Planning for Improvement of Higher Education in Rural China: JICA's Inland Higher Education Project

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Abstract: This paper evaluates the education planning process of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)'s Inland Higher Education Project (IHEP) in Guizhou, China. The IHEP intervention was implemented between March 2003 and July 2010, and an external evaluation was undertaken in 2013. The project was broad in scope and involved ODA financial and technical support for the construction of university buildings, the procurement of equipment and the training of teachers through an exchange programme with Japanese universities. It is this third component of teacher exchange and training that is the focus of this paper. Based on the external project evaluation and other supporting documents, the planning process was inferred and evaluated through the application of two analytical frameworks. The first involved the identification and strategic mapping of relevant stakeholders within the framework of a Theory of Change. The second is a Results-Based Management (RBM) logic model and a logical framework (logframe) used to align project objectives with inputs, activities, outcomes and impact. The paper analyses the effectiveness of these planning processes, and discusses how these approaches may contribute to the success of higher education improvement projects such as JICA's IHEP intervention.

Keywords: *Higher education, International development, East Asian international relations*

1. Introduction

1.1 JICA's Inland Higher Education Project in Guizhou, China

Insufficient funding coupled with increases in demand for higher education (HE) has raised concerns regarding educational quality at HE institutions in developing countries (Clifford *et al*., 2012). The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)'s Inland Higher Education Project (IHEP) has attempted to address these concerns in rural China. The IHEP was designed to improve higher education at eight universities in the inland province of Guizhou through the development of educational infrastructure such as university buildings and equipment, and by enhancing human resources through teacher and managerial staff training and academic exchange at Japanese universities (Murayama, 2013, p. 2). Another broader aim of the project was to foster collaboration and mutual understanding between Japan and China. Led by JICA, the project incorporated a number of other stakeholders, including the government of the People's

Republic of China (CPC), the Guizhou Provincial People's Government, and academics and administrators at universities in both China and Japan (ibid.).

1.2 JICA and higher education capacity building

JICA is a governmental organization that coordinates official development assistance (ODA) for the government of Japan. JICA provides bilateral aid in the form of technical cooperation, Japanese ODA loans and grant aid (JICA, n.d.). Among its efforts in areas such as rural development, basic education, poverty reduction, and promotion of trade and investment, JICA has recognized improvement of higher education in developing countries as a challenge falling within its remit. As such, it has in place an established set of objectives specifically for the development of higher education. These objectives are:

1. Improvement of Educational Activities
2. Strengthening of Research Function
3. Promotion of Contributions to Society
4. Improvement of Management (JICA, 2004)

The teacher exchange and training component of the IHEP aligns with the objectives outlined above. A further argument for the inclusion of this component of the project can be found on the JICA website:

"As globalization progresses, it has become increasingly clear that higher education institutions in developing countries cannot survive in isolation from the outside. Accordingly, there is a strong move to develop educational and research activities by forming academic exchange networks with institutions and researchers in other countries to enable the mutual utilization of respective advantages" (JICA, n.d.).

The formation of academic exchange networks and partnerships between institutions in the 'developed' and developing world is described by Clifford *et al* (2012) as a form of 'capacity building'. Capacity building "brings various stakeholders together to bridge the gap between supply and demand in developing countries and build these countries' domestic capacity to provide high quality tertiary education" (ibid, p. 9). The teacher training and exchange component of the IHEP can thus be described as a capacity building activity.

2. The context: The need for higher education in rural inland China

At the time of appraisal, the IHEP design aligned with some key development needs of China. One issue was a growing demand for higher education resulting from an increase in the number of graduates from secondary schools (Murayama, 2013). A further need

identified was the problem of a growing disparity between urban coastal areas and more rural, inland areas.

To address these needs, the IHEP project focused on improving the infrastructure, quality and capacity of HE provision in Guizhou in order to produce graduates with the skills needed in key industries deemed essential for regional development. This provision would, in principle, lead to impacts that would help rectify the disparities mentioned above by fuelling sustainable economic growth in Guizhou province.

2.1 A brief history of higher education in modern China and the urban/rural divide

In 1976 there were 392 higher education institutions in China (Ma, 2003). By 2014, there were over 4,000 institutions enrolling over 27.64 million students, making China the largest HE provider in the world (Wang, 2009). This rapid expansion has often occurred at the expense of quality, with many institutions lacking effective assessment, accreditation, and qualification systems (ibid.). The causes for this rapid but uneven development can be better understood by looking at the dramatic shifts in Chinese education policy over the last 50 years.

