Reflections on SPHEIR and development outcomes

Joseph Hoffman, SPHEIR Team Leader, February 2021.

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SPHEIR, the [Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform](#) programme, is a competitive grant scheme designed to help transform the quality, relevance, access and affordability of higher education in targeted low income countries. SPHEIR 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.

SPHEIR is based on partnerships – formal collaboration among public and private organisations to address higher education in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot. The programme supports [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.

This paper, by SPHEIR's Team Leader Joseph Hoffman, reflects on SPHEIR and development outcomes, prompted by recent research commissioned by the British Council.

1. Introduction

In October 2020, the British Council published an [evidence review](#) of the role of tertiary education in development in low- and lower middle-income countries (LLMICs).[1] Screening research since 2010, 170 studies from a total of 1,434 were selected for detailed review of the evidence of the relationship between tertiary education and one or more development outcomes.[2]

The evidence review identified four core functions of tertiary education – teaching and learning, innovation, engagement, and research – described as "*directly or indirectly, on their own or in combination*" contributing to nine development outcomes:

- Graduate skill and knowledge
- Enhanced professional knowledge and skill among all workers
- Economic growth
- Poverty reduction and development of sustainable livelihoods
- Equitable relationships
- New knowledge that contributes to technical and social innovation
- Strengthened and transformed institutions
- Strengthened basic education provision
- A strong and engaged civil society.

The evidence review makes valuable reading for anyone interested in the contribution of higher education to sustainable development, and prompted me to reflect on how SPHEIR contributes to these or other development outcomes.

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[1] '*The role of tertiary education in development: A rigorous review of the evidence*', Colleen Howell, Elaine Unterhalter and Moses Oketch, Centre for Education and International Development (CEID), UCL, Institute of Education, 2020.

[2] The review notes that "*development is understood in terms of economic and non-economic outcomes, and tertiary education as constituted by systems and institutions providing formal education beyond secondary school*".

2. SPHEIR impact on development

Impact on development is sought from all SPHEIR projects, with SPHEIR's programme-wide theory-of-change specifying at the impact level that "*higher education institutions contribute more effectively to economic development and growth, public institutions and civil society.*"[3]

Although the SPHEIR programme does not itself directly measure at the impact level of its theory of change, it does at the output and outcome levels, and it is at these levels that most, though not all, of the nine development outcomes used in the evidence review appear. Further insight on impact associated with the SPHEIR theory-of-change will be available when the programme's External Evaluator publishes its Mid-term Evaluation Report in early 2021.[4]

The British Council-supported evidence review provides an opportunity to look below the surface of the SPHEIR theory-of-change, and reflect on how individual projects are potentially contributing to one or more of the development outcomes identified. Three points are immediately striking:

1. Firstly, of the four core functions of tertiary education cited – teaching and learning, innovation, engagement, and research – all but the latter are applicable to the SPHEIR programme. SPHEIR projects focus on achieving an effect on *individuals* (teaching staff and ultimately students), and/or on *institutions* (a department or entire university), and/or on national higher education *systems* (all universities in a country).

    Although research is a core function of higher education, it is not part of the SPHEIR programme (other than research which projects may undertake as part of their respective summative evaluations). At the time of the programme's design, the decision not to fund research was based on a view that considerable attention from numerous funders was directed to supporting higher education research capacity, and less to supporting enhancement of the quality, relevance, access or affordability of higher education – in other words, to the educational delivery function of universities.[5]

    By way of added clarification, with one exception SPHEIR does not involve support to technical or vocational education and training (TVET), which is included in the evidence review's definition of tertiary education.

2. Secondly, the evidence review's caveat that contributions to development outcomes appear "*directly or indirectly, on their own or in combination*", is well-founded. For most SPHEIR projects, the development outcomes most apparently (directly or indirectly) relevant are 1, 2, 5 and 7 (graduate skill and knowledge, enhanced professional knowledge and skill among all workers, equitable relationships, and strengthened and transformed institutions).

