

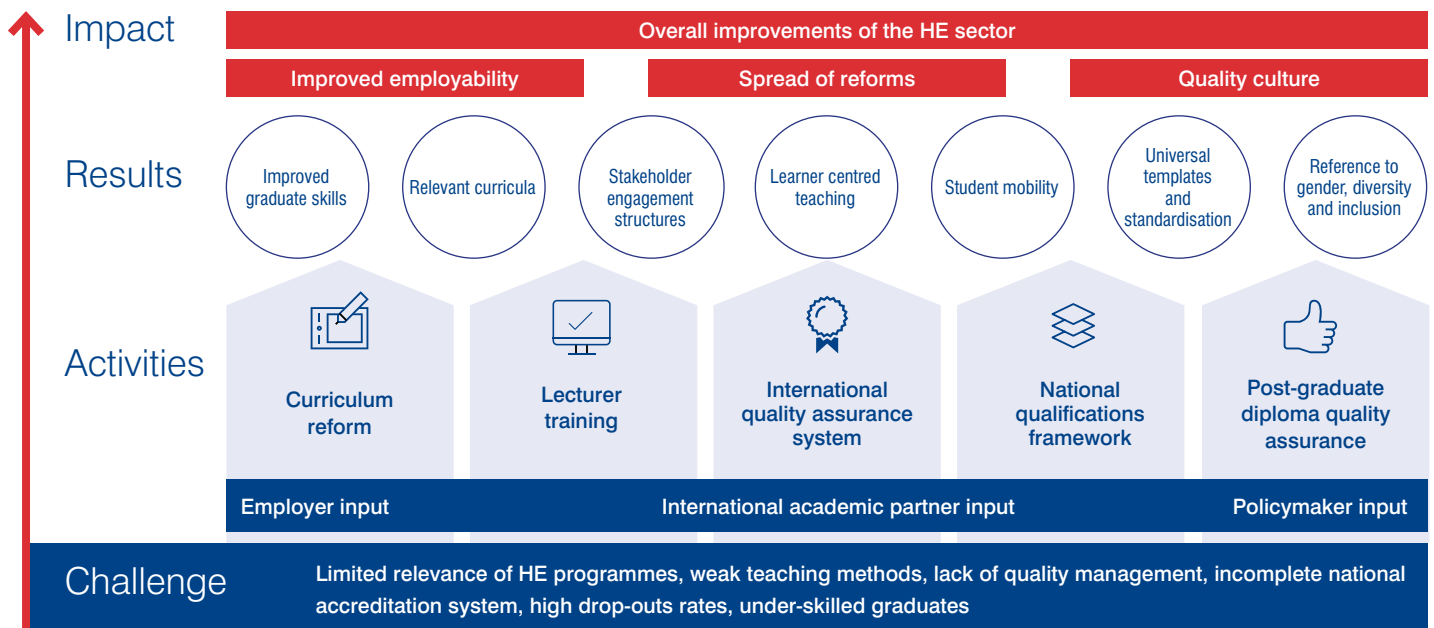


Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

RESHAPING HIGHER EDUCATION TO MEET STUDENT AND EMPLOYER NEEDS – ASSURING QUALITY HIGHER EDUCATION IN SIERRA LEONE

Sierra Leone’s higher education institutions face challenges shared by many other countries: limited financing and staff training opportunities and a lack of quality management systems. This has created a situation where university course content is misaligned with the needs of students and the job market. Employers find that graduates lack the skills and knowledge needed in the workplace.

Part of the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme, the Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHEd-SL) partnership brought together higher education institutions (HEIs), the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) and employers across Sierra Leone to work towards improving graduate qualifications and employability. The focus of the project was to improve HEIs’ capacity to offer quality education through outcome-based, student-centred learning that meets new quality standards.



SPHEIR programme management



Key achievements

Students equipped with the skills that employers and society need

Improved relevance of curriculum aligned with employer needs. The project revised and improved eight full degree programmes by integrating practice-oriented activities, soft skills and updated, localised content.

Stakeholder engagement. External stakeholders were actively engaged in the curriculum review process to align degree programmes to job market requirements. The positive relationships built in this way led to a wider engagement of employers with partner universities. Guest lectures, internships and work placements, networking events and support for careers fairs were all catalysed by the project's stakeholder engagement approach.

The CEO of Kabia Farms, a large agricultural company in Sierra Leone, visited Njala University to inspire students about the potential to use their degrees to help improve Sierra Leone's domestic food production when they graduate. He talked about the role of women as entrepreneurs in agriculture, challenging gendered expectations that female roles were limited to low-paid, manual work. Following his lecture, many students were keen to try these ideas out for themselves so Mr Kabia worked with Njala to establish a student farm for students to learn about the agriculture business and gain practical experience. They will be using seeds from Kabia Farms and selling their resulting produce through Kabia. This will generate income for the students to help pay their tuition fees and give them insight into the potential of working in agriculture. And some of them could get jobs with Kabia Farms when they finish their studies.

