Varieties of employer engagement and higher education transformation in SPHEIR

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Introduction

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.

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. Information on these projects can be found on the SPHEIR partnership profile pages.

In November 2019, SPHEIR partnerships met to share their experience of engaging employers for a range of purposes, and to contribute to a growing body of ideas on such practices across the SPHEIR portfolio. From the 2019 webinar and subsequent project reports, it is clear that employer engagement in SPHEIR takes a variety of forms, often within the same project, including:

- Input into curriculum design

- Strengthening the relationship between the university and community

- Employer interaction with students and academic staff

- Influencing the university as an employer.

Framing employer engagement in SPHEIR

Transforming higher education, which is at the heart of SPHEIR, implies that something will be better in the higher education environment after a SPHEIR project than it was before. That may be an effect on individuals (teaching staff and ultimately students), on institutions (a department or entire university), or on a national higher education system (all universities in a country). The examples offered in this paper show how employer engagement is contributing to the transformation sought by each SPHEIR project.

Globally, increasing attention is being given to how universities should enhance graduate employability, and engaging employers is often viewed in this context. Although it is risky to generalise about universities in a single country let alone globally, universities are often perceived as insular and disconnected from the organisations that ultimately employ their graduates. Surveys and research on employers' views of higher education (including studies done by the British Council) consistently identify concerns that graduates do not have the skills that employers are looking for. Enhancing graduate employability is unlikely to be fruitful without communication between academia and the employer community.

Links between universities and employers vary greatly based on many factors, including the nature and level of degree programmes. In many of the countries where SPHEIR projects operate, even occupationally-specific degree programmes - such as pharmacy or engineering - often have weak links to their obvious employer constituency. Degree programmes that are occupationally-agnostic, such as

some in the humanities, are even less likely to be connected with employers. In many countries, graduates will have to create their own livelihood opportunities because prospects for conventional employment are limited, and university education will need to help graduates prepare for this form of 'employability' as well. The impact of Covid-19 is likely to make the prospects for both conventional employment and self-employment even more challenging for graduates in the coming years[1].

Few proposals submitted to SPHEIR focused primarily on enhancing engagement with employers. The SPHEIR programme avoided being prescriptive about what kinds of reforms grant applicants should propose, other than requiring that they seek to address quality, relevance, access or affordability of higher education (acknowledging that proposals would tend to focus on some aspects more than others). However, all applicants – and therefore all the projects described in this paper – were expected to 'engage private and public employers as a dimension of their proposal'. SPHEIR wanted each partnership to facilitate university-employer engagement in the context of its proposed activities and objectives. This set the stage for the varieties of employer engagement now visible across the portfolio.

Input into curriculum design

The most common variety of employer engagement within the SPHEIR portfolio (seen in seven of the eight SPHEIR projects), relates to employers' input into curriculum design of one form or another. In all cases, projects have obtained views from employers and other stakeholders external to the university on the generic skills and competencies desired from graduates. Projects dealing with the design of occupationally-specific degree programmes have also sought views on specific technical competencies desired from graduates. In a few cases, employer engagement also involved an employer group or sector body because of its authority to approve curriculum or accredit/license graduates.

Increasing students' generic competencies, such as analytical thinking, communications or problem-solving skills, as a way to enhancing graduate employability, is illustrated by the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project. To answer questions about what skills employers seek in graduates, TESCEA looked comprehensively at available research and literature in order to integrate these views into the redesign of curricula at partner universities in Tanzania and Uganda. This process was enriched and complemented by stakeholder consultations in both countries. It also led to TESCEA's development of a 'skills matrix', integrated into the methodology for course redesign workshops to facilitate development of course-level outcomes and, at the lesson-planning level, to help teachers include more granular skills, abilities and dispositions into the class-level learning outcomes. The skills matrix and lessons from TESCEA's work provide further useful information.

Engagement involving occupationally-specific degree programmes is also illustrated by the various health professions programmes in Prepared for Practice (PfP) in Somaliland, and by the undergraduate electric and electronic engineering, commerce, pharmacy and agricultural programmes in the Assuring Quality Higher Education (AQHED) project in Sierra Leone. In these instances, new or revised curriculum was informed by very specific employer groups.

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[1] The term 'conventional' is used to avoid the use of 'formal' and 'informal' distinctions in labour market participation. In economics, this distinction is relevant, but in the context of graduate pathways, self-employment is not necessarily synonymous with 'informal' employment.

