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How to cite:

Lane, Andy and Fawssett, Susan (2019). Building employability into a traditional curriculum: partnerships and frameworks to help transform distance education curricula in Myanmar. In: Pan-Commonwealth Forum 9 (PCF9), 2019, 9-12 Sep, Edinburgh.

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/3355

oro.open.ac.uk

Building employability into a traditional curriculum: partnerships and frameworks to help transform distance education curricula in Myanmar

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Abstract

Higher participation rates in higher education support the social and economic development of countries. Distance education is an effective way of increasing the participation rate quickly rather than building more universities. But at the same time the curricula and qualifications being offered need to be aligned with the social and economic needs of the country so that graduates can be productive workers and responsible citizens. This paper reports on part of a large scale international development project (Transformation through Innovation in Distance Education or TIDE) working with over 30 Myanmar universities involved in the country's unique distance education provision. This distance education provision account for 60% of all higher education students in Myanmar but is based on traditional knowledge focused curricula that is not being taught using modern pedagogies and educational technologies. Working in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals this project is focused not only on enhancing online and distance education practices per se but also on enhancing the teaching of Environment and Sustainable Development in the curriculum. In trying to support the transformation of curriculum and teaching models the project is both providing a professional development programme for university staff on both areas but is also engaging with employers and other organizations with interests in the capabilities of graduates. Through this latter engagement we are trying to help develop both a generic graduate skills framework and also the expected graduate competencies needed by someone wishing to undertake Environmental Impact Assessments in Myanmar. These frameworks will hopefully help guide universities as they reform their curricula and introduce more teaching of practical and professional skills and behaviours for students taking these new qualifications.

Keywords: Employability; distance education; partnerships

Introduction

Higher education (HE) serves a number of purposes and a number of stakeholders (Sarkar et al, 2016). For many HE students there is an expectation that gaining a degree will enhance their employment and career prospects compared to those not gaining a degree. Some will choose degrees that directly prepare them for certain professions (e.g. in teaching and medicine). For employers there is also an expectation that a graduate will have appropriate skills and behaviours to be a good employee irrespective of the technical knowledge that they may have gained from their chosen degree and groups of employers or other organisation have set out what they see as being key attributes of employability (Yorke, 2006). However these key attributes are described, Sarkar et al, (2016) found that:

> '*both employers and graduates, irrespective of whether they are employed or engaged in further studies, viewed generic skills as having a higher level of usefulness in workplaces compared to discipline-specific knowledge and skills*' p44

While some degrees directly prepare students for a professional role, other degrees (e.g. engineering) provide a basic level of competence that must then be built upon to function as a practising engineer of a particular type. In many countries there are professional bodies who hold a register for practising professionals and develop competency frameworks to guide the initial and continuing professional development of their members (Lane, 2017a). These professional bodies in turn accredit degrees from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) where the student learning outcomes sufficiently match the competencies in their frameworks. However diversity in degrees and professionals in at least one subject relevant to this paper can lead to complexity as noted by Lane (2017a):

> '*Studying for, and working in, environmental subjects is both diverse and specialised and the way in which students and employees are expected to demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills/competences varies as to whether it is Universities, professional bodies or employers that set out the criteria, although there are many areas of overlap, particularly on 'transversal skills'* p425

This paper reports on some early results of a large scale project aiming to help the distance education (DE) system within one low income country – Myanmar – improve the level of employability contained within their curricula and expected of graduates.

Distance Education 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 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.

In the lead up to the first democratic elections for many years, a reform process had been launched. Through the 'Comprehensive Education Sector Review' programme a wide range of international donors became involved with a range of Ministries involved in HE in developing the 'National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) 2016-2021'[1]. 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 criticized for low quality and lack of relevance to the job market. With the Ministry of Education 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 recognized.

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 backdrop that early in 2017, following a Myanmar delegation visit in 2016, the Open University UK, University of Manchester, Oxford University and the Irrawaddy Policy Exchange 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 runs to September 2021 and is focused 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

The project formally began in February 2018 and the launch workshop in Yangon in March 2018 was opened by the Minister of Education. The academic focus for the TIDE project, responding to a request by the State Counsellor has been on 'Education for Environment and Sustainable Development (EfESD)' and this guides the nature of new content being developed in the form of Open Educational Resources (OER) which have the potential to be delivered through new online platforms.

