



SPHEIR
Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

Online higher education and Covid adaptation in SPHEIR

September 2021.

Visit the SPHEIR website www.spheir.org.uk.

Contact info@spheir.org.uk or sign up to receive [SPHEIR updates](#) by email.

SPHEIR programme management:



The [Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform](#) programme (SPHEIR) is a competitive grant scheme designed to help transform the quality, relevance, access and affordability of higher education in targeted low-income countries. The SPHEIR programme is funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and managed by a consortium led by the British Council in association with PwC and Universities UK International. The portfolio of SPHEIR projects includes eight partnerships: six focused on countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in Myanmar, and one focused on higher education for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

Introduction

Between September 2020 and January 2021, all SPHEIR projects collaborated to produce a webinar series sharing their experiences with three varieties of delivery of online higher education:

- *Formal learning to students* – either individual courses/modules or full academic degree programmes,
- *Non-academic services* like student support, and
- *Staff capacity-building* (academic and non-academic staff).

Of the eight projects supported under SPHEIR, four were expressly designed with online higher education at the centre of their respective activities and goals: the Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL); the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA); Prepared for Practice (PfP); and Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE).

For the other four, online activities largely evolved to accompany and support other reforms – such as training in use of open educational resources. This group includes: Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PEDAL); Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA); Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHEd-SL); and, the Lending for Education in Africa Partnership (LEAP).

The webinars were not explicitly focused on the impact of Covid-19 (Covid). However, given the timing of the series, it became part of the narrative as each project described how it added or adapted online activities in response to Covid's impact on partner institutions, students and staff.

Covid has had both immediate and longer-term implications for all organisations involved in SPHEIR, as it has for virtually all higher education institutions globally. A body of international literature is now emerging, some referenced later in this paper, examining the impacts of Covid on higher education. Some are surveys, such as

those done by the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the International Association of Universities, while others look at specific dimensions of Covid's impact, such as on the lives of students.

It is fair to say that the literature focuses primarily on Covid's impact on the 'regular' functioning of universities – academic delivery, research and the effects on students and teaching staff. Less attention has been given to the impact on *development assistance* in higher education – reform initiatives like SPHEIR that were launched before Covid, but saw the higher education landscape shift dramatically during implementation, with implications for reform traction and uptake.¹ A body of literature is also growing around Covid's broader impact on international development, some of which is also referenced.

Collectively, SPHEIR projects have reached more than 150 organisations in 17 countries, and include public and private universities and colleges, private sector organisations, civil society groups and national higher education authorities. In Sub-Saharan Africa, over 125 universities have been reached by SPHEIR (roughly 10% of all universities in Africa).² This means that the very large number of organisations, and the even larger number of educators, involved in SPHEIR provides a rich base from which lessons on online higher education can be drawn, as well as lessons on Covid adaptation.

Recordings of each webinar can be viewed on the SPHEIR website here ([1](#), [2](#) and [3](#)); so this paper is not going to repeat each presentation. Rather, it will briefly summarise the online activities of each project and lessons reported, including those related to Covid adaptation. Most information has been extracted from the webinars, but points have also been included from sources such as project MEL³ reports, or summative evaluations for projects that have completed them. The paper then looks at some of the emerging literature on Covid's impact on higher education, with reflections on how SPHEIR projects might take into account the prevailing conditions relevant to higher education when planning for sustainability and scaling. It also includes some reflections on Covid's impact on *official development assistance* (ODA) with implications for and beyond higher education.

Online higher education in SPHEIR

As noted earlier, all SPHEIR projects have one or more varieties of online higher education at the centre of their activities or as an adjunct: delivery of academic

¹ For the purposes of SPHEIR, *traction* means substantial evidence of uptake and/or evidence of demand and/or potential replicability in higher education institutions within or beyond those covered by SPHEIR.

² [uniRank's](#) 2020 database indicates 1,225 officially recognised higher education institutions in Africa, with 586 public, 601 private, and status of the remaining unknown or not reported. Other sources like [webometrics](#) give different numbers.

³ MEL – *Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning* reports prepared by all SPHEIR projects at six-month intervals.

programmes or modules; online capacity-building for staff; and, online provision of non-academic services like student support.⁴

A useful way to look at the online experience of each project and extract comparable lessons is to differentiate *student-facing* reforms from *staff and institutional-facing* reforms. Ultimately, of course, all higher education reforms are intended to benefit university students, but some projects *directly* developed and delivered online content to students – i.e. online courses, MOOCs, mentoring, training, counselling, etc., while most focused online activities on staff capacity-building in higher education institutions. It is worth noting that the boundary between formal learning for students and capacity-building of academic staff can be somewhat blurred. For example, capacity-building of academic staff might take the form of a post-graduate degree or diploma course – i.e. in pedagogy or quality assurance (QA). Where the ‘students’ in such activities are teachers, QA or administrative staff in higher education institutions, the activities are included here under staff/institutional-facing reforms.

The descriptions below follow this disaggregation, and focus mostly on the *online activities of each project*, rather than activities that are not online, even though these are substantial and impactful. For example, several projects include various approaches to [employer engagement](#), much of which was paused by Covid, or occurred via Skype or Zoom calls, which were also used pre-Covid. Nor does it name the many individual partner organisations who played immensely valuable roles developing and delivering face-to-face and online activities in their respective projects, and helping navigate Covid’s impact, as this information is available in each webinar presentation, and on the [SPHEIR](#) website.

Student-facing reforms

Three SPHEIR projects *directly developed and delivered online content to students* through online course delivery, use of MOOCs, mentoring, and/or student support such as counselling or non-academic training. The projects targeted different student populations, respectively: refugee students; financially disadvantaged student loan recipients; and, undergraduate medical, nursing and midwifery students. Other online activities are part of each of these projects – training of teaching staff, for example – but a defining feature of each project is its first-hand *delivery* of online services to students. This is different from other projects where students are *future* beneficiaries of the results from online capacity-building of teaching staff and other forms of institutional development.

⁴ Programme here refers to an entire degree programme, although in some countries the term course refers to an entire degree programme. In some countries (and projects) the terms module and course are used interchangeably referring to a semester-long unit.

Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA)

[PADILEIA's](#) mission is to facilitate access to higher education for those displaced and impacted by the Syrian refugee crisis in Jordan and Lebanon. A three-pronged approach is used, determined by students' interests and immediate goals, including: bespoke short courses (one month); a foundational programme for college preparation (eight months); and, self-paced study tracks (six to 24 months). Each was designed from the outset with online elements, informed by learner-centric methodologies, knowledge on the gap between school-leavers and university entry requirements, and vigorous QA. All online courses other than foundation courses are open-access, downloadable, mobile-friendly, and optimised for low bandwidth.

Blended delivery (the combination of face-to-face and online services) is central to PADILEIA because it is suited to addressing challenges such as language barriers, digital literacy, and a dispersed student population. Course facilitators are trained on the use of the various platforms used. Online learning is assessed differently depending on the student's pathway. Short courses are designed to be introductory and are not accredited, although quizzes and summative assessments are used. Study track modules are all accredited in order to be transferrable to local universities.

All of PADILEIA's student offers can be accessed through the project's study hubs, such as the one located in Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan, the largest camp for Syrian refugees. Study hubs were created to provide a safe, learner-centred space, where students access language training, interact with one another, and participate in online learning using IT equipment and internet connections which they may not have access to in their own living space. Covid meant temporary closure of study hubs, and similarly affected the project's two partner universities in Jordan and Lebanon.

Because PADILEIA was already engaging its students online before Covid, it was able to quickly adapt by providing students with tablets and/or allowances for data, providing additional training in online delivery for staff, and creating extra time for course facilitators to discuss activities and weekly topics with students, in part to maintain engagement during lockdowns. Student services "wrap around" the three PADILEIA pathways to support students during their study and subsequent student journey, and include:

- Language exchange and mentoring through UK-based mentors providing structured scholarship guidance/language support to students via WhatsApp and Zoom
- LiveChat and online support with LiveChats embedded in each course on the digital campus, enabling peer-to-peer discussions, using ZenDesk, a tool for

deeper enquiries. This enables students to ask about upcoming courses, credits, pathways, etc., with 95% of enquiries answered within 24 hours

- Guidance through workshops and a 'Transfer Checklist' – a 'how to' tool that walks students through available university programmes, the documents required, steps and credit recognition, scholarship options, and assembly of their digital 'wallet' of certificates and documentation. Under Covid, this included digital workshops and 'virtual coffees' to support individual students applying to university and interested in transferring recognised online credits to in-person study at a range of universities.

