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Adaptive Project Design: Early insights from working on the transformation of the Distance Education System in Myanmar

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Abstract

The manner in which a development project is designed and implemented can have a significant impact on the nature of the outcomes. There are few examples of international projects funded to support transformation of Higher Education systems in developing countries, so it is important to learn about the factors that emerge as significant and challenge wider assumptions about what works and what does not.

This paper draws on insights from an inception period lasting several months followed by the first full implementation year of the Transformation through Innovation in Distance Education (or TIDE) project. This project, which runs from 1st February 2018 to 30th September 2021, aims at improving the quality and relevance of the distance education system in Myanmar which reaches over half a million students, and involves the participation of 34 Universities spread across the country. The paper discusses a range of unanticipated insights relating to:

- The opportunities and challenges faced working within a changing policy context
- Sustainability and use of human and financial resources
- Gender and characteristics of a rotation based staffing model
- The value of openness as an approach

Key words: Adaptation, Design, Distance Education, Project Management, Transformation

Introduction

International development projects are meant to be interventions that improve the situation being addressed, whether that be looking for better economic, social, health, and educational outcomes or some combination of these factors. Those funding the project want to see that their money is well spent as they have to account for their largesse, while those undertaking the project also want to see good outcomes and want to get further funding for similar or different projects. This has led to the development of a significant number of project design and planning tools such as logframes, theories of change, and outcome indicators which guide activities and enable accounting for planned outcomes before the project commences. Such detailed systematic planning is seen to be more necessary and more challenging as the scope, size and scale of the project increases. However, such systematic approaches creates the risk of inflexibility and of missing out on the power and system dynamics when trying to make change happen (Lane, 2017). This requires being adaptive and responsive to change within the planned framework. In particular, as Lane (2017) notes:

'it is better to think of promoting a relational dynamic where actors are constantly explaining what they are trying to achieve to other actors and through those conversations are able to reach dynamic agreement on the similarities and differences and purposes of what they do and why they do it. [...] where constructive alignment, where possible and desirable, is achieved through the conversations between the actors and in light of developments in real world situations that may throw up new challenges that all involved have to adapt to. [...] how willing, how able and in what spaces the actors will undertake those conversations if some of those conversations appear to challenge their own positions of power and traditions of practice.'

This paper looks at how this philosophy is being enacted through one particular project in Myanmar.

Higher Education reform in Myanmar

Since the time of the military government in Myanmar, arts and science undergraduate courses had been offered through 34 'Day Campus' Universities distributed across the country, and whilst courses were offered on campus the majority of students studied by distance education (DE) and this remains the case in 2019. The 'Day Campus' Universities provide some pre-exam, on campus tuition to distance students, support registration and distribution of printed study materials. English is the expected language of instruction and all DE materials are in English. Although arrangements are now changing, up until 2019 degrees arising from DE study have been awarded by Yangon University of Distance Education (YUDE) and Mandalay University of Distance Education (MUDE), and these institutions have provided the academic oversight of the degrees, as well as creating all the study materials for the courses. Under the military regime the two leading academic institutions Yangon and Mandalay Universities focussed on research and were not allowed to offer undergraduate courses on campus until this option was relaunched in 2013.

In the lead up to the 2015 democratic elections, a reform process had been launched, and the British Council Myanmar initiated an international conference in October 2013 called ‘UK-Myanmar Higher Education Partnership – Turning Policy into Action’ (University of London, 2013), as a first step in encouraging collaboration with UK Universities.

The ‘Comprehensive Education Sector Review’ programme was launched, and the international donor community became involved in working with a range of Ministries involved to develop the ‘National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016-2021’. NESP was finalized and launched after the election of the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by Aung San Suu Kyi (now Myanmar State Counsellor) in November 2015.

The DE system has promoted widespread access to undergraduate degrees but has been criticised for low quality and lack of relevance to the job market. With the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Myanmar committed to increasing investment in HE and the opening up of the country to greater collaboration in the ASEAN region and internationally, the need for skilled and employable graduates has become ever more urgent. The importance of upgrading the DE system and taking advantage of the benefits of a rapidly growing digital infrastructure to support online learning has also become recognised.

Development of the TIDE project

Late in 2016, a new programme called ‘Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform (SPHEIR)’ was announced by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). SPHEIR is managed by a consortium comprising British Council, PwC and Universities UK and is a major international programme focussed on support for HE transformation in developing countries.

