



Curriculum design at Uganda Martyrs University. Photo: TESCEA

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Transforming core skills in university curricula

Jon Harle 16 January 2020

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There can be a disconnect between how students are taught in universities and the skills they will need in the workplace and in wider roles in society. In East Africa, the **Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa** (TESCEA) partnership is working to address this challenge by transforming teaching and learning for undergraduates, to help them become better equipped with the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills that they will need when they graduate.

The TESCEA partnership, which is funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) as part of the **Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform** (SPHEIR) programme, involves two universities in Tanzania, two in Uganda, three Kenyan organisations and INASP, a UK non-governmental organisation.

Together, these partners are working on a programme of curriculum redesign, underpinned by reflection on transformative learning, gender-responsive pedagogy, strong links with employers and wider society, and a vision of scale-up and sustainability.

The aim of TESCEA is teaching for critical thinking, not teaching about critical thinking, and the TESCEA approach emphasises transformative learning. We therefore support university teaching staff to reflect on their roles in the classroom, as facilitators of student learning rather than as simply providers of information.

As a member of the teaching staff at University of Dodoma, Tanzania, **explains:** "Students are not empty vessels; they have a lot in their minds, they have their assumptions, they have their imaginations. When you give them the opportunity to interact, to share what they have, they will learn how to solve problems themselves."

Change in TESCEA happens in stages. Rather than trying to change a whole degree programme in one go, as many curriculum redesign projects do, the partners focus on specific courses that will be rolled out in the next semester. This enables university teaching staff to get new pedagogies into the classroom so that students can start to benefit more quickly – and it enables the partners to test and learn as we go.

It is important that these new pedagogical approaches work for all students and so we have worked hard to make this process responsive to gender. This ensures that what emerges is relevant to both female and male students, and that faculty are able to ensure the classroom environment is gender-responsive.

And this can connect with wider university goals, as Aloysius Tenywa Malagala, a senior lecturer in the Institute of Peace and Strategic Studies at Gulu University, Uganda, and monitoring, evaluation and learning lead for Gulu in the TESCEA project, **observes:** "Our hope is that, with the [TESCEA gender] vision and strategy in place alongside



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our existing policy, gender responsiveness will become one of our university core values.”

Beyond the classroom

For change to happen in universities and for wider uptake beyond specific courses and staff members, it needs to be backed by university leaders. Across the partnership we have been engaging university leadership in the process so that they are supportive and can help the approach to be scaled within their universities.

Bringing employers into the conversation and into the process is another important component of TESCEA and each university has established a joint advisory group. These groups bring together representatives from different fields and sectors, and from the private sector, public sector and civil society. They help the universities to understand the “generic” skills, competencies and attitudes that employers and other stakeholders expect of graduates.

Engaging these wider stakeholders throughout the process of redesigning curricula, and building wider connections within the universities, helps ensure the work of the partnership is relevant beyond the higher education institutions involved.

We have also started to see impacts of this that go beyond the immediate scope of the TESCEA work. For example, Uganda Martyrs University is now thinking about its wider branding strategy, partly due to feedback from stakeholders about the value of this level of engagement and connection to stakeholder needs that is being developed through TESCEA.

Relevance beyond the four universities underpins all of the work in TESCEA. Although each university has started with selected courses within three degree programmes, we are developing, testing and refining an approach to redesigning course curricula and pedagogy that does not emphasise subject knowledge, but ways of thinking. This means that it can be used across disciplines, and, where successful, taken to scale in the four universities and beyond.

Engaging students in the change process

TESCEA is about giving students more agency and power to debate, discuss and examine what they are learning, so it is important to involve students in the change process. This starts with ensuring they know what changes to expect in the classroom and what they are for.

As Veronica Munuve, a lecturer in the faculty of education at Uganda Martyrs University and the university’s course redesign coordinator for TESCEA, **says**: “Learners come to class as knowers and therefore discussion and re-evaluation of preconceived ideas are challenged with informed arguments...I see the students are beginning to own their learning.”

Similarly, faculty need to be engaged to see their roles differently, as facilitators of learning, not just as transmitters of knowledge or facts. This means, for example, thinking about how learning can happen outside the classroom, through practical projects and placements with local employers.

It is also important to support students’ own initiatives. For example, at the University of Dodoma in Tanzania, students started running student clubs inspired by the changes in their learning as a result of TESCEA.

Looking towards future impact

Measuring impact is important – although not easy – in a project such

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as this and we have built a learning mechanism at the heart of the project.

In the early stages of the work, we conducted surveys of students and their attitudes to their learning experiences, as well as surveys of employers and about gender issues. We will revisit these findings at the end of the work to see what change is observed. We also have learning questions that we are studying across the partnership throughout the three and a half years of the work.

The goal is that, by the end of 2021, we will have defined an approach that could be applied – with suitable adaptations – to any course in any degree programme, and a series of tools to enable and support lecturers to do this.

We hope that the model will support other higher education institutions across East Africa, and beyond, who want to embark on a similar process of change. There are already some promising signs. For example, teaching staff who have been involved with TESCEA are also incorporating transformative learning approaches into courses that have not been directly supported by the partnership.

Much of the intended success of TESCEA will come after the lifetime of this SPHEIR programme. The scalable model of course redesign, gender-responsive pedagogy, training of trainers and wider stakeholder engagement gives the potential to achieve faster change, for the benefit of students and for society as a whole.

As Jennifer Sesabo, a faculty member in the department of economics at Mzumbe University, Tanzania, **sums up**: “What excites me most about the TESCEA project is that we are doing this as a collaborative; all stakeholders who have a stake in higher education are involved in this change.

“It is an opportunity for students, staff, and top managers within a university, in the private and public sectors and also in the community, to come together to see how we can instil those attributes for critical thinking and problem-solving... TESCEA is not just about students getting employed but about them creating their own futures.”

Jon Harle is director of programmes at INASP and project director of the DFID-funded Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project. He tweets as @jonharle. This is the first in a series of articles about the work of TESCEA.

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) is helping young people in Tanzania and Uganda to use their skills and ideas to tackle social and economic problems. With partners in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya, TESCEA supports universities, industries, communities and government to work together to create an improved learning experience for students – both women and men. This improved learning experience fosters the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and allows for practical learning beyond the classroom that improves a graduate's employability.

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