessment data collection was perceived as duplicative, and contributed to some of the confusion, especially for IPs over the roles of the FM, and EM, as noted in [Section 4.3.1](#), above. The approach was also described as burdensome, even though it was very effective at generating reliable and robust evidence. Third, the evaluation approach was described as slow and complex in producing the evaluation outputs. One respondent from the FCDO reported that because a lot of the evaluation findings were at the window, rather than the project level, it was difficult for project-level stakeholders to know what was necessarily relevant to them. In addition, they suggested that it was difficult to extract simple messages or findings because of the complexity of design, the caveats and explanations around statistical significance in reports (KII, FCDO). Lastly, the timing of the products also limited the usability of the findings to inform programme learning and adaptation, as discussed in [Section 4.3.2](#), below.

A longitudinal study had been planned for Phase I but was dropped due to budget constraints. Respondents reflected that this was a missed opportunity for the GEC, citing the longitudinal tracking of marginalised girls as a key strength of the GEC's evaluation design (at project and programme levels), and the utility of the learning and insights generated from the longitudinal study commissioned through the GEC's RRLF in Phase II of the Somali Girls Education Promotion Programme (SOMGEP) (KII, FCDO). This cohort study followed up with girls six years post-intervention and offered insights into the broader impact of the project's interventions on girls' lives beyond learning

outcomes. As one respondent summarised *“the value for money [of following up with girls after the intervention period] is probably very high because you have this rich data from over time that you can't get otherwise”* (KII, FCDO).

Phase II

As the GEC progressed, the FCDO's interest evolved from output metrics related to learning to questions about cost-effectiveness and sustainable impact. Specifically, the FCDO were interested in understanding how effectively different approaches to girls' education worked in different contexts, and how interventions could be scaled and sustained through government systems (KII, FCDO).

The design of the IE's activities in Phase II was therefore considerably different to Phase I and responded to the change in FCDO's evaluation and learning needs. In summary, Phase II demonstrated a shift toward a more thematic, holistic understanding of outcomes and impact. The IE was therefore designed to deliver eight thematic studies on topics such as access and learning, teachers and teaching, educating girls with disabilities, and value for money, and manage a RRLF⁷. These studies were intended to scrutinise in more detail what was working for who, and where, and the facets that underpin changes in learning outcomes and attendance, as well as the additional benefits to learning beyond improved literacy and numeracy (KII, FCDO).

Within Phase II, a key change in approach was the introduction of Intermediate Outcomes and the need to measure transition as an outcome. This was another novel process, and it took time to clearly articulate and agree indicators for this (KII, FCDO). Feedback on Phase II IE scope and products gathered during the study has been largely positive, with respondents saying the approach was more 'rounded' and that qualitative data was more valued as time went on, offering a more three-dimensional view of the effect of learning beyond literacy and numeracy (KII, FM).

4.2.5. Lessons learned

The evaluation of the GEC demonstrated the ability to assess learning outcomes using mixed methods impact evaluation. This is a major achievement of the programme that responded to the need of the education sector at the time to move beyond access to education as an indicator for learning (KII, FCDO).

Introducing highly ambitious quasi-experimental impact evaluation design requires sufficient time for design and planning their operationalisation. If the programme design demands a resource-intensive accountability-focused evaluation approach, then programmes should allow sufficient time at the start to plan and assess the strategic and operational implications of these accountability needs in terms of the demands that the evaluation design puts on programme resources, and the practical considerations of administering these approaches (for example designing and piloting learning tests).

When resource-intensive impact evaluation designs are required for accountability purposes (for example linked with PbR), programmes need to be aware of the potential risk that quantitative data collection will be prioritised at the expense of qualitative data collection. Demanding evaluation requirements, especially those linked to PbR that have large budget consequences attached to them, will be prioritised. This potentially leads to a trade-off between measuring one metric in-depth (e.g., learning outcomes in the case of GEC Phase I) at the expense of a more holistic approach to understanding how and why learning happens, which requires other approaches to quantitative analysis combined with qualitative data. While both Phases of the GEC were intended to adopt mixed methods evaluation approaches, in practice quantitative data collection was prioritised in Phase I, whilst qualitative research and analysis was prioritised in Phase II. If designing a mixed methods evaluation approach, then it is important to be clear on the expected balance required between different research methods and ensure sufficient resources are set aside for qualitative research should that be necessary.

In developing a large-scale, diverse global programme like the GEC, it is important to identify the evidence and learning priorities at the start and consider the trade-offs between a highly standardised evaluation approach, allowing portfolio aggregation and learning, versus adaptable project-specific evaluation designs. As detailed in the preceding section, both approaches have their merits, and a lesson from the experience of GEC is that both approaches can be successfully conducted, with appropriate capacity and resourcing considerations considered. But both options respond to different evidence and learning priorities. Large-scale aggregation offers comparability and portfolio-level insights about reach and outcome achievement, while project-specific approaches provide a more nuanced understanding about how or why particular trends are observed at the project level, potentially at the expense of generalisable findings within or across projects.

⁷ During Phase II, the decision was taken to discontinue the RRLF and reduce the number of thematic studies to seven, to allocate resources instead to a Portfolio Effectiveness Evaluation.

