

Speaker biographies

10 years of the REAL Centre: Tackling injustices in and through education Thursday 12 June

Hanna Alasuutari is the Thematic Lead of Inclusive Education and Senior Education Specialist in the Global Department of the Education Global Practice of the World Bank. She has over 25 years of experience in managing education investment projects and analytical work and leading educational research in Europe, Africa, Middle East and North America. She holds a PhD in education from the University of Oulu, where she has also worked as teacher educator and post-doc researcher. Her areas of expertise are, equity and inclusion in education, teacher education, basic education, global- and development education and education sector partnerships.



Fatimata Ali hails from Ghana, where she was supported in her education by CAMFED, before becoming a trainer and expert in its youth-led mentorship programmes — guiding other young women to succeed after completing school. Fatimata holds a first-class BSc in Accounting from the University of Development Studies, Ghana, and an MSc in International Business from the University of Chester, UK. She was the first female Vice President of Ghana’s National Service Personnel Association and co-founded the UK chapter of the CAMFED Association of women leaders. Fatimata works as an interim Complex Care Support Worker, reflecting her compassion, adaptability, and commitment to service.



Amna Ansari is an accomplished education specialist with over a decade of experience in research, project management, advisory and training roles. Her work includes comprehensive technical assistance and policy support in South Asian and African contexts. Amna has previously led the development of provincial education policies and sector plans in Pakistan, and has worked with multilateral organisations such as the World Bank and Global Partnership for Education. As part of the REAL Centre, Amna recently led an independent evaluation study of the FCDO-supported Girls’ Education Challenge programme on sustainability, and is currently undertaking research on scaling CAMFED’s Learner Guide programme in Tanzania.



Rona Bronwin is an Education Advisor for the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office. She joined DFID's Education Research Team before moving to Ethiopia to work on the UK support to the Government of Ethiopia's education reforms. Previously, Rona worked as a primary teacher in London for many years, including as teacher training lead, and member of the senior leadership team. Rona completed her Master's in Education, Gender, and International Development at the Institute of Education, UCL, London and has worked with schools and teachers in the UK, Ethiopia, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya, and India. She is now FCDO's foundational learning policy lead.



Stephen Davison is Director of Strategy for Cambridge Zero. He oversees strategy and planning, external engagement, partnership development, education and operational activities. His areas of interest include university climate leadership, developing international communities of action, and university engagement within the UNFCCC process. Stephen is the co-convenor of the Higher Education Network of Networks (NoN) a coalition of leading climate networks and institutions from the global higher education sector committed to accelerating climate action. In 2024 he was seconded to be the Higher Education lead for the Climate Champions Team, supporting the UN Climate Change High Level Champions.



Julia Dicum is an experienced leader in the global education sector with nearly 30 years' experience as a teacher, researcher, manager, strategic policy analyst, and sectoral leader, having studied and worked across Canada, Egypt, the UK, Malaysia, Pakistan, the West Bank and Gaza. Throughout her career, Julia has demonstrated expertise in education sector leadership, including policy analysis and development, specialist advice, programme implementation, and multilateral institutional development, especially in emergencies and fragile states and for refugee children. Within the education field, she has interests in inclusive teaching and learning, ICT4E, gender and education, student empowerment, skills development and transitions from school to work. Julia is Director of Education at the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), where she leads the Agency's efforts on strategic and technical guidance in support of one of the largest refugee education programmes globally. Julia holds a Ph.D. in Comparative International Development Education from the University of Toronto.



Pauline Essah is a change-maker who is passionate about improving people's lives. She is the Chief Impact Officer at Education Sub Saharan Africa (ESSA) - an NGO that connects decision-makers (including educators, policymakers, and funders) and provides them with data and evidence from Africa to help improve education outcomes on the continent. Prior to joining ESSA, Pauline was employed at the University of Cambridge from 2009 to 2018, where she was instrumental in setting up the Cambridge-Africa Programme and became its Founding Manager. Pauline holds a Bachelor's Degree in Agriculture from the University of Ghana, and MPhil and PhD Degrees in Biological Science from the University of Cambridge.



Sally Gear leads the Gender Equality and Inclusion practice at the Global Partnership for Education (GPE). She has worked on gender, education, and development for over 25 years, in academia and for both government and non-governmental organizations. After completing her master's degree, she lectured in Social Development and Gender at the International Development and Policy Management (IDPM) institute at the University of Manchester. From 2007-2022, Sally worked as an education and senior education specialist, as Senior Education Adviser, then the Education Head of Profession for DFID. She was the Department's technical lead on Gender and Education for several years. During this period, she designed and led the £335mn Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) programme (first stage) which was the largest global fund focusing specifically on highly marginalised girls in low-income and fragile affected countries.



