



SPHEIR
Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

Reflections on SPHEIR's approach to promoting gender equality and social inclusion in and through higher education

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SPHEIR programme management:



The [Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform](#) programme (SPHEIR) was a competitive grant scheme designed to transform the quality, relevance, scale, access and affordability of higher education in targeted low-income countries. Funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and managed by a consortium led by the British Council in association with PricewaterhouseCoopers and Universities UK International, it was based on partnerships – formal collaboration among public and private organisations to address higher education challenges in ways, and at a scale, that a single organisation cannot. The portfolio of projects supported between 2017 and 2021 included eight partnerships: six focused on countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, one in Myanmar and, one on higher education for refugees in Jordan and Lebanon.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the approach taken to promoting gender equality and social inclusion in and through higher education within the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme, tracing the development of the programme's approach since it began in 2016 and highlighting what worked well and what could have been improved from the perspective of the programme's achievements at its close in March 2022. The paper forms part of the wider set of learning outputs produced during SPHEIR's closure phase to document key lessons from the programme.

The paper starts with a summary of how gender equality and social inclusion were approached in SPHEIR, before moving on to look in depth at two SPHEIR partnerships which focused specifically on enhancing access to and inclusion in higher education, and then exploring good practice in the remainder of the SPHEIR portfolio of projects. The concluding reflections summarise the learning generated throughout the paper.

2. SPHEIR's approach to promoting gender equality and social inclusion

Initial formulation of access and affordability themes

The objectives of SPHEIR formulated at the time of the programme's calls for proposals in 2016 and 2017 were to transform higher education in targeted low-income countries in relation to five key themes: quality, relevance, scale, access and affordability. Applicants could choose to address one or more of these themes, which were broadly defined. The concept of gender equality and social inclusion was not explicitly articulated within the management of SPHEIR and its projects at this stage. However, the two SPHEIR themes of most immediate relevance to the area of gender equality and social inclusion were access and affordability. The formulation of the concept of access, in particular, addressed key elements of gender equality and social inclusion, although primarily through the lens of the impact on the access of different groups to higher education.

In relation to what was referred to as access and equity, the guidance for applicants stated that '*SPHEIR specifically seeks to broaden access to higher education for traditionally under-represented groups. These may include women, students from poor families, remote or rural communities, or groups that may face particular physical, social, cultural, or religious barriers to higher education participation. It also*

relates to equitable progression within the higher education system, both from one degree level to the next (Bachelor > Master > Doctor), and within institutional hierarchies (lecturer > senior lecturer > professor).’ The guidance explained that ‘all SPHEIR applicants will be expected to describe the effect of their proposal on access, however narrowly or broadly defined, and whether their proposal might potentially raise new, unintended access barriers and, if so, how your proposal will mitigate these effects.’ Affordability was described as follows: ‘The affordability of higher education is an almost universal concern in both developed and developing countries, whether from the perspective of governments who are funding HE systems, or from the perspectives of families and students mobilising resources to enable them to access tertiary education. Please outline what impact your proposed project might have on the affordability of higher education in the countries you are targeting, and/or how your proposal specifically takes affordability into account, for example, by introducing new financing mechanisms, or reducing the cost of delivery.’ The themes of both access and affordability were required fields in the application form for SPHEIR proposals.

Results of the SPHEIR selection process

Following the two highly competitive calls for proposals, nine partnerships were selected for SPHEIR funding.¹ Two of these nine projects focused primarily on improving access to higher education for under-represented groups and, in doing so, addressed specific social inclusion considerations – students whose socioeconomic situation was a barrier to access to or retention in higher education in the case of the Lending for Education in Africa Partnership (LEAP), and refugees and marginalised host communities in Jordan and Lebanon for the Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access (PADILEIA). In the case of LEAP, the project also addressed the theme of affordability.

These two projects articulated specific objectives relating to access and social inclusion in their theories of change, learning questions, and results frameworks and measured these throughout their grant lifetimes. They were also required to report on ‘equity’ in the same way as the remainder of the SPHEIR portfolio, as outlined in the following sub-section.

Cross-cutting approach to gender equality and social inclusion

All SPHEIR projects were required to consider value for money in their design and implementation, of which gender equality and social inclusion dimensions formed a key part under the domain of ‘equity’ – one of the five value for money domains against which all projects were required to plan and report.

During the inception or Grant Stage 1 period, each SPHEIR partnership was required to develop a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation and learning plan which included a project-specific value for money framework based on a set of key principles developed by the SPHEIR Fund Manager. The guidance provided to projects through the SPHEIR Grant Recipient Handbook highlighted the importance of considering equity throughout the full project cycle and set out six steps for this, including: baselining and investigating available data; managing *with* and *for* equity; and, monitoring and evaluating equity in project results. An extract from the guidance is provided as Annex 1.

¹ One partnership – the Transformation of Pharmacy and Chemistry Degree Provision (TPCDP) project – was terminated in May 2020 following the programme’s midpoint review process and another – the Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE) project – was closed in May 2021 following the military takeover in Myanmar.

