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# USAID HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNING AGENDA: SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CDCS	Country Development Coordination Strategy
DDI	Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation
DO	Development Objective
EC	Evidence Champion
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HELAAG	Higher Education Learning Agenda Advisory Group
IP	Implementing Partner
LATT	Learning Agenda Task Team
MEL	Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
MLAAT	Mission Learning Agenda Advisory Team
OPI	Organizational Performance Index
PAD	Project Appraisal Document
RCT	Randomized Controlled Trial
TL	Theme Leader

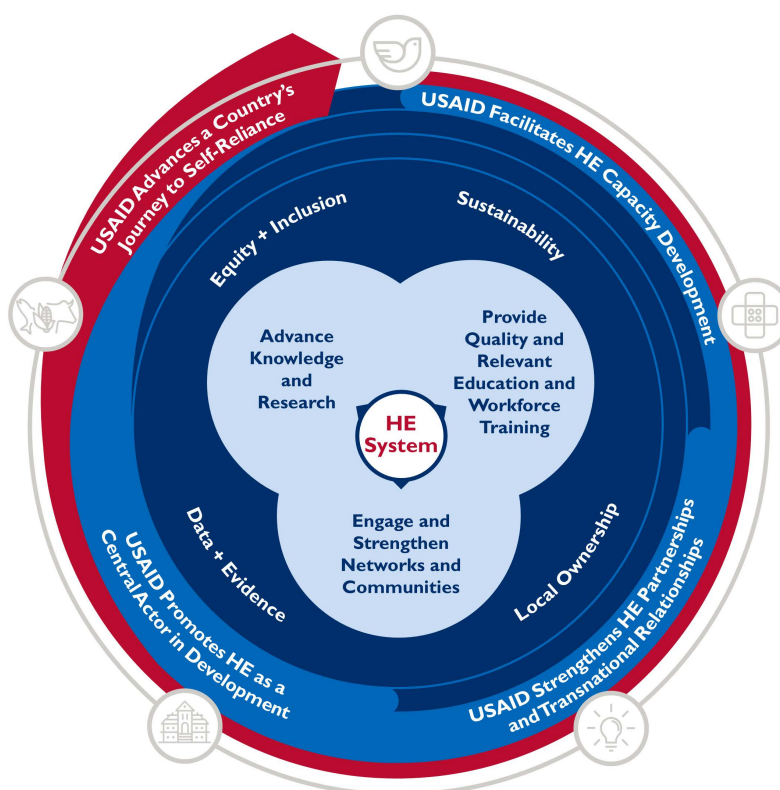
The Higher Education Learning Agenda is a resource for use in USAID’s higher education programming. As an Agency-wide learning agenda, it comprises a collection of prioritized learning questions developed by higher education stakeholders across USAID technical sectors, led by USAID’s Office of Education. The learning agenda is intended to guide the generation, capture, and dissemination of evidence to inform higher education program strategic planning, activity design, and professional development. Its implementation and use are expected to result in better programming decisions and improved program outcomes.

## LEARNING AGENDA DEVELOPMENT OVERVIEW

Development of the learning agenda was a collaborative effort that began in 2019 and culminated in 2020. Key components of the development process included a [higher education program framework](#), objective and goals, stakeholder consultations, theme- and question-development workshops, a [final list of ten learning questions](#), and an [evidence review](#).

## HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

Early in the development of the Higher Education Learning Agenda in 2019, USAID created a [higher education program framework](#) to depict its vision of higher education as a central actor in development (see Exhibit 1). The core functions of a higher education system are to (1) provide quality and relevant education and training, (2) advance knowledge and research, and (3) engage and strengthen networks and communities. The intended outcomes of USAID higher education programming are improved higher education capacity, strengthened higher education partnerships and transnational relationships, and strengthened capacity of higher education institutions (HEIs) to become central actors in development. Principles guiding USAID’s work in higher education are equity and inclusion, evidence and data, local ownership, and sustainability.



## LEARNING AGENDA CENTRAL OBJECTIVE AND SUPPORTING GOALS

USAID prepared a statement of the central objective and supporting goals of the learning agenda to emphasize that evidence-based programming is the principle desired outcome of the learning agenda, during both its development and implementation phases. The supporting goals clarify the role of stakeholders in achieving that outcome.

### CENTRAL OBJECTIVE

USAID/Washington, missions, and implementing partners (IPs) use evidence-based best practices to strengthen higher education programming, improve higher education partnerships, and facilitate higher education capacity development. This allows higher education systems and HEIs in partner countries to become central actors in locally-led development, capable of multiplying the impact of USAID investments through employment-oriented teaching and learning, problem-solving knowledge, and technology generation and dissemination.

### SUPPORTING GOALS

1. The key learning agenda stakeholders develop and implement improved metrics and analytics for measuring near-term and long-term outcomes and impacts of higher education programming, as well as for assessing the capacity of higher education institutions and systems.

2. National education systems incentivize HEIs to revise curricula, teaching methods, research, and outreach programs to respond to current and emerging market and community conditions.
3. USAID missions develop programming that empowers HEIs with the resources and capacity needed to be key development actors.
4. HEIs in host countries and the United States develop long-term partnerships that build the capacity of HEIs on both sides of the partnerships to be leaders in the creation and dissemination of solutions to local and global challenges.
5. The private sector collaborates with higher education systems and HEIs to identify skills and knowledge needed for employability and to identify research and outreach activities that address pressing economic and social problems.
6. Students become a source of information about the quality of their learning experience and graduates become a source of information about the relevance of academic programs for employment and lifelong learning.

## STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION AND ANALYSIS

USAID identified two broad groups of higher education stakeholders and analyzed their interests, knowledge gaps, and expected involvement in the development and implementation of the learning agenda.

### DIRECT STAKEHOLDERS

These are the designers, implementers, and/or evaluators of USAID-funded higher education programs. Persons in this group identify data, analyses, and information needed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of USAID's higher education programming, gather or assist in gathering and analyzing data for higher education programming, and interpret evidence on higher education programming outcomes.

At USAID/Washington, direct stakeholders work within (1) the Bureau for Development, Democracy, and Innovation (DDI), Center for Education, which plays a coordinating role for USAID higher education programming across sectors, (2) other functional bureaus, particularly Resilience and Food Security; Conflict Prevention and Stabilization; Global Health; and additional Hubs within DDI; as well as the regional bureaus. In USAID missions, direct stakeholders work at the regional or country level, where they may be employed as members of the education technical staff, sector technical staff, or monitoring and evaluation staff.

Program staff members of IPs are also considered direct stakeholders of the learning agenda. Some work in IP headquarters, typically located in the United States, while others work in the partner countries where USAID supports projects and activities.

