APPRAISAL OF THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH'S 2020/21-2024/25 EDUCATION SECTOR PLAN

Memorandum of 25th September 2020
[Final Appraisal]

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1. INTRODUCTION

On 22nd July 2020, Mike Douse and Pablo Martin Calvo submitted our initial Independent Appraisal of Bangladesh's draft first Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESP) dated July 10th. On 30th August we submitted a Memorandum on a revised version of the draft ESP dated 22nd July, responding to the request by GPE for *an appraisal report memo providing a brief summary of how the recommendations from the appraisal report have been addressed.*

This further Memorandum (constituting our 'Final Appraisal') of 25th September responds to the revised and final ESP of 16th September (which we received on 20th September) [We note that the Preface is still labelled as a draft.] It should be read in conjunction with both our initial Appraisal Report[1] and our earlier Memorandum.

In common with our two earlier reports, this Memorandum takes account of all other relevant supporting documents that we have received, including the ESA and Bangladesh's Covid-19 submission to GPE referred to in our initial Appraisal. In recent days we have received and studied:

- A summary report entitled *Stakeholders' views and expectations from the ESP* based upon five virtual stakeholder's consultations on the draft ESP organised by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) during August, 2020 and involving some 350 individuals; and
- The *Consolidated Report* on the consultations in late-July/early-August with senior DPE, DME, DTE and BNFE officials.

In addition to their relevant and interesting content (much of which is reflected in the final ESP), these documents further attest to the high level of genuine consultation and to the Government of Bangladesh's commitment to the sectoral planning process.

Some of the observations that follow take forward our earlier comments and the responses (verbal or tangible) to those. Others arise anew out of our inspection of the final ESP and, as already noted, the associated documents. All materialise from our utilising the structure and questions set out in the GPE/UNESCO/IIEP's 2015 *Guidelines for Education Sector Plan Appraisal*.

We reiterate that the Government of Bangladesh deserves commendation for having produced each of the initial draft, the revised draft, and this final version of its first ever Education Sector Plan, together with all the accompanying documents, based on substantial and genuine

[1] For example, the set of Acronyms presented in that earlier document covers those used in this memo; the references remain pertinent; and the list of persons interviewed, as annexed earlier, still applies.

consultation, during the months of the **Covid-19 pandemic**. It will also be noted that, in some sections of this report, we recognise the especial circumstances attendant upon the pandemic – notably in relation to making realistic financial projections. The Appraisers, while necessarily being constructively critical in assessing the ESP against specified criteria, have continued to attempt, above all, to be sympathetically helpful. Our approach has, we believe, contributed in some ways to Bangladesh producing an ESP of acceptable standard and of practical value, as we are about to describe.

2. SUGGESTIONS

In our initial Appraisal of 22nd July, we made a number of suggestions for the consideration of those involved in taking forward Bangladesh's first Education Sector Plan, emphasising that whether, when and how the GoB responds to them would **not** affect the overall Appraisal. In our memorandum of 30th August, we noted how some of these had been responded to and submitted some additional advice, underlining again that any response – or none – would not affect our Appraisal. The fate of our suggestions is summarised below:

2.1 Taken on Board

We are pleased to note that most of these suggestions have been considered by the Plan's authors and/or – at least to some extent – been addressed, including:

- Local consultations (many had taken place, unknown to the Appraisers, before 22nd July – a high level of participations has occurred throughout ESP development);
- Media releases (to occur at 'appropriate times);
- Data deficiencies (these have been recognised in both the ESA and the ESP but why, for example, are the NASS 2019 results not yet available, nor data on the "number and proportion of students with disabilities remaining out of the education system"?);
- The pros and cons of OFSTED/PISA initiatives;
- Recent strategic initiatives;
- Joint annual reviews;
- Education and contemporary technology (this is now specifically addressed);
- Educational governance (the central, long-standing and related issues of 'One Sector Two Ministries' and of a 'Permanent Education Commission' are similarly addressed in a cogent and convincing manner); and
- The underlying paradox of setting aside a significant amount for the education of OOSC while at the same time claiming near-UPE (the primary school access/ enrolment/ attendance/ dropout situation is now addressed somewhat more convincingly).