In line with funder requirements, all SPHEIR projects had to disaggregate results data by gender at a minimum in order to enable them to track any differential impacts of their activities on men and women. They were also encouraged to consider disaggregating by other equity dimensions that were relevant to their specific projects.

SPHEIR projects were required to monitor progress in equity on an ongoing basis and were asked to report on all five of the programme's value for money domains in their annual monitoring, evaluation and learning reports and on at least three of these domains in their mid-year reports. Equity was a required domain for reporting in both the mid-year and annual reports and results were discussed with the SPHEIR Fund Manager team in the follow-up feedback discussion with the lead and downstream partners, maintaining a focus on projects' attention to progress on gender and social inclusion.

Knowledge sharing

In addition to the focus on equity in the six-monthly narrative reporting cycle completed by all SPHEIR projects, access and equity issues – with a particular focus on gender – were explored with all SPHEIR projects during a portfolio workshop held in Nairobi in October 2018 during dedicated sessions led by external gender specialists and expert practitioners from within the higher education institutions participating in SPHEIR. Following the Nairobi workshop, gender and inclusion was chosen by partnerships as a thematic area for the online SPHEIR Community of Practice platform to provide a space for further discussion of related issues among the SPHEIR partnerships. The Community of Practice site was not widely used in practice but a follow-up webinar session was held in autumn 2019 to enable partnerships to share learning on their approach to gender equality.

Safeguarding

The promotion of a culture of safeguarding across the SPHEIR portfolio, which was a particular focus of attention following the FCDO's Wilton Park event on 'Making tertiary education #safetolearn' in November 2019, was linked to considerations of gender and social inclusion given that factors which lead to the risk of exclusion from education – such as poverty, displacement or disability – are often associated with the risk of safeguarding breaches.

3. Creating pathways to higher education for Syrian refugees – PADILEIA

The PADILEIA project helped refugees and displaced young people in Jordan and Lebanon to access higher education through a unique online and blended learning initiative, building pathways to higher education to enhance their ability to make strategic choices about their futures. Many refugees in both countries, alongside young people in host communities, live below the poverty line and face major challenges in accessing higher education – giving PADILEIA a unique target group from the perspective of social inclusion.

PADILEIA's offer consisted of bespoke short courses, contextualised foundation programmes for university preparation, and study programmes with university credit-bearing courses. The academic programmes were complemented by support services for PADILEIA students, including: online mentoring to improve English language skills and support scholarship opportunities; a peer-to-peer

network linking PADILEIA students with UK university students; LiveChat for academic and technical support; guidance for transfer into formal higher education; and, psychosocial support.

PADILEIA succeeded in developing a functional and transferable learning model providing refugees access to higher education. Connecting with other organisations working with refugees maximised the value of PADILEIA's educational offer and created pathways to future opportunities. PADILEIA's integration into the learning ecosystem in Lebanon and Jordan enabled it to leverage the networks and delivery capacity of other agencies, particularly for recruitment of students from its target groups.

The project's blended learning model – delivered both online and through study hubs at refugee camps – addressed a range of student needs. Providing access to a physical space and face-to-face support had a positive effect on students from both an academic and psychological perspective and the use of study hubs created a space to meet peers and form a learning community. *'As a refugee we do not meet lots of people from outside our community, the programme helped me a lot [to] meet new people and feel part of the society,'* said one refugee student at Al Al-Bayt University in Jordan.

More than 12,500 students in Lebanon and Jordan studied on PADILEIA's study programmes and bespoke short courses online and in the study hubs and 102 students were accepted into university to study over 20 different subjects including English language, law, civil engineering, and nursing. In addition to gaining subject-specific knowledge, students gained soft skills – such as communication and teamwork – which will support them in future study and work. 85% of PADILEIA students reported increased digital literacy and English language skills.

PADILEIA demonstrated that learner-centred approaches – including contextualised curricula and wraparound support – are critical in emergency settings, as is responsiveness to regular needs assessments and feedback loops to ensure the relevance of course content and design. Considering students' needs holistically is also particularly important when working with vulnerable groups. Provision of psychosocial support and tailored mentoring enables students to access learning effectively.

PADILEIA commissioned a rapid evaluation of its shift to entirely online delivery in the face of Covid-19, which highlighted a number of lessons applicable both to the immediate project and for other education in emergencies practitioners. These included: the impact of the specific devices used by students to access online learning materials on the quality of their experience; the additional time required from staff to support students to learn effectively online and the need to build their capacity specifically to support this; and, the value of using instant messaging platforms with voice-note capabilities to provide effective support to students in low connectivity contexts. PADILEIA's online support mechanisms and digital foundations enabled a fast response when the Covid-19 pandemic struck and the team provided internet bundles and tablets to PADILEIA students and maintained student support services online. Providing internet access and appropriate devices enabled PADILEIA students to continue studying during the pandemic but lack of access to devices and limited connectivity remain barriers to online learning, particularly in refugee camps.