This paper focuses on the second stream: Enhancement of Programmes. A separate paper (Lane and Gregson, 2019) focuses on the first stream of work (Enhancement of Staff Capacities) while yet another paper (Gregson, Lane and Foster, 2019) reports on the adaptive nature of the whole project design.

The enhancement of programmes: the plans

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[1] http://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Core_Doc_National_Education_Strategic_Plan_2016-21.pdf

The aim of this stream of work is to strengthen the design and authoring of relevant 'Education for Environment and Sustainable Development' (EfESD) curricula, course materials and related competency and skills frameworks that support different modes of delivery which respond to employers' needs and promote employability skills. Figure 1 indicates some major elements (red blobs) in the TIDE project that were planned to help enhance degree programmes in the original proposal in 2017. This includes both an EfESD skills framework for graduates (also referred to as 'Environmental Science') and an Environmental Science competency framework for professionals, with the hope that the latter informs the former and the former shapes the degrees programmes on offer and which in turn influence students' behaviours.
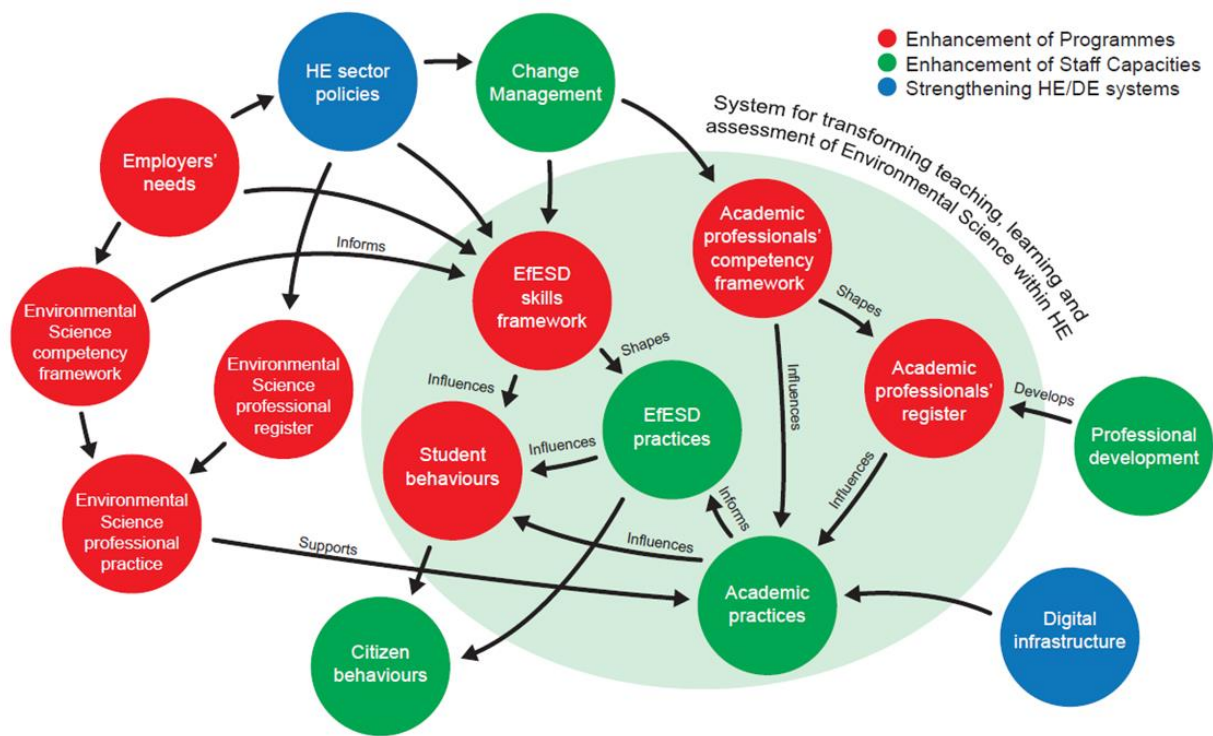
Figure 1 Influence diagram of factors affecting the system for transforming teaching, learning and assessment of 'Environmental Science' in Myanmar's HE sector. (Lane, 2017b)

The subject focus of EfESD means that TIDE outcomes will have an overarching link to environmentalism as both a professional and personal activity in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Moreover, this provides links to not just SDG Goal 4 Quality Education but also other sector-based goals such as Goal 6 Clean Water and Sanitation, Goal 7 Affordable and Clean Energy, Goal 11 Sustainable Cities and Communities and Goal 13 Climate Action as well as there being links to Goal 17 that deals with how all 16 sector-based goals should be tackled through partnerships (Lane, 2017b).