### INDIRECT STAKEHOLDERS

These are partner country collaborators and beneficiaries of higher education programming. Faculty, administrators, and staff are the largest group of collaborators. Students, alumni, and employers are the largest group of beneficiaries. These collaborators and beneficiaries serve as sources of data and information on HEI supply and demand, as well as informing higher education programming outcomes for the learning agenda.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS ABOUT STAKEHOLDERS

Higher education knowledge gaps and knowledge possession differ among the stakeholder groups. Some of the gaps can be filled by better coordination between USAID and partner country higher education systems and institutions. By identifying and addressing these knowledge gaps, the learning agenda will contribute to greater shared understanding among stakeholders and more effective higher education programming.

For education specialists within USAID and the IPs, the learning agenda is expected to help them make an evidence-based case for an expanded role for higher education programming throughout USAID. For sector specialists, the learning agenda will promote the sharing of models of successful higher education programming and lessons learned across sectors. For specialists who focus primarily on HEIs, the learning agenda is likely to improve their knowledge of higher education systems and ways in which they can be strengthened to improve educational outcomes at the institution level.

To improve USAID higher education programming, indirect stakeholders within higher education systems and government ministries have important roles to play in providing information on national development objectives, national labor force needs, and higher education capacity development needs. HEI administrators and faculty can provide information on their strategic priorities and capacity building needs. Students can provide information on issues of access, quality, and relevance of higher education training and other matters. The private sector can provide information on skill- and knowledge-generation gaps that can and should be filled by HEIs.

## THEME AND QUESTION DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS

USAID held a workshop in December 2019 to prioritize themes identified through stakeholder consultations. Five themes were identified:

1. Management and financing of systems and institutions
2. Academic programs
3. Research and innovation
4. HEI outreach and engagement
5. Access, equity, and student services

After the themes were selected, a list of 60 candidate questions related to the five themes was developed through virtual consultations with the Learning Agenda Task Team (LATT), Mission Learning Agenda Task Team (MLAAT), and external stakeholder groups. To aid in moving toward a short list, the following question selection criteria were developed:

1. Relevance to central objective and learning goals of the learning agenda
2. Relevance to USAID programming decision makers
3. Relevance to desired higher education outcomes
4. Magnitude and scale of potential application of learning
5. Reach (sectors, operating contexts, populations)
6. Feasibility

An online survey was then sent to stakeholders to aid in prioritizing the questions. Based on the results of the survey, the original list of questions was reduced to a list of 25 questions voted as “high priority” by at least half the respondents.

In June 2020, an online workshop was held to further reduce the number of questions. The webinar participants were members of the LAAT, MLAAT, and external stakeholder groups. Participants discussed, analyzed, and voted upon the questions.

## LEARNING QUESTION SELECTION

Based on responses to the survey conducted during the question development workshop, the questions were ranked and vetted to verify that they met the six question selection criteria. The final ten questions selected are shown in Exhibit 2.

Exhibit 2: Higher Education Learning Agenda Questions and Themes

NO.	QUESTION	THEME
1	How can higher education systems and institutions become more strategic in planning, implementing, and monitoring core activities (e.g., enrollment, academic programs, research, and outreach)?	Management and Financing of Systems and Institutions
2	How can financing of higher education systems and institutions become more sustainable?	
3	How can the viability and effectiveness of online and other forms of distance education be improved?	Academic Programs
4	How can skills or competencies (e.g., technical and soft skills) for employability best be identified, analyzed, and incorporated into curricula, teaching, and learning?	
5	How can the practice and culture of teaching become more learner-centered?	
6	How can higher education systems and HEIs play a more active role in developing and strengthening national and regional innovation ecosystems?	Research and Innovation
7	How can HEIs collaborate more effectively with the private sector to enhance the relevance and quality of teaching and learning, and research and innovation?	HEI Outreach and Engagement
8	How can USAID best partner with HEIs to make use of local knowledge and expertise?	
9	How can higher education access, retention, and completion rates be improved for underrepresented populations (e.g., women, indigenous and marginalized populations, and people with disabilities)?	Access, Equity, and Student Services
10	What institutional and behavioral changes are needed to improve gender awareness and gender equity?	



# ASSESSMENT OF AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

A team of researchers conducted a review of the available evidence relevant to the ten learning agenda questions. The aim of the review was to assess the quantity of evidence and the extent to which the research findings are organized in an accessible manner.

## EVIDENCE REVIEW

The team identified literature selection criteria and developed a search strategy. They collected and analyzed over 200 published studies. Based on the volume of evidence, which was measured by the number of identified studies, the maturity of the evidence, and the number of systematic or narrative reviews, each of the ten learning questions was assigned to one of the following categories:

1. Evidence generation – relatively little evidence is available and therefore additional evidence needs to be generated by researchers, program managers, or other sources.
2. Evidence capture – evidence is available but few systematic or narrative literature reviews that organize it are available, and therefore findings must be aggregated, synthesized, distilled, and packaged for sharing with evidence users.
3. Evidence dissemination – evidence is relatively abundant and multiple literature reviews categorizing and summarizing it are available for dissemination to users.

The ten learning questions are broad and therefore none of the categories imply perfection. Though the evidence for questions in the dissemination category is more complete than for those in the other categories, some aspects of questions in this category may still require capture or generation of additional evidence.

## QUESTION-BY-QUESTION ASSESSMENT

The team found large differences in the volume and maturity of the body of evidence across the learning questions. For some questions, a large amount of well-organized evidence is available. For other questions, the evidence is scant and not well organized in the literature. This section assesses the evidence available for each question.

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### **Question 1: How can higher education systems and institutions become more strategic in planning, implementing, and monitoring core activities (e.g., enrollment, academic programs, research, and outreach)?**

**Evidence category:** *Dissemination*

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The review team found many empirical papers on this question. However, despite the abundance of papers that are broadly related to this question, findings from the literature are not easy to summarize. More than half of the empirical papers are qualitative analyses or case studies based on relatively small samples and lacking controls that would account for the influence of variables besides the intervention(s).

One reason for the difficulty in summarizing the evidence on higher education strategy is the paucity of relevant data at the HEI level. Most countries have no official databases maintained by higher education

systems on management or administration of HEIs. For researchers wishing to conduct research on higher education strategy, gathering data on institutions is time-consuming and expensive. Researchers rarely have access to data on a large enough number of institutions to use quantitative methods that would control for contextual influences.