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[3] SPHEIR uses a 'nested' theory-of change approach, designed to accommodate a variety of quite different reform projects, each with its own project-specific theory-of-change.

[4] The External Evaluator is a consortium of IPE Triple Line, Technopolis Group and the University of Bedfordshire, reporting independently to the FCDO.

[5] This paper provides a useful overview of research capacity building investment in Sub-Saharan Africa. Alex Ezeh and Jessie Lu, 2019. "Transforming the Institutional Landscape in Sub-Saharan Africa: Considerations for Leveraging Africa's Research Capacity to Achieve Socioeconomic Development," Center for Global Development Policy Paper 147, Washington, DC.

Possible contributions to other outcomes are present, though less visible, or at least less common.

3. Lastly, it is probably too strong to talk about SPHEIR projects *contributing* to development outcomes as even if measurable, it would be extremely difficult to discern impact on development during the life of the programme.

   Scalability is an important factor in the impact of educational reform on development. Most SPHEIR projects are championing three to five specific, mutually reinforcing reforms, aiming for sustained uptake by individuals and institutions directly involved in the project. For a higher education reform to 'move the dial' on a development outcome – for example, on a country's progress on 'poverty reduction and development of sustainable livelihoods', scalability is essential. A specific reform – student-centred pedagogy, for example – would need to be adopted across enough people and institutions, and sustained over a significant period of time, to appreciably influence the development outcome.

   For SPHEIR, it is probably more accurate to think about whether there is a potential *link* between a project and any development outcome identified in the evidence review.

I hasten to note that these, and the observations that follow, are my own views, and are not an attempt to speak for colleagues within SPHEIR, or for those involved in individual projects, who may have other thoughts. However, I have drawn on information in the reports and publications of various projects, and any errors or mischaracterisations are my own.
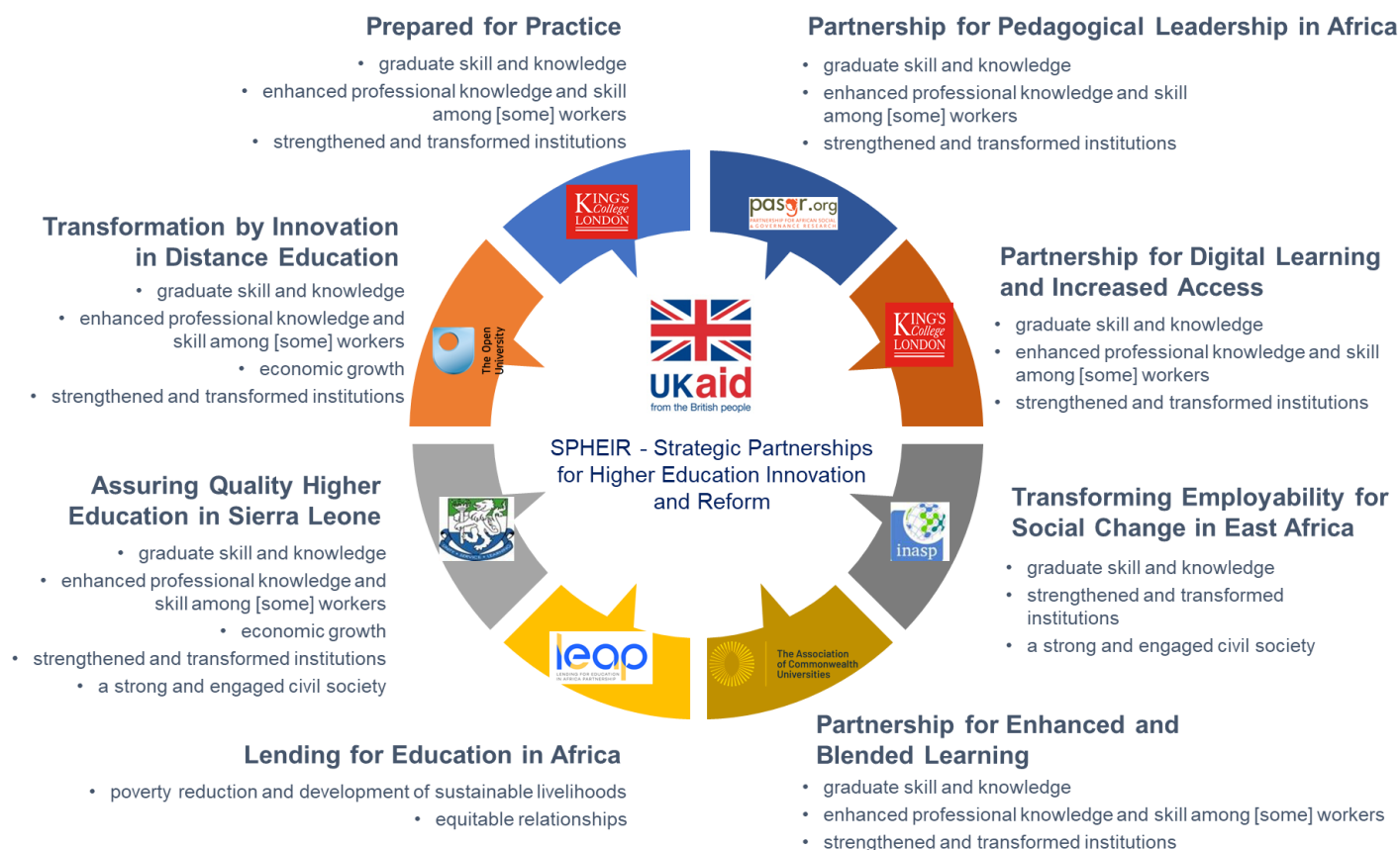
In looking at the eight projects supported by SPHEIR, I've tried to offer reflections at two levels:

  i. a visualisation of the entire SPHEIR portfolio's relationship with the development outcomes in the evidence review; and,

  ii. more detailed illustrative examples of the potential link between project activities and specific development outcomes, or 'themes', as framed in the evidence review.

The visualisation in the figure overleaf (on page 5) 'maps' SPHEIR projects against the development outcomes in the evidence review that they are most likely to be *linked* to. It illustrates only the most obvious potential linkages, whether direct or indirect, without any attempt to weigh or indicate the possible strength of the link or gauge its impact.

The most obvious point arising from the 'map' is the prevalence of projects with links to 'graduate skills and knowledge' and 'strengthened and transformed institutions', although how each project connects to these, or other development outcomes, varies significantly.

SPHEIR partnerships and development outcomes

Prepared for Practice
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- strengthened and transformed institutions

Partnership for Pedagogical Leadership in Africa
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- strengthened and transformed institutions

Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- economic growth
- strengthened and transformed institutions

Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- strengthened and transformed institutions

Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- economic growth
- strengthened and transformed institutions
- a strong and engaged civil society

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa
- graduate skill and knowledge
- strengthened and transformed institutions
- a strong and engaged civil society

Lending for Education in Africa
- poverty reduction and development of sustainable livelihoods
- equitable relationships

Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning
- graduate skill and knowledge
- enhanced professional knowledge and skill among [some] workers
- strengthened and transformed institutions

SPHEIR - Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

3. Evidence review themes and SPHEIR projects

To further illustrate, while avoiding an exhaustive project-by-project inventory of potential links to each development outcome, I've interpolated observations on specific SPHEIR projects into each of the main themes cited in the review's executive summary as emerging from the analysis of the evidence (each theme in blue and verbatim). Rather than being enumerative, only *some* projects are identified for each theme.

1. **Economic growth and enhanced earnings for graduates** are crucial development outcomes associated with tertiary education. Although some of the evidence highlights that aggregate economic growth is not well distributed and that the income benefits of participating in tertiary education tend to go to groups that are already established in dominant political and economic positions, the evidence as a whole points in a positive direction, associated with national economic growth, regional development initiatives, increased labour market opportunities and earnings for graduates, and skill enhancement that contributes to productivity.