This whole stream was further explained in our original proposal through Figure 2 where the two central pillars refer to students' employability outcomes alongside two supporting pairs of pillars dealing with the professional development of HE teachers (as detailed in Lane and Gregson, 2019) and of environmental science professionals.

Figure 2 illustrates a progressive, developmental approach towards transforming people that is integral to TIDE. The development of skills/competency frameworks for environmental science professionals and academics would provide with incentives, potential recognition and a pathway for professional development. The academics will develop their contributions to EfESD teaching and learning at different levels, moving from the more general life related learning (suited to broader undergraduate teaching and learning) up to the more specialist postgraduate levels. Both an EfESD competency framework for professionals and an EfESD skills framework for higher education students were to be developed with relevant stakeholders, including employers (public and private sectors), academics and curriculum committees, which also reflected different levels of outcome.

It was planned that the EfESD skills framework would reflect the skills requirements of existing international professional bodies that relate to the teaching and practice of environment and sustainable development. Our understanding at the time was that there was no current professional body that relates to EfESD in Myanmar. By engaging with local employers and international organisations working in Myanmar, the TIDE project would explore the scope for encouraging the development of a professional body in Myanmar that could take 'ownership' of the EfESD competency framework.
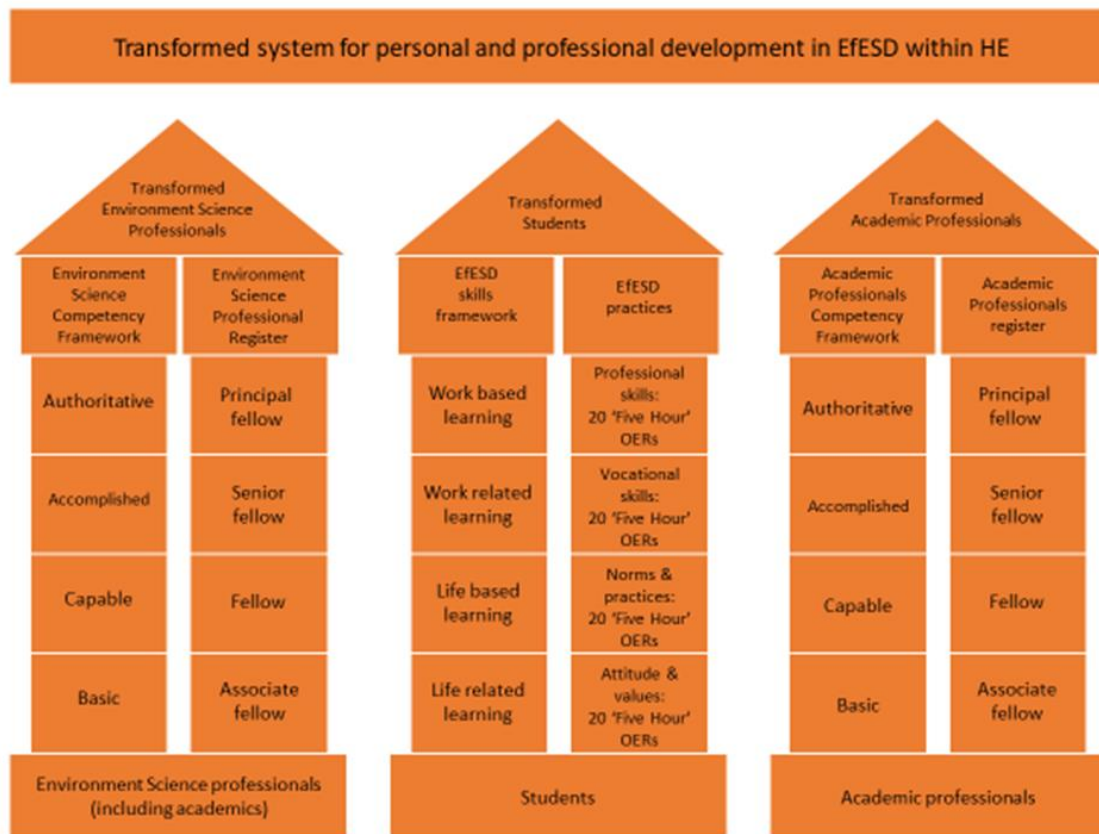