Large, multi-country, long-term programmes with a longitudinal evaluation design (like the GEC) lend themselves to additional longitudinal impact studies to assess the long-term effects of improved education on girls' lives as they progress into adulthood. As noted above, respondent felt that it was a missed opportunity in the GEC's evaluation approach to not progress with a longitudinal study, which is something that should be considered for large-scale programmes supporting long-term transformational change in beneficiaries' lives.

4.3. The GEC's approach to learning

This section presents reflections on, and lessons learned from, the GEC's approach to learning. It considers learning both in terms of internal programme learning to inform programme adaptation and learning in terms of the GEC's contribution to the global evidence base on girls' education programming and policy. For each of these learning functions, in turn, the section presents the evolution of the approach to learning and then evidence of the uptake of learning generated from this approach throughout the lifecycle of the GEC. The section then presents lessons learned from these approaches.

4.3.1. GEC's approach to learning for programme adaptation

Phase I approach

During Phase I, the FM took the lead on knowledge management and dissemination. All communication and dissemination activities were coordinated through the Knowledge Management Working Group (KMWG), which was led by the FM and included representation from the EM and FCDO.

The FM facilitated the sharing of fund-level lessons from the FM and EM's evaluation activities between projects and external stakeholders through learning events and newsletters. Key dissemination efforts included global and regional midline and endline learning events, where insights and findings were shared widely across the GEC network (UKES, 2017); although these activities were reported to be deprioritised as budget pressures increased (KII, FM).

Project-level dissemination primarily occurred on an ad hoc basis. Individual projects independently published their findings and shared lessons with stakeholders and policymakers within their respective countries through events and meetings. These efforts were not centrally coordinated but provided opportunities for projects to engage directly with stakeholders at the national level. However, given the ad hoc nature of this approach, there was little formal documentation to draw from for this Lessons Learned Study to be able to clearly articulate the extent to which this was undertaken across the GEC I portfolio.

Key informant interviews reflected that both project- and fund-level stakeholders prioritised evaluation over learning in Phase I. As noted above, the GEC was a large, novel, multi-country initiative, that demanded a robust evaluation approach driven by accountability. Evaluation activities were therefore prioritised, and while learning activities were conducted throughout Phase I, these were described as largely ad-hoc and with no formalised approach to learning to oversee the FM's or IE's learning and dissemination activities. Respondents from the FCDO also reported that learning in Phase I was affected by a lack of planning around roles, responsibilities and timelines, as similarly reported in the GEC's approach to evaluation in Phase I, described in [Section 4.2.1](#). As one respondent articulated, the prioritisation of evaluation over learning was not necessarily a critique, but an acknowledgement that *"as early as you want to be capturing and sharing [lessons], there does need to be time for really valuable lessons to emerge"* (KII, FM).

Towards the end of Phase I, there was a noticeable shift in emphasis towards qualitative analysis and internal learning. Key informant interviews with representatives from the FM and the FCDO indicated growing recognition of the need for qualitative evidence and thematic learning (KII, FM, FCDO). Early Phase I learning products presented lessons from the field but lacked a thematic structure, reflecting the initial stage of the GEC at that stage. Over time, the learning process evolved to become more thematic with the production of the GEC Thematic Discussion Papers by the FM, and technical experts were brought in to provide insights on eight major themes including community-based awareness, economic interventions and self-esteem (KII, FCDO).

