ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE IN MYANMAR VIA DISTANCE LEARNING – TRANSFORMATION BY INNOVATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Prior to the February 2021 military coup, Myanmar was experiencing a significant deficit in the supply of skilled graduates to meet employment needs. With the country being highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, skills for sustainable management of Myanmar's natural resources were a priority.

Part of the Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR) programme, the Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE) partnership aimed to improve the quality of distance education in Myanmar and produce more employable graduates by:

- Enhancing the capacity of academic, teaching and support staff

- Working at policy level to strengthen the higher and distance education systems

- Enhancing academic programmes with a particular focus on environmental science

- Supporting the digital transformation of education in Myanmar at a national level

With over 500,000 students accessing higher education through distance learning, reform of higher and distance education in Myanmar was a priority at the time when TIDE was designed.

TIDE focused on enabling educators to deliver improved learning outcomes for students, with a particular subject focus on education for the environment and sustainable development. The project also supported the development and use of the growing information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure in Myanmar's higher education sector through offering training on online education platforms and facilitating online courses designed to enhance digital literacy.
An emphasis on the use of open educational resources (OERs) and associated open educational practices for teaching and learning was one of the most important aspects of TIDE. The TIDE project was closed early following the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021.

SPHEIR programme management

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Key achievements

Support to national-level reform of higher and distance education.

TIDE engaged strongly with policy and strategy in Myanmar from its inception and was part of a major structural change in the higher education system. The partnership supported the implementation of the national One Campus Two Systems initiative and developed approaches to professional development that could be replicated across Myanmar's Arts and Science universities. TIDE actively engaged with government and policy actors, including through workshops to explore options for reform and system strengthening. A key recommendation that emerged was a proposal to establish a Myanmar Open University. TIDE also contributed to the process of developing Myanmar's National Education Strategic Plan II (2021–2030), with a focus on distance and online education.

Development of roadmap for Myanmar Open University.

TIDE's scoping work led to the creation of a roadmap for the establishment of a Myanmar Open University in 2020, which was approved by the then Union Minister for Education, and a steering group planning for the legal establishment of a new university. This work had not been completed at the time of TIDE's closure in 2021, although it was never anticipated that a Myanmar Open University would be fully realised within the project's lifetime. TIDE supported the development of prototypes for the online learning environments and systems that the university would require.

Development of innovative ICT pilots.

TIDE aimed to develop a strategic response to the opportunities presented for digital technologies to enhance the design and delivery of distance education in Myanmar. An ICT working group was established to bring together public and private universities with e-learning companies, and practical collaboration with educational technology firms was promoted through the delivery of four ICT pilots. As an example, the pilot delivered by ATG and Pathein University led to the trial of a student registration system that used ICT software to replace a paper-based system. The insight generated by the pilots, in addition to several workshops, led to the production of the TIDE Digital Strategy report which fed into the National Education Strategic Plan II consultation and into plans for a Myanmar Digital Education Platform which were fast-tracked in response to Covid-19.

Capacity of academic and support staff strengthened.

TIDE built the capacity of staff at 40 Arts and Sciences universities across Myanmar through the development and delivery of training and professional development activities focused on academic subject knowledge, educational and technical practices to support face-to-face and distance education. As one participant in the natural ecosystems course commented, *"I found this course very exciting and informative. I learned a great deal about valuing ecosystem course and its complex challenges. Ecosystems courses are a way of thinking about – and evaluating – the good and services provided by nature that contribute to the well-being of humans."* TIDE's capacity strengthening activities led to the adoption of improved teaching and learning models by participating universities, with a more learner-centred approach, greater interaction in the classroom and increased use of group work and presentations.

Promotion of open education approaches.

TIDE introduced the concept and practical application of online OERs to university staff in Myanmar. Staff capacity in the use, adaptation and authoring of OERs was developed considerably from a low baseline. Creative Commons licensing was introduced as both a conceptual and functional approach to generating teaching content.

Delivery of change management workshops.

