



## Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

# STRENGTHENING STAFF CAPACITY AND DEVELOPING BLENDED LEARNING COURSES IN EAST AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES – PARTNERSHIP FOR ENHANCED AND BLENDED LEARNING

Scaling up capacity on all aspects of blended learning – including interactive content design, quality assurance and virtual learning platform utilisation – is a recognised priority among higher education institutions across East Africa.

The implementation of blended and digital learning is a complex process, presenting many challenges, particularly for institutions in the initial stages of their digital transformation.

Part of the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme, the Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) enabled participating universities to rapidly, and sustainably, scale up capacity for blended learning design and delivery. The project supported 23 universities to develop, deliver, and share blended content – and enhanced the expertise of academic staff to successfully deliver blended learning. The key components of the project were:



### Pedagogical development

PEBL academics leading on module development were trained in blended learning pedagogy.

*'The PEBL project was an eye-opener to our young university... thanks to PEBL, our university had fully implemented blended learning before COVID-19, and therefore it was possible to move from blended to pure online learning with ease. Our university staff were well trained by the PEBL team and the effect has been good and positive.'*

Wanjiku G. Thuita, PEBL team member, Coordinator of Student Affairs, and lecturer at Riara University.



### Curriculum design

Academics across the PEBL network developed and rolled out a series of quality-assured, credit-bearing, blended courses in a range of undergraduate and graduate degree programmes: ICT, business, health and applied sciences, and education. All courses were hosted on the open-access platform OER Africa and are available for any university to download for use and adaptation.



### Quality assurance

A Quality Assurance (QA) Rubric was produced to standardise the quality assurance process for blended learning content and help academic developers benchmark the features of any blended learning module against defined standards in eight distinct areas, from instructional design and navigation to assessment and student support.

## SPHEIR programme management



## Key achievements

### Creation of a portfolio of 26 quality-assured, credit-bearing blended learning modules shared by universities across the region.

Some institutions used the courses as complementary material to enhance teaching while others have gone further – Africa Nazarene University has embedded PEBL modules designed by other universities into its learning management system for use by students on degree programmes where the content aligns.

### Establishment of a regional cadre of blended learning experts across Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda

delivering high quality training to academics in their own institutions and beyond. PEBL-trained lecturers at Kenyatta University led capacity building activities in online and blended learning for 1,150 other academics at their university and delivered training to other Kenyan institutions. *'Technology adoption and proficiency among faculty and students have increased drastically,'*

Dr Lucy Ikiara, Director of Quality Assurance at Kenya Methodist University.

### Successful adaptation of PEBL institutions to online learning during Covid-19.

*'PEBL became a very useful platform, a useful vehicle to support the institutions'* in Kenya. The training provided by PEBL for academics in 11 institutions across Kenya on how to develop and use blended learning approaches meant that *'the universities whose academics had been trained became so useful when [Covid-19 created] the demand that they migrated to online platforms and accelerated the uptake of technology.'*

Professor Jackson Too, Director of Research and

Development at the Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya.

### Adoption and adaptation of the project's QA rubric and institutional QA review tool by universities.

Several institutions have developed or adopted blended learning policies drawing on their involvement in PEBL, with more than 50% of the universities in PEBL's network implementing either a blended learning policy or a blended learning strategy in 2020-2021. The practical capacity developed by PEBL catalysed wider policy and procedural changes in partner and participant universities that were crucial for ensuring a streamlined transition to blended learning.