The Cultural Revolution that took place between 1966 and 1976 had a devastating effect on Chinese higher education. Professors and university students were forcefully removed from their posts and were sent 'down to the countryside' to teach in primary schools and work as farmers. This policy had paradoxical effects. On the one hand it created the means to develop widespread expansion of primary education across China. According to Sen (1999), in many ways the results achieved in post-reform China are due in part to the foundations established during the Cultural Revolution. However, unsurprisingly those who were forcibly removed from their positions at universities were highly critical of the policy upon return to their former positions. As a result, the effects of the Cultural Revolution led to an extreme opposite reaction after 1978, in which the socialist ideals of egalitarianism were discredited in favour of the development of an elite ruling class (Vickers, 2011).

The 80s and 90s saw investment in education shift focus to the development of key schools for this elite class. These elite schools and universities tended to be located in urban areas, leading to a dramatic urban/rural divide and increasing levels of inequality. Urban unrest culminating in the Tiananmen Square protests exacerbated this problem, as the CPC increasingly focused its attention on maintaining social stability through the promotion of economic development in the urban areas, leading to further neglect of the inland rural regions (ibid.).

Since the 2000s, the CPC has made attempts to address the disparities between inland and coastal China through promotion of inland development in partnership with a number of international organisations. In 2002, China received US $1.48 billion in aid,

with Japan being the largest donor nation (Vickers, 2007). However, the rapid rise of China as an economic world power coupled with a range of socio-political dilemmas between Japan and China have put strains on diplomatic relations.

2.2 Japan/China relations and the need for 'mutual understanding'

In recent years a number of issues have arisen that have caused tensions between China and Japan and led Japan to scale back bilateral aid (ibid.). One such example can be found in the CPCs incitement of anti-Japanese nationalist sentiment as part of its programme of 'patriotic education' (Vickers. 2011). Japan, too, has stoked these sentiments by having its national leaders make repeated visits to Yasukuni Shrine to pay respects to the war dead, some of whom include war criminals responsible for atrocities during the era of Japanese imperialism (*The Guardian*, 2015). Numerous other causes for tension are often highlighted in the media, such as the disputes over ownership of the Senkaku/Daioyu islands between the two countries (*BBC News*, 2014). These tensions have led to displays of anger and resentment, at times manifesting in demonstrations. Thus JICA has recognised the need to work towards collaboration and improvement of 'mutual understanding' between China and Japan. The academic exchange component of the IHEP intervention provides a timely opportunity for citizens of Japan and China to work towards these goals.

3. The planning problem: How to build capacity for quality teaching and research at universities in Guizhou province

JICA's IHEP intervention aimed to address the lack of quality teaching and research capacity at Guizhou HE institutions by setting up a number of exchange partnerships with universities in Japan. Through these agreements academics, managerial staff and doctoral students from Guizhou could spend six months or longer at Japanese universities studying best practices in their specialisms. Upon return to China, programme participants could impart the new knowledge and approaches to teaching, administration and research, and academics could also undertake higher quality research of their own (at times in collaboration with researchers at the Japanese universities). Combined with the other components of the IHEP such as new university buildings and equipment, improved capacity for quality teaching and research could be realised.

3.1 The challenge of creating successful partnerships
Faculty exchange and training programmes appear at first glance to be a straightforward and cost-effective means to build capacity at HE institutions in developing countries. However, some scholars point to issues that have arisen and areas for improvement in the delivery of these programmes. In theory, collaborative research and training partnerships should be mutually beneficial to all partners, and move beyond the often

criticised power dynamics of the "donor-recipient aid paradigm" associated with other types of interventions (Crossley and Holmes, 2001, p, 399). However, the reality is many partnerships fall short of this ideal.

> "Successful cross-cultural partnerships are difficult to achieve, depending as they do on a high level of cultural awareness and an understanding of the subtle political and economic dynamics of changing North-South relationships. Issues relating to colonial history, economic power, culture, language, gender, class, race and ethnicity are invariably involved, but seldom addressed or openly discussed (Tikly, 1999). This in itself may explain why such partnerships have frequently proved problematic and short-lived." (Crossley and Holmes, 2001, p. 400).