The partnership recognised that capacity strengthening for academic and support staff needed to be accompanied by wider institutional change and developed a change management strand in response. Participating universities focused on topics like quality assurance and employer engagement and online workshops were delivered by change management experts. The focus on employer engagement led to a team from Dawei University working with the local tourism authority to develop a new short course on tourism.

Successful pivot in response to Covid-19.

In response to the pandemic, TIDE effectively pivoted online and adapted its training materials to deliver a self-access, self-paced experience for participating staff in Myanmar, supported by regular interactive sessions online. The partnership also provided support to the wider response to Covid-19 in the higher education sector in Myanmar by developing online 'Gateway' courses helping staff and students to transition to online learning and teaching. When the Myanmar Digital Education Platform was established as a national response to Covid-19, transition was relatively easier for universities participating in TIDE due to the training they had already received.

Award-winning approaches

The TIDE project won the 2021 Open Practices Awards – Open Collaboration category – of the Open Education Awards for Excellence. These awards provide annual recognition to outstanding contributions in the open education community around the world, with the Open Collaboration category recognising an environment that fosters the collective production of open resources and open practices with a shared goal.

"This award recognises the hard work of everyone involved in TIDE. The project succeeded in introducing new concepts, practices, and ways of working, which enabled higher education staff in Myanmar to gain valuable experience in OER and online distance education. It was a pleasure to be part of a project that made a difference." Chioma Obi, Senior Project Manager, Open University

Lessons learned

Establishing and nurturing high-level engagement

- From the outset, TIDE built strong relationships with the Department of Higher Education and Ministry of Education in Myanmar and was able to leverage these throughout the project. TIDE's credibility was grounded in expertise contributed by international partners and supported by it being a comparatively long-term initiative with a consistent offer, which enabled trust to build over time. The fact that the project resulted from in-depth analysis of government strategy in Myanmar meant that its objectives were aligned with the Ministry's priorities.

- TIDE's access to Myanmar's political leadership at a national level generated high expectations that had to be carefully managed alongside the delivery of project objectives.

Maximising policy influencing windows and engagement

- TIDE was highly effective in influencing national policy and strategy. Strong political connections were crucial to this, facilitated by an effective Myanmar partner in Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (IPE). The support of the then Union Minister for Education was considered important in establishing TIDE as an influential initiative. The timing of TIDE coincided with the development of the National Education Strategic Plan II, thus the partnership was able to feed into the distance education sections of the draft.

Building relationships of trust to enhance capacity development

- Nominated focal leads in TIDE-participating universities were central to the delivery of the project – including the development of additional services for students, the promotion of TIDE activities, and data collection for reporting. Senior level support for the partnership generated buy-in at universities and enabled individual staff to both take part in TIDE and deliver change as a result.

- At the institutional level, TIDE supported changes that senior management wanted to implement and change management support and mentoring contributed to capacity development.

The importance of robust needs assessment

- TIDE had to adjust its delivery during implementation as it learned more about the skills of its participants in areas like English and ICT, the infrastructure available to them, and the culture of the wider higher education sector. Allowing time for detailed needs assessment at the beginning of an initiative could allow these adaptations to be made earlier to design capacity building approaches that respond to contextual realities.

Engagement with private sector educational technology stakeholders

- As a project that sought to combine academic resources and subject-specific skills in environmental sciences with technology-enhanced learning, TIDE found that engagement with private sector educational technology organisations in Myanmar created new opportunities for innovation. Such cross-sector relationships were successful, as exemplified by the ICT pilot projects delivered by teams from private sector organisations, universities and the TIDE project team.

Anchoring partnerships in local support and networks

- TIDE's ability to build momentum and influence was significantly enhanced by the support offered in Myanmar by IPE – a TIDE partner. The IPE team maintained the networks, relationships and communication that were established through the partnership's regular face-to-face training sessions and residential schools, ensuring that these connections remained active in the absence of a continuous physical presence from UK university partners.