A second reason for the difficulty in neatly summarizing the evidence related to this question has to do with the nature of the topic itself. Strategic management is more about mindset than technique. It requires a mindset that embraces change and proactively seeks to change the inside of an organization, such as an HEI, to ensure that it survives and flourishes, given the changes occurring in the outside environment. Along with a conducive mindset, effective change management requires high-level soft skills that include vision, communication, team building, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution. A higher education leader possessing a change-embracing mindset and the aforementioned set of soft skills is constantly scanning the external environment for changes that present opportunities or threats, searching for models and ideas for internal responses that ensure survival and growth of the institution, and fine-tuning internal changes through feedback. Though they are critical elements of organizational change, mindset and soft skills are not easily measured. For this reason, business schools and organizational studies programs rely heavily on case studies in research on strategy.

Moving forward, in the absence of large data sets and controlled studies on higher education strategy, it is recommended that USAID use and promote the creation of case studies for evidence-based programming related to higher education strategies. The database of literature gathered by the evidence review team includes a number of case studies, some involving a single institution and some multiple institutions. Future additions to the database could greatly expand the number of case studies on higher education strategy. A creative and potentially very effective evidence-gathering approach would be for higher education leaders to review several case studies on higher education change management, followed by a site visit to one or more of the institutions featured in the case studies. Productive site visits require advance planning, which could be informed by the knowledge gained from the written case studies. Based on the case studies, a list of issues and questions could be developed and sent to the host institution so that it can prepare before the visitors arrive. Post-trip processing of lessons learned is also essential to make site visits worthwhile, and a written summary of best practices observed during the site visit could be prepared by the visitors. This document could become part of a regional or global USAID database on best practices in higher education strategy.

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## **Question 2: How can financing of higher education systems and institutions become more sustainable?**

### ***Evidence category: Generation***

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Empirical evidence on higher education financing is difficult to find in a form that allows analysis across USAID partner countries or across HEIs within countries. It is therefore not surprising that the number of empirical papers found by the evidence review team is small and no systematic or narrative reviews of literature from developing countries were found.

At the national level, many governments publish budgetary data on higher education, but it is typically highly aggregated, allowing analysis of trends in the total higher education budget allocation but not trends in expenditure and revenue. Data on these components and how they shift over time are important for understanding financial sustainability. Because of insufficient government funding for higher education, many HEIs now pursue alternative revenue streams and have attempted to tighten expenditure control. To analyze financial management of non-government funding requires institution-

level data, and these must be obtained directly from the institutions themselves in most countries. Many African governments require HEIs to publish an annual report or audit report. Though the reports typically provide a single-year snapshot rather than multi-year trends, it is possible to undertake a sustainability analysis by analyzing data reported for multiple years.

Given the paucity of empirical evidence on this topic, USAID could focus on generating evidence on higher education financial management. Faculty and students in business schools and public management departments could be encouraged to analyze financial strategies over time at the higher education system level and HEI level, assisting systems and institutions in creating and organizing the data. Case studies could be carried out on non-traditional sources of funding, such as previously untapped student populations, internally generated revenue, sale of intellectual property and services, philanthropic contributions from alumni and businesses, and other sources.

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### **Question 3: How can the viability and effectiveness of online and other forms of distance education be improved?**

*Evidence category: Dissemination*

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This is the question that was ranked highest in overall priority by stakeholders in 2019 during the learning agenda development process. The question is even more relevant in the year 2020 because the coronavirus pandemic has forced HEIs around the world to increase the use of distance learning. Fortunately, the evidence on this question is relatively abundant, and the analytical methods used in many of the studies are rigorous. The five systematic reviews identified on this topic will be of great value to USAID in summarizing the literature. In addition, this is one of the few learning questions for which a meta-analysis on existing research is available.

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### **Question 4: How can skills or competencies (e.g., technical and soft skills) for employability best be identified, analyzed, and incorporated into curricula, teaching, and learning?**

*Evidence category: Dissemination*

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This question addresses a high-priority issue for higher education systems and HEIs worldwide: the labor market relevance of higher education training. Higher education leaders are under immense pressure today from employers, politicians, and parents to provide training on technical and soft skills, in addition to the subject-matter knowledge on which higher education has traditionally focused.

The evidence review team had little difficulty finding evidence on this topic. A particularly promising subtheme in this literature is competency-based education, which includes technical skills and soft skills subject-matter knowledge. The combined total of systematic and narrative literature reviews is larger for this question than for any of the other learning questions, implying a relatively high degree of maturity of this body of literature. These reviews provide efficient access to this body of literature. In addition, a meta-analysis of literature on this topic is available.

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### **Question 5: How can the practice and culture of teaching become more learner-centered?**

*Evidence category: Capture*

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The evidence review team discovered relatively little literature on the topic of learner-centered education in several of USAID's geographical regions, probably due to cultural differences between these

regions and the high-income countries where this concept originated. Learner-centered education, by seeking to empower students in the learning process, involves a shift in power relations between teachers and students. The review team discovered studies that point to the failure of attempts to introduce learner-centered education in cultures that reinforce hierarchical relationships between teachers and students. Learner-centered education, as conceptualized in Western societies, is especially likely to fail in settings where the demand for higher education has grown rapidly, but funding has lagged and the only solution that has emerged is to increase class size.

The evidence review was intended to be a learning process and, in that spirit, the evidence review team adapted to what they learned regarding this question. They broadened the literature search to focus on best practices in teaching rather than just learner-centered education. Going forward, it is recommended that the focus of question 5 remains on capturing best practices in teaching rather than the narrower topic of learner-centered instruction. In particular, it is recommended that more literature be gathered on best practices in teaching large classes.

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**Question 6: How can higher education systems and higher education institutions play a more active role in developing and strengthening national and regional innovation ecosystems?**

**Evidence category:** *Generation*

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Higher education systems and HEIs are expected, particularly by the national governments and foreign donors who fund them, to go beyond the traditional endpoint of academic research to provide innovative and practical solutions to economic and social problems. Higher education systems and HEIs cannot do this alone. Innovation requires conducive science and technology policies, as well as collaboration with research institutes, the private sector, and government agencies. Together, the policies and institutions involved in turning research findings into commercialized or government-provided products and services are referred to as the innovation ecosystem. The literature on innovation ecosystems pertains primarily to high-income countries. Relatively little literature on this topic focuses on developing countries. The evidence review team found just 13 empirical papers on innovation ecosystems in developing countries and only one review of literature.