While the 'North-South' relationships described in the above quote may not be geo-politically accurate in the context of Japan/China relations, the two countries undoubtedly face a range of historical and contemporary issues relating to colonialism, racial discrimination, regional economic power relations, and contrasts in culture. Unless carefully planned, a Japan/China exchange programme could conceivably exacerbate tensions rather than lead to mutual understanding and improved relationships. Castillo (1997, cited in Crossley and Holmes, 2001, p. 400) describes how 'unhealthy' partnerships are those "conceived, initiated and directed by the relatively affluent partner", and "lack mutual learning, shared objectives, long-term commitment and joint achievement." In order to avoid having the teacher training exchange become an example of an unhealthy partnership, it is crucial to involve all stakeholders in the various stages of the project planning process.

A further challenge lies in the nature of capacity building projects more broadly. International capacity building projects have been described as both *complicated* and *complex* (Rogers, 2005, p. 13). While overall programme goals may be clear at the outset, specific activities and causal paths are expected to evolve during programme implementation. Complicated programs may have multiple ways of achieving outcomes, and are themselves multi-levelled with local, regional, national and international layers. Complex programmes have both *emergent properties,* where objectives and strategies are developed during implementation, and *disproportionate relationships,* where a small change can make a big difference and serve as a tipping point (ibid, p. 13). Acknowledgement of the complicated and complex nature of capacity building projects is thus an important first step in designing a collaborative planning process. Two frameworks to assist in this process will be discussed and analysed in the following section.

4. Frameworks to aid in the planning process: Theory of change system mapping and results based management

This section of the paper will infer and reconstruct JICA's planning process through the application of two analytical frameworks. These frameworks will be applied specifically to the IHEP component involving academic/staff training at Japanese universities.

The first framework involves a process of identifying and mapping all potential stakeholders with some level of interest and/or influence in the project, with the aim of involving them in the planning process from the early stages through to project completion. This activity is called System Mapping, and is a key component in the planning approach known as a Theory of Change.

Once all the relevant stakeholders are identified and involved in the planning process, the actual activities of project planning can begin. This stage will be addressed by the second framework, known as a Results-Based Management (RBM) approach to planning. It involves two corresponding analytical models: the logic model and the log-frame.

4.1 Theory of Change (TOC) – System Mapping

An approach that is increasingly used in international development and educational planning is known as a Theory of Change (TOC). This approach entails a mapping of both the logical sequence of an initiative from activities through to changes and a "dialogue-based analysis of values, worldviews and philosophies of change that make more explicit the underlying assumptions of how and why change might happen as an outcome of the initiative" (Vogel. 2012, p. 9). It is this second component of dialogue-based analysis that can contribute to the development of mutual learning, shared objectives, long-term commitment and joint achievement characteristic of successful partnerships (Castillo, 1997; Crossley and Holmes, 2001).

> "A TOC creates an honest picture of the steps required to reach a goal. It provides an opportunity for stakeholders to assess what they can influence, what impact they can have, and whether it is realistic to expect to reach their goal with the time and resources they have available" (Anderson and Harris, 2005, p. 12).

In addition to revealing a range of factors and conditions necessary for programme success, a discussion of underlying assumptions through the TOC approach is a useful means to unpack and acknowledge the power dynamics involved in an international collaboration.

The nature of the IHEP intervention entailed JICA collaborate with a number of external actors in both China and Japan. Additionally, it may have been possible that other international aid organisations were active in the Guizhou region at the time of the intervention. Thus, an important early step in the planning process would be the

identification and understanding of the system of actors and social forces that may influence the project's intended outcomes both positively and negatively (KeystoneAccountability.org, 2009).

This step, known as System Mapping, is a vital stage in the process of developing a TOC and occurs after a vision and preconditions for the success of an intervention have been mapped out (ibid.). If an organisation is able to influence the key players in a system to support the change it hopes to bring about, there is a greater likelihood the intervention will be successful and sustainable. Furthermore, once actors and the ways in which they influence the system are identified, it is possible to do the following:

- "Plan collaborative interventions that will enable an organization to achieve more together than it could alone
- Identify actors who might negatively influence the system and plan strategies to change their attitudes and practices or reduce the negative influence they might have" (ibid, p. 19)

JICA's training exchange programme in Japan involved the orchestration of a number of players including academics and senior management at universities in China and Japan, and most likely involved a range of local, regional and national government departments in both countries as well. Each of these stakeholders will have different missions, purposes, cultures and values, as well as having varying levels of interest and influence in the potential success of the intervention. Utilisation of a system mapping activity would be a useful tool for all stakeholders involved in the project to help identify the best means to establish effective partnerships.