It was against this very positive political backdrop that early in 2017, following a Myanmar delegation visit in 2016, the Open University UK, University of Manchester, Oxford University and IPE entered into a partnership arrangement with Yangon University, YUDE and Yadanabon University to develop the ‘Transformation by Innovation in Distance Education (TIDE)’ project proposal. The proposal was one of 9 projects selected for support by SPHEIR from a very competitive pool of over 270 applications. The TIDE project is designed to run to September 2021 and is focussed on three main streams of work:

- Enhancement of Staff Capacities for Academic, Teaching and Complementary staff
- Enhancement of Programmes
- Approaches to the strengthening of HE/DE systems

Aspects of stream 1 and stream 2 are covered in separate papers (Lane and Gregson, 2019 and Lane and Fawcett, 2019 respectively). This paper focuses on planning and delivering change in a dynamic context.

In July 2017 a six month inception phase, known as ‘Grant Stage 1’ was initiated. At this point detailed plans were developed with no certainty that the project would proceed to the fully funded ‘Grant Stage 2’. A range of detailed planning documents were produced covering detailed plans, budgets, ‘Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)’, risks, and a framework agreement for how the partnership would operate.

This inception period provided an opportunity to develop the relations with the Myanmar core partners who all brought different strengths. Yangon University whilst not offering DE had leading academic expertise, YUDE effectively ran the DE system in Lower Myanmar, and Yadanabon University represented one of the major ‘Day Campus’ Universities in Upper Myanmar who operate at the frontline in terms of supporting and interacting with the DE students linked to MUDE.

Early insights informing project design

Financial autonomy

The MOE has introduced moves to pilot greater academic and financial autonomy, initially with 11 Universities. With the exceptions of Yangon and Mandalay Universities none of the ‘Day Campus’ Universities involved in the TIDE project in the initial pilot.

The lack of autonomy has meant that transferring money to Myanmar partners, for example to cover staff time related to TIDE project activity is not possible. Whilst a lot of the TIDE project budget is spent in country on major project activities and local expenses are reimbursed, in the current context it is not possible to allocate a targeted percentage of budget for direct use by Myanmar partners.

It could be questioned whether this situation reflects a fair and balanced partnership where power and resources are evenly distributed. Interestingly, the situation has led to some insights that challenge such an assumption. Firstly, there is less debate over financial resources, and whilst the budget plan is openly shared, it is largely the UK partners’ responsibility to ensure money is well spent and reflects ‘Value for Money’ objectives. Myanmar partners, through significant ‘contribution in kind’ commitments, have made a clear and substantial commitment

to the project activities that is not based on project financial incentives. They have provided free use of venues and given time to critical project tasks related to design and MEL activities. This has happened with the support of the Department of Higher Education (DHE), and not involved time consuming debates over whether the budget can support these roles. Funding for a project related was declined on the basis that it would be unlikely to be sustainable beyond the project life. In short, the project is valued for what it delivers in terms of outcomes, and not for any money that it can provide to cover short term local funding.

Relationships and Champions

Critical to the inception phase was the development of trust and key relationships that can support effective project design and delivery. From the outset we worked closely with Rectors and Pro-Rectors from our core partner Universities who are involved in the Strategic Management Board (SMB). This body plays the high level decision making role in the TIDE governance structure. We are fortunate that a major champion for the project emerged early on. At the outset of the project planning the person in question was a Rector at YUDE, but during this phase he became Deputy Director General (DDG) at the DHE. This meant that the project had significant input and support from DHE from an early stage. Whilst DHE and the Ministry of Education (MOE) have not been an official TIDE project partner, and do not benefit from any project funding, they have championed the project and seen it as one of the major catalysts for transforming and improving the quality of DE/HE.

We are equally fortunate that our consortium partner IPE has excellent and established relations with the MOE and HE stakeholders and is well positioned to help the project respond to emerging agendas as well as supporting communication from the project to the policymakers. We have a context where positive policy influence is invited and welcomed at the Ministerial level, which provides great opportunity for the project to contribute and have impact, whilst also presenting the challenge of managing expectations and new requests to adapt to the latest policy level thinking.

Implementation under uncertainty and a changing policy context

Prior to the TIDE inception phase a study on the current status of distance education in Myanmar, had been commissioned by the British Council in Yangon. This study recommended that three ‘tracks’ be considered by the MOE and DHE for reforming DE:

Track 1: An access track which builds on much of the current undergraduate provision and its strengths around access but with strengthened teaching and learning approaches, and some move to greater use of appropriate technology (whilst retaining different delivery methods so as not to exacerbate the digital divide).

Track 2: A non-legacy model of DE that uses the versatility of online delivery to reach professionals throughout the country for professional advancement.

Track 3: Support for selected universities to offer new DE degrees for career development and life-long learning.

