

Review of higher education-related activities across USAID

USAID recently undertook, with assistance from a team of consultants, a landscape analysis of higher education engagement activities across Agency operating units that occurred between FY 2014 and 2018. The landscape analysis was based on document reviews, interviews with key informants, and a collection of narratives from Operational Plans and Performance Plans and Reports. Through an iterative data collection process, data was analyzed and coded across operating units.

1 HIGHER EDUCATION ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

The landscape analysis found that there were five primary types of higher education engagement that took place within the Agency between FY 2014 and 2018: **partnerships**, **scholarships**, **institutional capacity-building**, **workforce development**, and **policy reform**. These categories are not discrete and often overlap, and each type of engagement was found in nearly all functional and regional bureaus. The intensity of the engagement and the purpose of the engagement vary widely across operating units.

● Partnerships

1:1; 1:Many; & Networks for research, curriculum, & pedagogy reforms

● Scholarships

For vocational, certificate, Bachelors or advanced degrees in the U.S., host or third-country

● Institutional Capacity Building

Implemented by NGOs, HEIs, etc. primarily for pedagogy & curriculum improvement

● Workforce Development

Career centers and curriculum reform with HEIs; short-term training for certificates & skill development

● Policy Reform

Ministry reform and training; legal reform and equity and access, and accreditation or quality assurance

 Students at the USAID supported Career Center at the Université Hassan II Casablanca. Photo credit: USAID Morocco





📍 Graduates of the USAID-funded Merit and Needs-Based Scholarship Program (MNBSB) in Pakistan. Photo Credit: Pakistan, USAID

2 SUCCESSES, CHALLENGES, GAPS, AND LESSONS LEARNED

SUCCESS: There are significant successes in HE engagement, both in terms of supporting host-country HEI capacity-building as well as other, non-education development goals. USAID successfully utilized the deep connections higher education has within larger social systems including workforce, technology and innovation, teacher professional development, community engagement, and policymaking to support development priorities.

CHALLENGES: Several challenges emerged through the analysis. Institutional capacity building is not well understood across the Agency, particularly for HEIs, and the predominant partnership model may be inadequate to systematically improve host-country HEI capacity.

GAPS: There is a need to collect systematic evidence of what works in HE, particularly around the purpose and outcomes of scholarship programs and capacity building activities. In addition, although USAID engages with hundreds of HEIs, it relies on the same institutions as partners or recipients of aid for multiple activities across the Agency. Within host-countries, HEIs that are more rural or regional are often not engaged compared with urban institutions.

LESSONS LEARNED: Key informants and extensive document reviews revealed several potential lessons learned, including the advantage of interdisciplinary teams from U.S. HEIs in partnership programs, the need for systematic evaluations on short-term vs. long-term scholarship activities, a clear definition of institutional capacity-building that includes both academic and non-academic institutional functions, workforce development programs that create lasting connections to industry and HE, and a better articulation of policy reform goals within activities.

3 ACHIEVING DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

In addition to the success of HE engagement in achieving a variety of development goals outside of education, the analysis revealed engagement activities focusing on inclusion, conflict and crisis, and partnerships with minority serving institutions. While gender was a near-automatic consideration in most HE engagement activities, other inclusion criteria such as disability and LGBTQ, and activities focusing on conflict or crisis contexts, were less common. During the period of review, minority serving institutions made up a small fraction of implementers of HE engagement activities, primarily through subawards from other U.S. HEIs.



INFORM FUTURE USAID PROGRAMMING

The HELA team has five primary recommendations for USAID to improve HE engagement across the Agency:

1. FOCUS ON INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

USAID should consider formalizing a human and institutional capacity-building policy, so it is better understood, routinely introduced, and adequately budgeted in major programs. Institutional capacity development is a recognized goal of USAID, but current approaches are scattered across the Agency and often not directly related to the unique aspects of higher education, such as policy reform and government support. An institutional capacity policy would also help guide the Agency to embed capacity development in small but significant ways and allow for coordination across the Agency. Evidence of small, but significant, capacity-building imbedded within some activities (i.e. PEER, Pakistani scholarship program) demonstrate the need to further disseminate these practices into other Bureaus.