TIDE in numbers

All
40 Arts and Science universities and degree colleges in Myanmar participated in TIDE

88% of trained academic staff reported applying approaches to support the development of 21st century skills for their students

More than
650 academic, teaching and support staff were trained directly, with an estimated 3,000 more reached through cascade training

12,400 students accessed online courses developed by TIDE and 95% of students surveyed said they had learnt new skills from these courses

Sustainability and scalability potential

By enhancing programmes of study, focusing on environmental studies, and strengthening national systems and structures that support higher education institutions, TIDE became a catalyst for further improvements, helping to support strategy and leadership for the future of the higher education sector in Myanmar and its contribution to sustainable development.

When the project was closed early, the TIDE team was able to draw on the online, self-access components of the TIDE offer in order to curate a collection of open educational resources to allow partners to continue their journey and to sustain the project's positive legacy for staff and students in Myanmar.

The 'TIDE Collection' is available under a range of Creative Commons licences and features original, localised, adapted and translated content. It includes:

- Educational practice materials for both academic and support staff covering topics such as pedagogy, learning design, professional development, open education, and environmental and sustainable development.
- A change management course.

- A range of collaboratively created OERs aimed at both educators and students in Myanmar.
- Online Gateway courses for staff and students to support the development of online teaching and learning skills.
- A range of master trainer programme resources focused on copyright and licensing, natural ecosystems, water quality, and online and distance education.

The TIDE Collection also includes a Myanmar-specific toolkit for the establishment of an Open University. Access to this is restricted in the current circumstances but the toolkit captures the progress made by the partnership in this important area of higher education reform in Myanmar. The approaches contained in both the toolkit and the wider TIDE Collection have potential applicability in other contexts where open and distance education is a priority.

Partners

The TIDE partnership was led by The Open University (UK), working with Yangon University (Myanmar), Yangon University of Distance Education (Myanmar), Yadanabon University (Myanmar), Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (UK), Oxford University (UK) and the University of Manchester (UK).
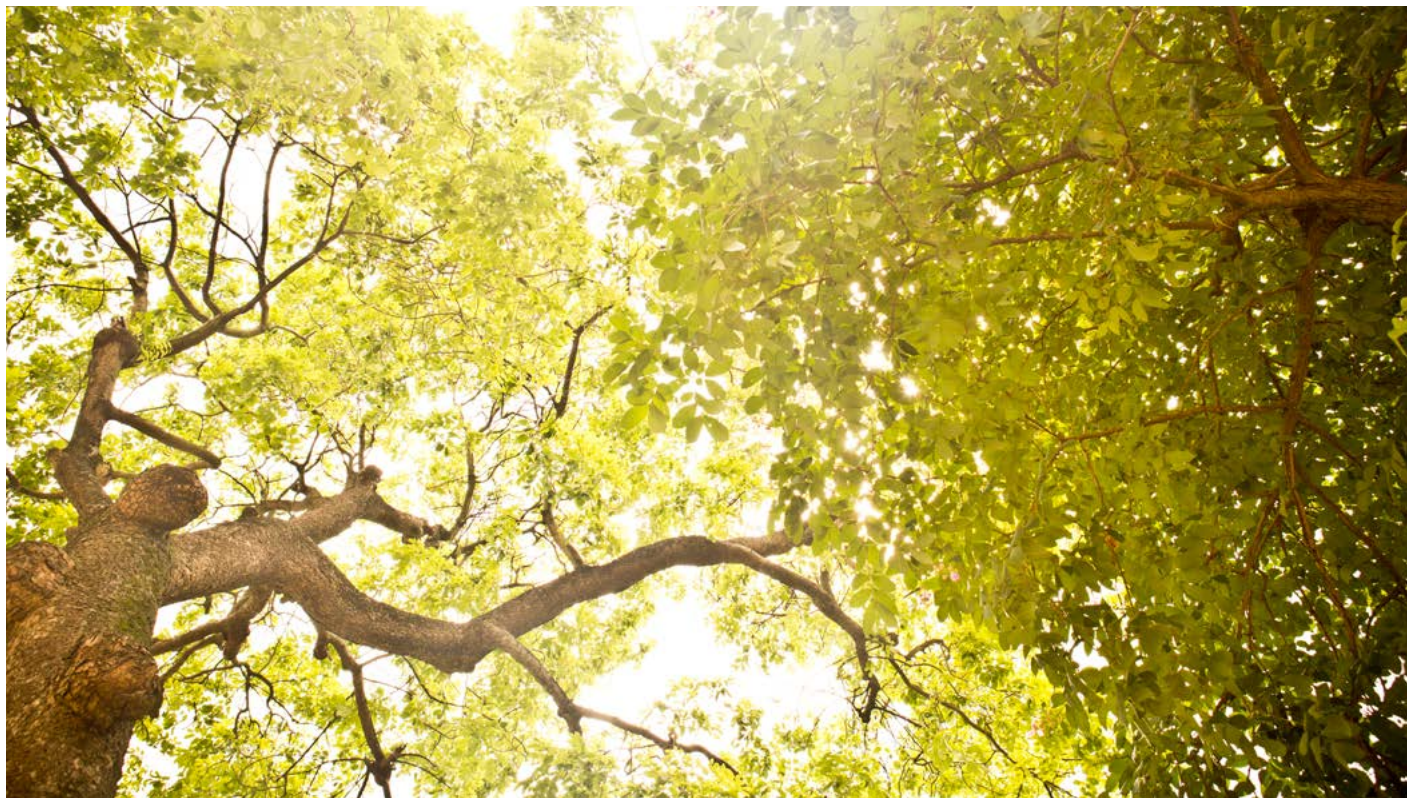
Find out more