Two projects immediately come to mind under this theme, for quite different reasons.

The _Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education_ (**TIDE**) project in Myanmar, with its focus on improving the quality of an _entire_ national distance education system (already serving over 500,000 students), reflects Myanmar's policy goal that a stronger and more accessible distance education system will support national development priorities, such as growth of a knowledge economy.

In the context of enhanced earnings for graduates, the _Lending for Education in Africa Partnership_ (**LEAP**) is the only SPHEIR project that actively monitors economic opportunities for its Fellows. LEAP is piloting a non-profit social lending fund that provides student financing to youth from low and middle-income backgrounds who cannot access conventional commercial loans, nor benefit from bursaries or scholarships. LEAP's curated choice of degree and TVET programmes in specific Kenyan institutions followed careful market analysis that includes graduate employability and income projections. Combined with targeting students from the bottom three wealth quintiles (62% from the bottom two quintiles, and 34% from the poorest quintile), this reflects LEAP's interest in enhancing potential employability and earnings for a cadre of graduates that, in Kenya, are 13 times _less likely_ to access higher education than students in the top quintile. Still a pilot, LEAP's intention is to expand to additional countries in Sub-Saharan Africa.[6]

2. Many studies in this review highlight a 'mismatch' or misalignment between **the skills and knowledge of graduates and the needs of the labour markets in LLMICs**. Although the nature and scope of this 'mismatch' may differ slightly across countries and regions, attention is often drawn to the curriculum within tertiary education institutions and the extent to which it is regarded as not adequately providing graduates with the skills and knowledge that are needed for their country's development.

Three SPHEIR projects stand out for their different approaches to addressing 'misalignment' between graduates' skills and knowledge and the labour market.

The ambition of the _Assuring Quality Higher Education_ (**AQHED**) project in Sierra Leone is to transform the quality of higher education in the entire country by incrementally moving all degree programmes to 'outcome-based education' (OBE), which means focusing on the knowledge/skills needs of graduates. AQHED's use of 'sector skills councils' (consultative groups of employers) is a major tool to accomplish this. Councils advise on the content of degree programmes to ensure they are better aligned with the realities of the working world, and the project is already moving beyond its initial focus on undergraduate programmes in electrical and electronic engineering, commerce, pharmacy and agriculture. The tools and processes used, including external and internal quality assurance, are now being replicated in additional degree programmes and institutions. Stakeholders identify gaps in curricula, comment on the relevance of specific technical content to jobs in the current labour market, and on the optimum learning progression of technical skills. This includes looking at general knowledge gaps observed in past graduates, such as problem-solving, numeracy, and communications, to inform how to better incorporate these skills into teaching.

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[6] LEAP is the only SPHEIR project that involves TVET as the business model: i) requires a blend of short and long programmes (i.e. typically two years for TVET and four for undergraduate) to be viable; and, ii) the financing need is similar.

The *Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa* (**TESCEA**) project supports universities, industries, communities and governments in Tanzania and Uganda to create a learning experience for students that fosters development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and practical learning beyond the classroom to improve graduate employability. With an eye on enhanced opportunities for graduates, TESCEA takes a broad view of employability and the labour market, encompassing community service and 'social entrepreneurship', in order to equip students for futures that may not necessarily include conventional employment. Partner universities have also developed models for student and faculty placement in employer and community settings intended, in effect, to *avoid* 'misalignment' by strengthening the university's understanding of the labour market environment. Regrettably, Covid-19 restrictions have impeded this activity.