Staff training used a collaborative approach, drawing on the practical experience of participants, and used simple technologies such as whiteboards and small group discussions, with examples for later use by instructors and facilitators. Staff training also occurred through collaboration with the Prepared for Practice (PfP) project in Somaliland, through development of Sharing Wisdom about Online Pedagogies (SWOP) under a SPHEIR IPIE grant, to share knowledge related to online learning.⁵ SWOP leveraged expertise across both projects to enhance capacity in the design and delivery of digital courses. It included workshops covering mentoring practices, content development, and online content delivery, involving mentors, instructors, academic content providers, project managers and facilitators from both projects. Originally designed to be face-to-face, Covid caused SWOP collaboration to move entirely online.

Following its adaptation of courses to enable fully remote, online course delivery in response to Covid, PADILEIA commissioned a rapid evaluation "*to capture learning from this period with the aim of informing future programming and sharing knowledge with the wider sector*".⁶ It is the only SPHEIR project that singled out Covid adaptation for independent review, with some key lessons noted below:

- Having digital scaffolding already in place made for a smoother pivot to fully online delivery for facilitators, instructors and students
- Limited access to devices by students was an impediment to learning, and those using only smartphones found it difficult to fully engage with online learning, so the provision of tablets and data cards was effective in enabling continued learning

⁵ *Inter-Partnership Impact Enhancement Grant (IPIE)* is a unique feature of SPHEIR. Essentially it is a competitive, grant-within-a-grant facility, to support two or more SPHEIR projects collaborating on activities that enhance the impact of both projects.

⁶ [PADILEIA Rapid Evaluation: Community Report](#), PADILEIA and Jigsaw Consult, February 2021

- The instant messaging platform with voice-note capability (WhatsApp) was vital to the delivery of effective support to students and, along with strong online student support structures, was essential to successful remote delivery.

Lending for Education in Africa Partnership (LEAP)

[LEAP](#) is a private sector-led social lending fund that provides affordable loans for higher education in specific degree programmes in selected Kenyan universities and TVET institutions. It expressly targets students (called LEAP Fellows) from disadvantaged backgrounds who otherwise could not afford the full cost of their higher education. For example, 84% of its Fellows come from the bottom three wealth quintiles in Kenya and 48% are the first in their family to ever attend higher education.

In addition to affordable financing (a loan for tuition and stipend for living expenses), LEAP offers student support services such as career readiness, and financial literacy training. LEAP is unique within SPHEIR in that it is not involved in the delivery or QA of any academic programme attended by its Fellows in partner universities. Its focus is on removing financial barriers for disadvantaged students to access these programmes. LEAP's online services focus chiefly on providing its Fellows with non-academic student support, such as financial literacy training, and it always envisioned that support would include remote delivery as the number of Fellows grew. Due to Covid, financial literacy training is now entirely SMS-based, with a compulsory core curriculum and refreshers based on credit behaviour. It is delivered directly to all LEAP Fellows, with modules tailored for new borrowers, and for students transitioning into the job market.

Career readiness training is provided to LEAP Fellows in their last 18 months of study. It uses a blended learning approach focusing on 21st century skills and employability training provided through interactive training sessions and access to a customised online platform. Since Covid, the in-person element has been paused and the format is now entirely virtual. The main tool for LEAP's student support is the establishment of 'chapter groups' in each partner university. Chapter groups provide opportunities for student networking, community-building, peer-to-peer support, and leadership development. Part of the intention of peer-to-peer communities is to create an informal support network for students within each university, which can be helpful for Fellows who may be struggling academically.

Covid has impacted LEAP somewhat differently than it has other SPHEIR projects. As a student-financing vehicle, it has had to deal with Fellows struggling to make loan payments as universities and workplaces closed and economic conditions

deteriorated.⁷ Chapter groups could not operate as intended, and all contacts between LEAP and its Fellows moved online, using virtual training and peer-to-peer sessions, newsletters, and hotlines, with facilitation and individualised follow-ups from the LEAP team. Career readiness training shifted to interactive webinars to deliver training 100% virtually through video and audio sharing, online quizzes and session activities. An i-Coach feature was introduced to provide Fellows with individualised support and an online learning academy used to discuss topics supported by LEAP-facilitated virtual discussion sessions.

Throughout Covid, some LEAP Fellows were able to continue their studies where their university programme was offered online – mostly by private rather than public universities. LEAP continued to provide most Fellows with stipends for living costs (which are covered under its loans) to help mitigate the financial impact as universities closed (in some cases more than once).

LEAP's aspirations under SPHEIR are to validate its lending model, and expand in terms of student numbers, types of degree and TVET programmes, as well as the number of countries in which it operates. A planned expansion into Uganda under SPHEIR was paused, largely due to Covid impact. SPHEIR (UK Aid) is LEAP's initial investor, and, notwithstanding the financial impact of Covid on donors and the investment community, LEAP has successfully grown and diversified its investors.

LEAP has noted some broad observations on the higher education environment in Kenya, and from its engagement with Fellows online. On the former, it notes that the current learning approach in most institutions has been hugely instructor-centred, which limits student interaction and opportunities for them to lead their own learning, particularly in the use of online services. On the latter, including the adaptations made due to Covid, LEAP found that:

- Providing learners flexible opportunities to access the platform and learn at their own pace proved beneficial, and supported Fellows to take initiative and ownership to stay engaged and remain disciplined in their learning
- The main challenges faced by Fellows relate to data, connectivity and lack of access to devices (echoing PADILEIA's experience), in addition to soft skills like time management and critical thinking.

Prepared for Practice (PfP)

[PfP](#) is focused on addressing the health workforce crisis in Somaliland to help ensure that graduate doctors, nurses and midwives are prepared for clinical practice

⁷ LEAP's loan model involves Fellows making nominal interest payments during the loan as well repayment of the loan principal after graduation.

and able to contribute to improved health outcomes. PfP's three workstreams cover undergraduate learning and assessment, faculty and institutional development, and policy and regulation to strengthen governance, management and oversight of higher education for health professions.

Use of online delivery since the beginning of the project in 2017 was at the core of PfP's efforts to strengthen teaching, learning and assessment for undergraduate medical, nursing and midwifery students at its three partner universities. To illustrate, the academic year that started in October 2020 included 11 distinct live and interactive online courses, each delivered multiple times to small groups of students. Clinical reasoning courses (surgery, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics), communication skills, radiology, and basic research skills were delivered to medical undergraduates at the University of Hargeisa and Amoud University. Nursing courses were delivered to nursing students, and midwifery courses to midwives at Edna Adan University. Two new online courses were also introduced (neurology and mental health). A unique feature of PfP is its use of volunteers from the UK health sector, both for selected activities in Somaliland, but also online.

PfP's major focus is on enhancing the quality of undergraduate medical education through the integrated approach described above. However, its inclusion of professional development for health *educators* provides an appropriate segue to other SPHEIR projects that focus on staff/institutional-facing reforms.

An important staff-facing activity for PfP is professional development to enhance the capacity of higher education personnel through delivery of Health Professions Education (HPE), a one, two or three-year blended course (Certificate, Diploma or Masters) that builds faculty capacity in designing and delivering quality education to future health professionals. Topics include pedagogy, student-centred teaching, and evidence-based assessment. The blended delivery model saw experienced volunteers teach face-to-face on short trips, followed up by online sessions through the project's hosted learning management system (LMS) based on Moodle. Having this platform in place from the beginning meant that the project was able to quickly adapt to the Covid-19 reality of travel restrictions and local lockdowns. The online platform went from being a supplementary tool for the project's education activities to being that which made them possible. All HPE teaching moved online, making use of the many platform features – quizzes, polls, video conferencing, narrated PowerPoints, podcasts, etc.

