

Request for Proposals: J-PAL Post-Primary Education (PPE) Initiative

Round 8 - 2017

J-PAL's Post-Primary Education (PPE) Initiative funds randomized evaluations of strategies to improve access, quality, and relevance of post-primary education throughout the developing world. The Initiative has two regular funding cycles per year for full research projects, pilot studies, and exploratory work in proposal development that address open questions outlined in the [Post-Primary Education Review Paper](#).

J-PAL affiliates, postdoctoral fellows, and other invited researchers are eligible to apply for all categories of funding. PhD students with J-PAL affiliate advisers are eligible to apply for pilots and travel/proposal development grants.

The PPE Initiative welcomes a full range of proposals. Based on evidence gaps, we particularly welcome strong proposals in the following areas:

- *Innovations in delivery of core curriculum at the secondary level, including basic math, science, and language education*
- *Effective pedagogies at the secondary level, taking into consideration the greater complexity of material taught and the qualifications required to teach it*
- *The use of information and communication technology (ICT) for student learning or teacher training at the secondary level*

*The deadline for all proposals is **5 pm EDT on Sunday, May 7, 2017**. Proposals should be e-mailed to PPE@povertyactionlab.org. If you do not receive a confirmation email from J-PAL staff within 72 hours of submitting your proposal, please follow up with the Initiative Manager, Luke Strathmann, at lstrathm@mit.edu.*

Background: In Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia alone, more than 3 million young people are expected to enter the labor market every year between 2010 and 2015. Unlike previous generations, most of these young people will have attended primary school for at least a few years, thanks to the successful expansion of primary education in these countries. Increasing numbers of these young people are also attending secondary, vocational, and tertiary schools. It is far from clear, however, that these countries and others in East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America are equipped to provide this new generation with marketable skills at the post-primary level. Finding ways to promote access to post-primary education, while ensuring the quality and relevance of that education to the needs of rapidly changing labor markets, is a great challenge that must be met in the context of severe budget constraints, insufficient preparation from the primary education system, and persistent gender gaps in many countries.

Framework: While research from randomized evaluations has generated a rich body of evidence on improving school access and quality at the primary level, much less is known about what works and what does not work in secondary, vocational, and tertiary education. The existing evidence on PPE, as summarized in the [PPE Initiative review paper](#), may be organized into two broad topics: the demand for education from students and parents, and the supply of education from governments and private providers. The review found that there is strong evidence for simple ways to increase demand for post-primary education, such as extending credit and providing information on the economic benefits of education, but little evidence about how to improve quality and teach 21st century skills. Moreover, it is likely that many of the existing lessons on improving access and quality in primary school will not transfer to the post-primary context, where the material is more complex, school fees are more expensive, and the opportunity cost of students' time is higher.

Focus: Please refer to the PPE Initiative Review Paper for a description of key open questions based on the review of the literature. The major themes identified in the review include:

- **Pedagogy:** How do variations in content (practical vs. theoretical knowledge), teaching styles (inquiry-based vs. rote learning), supplementary teaching programs, and languages of instruction (mother tongue vs. official language) impact learning outcomes at the post-primary level?
- **Information and Communications Technology (ICT):** Can ICT be used effectively to teach more advanced material and improve learning at the post-primary level?
- **Teacher Effort/Performance:** What are the best ways to train and motivate teachers (e.g. incentives and performance-pay, social recognition, mentorship, improved school governance, etc.)? What is the optimal level of in-school teacher monitoring and mentoring? What role can performance management or pay-for-performance schemes play in enhancing teacher effort? How should these programs be administered?
- **Vocational/Entrepreneurial Education:** What are appropriate selection mechanisms for vocational vs. general education? What is the optimal mixture of classroom versus hands-on training? What life skills are linked with acquisition of employment and increased earnings? What kinds of skills—transferable (decision making, problem solving, etc.) vs. technical—have greater impact on employment, employability, or increased earnings?
- **Disadvantaged Students:** What are the best interventions to include and support disadvantaged populations, such as girls, ethnic/racial minorities, or the poorest students, in post-primary education? What are the best ways to reach youth who have already dropped out, and would these differ for boys and girls, who may have dropped out for different reasons? What are the best ways to reach youth in urban/peri-urban areas and how would these differ for those in rural areas?
- **Private Schools:** How should the private sector be encouraged and/or regulated? Would vouchers for private schooling have much of an effect in a context where the supply of high-quality private schools, and of teachers to staff them, is relatively limited?
- **Designing More Effective Demand-Side Interventions:** What is the optimal design of interventions to inform parents and students of their educational options and the benefits

of each option? What is the optimal structure of CCT programs, and does the structure affect strong and weak students differently?