Prepared for Practice (**PfP**) in Somaliland, provides a compelling sector-specific illustration of addressing misalignment in skills and knowledge of graduates – in PfP's case, of graduating health practitioners (midwives, nurses and doctors). The "mismatch or misalignment" related to these professions has been evident in the graduates' lack of preparedness for practice. Practical experience, such as ward rotations in hospitals, helps students develop clinical skills needed when they enter the health labour market. Faculty training, called 'health professions education', focuses on educational practice, and strengthening pedagogy and assessment, and is explicitly concerned with ensuring that students graduate with the skills and knowledge needed for Somaliland's health sector. PfP is also working with policy bodies on a national medical curriculum that will help to build an effective health system in a resource-constrained environment; assisting Somaliland to address a key sustainable development goal, SDG 3 (*ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*), itself a key development outcome not included within the scope of the evidence review.

3. **Poverty reduction** does not present as a directly intended outcome of tertiary education. However, there is some evidence to show that participating in tertiary education may increase lifetime earnings or entrepreneurial activities of groups who were born poor. A small body of evidence shows that under certain conditions tertiary education's capacity to provide technological or managerial support can be oriented to addressing aspects of poverty, which can have beneficial results.

4. The evidence that provides insight into the role of tertiary education in the **creation of equitable relationships** suggests that tertiary education contributes positively in a number of different ways to enhancing quality of life, both for those who participate in it and through the influence of its graduates. However, the evidence also suggests that there are a number of ways in which tertiary education may maintain hierarchies and exclusions, and may be complicit in relations of violence, thus reinforcing or deepening existing inequalities.

In the context of SPHEIR, interest in creating equitable relations is exhibited in the way that projects include equity as one of five 'value-for-money (VfM) domains in their reporting. Each project identifies activities and management processes that demonstrate its efforts to promote equity in and through its respective activities. How equity is promoted is remarkably varied, for example by actions supporting gender-responsive curriculum and pedagogy (TESCEA and AQHED), to participation of female teaching staff in professional development (PEDAL), and by targeting specific vulnerable beneficiaries as noted below.

Two projects, LEAP and the [Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access](#) (**PADILEIA**), are dealing with aspects of poverty reduction and inequitable relationships, which is why I've grouped these two themes together.

While not a poverty-reduction initiative per se, PADILEIA, by producing and delivering blended higher education programmes to Syrian refugees and disadvantaged local students in Jordan and Lebanon, is reaching financially disadvantaged populations. By broadening access to high-quality educational programmes, it provides refugee students, a population who are victims of a particular form of inequity, with a foundation for further participation in higher education, partially mitigating the impact of displacement on their lifetime earnings and/or future entrepreneurial opportunities.

LEAP's targeting of higher education access for students from lower wealth quintiles has already been mentioned, but the implications for poverty reduction are worth underscoring. Almost half of all Fellows supported are the first in their family to attend tertiary education; 28% are from a household where neither parent/guardian completed secondary school; 10% are orphans, and an additional 9% have only one parent; 60% are from households where neither parent/guardian is formally employed; 6% have a disability; and, 4% have children of their own to support. LEAP emphasises the value of higher education "*as a lever for upward social mobility*" – youth whose parents complete at least secondary school are ten times more likely to pursue a higher education than those whose parents did not.[7]

Both of the examples above also illustrate the issues associated with scalability mentioned earlier. It is clear that there are positive outcomes for individuals (and their families) associated with both PADILEIA and LEAP. The reforms (educational resources for refugees or university completion for poorer students who would not 'normally' have access to higher education) indirectly address inequality and poverty. However, both reforms would need to be available on a considerably larger scale if a development outcome for a country or society was to be noticeable. This is in no way meant to imply that efforts on the scale undertaken by each project do not have merit, or that PADILEIA or LEAP are not supporting development, especially in combination with other initiatives.

5. **Technological and social innovation** do not currently happen at optimum in LLMICs because there is often poor connectivity between tertiary education and the knowledge needs of a country, community or society, be they in relation to health, environmental problems, industrial development, or enhancement of ICT. The evidence considered in this review shows mixed outcomes, with missed opportunities to connect well and align inputs, outputs and processes.