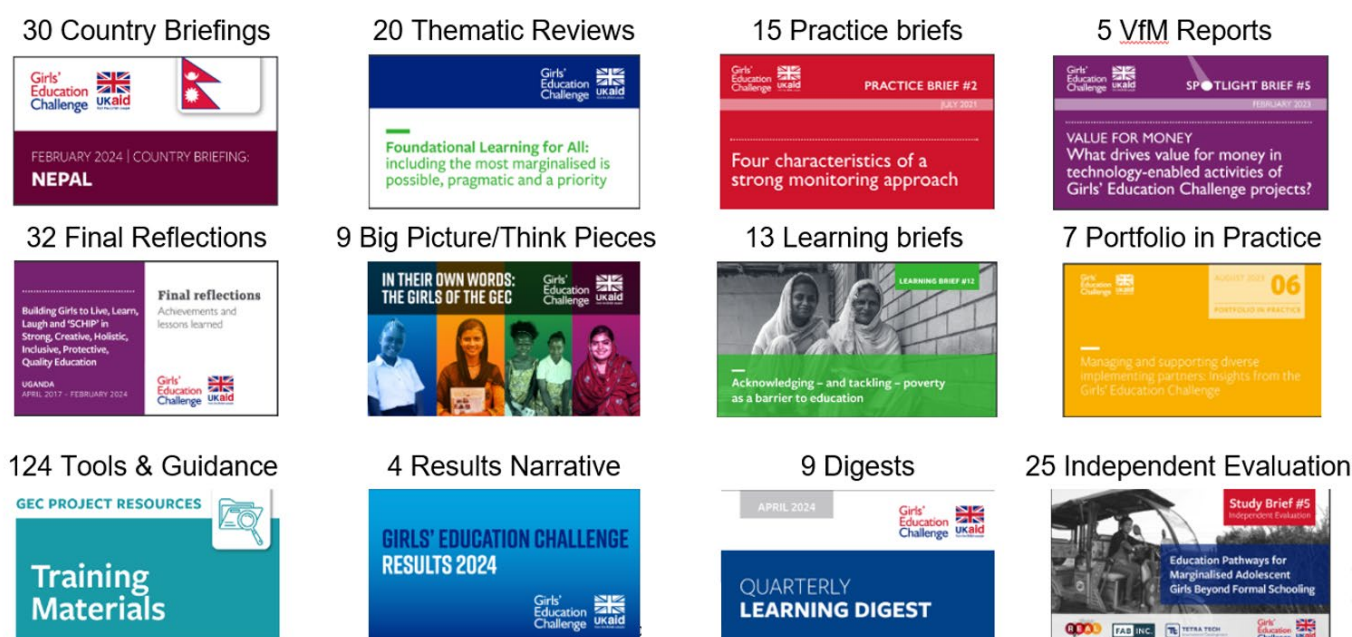
Phase II approach

The GEC II Business Case set out an increased focus on strengthening the capacity of partners to use evaluation data to inform programme design. While adaptive programme was recognised in the Business Case to still be an *"evolving area in global M&E"* ([FCDO, 2015, p71](#)), it also emphasised the FM support to project IPs to use

learning for programme adaptation and course correction as an importance feature of Phase II, in part in response to lessons from GEC Phase I, which showed that *“to a large degree, some partners have struggled to internalise, understand and respond to the information being gathered on their interventions”* (FCDO, 2015, p71).

In Phase II, the sharing of lessons for internal learning purposes was more systematic. The FM retained responsibility for collating and sharing learning across the GEC programme. In 2020, a Learning Strategy was produced, which consolidated the GEC's approach to learning and set out an action plan for learning and dissemination. This strategy considered learning for internal purposes as well as for external audiences (see [Section 4.3.3](#)). As a result of a more structured approach, the FM's Learning Team within the FM produced a suite of learning products, shown in [Figure 7](#) – this included 124 different sets of tools and guidance, 15 Practice Briefs, 13 Learning Briefs and seven Portfolio in Practice reports.

Figure 7: GEC II learning products developed by the FM in Phase II



As noted in [Section 4.2](#), above, the GEC's approach to evaluation in Phase II also shifted to prioritise thematic insights over impact evaluations. This, coupled with the further shift precipitated by the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a greater focus on thematic insights, emphasising lessons learned, the wellbeing and safety of girls, and assessing how projects could adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic. (UKAID, 2020b; UKAID, 2020c)

4.3.2. The use of evaluation and learning for project adaptation

Phase I

Respondents from the FM, IPs and EEs suggest that there were country and project examples of uptake of learning in Phase I. There were examples of learning from across the GEC portfolio, for example through country- or regional-level learning events, for example to share finding from GEC midline evaluations. There were also some reports from KIIs with representatives from the FM of factors that facilitated learning. For example, EEs that worked across multiple projects played a key role in fostering collaboration and learning, suggesting that uptake was at least in some part determined by each project-level evaluation contract rather than being guided by a central learning or uptake strategy. Project EEs also reported the benefits of close working relationships with partners that facilitated learning (FGD, EE). Lastly, the FM also encouraged projects to interact and exchange insights by facilitating events, both regional and global, which deepened learning over time (KII, FM).

However, learning uptake at the project level was not guided by a central learning or uptake strategy.

Therefore, uptake was dependent on having a strong EE in place and was not consistent across the portfolio. More often, projects' resources were prioritised for quantitative data collection to fulfil evaluation requirements. This limited the opportunities for project-level learning and uptake especially, as some respondents highlighted, because IPs did

not always realise that project evaluations also had value in guiding project level learning and could be used for this purpose.

The evaluations produced by the EM were focused on accountability. These evaluations were long, complex and slow to produce, meaning they were not conducive to facilitating programme- or project-level adaptation. They presented findings at the window level, which meant that it was difficult for projects to identify which findings were most relevant to their project (KII, FCDO). Another key limitation in the use of EM products to inform programme adaptation was the timing of the reports. Due to their size and complexity, reports were slow to produce, and feedback from FM and FCDO respondents suggested that this ultimately hindered their usefulness in informing programme adaptation (KII, FM, FCDO). These studies, did, however contribute to the design of GEC Phase II, providing a robust evidence base on which to make decisions about programme design.

While there were numerous learning events focused on the dissemination of lessons, there was little follow-up to document the extent to which these events led to a meaningful uptake of information, and as such it is difficult for this study to suggest how much the evidence shared from these events was used.

Phase II

Phase II had a more systematic approach to learning and uptake, and there is more evidence of projects using learning to inform project adaptation compared to Phase I.

Respondents specifically mentioned the following characteristics of the approach to learning in Phase II as supporting internal learning and uptake:

- 1) The short-form learning products produced by the FM in Phase II were more targeted and quicker to produce, making them easier to use to inform programme design and decision-making.** Specific products, such as process reviews, learning briefs, LNGB insights on what works, cost-effectiveness analyses, and accessible tools like briefs, were particularly noted in key informant interviews as being widely used. Respondents highlighted the balance between these products being short while still analytical as making them especially useful and easier to utilise. (KII, FM; KII, FCDO).
- 2) Peer learning among project grantees was also actively supported by the FM,** creating a learning community strengthened through meetings and webinars, which were reported to be highly effective (KII, FM).

4.3.3. GEC's approach to dissemination of learning to external stakeholders

Phase I

The GEC I Business Case set out the intention for the GEC to influence broader policy on girls' education.

During Phase I, the FCDO notably sought to share and promote best practices and approaches with other donors in the sector, such as the World Bank. Additionally, the programme's scale and reach were viewed as an opportunity to elevate the global priority of educating marginalised girls (FCDO, 2011).