Co-delivery of the HPE courses by Somaliland faculty is one part of a sustainability strategy to equip universities with the skills and confidence to deliver the courses when the project comes to an end, although, due to Covid, the switch to teaching online has meant that co-delivery has been impeded. Even so, Somaliland university

partners have made huge progress, and have begun to deliver the HPE Certificate year to faculty in their institutions who hadn't already taken the course.

Like other projects, Covid's limiting of international travel has affected the project and, uniquely given PFP's model, also constrained its use of volunteers, many of whom are front line clinicians from the UK's National Health Service who faced demands on their time at home as part of the UK's Covid response. As noted earlier, it also meant shifting online the SWOP activities developed jointly with the PADILEIA project.

The project team learned that achieving high-quality online delivery required it to continuously assess, optimise and develop online platforms based on user experience to reduce barriers to access. This included revising support processes to improve resources for self-help tailored for the different users (undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as tutors), and enhancing the availability of live support during courses at the beginning of term. Another lesson is that successful delivery of synchronous online courses to undergraduate students requires considerable investment in human resources.⁸ In the case of PFP's partners, this involves: recruiting and onboarding tutors; scheduling tutorials and working with partners on course delivery; platform development and maintenance; providing support to users to ensure they can log on and access the platform; and, helping partner universities communicate courses to students and follow up to offer support to those who miss tutorials. Also critical is clear communication by universities on how online courses contribute to students' overall undergraduate qualification.

Staff/institution-facing reforms

The projects below involve *staff/institution-facing* reforms in that their online activities primarily involve staff training, mentoring, and use of tools to support capacity-building of higher education institutions (universities as well as national QA/regulatory bodies). While these reforms ultimately translate into improvements in the teaching and learning of students, the benefits to students are downstream from project activities.

Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL)

[PEBL](#) works with universities across East Africa to strengthen capacity in the design and implementation of blended learning. It supports the development and sharing of quality-assured, credit-bearing blended courses, aiming to drive innovations in teaching and learning in universities in the region. The project revolves around three

⁸ *Synchronous* means online learning in real time including interaction with teaching staff and possibly peers, in contrast to *asynchronous* learning where online resources are provided without any real-time interaction.

interconnected elements: development of blended content; its quality assurance; and, facilitating access to courses for use by PEBL universities and other interested institutions.

Development of blended content involved an accredited nine-month *Developing Blended Learning* course for more than 70 ‘academic developers’ on how to design effective blended learning modules. The course is accredited to two awards: Supporting Technology-Enhanced Learning (STEL) and Developing People and Enhancing Practice (DPEP). Twenty-two academics were further trained on how to support colleagues in their respective institutions (training of trainers). So far, 26 courses (modules) have been developed by trained staff in Kenyan, Rwandan, Tanzanian and Ugandan universities. All but one are undergraduate courses, and all were already being taught in a face-to-face format.

PEBL’s QA activities include online courses: Quality Assurance in Blended Learning, which provides an introduction to concepts and issues; and, Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Africa, which focused on addressing challenges from a QA perspective, and on how to conduct internal quality reviews and develop QA improvement plans.

The project also introduced a QA Rubric for Blended Learning – a tool to support individuals and institutions in the development of blended learning courses. The rubric, already downloaded over 3,300 times, covers eight categories that can be used to benchmark a blended learning course against a set of qualifiers (e.g. learning outcomes being clearly described against academic or workplace standards). Training for PEBL academics on the rubric occurred through workshops and webinars.

A QA Institutional Review Tool was designed to further support review of existing QA systems in PEBL institutions, and help them to put in place QA processes throughout blended learning course development. The tool includes an online survey and an on-site review. QA teams at universities attended in-person and online trainings/webinars on the use of the tool.

Delivery of blended content is the responsibility of each university that chooses to utilise PEBL-developed courses, with the online component of blended courses made available through their respective LMS. Students receive credit for these courses from their institutions. All courses have an open access licence, and are available from [OER Africa](#) for use by any university or academic.

The initial response to Covid from most of PEBL’s universities was to move course offerings almost exclusively online. Anecdotal data from teaching staff and university leaders indicated that many universities fast-tracked online and blended learning

implementation, crediting PEBL with helping facilitate the shift online because their teaching staff who were involved in PEBL were able to lead or support that transition.

PEBL and the Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PEDAL) project also collaborated through SPHEIR's IPIE grant facility to respond to concerns from universities that teaching staff did not always know how to use virtual learning environments. Training initially included 36 academics in the PEBL network, extending to more than 200 through follow-up trainings in specific universities. A second version of enhanced training was titled ITP4DE (Intensified University Teacher Preparation for the Digital Era) for faculty members from five universities that are part of both PEBL and PEDAL.

The project found that no major adjustments were needed in staff capacity-building due to Covid, but noted that online training increases reach but not the level of engagement by participants. The project also found that academic staff are motivated to participate in, complete, and subsequently cascade training within their university if there is institutional commitment.

PEBL's externally commissioned [summative evaluation](#) highlights that among the external factors that influenced the project's progress and impact, *"By far the most significant was the COVID-19 pandemic. While the lockdown delayed the number of new modules being produced, it hugely accelerated the demand for online and blended learning, the conversion of existing courses to online or blended courses, the improvement of technology and access, and the development of policies, processes and structures to support online and blended learning"*. Lesson include:

- Digital inequalities: not all students have access to stable internet and/or personal gadgets such as laptops, smartphones, etc. Under Covid, some universities are partnering with internet service providers to offer low-cost data access to students
- Inadequate IT infrastructure within and outside universities
- Lack of formal guidance for students on the use of learning management systems led some universities in PEBL's network to provide training to students on the use of online platforms
- Limited capacity among academic staff to use and implement blended learning courses
- Lack of formal guidelines from national higher education commissions affects universities' adoption of blended learning, with some universities more willing to proceed on their own than others.

Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE)⁹

[TIDE](#) brought together UK and Myanmar universities to increase the quality of distance education and academic knowledge in environmental science subject areas. In Myanmar, over 500,000 students access higher education through distance learning, and quality improvement of the system was a policy priority under the civilian government.

TIDE worked with over 330 members of staff (both academic and ICT support staff) across 39 universities and degree colleges in Myanmar. The project's academic strand focused on subject knowledge development and online/distance pedagogies; the ICT strand on media production for technology enhanced learning (TEL). Both strands came together in the development of open educational resources in the discipline of environmental science.

Covid meant a move to fully online activities for a project already concerned with distance and blended learning. Examples of adaptation include the project's original approach of annual residential schools being condensed into an online offer, with asynchronous support through Facebook groups, and use of members of the 2018 cohort as peer mentors. Some online webinars and courses were pre-recorded to reduce the time commitment of learners, and to reduce group gatherings.

Further online elements of TIDE are highlighted below illustrating Covid adaptation, particularly its Master Trainer Programme. This focused on helping TIDE participants become key people to take the TIDE model further within their own institutions, and more broadly across all partner institutions. It encompassed several strands, including courses in:

- Creative Commons (six weeks, with facilitated sessions run via Zoom with translation in-session, recordings available on YouTube, and a Facebook group)
- Audio-visual (AV) training for professionals and academics on practical application of skills (moving from static studio-based filming to mobile-based, integrated with learning design)
- Natural Ecosystems, run by UK academics with support from Myanmar language study skills academics (including pre-recorded lectures, online teaching and self-study with assignments)
- Open and Distance Education, adapted from a UK Masters course in online and distance education, focused on the technologies that enhance learning and teaching. It was moved wholly online via Zoom, with recordings available

⁹ The TIDE project was brought to an early closure following the escalating situation in Myanmar in early 2021. However, instructions on how to access project legacy documents are available [here](#).

on YouTube, weekly e-mails, telephone support, and monitoring to identify learners falling behind or who might need more support.

TIDE's pivot in response to Covid also included the development of 'Gateway' courses which were aimed at helping students and staff to transition to online learning.

TIDE early closure meant that it has already completed its summative evaluation and a SPHEIR completion report reflecting on the project's trajectory and achievements. The latter noted: *"An unintended achievement...has been the indirect contribution of TIDE to the Covid-19 response in the Myanmar HE Sector. TIDE project participants benefited exponentially when the development of the Myanmar Digital Education Platform (MDEP) was fast tracked by the Ministry of Education as they were able to transition to the online provision easily."*

The project team reported in 2020 that TIDE, *"had better prepared their institutions for the pandemic response, in terms of the use of technologies and learning management systems"*. A direct link was made to the practices taught in TIDE's residential schools.

Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PEDAL)

[PEDAL](#) seeks to create systemic change in teaching and learning by equipping African academics with competencies for pedagogical practice and leadership, creating an active community of practice, and facilitating institutionalisation of pedagogical excellence in universities.

The 'PEDAL pedagogy' comprises six building blocks/modules: pedagogical models and strategies; educational foundations; technology-enhanced learning; transformative curriculum and learning design; leadership in pedagogical practice; and, innovative assessment. Depending on the university and length of training, teaching staff obtain various awards, ranging from a certificate of accomplishment, through a post-graduate certificate or diploma, to an MA in Pedagogical Practice and Leadership. PEDAL courses are designed to help teaching staff articulate and implement a personal teaching philosophy, employ reflective processes to improve their practice, and provide effective teaching and learning strategies using applied, learner-centred approaches.

Although delivery was originally through face-to-face workshops regionally, nationally, and at individual universities, PEDAL has always had online components, such as its coverage of TEL, and use of its own LMS to support reflective practice, knowledge transfer and mentorship. As described already, PEDAL collaborated with

PEBL on training for teaching staff on how to use and assess online learning.

As the SPHEIR project reaching the largest number of universities and countries, PEDAL's activities were significantly affected by the institutional and border closures necessitated by Covid. At the same time, demand grew from its institutions and network members for adaptation of PEDAL's courses to an online format, and for greater attention to remote and blended learning.

The result was PEDAL Online, an adapted version of PEDAL's pedagogical training that took teaching staff through the process of course planning (for face-to-face and online delivery), course design, effective online facilitation, and innovative assessment of online learning. Participants benefitted from a range of opportunities for collaboration, experience-sharing and reflective practice, using tools like: e-portfolios; online journals; feedback surveys; Zoom breakouts, discussion forums and chat rooms; and collaborative wikis. All courses are bench-marked on the [UNESCO ICT Competency Framework for Teachers](#).

PEDAL emphasised the immediate application of the knowledge and skills learnt by participants into their teaching. This included providing rubrics and supporting teaching staff as they redesigned course outlines (1,800 to date), developed session plans and e-portfolios. Use of the latter are particularly innovative, as e-portfolios were rarely used in African higher education, and are now being used by students and staff alike.

The rapid implementation of PEDAL Online is one of the factors contributing to PEDAL's reach – so far involving teaching staff in 88 African universities in 10 countries. Institutionalisation of PEDAL in universities is evident through actions such as universities sharing the costs of training their staff, approval for accredited versions of PEDAL's pedagogical training, strengthening of existing or establishment of new centres for teaching and learning influenced by the project, various formalised collaboration agreements, and changes to university policies on pedagogical training requirements for teaching staff. Lessons from online experience include:

- Unstable internet tended to undermine the quality of the training experience for some participants (materials and audio recordings were made available online)
- Online training has a relatively high dropout rate, requiring creative strategies to optimise outcomes
- Training works best when it is flexible (e.g. avoids requirements to use a particular online tool), accessible (provides different entry points), and self-paced (through a mix of offline and online activities, access to recorded sessions, peer mentorship and guided support)

- Course design needs to be user responsive – for example, adaptive to connectivity challenges, and accessible via mobile phone (via Mobile App)
- Demand is evidenced by participants being motivated and willing to invest time and money in data bundles and to recommend PEDAL to peers.

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA)

[TESCEA](#) seeks to transform learning through teaching for critical thinking and problem solving, by helping its four universities (two each in Uganda and Tanzania) re-design courses, equip lecturers with new pedagogical skills, make classrooms more gender responsive, and forge new connections with employers and communities. Although the project included face-to-face workshops and events, use of online technology was written into the project from the outset to enhance workshops and continue learning after events.

An online course on the topic of course design was part of the original project plan, which Covid accelerated. In 2020, an online course was developed on the topic of learning design (lesson planning). TESCEA had originally planned for this topic to be covered in a series of face-to-face workshops, but under Covid decided to develop it as an online course instead. To develop the course in a short timeframe a 'rolling design/delivery' was used – meaning that delivery started as soon as the first couple of modules were ready, even while others were being finalised.

TESCEA already had the foundations needed to make the move to fully online training possible under Covid. Teaching staff were accustomed to online tools used in course redesign workshops – such as Google Classroom, which was used for preparatory activities before workshops, and to share content and readings during workshops. Mentimeter, an interactive presentation software, was used to get every participant engaged and obtain participant feedback in real time.

TESCEA's original face-to-face 'course redesign workshops' were very hands-on and covered a lot in the span of five days. To give academics a digital tool they could use individually, or with colleagues on campus, the final day was used to introduce participants to Learning Designer – a free online application that supports lecturers in the process of course activity planning. This tool helps lecturers think about how they are going to engage students before, during and after each class, unpacking the teaching and learning activities for each class. This process continued after workshops through e-mentoring. Group mentoring facilitators were matched with participants to support them remotely in the process of lesson planning. Participants send links to their revised lesson designs, and mentors comment within the online tool, complemented by discussion on Zoom or WhatsApp.

The online course on learning design is mostly asynchronous, which means that

participants can go through the content, activities and discussions in their own time, but also uses regular live sessions to help participants stay connected and benefit from the presence of facilitators. From this pilot the project developed an eight-week modular training on course (re)design, and a six-week course on learning design (i.e. lesson planning).

Some universities found that the ‘foundational’ work to rethink how courses could be structured and designed, as well as how to approach teaching, enabled them to adapt more readily when the mode of teaching and learning changed due to Covid. TESCEA’s summative evaluation (available [here](#)) notes several lessons specific to online activities and Covid’s impact, including:

- Teachers reporting that because the approach relied heavily upon technology (increasingly under Covid), reliable infrastructure (power supply, internet connections, IT equipment) is essential but often absent
- Some teachers commented on the limitations of online training and felt they required a more discipline-specific approach to trainings. *“I have been able to facilitate all my classes remotely during the COVID-19 lockdown using a variety of methodologies. This would not have been so had I had no skills and experiences in ensuring learner-centred pedagogy”*
- Training for multipliers (training academic staff to be trainers) in lesson planning in the third year of the project was moved online due to Covid. Adapting face-to-face training to online required a greater time investment/expenditure for those developing the training, although ultimately online training was significantly cheaper than face-to-face trainings would have been. Online training did not differ significantly in quality from previous face-to-face trainings.

Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHEd-SL)

The AQHEd-SL project seeks to transform the entire higher education system in Sierra Leone – a system challenged by poor financing, limited staff training opportunities, a lack of quality management, and degree programme content that is misaligned with the needs of students and the job market.

The project’s mutually reinforcing focus areas are stakeholder engagement, external and internal QA, and curriculum reform. The project team and colleagues across eight institutions are redesigning selected undergraduate degree programmes to exemplify quality-assured, outcome-based education.¹⁰ The tools and curriculum reform practices are cascaded from ‘anchor’ to ‘waterfall’ institutions. The project is

¹⁰ The degree programmes selected under the project include: Electrical and Electronic Engineering; Pharmacy; Accounting and Finance; Agriculture; Civil Engineering, Public Health, Business Studies, and Agriculture (Education).

underpinning this transformational process by initiating development of a national qualifications framework for tertiary education, with encouragement from government, employers and other national stakeholders.

Prior to Covid, AQHEd-SL did not involve any significant online activities, primarily due to lack of national infrastructure, and low levels of connectivity, especially outside Freetown. Initially, the project's adoption of online activities was almost entirely a response to Covid. In March 2020, Sierra Leone closed all borders, schools and universities, banned public gatherings, and restricted cross-district travel. However, by July/August 2020, low case numbers enabled the country to come out of lockdown more quickly than many other countries, and project activities were able to recommence at the local level. Workshops and training events, temporarily paused or held on Zoom, could again be held in person, compliant with health requirements. International travel restrictions continue to prevent international partners from visiting to support capacity-building in critical thinking, pedagogy and quality assurance. It is these activities that were adapted under Covid.