Additional research is needed to provide guidance on how to develop inter-institutional relationships that promote innovation in developing countries. It seems likely that different kinds of institutions are needed to nurture innovation in developing countries than in high-income countries, and researchers could be encouraged to “be innovative in their study of innovation.” Much of the literature on innovation systems takes Silicon Valley in California, Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, or the Route 128 corridor in Boston as ideal models, but these models cannot be duplicated in many other parts of the world. In a developing country setting, innovations may be incubated in outdoor workshops, social venues where useful computer programmers congregate, or village health clinics. Informal and semiformal innovation milieus that are emerging in many developing countries have received little attention from researchers. These innovative environments are spawned by local computer programmers, craftsmen, and artisans, some using mobile technologies while others use local natural raw materials. Some developing-country HEIs are involved with innovators in the informal and semiformal end of the innovation spectrum, but such collaboration is often carried out by one-off donor-funded projects that get written up in project reports. They are seldom the focus of innovation systems research. USAID could identify and motivate researchers to gather data on informal and semi-formal mechanisms that nurture and sustain small-and medium-scale innovators and analyze interventions aimed at promoting them.

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**Question 7: How can HEIs collaborate more effectively with the private sector to enhance the relevance and quality of teaching and learning, and research and innovation?**

*Evidence category: Dissemination*

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The push for relevance in higher education has led to much talk about collaboration with the private sector. Despite the rhetoric, many HEIs struggle to find ways to engage in such collaboration. Evidence on “what works and what doesn’t” would be valuable to both HEIs and to donor agencies seeking to nurture higher education-private sector linkages.

There are two distinct bodies of literature on higher education-private sector collaboration. The first is a relatively large body of literature on “university-industry linkages,” a term that typically signals a focus on research and innovation. The evidence review team identified four systematic literature reviews on university-industry linkages in developing countries, which USAID can draw on in developing dissemination products related to this question. Many of the studies covered by these literature reviews, as well as the individual studies collected during the evidence review, are empirical and not merely descriptive. These studies provide a strong evidence base for the design of policies and programs.

The second body of literature focuses on higher education-private sector collaboration related to teaching and learning. Key themes within this literature are workplace-based learning experiences, such as internships, and curriculum reform in which employers assist in identifying relevant knowledge and skills and in developing ways in which they can be taught and learned. Most of these studies are descriptive and lack analytical rigor. There are very few empirical analyses that shed light on the relative effectiveness of alternative forms of teaching-related collaboration between HEIs and the private sector. More research is needed on higher education-private sector collaboration on teaching and learning.

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**Question 8: How can USAID best partner with HEIs to make use of local knowledge and expertise?**

*Evidence category: Generate*

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This was the most challenging question for the evidence review team. Fewer empirical studies were found for this question than for any of the other learning questions. The question has two themes: (1) how USAID partners with HEIs, and (2) HEIs as sources of local knowledge and expertise. The review team searched for literature on both of these themes but relatively little was found for either.

The concept of local knowledge is used primarily in two contexts. First, it is used by anthropologists and sociologists to refer to traditional or indigenous, nonscientific knowledge, particularly related to homeopathic medicine. Second, it is used by researchers on sustainable development to refer to the knowledge of residents who are guardians of the natural ecosystems in which they live and pursue livelihoods. The evidence review team found virtually no literature on local knowledge outside of these two areas of study.

The evidence review team found no research studies on direct partnerships between donor agencies and HEIs. The primary way in which donor agencies tap the knowledge and expertise of partner-country HEIs is through partnerships between developing country HEIs and donor country HEIs. While higher education partnerships of this sort are valuable, the evidence review team interpreted them to be peripheral to this learning question, though in retrospect it seems it would have been useful to pursue this angle.

As the literature database is expanded, it is recommended that this question be reformulated after further dialogue with higher education stakeholders. A re-written question could draw on one or more of the following bodies of evidence: (1) literature on higher education partnerships, specifically those designed to expand the involvement of developing-country HEIs in development-related issues, (2) literature on the “developmental university,” which focuses on research and innovation addressing economically and socially relevant issues, (3) literature on the threefold mission of teaching, research, and extension in U.S. land-grant universities and the transfer of this model to developing countries, and/or (4) literature on the involvement of developing-country HEIs (e.g., Earth University in Costa Rica and Gulu University in Uganda) in community outreach.

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**Question 9: How can higher education access, retention, and completion rates be improved for underrepresented populations (e.g., women, indigenous and marginalized populations, and people with disabilities)?**

**Evidence category:** *Capture*

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A fairly large volume of literature was found for this question, but it was placed in the capture category rather than the dissemination category because there are fewer literature reviews for it than for some of the other questions. Consequently, prior to preparing dissemination materials, it will be necessary to distill the relevant findings from individual studies. While only two systematic reviews were found on this topic, one of them is extraordinarily rich in useful content ([Clifford et al., 2013](#)). This review presents informative summaries of the findings on a variety of policy interventions, including affirmative action, increased access for specific subgroups, financial aid for students, and open and distance education as a means of increasing access. The review also identifies intervention studies according to whether the implementing institution was public, private, or TVET.

The evidence on this question is strongest on the subtopics of access and retention in higher education and weakest on completion (graduation) rates. Regarding sub-populations, the literature is strongest on women and people with disabilities and weakest on indigenous and marginalized groups. There is a need to generate additional evidence on these sub-topics and sub-populations for which evidence is weak. Many USAID missions focus on underrepresented populations in their Country Development Coordination Strategy (CDCS), and plans could be made to generate evidence to fill these knowledge gaps.

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**Question 10: What institutional and behavioral changes are needed to improve gender awareness and gender equity?**

**Evidence category:** *Capture*

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The volume of developing-country literature on this topic is modest. Just one systematic review of literature was identified, and it has a wide scope, only a small portion of which is devoted to gender issues. All but one of the 19 relevant studies identified by the evidence review team use narrative, qualitative, or mixed methods, and, therefore, distilling relevant information to prepare dissemination materials will require considerable effort.

This question deals with two sub-themes: gender equity and gender awareness. Gender equity in higher education is covered in the literature gathered for this question as well as for question 9 on underrepresented populations.

On the issue of gender awareness in higher education, however, there is relatively little evidence available for developing countries. While there is a small body of literature on gender mainstreaming in curricula and research in developing-country HEIs, most of it focuses on the lack of gender considerations in HEIs and on recommendations for change. Few studies analyze the extent to which gender mainstreaming policies and programs have been implemented in higher education. Research is needed to document “what works” in gender mainstreaming in higher education in developing countries, focusing on specific strategies and interventions that have been implemented. Outcomes could be measured in terms of student and faculty gender awareness, retention rates of female students, gender balance in staffing, the volume of research informed by gender considerations, and the incidence of sexual harassment.

Other important gender awareness topics on which there is little literature relevant to USAID-partner countries include gender-differenced student services, mentoring for female students and junior faculty, and sexual harassment. These are research topics that could be addressed by higher education partnerships between U.S. and partner-country HEIs.