Improved quality of the HE sector

Establishment of quality management systems at both institutional and national levels. *"It is too soon to see the lasting impact of this project, however what is clear is that the outcomes are outstanding. Quality culture has been established and is being actively sought in Sierra Leone higher education and we at the University of Makeni and more widely on behalf of the Conference of Vice Chancellors and Principals, will work actively to continue the sustainability of these outcomes and indeed to build upon them for a brighter future for our young people and the development of our country."*
Vice-Chancellor of the University of Makeni

Creation of a cadre of quality assurance officers to monitor and evaluate the implementation of revised curricula. A one-year postgraduate Diploma in Quality Assurance was established by the project in 2018 and three cohorts of students – including staff from the TEC and universities in the AQHEd-SL network – graduated within AQHEd-SL's lifetime, with delivery of the course shifting to local instructors. The project's evaluator emphasised that such a strong endorsement of quality

assurance was a particular strength of the project: *"In many contexts, HEIs are reluctant to accept QA institutions and processes for fear of having weaknesses exposed. In the context of Sierra Leone however, with various structural problems of the HE sector obvious, QA is seen as a tool of problem solving rather than a danger for institutional reputation."*

Increased collaboration and sense of community between all partners to work together towards shared objectives. There is now a network of academics and industry professionals across the country who are committed to improving student and graduate experiences and performance and supporting each other professionally. *"SPHEIR was a great platform to bring people/HEIs together and create a common understanding, vision, exchange knowledge, connect with stakeholders and build capacity. This is the first time in the history of Sierra Leone that we are together in one room."*

University Quality Assurance Officer

Increase in gender, diversity and inclusion awareness.

The inclusion in the AQHEd-SL consortium of The 50/50 Group – a Sierra Leonean NGO working on gender equality – was a "door opener" for future work on gender and inclusion in the higher education sector beyond the SPHEIR project, according to AQHEd-SL's evaluators. Questions of gender, diversity and inclusion were integrated into all training materials and frameworks and the project trained over 100 gender champions.

Systemic reforms and stronger regulatory framework for HE

National Qualification Framework developed and validated. The project developed the National Qualification Framework for Tertiary Education in Sierra Leone (NQFTESL) to standardise and measure quality, and to provide new pathways for lifelong learning and transfer between institutions. The development of the NQFTESL was coordinated with the parallel design of a tertiary and vocational education framework and validated by the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education, all HEIs, Vice-Chancellors, registrars and the TEC chairman.

Adoption of key manuals and regulatory policies. The practical focus on curriculum review, pedagogy, quality assurance and stakeholder engagement was captured in a series of manuals and handbooks. The two curriculum review manuals and the pedagogy training manual have been validated and adopted by the TEC and the quality assurance manual was agreed as a national quality assurance policy by HEIs and the TEC.

Increased regulatory capacity. Capacity development activities have strengthened the TEC through its central role in the project. According to the project's evaluator, *"the mission and standing of the TEC have been significantly improved along with the level of qualification of its staff"*.

Main lessons

National leadership and ownership

The leadership of the University of Sierra Leone and the involvement of key national universities meant that the project responded to the needs of the higher education sector and created local ownership of its results, which supported sustainability and enabled positive engagement with key political actors.

Engagement of regulatory bodies

The involvement of the TEC as a formal partner was an effective influencing strategy in a project that set out to achieve national level change. The TEC's adoption of the frameworks and manuals developed by the project and its ongoing leadership of the NQFTESL were essential to sustain change. Having TEC staff trained alongside university colleagues also strengthened relationships and deepened understanding in both directions.

Centrality of quality assurance

Linked to the engagement of the regulator was the centrality of quality assurance in the project's design. By foregrounding this concept, actively building quality assurance capacity both within and outside universities and making clear connections to other areas of its work, the project ensured that quality culture was a visible and valued part of change at institutional and national system levels.

Standardisation through templates and frameworks

This approach provided a structure for policy makers to review and endorse new methods and standards and created guidance for practitioners seeking to adopt reforms introduced by the project.

Vision and incentives

The project successfully built and communicated a vision and identity that inspired its participants, creating a sense of belonging, commitment, and shared purpose. At the level of both individuals and institutions, the project offered clear opportunities for personal and professional development. The involvement of the regulator and key institutions and the establishment of formal collaboration platforms such as the High-Level Taskforce meant that, as the positive results of the project's approach emerged over time, participation benefits became stronger. As an example, Eastern Polytechnic leveraged the changes catalysed by its participation in AQHEd-SL to accelerate transition and become Eastern Technical University.

Maximising the impact of capacity development: the 'waterfall' approach

The project worked with a core group of 'anchor' universities to cascade frameworks and training to 'waterfall' institutions. Key reforms and training were first introduced to the anchor universities, who then supported waterfall counterparts. The approach allowed partner institutions to build relationships and strengthen practical cooperation, including with non-partner institutions.