These proposals received considerable high level attention, with the result that in August 2018 the Union Minister for Education announced the launch of what has become referred to as the ‘One Campus Two Systems’ model, whereby the 34 Day Campuses take on full responsibility for the award and delivery of undergraduate distance education degrees. This model which is an adapted version of ‘Track 1’ has been launched in 2019, with the degree awards passing from YUDE and MUDE to the ‘Day Campus’ Universities in 2020. The future vision for YUDE and MUDE is yet to be fully articulated, and whilst a potential upgrade into some form of Myanmar Open University has at times been mentioned, the short term agenda for these two Universities is to develop online short course provision, aligning their future more with Track 2.

The policy announcement represented a radical system change that in the short term is disruptive. It has the potential to pave the way for transformative decentralised solutions, as ‘Day Campuses’ will have more devolved responsibility related to the blended mode of DE they offer. There is also scope for more flexible and relevant curricula that respond to local employment needs. And that are designed and delivered in a manner that takes advantage of local ICT infrastructure development. Likewise, there is scope for some Universities to emerge as leading online course providers, that develop use of appropriate educational technology driven by pedagogical innovation suited to the Myanmar context.

For the TIDE project, the changes provide a significantly different HE/DE landscape as the central roles of YUDE and MUDE have dramatically changed, with the registration of over half a million students passing from

them to be distributed across the 35 Day Campuses. The TIDE media production, capacity development and change management components, have been rethought to take account of the new context, and some key project MEL indicator targets also needed to be adjusted.

The transition from the inception to the full implementation phase (grant stage 2), was envisaged to take place towards the end of 2017, with space of a couple of months envisaged between submitting final documents and launching activities in January 2018. Events in UK and Myanmar threw this planning process into uncertainty. Following UK elections in June 2017, changes in leadership led to the decision for DFID to undertake a strategic refresh of its education strategy. In Myanmar the crisis in Rakhine State had become the focus for media headlines, affecting international relations, and creating further uncertainty for projects such as TIDE. Fortunately, despite delay, TIDE was given the go ahead at the end of January 2018. The project focus on improving higher education is seen as a positive for the future of Myanmar as a whole and for its nascent democracy.

The later than anticipated start meant that the project needed to deliver its first year outputs in a compressed timeframe of eight months, and activities were launched without the lead time that would have been desirable.

Staffing Model: Rotation and Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

During the inception period, some of the unusual aspects and challenges of working in the HE sector in Myanmar surfaced. Firstly, academic staff (who are all involved in teaching) and support staff (such as librarians and ICT experts) are regularly ‘rotated’ to different Universities. This rotation system is unpopular but viewed as necessary to ensure that smaller Universities and those in more rural or remote locations are able to operate with a good staff complement. There are incentives to spend time and gain experience in rural Universities, but at the same time the system does not encourage long term commitment to institutions, and academics involved in research find it difficult to develop their work. In terms of TIDE project design, the staff rotation system, combined with a retirement age of 60 for those working in public sector Universities represents a challenge, as there is no guarantee that a participant in capacity development activities will remain in the same TIDE supported University throughout the project.

Whilst the transfer system could be seen as a negative, the project design response has been to gradually scale up project reach. During the project life we planned to run with three cohorts of 10 Universities which each engaged in a two year capacity development process (Lane and Gregson, 2019). While we started with 10 universities, we now have 11 in the second cohort and by 2021 we expect to involve staff from all 34 ‘Day Campus’ Universities. This has meant that the project ambition is to work across the system as a whole and not simply focus on individual Universities for this project component. By following the staff and keeping them involved even if they transfer to a University that is not part of a current cohort, the movement around the DE/HE system can be seen as a potential positive as skills gained can be used to influence new practice among all the ‘Day Campus’ Universities supporting DE.

Universities supported by TIDE Project in 2019		
Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Map of Myanmar States and Regions
1) Bago <i>Bago Region</i>	11) Dawei <i>Tanintharyi Region</i>	
2) Dagon <i>Yangon Division</i>	12) Hpa’an <i>Kayin State</i>	
3) Magway <i>Magway Region</i>	13) East Yangon <i>Yangon Division</i>	
4) Mandalay <i>Mandalay Region</i>	14) Kalay <i>Sagaing Region</i>	
5) MUDE <i>Mandalay Region</i>	15) Loikaw <i>Kayah State</i>	
6) Mawlamyine <i>Mon State</i>	16) Monywa <i>Sagaing Region</i>	
7) Pyay <i>Bago Region</i>	17) Myitkyine <i>Kachin State</i>	

8) Yadanabon <i>Mandalay Region</i>	18) Patheingyi <i>Ayeyarwady Region</i>	
9) Yangon <i>Yangon Division</i>	19) Sittway <i>Rakhine State</i>	
10) YUDE <i>Yangon Division</i>	20) Taunggyi <i>Shan State</i>	
	21) West Yangon <i>Yangon Division</i>	

Source: <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/myanmar-statesregions>

A major focus for most international development projects, is on promoting equal access, voice and benefit for women, people with disabilities, and those coming from marginalised ethnic groups. The challenge of equity and inclusion in Myanmar within the TIDE project is an interesting one.