In the case of PfP, rather than a lack of jobs for health practitioners (mid-wives, nurses and doctors), the 'employability gap' is manifested by lack of their preparedness for practice. The project has focused on ensuring that practical experience, such as ward rotations in hospitals, is central to students being able to develop the clinical skills they will need when they enter the workplace. In addition to PfP's own course content and clinical supervision initiatives, it has designed and delivered training that focuses on educational practice, and strengthening pedagogy and assessment in health faculties, called 'health professions education'.

Employers of health professionals in Somaliland include public and private clinics and hospitals. Developing and delivering course content through face-to-face and online methods involved consultations with these employers, as well as with professionals in the UK's National Health Service (itself a major employer of medical practitioners). More broadly, the project has been engaging public and private stakeholders in Somaliland as part of the development of a national medical curriculum. For example, academic staff, employers and students were brought together in small working groups to define core curriculum content in order to address the primary clinical problems encountered in Somaliland.

AQHED in Sierra Leone illustrates both the potential and challenges of engaging employers on multiple fronts. The project has created 'sector skills councils' – essentially consultative groups of employers – to advise on the content of degree programmes to ensure they are better aligned with the realities of the working world. Sector councils are now contributing to curriculum design related to electrical and electronic engineering, commerce, pharmacy and agricultural degree programmes.

The input received has proven immensely valuable in identifying gaps in current curricula and in the skill sets of past graduates. For some degree programmes, like electrical engineering, employers shared views on the relevance of specific technical content to jobs in the current market, and views on the optimum learning progression of technical skills. In others, like the commerce programme, employers have focused on general knowledge gaps observed in past graduates, such as problem-solving, communications, and numeracy, to inform how development of these skills might be better incorporated into teaching.

AQHED has documented many of the challenges encountered and lessons learned, for example, finding ways to align the schedules of employer representatives for group discussions, which, pre-Covid, was the project's preferred mode of engagement. Bringing multiple employers into a group discussion with teaching staff was found to be more valuable than obtaining input in parallel through individual meetings. The project team reports that it is moving from only engaging 'future potential employers' towards a more holistic approach that combines the employer perspective with that of stakeholders such as students and NGOs. Sector councils also provide an avenue for building stakeholder awareness and support for gender responsive content and pedagogy.

The AQHED project team has noted that the practice of employer engagement for this purpose is relatively new for universities in Sierra Leone. The project's ambition is to transform the quality of higher education in the entire country by progressively moving all degree programmes to an 'outcome-based education' (OBE) model, and the initial degree programmes being redesigned under the project are serving as exemplars of OBE. Similarly, engagement practices are being replicated as a growing

number of universities and degree programmes become part of this cascading transformational process. What commenced as a relatively narrow concern with short-term curriculum objectives, is now evolving towards a broader process, embedded in each university, to engage external stakeholders in a variety of ways such as job fairs, visiting lecturers, and placement opportunities.

Another SPHEIR project with similar aspirations for transformation of an entire national higher education system takes a somewhat different approach. The Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE) project in Myanmar is focused on improving the quality of distance education in a system that already serves over 500,000 students, but not to the standard of quality desired by Myanmar policy leaders and educators. Like AQHED in Sierra Leone, part of TIDE's transformational approach involves use of an exemplar, in this case, environmental science disciplines, through enhancing delivery of 'Education for Environment and Sustainable Development' (EfESD) related curriculum.

TIDE's employer engagement has so far been narrowly targeted but technically deep, focusing on creating a competency framework/code of conduct for EfESD that outlines the skills and competency requirements for graduates who will eventually perform environmental impact assessments (EIA) in Myanmar. This example of occupationally-oriented engagement started with the Myanmar Environment Assessment Association leading to production of an EIA framework. The next step will be to bring together key actors from the Myanmar Environmental Conservation Department, EIA firms and practitioners, academics and higher education officials, to advance professionalisation of the EIA process and move the EIA competency framework forward. TIDE reports that a major goal of its engagement has been to 'reconcile what employers are looking for from new graduates and where graduates currently are'. The choice to focus initially on a fairly narrow area of professional activity is intended to demonstrate the value of a process which is relatively unfamiliar to both educators and employers in Myanmar.

The Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning (PEBL) illustrates how employer engagement can contribute to curriculum design of individual courses/modules rather than entire degree programmes. Its approach also underscores the role played by quality assurance (QA) in situating employer engagement within the curriculum development process. PEBL is helping East African universities develop level high quality blended learning courses, covering a remarkably wide variety of undergraduate and graduate programmes. Once a course is redesigned for blended learning, the university shares course content with other institutions through an open educational resources (OER) platform. Educational developers and teaching staff receive technical capacity building in creating blended learning courses. Internal QA staff in universities (IQA) and those in national accreditation bodies (external or EQA) also receive training in QA practices provided by the Commonwealth of Learning, one of the PEBL project partners.

To enhance the quality assurance supports in PEBL, the Commonwealth of Learning developed a rubric, and an institutional review tool for QA in blended learning. Both were developed with inputs from the 23 institutions that are part of the PEBL network, along with the project's technical partners, such as Kenya's Commission for University Education, the Staff and Educational Development Association, and the University of Edinburgh.

It is noteworthy that a number of the African QA bodies involved in PEBL have separately been engaged in a continental process, the 'Harmonisation of African Higher Education Quality Assurance and

Accreditation Initiative' (HAQAA). Guidelines for engagement of employers are included in HAQAA's standards for independent evaluation and those for design, approval, monitoring and evaluation of study programmes.

AQHED also has a QA component that includes standards for employer engagement. The project has created a two-volume curriculum review tool kit which sets out the place of employer engagement in curriculum reform. It is now being used by the national regulatory body in Sierra Leone, the Tertiary Education Commission, which is a project partner, and several universities have recently mandated its use by departments other than those directly involved in the project.

Another SPHEIR project involved in curriculum design is the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA). It illustrates the importance of attention to employability and creativity in stakeholder engagement in the context of higher education for refugee populations. PADILEIA produces and delivers blended higher education programmes to Syrian refugees and disadvantaged local students in Jordan and Lebanon. The partnership aims to broaden access to high-quality educational programmes, provide a foundation for further participation in higher education, and prepare refugee students for a hopefully less uncertain future.

PADILEIA operates in an environment where work rights for Syrian refugees is a sensitive issue and where labour market restrictions exist. It has found, however, that students are keenly aware of career paths, the job market and its regulations, and of possible pathways to employment, in addition to their own academic desires and inclinations. The partnership strongly believes that higher education should respond to individual inclinations and students' own sense of agency and future.

The project has found innovative ways to inform course design to enhance opportunities for employment and community service within refugee and local communities. For example, KIRON, one of the PADILEIA partners, worked with the Humanitarian Leadership Academy to simplify the social work curriculum for students within Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan; enabling students with low levels of English to find meaningful employment while they upgraded their English to be able to study onwards in PADILEIA offerings. Students have the option of taking the social work courses and advancing with certificates recognised within the camp. With a similar goal, Al al-Bayt University, a Jordanian partner, has significantly tweaked its foundation course to become more 'labour market focused' by emphasising the computer skills aspects of their curriculum. This has shown that even within a restrictive labour market it is possible to find ways to address career pathways and employability, such as by enabling students to become self-employed and offer their services internationally, using just laptops and minimal resources.

Strengthening the relationship between the university and the community

In addition to engagement around curriculum reform or delivery, some SPHEIR projects use a broad definition of 'employer' that encompasses the university's relationship with the community – a constituency that includes the private sector, community organisations, public bodies (including ministries and national commissions for higher education), and the local business/social enterprise start-up ecosystem.

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) is working with partners in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, to support universities, industries, communities and government to create a learning experience for students that fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and allows for practical learning beyond the classroom to improve graduate employability. TESCEA has been especially purposeful in taking a broad view of engagement that encompasses 'social entrepreneurs' and how they too can help equip students for their post-university journey, which may not include conventional employment. Ashoka East Africa, one of the project partners, describes this 'ecosystemic' approach.

One of TESCEA's core activities is fostering Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs) for each of its four partner universities, to connect them with local and national stakeholders including employers. The JAGs now meet on a regular basis, although Covid-19 has triggered efforts to move this process online. Over time, the project has seen each JAG grow in membership, scale and relevance. For example, the JAG at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania now includes senior members from public institutions with national influence, such as the Commission for Science and Technology, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, and the Tanzania Commission for Universities. It also interacts with senior members from the Confederation of Tanzania Industries and the Association of Tanzanian Employers. The JAG at Uganda Martyrs University has a committee revising the university's statutes to ensure that there is more community and industry representation on relevant committees and councils. The JAG meeting with the university's technical steering group to discuss course redesign is described here.