Exhibit 3: Higher Education Learning Agenda Question Categorization

GENERATE	CAPTURE	DISSEMINATE
<p><b>Q2:</b> How can financing of higher education systems and institutions become more sustainable?</p>	<p><b>Q5:</b> How can the practice and culture of teaching become more learner-centered?</p>	<p><b>Q1:</b> How can higher education systems and institutions become more strategic in planning, implementing, and monitoring core activities?</p>
<p><b>Q6:</b> How can higher education systems and HEIs play a more active role in the development and strengthening of national and regional innovation ecosystems?</p>	<p><b>Q9:</b> How can higher education access, retention, and completion rates be improved for underrepresented populations?</p>	<p><b>Q3:</b> How can the viability and effectiveness of online and other forms of distance education be improved?</p>
<p><b>Q8:</b> How can USAID best partner with HEIs to make use of local knowledge and expertise?</p>	<p><b>Q10:</b> What institutional and behavioral changes are needed to improve gender awareness and gender equity?</p>	<p><b>Q4:</b> How can skills or competencies (e.g., technical and soft skills) for employability best be identified, analyzed, and incorporated into curricula, teaching, and learning?</p>
		<p><b>Q7:</b> How can HEIs collaborate most effectively with the private sector to enhance the relevance and quality of teaching and learning, and research and innovation?</p>

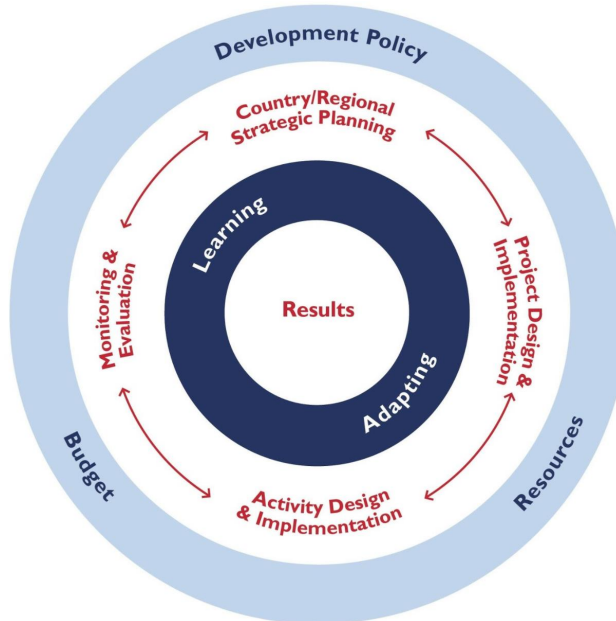
# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

A set of implementation recommendations was developed for the Higher Education Learning Agenda based on the findings and conclusions of the evidence review and lessons gleaned from learning agendas in other USAID sectors and other organizations. Successful implementation of the learning agenda will require it to be embedded within the program cycle. Other recommendations focus on policy areas, evidence champions, an advisory group, monitoring and narrating progress, targeting specific policy areas, project and activity evaluations, improvement of indicators, collaboration with researchers and the private sector, further development of the literature database, and learning agenda products.

## PROMOTE EVIDENCE USE IN PROGRAM CYCLE

The most important strategy for implementation of the USAID Higher Education Learning Agenda is to integrate its use into USAID’s program cycle (USAID 2019). For the learning agenda to have a significant impact on the quality of higher education programming, the evidence that it offers must be used within the cycle, especially in the early phases of the cycle. Chapter 201 of USAID’s Automated Directive System describes the cycle and presents several principles on which it is founded (USAID 2019). The first of these principles is to “apply analytic rigor to support evidence-based decision-making.” Each component of the cycle provides an opportunity for the use of evidence.

Exhibit 4: USAID Program Cycle



The first component is **country and regional strategic planning**, in which missions identify development objectives (DOs) and regions identify regional development objectives. Missions then contextualize and justify their DOs in a CDCS. The Higher Education Learning Agenda could be consulted by missions and regions as they develop and define their objectives, not only with regard to education but also with regard to other non-education sectors.



The second component is the **design and implementation of projects**. As of October 2020, USAID expanded this component to include stand-alone activities. In this component, USAID defines intended results related to the objectives in the CDCS and gives a broad outline of how the results will be achieved. Seven of the learning questions (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10) are particularly relevant to education sector projects, and evidence related to these questions can be used by project planners to understand context and to identify the most effective interventions. Three of the questions (4, 6, 8) are relevant to non-education projects that use higher education as a vehicle for accomplishing their objectives. Here, too, the available evidence will help steer planners towards best practices.

The third component is the **design and implementation of activities**, in which USAID, typically through IPs, decides how a project will be implemented. Currently, USAID strongly encourages activities that build local capacity and self-reliance. It is at this level of planning that the Higher Education Learning Agenda can have the greatest impact on increasing the volume and improving the quality of higher education programming. The seven questions that are particularly relevant for education sector projects (1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 10) provide a wealth of ideas for specific interventions and evidence on their effectiveness. The three questions that are relevant to non-education sectors provide planners in those areas with new ideas for higher education activities that would accomplish sector objectives (these questions are also identified in the preceding paragraph).

The fourth component is **monitoring and evaluation**. The evaluation stage also provides an opportunity for the use of literature from the Higher Education Learning Agenda. Project and program evaluations gathered for the evidence review provide ideas on evaluation methods and on how evaluation findings can be used to improve programming.

Several other activities related to the program cycle provide opportunities for evidence use. Missions are required to develop Collaborating, Learning, and Adapting plans that specify organizational learning activities. Identifying knowledge gaps in higher education programming and the nature of evidence that would address these gaps could be one such learning activity. Portfolio reviews, which are part of USAID's strategic planning, also provide an opportunity to review knowledge gaps that could be filled by evidence on higher education programming.

A recently released USAID report entitled [The Program Cycle Learning Study](#) analyzed the use of the program cycle in four missions based on interviews and review of documents (USAID 2020). The study concluded that the missions used evidence to provide background information and to shed light in contextual discussions in their CDCS and Project Appraisal Documents (PADs). However, the missions seldom used evidence in choosing theories of change or in the choice of interventions. This is surprising given that the national and global evidence-based programming movement has attempted to expand the use of evidence, especially in the design of interventions.

To overcome barriers in the use of evidence, the Center for Education could develop briefs illustrating how missions can use evidence to improve higher education programming throughout the program cycle, focusing in particular on evidence use in the development and use of theories of change and in the design of interventions. Early in the implementation phase of the learning agenda, a short brief illustrating its use in the program cycle could be prepared. Later, a longer brief showing how multiple missions are using the learning agenda could be prepared.

