

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

Round 9 - 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. Graduate students who have a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university are eligible to apply for up to \$50,000 of funding in full projects, pilots and travel/proposal development grants.

The PPE Initiative welcomes a full range of proposals related to the focus areas outlined on Page 3. 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*
- *Policies to reduce the gender gaps in education participation and completion that emerge in the years of post-primary education*
- *Longer-term impacts of programs designed to improve secondary education*

*The deadline for all proposals is **5 pm EDT on Sunday, December 10, 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, Meagan Neal, at mneal@povertyactionlab.org.*

Background: According to the World Bank, in Africa alone, 11 million youth are expected to enter Africa's labor market every year over the next decade. 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, Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia 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 that the quality and relevance of that

education adapts 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. Phase 1 of the PPE Initiative funded 48 projects (23 randomized evaluations, 15 pilots, and 10 project development grants) during 2014-2017. Phase 2 was launched in 2017 to continue to build the PPE evidence base. The existing evidence on PPE, as summarized in the [PPE Initiative review paper](#) and forthcoming update, 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 and update 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: The second phase of PPE research aims to build a stronger base of evidence to inform the design of more effective (and cost-effective) education policies and programs. The PPE Initiative Phase 2 will explicitly encourage proposals to consider both the opportunity costs of money (how do the *financial resources* required to implement the program compare to other possible investments?) and also time (how does the *time* required to implement the program during the school day or outside school hours over a given duration compare to other alternative options?). We will also request proposals to consider potential negative or unintended consequences of the program being evaluated when relevant, and to test for these effects to the extent possible.

The PPE Initiative Phase 2 will focus on evaluating the impact of the following nine priority areas and two cross-cutting themes on access, learning, and equity:

- 1. Curriculum:** Curricular reforms are being considered in many parts of the world, with very little evidence on their impact. Some of the reforms being undertaken include: (a) making curricula more oriented towards critical thinking and practical problem-solving skills as opposed to rote learning, (b) increasing the role of collaborative teamwork as opposed to individual exam-taking, (c) integrating more vocational skills in regular curricula (and offering vocational streams as part of post-primary education), (d) incorporating diversity and inclusiveness modules in school curricula, and (e) incorporating more social and behavioral soft skills over and above content knowledge. We have very little evidence on the impacts of such changes, and would welcome proposals that address these issues. Proposals should consider not just what is being added to the curriculum, but also about what is being left out (or getting a reduced time allocation), and be sure to measure outcomes across all components (both those added and those reduced).
- 2. Pedagogy:** Educationists have several hypotheses about teaching styles, which have not been tested experimentally in developing countries. Proposals that clearly map reforms in teacher training and pedagogic approaches to theories of instruction and propose

experimental evaluations of these will be especially welcome. For instance, what is the impact of using an inquiry-based and student-centered learning approach compared to a rote learning teaching style? How can we build off the promise of remedial education to develop effective post-primary bridging and tutoring solutions to increase participation and learning?

3. **Education Technology:** There is widespread excitement about the transformative potential of education technology (or “ed-tech”) which includes distributing computers, learning software, text message applications, online course and much more. While programs which expand access of computers alone have not generally led to higher learning, educational software designed to help children develop particular skills, particularly when personalized, have been more successful. Given evidence that many teachers in developing countries do not understand the more advanced materials they are meant to be teaching, ed-tech also has promising potential to support teachers in delivering lessons. However, in many cases ed-tech programs have not lived up the hype and in some cases have actually hindered learning. We welcome proposals to generate more evidence in this area, including evaluations of programs aiming to engage students with high-quality digital learning material and programs thoughtfully integrating ed-tech into the classroom. Proposals should consider the cost-effectiveness of ed-tech in increasing access to PPE and learning outcomes and also account for potential negative outcomes.
4. **Private Schools:** An increasingly large number of students are enrolled in private schools but there is little evidence on the effectiveness of these schools in developing countries. There is growing interest in reforms whereby the private sector is leveraged to improve the performance of public schools (such as through management contracts), without much evidence on effectiveness. We welcome proposals that address the wide variety of open questions in this area. These include school governance issues around regulating, leading, and managing private schools; the impact of “school choice” on learning and equity in both private and public schools; comparing the impact of similar programs implemented in both private and public schools; etc.
5. **Vocational/Entrepreneurial Education:** In addition to questions around integrating vocational skills into regular curricula, there are many open questions about delivering effective vocational or entrepreneurial education. In particular, we welcome proposals that address selection tracks for vocational versus general education, how to incorporate hands-on training and mentorship, necessary skills for employment and increased earnings (life skills, technical skills, and transferable skills), and other relevant issues.
6. **Teacher Selection and Development:** Effective teachers are arguably the most critical input in the student learning process. Teacher salaries also account for the vast majority of education spending. There is a dearth of high-quality casual evidence on teacher selection, pre-service and in-service training, monitoring and mentoring, motivation, and performance management. We welcome proposals that address these issues.
7. **Governance:** Governments around the world are keen on improving the governance of education systems (including post-primary schooling) including new ideas with limited evidence such as using technology to track school performance, performance measurement