Programming for gender equality in digital development is acknowledged as being difficult. Since the onset of Covid-19, PADILEIA noted an upward trend in the enrolment and completion rates for its online courses among female students, suggesting that the increased uptake of online learning by target

learners as a result of the pandemic may have disproportionately applied to women. The project had previously made intentional efforts to increase the number of women using its blended courses – for example, by holding sessions and exposure visits with young women’s family members to reassure them about the safety and professional environment of study centres, ensuring inclusive transport and events where female relatives could accompany students, and introducing explicit gender sensitivity measures in classroom management and student support team behaviours that supported female students to feel at ease with learning on the project’s platforms.

Another focus of efforts to improve inclusion was the accessibility of PADILEIA’s online platforms. In order to assist differently-abled users on Kiron Campus, the team integrated several features, including: Accessible Rich Internet Applications (ARIA) tags for screen reader navigation for visually impaired learners; downloadable transcripts of videos for learners who are hearing impaired, which also notably benefits users with low bandwidth or limited data; and, a range of features to improve the Kiron Campus’s AA rating under the Web Accessibility and Content Guidelines, such as colour contrast, alt text, and consistent labelling and navigation.

These insights into PADILEIA’s efforts to address other areas of access and inclusion beyond its primary focus on displaced young people were captured through the project’s narrative value for money reporting.

The innovative model developed by PADILEIA has potential for replicability in large population displacement settings and its lessons are being shared through education in emergencies networks. Partner universities in Lebanon and Jordan have been able to apply the learning from PADILEIA to other higher education in crisis contexts – including ongoing efforts to support refugee communities in Jordan and a research project funded by the Mastercard Foundation in Uganda to provide insights on how to effectively provide access to higher education for displaced young people through blended bridging programmes. However, the partnership’s experience has highlighted the critical barrier of access to finance faced by refugee students. The lack of available scholarships and other forms of financial aid is a key impediment to university access for displaced students, even when they meet academic requirements. Future efforts to increase the number of refugees studying in higher education must consider the availability of financial support at the design stage.

4. Widening access to tertiary education through affordable finance – LEAP

LEAP is a first-of-its kind partnership which has established a social lending fund providing affordable student finance to young people from low- and middle-income backgrounds in Kenya who cannot fully cover the cost of their education through conventional loans, bursaries, scholarships or other means. In addition to direct financial support, the initiative delivers services to support students in their transition into the world of work in the shape of career readiness support, financial literacy training, and a collaborative peer-to-peer network and alumni community.

LEAP was able to successfully build and operationalise an innovative social lending fund in Kenya from scratch and transition its management to a Kenyan entity within the lifetime of the SPHEIR programme. LEAP adapted its original plans in response to the operating environment – including working through a Kenyan financial technology, or fintech, firm called Pezesha rather than a bank to disburse its loans and

adjusting loan management processes over time as the team learned more about the optimum approach to engaging with students. LEAP has partnered with five Kenyan universities and six technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions to create a diversified portfolio and has secured over £3.5 million of external investment from a mix of private sector impact investors and grant funders to support its future sustainability.

By the end of the SPHEIR grant, 913 students in Kenya had received an affordable loan from LEAP that enabled them to start or continue university. The most recent set of data from LEAP shows that 82% of LEAP Fellows came from the bottom three wealth quintiles in Kenya, demonstrating LEAP's success in reaching financially disadvantaged young people. The equity performance of the LEAP portfolio significantly outstrips the benchmark for post-secondary education overall in Kenya, where only 27% of students come from the bottom three wealth quintiles.² On the most recent annual survey of LEAP Fellows, 81% noted that without their LEAP loan they would not be able to finance their studies and 20% indicated that they had previously discontinued or deferred their studies for financial reasons, demonstrating that LEAP loans are being effectively targeted according to need. At present, nearly half of all LEAP Fellows are the first in their family to attend tertiary education, which is important because children whose parents completed at least secondary school are ten times more likely to attend university in Kenya than those whose parents did not.³ Investment in higher education is a powerful lever for upward socio-economic mobility, with a return on investment of over 20% from each additional year of higher education completed.⁴ In addition, 8% of LEAP Fellows are orphans, and an additional 31% have only one parent. 61% of Fellows are from households where neither parent or guardian is formally employed, 6% have a disability, and 4% have children of their own to support. One LEAP student highlighted the critical importance of the financial support that the project has provided, *'LEAP came at the right time. If LEAP wasn't around, I would have had to drop out.'* The statistics featured here demonstrate the data-driven nature of LEAP's reporting, an aspect of the initiative that is intrinsically incentivised compared to other SPHEIR projects given LEAP's priorities in understanding the factors driving the credit behaviour and employment outcomes of its student Fellows and in tracking the overall performance of its loan portfolio.