For example, the project found that teaching its post-graduate diploma in QA over Zoom was problematic, and moved to use of pre-recorded YouTube videos. WhatsApp groups had already been established for the previous QA diploma cohorts, and were further adapted to provide support and discuss training materials. Since August 2020, QA training resumed in person, with local facilitators teaching the material. WhatsApp and YouTube videos continue to be used to support learning.

Pedagogical training (linked to the curriculum reform process) was similarly modified because of constraints on travel for partners outside Sierra Leone. Training included video interviews with university staff involved in teaching curricula already revised through the project, to help participants relate the training material to their context. Critical thinking workshops utilised MoodleBox, (Moodle learning environment via Raspberry Pi), a small table-top device that provides Moodle content without internet, wifi or other infrastructure. This enabled participants to hear from lecturers and project staff about their experiences, without their physical presence in a workshop. Although initiated as a Covid response, the project is continuing to create video resources for future capacity-building, and hopes to introduce use of MoodleBox for offline blended learning in the classroom within the newly redesigned degree programmes. The project team's summary of lessons regarding online activity under Covid include: the importance of listening to lecturers and project staff about their experiences; the need to consider equity and accessibility when looking at different delivery methods; and, the advantages of using a variety of methods and having back-up plans for the back-up plans to deal with unexpected problems.

Cross-cutting lessons from SPHEIR

Common strands of experience are visible across the SPHEIR portfolio. For projects with student-facing reforms, these include:

- The value of having an existing digital architecture in place to make the pivot to full online delivery to students much easier to achieve
- Addressing access to devices and data, and avoiding inequities associated with different platforms
- The importance of student support mechanisms to maintain contact and engagement, especially for at-risk learners
- Continuous review and refinement of content, delivery tools, student support processes, and support for teaching staff engaging with new and possibly unfamiliar ways of teaching.

For projects with staff/institutional-facing reforms, in addition to the above, cross-cutting lessons include:

- The lack of infrastructure and IT facilities in universities presents a variety of barriers in transitioning to more than 'emergency' teaching (e.g. lectures on Zoom)
- The benefit of having multiple points of access to material and support as part of capacity-building
- The importance of addressing the needs of teaching staff associated with lack of experience or familiarity with online platforms
- Covid made apparent an additional layer of potential inequities for students and teaching staff participating in capacity building, teaching and/or learning.

Many of the lessons reported by projects resonate with the emerging research findings referenced below.

Emerging research on Covid's impact on higher education

Considering that Covid lockdowns and travel restrictions started in March 2020, a number of organisations concerned with higher education moved very quickly to start gathering information on Covid's impact. Some are highlighted below as they offer an opportunity to see how the impact/adaptation experience of SPHEIR projects aligns with broader evidence. The impacts flagged in the paper are those most immediately relevant to SPHEIR, such as on teaching and learning. Each study includes impacts on activities that are not supported by SPHEIR projects – research, or research capacity-building, for example – which are not referenced.

[Higher education during COVID-19: A snapshot of digital engagement in Commonwealth universities](#)¹¹

– This survey by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU) captures the short-term impacts of Covid on the working habits of staff, students, and university leaders across Commonwealth countries. Among other research questions were two with immediate relevance to SPHEIR: around the current picture of digital connectivity and engagement among university staff and students; and, on the effect of Covid on online and distance learning, and attitudes towards these.

The survey had 258 respondents from 33 countries, with 44% of respondents being academics and 17% students (10% of respondents were deans and above in universities). Africa, where the majority of SPHEIR projects operate, accounted for 66% of responses (35% of which were from East and Southern Africa, and 31% West Africa).

In terms of the current picture on connectivity and engagement, the study indicated that “*the challenges associated with remote working are predominantly technical and financial*”, with institutional support for remote working differing by income status and professional role. Findings also suggested “*that financial contributions toward data or devices from institutions may be effective, insofar as they correlate with a higher likelihood of broadband access, a lower likelihood of reporting never having worked online pre-pandemic, and a higher likelihood of predicting frequent online working following the pandemic*”. On access to devices, 86% of student respondents reported access to a tablet, and only 9% access to a desktop device (although it is unclear whether this term included notebook devices).

On the effect of Covid on online and distance learning, 80% reported that some, most, or all teaching and learning had moved online, with 53% predicting that all or most departments would continue to offer online teaching and learning after the pandemic.

A preference for blended degrees (combining online and face-to-face learning) was indicated, with 90% of respondents agreeing that “*a blended degree is equivalent to a traditional degree*”. Only 47% agreed that an *online-only* degree was equivalent. Interestingly, respondents were evenly divided on how the quality of online teaching and learning compared to in-person (33% indicating better, 33% the same, and 34% worse), although 81% agreed that quality improved ‘over the past six months’. The most cited online learning challenges were accessibility for students, staff training and confidence, connectivity costs, and student engagement.

¹¹ ACU Policy Brief, *Higher education during COVID-19: A snapshot of digital engagement in Commonwealth universities*, August 2020. Note: ACU also leads the PEBL project under SPHEIR, and a number of East African universities involved in PEBL are ACU member institutions. The survey and PEBL are separate activities.

[The Impact Of Covid 19 On Higher Education Around The World](#)¹² – This survey by the International Association of Universities (IAU) included a larger group of respondents (424) and countries (109) than the ACU survey, although only 2% were students (4% if PhD candidates are included).

Although closures were empirically obvious in all the countries involved in SPHEIR, it is interesting to see the quantification of the number of institutions impacted by Covid, with 59% of respondents reporting that *all* campus activities stopped and institutions closed completely. African respondents put this figure at 77%.

Two thirds of African institutions reported not being prepared to move teaching online when they closed, although most are transitioning to digital or self study. Close to 80% of respondents anticipate an impact on enrolment numbers for the new academic year, along with negative financial consequences, especially for private institutions. Three impacts are covered that have particular relevance to SPHEIR: on higher education partnerships; on teaching and learning; and, on community engagement.

On partnerships, 64% reported that Covid would have a variety of effects: half of these indicating that partnerships would be weakened; and 18% indicating that they would be strengthened. Overall, a little less than a third believe that Covid created new opportunities with partner institutions. In Africa, 73% reported that the effect on partnerships was negative, a much higher percentage than in all other regions. However, the survey did not define partnerships so it is difficult to know whether partnerships like those in SPHEIR are included, as compared to, say, research partnerships.

Covid affected teaching and learning with two thirds of respondents reporting that classroom teaching was replaced by distance teaching/learning, with challenges encountered such as *“access to technical infrastructure, competences and pedagogies for distance learning and the requirements of specific fields of study”*. Elaborating on challenges associated with teaching and learning:

“Several respondents referred to the fact that a different pedagogy is required for distance teaching and learning and that it is a challenge for faculty to seamlessly make this sudden and unprepared shift from face to face to distance teaching and learning. The level of readiness or preparedness of teachers to lift this challenge is very diverse... Institutions reported to not necessarily have a management structure in place to develop the teaching capacities of staff in order for them to shift towards online learning easily and this therefore often resulted in “learning by doing”

¹² Giorgio Marinoni, Hilligje van't Land, Trine Jensen, *The Impact Of Covid 19 On Higher Education Around The World*, IAU Global Survey Report, May 2020

approaches or attempting to imitate what would have been the face to face way of proceeding, yet using distance mode.

At the same time, the forced move to distance teaching and learning offers important opportunities to propose more flexible learning possibilities, explore blended or hybrid learning and to mix synchronous learning with asynchronous learning”.

Impact on community engagement was also reported. In Africa, two almost equal groups of institutions reported – those where community engagement increased (37%), and those where community engagement decreased during Covid (34%). Regrettably, engagement of employers was not among the survey choices, which related to medical or mobile care connected with Covid, science communication, community action or other (the latter two were not defined).

[*The impact of Covid-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence*](#)¹³ –

Although this review focused on higher education in Europe, two of its thematic areas resonate for SPHEIR – teaching and learning, and the social dimension of higher education. The findings cited below are those most likely to be relevant for the projects and countries covered by SPHEIR.¹⁴

The report synthesises rapid-response surveys by university networks, student organisations and researchers, and more than 50 journal articles, reports and publications. It usefully presents data and findings according to three levels of impact: *immediate* (the 2019-20 academic year); *short-term* (the current 2020-21 academic year); and, *medium-term* (likely effects by 2025). Thematic sections describe policy implications and recommendations for higher education systems and universities. Even though intended for a European audience, these are thought-provoking for educators and policy leaders in all countries involved in SPHEIR.