Julia Gillard was the 27th Prime Minister of Australia and the first, and only, woman to serve in that role. Since leaving office, she has dedicated her time to advocacy, governance roles, and writing. In 2021, Julia was appointed Chair of [Wellcome](#), a global charitable foundation based in the UK, which supports science to solve urgent worldwide health challenges. Julia is also the founder and inaugural Chair of the [Global Institute for Women's Leadership](#) (GIWL) at King's College London and Chair of its sister Institute at the Australian National University. Julia was Chair of the Global Partnership of Education from 2014 to 2021. She led the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia which concluded in August 2023. Julia is the author of 3 books including her memoir My Story.



Sakina Jafri is a doctoral student at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge and a member of the Cambridge Network for Disability and Education Research (CaNDER). With over a decade of teaching experience in primary schools across New York, California, and London, she brings a strong practitioner lens to her academic work. Her research explores the lived experiences and identity of teachers of South Asian heritage in London primary schools. Grounded in her own practice as an educator, Sakina's work is driven by a commitment to inclusive education, the amplification of minoritised voices, and the advancement of teacher education.



Baela Raza Jamil is the 2024 Asia Education Medallist by T4 Education, founder and CEO of Idara-e-Taleem-o-Aagahi (ITA) in Pakistan. She is the founder of the Children's and Teachers' Literature Festivals, now known as the Pakistan Learning Festival. A passionate advocate for children's learning, she promotes ITA's learning solutions for girls and the most vulnerable, children's publications, and lively libraries. A leading public policy advocate, Baela is a champion for the right to education, early childhood care and education, girls' education, skills and livelihoods, and working passionately in emergencies and mitigation. Through the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Pakistan, she drives the assessment to action foundational learning movement Chalo Parho Barho or Teaching at the Right Level across the country. Counted by many as a force with formidable institutional memory on education systems in Pakistan, she is committed to education as a public good and service for All!



Lucy Lake serves as Director of Global Engagement for the Yidan Prize Foundation, leading its efforts to highlight best practice and build the global community committed to creating a better world through education. She is the former CEO of CAMFED, dedicated to inclusion and gender equality in education, working with communities and governments in six countries in Africa. A founding member and former Co-Chair of the United Nations Girls' Education Initiative, Lucy has served on the High-Level Steering Group of the Education Commission's Workforce Initiative, and the Advisory Board of the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report. Lucy represents private foundations on the Board of the Global Partnership for Education.



Laraib Niaz is a post-doctoral researcher at the REAL Centre. She completed her PhD from the Institute of Education, University College London, where her research focused on the role of religion in schools in Pakistan. She has held multiple education consulting roles, including serving as an Inclusive Education Consultant with the Education Global Practice at the World Bank, as well as with the British Council and Oxford Policy Management. Her research interests lie in the area of inclusion and intersectionality in education, with a particular focus on gender, disability, and religion.



Stephanie Nowack is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Oxford's Department of Education, where she is researching youth conceptualisation of hope toward higher education in political and environmental precarity. Stephanie completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Education (REAL and PEDAL Centres) exploring a South African pedagogy of play for autistic learners. Broadly, her research interests are related to contextually-grounded, decolonial understandings of playful learning, teacher professional development, and gender and disability inclusive education in Global South contexts, including emergency settings. She is a 2019 Harvard Graduate School of Education Project Zero Classroom Fellow.'



Mythili Ramchand is currently with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru. Until 2024, she worked at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Her research interests are inclusion and teacher education. Mythili has helped many collaborative projects and research studies. In the last five years, she led a comparative study of initial teacher education in the BRICS countries in partnership with the University of Sussex. As part of a Global South partnership, she supported an inclusive STEM teacher education programme in Nigeria, Tanzania and Bhutan. She recently completed a research project on professional development for inclusive education in India.



Pauline Rose is Professor of International Education at the University of Cambridge, where she is Director of the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre in the Faculty of Education. She also co-directs the Cambridge Global Challenges Interdisciplinary Research Centre. Prior to joining Cambridge, Professor Rose was Director of UNESCO's Education for All Global Monitoring Report. Throughout her career, she has collaborated on large research programmes with teams in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia examining issues related to education and social justice. In 2022, Professor Rose was awarded an OBE for her services to girls' education internationally.



Sara Ruto is the Program Lead for Foundational Learning in Africa at Echidna Giving. Her career in education and research spans over 30 years, including roles in teaching, academia, as a founder and leader in the not-for-profit sector, and in government. These four phases have shaped her professional identity and propel her dream for an Africa where every child, irrespective of their background is enabled to learn to read. Sara is the Chairperson of Kisii University Council, a role rekindling a deeper interest in universities, evidence, and knowledge preservation and generation.



Ricardo Sabates Aysa is Professor of Education and International Development at the Faculty of Education. He is a member of the REAL Centre since 2005, when he joined the Faculty. He has collaborated in several projects of the REAL Centre and partners including RISE Ethiopia, Leaders In Teaching Rwanda, Cost Effectiveness of CAMFED, Scalability of PAL Network innovations, Disability and Learning Outcomes in Pakistan, Effectiveness of Complementary Basic Education in Ghana, Accelerated Education in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and Ghana, among others.