Similar to the approach to internal learning in Phase I, the GEC's approach to sharing learning with the broader education sector was limited and ad-hoc. As mentioned above, the primary focus of the IPs, FM and EM in Phase 1 was setting up and delivering a complex, accountability driven approach to evaluation and performance management. This generated large amounts of quantitative data that were very specific to the GEC's projects; and large and long technical programme evaluation reports that were sufficiently useful for programme adaptations. Moreover, because the qualitative evidence in Phase I evaluations was highly context-specific, lessons learned were hard to generalise beyond individual GEC projects and as such were not always as relevant to wider stakeholders (UKES, 2017).

Throughout Phase I, the GEC organised, and participated in both national and international conferences, (FCDO, 2015a). KIIs with stakeholders from the FCDO noted that learning and dissemination about the GEC raised the profile of the girls' education agenda in the development space through these national and international conferences, and was particularly strong when it came to advocacy, marketing and branding (KII, FCDO SP). However, this was the primary strategy used for wider dissemination during the first Phase, in the absence of a more comprehensive Learning Strategy.

Phase II

The GEC II Business Case reiterated the need for learning and the dissemination of evidence to wider stakeholders to influence broader policy on girls' education. Key informant interviews with stakeholders from the FM also indicated that 2018 marked a key shift in the prioritisation of the generation and dissemination of learning, highlighted by the launch of a dedicated GEC website that same year.

Throughout Phase II, several measures were rolled out to increase the dissemination of learning about the GEC to external stakeholders, guided by the GEC's Learning Strategy. The Learning Strategy recognised that communication and dissemination should be considered an equal priority to the generation of learning (UKAID, 2020a). It sought to amplify GEC learning pieces through partnerships and facilitated their increased uptake in other policies, contexts, and programmes; and the FM was set KPIs to encourage the dissemination of learning ([FCDO, 2022](#)). The strategy was supported by the creation of a new FM Learning Lead position, with ownership and responsibility for learning and dissemination and the creation of a GEC online brand through website and social media management. This additional resourcing was described as 'transformative' in facilitating the dissemination and uptake of learning (KII, FCDO).

Steps were taken to identify how the knowledge base created by the GEC could be harnessed to advance the global evidence base on girls' education and learning. The *Research Feasibility Study* ([Rose, P. et al, 2020](#)) identified that research related to the GEC in Phase I and the baseline for GEC-T projects could be used to advance the global evidence base on what works to improve learning outcomes for the most marginalised. Similarly, some IE Studies like the study on *Teachers and Teaching* ([2021](#)) identified gaps in the knowledge base, including on gender-responsive pedagogy; the role of female teachers; and teacher professional development.

Between 2022 and 2024, the GEC's visibility and engagement in the global education sector substantially increased. This included presentations at high-profile international conferences/ events, collaborating with global organisations such as United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI), Global Partnership for Education (GPE), World Bank and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and contributing to global reports on foundational learning and girls' education (FCDO, [2022](#)). The GEC has also collaborated with wider education stakeholders in developing and disseminating materials, including co-authoring reports with strategic partners (UKAID, 2024). The GEC has worked with organisations like the ODI, World Bank and GPE to exchange knowledge and shape strategies. Other dissemination efforts included webinars, and roundtables (UKAID, 2024).

Learning products were aimed at influencing international education policies and providing evidence for replication and scaling. This shift was most evident in the production of the Learning Briefs and Portfolio in Practice (PiP) series which synthesised cross-portfolio lessons and aimed to inform strategies on education for marginalised girls. Both Learning Briefs and PiPs were disseminated widely. The FM Programme Completion Report (PCR) cites the example:

"In a UNICEF ROSA regional workshop on learning loss recovery both series were used by eight countries to support the implementation of the RAPID framework and the Foundational Learning Think Piece formed the basis of some discussions." (UKAID, 2024, p119).

4.3.4. The use of evaluation and learning by external stakeholders

Phase I

There are some examples that demonstrate the utility of the GEC's learning for wider audiences, but the evidence of evaluation and learning products from GEC Phase I being used by external stakeholders is limited. In Phase I, there was no formal tracking of evidence use to document the uptake of learning or the influence that GEC exerted over the wider education sector.

Despite not having formalised measures of dissemination or uptake, there were still positive examples of this mentioned by stakeholders from the FM during interviews, specifically highlighting the positive reception of GEC learning products at the UK Forum for International Education and Training (UKFIET) conference, highlighting that the learning products were valuable to a diverse audience which included policymakers and implementors (KII, FM).

Phase II

Similarly in Phase II, there was no formalised tracking of use by the GEC programme. Key informants interviewed cited some examples, and consistently reported that they expected use by wider stakeholders to have increased

substantially compared to Phase I due to the more concerted effort made by the programme to consider utilisation in the development of its products, and to prioritise the dissemination of this through the broad range of products and communications mentioned in the previous section.