We readily accept that some of these developments and improvements might well have occurred anyway, irrespective of our having drawn attention to them.

2.2 Still Pending

We reiterate our earlier suggestion that consideration be given to those **Upazilla Resource Teams** each being one group covering all educational levels (PPE, Primary, secondary, NFE, madrasah, TVET, teacher training and – where applicable – tertiary). Though challenging, this might well contribute to a more sector-wide approach.

In terms of the **spreading out of some key activities beyond the 5-year Plan period**, taking account of such ESP elements as section 4 on reimagining the education work force and in section 6 on governance and management, such transformations will occupy at least a decade, possibly more (and the intended duration should, we feel, be specified and justified). As stated in our memorandum of 30th August, while the matter of costing remains problematical, we imagine that a justification, in terms of social as well as economic investment, may readily be made.

There remains a lack of **measures of educational consequences**: genuine outcome indicators. We accept that, for instance, test performance is a tenuous target (thus our caution regarding PISA). We recognise that 5 years is not a long time in education. But we do believe that there could and should be indicators that address, for example, 'Madrasah students acquiring core competencies', the 'improved performance and morale of teachers consequent upon that CPD', the 'progress of TVET graduates into employment', and some objective measure of 'climate change behaviour' and 'emergency preparedness' from the education sector perspective.

We noted earlier that the objectives, targets and indicators of the Secondary Education Development Plan (SEDP) should dovetail with those of the ESP. We would go further and say that **all education sub-sector plans should embody and take forward relevant ESP elements**. As we mention below (section 4.6), SWIFT will certainly do so and action should be taken in relation to, for example, PEDP4, SEDP (as mentioned) and plans presently in implementation, preparation or being envisaged in other areas, just as the ESP should itself feed into the 8th Five Year Plan and other relevant national planning and policy documents.

We call again for all who would plan to look at **the fate of earlier initiatives**, such as PEDP3's flagship project *Shikhbe Protiti Shishu* (Each Child Learns), as an indication of how even, in the words of Robert Burns, the best-laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft agley, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promis'd joy!

3. RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES

In our initial Appraisal, we set out six Recommendations for MoE and MoPME action that we considered necessary if the ESP is to become a credible basis for the sector's development over the coming five years. In our Memorandum of 30th August, in addition to commenting on the responses to our initial Recommendations, we made a further four relating to the revised ESP. These are all now considered (as one merged set) in relation to the final ESP of 16th September:

3.1 Elements Initially Missing

The ESP of 10th July lacked several crucial elements which, of course, we highlighted in our initial Appraisal and which were, in turn, referred to in the Observations and Responses. These included:

- An Action Plan with Clear Responsibilities and Calendar;
- A clear and realistic Financial Framework;
- A Results Framework including an M&E plan with SMART Indicators;
- A Capacity Development Plan; and
- A Risk Analysis.

These were, in some instances and to some extent, attended to in the revised ESP of 22nd July and, assuming that this would be occurring as part of the Work in Progress, we recommended then that "before the ESP is finalised, concerns expressed in this memorandum regarding the Action Plan, Risk Analysis and M&E Framework are attended to".

Much, if not quite all, of our concern has been dealt with in this final ESP of 16th September. For example, regarding the M&E, the Team[2] has reviewed some targets and addressed the issue of not having yearly targets (arguing that it would be "mechanical" to do it). There are still some missing baselines although it is explained that "further work is needed during the first year of the ESP to determine some of the baseline values" – this is, we feel, just about acceptable in a Covid-19 unusual year. We would have liked a more explicit Action Plan, with clear responsibilities and a calendar, and, although the mid-term and annual reviews are discussed, they could be more clearly defined. Nevertheless, we consider that, on balance, there are no longer any serious omissions although, as indicated, and as referred to in our earlier exchanges, we would have preferred that each of these key Plan elements were to have been more explicit and with all details provided. [However, 'the perfect is the enemy of the good' as we observed earlier.]