Further, institutional capacity-building is an important tool to ensure sustainability and self-reliance while creating stronger future collaborators, partners and implementers around the world. Therefore, the Agency approach to capacity development must also incorporate a systems-strengthening approach that connects higher education institutions to larger social systems. A systems approach to institutional capacity-building should be considered and analyzed to better reveal best practices, clarity, and priority. Higher education's capacity to generate research that leads to new industries, educate teachers to instruct future generations, and engage with communities to support change requires well-trained faculty and staff, resourced facilities, and local and global partnerships among other investments. The USAID Education Policy, which connects higher education to each of the four education priorities, provides a new focus on systems strengthening as a means for self-reliance as a starting point. In addition, the approach taken by Global Health could provide a model of systems strengthening applicable to other sectors.

2. CONTINUE TO ENGAGE THE PRIVATE SECTOR AND CLARIFY WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

One of the major goals of USAID's support is to increase the relevance of learning for employment. Like many of the recent successful activities that focus on equipping out-of school youth with skills, such as those in the Philippines, Senegal, and Rwanda, there is a role for private-sector employers in USAID activities supporting the development of curricula and improving employment opportunities. However, there needs to be a clearer connection between the Agency's support for vocational education (at both the secondary and post-secondary levels) and workforce readiness to better understand trends, rationale, and impact in various contexts. Activities that have experienced significant success incorporated the private sector into the planning and development of academic programs, creating linkages that support students, faculty, and research institutions.



3. STRATEGICALLY IMPROVE COORDINATION AND COMMUNICATION WITHIN USAID BUREAUS, OPERATING UNITS, AND MISSIONS

Although it might be expected that most higher education activities would have their provenance in E3/ED, most activities were developed and implemented by the Global Development Lab and the Bureau for Food Security. Because of the disparate nature of activities, USAID should explore its aims in higher education. With the expected reorganization of USAID, it is important that different units work together to ensure that activities are consistent with best practices and various policies and visions across the Agency. Current competing strategies and goals and poor communication between units leaves much of the higher education engagement within the Agency hidden. To reduce the siloing of HE activities, the Agency should widely share the broadened HE definition in effect across operating units, share the benefits and gain buy-in from operating units to utilize the definition, and establish links and more consistent connections throughout the life cycle of funding decisions. Toward this end, deepen use and participation in the Agency's Higher Education Working Group and other communication channels to raise the profile and legitimacy of HE-focused work as the development scaffolding among Bureaus.



4. CREATE MEANINGFUL MECHANISMS TO COLLECT DATA



One of the biggest challenges in completing this higher education landscape analysis was collecting program information across operating units. New mechanisms should be created to ensure regular reporting of higher education programs to a central office within the E3 Bureau on an annual basis. Serving as a clearinghouse, such reporting mechanisms would allow for an easy accounting of HEI activities aligned with development priorities. Moreover, the clearinghouse could serve as a key resource to plan activities in that it would be developed for the purposes of supporting USAID goals, not reporting to external audiences (i.e. Title XII report).

5. DEVELOP EVIDENCE



Currently, there is a small evidence base on what works in higher education. Given this lack of evidence globally, USAID has the potential to become a global leader in rigorous evidence—ranging from system reforms to improvements in teaching, learning, and research. For example, an evaluation of community engagement vis-à-vis higher education programming should be more clearly identified and prioritized within the education strategy. Other evidence bases could include a commissioned study on the partnership dynamics, and the roles of lead implementing partners based in the United States and those located in host countries to outline best practices and lessons learned. An Agency-wide evaluation policy for activities that engage higher education should be created and assessed to ensure that lessons learned are consistent and follow-on action plans are dependably put into place.



CONCLUSION

Given the limitations of data collection available for this analysis, the consultancy team concluded that USAID's higher education engagement is greater than the significant depth and scope the findings presented here. Higher Education engagement, defined more broadly to include U.S. higher education institutions' activities regardless of purpose, would expand the number of activities. USAID invests considerable funds into higher education institutions to capitalize on the unique and myriad roles they play in society. However, without improved internal data collection systems, cross-unit oversight, and clear Agency-wide definitions and objectives of higher education engagement, such investments will not be as efficient as possible or have as great an impact. The success higher education engagement has provided on several development goals to date demonstrates these institutions' ability to conceptualize, support, and deliver USAID programming around the world. With further attention to the role higher education has played and will continue to play in global development, continued and greater success can be achieved.