AQHEd-SL in numbers

8

degree programmes updated – including a total of

295

modules – in priority fields for Sierra Leone's national development: agriculture, engineering, health and management

37

quality assurance officers trained to work at universities and in the Tertiary Education Commission

161

stakeholders from

90

organisations spanning public and private sector employers engaged in curriculum revision and wider support to universities

540

university staff trained in learner-centred teaching, critical thinking, and gender, diversity and inclusion

Sustainability and scalability potential

- AQHEd-SL's approach to introducing mutually reinforcing reforms has potential for replicability in any low-income country interested in transitioning to outcome-based or learner-centred higher education and could be applied to any subject discipline.
- In Sierra Leone, the National Qualification Framework was handed over to the TEC in November 2021 to facilitate its national rollout and adoption. In preparation for this, the TEC has set up two additional directorates to work on quality assurance and the National Qualification Framework, including experts from AQHEd-SL which will provide valuable continuity.
- The stronger collaboration across the higher education sector catalysed by AQHEd-SL has been formalised in structures that will outlive the project. The Conference of Vice-Chancellors and Principals is a conduit for coordination between institutions and the Ministry of Technical and Higher Education on higher education policy and practice, nationally. AQHEd-SL-trained quality assurance officers are forming a professional body for further harmonisation and collaboration.
- The tools and frameworks developed by the project are used across faculties and institutions within and beyond the project. Beyond the eight degree programmes

improved directly through AQHEd-SL, an additional 93 programmes are being revised across the partner institutions using templates and expertise built during the project. Critical thinking training has led to teaching for critical thinking skills being incorporated into an English language foundation course at Njala University and the postgraduate Diploma in Quality Assurance accredited by the University of Makeni will become part of the university's course offering.

- The three cohorts trained through the diploma are employed in quality assurance positions within universities or the TEC, creating a foundation for ongoing enhancement of quality assurance.

Partners

The AQHEd-SL partnership was led by the University of Sierra Leone, working with partners from Sierra Leone – Njala University, the University of Makeni, Tertiary Education Commission, Sierra Leone Institution of Engineers, the 50/50 Group, Eastern Technical University, Milton Margai Technical University, Freetown Polytechnic, Fourah Bay College, College of Medicine & Allied Health Sciences, Ernest Bai Koroma University of Science and Technology – plus, King's College London and INASP from the UK and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign from the US.



Find out more

- [View the AQHEd-SL summative evaluation report.](#)
- [Visit the AQHEd-SL profile on the SPHEIR website.](#)
- [View the blogs produced by the AQHEd-SL team.](#)
- [Visit the AQHEd-SL repository](#) which includes: handbooks to help improve quality assurance in higher education; handbooks to help higher education institutions undertake curriculum review; resources for critical thinking skills development; and, resources for pedagogical training.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION AND REFORM (SPHEIR)

Transforming the quality, relevance, scale, access and affordability of higher education in low-income countries

8 partnerships

58 organisations

16 countries

About SPHEIR

Strong higher education systems are key for accelerating development, building inclusive societies and promoting sustainable economic growth. SPHEIR was a UK Aid programme (2016-2022) supporting change in higher education to better meet the needs of students, employers and society in focus countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The programme was managed by a consortium of organisations, led by the British Council in association with PricewaterhouseCoopers and Universities UK International.

SPHEIR's transformational impact

Quality – In Sierra Leone, a National Qualification Framework for Tertiary Education set new quality standards for higher education institutions. Across East Africa, a new quality review tool was applied in **21 universities** to improve institutional blended learning capacity.

Relevance – In Somaliland and Sierra Leone, **13 degree programmes** were redesigned with contextualised content and practice-based learning. In Tanzania and Uganda, four universities are engaging public and private sector representatives through new Joint Advisory Groups.

Scale – **4,470** academic and support staff were trained in curriculum design, student-centred and gender-responsive pedagogy, assessment, blended learning and distance

The SPHEIR approach

Mutually beneficial partnerships brought together different types of organisations – including higher education institutions, authorities and associations, civil society and private sector organisations – to design and deliver innovative solutions to higher education challenges by focusing on transformative change at individual, institutional and sector-wide levels.

education. Over **77,600** students benefitted directly from SPHEIR, including 12,400 from Myanmar who accessed online courses.

Access – More than **12,500** students in Lebanon and Jordan accessed study tracks and bespoke short courses with a further **1.1 million learners worldwide** enrolled online.

Affordability – **913** students in Kenya received an affordable loan to start or continue university, of whom **82%** were from the bottom three wealth quintiles and nearly half were the first in their family to progress to tertiary education.

SPHEIR partnerships

AQHEd-SL: Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone

PADILEIA: Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access in Lebanon and Jordan

PEBL: Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda

PedaL: Pedagogical Leadership in Africa in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda

PfP: Prepared for Practice in Somaliland

LEAP: The Lending for Education in Africa Partnership in Kenya

TESCEA: Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa in Tanzania and Uganda

TIDE: Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education in Myanmar