Based on the above description of this theme, it is logical that the SPHEIR projects that would most likely relate to it will be those focused on an entire country, and involve activities chosen specifically to align higher education reforms with formally identified national knowledge needs. Two SPHEIR projects are salient examples.

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[7] World Bank. 2014. Montenegro, Claudio & Patrinos, Harry. *Comparable Estimates of Returns to Schooling Around the World*. Note: private returns to education are typically defined as the estimated proportional increase in an individual's labour market earnings from each additional year of schooling completed, and World Bank. 2017. Darvas, et al. *Sharing Higher Education's Promise beyond the Few in Sub-Saharan Africa*. The private rate of return to higher education worldwide is estimated at 15% for each additional year of education, with even higher returns in low- and middle-income countries.

As already mentioned under theme #1 (economic growth etc.), TIDE's design and activities are carefully aligned with the Myanmar government's *National Education Strategic Plan 2016–21*, and its policy goal of ensuring students have '*equitable access to a world-class higher education system, leading to better opportunities for employment and significant contributions to a knowledge-based economy*'. The project has also been able to contribute to development of the Myanmar Economic Resilience and Reform Plan, that will be used to guide economic policies over the post-pandemic years.

Along similar lines, AQHED has been careful to maintain alignment with Sierra Leone's *Medium-term National Development Plan (2019–2023),* which prioritises improving "*support to the teaching of science, technology, and innovation at universities and polytechnics*". Connectivity between tertiary education and national knowledge needs is visible in the project's choice of its four 'clusters' – STEM, Health, Management and Agriculture – from which specific degree programmes are selected for reform, and 'anchor' and 'waterfall' institutions identified. It is also mirrored in the project's establishment of a High-Level Task Force involving key national bodies and governmental representatives (including the Ministry for Technical and Higher Education).

6. The evidence shows that tertiary education's role in **strengthening basic education** is primarily enacted through the provision of teacher education programmes and thus through its teaching and learning function. The evidence shows, however, that misalignment can exist between these programmes and teachers' practices in the classroom. This 'mismatch' is shaped by both perceived curriculum weaknesses and complex contextual factors that hinder the translation of what is learnt into meaningful practice.

SPHEIR's calls-for-proposals sought projects that would transform the quality, relevance, access and affordability of higher education, without prescribing any particular discipline or higher education domain. The eight projects selected deal with a large array of degree programmes, and involve activities such as pedagogical development, curriculum reform, blended learning, online delivery, quality assurance, equity, and others. As it happens, none of the projects involve training of basic education teachers and, in fact, very few of the more than 275 proposals received in response to the SPHEIR calls included a focus on basic education.

However, linkages often emerge organically. The Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PEDAL) project (described in more detail under the next development outcome) and the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development have explored the potential application of PEDAL's pedagogical training for teaching staff in primary and secondary schools, as well as TVET institutions. This is not formally part of the SPHEIR project activities but illustrates how tools and practices designed to strengthen higher education are potentially adaptable for strengthening basic education.

7. Tertiary education's role in **enhancing professional knowledge, understanding and skill** happens primarily through the teaching and learning functions of higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, impacting across a range of sectors and involving a range of programmes and initiatives at different levels of post-secondary education. On the one hand, the evidence points to positive outcomes, mainly through innovative initiatives to enhance particular kinds of professional knowledge and skill, emphasising the importance of tertiary education's role in the development of professional capabilities across LLMICs. However, it is also clear that a range of contextual factors undermine the capacity of tertiary education systems to play this role effectively.

In addition to AQHED (Sierra Leone), PfP (Somaliland), TESCEA (Uganda and Tanzania), and TIDE (Myanmar), which have already been described, two additional SPHEIR projects are strongly connected with this development outcome.