Figure 2 The potential pillars of professionalism and employability in the TIDE project

The TIDE project would also work with Myanmar academics to identify and strengthen existing and forthcoming curriculum which focus on 'environmental studies' in a general sense, and also more advanced curriculum which focus on 'Environmental Sciences' topics, potentially at the postgraduate level. The aim was to influence curriculum development processes, so that both the EfESD competency and skills frameworks, and the EfESD related educational resources, become exemplars of how academic courses and educational resources could be developed with a focus on employability of students and work skills requirements.

The enhancement of programmes: the realities (so far)

In this section we are focussing on the left and central sets of pillars in Figure 2. Initially there were two sets of activities that were undertaken to set a baseline for later activities, the first of these was an assessment of DE/HE students' needs in terms of learning and the second a series of one to one discussions with representatives of employers and other bodies with an interest in environmental matters.

Students' needs assessment

The students' needs assessment investigated the knowledge and skills needs of Myanmar university students. It identified what students think about the current DE offering, and explored what they feel they need to make their study more effective. The field research was conducted in Myanmar in August 2018 facilitated by Irrawaddy Policy Exchange (Fawssett, 2018a).

An integrated mixed methods approach was utilised, involving both quantitative and qualitative enquiry. The quantitative element consisted of a student questionnaire which was distributed to DE students at 5 of the 10

universities that TIDE was working with in its first year. The qualitative element were two focus groups held with DE students from Dagon and Mawlamyine Universities, complemented by a further focus group with day students at Yangon University as a comparator.

The major strength of studying through DE reported by the students was its flexibility, allowing them to study other courses and work and earn. But the quality of materials and teaching was felt to be weak, and some students felt poorly served by their teachers. Level of English was a key discriminator in the constraints facing students and students would welcome more peer group learning. They did not see the subject of their degrees as being instrumental in securing their chosen career and wanted their degrees to help them build confidence, communication skills and better English.

Competency framework development

The development of a competency framework began in 2018 and continued in early 2019. The first phase involved several meetings with employers in August 2018 facilitated by the Irrawaddy Policy Exchange and informed by the British Council and DFiD in Myanmar (Fawssett, 2018b). A qualitative methodology was designed where key informant interviews explored the experiences of graduate employers to understand what knowledge and skills they are looking for from local graduates. Informants came from the government, voluntary and private sectors. A total of 10 interviews were undertaken in country, with a further 2 Skype calls from the UK.

Whilst the brief was to focus on graduates aiming to become environmental practitioners, it was not possible to canvas a sufficiently wide range of views on such specific graduates. Therefore, the focus was widened to look at all graduates. This broader approach was supported by early feedback from employers that the degree subject studied was less important to them than a range of other skills. The results therefore represent the views of employers of local graduates for a range of roles, although interviews were weighted to organisations with an environmental focus. These interviews did however provide some useful insights into the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process which is at the core of environmental practice in Myanmar and which subsequently became the focus of a separate graduate competency framework.

General graduate competency framework

The investigation found that competencies are not used explicitly by employers, and that graduates are unfamiliar with presenting themselves to demonstrate through examples how they have the knowledge and behavioural skills asked for in a job. A review of jobs on www.mimu.info in Myanmar showed that jobs were advertised with only a loose engagement with competencies. Firstly the job role was described in bullet points. Then the job requirements were listed. Sometimes these were broken down into sub-headings like personal skills, language skills, computer skills and qualification background. Finally, a brief overview of the company was provided. No jobs viewed actually used the concept of competencies.

Feedback from employers suggest that applicants that are successfully shortlisted follow the bullet points of the advertisement stating how they meet the job requirements. But there is little evidence to support their statements or to go beyond the job specification to showcase greater knowledge or skills. At interview, candidates fail to demonstrate the competency required for the job. They are ill-equipped to elaborate on aspects of their CV, to tell their stories and how their experience demonstrates their competence in a particular requirement. Indeed, they are poor at presenting themselves and their achievements. It is often only by skilful questioning that a candidate is supported to make the links between what they have done, and how this is transferable to a skill they are being asked to demonstrate. Consequently, the situation confronting employers is that they are rarely faced with the difficult decision of having to choose between two or three appointable candidates. Invariably there is just one candidate that edges ahead from the others. There is therefore a thin graduate talent pool in Myanmar despite the large number of graduates.