Gender: Researchers should include a discussion in their proposals of how the intervention they are looking at may affect boys and girls differently, whether the intervention is likely to have a particular gender focus, and, whether the intervention is cognizant of the potential special vulnerabilities of girls or boys. Evaluations are expected to include analysis disaggregated by gender. A study may also be directed narrowly at boys or girls as long as the researcher(s) justify why the intervention is specifically aimed at one gender.

Proposals will be considered as long as they address the themes outlined above. If a researcher is uncertain about whether a research project is eligible for funding, please contact PPE@povertyactionlab.org.

Funds: In the current round, the PPE Initiative expects to award roughly \$750,000 in research grants. Three types of proposals will be considered:

1. ***Full Research Projects:*** These grants will generally be for a maximum amount of \$300,000. Awards greater than \$300,000 will be considered in special cases. These grants are for research projects at a mature level of development. Not only must the research question be clear, but the applicants must also demonstrate a commitment from implementing partners, a method of randomization, well-defined instruments, and power calculations. The expectation is that these projects will result in a publicly available paper that is eventually submitted to a top economics or education journal.
2. ***Pilot Studies:*** These grants will be for a maximum amount of \$50,000. They are for studies with a clear research question, but for which the design and implementation of an evaluation requires further testing and pilot data. Applications in this category should be for exploratory work and not simply inexpensive RCTs. If a researcher applies for pilot funding from more than one J-PAL initiative, the proposal should justify (i) why the project spans both initiatives and (ii) why more than \$50,000 in funding is needed for the pilot. The expectation is that these projects will ultimately develop into full-scale randomized evaluations. For projects that do not result in a full-scale evaluation, the expectation is that these projects will produce a publicly available paper.
3. ***Travel/Proposal Development Grants:*** These grants will be for a maximum amount of \$10,000. They cover exploratory work (e.g. background research, partnership development, visits to field sites, preliminary data collection, etc.) related to preliminary research ideas, with the eventual aim of generating full-scale randomized evaluations. The expectation is that these funds will be used to develop a proposal that addresses key open questions identified in the PPE Initiative review paper and which then could be submitted for pilot funding (up to \$50,000) during a subsequent call for proposals.

Please note that the PPE Initiative typically does not cover PI time or summer months.

Off-Cycle Funds: The PPE Initiative offers two types of funding outside of the regular RFPs:

Off-Cycle Projects: These grants are intended for research projects in cases where a timing

constraint prevents researchers from applying to a regular RFP. Funding for these requests will be capped at \$50,000, and proposals must clearly justify the need to receive a decision on an expedited schedule.

Policy Outreach Support: These funds are intended to support conferences and workshops to disseminate findings from PPE-funded evaluations or other randomized evaluations that address the Initiative's research priorities. These funds can cover travel, accommodations, meals, venues, and related costs, and the suggested budget cap for these requests is \$20,000.

Eligibility: For *full studies*, the pool of eligible applicants is comprised of J-PAL affiliates, J-PAL postdocs, and other invited researchers outside of the network who work on post-primary education and are approved by the Executive Committee of the J-PAL Board.

For *pilot proposals*, the pool of eligible researchers includes those eligible for full studies, and PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university. This adviser must provide a letter of support and indicate willingness to remain involved in a supervisory role throughout the lifetime of the project.

For *travel/proposal development grants*, eligibility includes those eligible for full studies, and PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university. This adviser must provide a letter of support for the proposed exploratory work.

J-PAL regional offices are eligible to apply for *policy outreach support funds* without an affiliated professor as a collaborator.

All proposals may include other collaborators outside of this group as long as the principal investigator (PI) is among those invited to participate in the RFP.

Applications: Proposals are due by **5 pm EDT on May 7, 2017**. To apply, please follow the instructions in the [Full/Pilot Proposal Application Form](#), the [Travel/Proposal Development Grant Application Form](#), or the [Policy Outreach Support Application Form](#) and submit by e-mail to PPE@povertyactionlab.org.

In addition, when submitting a proposal for full research projects or pilot studies to the PPE Initiative, applicants should:

- Attach a letter of support from their partner (intervention-implementing organization), if applicable (full proposals only). Letters of support from all implementing partners should indicate willingness to share program cost data with J-PAL (through the PI) for the purpose for conducting program cost analysis.
- Concurrently apply for approval from their respective Institutional Review Boards (Human Subjects Committees). The award of any grant is contingent on approval from the host institution's IRB (unless that IRB defers to the judgment of MIT's IRB, as is often the case) as well as the IRB at MIT, the Committee On the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES).
- Submit the application to their office of sponsored programs or contracts department, as MIT will need official acceptance of the proposal and budget by your institution to process

the subaward. You can do this after submitting to the Review Board, but doing so before the award decision will lessen delays.