The findings on *teaching and learning* make an important (and cautionary) distinction “*between the resulting ‘emergency remote teaching’ and ‘online learning’ – namely, emergency remote teaching involves transforming on-site classes to a virtual mode, without making changes to the curriculum or the methodology*”. Among a number of medium-term challenges or risks noted arising from a permanent move to online/remote learning are:

- Teaching staff being able to adapt curriculum and teaching methods
- Students being better prepared for online learning

¹³ Thomas Farnell, Ana Skledar Matijević, Ninoslav Šćukanec Schmidt, “*The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence*”, NESET Analytical Report, 2021

¹⁴ A third theme – international student mobility – is not covered because this is not an aspect of SPHEIR projects, although all universities involved in SPHEIR have international students or graduates who may become internationally mobile students.

- Disengagement and drop-out of students who face difficulties in the online environment
- Adapting assessment processes to assure quality and academic integrity in online learning
- Adapting QA regulations for online and blended delivery.

In terms of the *social dimension* of higher education, European students surveyed identified issues also flagged within SPHEIR, such as challenges related to:

- Studying conditions (access to suitable space, equipment, internet, study materials and confidence using online platforms)
- Funding (income loss, living costs, accessing scholarships (and other forms of student finance))
- Student well-being (access to supportive social networks and help to cope with frustration, anxiety and boredom).

The paper also flags risks for higher education arising from “*a significant deterioration in educational inequality in pre-tertiary education*”. Specifically, that school closures and the switch to online learning in primary and secondary education may exacerbate educational inequalities, “*resulting both in learning losses and in disengagement from education. This in turn will result in lowering access and participation of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in higher education*”. While this was flagged in the context of European higher education, the risks are likely to be more acute in countries facing significant challenges in access to primary and secondary education, girls’ participation, and quality in education delivery at all levels.

[ILO-UNESCO-WBG Joint Survey on Technical and Vocational Education and Training \(TVET\) and Skills Development during the time of COVID 19](#)¹⁵ – This study (also survey-based) provides a useful comparator to Covid impact on university education, with its focus on TVET institutions. Responses to questions on impact are not dissimilar from what is heard in surveys on university impacts. However, the proportion of TVET closures appears to have been higher than university closures (the survey indicates that almost 96% of African TVET institutions closed completely). This may be due to the higher proportion of practical, skills-focused programmes that are difficult to adapt to an online environment, especially where these involve work placements. Among the findings that resonate for university education (and for SPHEIR) are:

¹⁵ *Joint survey on technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and skills development during the time of COVID-19*, International Labour Organization, UNESCO, World Bank Group, 2020

- Potentially unrealistic expectations about a quick transition from face-to-face to online learning
- Infrastructure being the major “bottleneck”, and need for investments that target vulnerable students most likely to lack access to connectivity
- The need for more collaborative initiatives on training, etc. among institutions, IT professionals, private sector, social partners, internet providers and governments.

On teaching staff, the study emphasises the need for continuous training and technical support, highlighting their role as moderators and facilitators of e-learning. The need for pedagogical training and peer-to-peer learning for teachers was noted, as well as a need to recognise differences in learning outcomes between face-to-face and online learning.

For students, it emphasised the need for better preparation for independent learning, the importance of effective engagement of students by teaching staff to avoid dropouts, and the need to provide support for those struggling to participate in e-learning, including poor students who may struggle with connectivity.

For SPHEIR, this study is most relevant for LEAP as it supports Fellows in both university and TVET institutions. More generally, the similarity to issues faced by universities (pedagogy, blended learning, QA, etc.) suggests that some elements of project activities in the future could be adapted to support both universities and TVET institutions.

Additional literature on Covid and higher education

Other studies flag similar issues and some include aspects of Covid’s impact on higher education not found elsewhere. For example:

- The Mawazo Institute’s Covid impact survey on the learning and ongoing research of individuals in Africa’s higher education and research sector includes interesting data on gender and age impact on academic staff.¹⁶
- A study with very interesting data on student satisfaction with the role played by different institutions (government, universities, banks, hospitals) under Covid.¹⁷ It found satisfaction with universities’ response was 60% globally (53% in North America and Europe), but that in Africa the response was only 29.2%. It also noted that “*interestingly, students in Africa were generally more satisfied with how banks had responded to the crisis than with universities*”.

¹⁶ [Survey Findings on the Impact of COVID-19 on Africa’s Higher Education System](#), Mawazo Institute, May 2020

¹⁷ Aleksander Aristovnik, Damijana Keržič, Dejan Ravšelj, Nina Tomaževic and Lan Umek, [Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Life of Higher Education Students: A Global Perspective](#), 13 October 2020

- For those interested in refugee education, a study conducted by Edvise ME looks at the experience of refugees and vulnerable populations with distance/online education during Covid.¹⁸ Although not focused on higher education, it provides informative survey responses related to access to education, quality of educational services, and the enabling environment around learning.
- The World Bank's monitoring of Covid impacts, among many other issues, flags particular implications for private universities arising from closures and the transition to online learning.¹⁹ These include the possibility of declining enrolment, with impact on revenue and operating margins, and loss/lay-offs of part-time faculty members. The Bank notes that one in every three students is enrolled in private institutions globally.

The latter issue is potentially significant for SPHEIR projects which include both private and public universities. According to UniRank data, more than half of universities in Africa are private. The majority of students are in public institutions, which tend to be larger than their private counterparts. Regardless, financial vulnerability of private universities could still impact significant numbers of students. It underscores the reality that many national higher education systems include both public and private provision, and that impacts on either will affect a national system in its entirety.

Reflections on SPHEIR project experience

As noted in the introduction, all SPHEIR projects have one or more varieties of online higher education at the centre of their activities or as an adjunct: delivery of academic programmes or modules; online capacity-building for staff; and, online provision of non-academic services like student support. Only one project, AQHEd-SL, which largely due to the barriers to connectivity in Sierra Leone, did not include online activities as part of its initial design.

Recurrent themes visible across the emerging research are also visible in the experience of SPHEIR projects with online higher education.

- The need for flexibility and adaptation in providing effective online delivery (i.e. more than 'emergency remote learning'), and the importance of investment in capacity-building for teaching and non-teaching staff. The fact that several SPHEIR projects are providing teaching or QA staff with training has been seen by many universities as instrumental in helping them adapt to

¹⁸ [E-learning Experience During COVID-19 Needs Assessment](#), Edvise ME for Plan International, Relief International and War Child

¹⁹ [The COVID-19 Crisis Response: Supporting Tertiary Education for Continuity, Adaptation, and Innovation](#), World Bank Group, 2020

online delivery. The ability of projects to pivot to address staff online capacity illustrates the variety of needs such as online mentoring/counselling, peer support, training in use of specific tools, etc.

- The need to accommodate the added challenges to equitable participation in online higher education, including investment in preparation of students for remote study, and mobilisation of support to students facing access barriers and stress with independent study. Several SPHEIR projects adapted and ramped up their level of student support, and/or used different approaches to facilitate access to data and devices. Equitable participation also means taking into account the devices used by students. As noted in PADILEIA's rapid evaluation report, this means "*tailoring course content and delivery so that it is optimised for the most basic device, particularly mobile phones. This mindset should inform design of remote learning at all stages, from course content, to platforms, feedback systems and communication with students. It is equally necessary to be aware of local internet connectivity levels and tailor course content and delivery to be suitable for the lowest bandwidth of a given context*".²⁰
- Addressing concerns and reservations (among educators and students) about quality of blended or fully online degrees. Although SPHEIR projects do not generally track enrolment data, project partners did report concerns about the impact on enrolment. Projects such as PEBL and PADILEIA were in part intended to address attitudes towards online learning in the countries involved, and found greater receptivity as Covid hit. LEAP encountered a significant number of Fellows choosing to defer resumption of study due to concerns about quality and the readiness of some universities to do more than Zoom lectures (a form of emergency remote teaching).
- Engagement of employers undoubtedly became more challenging under restrictions, although the experience of several projects was that engagement was able to continue. Further research on this aspect of Covid's impact on universities' community engagement is needed, as well as on how Covid has affected a broader range of partnership activities.
- Deeper exploration is needed of how Covid affects the ability of initiatives like SPHEIR to adapt and persevere, and, more fundamentally, affects the

²⁰ Julia Pacitto and Bethany Sikes, *Rapid Evaluation Report: Rapid evaluation of the Covid-19 adaptations to the PADILEIA project*, Jigsaw Consult, 24 February 2021

operating environment for higher education institutions as they struggle operationally and financially with a transition to online learning (or at least a blend of face-to-face and online delivery). Financial barriers have increased in terms of student access to finance (loans or grants), and the business models of universities (taking into account that public and private universities face different challenges and, if either are unaddressed, the entire national higher education system is at risk).