Laura Savage - Someone recently called Laura a 'policy entrepreneur' and 'system orchestrator' who is driven by the mission of achieving education for all. She quite liked that. Laura is currently Executive Director of the International Education Funders Group (IEFG), the largest global network of philanthropic foundations and donor-advised funds working towards achieving SDG4, focusing on low- and middle-income countries. She is also a Research Associate at the REAL Centre. Prior to her role nurturing a network, Laura was an aid funder over 15 years for the FCDO, AusAID and UNICEF, particularly working on the quality and use of evidence in education, and placed within Ministries of Education to support the coordination of aid behind government education sector plans. Laura has lived and worked in Malaysia, Bangladesh and Malawi and holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge on the politics of aid in national education reform.



Yusuf Sayed holds the Professorial Chair focusing on Global Education Policy and Equity in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. Yusuf is also a Visiting Professor at the University of Sussex. He was previously the Professor of International Education and Development Policy at the University of Sussex; the South African Research Chair in Teacher Education, and the Founding Director of the Centre for International Teacher Education (CITE), at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. His work focuses on the intersection of education policy, teacher development, and equity, particularly in contexts affected by conflict and inequality. He is currently engaged in several large-scale studies about global education policy and practice, including teacher professionalism and professional development.



Lydie Shima is a Senior Program Associate at Laterite in Rwanda, with over eight years of experience managing medium- and large-scale research projects, particularly in the education and gender sectors. She has led both qualitative and quantitative studies across Rwanda at all levels of education - primary, secondary, and tertiary. Lydie has extensive experience in stakeholder engagement, working closely with government officials, civil society actors, and implementing organisations. Her work spans the full research cycle, from study design to dissemination activities. She is passionate about using evidence to inform policy and programming, and to promote equitable learning outcomes.



Maha Shuayb is the British Academy Bilateral Chair in Education in Conflict at the University of Cambridge and Director of the Centre for Lebanese Studies. She holds a PhD in education from Cambridge and was formerly a Senior Fellow at Oxford's St Antony's College. A founding member of the Lebanese Association for History and the Disability Hub, her research explores the sociology and politics of education, with a focus on equity, curriculum reform, and marginalised groups including refugees and persons with disabilities. Maha has published extensively on educational reform and social justice in Lebanon and the wider Arab region.



Nidhi Singal is Professor of Disability and Inclusive Education at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and Vice President of Hughes Hall. Her research focuses on advancing inclusive educational practices, with a particular emphasis on addressing systemic inequities, amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalised communities, and critically examining power dynamics within policy and reform discourses. Her work is characterised by methodological innovation and creative research dissemination, aimed at challenging the geo-politics of knowledge production. Nidhi also convenes the Cambridge Network for Disability and Education Research (CaNDER), a multidisciplinary and international forum working with diverse stakeholder groups.



Dawit Tibebe Tiruneh is a Senior Research Associate at the REAL Centre, Faculty of Education, and a Bye-Fellow at Homerton College, University of Cambridge. He is a member of the Research on Improving Systems of Education (RISE) Ethiopia research programme, working in collaboration with researchers at Addis Ababa University. He was also part of the Leaders in Teaching (LIT) Rwanda research programme. Dawit's research focuses on strengthening education systems in sub-Saharan Africa, a region where the learning crisis is most acute. He has published evidence on the impact of large-scale national education reforms in promoting equitable learning.



Bhaskar Vira, FAcSS, is Senior Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and Environmental Sustainability at the University of Cambridge. He is Professor of Political Economy at the Department of Geography, a Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, and an Honorary Fellow of St John's College. Trained as an economist, Bhaskar's research focuses on the political economy of land use and landscape level strategies, water use and management, forest management, biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services and human wellbeing, with a specific focus on South Asia. He works with a number of PhD students and early career researchers on his broad interests in the political economy of environment and development, and has collaborations with colleagues in both academic and non-academic institutions in South Asia and around the world. He is currently leading a major initiative on Decent Work and Youth Livelihoods. He has led large scale applied research projects that involve interdisciplinary conversations across the natural and social sciences, and contributes regularly to policy advisory processes across the science-policy interface.



Professor Tassew Woldehanna is a distinguished economist and President of the Ethiopian Economic Association. He was President of Addis Ababa University until August 2023 and holds a PhD in Household Economics from Wageningen University. His research covers fiscal incidence, child welfare, poverty, employment, education, and health. He has authored numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters and received several research awards. He leads major studies, including Young Lives, which tracks 12,000 children across multiple countries, and RISE Ethiopia, addressing the learning crisis. He is also Principal Investigator of GAGE, a multiyear study on adolescent girls, and the WHW Exemplar Study for Ethiopia, focused on women's health and well-being. His work continues to influence economic and social policy.