## TARGET SELECTED USAID POLICIES

USAID policies provide an opportunity for identifying specific ways in which the learning agenda can be used. Initially, it is recommended that four policy areas be targeted: education; democracy, human rights, and governance; private sector engagement; and gender equality and female empowerment. The education policy area is a natural fit for a learning agenda focused on higher education. The other four policy areas recommended for targeting for learning agenda implementation are ones in which training, research, and community outreach are typical elements in USAID programming. There is opportunity for substantial expansion of higher education involvement in programming related to these policy areas since many partner-country HEIs are eager to play a more prominent role in national and community development. A knowledge product could be developed identifying ways in which the Higher Education Learning Agenda can be used in programming in each of the targeted policy areas.

## DEVELOP GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE

It is recommended that the Center for Education develop a governance structure for managing the implementation of the learning agenda. The purpose of this structure would be to ensure that evidence on each of the learning questions is being generated, captured, or disseminated. One possible structure would make use of Theme Leaders (TLs). Given the distribution of questions across the themes, three TLs would coordinate two questions, one would coordinate one question, and one would coordinate three questions.

The TL's first task could be to identify a list of persons within the agency with whom they will maintain virtual contact regarding the questions to which they have been assigned. Contact can be maintained by email, social media, or videoconferencing. The contact list could be developed through personal knowledge of those involved in higher education-related programming in the education or non-education development sectors. The Center for Education can also provide valuable input on suggested members of the TL's contact list.

Through periodic communication with the members of the list, the TLs would promote awareness of the availability of the evidence gap map and its use. For questions in the dissemination and capture categories, TLs could send references and abstracts from the available systematic and narrative reviews to members of their contact list. For the questions in the generation category, TLs could send references for the few available literature reviews, supplemented by references for individual studies. The TLs could also elicit information on new evidence of which the members may be aware.

Additional research or curation of research is needed for the questions in the capture and generation categories. For the questions in the capture category, the TLs can be a source of ideas on targeted topics for which distillation of findings from the available research would be most useful. They could also be on the lookout for new systematic or narrative literature reviews that become available for questions in the capture category. The TLs with questions in the generation category would be a conduit for providing ideas to the Center for Education on new sources of data and on how to identify researchers who may be interested in conducting research on these questions.

## IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT EVIDENCE CHAMPIONS

The Higher Education Learning Agenda was developed through a highly consultative process, and buy-in appears to have been widespread. For this level of enthusiasm to continue, the learning agenda must be

useful and practical. The implementation strategy of the Center for Education could focus on demonstrating the use of the learning agenda through actual, concrete examples. Examples could be developed by internal Evidence Champions (ECs), envisioned to become agents through whom use of the learning agenda will spread. These are persons with enthusiasm, vision, and a skill set that enables them to use evidence in their work and to show others how it can be used. ECs have been an important channel through which evidence-based programming has spread in other organizations (Hewlett Foundation 2018).

## APPOINT ADVISORY GROUP

It is recommended that a Higher Education Learning Agenda Advisory Group (HELAAG) be formed by the Center for Education to provide strategic direction and guidance. This group could include, but not be limited to, ECs or TLs. It could also include some of the persons who were members of the LATT and MLATT. Since missions will play a key role in the implementation of the learning agenda, the HELAAG could include mission personnel. To include spatially dispersed members, meetings will need to be held virtually and could be led either by the Center for Education or by group members. The meetings will provide opportunities for members to share how they are using evidence, new ways in which it might be used, and new items and sources of evidence. The HELAAG could also review and provide feedback on evidence dissemination products prior to their release to the public.

## MONITOR AND NARRATE PROGRESS

A Quarterly Evidence Roundup could be initiated to collect several types of information. The first type is information on uses of the Higher Education Learning Agenda within the agency. This information can be used to create an implementation narrative identifying and promoting “early wins,” which can be used in products intended to promote the learning agenda and disseminate evidence. The roundup can also gather information on items and sources of new evidence.

An Annual Evidence Summit could be held each year to share and assess progress in the use and further development of the learning agenda, learn from the feedback, and identify priorities for the upcoming year. The first summit could focus on “early wins,” which will provide momentum for the second year of implementation. An early win, for example, might be the use of evidence in a mission’s CDCS to provide background information and program justification for a new country strategy involving higher education. A compelling win would be one that would, within the same mission, make use of evidence in a PAD developed to implement that strategy through particular interventions that available evidence has analyzed empirically in literature curated by the Higher Education Learning Agenda. ECs, IPs, HEIs, and private sector partners could present and discuss examples of how they are using the learning agenda. Researchers could be invited to present analyses they have conducted using data from USAID or other sources. A working session on higher education research could collect and organize themes and issues on which additional research is needed. From the information exchanged during the summit, the Center for Education could prepare an annual Higher Education Emerging Research Issues list and circulate it among researchers. A summary document that includes the Emerging Research Issues list could be made available to the public.

## PROMOTE HIGH QUALITY EVALUATIONS

Project and activity evaluations are a valuable source of evidence during and after the life of a project. The literature database assembled during the learning agenda evidence review includes evaluations by USAID and other organizations. Additional evaluations of USAID-funded higher education activities carried out in recent years could be added and, moving forward, all future higher education evaluations could be added. A process could be developed to identify lessons learned from evaluations, to identify ways in which the findings and lessons can be used, and to make this information readily available to decision makers and users.

Performance evaluations provide evidence on implementation processes and their effectiveness. Impact evaluations provide evidence on the outcomes of higher education interventions. Both types of evaluation may provide insights into new and creative sources of data and methods of analysis.

Performance evaluations provide an opportunity to evaluate the extent to which evidence was used in the various stages of the program cycle. Evaluations could examine the use of evidence, particularly for intervention design. Evaluations could also assess monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) data quality, analysis of performance, reporting of results, and the process of learning from the internal evidence generated by the project.

Randomized controlled trial (RCT) methods, once used largely in medical research, are now widely used for impact evaluations in development research. Highly ranked academic journals now publish many articles using RCT methods, and researchers are eager to acquire data that can be analyzed for research papers for publication. The embrace of this method by development researchers over the past decade provides an opportunity to expand the pool of evidence on higher education interventions. RCTs are considered by many researchers to be the gold-standard in impact evaluation. While RCT evaluations are costly, some researchers and groups of researchers have attracted funds from philanthropic sources, and the availability of these external funds has further expanded the use of RCT evaluations. To carry out an RCT, it is essential that the evaluation researchers be involved in the project and activity design from the beginning. Without the prior involvement of researchers to ensure random selection of beneficiaries, the RCT method cannot be adopted. It is recommended that the Center for Education develop a list of individuals and groups of researchers that conduct RCT research and link them to USAID and IP personnel in the early phase of project and activity development.