Grants Conditions: If selected for full or pilot funding, applicants will be asked to:

1. Peer-review proposals in future PPE RFP rounds in which they are not applying for funding.
2. Collect and report to the PPE Initiative program cost data that are sufficient to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis. The PPE Initiative will provide a cost-collection template to projects selected for funding, and applicants are encouraged to budget for these activities at the outset.
3. Publish de-identified data in an open access, online database at the end of the evaluation.
4. Share data collection instruments and methodologies with other grantees, as needed.
5. Register the trial with the AEA RCT Registry (<https://www.socialscienceregistry.org/>) prior to beginning RCT fieldwork. Registration includes 18 required fields (such as your name and a small subset of your IRB requirements) and the entire process should take less than 20 minutes if all documentation is in order. There is also the opportunity to include more information, including power calculations and an optional pre-analysis plan. The Initiatives will contact grantees at the start of fieldwork to request the assigned registration number. For questions and support with the registry, please contact Keesler Welch (keesler@mit.edu).
6. Provide brief annual progress reports and a final narrative and financial report within 60 days of completion of the award period. The PPE Initiative will follow up one year after the award is made to provide the necessary narrative and financial reporting templates.
7. Produce a publicly available paper describing the intervention, study design, analysis, and results that can be posted to the J-PAL website within 6 months of the project end date.
8. Participate in one of the Initiative's activities on a mutually agreed date and place. This activity could be an evidence workshop, a webinar, a matchmaking conference, or a presentation to one of the Initiative's donors.

Recipients of **travel/proposal development grants** are only required to submit a brief progress report after completing travel¹ and participate in one of PPE's activities.

Recipients of **policy outreach support funds** are expected to report on the use of these funds in regular project reports. In the case that the policy event is not linked to a specific PPE-funded project, recipients will be asked to submit a brief report following the event.

Review Process: Selection of awardees for **full and pilot grants** will follow a two-stage process:

1. Proposals will be distributed for peer review to referees selected from a roster of researchers and policy experts on post-primary education. The roster will be assembled by the co-chairs of

¹ If the exploratory work results in the development of a pilot, grantees will be requested to submit annual progress reports.

the PPE Initiative. Each application will be reviewed by at least 3 referees, including a researcher on the Initiative’s Board, a researcher not on the board, and at least one policy expert. Reviewers will remain anonymous to applicants. Reviewers may use their own judgment when contacting others for assistance with proposal content.

To avoid conflicts of interest, those submitting proposals for large grants (more than \$50,000) will not be part of the review roster for rounds in which they compete. However, they will be asked to volunteer in subsequent rounds, whether they are awarded the funds or not. Those who have submitted small grant proposals (up to \$50,000) may be asked to take part in the peer review of the current round and are expected to adhere to the same professional standards expected in all peer review processes. We will attempt to recruit only reviewers who have not submitted a proposal in the current round. Any Review Board members competing in the current round of grants are required to recuse themselves from this review and will be replaced by an interim Review Board member with similar qualifications. No spouse, partner, or immediate family member of any individual named on a proposal application may serve as a peer or Board referee in the round in which the applicant’s proposal is being reviewed.

- Proposals will be scored using the evaluation criteria in the “Application Form and Instructions” document and then ranked by members of the Review Board. Funding decisions will be made in a meeting of the Review Board.

Travel/proposal development grant proposals will be considered through a leaner review process, and final funding decisions will be made by the PPE Initiative co-chairs.

Proposals for **off-cycle projects** will be reviewed by the PPE co-chairs, who may decide to award funding, reject the proposal for funding, or include the proposal in the regular review process for this round. Rolling requests for **policy outreach support** will also be reviewed by the PPE co-chairs. Off-cycle decisions are generally made within 2-4 weeks.

If you would like to appeal a decision of the Review Board, you may contact the Initiative Manager, Luke Strathmann (lstrathm@mit.edu) within one week of the funding decision. This appeal will then be communicated to the Review Board.

Timeline

March 7	8 th Round RFP Released
May 7	Proposal Submission Deadline
June 5	Peer Review Deadline
Week of June 5/June 12	Review Board Meeting
Week of June 19	8 th Round Decisions Announced
Week of July 3	Revise and Resubmit Deadline
Week of July 10	Revise and Resubmit Decisions Announced

Administrative Notes: Budgets, Requirements, and Process

Full and pilot grants are provided under an award from MIT to the grantee’s host institution. Travel/Proposal Development grants are generally paid as travel reimbursements. For more

information on budget, requirements, and process, please see instructions in the [Full/Pilot Proposal Application Form](#), the [Travel/Proposal Development Grant Application Form](#), or the [Policy Outreach Support Application Form](#). All materials needed to apply for full, pilot, travel/proposal development, or policy outreach support grants are also available at <http://www.povertyactionlab.org/PPE>.