3.2 Pandemic Implications

This recommendation was that "The ESP, before finalisation, should take the Covid-19 consequences, challenges and, indeed, opportunities into account". The Team's response related to "the cross-sectoral discussion on education response to climate change and man-made and natural emergencies. The underlying premise is that the pandemic exposes and exacerbates the pre-existing weaknesses in the education system… immediate actions… longer term plan, looking beyond the urgent measures, have to focus on building resilience of learners and the system, and taking on broad lessons for overcoming the deficiencies of the system – mitigating inequities, strengthening inclusion measures, promoting ICT-enabled blended learning, learning content and pedagogy to promote resiliency attitudes and behaviour, better understanding and preparedness for emergencies and so on". This has now been made more explicit, both in the revised and in the final ESP, including a full, thoughtful and practically-applicable consideration of resilience generally, including resistance to pandemics. On those bases, we consider this recommendation to have been dealt with well. Indeed, we go further, indicating below that – in relation to financial analyses and forecasting – the **especial conditions of the pandemic allow less precise projections** of overall economic growth, of education sector funding, and of the projected gap, than would otherwise have been insisted upon.

4.2 Coherent sector-wide understanding and planning

This recommendation stated that "This ESP should **dovetail with other major interventions,** such as (but not restricted to) the current Covid-19 proposal to the GPE, providing coherence across the education sector. All forms of support should be conceptualised and attended to under the one education sector umbrella." We were to some extent persuaded by the Team's response that "dovetailing administratively and financially may not be practical" but that

[2] The 'Team' refers to the 'EXP Expert Team' originally referred to as the 'National Expert Team' or the 'NET'.

"Dovetailing in ideas and objectives looking for complementarity is necessary and important, which is intended in ESP". While there are but brief references to the concurrent application to GPE for Covid-19-related support – and while we still consider that this could be better-integrated with the overall Plan – as already noted, the **broad attention afforded to resilience generally** is convincing and commendable.

4.3 Required and Available Funding

Our initial Recommendation was that "The eventual **funding gap**, while fully justified and ambitious, should be realistic". Our subsequent Recommendation was to "include a convincing explanation of the foreseen financing situation, embracing costings for all ESP plan period capital and recurrent expenditure, GoB's selected scenario and a clear exposition of the anticipated funding gap". We sought clarification on the extent to which GoB will be able and willing to increase education sector public expenditure and, while we agree fully with their response that "more important than the arithmetic of funding is the use of available funding effectively and efficiently and redirecting funds to right purposes and priorities", our view was that the 'arithmetic' cannot be avoided and we expressed our continuing concern that the sums (in the version of 22nd July) just did not add up.

Based upon the 16th September ESP, we recognise that there has been much improvement in the simulation model with regard to the sub-sectors taken into account, especially considering that expenditure is planned to increase substantially over the coming five years. However, we continue to feel that the forecast macroeconomic evolution is still over-optimistic: 13% GDP annual growth in one scenario and 12% in the other are far in excess of anything achieved in Bangladesh's economic history to date. It is noted also that ADB's projections are of the order of 6-7%; the WB expects 1.6 for 2020, and 1% for 2021; and the IMF 5.2% for 2020 and 6.8% for 2021. Taking account of Covid-19, basing projections on 12% and 13% growth rates (a) is unrealistic and, (b) involves insufficiently distinct scenarios.

The Plan states that: "ambitious targets are set against different indicators in accordance with the national aspirations. In case of low economic growth prospects and resource shortages, in spite of the good faith effort of Bangladesh government to increase education budgets, some targets may be stretched out beyond the five year period and shifted to the next five-year plan". This is likely to be an understatement. The **funding gap** is estimated in the Plan at 16% for the more optimistic scenario and 18% for the less optimistic. [Our own calculations give 10% and 12.6% for the two scenarios – the Team seem to have calculated the average percentage without taking into account the size of the funding gap each year. We also detect some discrepancies in the total national budget numbers which lead to further inaccuracies in the actual funding gap.] Even with the most optimistic projections (7% of annual GDP growth), the funding gap would be 27%, which is too high for it to be covered by development partner support.