LEAP developed tailored support services for its Fellows to improve their readiness for the job market and build their ability to manage their loans and wider finances. Developed in partnership with the African Management Institute, LEAP's online career readiness training helps students to prepare for their careers during their last 18 months of study. All LEAP Fellows are offered virtual training sessions, a career readiness newsletter, town halls, and other networking opportunities. Additionally, LEAP provides financial literacy training via SMS through a provider called Patascore to facilitate access for all students. Fellows average an increase of 20 percentage points from pre- to post-training. *'From the financial literacy trainings I've received, I am able to manage my finances well. I now prepare a monthly budget, make savings goals, repay my interest on time, and manage my priorities better,'* reported one LEAP

² Data taken from the World Bank's Edstats database using data collected during the 2014 Demographic and Health Survey. Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) for quintile 1 is 1.5% and 20% for quintile 5.

³ World Bank, Darvas et al, *Sharing Higher Education's Promise beyond the Few in Sub-Saharan Africa* (2017).

⁴ 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. According to most recent data, the return on investment from each additional year of higher education in Kenya is 22%. World Bank, Montenegro, Claudio and Patrinos, Harry, *Comparable Estimates of Returns to Schooling Around the World* (2014). Note that 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.

Fellow. LEAP has also established an increasingly Fellow-led peer-to-peer and alumni community, with chapters of LEAP Fellows at participating institutions and connections made between current students and recent graduates to create a support network.

To ensure LEAP supported students whose qualifications are in demand in the job market, the initiative expanded its scope over time to include TVET institutions with shorter study programmes and lower tuition fees and whose graduates – in fields such as health sciences – are in high demand in the Kenyan economy. This also creates a future opportunity for LEAP to extend access to an often even more financially disadvantaged student population.

LEAP's primary focus is on its students' socioeconomic background. However, the project also made gender projections for its Fellows during the lifetime of its SPHEIR grant and these have been regularly discussed with the SPHEIR Fund Manager. The projection for the percentage of female Fellows was based on a benchmark participation rate for the degree programmes whose students were eligible for LEAP loans – last set at 33%. Female participation among the total number of Fellows fell short of the benchmark by 7% at the end of the grant. Analysis by LEAP suggests that the low gender numbers were primarily due to a limited pipeline of female students entering LEAP-supported degrees (selected STEM subjects) and meeting their eligibility criteria. LEAP's focus on supporting those studying programmes with strong employment prospects has created a portfolio of Fellows from health sciences, engineering, ICT, and accounting and actuarial science courses and the uneven enrolment on these programmes by gender has largely driven the gender imbalance in the LEAP loan portfolio. Among the recent LEAP intake in late 2021 were students from nursing programmes, boosting the actual numbers of female students, but LEAP had not yet recalculated its gender benchmark to take account of this new intake.

Following the gender analysis carried out by LEAP in 2020, the project has not had the opportunity to apply the findings to a large cohort of new students because the intake of new LEAP Fellows has been on pause for long periods as a result of Covid-19. The learning from the analysis – particularly around the need to target female students more directly prior to the application stage in order to increase numbers – will be applied to future application rounds for LEAP loans. The project continues to seek to deepen its understanding of and address the gender imbalance in its portfolio and has secured grant funding from one of its recent investors to contract a gender expert. To broaden its understanding of gender and education issues in Kenya, LEAP has started discussions with an NGO called the Women's Initiative in Education (NEWI), which focuses on supporting female students at the secondary level with financing, career readiness skills, and sexual and reproductive health education.

A key lesson from LEAP is the need to balance social impact and credit risk. LEAP's model is driven by social impact but relies on becoming a revolving fund where repayments from students provide future affordable finance for others. This means that the initiative has to find the right balance between targeting financially disadvantaged students and managing the overall credit risk in the LEAP loan portfolio. On an individual level, LEAP has refined its processes over time to ensure that low-income students are not overburdened with debt if they are likely to face high financial pressures from their family and extended network when they secure employment.

In parallel, for education initiatives where outcomes take time to materialise, it is critical to have patient capital from funders who are motivated by impact. For LEAP, the grant and first loss funding offered by SPHEIR enabled it to demonstrate proof of concept and has lowered the credit risk for future investors, supporting LEAP's sustainability and ability to provide finance to future students who fit its target profile.

5. Mainstreaming gender equality considerations

Beyond the two projects where access and inclusion were a central focus, the most intentional focus on inclusion considerations within the SPHEIR portfolio related to gender equality. There was good practice within some partnerships and significant expertise within the network of SPHEIR partner organisations in this regard. Gender responsiveness as a component of inclusive pedagogy meant that this was particularly prominent in the SPHEIR projects which focused on pedagogical transformation. However, it is noted that, where emphasis was placed on mainstreaming gender equality, this was largely due to the decisions of individual projects and the expertise that existed within their teams and that opportunities were potentially missed to harness this experience and practical expertise to widen the benefits to other projects who were less well-equipped to analyse and address their impact on gender equality.