Firstly, it rapidly became clear during University visits, and by reviewing residential school and workshop attendance figures that most academics and support staff involved in the project are female. Reporting on gender disaggregated indicators, reveals that more than 60% of participants are female resulting in very different figures to other SPHEIR projects. However, the majority of senior management roles (i.e. Rectors and Pro Rectors) are occupied by men and gender remains a major consideration in the HE sector. How can more women gain access to senior management roles in these institutions? How can more men become involved as academics and support staff, in arts and science Universities? What are the structural, societal and cultural factors that lead to the situation that we are observing? These questions need to be researched and addressed but represent challenges that go beyond the scope of the TIDE project. Likewise addressing the root problems that need to be confronted to solve issues of conflict related to the Myanmar peace process are outside the project scope.



Photo: Introducing the TIDE project to faculty at Hpa'an University, December 2018

For the TIDE project it is important to consider gender and diversity when it comes to content creation, and in terms of how the project is managed and the arrangements that are put in place to engage with both male and female participants.

Introducing Openness in a Closed System

The existing model for DE in Myanmar is predominantly a closed one. Study guides and materials used to support courses are not openly licensed, admission depends on matriculation scores. Whilst the system is not wholly merit based and does not give equal opportunities to women, it reflects an approach that allocates students with better results to opportunities in the most in-demand courses and Universities.

By contrast the TIDE approach, as exemplified by the approach of the Open University UK is based around a design that advocates open access. Whilst the admissions system and many of the features of the design of DE in Myanmar remain closed, the TIDE focus on openness can bring positive changes within the current closed framework. Development and use of OER (Lane and Gregson, 2019) provides a focus for collaboration between departments within an institution and between Universities and encourages development of a team based approach for learning design. The OER produced can be shared and adapted for courses in different parts of the country encouraging system wide sharing. OER can also be translated into local languages, encouraging inclusion and being adapted in ways that respond to the diverse cultural context in Myanmar where there are over 100 different ethnic groups. There is also a current issue around cost of licensed text books for University libraries and for students and this suggests that development of open textbooks can be an effective solution.

Introducing new open approaches, goes beyond capacity development, and the project is now seeking to design change management components that can promote adjustment of processes and policies within Universities supporting distance education, so that open approaches can be institutionalised. This implies further internal capacity development within Universities, mentoring of change champions, and ensuring quality assurance and employer engagement processes also influence the way relevant OER are developed, adopted and valued

Concluding remarks

The TIDE project sits within the wider SPHEIR programme design and theory of change, and the success of both the project and programme are subject to monitoring and evaluation. TIDE has its own results framework (RF) which supports internal project management and learning, and SPHEIR have a higher level programme logframe which the TIDE RF maps onto. SPHEIR and its nine projects fall under the scrutiny of external evaluators who report to DFID on the overall effectiveness of the programme to deliver on DFID's objectives. As well as meeting annual reporting needs to the SPHEIR fund manager, TIDE also has to deliver a summative evaluation by the end of the project.

The SPHEIR and TIDE project management frameworks sit within a quarterly reporting system that supports the overall financial management, and which reflects a results based payment and forecasting model.

This systematic planning and reporting approach is challenging to implement given the dynamic nature of the HE context described in Myanmar. However, the commitment by SPHEIR from the outset for a flexible and more systemic implementation of this approach as outlined by Lane (2017) has been critical and has enabled TIDE to adapt the project design to the changing priorities for HE/DE capacity development and system

transformation in Myanmar. This has meant being open to learning and reflecting this in timely updates to the theory of change, project plans and budgets.

A lot has been learned from the inception and early implementation stages of the TIDE project, some of which is counter to prevailing thinking in relation to development projects. A flexible approach that has been able to respond and adapt to emerging insights and changes in the context has been essential.

This has required excellent and open relationships with the SPHEIR fund managers in UK, and with major stakeholders including MOE, DHE, NEPC, Rectors Committee, British Council, DFID and University partners in Myanmar:

‘.. where actors are constantly explaining what they are trying to achieve to other actors and through those conversations are able to reach dynamic agreement on the similarities and differences and purposes of what they do and why they do it. [...] and in light of developments in real world situations that may throw up new challenges that all involved have to adapt to’. Lane, 2017

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