and monitoring at district and sub-district levels (and rewarding administrators for improvements), using dashboards to track and improve quality of service delivery, and better rewarding teachers and principals for improved outcomes. We welcome proposals to evaluate policy initiatives in this area that are likely to yield results of interest to other settings as well.

8. ***Demand-Side Interventions to Reach Disadvantaged Populations:*** Several types of programs aim to improve access by increasing demand from parents and students for PPE. A critical issue is how to increase PPE access while maintaining quality and economies of scale. Policy options include school construction, supporting transportation, behavioral and information programs to inform students on their PPE options and increase the salience of the benefits from PPE, and school readiness programs, bridging, and programs for children who have dropped out. We welcome proposals that further the literature on increasing access to post-primary education for disadvantaged students, including girls, ethnic/racial minorities, and the poorest students.
9. ***Student Motivation/Effort:*** The discussion around improving educational outcomes often focuses around schools, teachers, and parents, but clearly students themselves are important actors in their own education. For students enrolled in school, how can we effectively increase and leverage student motivation and effort within the classroom to improve learning? We welcome proposals addressing this question, including, but not limited to, programs which incorporate role models, incentives to students, and incorporate concepts such as developing mindsets for growth and perseverance.

Two critical themes that cut across the priority areas listed above are ***gender*** and ***marginalized populations***. Particularly for post-primary education, it is important to examine the gender implications of different educational programs, as well as differences related to socioeconomic status and other ways in which groups are marginalized. We encourage projects to expand in their proposals whether and how the research proposal addresses marginalized groups and gender issues and if the researchers plan to disaggregate the analysis by socioeconomic status, gender, or other subgroups. To ensure that studies take these themes into account where appropriate, the PPE Initiative Phase II will continue to consider marginalized populations and gender as part of the formal evaluation criteria included in the RFP and sent to Review Board members.

For gender specifically, 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. 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. Evaluations are expected to include analysis disaggregated by gender, and we request applicants to state if the studies are powered to detect differential effects by gender.

Long-term follow-ups: In addition, we encourage researchers to consider longer-term effects and particularly welcome proposals including or focused on a long-term follow-up of an evaluation. Successful proposals for long-term studies will need to be sufficiently well-powered to detect long term impacts (for example, as a result of large documented effects in the short run or of large sample sizes as well as good tracking strategies).

Proposals that address the themes outlined above will be prioritized, but other proposals focused on post-primary education will also be considered. 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 documenting insights from the pilot.
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. PhD students who have a J-PAL affiliate or invited researcher on their thesis committee at their host university are eligible to apply for up to \$50,000 in funding for a full study.

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 ET on Sunday, December 10, 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 the PPE Initiative. Each application will be reviewed by at least three referees, including two researchers 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.

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

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 PPE Initiative staff (PPE@povertyactionlab.org) within one week of the funding decision. This appeal will then be communicated to the Review Board.

Timeline

October 11	9 th Round RFP Released
December 10	Proposal Submission Deadline
January 8	Peer Review Deadline
Week of January 8/15	Review Board Meeting
Week of January 15/22	9 th Round Decisions Announced
Week of February 5	Revise and Resubmit Deadline
Week of February 19	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>.