Examples of the use cited by respondents interviewed and documents reviewed for this study included:

- FCDO respondents reported that evidence produced in Phase II helped the FCDO talk to partner governments in a more informed, evidence-based way, even in programmes where GEC was not implemented, as the learning could be adapted to similar contexts (KII, FCDO).
- An FCDO respondent also reported that evidence from GEC Phase II has helped influence global partners like the GPE and Education Cannot Wait (KII, FCDO).
- Respondents from the FCDO also reported that learning from the GEC has been used to inform the design of other FCDO-funded education programmes, such as in the development of a Gender, Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Strategy and to inform the MEL strategy for SCALE, and the design of the Rwanda GIRL programme. Lessons from the GEC’s approach to pedagogy and the use of Ed Tech was also reported to influence the Ed Tech Hub, with one respondent explaining that *“Having tangible demonstration cases of innovation [from GEC] proved powerful for driving change, though institutionalising changes, particularly around disability, remained challenging”* (KII, FCDO).
- Some limited collaboration with local governments were also cited, such as the integration of projects into broader government initiatives, as in the case in Malawi. Ghana, Kenya and Nepal also showed government involvement in GEC programmes, albeit with limited resource contributions. ([Rose, P. et. al, 2023](#)). Overall, engagement with national governments and uptake of learning was limited to specific interventions where IPs had pre-existing relationships with local authorities, but some positive examples exist.

In addition, the Lessons Learned Study undertook a **Structured Web Search**, to take a more systematic approach to assessing the use of GEC’s learning by wider education sector stakeholders. As detailed in [Annex FG](#), the Structured Web Search (SWS) reviewed documents published and openly available on the internet that mentioned the GEC. Graphs summarising the trends in GEC mentions over time are presented in [Annex F](#), and trends and specific examples of use cases are summarised below.

The SWS found that the number of links that referenced GEC had steadily climbed from 2012, with a noticeable increase in the number of online sources that referenced the GEC from 2020, when the number of unique links that mentioned the GEC across all publication types doubled.

The results of the SWS include some examples of use of GEC’s data or evidence in other programmes. For example:

- A research team studied IGATE-T, a GEC-T project, to determine whether interventions targeting community attitudes improved education for marginalised students in Zimbabwe. ([Nordstrom, A., 2021](#)).
- EdTech Hub global research partnership, conducted a study ([Amenya, D. et. al, 2021](#)) to examine the learning experiences of girls in Kenya during school closures caused by Covid-19. The research aimed to assess and highlight the impact of various interventions, such as peer learning, radio lessons, and reading camps, implemented by a GEC-funded project.
- Brookings, an American think tank, used GEC evidence and the GEC as an example in a report on the challenges facing girls’ education. ([King, E., & Winthrop, R., 2015](#))
- More informal knowledge pieces using GEC evidence were also produced. A blog by Oxford MeasurEd, an education consultancy, was based on analysis of baseline data on learning levels of girls supported by the GEC-T Window to evaluate the impact of Covid-19 on marginalised girls. The blog detailed key considerations and policies needed to support girls during and after school closures. ([Outhred, R., Reilly, A., Turner, F., 2021](#))

It is also worth highlighting that, even without directly using GEC data, other organisations have contributed to the broader dissemination of GEC learning by sharing related documentation and findings on their platforms. For example, the UNESCO Health and Education Resource Centre⁸ hosts a dedicated page on GEC resources, compiling a collection of relevant reports and toolkits. These resources include lessons on preventing violence in schools and a toolkit on life skills for adolescent girls during Covid-19.

⁸ The website of the UNESCO Health and Education Centre is available [here](#). Webpage last consulted the 30.01.25.

4.3.5. Lessons Learned from the GEC's approach to learning

Comparing the approach to learning taken by the GEC in Phase I and II illustrates the benefit of having dedicated learning resource and a formalised Learning Strategy. If evidence and learning is intended to inform programme adaptation, then a utilisation-focused approach should be embedded at the start of a large-scale global intervention. Feedback from respondents in this Lessons Learned Study has shown the benefits of taking a utilisation-focused approach to learning. As detailed in this study, there was an important contrast between the formalisation of the programme's approach to learning in Phase I compared to Phase II. The products produced in Phase II, driven by a learning and dissemination strategy, were reportedly more useful and there is greater evidence of their use and uptake from both key informant interviews and the structured web search.

If projects intend to have a strong internal learning component, then sufficient resourcing and organisational capacity is needed to facilitate this. In Phase I of the GEC, the constrained capacity of EEs and IPs was reported as limiting project learning and adaptation opportunities. According to KIIs with the FCDO, capacity constraints hindered learning as the FM and IE teams often lacked the time to determine the best approaches for knowledge sharing and dissemination.

If policy influence is an explicit aim of a programme, then dedicated resource should be built into the programme design to drive learning and dissemination efforts forward. External dissemination of learning and influence over broader programming and policy has been shown to be bolstered by having dedicated learning resources. As seen in Phase II, dissemination efforts were most effective when dedicated FCDO and FM staff were focused on communications and dissemination. As one respondent summarized:

“there's been two or three major points when the FCDO realised they want to disseminate more widely and they put someone in place, and that has been transformative in terms of speed and agility. In the most recent period, we had someone dedicated to the [GEC] website and that was transformative in terms of our last 12–18-month push. It's made a huge difference when there has been additional pressure to put stuff out but also additional support” (KII, FM).

Using a broad range of communications tools has also been conducive to uptake, with short-form products being cited as especially conducive to uptake, while the GEC website and use of social media platforms like LinkedIn have been credited with increased access.