The effectiveness of mainstreaming gender

Within the SPHEIR portfolio, the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) partnership displayed the most intentional focus on gender responsiveness and succeeded in promoting attention to and ownership of gender issues within partner universities in Tanzania and Uganda.

TESCEA's conceptual framework included gender-responsiveness from the outset and this was integrated into the project's pedagogical model. However, the attention to gender issues went beyond pedagogy. By consistently addressing gender throughout its activities, the project was able to raise gender awareness more broadly and to catalyse changes in university policy and related resourcing.

Gender was a central consideration in TESCEA and the partnership agreed on a vision of gender responsiveness at a meeting of all partners in April 2019 which included commitments that: courses redesigned through the project would demonstrate evidence of gender responsiveness; implementers and instructors would demonstrate evidence of being gender responsive; and, the project would communicate its commitment to gender responsiveness clearly to its stakeholders and to employers.

The partnership developed and piloted [a framework for gender-responsive pedagogy in higher education](#) with the aim of improving the classroom experience for female students by challenging pedagogical practices that reinforce gender inequalities. A [learning brief](#) produced by the project concluded that gender-responsive teaching improved learning outcomes for both women and men through increased participation and interaction, with particularly noticeable benefits for female students.

TESCEA's work to improve university engagement with employers and the wider community also had a gender angle. Although the project may not have had direct influence on employers' policies, the focus on gender in the meetings of the project's Joint Advisory Groups (fora set up by the project to promote dialogue between universities and external stakeholders, especially employers) – including through the involvement of external gender experts in several groups – ensured that the topic was firmly on the agenda. According to Aloysius Tenywa Malagala, a senior lecturer in the Institute of Peace and

Strategic Studies at Gulu University and a TESCEA MEL lead, *'Doing course redesign within TESCEA is giving us an opportunity to see how we can translate our university [gender] policy and other work into action and how we can operationalise the policy into the courses that we're designing. [...]*

Our hope is that, with the vision and strategy in place alongside our existing policy, gender responsiveness will become one of our university core values. We intend to ensure that such values are taken up and appreciated by the members of our TESCEA joint advisory group (JAG, a group made up of external actors from business and the wider community who are advising us on this project). Some JAG members will participate in course redesign and so will be able to contribute to the desired change in gender responsive pedagogy. This will be important for TESCEA in terms of scale up and adaptation of activities and programmes and – in the long run – for enhancing the employability of our graduates.'

The mainstreamed approach to gender within the project also led to policy changes at institutional level – notably, the establishment of a dedicated Gender Unit at Gulu University. As Christine Oryema, the university's gender lead, explains, *'The establishment of the gender unit has been a great step for Gulu University to have an autonomous office for handling gender related issues. Before, gender mainstreaming was considered a small unit under the academic registrar and was mainly concerned with admission issues. However, with the TESCEA project, the university has realised that gender encompasses more than admission and requires special attention.'*

From the evaluation of TESCEA, there is evidence to support the assertion that the project's gender component has had a positive impact in the university environments, albeit to varying degrees. It has improved awareness, attitudes, engagement and practice as reported by teachers, students, senior managers and members of the JAGs. The evidence suggests that gender conscious or responsive pedagogical approaches are systematically becoming an integral part of not just lesson planning, but also how teachers prepare to deliver lessons. There was a deliberate effort by some teachers in TESCEA to make (sometimes small) things happen – such as changing seating arrangements. Several teachers commented on making conscious efforts to diversify discussion and workshop groups in order to provide opportunities to students, so they can work with other students (and not just friends) with differing knowledge and skillsets. This conscious effort to disrupt traditional set-ups and student comfort zones is a positive move towards enabling students to become more self-dependent in their learning. Having the intention to make change within those 'small' parameters and backing these with concrete implementation plans helped create the opportunities for teachers to effect change. Classroom discussions appeared to be more gender sensitive and it was noted that confidence amongst female students had improved since the inception of TESCEA. Senior management were also becoming increasingly committed to gender equality agendas and either have or are working to develop gender policies and plans to promote greater gender equality in and outside the classroom.

Gender champions and integration into frameworks

The Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone (AQHEd-SL) partnership was another project where attention was paid to gender equality. The partnership included a national NGO called The 50/50 Group which focused on gender equality within Sierra Leone and this enabled it to draw on contextualised gender expertise, invalidating the common perception of gender mainstreaming as a Western, and thus external, concept.

The partnership included gender-responsiveness in its pedagogical training courses for faculty who were revising curriculum content to ensure that modules and degree programmes had structure, content and pedagogy which was responsive to the gender context in Sierra Leone. AQHEd-SL provided training for over 100 gender champions across its partner institutions and the project's evaluation concluded that The 50/50 Group's inclusion as a project partner had been a '*door opener*' for future work on gender and inclusion in the higher education sector in Sierra Leone, although there is clearly still considerable work to be done to achieve cultural change.

