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TERMS OF REFERENCE

Technical consultant, Secondary Education Guidance: Multiple and Flexible Pathways (2027 edition)

CONTRACT MODALITY	Individual Consultancy
DUTY STATION	**Amman, Jordan, remote**
DURATION OF CONTRACT	3 months, 10 days

Purpose of Assignment

Background

Secondary education is the bridge between foundational learning and work, further learning and civic life. It has also been the missing middle of the global education architecture, underfunded relative to both primary and tertiary education. Globally, only 61 per cent of young people complete upper secondary education, and 28 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa. Even if every country met the benchmark it has set for itself, upper secondary completion would reach just 73 per cent by 2030. Some 194 million adolescents and youth of secondary school age are out of school, close to half of them girls, and one in five young people aged 15 to 24 is not in employment, education or training, with young women twice as likely as young men to be so. The world needs 31 million additional secondary teachers by 2030, and only 30 of 187 countries are expected to meet their secondary teacher recruitment targets.

UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2026-2029 commits the organization to 160 million more young people, of whom 80 million adolescent girls and young women, acquiring skills for work and life, within Impact Result 2 of 350 million more children and young people learning and skilled. The Education Strategy 2026-2029, Shaping the Future of Learning, names secondary education as one of three programme areas under the heading of reclaiming the missing middle, and sets out two shifts that apply across the life course: placing teachers and teaching at the centre while harnessing education technology and AI responsibly, and working through sustainable financing for reform at scale and through Global Centres of Excellence that deliver catalytic technical assistance to country offices. The Global Education Practice Technical Note 2026-2029 operationalises this through a country typology that groups countries by above-median challenges in access, learning and skills, with lenses for fragility, disruption, efficiency and equity, and sets out the technical assistance areas prioritised for each group, including secondary education and skills.

In 2020 UNICEF published the Secondary Education Guidance: Multiple and Flexible Pathways, which gave country offices a framework for secondary-age education built on progressive universalism, a typology of multiple and flexible pathways, and a mapping template. The guidance remains the pillar's reference document. Since then the strategic frame has changed, UNICEF's technical architecture has moved from regional offices to Global Centres of Excellence, and the evidence base has grown. The 2025 global evaluation of UNICEF's contribution to reducing out-of-school children and expanding multiple and flexible pathways (2019-2023) found that UNICEF has helped reduce dropout and improve retention and that flexible pathways enabled catch-up and re-entry, while calling for stronger certification of alternative pathways, continuum frameworks between non-formal and formal education, better data and cost-effectiveness analysis. The Skills and Secondary Education (SSE) pillar has since articulated a four-part programme offer: financing; system strengthening; programme scale-up; and evidence, data and capacity building.

An updated guidance is needed that reflects the Strategic Plan and Education Strategy, speaks to the Centre of

Excellence operating model, incorporates the evaluation and the global evidence since 2020, and is written in a form that country office colleagues will use.

Purpose of Activity/Assignment:

The purpose of this consultancy is to produce the 2027 edition of UNICEF's Secondary Education Guidance: Multiple and Flexible Pathways as a standalone, user-friendly reference for UNICEF country offices, anchored in the SSE pillar's programme offer and differentiated by country context. The product supersedes the 2020 guidance while carrying forward the elements of it that remain valid, and refers readers to the 2020 guidance, the 2025 evaluation and the Education Strategy for depth rather than reproducing them.

The primary audience is UNICEF staff, in particular education and adolescent development colleagues in country offices. The secondary audience is UNICEF's partnership base, including governments, multilateral and bilateral partners, foundations and the private sector, for whom a short partner-facing summary will be produced.

Scope parameters

- **Pathway types in scope**. Secondary-age education and multiple and flexible pathways, addressed through six action cards: transition, retention and girls' completion; teachers for secondary; catching up adolescents without foundational skills; competency-based curriculum and assessment; TVET within upper secondary and pathways to work; and certified alternative learning pathways for out-of-school adolescents. Financing, digital and AI, gender and disability inclusion, crisis settings and mental health and psychosocial support are addressed within every card rather than as separate cards.
- **Age band**. Adolescents and youth of secondary school age (10-18 years of age), in and out of school.
- **Country coverage**. Global, differentiated through five context profiles built on the Global Education Practice country typology, with crisis, displacement and climate disruption treated as an overlay within each profile. The assignment is remote, with no travel.
- **Audience**. UNICEF staff, in particular education and adolescent development colleagues in country offices, as the primary audience. UNICEF's partnership base, including governments, multilateral and bilateral partners, foundations and the private sector, as the secondary audience, reached through a short partner-facing summary.