Gulu University, another TESCEA partner, further illustrates how the role and membership of a JAG can reflect the priorities of the university. Its JAG includes professionals from medicine, agriculture and business, because its course redesign pilots are focused on these areas. This blog from Gulu describes the contribution of its JAG to the university and to curriculum design.

It is noteworthy that AQHED in Sierra Leone started employer engagement with a narrow focus on specific curriculum redesign before moving towards other forms stakeholder engagement; while TESCEA started broad, with its JAGs now moving towards more granular input on curriculum reform. This suggests that it may not matter where a university starts in its effort to enhance employer engagement, as one step will likely lead to others.

In a different example of building sustainable relations between universities and the community, in line with its targeted focus on the health sector in Somaliland, PfP has engaged health education stakeholders, including government ministries, public and private sector employers, in efforts to develop a national medical education policy. A medical education taskforce is the primary instrument for this engagement.

The one SPHEIR project that is not directly involved with the delivery of curriculum has nonetheless invested time and attention to engaging employers for very different purposes. The Lending for Education in Africa Partnership (LEAP) is 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 – the 'missing middle' of higher education finance.

LEAP financing is available for a select number of degree and TVET programmes offered by specific institutions in Kenya (with the objective of expansion to Uganda and other countries in the region). The

institutions and programmes are chosen following careful market analysis to assess perceived quality of programmes, graduate employability data, and university reputation, all of which was informed by consultation with employers. LEAP has also created opportunities that bring universities, colleges, employers, policy makers and other stakeholders together for high-level dialogue on the strategic direction of higher education reform in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Although LEAP does not directly engage employers in connection with its students, it creatively utilised volunteer MBA students from Yale University to probe employer engagement practices. This took the form of primary and secondary research looking across twelve countries (three in Africa) to obtain information on best practices for career services professionals to 'upskill their students and build robust partnerships with employers, alumni, and broader academic institutions'. The review looked at student-facing practices, involving the typical student journey of early, mid, and late-tenure students in universities and TVET institutions; as well as internal and external partnerships, such as partnerships for career services, or with academic departments and alumni. The findings are being shared with LEAP's collaborating education providers to aid their efforts to strengthen career services offered to all students, not only those supported through LEAP financing.

Employer interaction with students and academic staff

Some projects have tried to encourage direct interaction between employers and students and/or teaching staff. The Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PedaL) project's core goal is to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in African universities through a unique pedagogical training programme. Exposure to new pedagogical approaches, like case method teaching, helps teaching staff develop strategies and practices for obtaining employer input into course content and delivery, such as guest lectures, contributing content to e-cases (interactive online case studies for students). PedaL deals with a broad and growing number of lecturers and universities (as well as disciplines), to transform teaching practices across Africa. Like some other partnerships, it also thinks in terms of stakeholders rather than employers, and includes graduates, civil society, governments, and private sector associations to inform design of training for teaching staff.

Both PEBL and PedaL are similar in that they focus on building the capacity of individual teaching staff to enhance the content and delivery of the courses they teach. PEBL does this in the context of redesigning individual courses for a blended learning format subsequently made available through OER; while PedaL does it through pedagogical training and assisting teaching staff to apply learned practices in redesigning their own courses, then sharing content and experience with peers through its own learning management system.

In addition to selectively reforming specific courses to enhance graduate employability, TESCEA's universities have also engaged several guest speakers in classes and at campus events. It is in the process of signing agreements with different organisations and companies to secure further engagement and internship opportunities for their students.

From an employer engagement perspective, all three of the projects focus on enabling teaching staff to re-design individual courses/modules, which has both obvious benefits but also some potential limitations. Engaging employers (or other external stakeholders) to inform curriculum is challenging for

an individual lecturer to arrange on a course-by-course basis. Employers are more likely to be reached where there is an institutional mechanism in place for doing so, such as TESCEA's JAGs, or the sector skills councils in AQHED.