It is noted in the Plan that GoB has now committed to increasing education spending to 16% of the national budget by 2025 (and hopefully to 20% by 2030). While insufficient to cover the gap as costed, this is most encouraging and gives us a basis for advocating a provisional way forward. The considered opinion of the Appraisers is that, once the figures are checked and any mistakes corrected, the GoB must give a clear indication that it fully understands and stands by the projections and their implications. As noted in 4.1, above, Covid-19 has thrown all 'normal' calculations askew: the demand for and the delivery of education, government income and

expenditure, the launching of educational initiatives, and the contributions of development partners will not resemble that anticipated for this present, and perhaps the next, financial year. On those basis, it is reasonable to recognise the substantial work that has been done and, assuming that a full GoB commitment is forthcoming, to accept – overcoming our initial hesitation – that **convincing post-pandemic financial projections** will be conducted and applied as soon as the passage of viral-related events make that possible.

4.4 Strategies and Priorities

We recommended that "Strategies should be presented explicitly and coherently; **clear priorities between the proposed actions** should be set out, justified and reflected in targeting and costing". Upon reflection, we acknowledged that an 'overall coherent strategy' is implicit in the earlier ESP while we welcomed the response that the question of priorities in subsectors and cross-sector will be further examined. The Team's comment that "The ESP period is largely seen as preparatory for further action beyond the ESP period" (i.e. planning to produce better Plans) and that "how priorities in the context of resource and capacity deficits can be determined will be examined further" were interesting but not completely convincing observations. This issue has, however, been rectified in the final ESP of 16th September and no longer poses a problem.

4.5 Policies and Indicators for Equity and Equality

Our first Appraisal recommended that "the ESP should set out clearly the policy towards the reduction or elimination of disparities and inequalities between different categories of learners (gender; urban/rural; those with disabilities; ethnic communities…) and there should be measurable outcome indicators and also clear strategies to gather missing data in this area." The Team's response to the effect that this is a critical difficult and complex issue with causes and consequences beyond the education system was fully acknowledged and the revised ESP showed evidence of having examined government objectives and indicated plans "at both the indicators and targets as well as strategies for getting there". We noted some indicators (Access & Inclusion Plans; stipends; Girls in TVET; low-income groups' tertiary participation) in this area but believed that this could be looked at even more determinedly and creatively. In our Memorandum of 30th August we recommended that the Plan should: "Identify viable and verifiable Indicators that address (a) movement towards educational equality and equity, and (b) outcomes and consequences consequent upon successful ESP implementation".

As we had already noted, the ESP certainly includes targets and indicators covering the more obvious, and most easily monitored, disadvantaged groups (for example "percentage of female enrolment in total in different tertiary categories") and all data are to be disaggregated by gender. It would seem, however, that it would be for researchers and external monitors to review and account for the participation and performance of more diverse groups, rather than this being carried out by ESP managers within the responsible government agencies. Moreover, the more searching indicators, such as "*Assessed progress on inclusion measures related to gender, disabilities, ethnic groups, and economically/geographically disadvantaged groups (including numbers and proportions in reducing exclusion at different levels and different types; and comparative cost-effectiveness of measures)*", still only suggest the directions and features against which progress will be evaluated. [See also our suggestion regarding measures of educational consequences in 2.2, above.] Nevertheless, the recognition that progress is to be

assessed at this level, along with the Plan's signal that indicators will be more precisely defined during the first year of implementation, may be accepted as an indication that this recommendation has been responded to realistically.

4.6 Further Creative and Comprehensive Approaches

Our final recommendation of 22nd July related to how best "…that which would be involved in implementing major programmes (such as teacher quality, motivation and sufficiency; vocationalisation; re-focussed madrasah education; curriculum for the 'new normal'; market relevance of TVET courses; transforming examinations and assessment; et cetera) should be thoroughly thought through, planned for, targeted (with SMART indicators) and costed". As the ESP Expert Team responded, these are important objectives with far-reaching implications but not necessarily "major programmes" in terms of budgets and personnel at least in this ESP time period. We were partially persuaded that it makes sense for the ESP to propose "developing common understanding of the situation, figuring out what needs to be done, what steps can be taken and how on these major issues" rather than providing answers or solutions. The Team's response stated that "a technical assistance approach will be necessary during the 5-year plan period to "get the stakeholders, especially the government, engaged, laying the ground and taking initial actions". But our considered view was that the ESP could and should – without attempting to delineate the solutions – in some cases proceed somewhat further in terms of 'laying the ground'. ESP, despite the challenges of policy and information, needed, we felt, wherever feasible to go beyond being a Plan to come up with a set of really good Plans!