System mapping would provide JICA with a clear picture of the conditions necessary for each stakeholder to become effective collaborators in the successful implementation of the IHEP. Once these actors and conditions are mapped out, the planning process itself can be designed and implemented. One means to accomplish this is to apply the results-based management approach.

4.2 Results-based management (RBM)

The RBM approach consists of two corresponding frameworks intended to aid in the planning process. The first framework to be applied is a *logic model*. Logic models provide a graphic overview of a programme that can be a useful tool in the early stages of a project. The purpose of the logic model is to describe a hierarchy of intended results by providing a "schematic illustration of the "if/then" relationships ranging from project inputs and activities to the outcomes and broader impacts" (Farrell, 2009, p. 24). A logic model can serve as a complement to a theory of change process, providing a simplified and easily understood representation of a programme's theory of change (Penna and Phillips, 2005). Key components of logic models include inputs, outputs, and outcomes, with arrows to show relationships between components of the model (ibid, 2005).
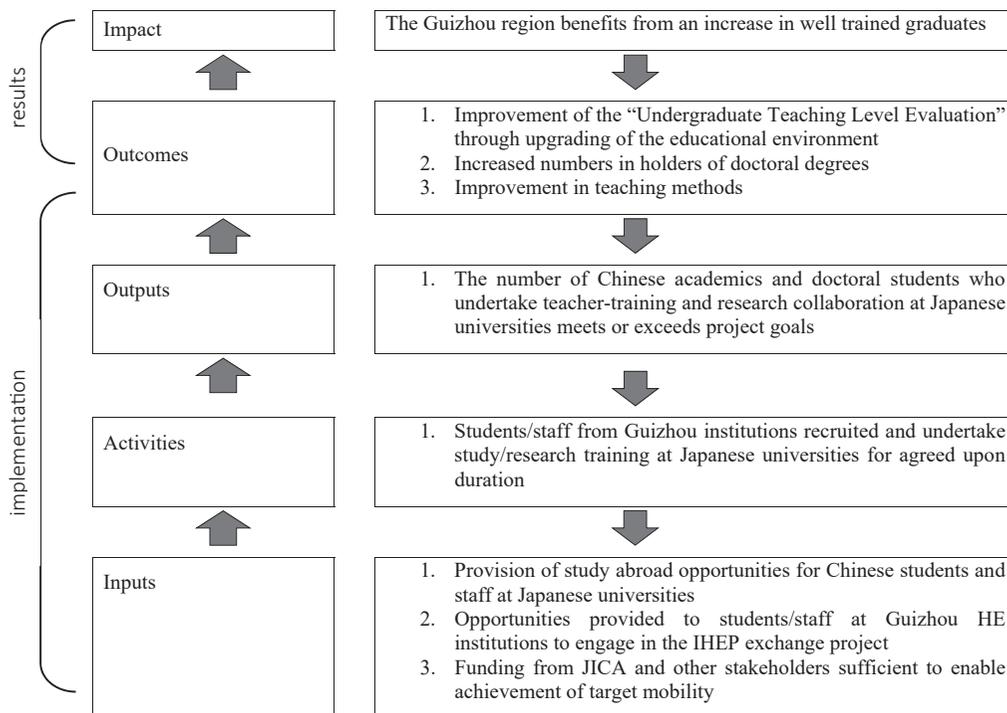
Figure 1. Logic Model for describing programme results of IHEP teacher exchange project
Adapted from Farrell, 2009

Figure 1 represents a logic model for the IHEP teacher-training project.

The logic model in Figure 1 distinguishes between implementation and results phases of the project. It is further broken down to its "if/then" components, outlining how if the inputs and activities are implemented effectively, then the desired outputs, outcomes, and impact should logically follow. The logic model does not include the many assumptions inherent in these causal statements, which would have been covered in detail during the TOC process.

> "Once a precondition (or outcome) has been identified through the TOC process, a logic model can be used to explain how that outcome will be produced. The TOC summarizes work at a strategic level, while the logic model would be used to illustrate the tactical, or program-level, understanding of the change process" (Anderson and Harris, 2005, p. 19)

The next step in the planning process is to elaborate on the logic model with a more exhaustive framework. A logical framework (log frame) complements the logic model by providing a more specific and detailed management tool (Farrell, 2009). It includes:

- a general overview of results expected from an intervention;

- a basis for project implementation, including the development of annual work plans and budgets;
- a description of how the achievement of results will be monitored and evaluated by specifying the indicators to be used to assess the achievement of the results, the means for verifying the indicators, the assumptions being made and risks that may arise if the assumptions are not met. (ibid.)