TESECA also has an interest in exposing academic staff to the world of work outside the university environment. This could help address a common enough dilemma - those who teach occupationally-oriented degree programmes may over time lose touch with how those occupations have evolved. Moreover, many teaching staff enter university employment direct from their own graduate student journey, and have had little, if any, direct experience in the labour market or with self-employment, yet are expected to prepare students for these eventualities. TESCEA's plan for short placements of academic staff with employers was intended to test whether such exposure would enhance teaching and learning. However, Covid-19 restrictions may make this difficult to implement in the time remaining in the project.

Although, strictly speaking, not an example of engaging national employers, PfP has been linking volunteers from UK employers with expertise in university administration with administrative counterparts in Somaliland. PfP is now adapting these activities as it has been challenging finding volunteers with suitable administration experience who are also familiar with low income countries or teaching.

Influencing the university as an employer

When thinking about engaging employers, it is easy to overlook that universities are themselves large employers, as are the government ministries and regulatory bodies that set higher education policy.

Two SPHEIR partnerships, PedaL and TESCEA, purposefully think in terms of engaging universities as employers, recognising that the reforms being championed by the projects are dependent on the university as an employer adopting them. Influencing universities is often characterised as policy engagement, but when the issues are concerned with the actions of the university as an employer, the boundary between 'policy' and 'employer' engagement is blurred.

Although PADILEIA's focus is on access to higher education for Syrian refugees, with its two university partners, the American University of Beirut in Lebanon, and Al al-Bayt University in Jordan, it has tried to address scepticism prevalent in the region regarding the potential quality of online learning: scepticism which is shared by public and private sector employers, as well as regulators and indeed some educators. The project's effort to change this has had some interesting effects. Al al-Bayt University reports that as a result of involvement in PADILEIA, it has been much more resilient as an institution in coping with Covid-19, helping the entire university embrace and adapt to the transition to online delivery.

The university-as-employer perspective is probably relevant to most projects, even if not expressly acknowledged. Whether changing teaching practices or adopting new tools and/or methods like curriculum reform templates or QA standards, at some point sustainable transformation will rest on a university as an employer modifying its financial, administrative and/or academic policies. Like any large employer, change is neither simple nor quick, and thinking about universities (or for that matter higher education regulatory bodies) as an employer can be strategically useful in sustaining reform efforts.

Conclusions

As is evident across the SPHEIR portfolio, employer engagement is nuanced and varied in terms of approach and outcomes. In some environments, 'employment' in the context of conventional jobs is very limited and this underscores the merits of taking a broader view of 'employer' that includes the public sector, community, social entrepreneurs and others to enhance exposure to self-employment and community service experiences.

The varieties of employer engagement visible in SPHEIR can be viewed against a backdrop of global trends in higher education that will have profound consequences, regardless of how successful each SPHEIR project proves to be. Two are especially noteworthy: the impact of Covid-19 on the functioning and financing of higher education institutions; and, an emerging emphasis on graduate employability as a metric and a defining feature of university education. Both are now unavoidably interconnected.

Across all SPHEIR projects, Covid-19 has interrupted not only academic delivery, but activities that traditionally involve face-to-face contact, including capacity building of academic staff, and employer engagement. Activities like consulting on curriculum design or advisory group meetings are potentially adaptable for online engagement, but visiting lecturers, student placements, and job fairs are not as obviously adaptable while Covid-19 persists. Nor is online engagement uniformly accessible due to barriers such as stable power or reliable, reasonably priced internet and data services. These can be challenges for universities, employers as well as students. The mid to longer term economic impact of Covid-19 will make graduate employment of any kind more challenging, even where mechanisms for engaging employers are already in place.

A rich literature is available on employer engagement internationally, which among other things indicates that the approaches pursued by SPHEIR partnerships are part of a spectrum of practices that are amenable to adaptation, scaling and comparative research. A few of the more interesting resources are provided below:

- An overview of emerging practice in engagement between higher education and employers, based on an analysis of published reports arising from reviews by the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

- A UK summary of findings from ten case studies of how higher education institutions are developing and promoting strategies for engaging with employers.

- From the US, a guidebook for colleges on building partnerships with business and industry.

- A recent blog intriguingly titled 'Calling everyone working in employer engagement in higher education'.

In addition, two sources relevant to employer engagement in higher education in developing countries and Africa are from the World Bank's International Finance Corporation, and the British Council's own research on graduate employability in Africa.