The product

The guidance will be delivered as content for a single publication, which will be designed by UNICEF, in three layers:

1. **Core narrative.** A core narrative of approximately 8 to 10 pages: why secondary education matters now; what the Strategic Plan and Education Strategy ask of UNICEF at secondary level; the central place of teachers; the four-part programme offer; financing; principles (e.g. equity, gender, disability inclusion, co-creation with adolescents, multi-sectoral action); how country offices engage the Global Education Practice; and what is carried forward from the 2020 guidance.
2. **Context profiles.** Five two-page profiles built on the Global Education Practice country typology[1], each describing what to prioritise at secondary level, what not to do and which action cards (see point below) to refer to. Crisis, displacement and climate disruption are treated as an overlay within each profile, consistent with the typology's lenses.
3. **Action cards.** Six two-page action cards using a common template: what the lever is; why it matters and the strength of the evidence; when to prioritise it; what UNICEF does; one country example drawn from UNICEF

[1] 1) Highest-burden systems challenged on access, learning and skills; 2) Access-constrained systems; 3) Learning-constrained systems; 4) Skills-constrained systems; and 5) Comparatively better performing systems

programmes; tools and references. The six cards are: (1) Getting in and staying in: transition to secondary, retention and girls' completion; (2) Teachers for secondary: shortages, preparation and support, para-professional pathways and AI support for teachers; (3) Catching up adolescents without foundational skills; (4) Competency-based curriculum and assessment, including transferable and digital skills; (5) TVET within upper secondary and pathways to work, including career guidance; (6) Certified alternative learning pathways for out-of-school adolescents, including equivalency and recognition of prior learning. Financing, digital and AI, gender and disability inclusion, crisis settings and mental health and psychosocial support are addressed within every card in this edition rather than as separate cards. Each card states the Strategic Plan output indicators it contributes to. Together the cards operationalise, for secondary education, the technical assistance areas set out in the Technical Note.

The template is designed so that further cards can be added by the pillar or through follow-on work. A handover note will propose the next set, beginning with: financing of secondary education, examinations and assessment systems, data and school-to-work tracking, digital and AI, mental health and psychosocial support, and secondary education in crisis settings.

Evidence base

The guidance will rest on three tiers of evidence: 1) the 2020 guidance, the 2025 global evaluation with its annexes and good practice notes, the Education Strategy 2026-2029, the Global Education Practice Technical Note 2026-2029 and country typology, the Strategic Plan results framework and the pillar programme offer as the spine; 2) UNICEF results reporting, regional products and flagship programme documentation as supporting material; and 3) for each card, a structured review of the global evidence since 2020 drawing on UNESCO and UIS, ILO, the World Bank, the Accelerated Education Working Group, OECD and peer-reviewed impact evaluations. Each card will state the strength of the evidence behind it.

An evidence register will be maintained and delivered with the final package.

Time period

70 working days between 30 November 2026 and 9 March 2027.

Supervisory arrangements

The consultant will work under the overall guidance and supervision of the Global Lead, Skills and Secondary Education, Global Education Practice, Centre of Excellence (Amman), who will act as contract manager and approve each deliverable. The consultant will work closely with the Programme Specialist - Youth and Adolescent Development, Skills.

Methodology

The assignment is designed to deliver a usable product within the contract period by submitting an inception note to be cleared by the supervisor:

- Inception. The inception note confirms the structure, the card template with one mock card, the six cards, the evidence approach, the context profile approach and the reviewers, for decision by the contract manager.
- Evidence. An evidence synthesis is prepared per card; country examples will be provided by the SSE pillar with input from country offices, and the key data for the core narrative are drawn from the evidence register.
- Drafting. The core narrative and two sample cards are submitted first so that the format can be adjusted before the remaining cards and the profiles are written.
- Targeted review. The full draft is reviewed by a small group of specialists agreed with the contract manager at inception, drawn from the Global Education Practice and from two to three country offices across contexts, through written comments, with short interviews for the country office reviewers. A comments matrix records

how each input was addressed. The SSE pillar team may share the draft more widely at its discretion; the consultant will respond to consolidated comments in one revision round.
- Final package. Final content in the agreed template, a partner-facing summary, the comments matrix, the evidence register and a handover note.