If a programme has the explicit aim to influence global policy on girls' education, then a comprehensive stakeholder Use and Influence Plan as a key complement to the MEL Strategy is critical for systematically assessing uptake and use of the global evidence base generated across the life of the GEC. The sheer scale and reach of the GEC has raised the global profile of the importance of educating marginalised girls and there is evidence that the programme has influenced broader education policy and programming, as it set out to do. But the lack of a formalised Use and Influence Plan for stakeholders in the wider education sector, with a systematic approach to tracking uptake and use of the GEC's evaluation and learning products meant that it is difficult to confidently assert how much, and by whom evidence and learning from GEC has influenced broader policy on girls' education.

5. Discussion

The preceding section summarised the lessons identified through this Lessons Learned Study related to the GEC's approach to marginalisation and trade-offs associated with targeting marginalised girls as well as the evolution of the GEC's approach to evaluation and learning over the course of Phases I and II; and the lessons learned from these approaches. This section considers the lessons within the current FCDO and broader international development landscape and considers their applicability for current and future FCDO programmes, noting that there is no successor programme to the GEC.

KLQ 1: GEC's approach to Marginalisation

This discussion identifies considerations for the targeting of marginalised groups, the need for tailored approaches and balancing tensions related to supporting marginalised groups.

The GEC made significant contributions to understanding and addressing educational marginalisation, offering important implications for future educational programming and policy development. The lessons learned from the GEC can inform strategies aimed at creating equitable and inclusive educational opportunities for all children, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

Ensuring quality data are available and used for identifying and reaching marginalised groups cost-effectively

Identifying groups experiencing overlapping and complex marginalisation requires good quality, disaggregated data to identify and reach them

Programmes require good quality disaggregated data to understand how different factors intersect to marginalise a girl from education; and then inform the design of tailored strategies enabling girls and communities to overcome or mitigate for them. The challenges faced in gathering disaggregated data reflect broader systemic issues within educational frameworks, highlighting the need for ongoing investment in national and comparative cross-country household data systems that are able to capture the complexities of marginalisation.

Data available to IPs during the selection process for Phase I did not always capture the overlapping complexities of marginalisation or were insufficiently accurate, for example, due to insufficient sample sizes. This meant that identifying and subsequently targeting such 'hidden' groups was challenging. In the absence of available high quality and disaggregated data, programmes working with marginalised groups are able to engage with local governments and community groups to identify who the girls are and how to reach them at an operational level. Local governments and community groups can leverage their understanding of specific markers of marginalisation and use this to help IPs identify and reach marginalised groups whose data may not be captured at the national level.

Identifying, reaching and supporting marginalised groups incurs higher costs because of the contexts in which they live and the complex set of factors that marginalises them from education

The GEC has demonstrated the challenges of targeting, reaching and supporting marginalised groups, that often requires higher costs. For example, girls living in geographically challenging contexts such as Somalia and Afghanistan or girls in domestic or bonded labour who require highly individualised and time-intensive support that incurs higher costs than less marginalised girls. Costs were particularly high for projects targeting girls with disabilities given the highly individualised and resource and time-intensive support required to support these girls. The higher unit cost of supporting marginalised girls needs to be explicitly understood and considered from the outset. This should be accompanied by an analysis, which includes equity considerations as an integral part of the value for money assessment, enabling programmes to identify cost-effective approaches to reaching marginalised groups.

PbR created an adverse incentive for programmes that hindered the focus on supporting marginalised girls who were harder to reach

The key potential risk of using payment mechanisms such as PbR as a funding mechanism was the adverse effect of undermining efforts to reach marginalised girls by incentivising projects to focus on easier-to-reach populations. PbR in the GEC was introduced for the purpose of risk sharing and encouraging innovation and transparency – a key rationale for using a Challenge Fund process to identify project solutions. However, the introduction of PbR required projects to demonstrate measurable outcomes in reaching their targets for the number of girls with improved learning

outcomes, which created a risk that projects would target less marginalised girls and take a more risk-averse approach to achieve the performance metrics required for payment. The removal of PbR in Phase II for the LNGB Window enabled a shift towards more innovative and inclusive strategies, reflecting the importance of addressing the intersectionality of marginalisation and the unique needs of diverse marginalised groups.

Tailoring interventions to contextual needs

A flexible definition of marginalisation allows programmes to identify marginalised girls based on a context-specific assessment of overlapping factors

The GEC used a flexible definition of marginalisation that enabled projects to identify and target girls who were marginalised within their context. A standard definition of marginalisation applied across different country and local contexts, would not have been the most appropriate because of the complex variations in the ways girls are marginalised.

Engaging local communities and stakeholders is critical in successfully reaching and supporting marginalised girls

The GEC achieved notable successes in reaching marginalised girls, primarily through collaborative efforts with national and local stakeholders, which facilitated context-specific strategies. These successes highlight the effectiveness of tailored interventions that engage local communities in identifying and supporting the most vulnerable populations. Engaging communities in the design and implementation of programmes fosters trust and ensures that interventions are relevant and effective.

Taking a gendered approach in designing interventions ensures that gender social norms are considered in the support provided

Programmes that exclusively target girls in communities in which there are boys who are also highly vulnerable, risk creating perceptions of inequity and heighten the potential for acts of resistance at the community level. GEC projects that adopted an approach to addressing gender norms were successful in including boys and in understanding how attitudes and behaviours of men and boys could affect girls' education and employment opportunities.