In some areas this has been achieved impressively: the *Reimagining the Education Workforce* initiative was, we recognised, a major reconceptualization with immense practical potential. Similarly, *Education for the 21st century skills and 4IR*[3] rose impressively to the Digital Age occasion. Such creative and well-thought-through intentions in those two areas, highlight the unwillingness to move with similar determination in others. We then took the example of the Madrasahs, noting that most of what is contained in the Plan of 22nd July was descriptive, there being no mention in the KPIs, and the Results Framework listings being beset with question marks. Given the strength shown in relation to the Education Workforce and the ICT/AI Educational Revolution (our terminology), what appeared as relative frailty in areas such as the Madrasah constituted an imbalance that, we believed, could and should be remedied before the ESP is finalised. Accordingly, in our Memorandum of 30th August, we recognised that a thorough and thoughtful approach had been made in response to such key matters as the education workforce, resilience, and contemporary technology, and recommended that "where feasible, they should apply **a similarly creative and comprehensive approach to some other sub-sectors** and sets of issues such as Madrasah Education; teacher supervision and guidance; and private tuition", noting that "it is fully understood that this will not be possible in every area".

We now feel that this has been attended to in the final ESP of 16th September to a reasonable extent. For instance, the discussion of technical and vocational education now includes a recognition of recent developments regarding the Sector-Wide Integrated Framework for

[3] But please, as we mentioned in our initial Appraisal, and yet again in our Memorandum, stop saying '4RI'. It still appear seven times as a jumbled abbreviation for 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'.

TVET (SWIFT) which will dovetail and take forward the relevant sections of the ESP. Some additional attention is now given to teacher supervision, although the awkward issue of private tuition is only touched upon in passing. We particularly acknowledge and appreciate that particular attention has been given to Madrasah education in which 'one-third of all young people' participate, 'three million in government-affiliated madrasah'. Measures such as rapid mapping and needs assessment, and teachers and learning assessment, and a clarification on 'vocationalisation' in this sub-sector could result in its becoming one of this ESP's most significant practical outcomes. While regretting that the uncharacteristically vague injunction that 'This opportunity of creating linkages between madrasah education and TVET should be followed up through appropriate actions' remains un-strengthened, we recognise the substantial additional thought – based upon consultations, of which evidence has been provided – that has now been added in this and some other areas.

4. CONCLUSIONS

As already acknowledged, and as has been underlined by further evidence now to hand, the Plan preparation process was genuinely led by GoB, with substantial and welcomed technical input from beyond government; there was widespread participation throughout and there is no doubt that this ESP is 'owned' by Bangladesh.

We noted earlier that "the ESP of 22nd July (was) a considerable improvement on the version of twelve days before". We may now go further and state that the final version of 16th September is **an impressive and authoritative roadmap pointing the way to significantly enhanced educational delivery and performance over the coming 5-year period**. There are undoubtedly some deficiencies which we have highlighted but, given that this, Bangladesh's first-ever ESP, was developed, with genuine consultation and GoB oversight, during the time of the pandemic, our overall impression – as Independent Assessors – is, on balance, positive.

The unmet elements of our earlier recommendations regarding:

- **Indicators**: being more precisely defined and extending to measures of educational consequences;
- **Capacity Development**: determining priorities, specifying the necessary resources (extending beyond the 5-year Plan period), including qualitative outcome measures; and
- **Financial Projections and the Funding Gap**,

may still be taken forward – a Plan is a living document rather than something to be carved in marble.