The templates developed by the project to guide curriculum revision and quality assurance processes at partner institutions included gender and other inclusion elements as 'transversal topics' to ensure that the creation of a safe and inclusive environment for all was considered when planning and monitoring the delivery of tertiary education in Sierra Leone. Questions of gender, diversity and inclusion were integrated into all training materials and frameworks, including the quality assurance handbook and the National Qualification Framework for Tertiary Education in Sierra Leone developed by the project.

Transformative female leadership

The SPHEIR mid-term evaluation included a case study highlighting the female leadership attributes that were pivotal to the success of the Pedagogical Leadership in Africa (PedaL) project. The case study described how PedaL's structure, expert contributors, and inclusive leadership were core to its success and described eight attributes of female leadership that had contributed to PedaL's success in transforming social science pedagogy in higher education across Africa. The attributes identified were: leaders pursue a vision selflessly and inspire the same from team members; eliciting team buy-in; carrying people along in an evolving process; prompting subtlety of thought; problem-solving through inclusive discussion; a nurturing approach to building leadership skills; availability; and, diffuse leadership that negotiates and influences. The full case study is available on the SPHEIR [website](#).

The PedaL project also included a module on gender in its pedagogical training package and seven of the project's 15 e-cases featured a focus on gender and marginalised groups. The project used revised course outlines and reflective logs, as well as focus group discussions, to capture changes in teaching practice among staff trained under PedaL and reported a range of examples of strategies that have been used by faculty to integrate gender into their delivery to students, including: adapting classroom management techniques to facilitate contributions by male and female students; reviewing academic reference lists to include sources from female authors; using gender-sensitive language and examples; and, directly addressing gender issues through curriculum. In addition to its Team Leader, PedaL also developed the leadership skills and visibility of a number of female academics through their involvement in its regional training team.

6. Addressing other aspects of social inclusion

As has been highlighted above, the PADILEIA and LEAP projects designed tailored interventions to address the impact on access of students' refugee and socioeconomic status respectively and there was also good practice within the SPHEIR portfolio in addressing gender equality.

Within the wider portfolio, efforts to address aspects of social inclusion outside gender were more limited. A few examples are outlined below but, overarchingly, these considerations were not addressed adequately and insufficient attention was paid to disability, in particular.

To illustrate this point, the PedaL project did not incorporate a focus on people with disability at the design stage, although adjustments were made on two occasions when teaching staff with disabilities attended PedaL training. Later in the implementation of the initiative, the need for inclusion of people with disabilities was appreciated more fully, prompting the introduction of a case study on disability in the African context into the PedaL Online training course and engagements with higher education institutions with relevant expertise such as Tangaza University College in Kenya, which offers training to people with disabilities. Participants from the college who attended PedaL training learnt strategies relevant to the inclusion of visually impaired students in online learning following the onset of Covid-19 and they encouraged the PedaL team to include a colleague from Tangaza – a leader in disability mainstreaming at the institution – as a PedaL facilitator. Her expertise enhanced the conversation around disability mainstreaming within PedaL and the project's external evaluation recommended that this focus should be increased as the initiative develops in the future.

The TIDE project in Myanmar contributed a distinct perspective on inclusion within the SPHEIR portfolio in its reporting and reflections. Engaging with universities in more remote regions of the country, beyond the central Burmese heartland and the cluster of 'prestige' universities such as Universities of Yangon or Mandalay, meant that the project reached staff and students from a wide range of minority ethnic groups in Myanmar. However, the project did not necessarily engage substantively with the contextual implications of this extended reach.

Following the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, the digital divide created by uneven access to reliable internet connectivity and appropriate technological devices for online learning became a new focus of attention in relation to social inclusion for several projects within the SPHEIR portfolio as they grappled with adapting their interventions to online or blended modes of delivery. Across the SPHEIR partnerships, the digital divide affected both students and university staff where the cost and quality of internet connection and access to appropriate devices remain key challenges in accessing online teaching and learning resources. Several projects highlighted as a key lesson that 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 – and to address this digital divide.

Promoting attention to safeguarding in higher education initiatives

As highlighted above, SPHEIR was committed to ensuring that everyone involved in the programme was protected from sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment by creating a strong culture of safeguarding across the portfolio of projects.

Following an initial roundtable on safeguarding with the SPHEIR projects and the FCDO team in July 2019 and the subsequent participation of representatives from the Fund Manager and SPHEIR projects in an FCDO summit on 'Making tertiary education #safetolearn' at Wilton Park in November 2019, the SPHEIR Fund Manager developed a tool for all SPHEIR partners to assess their progress against [the enhanced safeguarding due diligence standards](#) set out by the FCDO and then worked with the lead partners of each project to identify existing good practice and gaps and to provide targeted support and

guidance, including a series of webinars open to all partner organisations. Each project subsequently submitted a revised self-assessment against the due diligence standards and there were positive shifts in the RAG ratings for seven of the eight projects, with three of the partnerships notably moving to an overall green/amber or amber/green rating as a result of improvements made. While there have been limitations in this approach, it has provided a robust proxy for improvements that have taken place within the lifespan of SPHEIR.