Considering marginalisation as an integral part of target-setting and scaling strategies

Explicitly considering the balance between the scale of a programme's reach and the need to support marginalised groups is a critical part of the design and target-setting process

Throughout the GEC, challenges emerged in terms of balancing the scale of the programme's desired outreach with the depth of resources and expertise needed to effectively reach and support marginalised girls. The disparity between the targets set in terms of the number of girls to be reached, and the contextual and financial realities of supporting marginalised girls, highlights the need to balance programme ambitions for scale with the cost and expertise needed to support marginalised girls.

Incorporating interventions that target marginalised girls along with systemic improvements benefit all learners ensuring that no one is left behind

The programme's focus on both targeted interventions for marginalised girls and broader systemic improvements highlights the potential for inclusive educational initiatives that benefit communities as a whole. For example, projects' awareness sessions that focused on changing community attitudes towards marginalised girls (e.g., girls with disabilities) changed norms for all girls and not just those who were more marginalised. Other spillover effects in the community included increased vaccination rates, improved contraception use, reduced perceptions of GBV and strengthened social networks. It is also critical to ensure that marginalisation is central to scaling strategies to ensure that they are equitable, and no one is left behind.

Recommendations: Marginalisation

Recommendation 1: Multi-country programmes operating across diverse contexts should establish principles for identifying marginalisation while allowing a flexible approach on how marginalisation is understood and applied across different contexts.

Recommendation 2: Programmes aiming to support marginalised girls need disaggregated data by different characteristics of marginalisation, while considering the need for sufficient sample sizes for analysis, to enable them to identify and target relevant beneficiaries.

Recommendation 3: The cost of reaching marginalised girls should be explicitly estimated at the planning stage to ensure sufficient resources are available to reach and support marginalised girls with diverse needs.

Recommendation 4: Programmes need to ensure that Payments by Results approaches incentivise outcomes that benefit the marginalised, recognising the potentially higher cost of doing so.

Recommendation 5: Programmes should adopt an approach that assesses the effects of gender social norms on education opportunities and outcomes and design interventions with a gendered approach that also takes account of the effects on boys as well as non-marginalised girls.

Recommendation 6: Future programmes require careful consideration of the targets set for the number of beneficiaries while accounting for the type and level of resources and expertise needed to reach different groups of marginalised girls.

Recommendation 7: Programmes should be designed to include both targeted interventions to support marginalised groups along with interventions that strengthen the education system more broadly, thus benefiting all children and young people.

KLQ 2: GEC's approach to Evaluation and Learning

Articulating evaluation and learning priorities and intentions for use and uptake

Measuring learning across diverse country contexts at programme and projects levels is possible

The GEC has demonstrated that it is possible to measure learning outcomes on large scale education programmes, and that this can be done in a wide range of educational, cultural and geographic contexts. This is a major achievement of the GEC and can inform future evaluation and learning approaches. Project-level lessons from the GEC about the ways of measuring girls' learning in different contexts also offer current and future programmes with more granular lessons and considerations to integrate in their design.

Articulating clear objectives for use and influence of programme evidence is an integral part of evaluation and learning strategies

Learning from the GEC demonstrates the importance of defining how an education programme is expected to influence broader education policy and programming and centring these objectives when defining a programme's evaluation and learning approach. While the GEC had the explicit aim of influencing broader education policy, the experience from the evaluation and learning activities over the course of the programme shows that some activities were more effective at facilitating evidence uptake and use than others. In particular, the launch of a Learning Strategy and allocation of dedicated resources (in Phase II) for the dissemination and use of learning was recognised as key success factors enabling the uptake and use of the GEC's evaluation findings and learning products. This emphasises the importance of focusing on the utilisation of evidence in the design of evaluation and learning activities and being explicit about how products are intended to be used, by whom and when.

The intended use of evaluation and learning informs programme evaluation design

Utilisation was also an important lesson with regards to the prioritisation of quantitative data collection and analysis (in Phase I) and the use of the data to inform decision-making about PbR. Education programmes that use results-based financing will inherently set out a clear case for the use of evaluation data, which will most likely be prioritised because of the financial implications attached to it.

The GEC also showed that multi-year programmes that aim to contribute to the global evidence base on the longer-term impacts of education interventions can effectively employ longitudinal impact studies. These studies provide the opportunity to assess and track how education and intersecting inequalities affect the lives of marginalised girls and children as they progress through early years on to adolescence and into adulthood; as demonstrated through the project-level cohort impact study of the Somali Girls' Education Promotion Project (SOMGEP) commissioned by the IE.

Balancing potential tensions between outcome-based payment mechanisms, innovation and failure

In defining an evaluation and learning strategy and approach, the delivery modality of a programme will influence the design. Tensions are likely to arise between supporting innovation and the need to acknowledge the potential for project failure, and funding that is tied to achieving target outcomes. Results-based financing (e.g., PbR) can result in programmes focusing on achieving education outcomes through the easiest intervention strategies (see marginalisation section). One critique of the GEC's stringent PbR performance metrics was that it stifled innovation by incentivising programmes to reach 'easy to access' girls, and also that it acted as a barrier to novel development actors, who were likely to be smaller organisations that could not absorb the potential reduction in their funds that may have resulted from poorly performing interventions. It also incentivised stakeholders involved in evaluation and learning to prioritise performance metrics (i.e., quantitative) that were linked to payments over research methods and analysis (i.e., qualitative) that could provide a more holistic understanding of how and why a programme is delivering results.

Evaluation and learning approaches need to address issues such as value for money, gender equality and social inclusion and conflict sensitivity.