Benefits of a logframe include being able to break down complex activities into a 'feasible means-to-ends narrative' and allowing actors involved in different activities to see how their actions fit into the bigger picture (Grove and Zwi, 2008). Furthermore, each stage of the process is designed to be measurable and verifiable so results can be clearly demonstrated. In reality, all relevant stakeholders should have input in the final design of the log-frame, or at the very least be given the opportunity to approve or amend any proposed versions. Thus, the model provided represents a starting point that could be improved upon through negotiation by all involved parties.

4.3 A critical analysis of the TOC System Mapping and RBM frameworks
The frameworks described above may prove beneficial in helping the IHEP intervention achieve its aims, but both logframe and theory of change approaches are not without their drawbacks.

Regarding the logframe approach, critics point out that the bias towards quantifiable outcomes can have detrimental effects. Ensuring that outcomes are measurable could entail the logframe matrix becomes "dominated by those easiest to design and measure, rather than those most central to success" (ibid., p. 72). In the interests of defining measurable outcomes, areas such as relationships between people (both internal and external to the project) and processes may be overlooked (ibid.). Thus the logframe could be problematic with respect to JICA's goal of developing mutual understanding between Japan and China, as this relationship-oriented goal is difficult to measure. The numerous benefits of the teacher/staff exchange programme could be overlooked and not factored into the measures of success defined for the IHEP intervention. Another issue often raised is the log-frame can hide how the immediate results of a programme influence changes at other levels such as outcomes and impacts in the longer-term (Vogel, 2009). It is often these more qualitative factors that may be the most notable impacts of a given project.

To remedy these issues, additional means of assessing the project could be incorporated. One possible approach is known as Most Significant Change (MSC) (Davies and Dart, 2005). This approach involves the collection of stories from participants and beneficiaries at all levels of the project, and the subsequent discussions of the "most significant" stories that have emerged as a result of the intervention.

"the process involves the collection of significant change (SC) stories emanating

from the field level, and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by panels of designated stakeholders or staff. The designated staff and stakeholders are initially involved by 'searching' for project impact. Once changes have been captured, various people sit down together, read the stories aloud and have regular and often in-depth discussions about the value of these reported changes (Davies and Dart, 2005, p. 8).

The MSC approach purposefully avoids the use of indicators to measure performance. This contrasting approach may be beneficial to complement the logframe to glean more qualitative and nuanced accounts of IHEP impacts.

Theory of change is another approach that has gained favour in recent years because it goes beyond the linear logic of the log-frame model and investigates more closely the assumptions that go into each phase of a project. The system mapping aspect of TOC is one such way to have an organization carefully consider the motivations and goals of each of its collaborators, and can be of further benefit if each stakeholder goes through the process themselves.

However, implementing a theory of change can be a time and resource consuming endeavor. Furthermore, the participatory nature of the approach may be unfamiliar and even unwelcomed among actors more comfortable with top-down approaches. In countries with a Confucian social orientation like Japan and China, the culturally-defined styles of communication may not be aligned with open dialogue, the expression of contrasting opinions, or the challenging of authority. Thus, in this context, it is possible that stakeholders would prefer to be simply provided with a well thought out plan in the form of a logframe, and go about getting the project done in accordance with the parameters laid out by JICA and the government.

While both approaches are undoubtedly imperfect and may pose certain issues in the East Asian context, the use of these approaches in combination would help to negate the less productive elements of each.

5. An evaluation of JICA's planning process

While deemed an overall success, the IHEP evaluation report highlighted some noteworthy issues that arose which point to potential inadequacies in the planning process of the actual project. Firstly, the project implementation period at the planning stage was 36 months but the actual project period lasted 78 months. One reason for this time extension was the project temporarily stopped due to a merger between two Chinese universities, a contingency that was not predicted. The fact that this was not known to the project planners raises questions as to whether and to what degree the Chinese institutions had input in the planning process. Perhaps the setbacks that arose

as a result of this merger could have been avoided if there was better communication between JICA and the stakeholders at the two universities who merged mid-way through the project.