Moreover, as we have emphasised, the especial economic and educational consequences of Covid-19 necessitate that all projections be recalculated. As that process, in time, occurs in relation to this ESP, forecasts for the post-pandemic portion of this 5-year Plan period will need not only to reflect the presently unpredictable circumstances but embody an economic realism (and perfect arithmetical accuracy) that this present document sometimes lacks. We have made our Final Appraisal on the assumption that this will happen.

Recognising that Bangladesh's ESP is an impressive albeit imperfect document, testifying to the capabilities of those involved in its development, we have every confidence that it will improve still further, as it is implement, monitored, reviewed and evaluated. On that basis, and

provided this Education Sector Plan is shown to have the full and clear endorsement of the Government of Bangladesh, we conclude that – as it stands now and, more significantly, how it will evolve through participative and on-going review – constitutes a **credible foundation for further action**. The Appraisers congratulate those responsible and are privileged to have been enabled to play their part in this process.

Annex: Key aspects of credible education sector plans

The Appraisers' responses to the questions listed in the table below are consistent with the conclusions and recommendations set out in this memorandum of 25th September 2020.

No.	QUESTIONS	YES	NO	COMMENTS
1	Sector-wide *Does the plan cover all subsectors including non-formal education, literacy, and higher education?*	X		
2	Based on a sector analysis *Does the ESP summarize key results of the sector analysis and identify key challenges based on those results?*	X		
3	Coherent and consistent strategies *Do the general objectives, specific objectives, and activities address the key challenges and their underlying causes?*	X		
4	*Are there any major inconsistencies in the presentation of general objectives, specific objectives, and activities across different sections of the ESP (e.g. narrative of the strategies, logic framework and action plan)?*	X		'Yes' is regarded as the positive answer here although this question (but no other) seems to demand a 'No'
5	Sound cost framework *Has the plan been costed?*	X		
6	*Are the data presented by education level?*	X		
7	*Are the data presented by year?*		X	'Present/2021' and '2025' rather than year by year
8	*Does the cost framework specify the capital and recurrent expenditures as well as the staff salaries share?*	X		
9	Sound financial framework *Is the financial framework based on official macro-economic assumptions?*	X?		Assumptions to be reviewed and calculations remodelled in the context of Covid-19
10	*Does the financial framework specify the domestic and external resources allocated to the education sector?*	X		
11	*Does the financial framework specify the financial gap?*	X?		This remains unrealistic: to be recalculated in the context of Covid-19.

12	*What is the level of the funding gap as a percentage of the total resources available (including external aid)?*	X?		To be recalculated in the context of Covid-19
13	Simulation model *Was a simulation model used for testing the policy targets/informing policy dialogue?*	X		
14	*Was a simulation model used for devising the financing framework?*	X		
15	Sound action plan *Does the action plan contain a precise timeline for each activity?*	X?		To be confirmed, taking full account of the impact of Covid-19
16	*Does the action plan contain a responsible authority for each activity?*	X		
17	*Does the action plan contain the total cost and source of funding for each activity?*	X?		To be confirmed, taking full account of the impact of Covid-19
18	Monitoring tools and mechanisms *Does the ESP contain a description of the monitoring tools and mechanisms that will be used to monitor progress, or mention a plan to develop them?*	X?		Still being delineated in some areas – there is a plan to identify them
19	Clear roles and responsibilities *Are there clear roles and responsibilities defined for the implementation and monitoring of the ESP?*	X		
20	Sound indicators *Are most of the indicators well defined, meaning they contain a target, a timeframe, and are measurable?*	X?		Incomplete. Missing baselines and clear targets for intermediate years
21	*Do most objectives have corresponding outcomes, and do most activities have corresponding outputs?*	X		Yes – the logic is there
22	Capacity development *Does the ESP contain a programme on capacity development that is based on an assessment of capacities?*	X?		To be convincingly completed as the Plan commences
23	Strong government leadership *Did the ESP's preparation process demonstrate strong leadership of the government?*	X		
24	Broad stakeholder participation *Did the preparation of the ESP involve a participatory process that included a broad range of stakeholders…?*	X		This is a definite strength.

[X? = Not quite there]