What emerged from the investigation was that other than English language skills, employers were not looking for specific skills. Instead they valued particular behaviours, such as initiative, strong motivation and critical thinking. Thus, it was decided, based on the substance of the interviews, to firstly create a more general graduate competency framework that is intended to inform environment teaching across all public university programmes associated with TIDE. It is less technical than a competency framework focused on environment

practitioners, acknowledging that technical skills are insufficient to equip an employee, and focusing instead on a suite of soft, transferable skills that students need to be successful in gaining and keeping employment.

A follow up visit to Myanmar was undertaken in March 2019 (Fawssett, 2019a). The purpose of this visit was for employers to comment on whether the draft graduate competency framework (GCF) developed from the 2018 visit was an accurate and fair reflection of what they are looking for from graduates. This was found to be the case. Conversations in a workshop setting as well as one to one meetings revealed that the GCF captured the skills, values and behaviours employers were looking for in graduate employees. However, further discussions with employers revealed that the GCF reflected an ideal situation, a wish list in effect, as they felt that new graduates were a very long way from achieving the most basic level of competency of the framework.

This led to discussions about the skills and knowledge of the average new graduate. The output from these discussions was captured using the same approach adopted for the GCF in order to more fully understand the huge chasm between what employers are looking for, and what the universities are producing. Part of this chasm may be down to how skills and knowledge are communicated to employers. While the degree alone is not equipping graduates with the employability skills they need, many do undertake extra studies and/or work experience that should potentially enhance their employability. The problem appears to be that they are ill equipped to leverage their knowledge and experience when applying for a job.

Following this work we are now looking at modifying an existing plan to provide up to 20 hours of existing online courses dealing with English language skills, digital skills and online e-learning skills for testing out with students and also looking at developing a short course that would support students in identifying the skills learned through their degree and further study and work, and guide them on how to present these to employers, on paper and through interview, to demonstrate attainment of desired competencies.

An Environmental Impact Assessment graduate competency framework

Upon learning that a more generic environmental professional competency framework would be seen as being premature given the developmental pathway for such a profession in Myanmar it was decided to focus on one specific area – Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) – where it was acknowledged that something was needed sooner rather than later. The Myanmar government issued EIA reporting guidelines in 2015. However, conversations with organisations connected with the EIA process suggest that there are serious challenges of regulation and oversight of the environment and of reports arising from EIAs. A further internal report (Fawssett, 2019b) touched on these challenges in order to shed more light on the skills needed among EIA practitioners to make the EIA process effective. It draws on the perspective of five key actors:

- an international EIA consultancy firm,
- a local EIA consultancy firm,
- an international development agency,
- the Myanmar Environmental Assessment Association which is the newly established association of EIA professionals,
- an environmental NGO.

Drawing on the discussions with these key informants, a set of competencies have been recommended as the basis for producing a competency framework for EIA professionals. This new EIA GCF now needs to be tested out as has the Generic GCF and this is the basis of future work.

Concluding remarks

Making change happen can take a long time (Lane, 2017b) and needs to consider the systemic aspects of the existing situation and in particular:

- understanding inter-relationships
- engaging with multiple perspectives
- reflecting on boundary judgements

This stream of work in TIDE has explored inter-relationships and multiple perspectives and has subsequently had to change the boundaries of what it is doing around competency frameworks. Myanmar is not alone as a country in wanting better equipped graduates of all types and all parts of the system of interest need to move together with the same purpose as implied by Figure 1.

As noted by Lane (2107a):

> *'This diversity [in competency frameworks] is both a strength and a weakness as it is able to encompass a wide range of possibilities and perspectives as the subject evolves over time but equally there are significant transaction costs for individuals and organisations to understand and match themselves and their activities against different frameworks. This might suggest that it would be better to try and create a single overarching framework but I have argued that such consensus may lead to an impoverished framework and lack of trust between the different actors. Instead I have argued that the constructive alignment of such frameworks can best be achieved through constant and ongoing conversations between the actors so as to resolve any unnecessary differences but to enable requisite diversity to meet the many complexities of the real world'* p425

In TIDE we have just started one such conversation and plan to take it further as the project progresses but we are also realistic that creating and sustaining partnerships to take such work forward is not easy.

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