Ensuring that the GEC offered value for money was of central importance, although the approach to measuring and assessing this varied throughout the programme's implementation period. Findings from the IE's study on the VfM of educating the most marginalised girls taking a holistic approach to assessing *all* the benefits realised by GEC beneficiaries – including project effects on their health, safety, employment after school – showed that the benefits substantially outweigh the costs. This includes girls with different marginalisation characteristics facing additional barriers to education incurring higher costs to reach and support them. These findings highlight the need for a robust and comprehensive approach to assessing VfM to ensure that the full range of benefits of education programmes are captured and reported.

Conflict, security and social inclusion are important contextual considerations for education interventions addressing marginalisation. Programmes that operate in conflict or insecure settings potentially require different approaches to evaluation and learning. As seen through the GEC's experience, quasi-experimental approaches to assessing results may face particular ethical challenges and be challenging to implement in these settings. For the protection and safety of beneficiaries, these considerations should be an integral part of the design of evaluation and learning strategies from the start of the programme.

Operationalising evaluation and learning strategies

Operationalising complex, mixed-methods evaluation approaches to evaluation requires time, collaboration, and resource planning

As noted in [Section 4.2.2](#), the combination of the novelty and complexity of the GEC's approach to evaluation meant a steep learning curve at the beginning of the programme. Additionally, the GEC did not have an Inception Phase to sufficiently plan and operationalise the evaluation approach. Consequently, this required an iterative approach to planning and operationalising its implementation in Phase I, whereby the FM and EM defined and refined the approach, roles and responsibilities during the initial stages of implementation. While this collaboration was effective, it was not the most efficient approach, particularly because there was insufficient time to properly consider the time, cost and burden on all stakeholders involved in the evaluation process at project and programme levels.

The key lessons from this experience were the need to factor in adequate planning time into programme design, and the importance of taking a multi-stakeholder approach to evaluation design. While the inclusion of an Inception Phase, especially on large, complex, multi-programme initiatives are now commonplace, the experience from the GEC highlights the importance of ensuring sufficient time and resource is allocated to inception planning, especially when using new and complex approaches to outcome measurement and performance management mechanisms such as PbR.

Assessing the feasibility of operationalising the evaluation strategy – in particular the costs and expertise needed – ensures a robust assessment of its VfM

Learning from this study emphasises the importance of considering the feasibility and resource implications of an intended evaluation approach. As described throughout [Section 4.2](#) of this report, the GEC's approach to evaluation, especially in Phase I, was resource intensive and demanding of all programme stakeholders involved. At the project level, there was an additional challenge of capability and capacity constraints for IPs and EEs managing and delivering 41 project level evaluations. The FM also undertook the considerable challenge of validating and aggregating learning data and quality assuring monitoring and evaluation evidence across the whole GEC portfolio.

The experience from the first Phase of GEC in particular highlights the importance of programme's evaluation strategies being informed by feasibility and evaluability assessments conducted during an Inception Phase. This ensures that the design of evaluation and learning activities not only responds to the FCDO's evidence priorities but is also proportionate and deliverable without over-burdening programme stakeholders.

Investing in dedicated resources to support the dissemination and facilitation of learning – including systematic tracking of uptake and use – helps optimise evidence utilisation and impact

This study identified the importance of dedicating resources and articulating a use and influence plan to enable a programme to effectively facilitate and assess the uptake and use of the evidence generated through evaluation and learning activities. As noted in [Section 4.3](#), the GEC did not systematically track the use and uptake of the evidence generated through its evaluation and learning activities. A more systematic approach to tracking evidence and learning use and uptake could have helped the GEC to maximise its influence and adapt its dissemination and communication strategies accordingly. This study used a structured web search to identify mentions of the GEC in external sources published online, which is an example of a method that could be set up in the beginning of a programme and used to collect data on a programme's influence on wider stakeholders in the education sector. Learning from the GEC also highlighted that both the capacity of organisations and the accessibility of evaluation and learning products are key factors affecting their successful uptake and use. Both of these factors need to be taken into consideration in the development of a use and influence plan as an integral part of evaluation and learning strategies.

Recommendations: Evaluation and Learning

Recommendation 1: At the design stage, the programme-wide evaluation and learning strategies should be driven by clearly articulated evidence and learning priorities including identifying the intended users (at project, programme and strategic levels) and uses of the data collected, and the evidence and insights gained from evaluation and learning activities. This ensures that the added value of monitoring and evaluation at project and programme levels justifies the scale of the investment and potential opportunity costs and trade-offs.

Recommendation 2: At the Business Case stage, the FCDO should consider the potential benefits of investing in longitudinal impact studies for large-scale multi-year education programmes to provide long-term insights into how education and intersecting inequalities affect the lives of marginalised girls and children as they progress through adolescence and into adulthood.

Recommendation 3: When developing a programme's evaluation and learning strategies the FCDO should require a feasibility assessment to be undertaken to ensure that the programme has the resources needed to implement them. This should be completed during a programme Inception Phase with adequate time and resources dedicated to the assessment to ensure that evaluation and learning plans are realistic and deliverable and meet the evidence needs of the FCDO and wider stakeholder audiences.

Recommendation 4: All education programmes that explicitly aim to influence education programming and policy should set out key performance and measurement metrics for doing so. This study suggests that dissemination and facilitation of uptake is included in performance indicators for such programmes, to ensure that the benefits of evaluation and learning are realised and spillover to the wider education sector.

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