A course on Evidence in Education currently being developed for USAID will identify ways that education work at the mission level can contribute to and benefit from data and evidence. One of the objectives of the course is to help education staff better understand what constitutes high quality evaluation and how to interact with IPs regarding the use of data and evaluations. During the course, participants will exchange learning agendas from their operating units and then discuss ways to share evidence and contribute to and learn from multiple USAID learning agendas. ECs and TLs could be encouraged to participate in this course.

## PROMOTE USE OF RELEVANT INDICATORS

Some of the Higher Education Learning Agenda questions are supported by indicators in the [Standard Foreign Assistance Indicators](#). This overlap means that the MEL component of higher education projects and activities can be a valuable source of evidence for individual projects and activities as well as for the evidence database of the Higher Education Learning Agenda. To make potential learning agenda users

aware of this overlap, a knowledge product could be developed to map USAID’s standard indicators that measure higher education outcomes to the ten learning questions.

Central to the Higher Education Learning Agenda is the building of capacity to improve recruitment and retention, transform curricula and teaching methods, and make research relevant to societal needs. Recent changes in the standard indicator list used by USAID have improved the measurement of capacity building. One of the capacity-building indicators added to the list is an index of organizational performance ([CBLD-9](#)). This indicator can be used to measure whether USG-funded capacity development efforts have led to improved organizational performance of higher education systems and institutions receiving organizational capacity development support. Though measurement of organizational performance is widely perceived to be difficult, tools are available to facilitate this task. For example, USAID’s [Local Solutions team](#) recommends use of the Organizational Performance Index (OPI) framework, which breaks organizational performance into four measurable components. For higher education programming, the OPI framework is highly relevant and can be used to guide both project/activity design and MEL. It is recommended that the [OPI handbook](#) and other materials be used to train users of the Higher Education Learning Agenda in data planning, data quality management, data analysis, and data reporting for capacity building. A knowledge product on organizational performance measurement in higher education could be developed for IPs and partner organizations, with the aim of increasing the use of capacity-building indicators. The Higher Education Champions List, currently maintained by the Center for Education, is a communication channel through which use of recently added standard indicators could be encouraged.

Missions may prepare project Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plans and are required to submit Activity Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning Plans. These plans provide opportunities for missions to use the existing standard indicators and to develop new custom indicators, some of which could eventually become standard USAID indicators. MEL plans for projects and activities also provide an opportunity for the use of standard and custom indicators. In general, standard indicators are preferred by USAID but use of custom indicators is allowed. The custom indicator option is most valuable as an experimental channel for developing and refining indicators that ultimately become part of the standard indicator list. To serve this purpose, custom indicator development could be carried out through consultation with higher education stakeholders beyond the particular mission, project, or activity for which the indicator is being developed. The internal USAID Higher Education Working Group is a forum that can provide valuable input for the development of custom indicators.

## GATHER INFORMATION FROM COLLABORATORS AND BENEFICIARIES

The section on indirect stakeholders of the learning agenda identified collaborators and beneficiaries in higher education systems and institutions as important sources of evidence during the implementation phase of the learning agenda. Higher education collaborators are administrators, faculty, and staff, while beneficiaries are students, alumni, and employers. They are essential sources of information on HEI demand and supply and on higher education programming outcomes. Missions can obtain higher education supply information from published ministry and institution reports. Missions could also request monitoring and evaluation units of higher education systems and institutions to provide unpublished education supply information. On the demand side, institutional capacity building activities sponsored by USAID could focus on helping HEIs obtain information from graduates and employers, with the aim of providing an evidence base for reform of curricula and teaching methods.

## BUILD EVIDENCE GENERATION AND IMPLEMENTATION RESEARCH INTO PROGRAM DESIGN

A vital step in evidence-based programming is to build evidence generation into program design and to take data generation requirements into account in the design of activities. Data attain the status of evidence only if they can be analyzed in such a way that the effects of programmed interventions can be distinguished from the effects of forces outside the project or activity. This can be done using well-known program evaluation methods that focus on the design of the data sample and on the type of data to be gathered, but both must be planned and baseline data must be gathered before program implementation begins. A data plan capable of generating evidence specifies the variables for which data are to be gathered, the sample selection method, methods of statistical analysis, and other details. It is therefore recommended that higher education project/activity design teams include persons with knowledge of rigorous program evaluation methods and that program and data planning occur simultaneously and not sequentially.

Sound data is the first step in producing evidence from projects and activities. Research is a second, and essential step. To help achieve the objectives of the learning agenda, it is recommended further that USAID analyze project/activity data with a focus on implementation. Implementation research, as described in a [working document](#) from the Center for Education, aims at understanding “how and why implementation is working or not working.”

## COLLABORATE WITH OUTSIDE RESEARCHERS

Researchers outside USAID can be of enormous help in expanding the pool of available evidence. Collaborators could be sought to conduct research on questions in the generation category in particular. U.S. HEIs that serve as IPs, both prime and subprime awardees, are potential targets for collaboration with the Center for Education. Many academic researchers, seeing an opportunity to produce publishable research, would be eager for access to USAID’s research agenda and to data that could be used for research addressing the learning questions. A webinar targeting researchers in HEIs and other research organizations in both the United States and partner countries could be developed to introduce them to the learning agenda, how it is being used, and how they can contribute to its further development. These institutions and researchers could be provided with opportunities to sign up for the [Higher Education Champions List](#), which will include learning agenda updates.

Building capacity to generate evidence could be a key component of higher education partnerships between HEIs in the United States and USAID partner countries. The learning questions constitute a research agenda on which partnerships could draw in helping graduate students and faculty researchers choose their research topics. In addition to filling gaps in the available evidence, such partnerships would be a means through which graduate students in both the United States and partner countries could become involved in research relevant to higher education. Faculty advisors could make USAID’s Higher Education Emerging Research Issues list, described earlier in this document, available to graduate students who are searching for research topics for theses, dissertations, or papers assigned in graduate courses.

ECs and TLs could develop informal “evidence collaborations” with researchers, such as former graduate school professors and colleagues, within their network of contacts. Through such collaboration, researchers would become aware of higher education knowledge gaps they could target

in research proposals they would prepare and submit to various sponsors of competitive research funding. Informal evidence collaborations with professors would also be a vehicle through which graduate advisees could be informed of issues on which they could focus in their thesis or dissertation research.

## COLLABORATE WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

Employability of HEI graduates is a high priority for private-sector employers and government officials. Closing the skill gap through changes in higher education curricula and teaching methods has been a challenge. The gap cannot be closed without a high degree of collaboration between HEIs and the private sector. Training for employability is the topic of one of the learning questions in the dissemination category. A great deal of evidence is available on this topic, but it is not widely known in many countries where USAID works. Based on the available evidence, a toolkit could be developed to promote best practices in higher education-private sector collaboration. The audience would be both HEIs and the private sector.