The increased focus on safeguarding led to a corresponding increase in the number of safeguarding incidents reported by SPHEIR projects, which the Fund Manager considered as a positive indication of the effectiveness of its awareness-raising activities and the partner organisations' own engagement with their participants (students, faculty, etc.).

The self-assessment exercise revealed varying levels of understanding and practice around safeguarding across the SPHEIR portfolio, particularly in contexts where the terminology of safeguarding or related concepts was unfamiliar. Greater contextualisation of capacity strengthening approaches and more opportunities for discussion would be useful in deepening engagement with the concept and practice, including around issues of protection from gender-based violence.

The self-assessment exercise developed to assess partners' policy and practice against the enhanced due diligence standards was very worthwhile in informing appropriate action within the programme and within respective partner institutions. However, the analysis of the returns was very resource-intensive and it was critical to have supporting technical expertise from the British Council's safeguarding team throughout. It would be advisable to specifically allocate resources for safeguarding capacity development for all partners in future higher education and development initiatives.

The programme's work on safeguarding was an example of the value of a sustained capacity strengthening focus in driving improvement in both policy and practice. The consistent focus supported lead partners to work actively with their project partners to better manage safeguarding risks and create a safer environment. Feedback from partnerships indicated that the power of focusing on safeguarding practice on behalf of a funder helped to bring about further change, including within UK institutions, which they may not otherwise have been able to achieve as quickly. The importance of integrating safeguarding considerations from the outset of any future higher education programme is clear.

7. Concluding reflections

Providing space for initiatives targeted at specific marginalised groups promotes greater access and inclusion for those groups. The selection of the LEAP and PADILEIA projects meant that the SPHEIR portfolio included two partnerships with a specific focus on improving access for groups identified as under-represented in higher education. The success of these two initiatives underlines the importance of nurturing innovation and of allowing space within programmes for the development of bespoke, needs-based approaches that can respond to the specific circumstances and needs of marginalised groups alongside an emphasis on mainstreaming gender and social inclusion considerations across all projects.

A number of common lessons around promoting access to higher education for specific target groups arose across LEAP and PADILEIA, namely: the need for structured feedback loops and repeated needs

assessment to adjust and contextualise interventions to ensure their relevance to students' changing needs; the importance of seeing students' educational experience holistically and providing appropriate psychosocial support; the value of creating supportive peer-to-peer communities and mentoring opportunities; and, the value of working with other practitioners targeting inclusion of the same student groups to leverage the networks and delivery capacity of other agencies.

Projects where access was a specific focus collected better data on relevant characteristics of their student beneficiaries, demonstrating the incentive that can be provided by objective-setting and measurement against targets. More comprehensive data allows better decision-making and assessment of progress. However, it should be noted that it can be difficult for projects to collect data – even on gender balance – when high-quality and complete data is not always available for specific courses, higher education institutions or at the level of trends in national higher education systems.

Across the SPHEIR portfolio, the digital divide that was highlighted by the Covid-19 pandemic, whereby access to a reliable internet connection and to appropriate devices are unevenly distributed amongst both students and university staff, arose as a key consideration for inclusion and one which will remain a key challenge into the future.

Mainstreaming gender equality considerations was effective in promoting change at individual and institutional levels in a partnership like TESCEA, where gender responsiveness was incorporated into the project's conceptual framework and practical activities from the beginning. While there was strong practice in some SPHEIR projects, intentional planning for and reporting on gender equality and social inclusion impact was not consistent and there were varying levels of confidence and expertise across project delivery teams. Of all aspects of social inclusion, gender equality was most consistently addressed as a cross-cutting question within the programme. Other areas – such as disability – would have benefitted from stronger attention.

This assessment was supported by the mid-term evaluation of the programme, which concluded that, *'SPHEIR is likely to achieve good impact in the areas of gender equity and social inclusion (GESI). There is clear progress on integrating GESI into project implementation, and leadership on GESI within some partnerships stands out. The SPHEIR portfolio provides some very good examples of best practice strategies and tactics to drive forward GESI in HE. There is some evidence of progress towards impact on GESI at institutional, lecturer and student levels. GESI problem analysis at fund level and for some partnerships could be strengthened to better understand issues and opportunities; likewise, the theory of change and results framework could both better integrate GESI.'*

Greater integration of gender and social inclusion considerations into SPHEIR's frameworks at programme and project levels from the proposal stage onwards could have promoted a stronger and more intentional focus on addressing gender equality and the inclusion of under-represented groups across all SPHEIR projects, with due consideration for the contextual dynamics in which they were delivered. This could have been supported through the integration of specific gender and inclusion knowhow within the fund management team to provide targeted support, capacity strengthening and technical backstopping, and through dedicated budgets at project-level for analysis, strategy development, and activities to address relevant issues and to ensure that relevant expertise was available to partnerships. In particular, a stronger emphasis on gender and social inclusion during the

inception phase of the projects could have been timely to ensure that project design was reviewed through a gender and social inclusion lens.