## PEBL in numbers

**26** quality-assured, blended modules developed and available on open access platform OER Africa

Over

**44,000**

students enrolled on PEBL modules, including 8,000 registered for courses outside their home institutions

**76**

academics trained by PEBL to support online and blended learning, with capacity building cascaded to a further 3,441 lecturers

**21**

PEBL network universities used the Institutional Quality Assurance Review Tool to assess their blended learning capacity

More than

**10**

universities adopted or adapted PEBL's Quality Assurance Rubric to assess blended courses

## Main lessons

### Effective blended learning

- A holistic approach to blended learning – including digital pedagogy, learning design and quality assurance – is essential for students to have a positive experience. Engaging students in the design of blended learning contributes to high satisfaction rates.
- Assessment is an area which is often neglected but feedback channels and the design of appropriate assessments are important considerations in designing effective blended learning.
- Blended learning approaches need to be tailored to subjects and moving existing materials to online platforms should not substitute effective online learning design.

### Capacity development for blended learning

- Successful initiatives to strengthen the design and delivery of blended learning require a thorough needs analysis to consider attitudes, skills, capacity, and incentives. This applies at individual, institutional and national systems levels. The levels of ICT skills and the learning management systems utilised need specific consideration so that sustainable solutions are implemented.
- Capacity building activities should consider both the development and delivery of blended learning and be extended to students, so they become effective blended learners.
- Train-the-trainer approaches work well to build sustainability and scalability, cascading quality-assured training to others. A gradual shift from delivery by external technical partners to university-led training strengthens ownership.
- Most sustainable capacity was built by institutions that put in place effective processes and structures for continuous support – including sufficient time – so teaching staff apply what they learned and can train others.
- While universities have significant incentives to introduce blended learning, particularly in response to Covid-19, they also need to motivate teachers and students. The external accreditation of PEBL's blended learning training did just that.

### Digital inequality

- The cost and quality of internet connectivity and access to appropriate devices remain key challenges in accessing online learning resources. Significant financial investments are needed to expand and strengthen ICT infrastructure and connectivity to improve accessibility for all students and teachers – both on and off campus.

### Engagement with regulators

- Standardisation of QA and accreditation frameworks across universities is key to the sustainability of blended and online learning and requires engagement with national regulatory bodies so that appropriate standards for blended and online learning are agreed and monitored.

- The development of institutional policies and guidelines benefits from joined-up national or regional approaches and requires early engagement with policy makers to maximise the impact and sustainability of blended learning initiatives.

### Sharing resources and expertise

- PEBL identified significant potential for high quality teaching and learning resources to be shared and for networks to be established in East Africa to encourage collaboration and share expertise. However, ongoing barriers – such as a lack of clear rules around credit transfer, reputational concerns relating to academic quality in other institutions, and worries around intellectual property – prevent universities from using courses developed by others.
- Raising awareness among academics about the benefits of using creative commons licences and open educational resources (OERs) will encourage sharing of resources.

## Sustainability and scalability potential

- PEBL's tools and frameworks have wide applicability at national and institutional level across East Africa. The Commission for University Education (CUE) in Kenya has used them to inform its new policies and standards for blended learning in the wake of Covid-19 and learning from PEBL has fed into the development process for Uganda's National Digital Agenda led by the Ministry of Education.
- With the increased demand for online learning catalysed by Covid-19, PEBL's tools and frameworks have potential for applicability and scale-up to build more resilient higher education institutions and systems outside East Africa. With funding from the Government of Australia [PEBL West Africa](#) will put the learning from East Africa into practice and draw on the expertise of trained facilitators.
- The ACU and its partners are also developing a broader vision to implement a contextualised PEBL model in India and the Pacific Islands.

## Partners

The PEBL partnership was led by the Association of Commonwealth Universities (UK), working with Commission for University Education (Kenya), Commonwealth of Learning (Canada), Kenyatta University (Kenya), Makerere University (Uganda), Open University of Tanzania, State University of Zanzibar (Tanzania), Staff and Educational Development Association (UK), Strathmore University (Kenya), University of Edinburgh (UK), University of Rwanda, plus 18 'participant' universities in East Africa.

### Find out more

[View the PEBL summative evaluation report.](#)  
[Visit the PEBL profile on the SPHEIR website.](#)  
[Visit the PEBL profile on the Association of Commonwealth Universities website.](#)

# 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