Read the TIDE summative evaluation report.

Visit the TIDE profile on the SPHEIR website.

Visit the TIDE website.

Access the resources in the TIDE Collection.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INNOVATION AND REFORM (SPHEIR)

Transforming the quality, relevance, scale, access and affordability of higher education in low-income countries

8 partnerships   **58** organisations   **16** countries

About SPHEIR

Strong higher education systems are key for accelerating development, building inclusive societies and promoting sustainable economic growth. SPHEIR was a UK Aid programme (2016–2022) supporting change in higher education to better meet the needs of students, employers and society in focus countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The programme was managed by a consortium of organisations, led by the British Council in association with PricewaterhouseCoopers and Universities UK International.

The SPHEIR approach

Mutually beneficial partnerships brought together different types of organisations – including higher education institutions, authorities and associations, civil society and private sector organisations – to design and deliver innovative solutions to higher education challenges by focusing on transformative change at individual, institutional and sector-wide levels.

SPHEIR's transformational impact

Quality – In Sierra Leone, a National Qualification Framework for Tertiary Education set new quality standards for higher education institutions. Across East Africa, a new quality review tool was applied in **21 universities** to improve institutional blended learning capacity.

Relevance – In Somaliland and Sierra Leone, **13 degree programmes** were redesigned with contextualised content and practice-based learning. In Tanzania and Uganda, four universities are engaging public and private sector representatives through new Joint Advisory Groups.

Scale – **4,470** academic and support staff were trained in curriculum design, student-centred and gender-responsive pedagogy, assessment, blended learning and distance education. Over **77,600** students benefitted directly from SPHEIR, including 12,400 from Myanmar who accessed online courses.

Access – More than **12,500** students in Lebanon and Jordan accessed study tracks and bespoke short courses with a further **1.1 million learners worldwide** enrolled online.

Affordability – **913** students in Kenya received an affordable loan to start or continue university, of whom **82%** were from the bottom three wealth quintiles and nearly half were the first in their family to progress to tertiary education.

SPHEIR partnerships

AQHEd-SL: Assuring Quality Higher Education in Sierra Leone

PADILEIA: Partnership for Digital Learning and Increased Access in Lebanon and Jordan

PEBL: Partnership for Enhanced and Blended Learning in Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda

PedaL: Pedagogical Leadership in Africa in Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda

PfP: Prepared for Practice in Somaliland

LEAP: The Lending for Education in Africa Partnership in Kenya

TESCEA: Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa in Tanzania and Uganda

TIDE: Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education in Myanmar