Again, this is supported by the in-depth formative assessment of SPHEIR conducted by the External Evaluator in December 2019, which noted that, *'The "leave no-one behind" agenda was not a strong focus for SPHEIR at the beginning of implementation. The FM has incrementally strengthened focus and guidance to analyse and address issues affecting equitable access and benefits within specific partnership contexts, but retro-fitting mainstreamed approaches to projects that have not been designed on the basis of adequate contextual analysis of barriers to access will continue to be a challenge.'*

Finally, it is noted that there is a need for a system-change approach when addressing gender equality and social inclusion issues in higher education that recognises the importance of collaboration and broader awareness raising, beyond individual project interventions. Given that barriers to gender equality and social inclusion in higher education reflect wider cultural and social norms and partly result from entry barriers created at other levels of education systems, these conditions also need to be addressed beyond the higher education system itself and projects working within it.

Key recommendations for the future

- Integrate gender and social inclusion considerations from application phase onwards wherever possible – mainstreaming and design of intentional approaches are much easier to achieve when these are built in from the beginning of interventions.
- Ask partners to undertake structured analysis which identifies specific groups who are under-represented in higher education in their contexts, then give due consideration to this evidence and any related factors during project delivery.
- Promote discussion – create opportunities to talk about gender and social inclusion issues and how they affect project activities.
- Make it specific and practical – talk about gender and inclusion considerations and challenges in the context of the specific sector of focus, in this case higher education, to make conversations relevant and realistic.
- Provide guidance and training and draw on specialist expertise – technical expertise is unlikely to be present in every team and not all projects will feel confident to work on gender and inclusion issues.
- Use contracts and grant agreements to enshrine commitments to gender equality and social inclusion – hold partners and grantees to account through contractual mechanisms.
- Ensure that gender equality and social inclusion are prominently featured reporting requirements, including for baselining and evaluations – this encourages a sustained focus on progress and provides regular opportunities to review data and lessons and to adapt activities as a result.

Annex 1

Extract from SPHEIR Grant Recipient Handbook

Section 8.2.4 – Equity

- Equity is a normative concept, concerned not only with the simple construct of equality, but also with fairness and social justice. There are robust debates about its precise meaning, and a number of conceptions compete to be the ‘correct’ definition.⁵
- FCDO sums up the equity dimension of VfM as “spending fairly”. This was further described by DFID as how fairly benefits are distributed – i.e. to what extent the project is reaching marginalised groups.⁶ Gender is an obligatory equity perspective in SPHEIR, and you are also expected to give consideration to equity from the perspective of other groups that are under-represented, under-served or who suffer disadvantage, such as people with disabilities, people from households with low income or assets, or people from communities with particular disadvantage e.g. because of their remoteness or ethnic make-up.
- FCDO’s view of equity importantly focuses on both outputs and outcomes. However, it is also important to include equity considerations in your activities and processes. Without attention to equity in these stages, it is less likely that outputs and outcomes will be equitable.
- SPHEIR projects differ in how they focus on equity. Two projects have the creation of services for under-represented groups as their principal objective. Some projects highlight equity as a dimension in one or more outputs or outcomes – e.g. in staff capacity development, teaching and learning methodologies or curriculum design - and therefore have specific activities and indicators designed to support this. For other projects, equity is not explicit in their TOCs and results frameworks. For those projects, the VfM space is particularly useful for ensuring the equity dimension is captured.
- Bearing all this in mind, we propose that you incorporate a project-cycle approach to building equity into your project guided by the following questions:
 1. *Equity baseline assessment*: What steps are you taking to ascertain the status of under-represented groups in your project’s area of interest?
 2. *Equity diagnostic*: What investigations are you carrying out into the causes of any imbalances you discover?
 3. *Managing for equity*: What are you doing in your project to address these imbalances or at least not to make them worse? Gender sensitivity in the design of curricula, resources and pedagogic practices, for example, is expected.
 4. *Managing with equity*: How are you building equity into your project processes and activities – e.g. an appropriate balance of participation in these processes and activities – including an awareness of barriers to the inclusion of some groups?

⁵ See for example Jones, Harry (2009), *Equity in development: Why it is important and how to achieve it*. ODI, London.

⁶ ICAI (2018), p. 11.

5. *Monitoring equity in results:* How are you monitoring equity in outputs and outcomes? Gender disaggregation in relevant results is a required minimum in all projects and must be included in the annual Results Framework Report; but there are additional ways to monitor equity in outputs and outcomes.
 6. *Evaluating equity in results:* How are you intending to address equity in your project evaluation?
- These questions should shape your approaches to equity, including periodic review and reporting through your VfM framework.



SPHEIR
Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform

SPHEIR programme management:

