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Research and innovation to fulfil the potential of EdTech

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Sandboxes: our approach to systemic experimentation

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What's a sandbox you ask? First in the series, this blog explains what you need to know about the Hub's approach to experimentation and innovation.

A sandbox is a real-life location used for experimentation. As you might have imagined, a sandbox creates a small and contained space to test with a proposed intervention. It allows us to safely learn and adapt in a small space before rolling out promising ideas more widely. The term itself comes from software engineering and was originally used to describe a space that allowed developers to safely test new code before using it across the board.

Many sectors have launched sandboxes, to try new things and mimic a would-be “real world” environment to see what happens. For example, The Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) in the UK recently launched a [regulatory sandbox](#) that supports those working to deliver innovation in the UK financial services market with the ability to test products and services in a controlled environment.

For example, we may test a new EdTech intervention within a single school, adapt to any issues that may have been a challenge, and then roll out the initiative to a cluster of schools, adapt any issues seen at the bigger scale and then extend to an education district.



Making sense of ‘the enabling environment’

We are using innovation sandboxes to **make sense of the enabling environment**. The enabling environment is the whole system in which a certain EdTech intervention exists. This includes the interventions design, manufacturing, route-to-market, distribution, financing, user adoption and more.

Here are a **couple of hypothetical examples** of the ‘innovation’ being a factor in the enabling environment rather than the EdTech intervention itself.

We might encounter a brilliant new EdTech intervention that is operating within a massively constrained policy environment. Here, the policy change itself might be ‘the innovation’ that makes scaling the idea possible. Or, we could encounter a great intervention that is working for a small group of people but hasn’t yet figured out the business model that would allow it to scale. Here, the business model might be ‘the innovation’.

Our **‘6 P’s model’** is a set of factors that will allow an intervention to work within the enabling environment – often called ‘enabling factors’. Our work seeks to tease these factors apart and experiment with them, as well as the intervention itself. We believe this approach will make our work always focus on the whole system, rather than just one part of it.

1. **Places:** Where will this intervention be used?
2. **People:** Who are the users and who is implementing it?
3. **Products:** What is the intervention and how is it being delivered?

4. **Practices:** What is the required pedagogy?
5. **Policies:** What is the government stance?
6. **Provision:** How is this intervention being funded and supported? What does the supply chain look like?

During our sandbox, we set out our thinking, ideas, and views about the 6Ps, then test their validity and improve them in line with what we learn. So, we don't expect that the 6Ps model will be the same in the coming year or two – nor would we want it to be. However, we do think it's important to have a simple model that can help us test and learn across more than just EdTech interventions alone.

Sandboxing a problem, not a product

Most tech sandboxes work to test, learn and adapt *the product*. This means committing to the product improvement, come what may. However, our sandboxes are different. They will commit to test, learn and adapt to *the problem* – achieving SDG4 and overcoming the global learning crisis.

This means that the products we work with may change completely, or be dropped altogether if they don't solve the problem. It also means that we will experiment with other parts of the enabling environment if we think they can solve the problem more effectively.

To illustrate, instead of sandboxing a product that seeks to enhance the learning outcomes for children in rural Tanzania, we will work with the education district in rural Tanzania to apply technology interventions to its challenges. It's a subtle but profound difference that allows us to work directly with decision-makers (or 'policies' – one of our 6 P's) and be relatively agnostic about the technology or technologies that might ultimately prove best suited to the challenge.

Sandboxes: 5 key steps to setting up

1. Find our 'places' through a global call

We will invite education districts and others to take part in a sandbox and become 'demonstration districts'. This will be done through a global call for expressions of interest, in line with specific thematic areas of interest, such as teacher continuous professional development.

2. Selecting partners who need technical assistance

Our work will focus on venture building and technical assistance, rather than grant funding for those with technology ideas. This is because grant funding can distort the market, creating an illusion of a business model where none exists. Or, depending on how it is structured or deployed, it can have a 'crowding out effect' – this means that grant funding can reduce the incentive for the private sector to innovate.

3. Act as a hub to other funding for those interventions that demonstrate impact

We will bring together potential funders, in what we call a Funding Circle, to participate in the sandbox from the outset, to have a 'crowding in' effect and to help funding flow to ideas that impact learning outcomes.

4. Select 'products' through a call within the specific local context

Next, we will select products to be tested in the sandbox. We'll do this through an open competition in the local country and, wherever possible, with homegrown ideas. Here, the emphasis will be placed on local knowledge and contextual understanding.

5. Bring people from the 6Ps together to experiment

The focus of the work in the sandboxes is to test the most critical assumptions being made about how to solve the problems in education. For example, if the most critical assumption being made is about teachers valuing the product, we might run some user testing with teachers and measure the findings against very clear experiment goals (for example, 80% of users tested say they would recommend the product to colleagues). These insights help innovators to iterate based on evidence.

Being pragmatic about impact: 'Sandbox X'

We know that achieving SDG4 and ending the global learning crisis is a problem of unprecedented scale, need, and urgency. No single actor, program, or organisation will achieve this alone. At the hub, we plan to work and learn out loud. For us, this isn't just a nice thing to do, it's our most promising route to impact. A key characteristic of our work is to make our tools, lessons and growing understanding accessible for others to apply.

For sandboxes in the long-term, we want to invite the world to take part, by establishing their own Sandbox. This will help to contribute to the global evidence base of EdTech through a shared practise of testing, learning, and adapting. We're calling this 'Sandbox X' and we'll keep you posted on how you can get involved.

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