Webinars that started out as a look at the online experience of projects, became somewhat inseparable from a look at adaptability under Covid. At the early stages of the SPHEIR programme, even before the various calls-for-proposals, it was possible to visualise higher education reforms addressing quality, relevance, access or affordability, without necessarily involving online services.²¹ Covid's impact altered this, and it is impossible not to wonder what these same SPHEIR projects would look like had they been designed today, in a context with any of three prevailing needs:

- i. Demand for a fundamental transition in the capacity of universities to deliver higher education through a re-balanced blend of online and face-to-face student experience
- ii. Addressing an additional level of inequities in higher education – barriers to the learning and the social experience of students based on their access to technology and connectivity
- iii. Rethinking models for higher education finance. For countries like those involved in SPHEIR, financing public and private higher education was already challenging, and now must deal with new demands for investment needed to address (i) and (ii) in stressed economies, and a more difficult aid environment.

To be sure, each of these needs existed before Covid, but Covid's medium and long-term impacts have significantly increased their gravity and urgency. The reflections below are less about retrospective project design and more to do with implications for sustainability and scaling.

For *student-facing projects*, in the context of prevailing needs:

- PADILEIA might not look all that different as it is already using distance education to reach a uniquely disadvantaged population. The tools, techniques and strategies would continue to benefit from the project's commitment to continuous adaptation, and are also applicable to other refugee populations. PADILEIA clearly found that blended is the most

²¹ The concept note for SPHEIR's calls for proposals sought projects that "will seek to transform the **quality, relevance, access and affordability** of higher education to achieve sustainable change in higher education (HE) systems".

effective approach for its target group. A key lesson from its rapid evaluation is that having an online foundation for delivery strengthens the ability to move

more fully online in response to crisis. Financing will almost certainly increase as a challenge, in part because higher education for refugees tends to be disconnected from host country higher education system financing. An interesting webinar exploring the impact of Covid on education for refugees is available through the UNHCR [here](#).

- For LEAP, its selection of degree programmes might need to factor in the ability of university and TVET institutions to offer quality blended or distance learning, and to look at the experience of prospective public and private institutions in managing business shocks. These may need to become part of the selection criteria for eligible institutions and programmes. Considering students' access to IT and connectivity might also need to be a factor in selection of Fellows, and, consistent with the goal of targeting selection from the lowest wealth quintiles, new forms of student support may be needed. In addition to the financing of public universities, financial pressures on government will also affect access to student financing in countries like Kenya, where the Higher Education Loans Board may deal with constrained budgets and increasing defaults. LEAP will need to navigate a much more complex student lending environment in countries where public student loans are not available.
- For PfP, it's hard to see a need for fundamental changes in its model, which has demonstrated both effective online services, and continuous capacity to adapt. Its focus on health education and a volunteer model made it vulnerable in ways not experienced by other SPHEIR projects in a prolonged global public health crisis. Operationally, attempts to increase co-delivery of online courses have faced challenges and the PfP team recognise that solutions may vary course-by-course. It is possible to see PfP as fundamentally a health systems, rather than higher education, initiative. From a sustainability perspective, especially in a pandemic, unlike other SPHEIR projects, PfP is able to present itself to funders more likely to be interested in health than higher education. Literature on Covid's impact on aid financing suggests that support for health may be stable or increase, although financing priorities within health aid are expected to change. That said, PfP's model offers much to higher education more broadly, with potential for adaptation for use in other sciences, or occupationally-specific degree programmes in low-income countries. The project's work in conceptualisation of 'preparedness', and metrics to gauge that, is a useful contribution to work and research on graduate employability.

For *staff/institution-facing* projects:

- Because TIDE was designed with the intention to reform an *entire* national system (or at least the distance education element of a national system), it would be likely to be able to take on-board the lessons of Covid once the national political environment is conducive to resumption of donor support. This could involve greater attention to addressing barriers to equitable participation, and ensuring a foundation is in place for online learning for both staff and students, evidenced by the response to TIDE's Gateway courses. However, the present political crisis, combined with Covid's impact, makes it unclear when there will be an opportunity to resume reforms that were initiated through TIDE, or to discern what Myanmar's financing of higher education will look like.
- For PEBL, if anything, Covid validated the need to build effective blended learning capacity, evidenced by the number of its partner universities who found their transition to online learning aided by their involvement in the project. Empirically, there is some evidence to suggest that a transition from blended to fully online is much easier than going from face-to-face delivery to fully online. From a sustainability perspective, some aspects of how courses are selected for design, and the role of national commissions might need to be re-thought – particularly around whether investing in design of individual courses/modules is an optimal model where universities face significant pressure to move full degree programmes online. However, PEBL's fundamental mix of activities – pedagogical design and planning, QA systems at the course, university and commission levels, and addressing principles of open access – would not be likely to need altering in response to prevailing conditions. There would, nonetheless, be value in looking at how scaling blended learning capacity can include addressing inequities facing some students. PEBL's original concept was that *delivery* (not just content) of blended learning courses could be shared – i.e. students in university 'A' would participate in a course delivered (or co-delivered) by teaching staff in university 'B'. This was thought to be a feasible approach to addressing scarcity in teaching resources in East Africa. Barriers to implementing this idea were not surmountable during the project, although with Covid's financial impact on universities, and the added costs associated with transitioning many programmes online, the concept is worth re-examining.

Projects where online activities are present, but to some extent are an adjunct to other reforms, present a slightly different picture.

- The merits of PEDAL's offer – systemic change in teaching and learning through pedagogical practice and leadership, institutionalising pedagogical excellence in universities – has been validated by Covid, especially now that PEDAL straddles both in-person and online delivery. However, further calibration of pedagogical approaches may be needed to address discipline peculiarities for it to be seen by African universities as a key tool in helping the transition of all face-to-face programmes to quality online delivery. It would also be useful to look at how pedagogy can play a role in addressing inequities faced by students. PEDAL leveraged technology and adapted its own delivery online to cohorts of about 100 participants. PEDAL's community-of-practice model, which is heavily dependent on large annual convenings may need to be re-thought, at least for a period when barriers to regional and international travel remain high and domestic and aid funding scarce.
- TESCEA demonstrates how incorporation of online practices within a project network can enhance resilience and enable a project to maintain focus on its core activities. Questions worth consideration are how aspects of the TESCEA model might change if it was to help universities make a more comprehensive transition to online education, and how it can accommodate a larger network of universities. Models such as the joint advisory groups (TESCEA's model for university engagement of employers and other stakeholders), and peer mentoring among teaching staff, both championed through the project, can play an important role as universities deal with transitioning degree programmes online.
- Since its application to SPHEIR, AQHEd-SL has always stood out for its ambition and comprehensive national vision of mutually-reinforcing reforms. The initial design choice to forgo aspirations of adding online learning, might in the context of Covid appear regrettable, but could also be seen as prescient. Taking into account the realities of national infrastructure, the project was wise to focus on transitioning face-to-face degree programmes to 'outcome-based education'. Trying to introduce online degrees at the same time in an environment not conducive to low-cost reliable connectivity, would have been ill-timed and possibly impeded the project's impressive momentum. As infrastructure and connectivity improve, the now well-established collaboration among higher education institutions in Sierra Leone (which has notably included from the outset the Tertiary Education Commission), will be better placed to address the challenge of introducing outcome-based *online* education.