PEDAL's core goal is to enhance teaching and learning in African universities through a unique pedagogical training programme that includes dynamic teaching practices, like flipped classroom method, simulation and role play, case method and e-cases (interactive online case studies for students). PEDAL deals with a broad and growing number of lecturers and universities (as well as disciplines) across Africa, so far including collaboration with 111 departments in its five partner universities, and 310 departments in non-partner universities across the region. Collaboration also occurs with regional institutions like the Association of African Universities through AAUTV, other SPHEIR projects like PEBL (below), and, most recently, with the University of Nairobi's Centre for Pedagogy and Andragogy.

The Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) project is helping 23 East African universities develop high-quality blended learning courses, from a remarkably wide variety of undergraduate and graduate programmes. Once a course is redesigned, the university shares course content with other institutions through an open educational resources platform. Educational developers and teaching staff receive technical capacity building in creating blended learning courses. Internal quality assurance (QA) staff in universities and those in national accreditation bodies also receive training in QA practices, use of a QA rubric, and an institutional review tool for QA in blended learning.

Under this development outcome, it also worth noting that enhancing professional knowledge and skills in some SPHEIR projects has had unintended positive effects in the context of Covid-19. Among a number of examples reported is PADILEIA – with its two university partners, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, and Al al-Bayt University in Jordan. Since its inception, the project has been trying to address scepticism, prevalent in the region including among educators, about the quality of online learning. As a result of their involvement in PADILEIA's online activities, teaching staff at Al al-Bayt University have been able to play a key role in helping the entire university embrace online delivery as it adapts in the face of Covid-19.

8. The role of tertiary education in **strengthening and transforming institutions** is strongly enabled by its participation within collaborative relationships and partnerships that are facilitated via its teaching and learning and engagement functions. However, a range of broader national and global inequalities affect the functioning of institutions, creating complex processes of change that need to be managed and grappled with.

All eight SPHEIR projects are actively concerned with strengthening and transforming higher education institutions and, as highlighted below, collaborative relationships take many forms:

• All projects involve international collaboration, in that the composition of each SPHEIR partnership includes organisations from the targeted country or countries, and higher education institutions and other organisations from the UK, Europe, and North America.

• Across the portfolio, the variety of institutions involved in partnerships is extensive, including: universities, teaching hospitals, TVET institutions, ministries responsible for higher education, higher education regulatory bodies and QA agencies, sector ministries, staff associations, regional

bodies, fintech operators, impact investors, and a wide range and number of non-governmental organisations specialising in research, gender and capacity building.

- Half of the portfolio consists of projects focusing on institutional strengthening and transformation in a *single* country (Myanmar, Somaliland, Kenya, Sierra Leone). The other half involves institutional transformation across *multiple* countries (PEDAL, PEBL, TESCEA, PADILEIA).

- Two projects (PfP and PEDAL) were built on the foundation of an earlier institutional-strengthening collaboration, and one (PEBL) on a relationship among formal institutional members of the Association of Commonwealth Universities.

- Two partnerships were conceived and are led by Southern institutions (AQHED and PEDAL), five by a university or an association of universities (AQHED, TIDE, PfP, PADILEIA, PEBL), and one by an international NGO (TESCEA).

- LEAP is led by a private firm and involves collaboration among a mix of NGOs and private firms in addition to its relationship with the higher education institutions attended by its supported students, and its relationships with public and private impact investors.

- All SPHEIR projects have evolved to actively expand collaboration to include higher education institutions that were not formally involved in the project at the outset.

Overarchingly, SPHEIR's deliberate focus is on using collaborative partnerships as *the* instrument through which complex change and sustainability is achieved – i.e. "*collaboration among public and private organisations to address higher education in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot*". An additional benefit is that the collaboration among all the organisations involved strengthens institutions' experience and capacity for future collaboration beyond SPHEIR.

9. Although drawing from a small body of literature, the evidence in this review shows that tertiary education plays (or has the potential to play) a very important role in **strengthening and building the capacity of a vibrant and engaged civil society**. Change is enabled via the kinds of knowledge and skills that graduates acquire and by the 'space' that institutions provide for forms of engagement and relationship building, especially in the context of strengthening and building democracy. However, the evidence also shows that tertiary education's relationship with civil society often involves navigating complex processes and conflicting influences, all of which institutions and systems are required to manage.

TESCEA and AQHED stand out as examples of purposeful engagement with civil society. The former's design includes strengthening the ability of civil society organisations and universities to collaborate, and connecting universities to community groups and social entrepreneurs. The latter includes a national NGO advocating gender parity. It, as well as the lead partner of TESCEA, play a major role in embedding gender-responsive curriculum and pedagogy.

It's also worth noting that PADILEIA extensively engages with civil society organisations and international agencies in the context of outreach to refugee communities and efforts to join up refugee services as comprehensively as possible. As well, PfP's unprecedented mobilisation of volunteers from the UK's health profession, to provide on-site and remote support to health colleagues in Somaliland, demonstrates another form (and benefit) of engaged civil society.

4. Closing reflections

The evidence review concludes with a number of useful recommendations (p. 46), primarily research-oriented, some of which are noted below in abbreviated form:

- Initiating programmes and projects that comprise research, policy dialogue and practice initiatives.
- Supporting more 'joined-up' and reflective processes of discussion and review of research, policy and practice between tertiary education and other sectors.
- Developing in partnership with tertiary institutions and researchers in LLMICs a comprehensive research programme aimed at building a strong evidence base to inform policy and practice.
- Promoting the use of a wide range of research methods for studying the relationship between tertiary education and development outcomes.
- Strengthening research capacity of LLMICs through the development of strong and sustainable collaborative research partnerships and networks.
- Building and supporting projects, processes and systems for the effective dissemination of research findings on the role of tertiary education in the development of LLMICs.

Reflecting on SPHEIR, among the areas for research that could help guide future reform efforts and the investment in reform by national governments and funders, would be a comparative study of different types of reforms. Across the SPHEIR portfolio five significant activities are common, taking slightly (or dramatically) different forms.
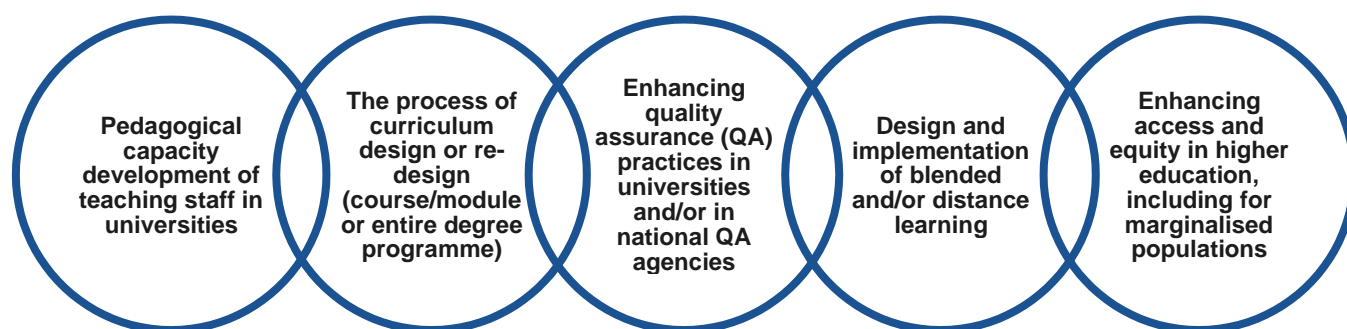
Research that would shed light on the comparative impact, optimum sequencing or prioritisation of these types of reform, would be useful in designing future large-scale programmes like SPHEIR, in addition to guiding more granular design, implementation, and funding decisions, especially for institutions where resources are limited. Combined with research related to development outcomes as suggested in the review, this would provide valuable knowledge to the dedicated people involved in SPHEIR's projects, and those engaged with other higher education reform efforts.

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