With regard to the training programme, the evaluator (Murayama) indicates that it was generally successful but offers little empirical evidence of this. Unlike other sections of the report that offer quantitative data representing concrete gains such as increases in enrolments, courses, publications and other outputs associated with the IHEP, the descriptions of the success of the training programme are largely anecdotal. Murayama writes:

> "there are many examples of the development of relationships between Japanese universities and Chinese universities for academic exchange and the dispatch of students during [the] training period. However, these relationships … are systematically and continuously conducted at each university and they are not necessarily shared among the universities, including the target universities in Guizhou province. Especially academic exchanges were not active in some universities [sic]" (2013, p. 23).

She also points out that there were cases of students who used the IHEP exchange programme to continue on to obtain doctoral degrees (one of the objectives of the intervention), some through scholarships provided by the universities, but that this "concrete number is unknown" (ibid, p. 18).

This lack of quantitative information points to another potential communication problem between the stakeholders involved in the project. While evaluation of aspects of the exchange project such as relationship-building and development of mutual understanding would warrant more qualitative approaches (such as MSC narratives), ample numerical data related to project outcomes should also be widely available. Why was information on exchange agreements, mobility numbers and doctoral student enrolments not shared between the various universities and other stakeholders, including JICA and the external evaluator? It is possible there was no task group or other monitoring body appointed to the project to ensure transparency and effective communication between stakeholders. A multi-party task group could have been included to verify completion of a range of activities and facilitate communication throughout the project.

The other causes for the delay were two accidental occurrences that interrupted the project: the SARS epidemic (2002-2004) and the Wenchuan earthquake in 2008. At the outset it would have been impossible to predict these natural disasters would occur, however contingencies like these should be considered possibilities and crisis management plans should be in place. It is unknown whether there was a crisis-management component in the actual IHEP plan, but it is recommended that it be included in any additional project plans intended to be implemented in the region.

While deemed successful, the lack of concrete data present in the training component of the IHEP evaluation report points to opportunities for improvement in project outcomes. Highlighting these areas for improvement may provide opportunities for organisations such as JICA to deliver even more effective interventions in the future.

6. Conclusion: The ongoing implications of the problem and recommendations

With regard to the actual IHEP project, Murayama's evaluation concluded with the following statement:

> "In order to deepen exchanges with Japanese universities structured by the project, it is recommended that a platform is established for sharing collaborative projects among the target universities and utilizing academic exchanges with Japanese universities. This would make it possible to enhance the sustainability and effectiveness of the training component" (2013, p. 27).

Lack of transparency and communication between the various stakeholders in the exchange network impeded the demonstration of substantial impacts of the IHEP training component. Integrating into the initial programme design a communicative platform for sharing collaborative projects and better utilizing exchanges would thus potentially improve the outcomes of future planning processes.

Even without JICA, the partnerships established between the Chinese and Japanese universities can continue beyond the formal completion of the IHEP intervention. The capacity building aspect of the project is one that can be nurtured and grow for the foreseeable future. While the construction of university buildings, establishment of new courses and procurement of new equipment may have contributed the most to the short-term outcomes of the project such as increased enrolments, it is the improvements in teaching, research collaboration and relationships between China and Japan that may have the most lasting and powerful impact.

Capacity building exchange programmes are a common approach used by many international aid organisations. Other HE capacity building projects include training programmes offered to individuals by organisations like the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), as well as institutional-level consortia such as the Department for International Development (DFID)'s DELPHE programme, which promotes partnerships between universities working jointly on activities linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Creed et al., 2010, cited in Clifford et al., 2012). As such, these and other similar programmes can be analysed comparatively to help identify best practices and shape the planning process of projects like the IHEP teacher/staff training programme.

Direct policy borrowing, however, may be problematic. Contextual factors will always come into play, which is why importations of successful capacity building models should be synthesised as much as possible with the voices of project beneficiaries and other local actors.

When the time comes to revisit the memoranda of understanding and consider renewing partnership agreements, it is recommended that the institutions in both countries participate equally in the establishment of new goals and subsequent programme planning. Utilizing the two frameworks presented in this paper, the partner universities may be able to strengthen and better monitor the impacts of the partnerships they establish. Regardless of which planning frameworks are chosen, the success of international capacity building projects such as the IHEP intervention will ultimately rest on commitment to shared objectives, joint achievement, transparency and effective communication among stakeholders.

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