Reflections on development assistance

As noted earlier there is a growing body of literature on the broader impact of Covid on development assistance, including implications for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Only a few are referenced below.

An excellent picture of global trends is provided by the Center for Global Development, especially on the impact on aid financing.²² Among the trends noted is that bilateral development agencies face an increasingly blurred boundary between development assistance and spending to tackle global challenges. It also argues that while resilience (ability to absorb, adapt to and recover from shocks) is a characteristic of governments and public services, *“development agencies have not always cultured it... COVID-19 has brought to the fore fundamental weaknesses of development agencies’ operating models, approaches, and use of instruments”*.

Research on the impact of Covid on Canada’s foreign aid sector provides an interesting survey-based perspective relevant to operational delivery of development assistance. It identifies *“the five most significant impacts and challenges”* as: loss of funding; suspension of programme delivery; impacts on the [aid delivery] workforce; impacts on volunteers (potentially useful to PfP); and, amplification of pre-existing issues (e.g. fundraising challenges, lack of coherence and consistency in the approach to international development, etc.).²³

A separate Canadian essay by Stephen Brown has immediate resonance for SPHEIR’s partnership model. It unpacks a range of factors impacting development assistance, such as the ‘localisation’ of aid through greater reliance on local staff and organisations.²⁴

Evidence emerging from SPHEIR and the literature on Covid’s impact prompts some reflections on higher education and development assistance more generally (in no particular order of significance).

- *Reform impact and resilience* – if anything, Covid’s impact raises important questions about how the design and implementation of development assistance might be made more shock resistant. SPHEIR’s experience suggests that the impact of reforms can still be realised under constraints that

²² Mikaela Gavas and Samuel Pleeck, Global Trends in 2021: [How COVID-19 Is Transforming International Development](#), Center for Global Development, March 2, 2021

²³ Andrea Paras (PI), Craig Johnson, Spencer Henson, Asa Coleman, and Jenine Otto, [The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Canada’s Foreign Aid Sector](#), University of Guelph’s Covid-19 Research Development and Catalyst Fund, October 2020

²⁴ Brown, Stephen. [The Impact of COVID-19 on Development Assistance](#), International Journal 76, no. 1 (March 2021): 42–54.

involve restrictions in movement of goods and people, closure of public and private workplaces, constriction of funding disbursement, etc. However, as this paper illustrates, SPHEIR involved a group of projects that were already engaged in online activities. Project partners were amenable to creative adaptations to work around Covid constraints, and were largely successful. Projects were also well-advanced with several years of implementation and accrual of partnership experience. Covid's impact may have been much more damaging had it emerged earlier in the life of SPHEIR. Other forms and models for development assistance – health, social protection, humanitarian aid, income generation, conflict and peace building, etc. – may have been impacted in very different ways.

- *Risk management* – as is common in selection processes for development assistance proposals, applicants are asked to identify risks and discuss mitigation strategies, and project managers are expected to monitor and report on risks. Rarely does this extend to the level of identifying an entire 'Plan B' (as arguably warranted by Covid) should 'Plan A' be nullified. Risk and mitigation may need to be re-conceptualised, possibly informed by the experience associated with scenario planning, a method more suited to imagining possible futures than the more prosaic risks that typically populate development projects' risk registers.
- *Functioning of partnerships*²⁵ – among the literature mentioned is one that asked questions about the impact of Covid on partnerships. This is an important and eminently researchable question, at both the level of intra-country partnerships (collaboration among national actors and institutions), and models of North-South and South-South partnerships commonly associated with development assistance. It is also relevant to issues raised by Stephen Brown on the "localisation of aid". On the basis of empirical evidence only, the impact of Covid on SPHEIR partnerships suggests that partnerships might sustain shocks better than initiatives involving a single organisation, even if some partner organisations struggle to remain engaged more than others. Universities in Sierra Leone found that their collaboration in the AQHEd-SL project helped them cope with managing Covid's impact and share information and resources. Research on the impact of exogenous shocks on partnerships (in any sector) and effects on individual partners, could help 'tune' partnership models to be more robust in many areas of development assistance. A related aspect for examination is how Covid has affected the functioning of, and attitudes towards, North-South models of

²⁵ SPHEIR defines partnerships as a formal collaboration among a group of public and/or private organisations that address HE in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot, although it considers partners only if active participants in a project's strategic management (it does not necessarily include suppliers, beneficiaries or key stakeholders as partners).

development assistance. Universities also play a major role in national knowledge systems, most obviously in terms of research relevant to the design, implementation and evaluation of development assistance in its many forms. The effects of Covid on higher education research capacity and international research collaboration are covered in some of the literature referred to in this paper.

- *Financial impacts* – the story of Covid’s impact on the availability of resources for higher education (or any other) reforms has not yet been written. Within the donor community evidence of constrained financial resources is already emerging, with some ODA spending dramatically reduced, although a few donors have maintained or even slightly increased their ODA commitments. National budgets in countries receiving support are likely to be challenged for some time in terms of matching contributions, while faced with growing debt and stalled or reduced economic growth. Individual institutions – like the universities in SPHEIR – are facing immediate and long-term financial pressures that may affect their sustainability and, almost certainly influence their willingness to undertake added commitments where costs are significant. Financial constraints are likely to be the largest single impediment to universities being able to transition to a reasonable threshold of quality blended or distance learning that takes into account factors like pedagogical training, student preparation and equity considerations. Potentially instructive lessons are available from a US initiative by the National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. With support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, it developed an institutional grant programme to encourage colleges and universities to redesign their instructional approaches using technology to achieve *both cost savings as well as quality enhancements*. The focus was on large-enrolment, introductory courses, which have the potential of benefitting significant student numbers and generating substantial cost savings.²⁶ The project design and research associated with NCAT’s work might allay fears that online delivery will erode learning outcomes or trade quality for savings. Although NCAT is no longer in operation, a rich body of legacy documents is available [here](#).
- *Demands on staff* – Covid clearly impacted the availability and level of involvement of healthcare professionals involved in SPHEIR projects (both nationals and, in the case of PfP, UK volunteers). What effect it had on other development initiatives related to health is not clear but is intuitively logical. For everyone involved in development assistance, online fatigue is

²⁶ Carol A. Twigg, *Improving Learning and Reducing Costs: Lessons Learned from Round 1 of the Pew Grant Program in Course Redesign*, 2003, Center for Academic Transformation

increasingly evident as people cope with the demands of Zoom, GoToMeeting, Skype, Teams, etc. Eventually, some new equilibrium will be reached, where development assistance (in the context of international expertise mobilised for local support) and programme activities are neither entirely online, nor 'back to normal' in the context of events or travel. However, there are very valid concerns around workload implications for teaching staff and the level of time needed to properly address training and professional development needs in relation to QA, teaching and institutional IT capacity.

Lastly, and in closing, a range of resources are available related to the themes of this paper, with four in particular noted.

- The [SPHEIR Mid-Term Evaluation Report](#), prepared for the FCDO by IPE Triple Line, Technopolis Group, and University of Bedfordshire, provides another perspective relevant to online activities and Covid adaptation by (some) SPHEIR projects, including two interesting case studies. The first focuses on how *five* SPHEIR partnerships supported higher education to respond to Covid, and captures the challenges of online learning for students and teaching staff in five projects. A second case study focuses on implications for equality and inclusion associated with the shift to online learning and response to Covid. It draws on qualitative views from lecturers and students in Somaliland, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Lebanon, Jordan and Myanmar.
- A roundtable at the British Council's 2021 Going Global Conference on how Covid has changed higher education and development, a summary of which is available [here](#).
- A report prepared for [Education Sub-Saharan Africa](#) looks at research articles, reports, policy briefs, blogs, and online resources relating to impacts of Covid on education in Africa. It highlights lessons from the Covid response for higher education students, faculty, and Vice-Chancellors.
- **Stories of innovation from educators in Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria collected by INASP as part of the [Digital University in Africa](#) programme, funded by the British Council. It is investigating the ways in which university academics and educators are innovating to create their own digital content to support student learning.**

Other resources are accessible in the SPHEIR programme's [knowledge bank](#).