One of the learning questions in the evidence generation category deals with innovation ecosystems. Private firms are an important part of the innovation ecosystem, and collaboration between them and HEIs is essential both for generating innovations and for generating evidence on the relative effectiveness of interventions intended to stimulate innovations. Many of the HEIs that are IPs for USAID's Feed the Future Innovation Labs and the Global Development Lab collaborate with private firms in partner countries and the United States. The reports of these projects could be gleaned for documentation on how the projects are helping partner-country HEIs to link with the private sector and develop national innovation ecosystems. A report could be prepared on the lessons learned from the private sector collaboration of the Feed the Future Innovation Labs and the Global Development Lab.

There is potential for private sector involvement in evidence-based programming through the development of IT products and services that gather data related to higher education. For example, a local artificial intelligence firm in Côte d'Ivoire is developing a platform for tracing the employment history of HEI graduates by accessing employment data that the country's business firms are required to submit to the government (personal communication with Dr. Isaac Bayoh, founder of FuturAfric). This and other information will be used to implement a feedback loop between HEIs and the private sector, aimed at improving graduates' readiness for the job market. Based on the information gathered, a combination of artificial intelligence and human input will produce student readiness scores, skills and knowledge gap analysis, findings useful for adapting curricula, onboarding of higher education and private-sector collaborators, and evaluation and management of performance.

Another way in which IT firms can contribute to evidence generation for higher education programming is in the development and refinement of online teaching and learning platforms that, in addition to providing course content, monitor outcomes of various teaching and assessment methods. This could become a source of valuable data to generate evidence related to the learning questions on distance learning, training for employability, and student-centered learning.

## ENRICH AND EXPAND THE LITERATURE DATABASE

The literature database developed by the evidence review is a starting point for continuing collection and curation of higher education evidence. A process must be put in place to disseminate and distill available evidence and to generate new evidence on an ongoing basis. This will require at least one

person for whom this task is part of their job description. Interns working under a supervisor can also make a valuable contribution to the further development of the database.

For questions in the capture category, the task is to distill and package evidence. Even for questions in the dissemination category, some packaging is required for some of the questions, as described in the section of this report on question-by-question assessment. For questions in the generate category, the task is to identify and contact researchers who can generate relevant evidence. For this, the ECs could draw upon their personal network of contacts with professors, other researchers, and current or former graduate school colleagues.

The evidence review has laid a solid foundation for conducting more targeted and in-depth reviews of the evidence. The systematic reviews identified in the mapping review exercise are broad and address the learning questions less precisely than reviews that would be based on more refined evidence domains and search criteria. It is therefore recommended that systematic reviews tailored to the regions in which USAID operates and the interventions that it implements be undertaken for the learning questions, particularly those in the "evidence capture" category. The evidence review provides detailed suggestions regarding the development of targeted systematic reviews.

The Higher Education Champions List could request readers to provide references for additional studies addressing the learning questions. The HELAAG meetings and the Annual Evidence Summit are also venues in which references for additional studies could be shared. A process could be set up for capturing new references and incorporating them into the literature database.

## DEVELOP KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTS

The first communication challenge is to inform persons in the direct stakeholder group (USAID headquarters, missions, and IPs) of the availability of the learning agenda and its intended uses. For this purpose, a [brochure](#) has already been developed by the Center for Education. This brochure could be distributed through the [Higher Education Champions List](#). ECs could be encouraged to share the brochure with direct stakeholders with whom they interact.

Beyond the brochure, which is intended for all potential users, knowledge products could target user groups based on their role in the program cycle. An important communication challenge is to equip mission personnel to use the learning agenda in the first two phases of the program cycle. A knowledge product that describes and illustrates its use in country and strategic planning (phase one) and in the design and implementation of projects and stand-alone activities (phase two) could be developed. This knowledge product might be a brief or case study report. Particular emphasis could be placed on obtaining education demand and supply information from local sources and using the learning agenda to choose theories of change and interventions. While the latter are decisions that can be improved by evidence, a [recent USAID study](#) of four missions showed that learning agendas have been little used.

Another important communication challenge is to provide guidance to IPs in the use of the learning agenda in the design and implementation of activities (phase three). The emphasis could be on use of the learning agenda in preparation of MEL plans, in activity design, and in MEL. A brief or case study report could be developed for this purpose.

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (phase four) is where evidence use is already most firmly rooted within the program cycle. The communication challenge regarding MEL is to tie the learning agenda to



the standard indicators. To accomplish this, a map could be developed and displayed on the Higher Education Learning Agenda [webpage](#) to link the ten learning questions to the standard indicators relevant to higher education. Many knowledge products have already been prepared by USAID for MEL and therefore, any MEL-related knowledge products for the learning agenda could be targeted. For example, as recommended in the section above on indicators, a particularly useful knowledge product would be one on the measurement of capacity building outcomes in higher education.

A knowledge product could also be prepared on the use of the Higher Education Learning Agenda in the policy areas identified in the recommendation on the program cycle. Alternatively, a knowledge product could be developed for each of the policy areas.

After the knowledge products described above are developed, they could be assembled as a Higher Education Learning Agenda Toolkit. It would provide a comprehensive view of the use of the learning agenda in the program cycle and could be a valuable resource for workshops on the learning agenda. The audience would be headquarters, mission, and IP personnel desiring a detailed understanding of how the learning agenda is used through the program cycle.

## CONCLUSION

This document marks the end of the development phase of the Higher Education Learning Agenda. A wide range of stakeholders contributed to the development of the learning agenda through planning meetings, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and workshops. The process was highly consultative to ensure that the learning questions address issues of the highest importance.

The time has come for implementation of the learning agenda. Though the use of evidence is not new in higher education programming at USAID, the Higher Education Learning Agenda will take it to a higher level. The learning questions and the evidence assembled to address them provide a framework for evidence use through the program cycle. Increased evidence use will improve the quality of higher education programming by providing empirical evidence to inform key decisions in planning, implementation, and evaluation. The evidence comes from the global research community as well as evidence generated internally within projects and activities of USAID.

Implementation of the Higher Education Learning Agenda will, itself, be a learning process. The foundation laid during the development phase is only the beginning, as the learning agenda is intended to evolve and improve through the creativity and innovation of its users. If the “learning revolution” in higher education programming at USAID continues as expected, not only will the body of evidence expand, but the ways in which evidence is used in decision-making will grow and mature. The result will be higher education programming outcomes that are more efficient, effective, and sustainable.