Support provided by UNICEF
- Access to the Skills and Secondary Education SharePoint, the pillar programme offer and related documents, and existing materials of other Education pillars, including the Teacher and Workforce Development pillar.
- The country typology and indices workbook maintained by the Global Education Practice, and the final version of the Technical Note 2026-2029.
- Facilitation of requests to country offices for programme examples and data, and introductions to reviewers.

- Layout and design of the final publication.

Work Assignments Overview	**Deliverables/Outputs**	**Delivery deadline to complete the deliverable**
Confirm the scope, structure and approach	- **Deliverable 1** – Deliverable 1. Inception note: product structure and card template with one mock card; the six cards; evidence approach and rating scale; context profile approach; reviewers; workplan. **Payment:** 14%	11 December 2026
Build the evidence base and establish the format	- **Deliverable 2** – Deliverable 2. Evidence synthesis and sample content: evidence register and synthesis with a strength rating per card; core narrative draft with key data points; action cards 1 and 2 in the agreed template. **Payment:** 40% .	22 January 2027
Draft the full product	- **Deliverable 3** – Deliverable 3. Full draft: core narrative, context profiles, six action cards and references, in the agreed template. **Payment:** 29%	19 February 2027

Review, revise and hand over	- **Deliverable 4** – Deliverable 4. Final package: revised content after targeted review; comments matrix; partner-facing summary (2 pages); evidence register; handover note with the proposed next set of cards. **Payment:** 17%	09 March 2027

Payment Schedule:
Payment will be made on submission and acceptance of deliverables. UNICEF reserves the right to withhold payment in case the deliverables submitted are not up to the required standard or in case of delays in submitting the deliverables on the part of the consultant.

Important Notes

- Individuals engaged under a consultancy or individual contract will not be considered "staff members" under the Staff Regulations and Rules of the United Nations and UNICEF's policies and procedures and will not be entitled to benefits provided therein (such as leave entitlements and medical insurance coverage). Their conditions of service will be governed by their contract and the General Conditions of Contracts for the Services of Consultants and Individual Contractors. Consultants and individual contractors are responsible for determining their tax liabilities and for the payment of any taxes and/or duties, in accordance with local or other applicable laws.
- Contracts are conditional upon the selected candidate's willingness to comply with any current or future vaccination requirements that may be established by UNICEF, where applicable. Failure to comply with applicable vaccination requirements, where required and without an approved medical exemption by UNICEF, may result in the withdrawal of the consultancy offer or termination of the contract in accordance with the General Terms and Conditions of Contract.
- UNICEF offers reasonable accommodation for consultants with disabilities. This may include, for example, accessible software, travel assistance for missions or personal attendants. We encourage you to disclose your disability during your application in case you need reasonable accommodation during the selection process and afterwards in your assignment.

QUALIFICATIONS / SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE / EXPERIENCE/ COMPETENCIES (CORE/TECHNICAL/FUNCTIONAL) / LANGUAGE SKILLS REQUIRED FOR THE ASSIGNMENT

- Minimum requirements:

Education: Advanced university degree in education, social sciences, development studies or a related field.
Years of Experience/ Knowledge/Expertise/Skills required*:

Work Experience:
At least 15 years of professional experience in education policy and programming in low- and middle-income countries, including secondary education, skills development and alternative learning pathways; experience with UNICEF education programming and guidance development; demonstrated ability to write concise, practical guidance for programme staff.

Language Requirements:
Fluency in English.

Knowledge/Expertise/Skills:

Familiarity with the 2020 Secondary Education Guidance and with UNICEF's Strategic Plan 2026-2029 and Education Strategy; knowledge of the global evidence on secondary education, skills and TVET; experience in multi-country consultation and synthesis.