



# Change in East African higher education : Reflections on the first year of the TESCEA partnership

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## Introduction

Significant change often seems hard to achieve in higher education – but in the last year, Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) – a partnership of East African organizations and INASP – seem to have had some real successes. In this paper, I try and identify why that might be, and what we are learning from it. These are very much personal thoughts, sifted from conversations and observations with the team. I hope that by writing them down we can extend those conversations further. The reflections are mine, but the credit goes to the teams in each university, who are driving this change, in Mzumbe, Dodoma, Gulu and Uganda Martyrs, in partnership with colleagues at INASP, and AFELT, LIWA and Ashoka East Africa in Kenya. I'm grateful to my colleagues who have generously shared their insights and taken the time to review this paper.

## Overcoming the 'islands of capacity' problem

Over the years there have been many initiatives that have aimed to strengthen research and teaching in African higher education (HE). I've been following these, and involved in some of them, over the last decade or so. Some have been very successful – producing important new scholarship and networks, equipping individual researchers and teachers with skills and confidence, and fostering stronger institutions – some less so. Many have nevertheless seemed to create islands of improved quality in particular departments or centres, but have struggled to achieve deeper and more systemic change, change that travels beyond a single part of an institution and has the potential to be scaled.

In some cases it is not surprising. Many initiatives focus their efforts on training individuals, expecting that to lead to wider shifts in practice, but neglecting the organizational culture and context. There may be one-off injections of training, but with little on-going support to individuals and teams as they negotiate the difficulties of changing their practice. Or they may do both of these well – individual and organizational-level change – but find that national or system-level policies make it hard to consolidate change in practice. They also encounter some well-recognized problems: insufficient domestic funding (whether from governments or other sources); the misalignment of incentive and reward systems; the often contradictory and competing pressures of research, teaching and consultancy or engagement with communities; rapidly expanding student populations which stretch available resources too thinly. International rankings and systems of reward, or the way research agendas are set (often by external actors) often further complicate, and in some cases distort, what universities are trying to achieve. They often seem to be running to keep up, and too rarely are they able to invest in the things they know are needed to improve the quality of what they do – staff training and development, new facilities, funds to seed new research or learning initiatives, or to access new sources of expertise and ideas on their own terms.

## ABOUT 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.

The TESCEA partnership is led by INASP (UK), working with Mzumbe University (Tanzania), University of Dodoma (Tanzania), Gulu University (Uganda), Uganda Martyrs University (Uganda), Association for Faculty Enrichment in Learning and Teaching (Kenya), LIWA Programme Trust (Kenya) and Ashoka Africa (Kenya).

TESCEA is funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) as part of DFID's SPHEIR (Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform) programme to support higher education transformation in focus countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

Added to this, the time frames and rules-sets of funded projects can both enable and restrict the change that they aim to support to, as well as encouraging a sense that change requires a funded project to be possible in the first place. Projects can be hugely beneficial, meeting the costs of travel to work with and learn from colleagues elsewhere, of accessing additional expertise, of enabling key staff to escape campus for some time to think and plan, or of allowing individuals to be released from other duties, but they bring with them various reporting and administrative requirements, and can introduce particular politics, logics of action and shift incentives in less positive directions.

Over the last year the TESCEA partnership has grappled with many of these challenges – intrinsic to both the higher education (HE) system and to the project mode of working. But we have also enjoyed some real successes – some of which I'm sure have been a surprise to many of us. Although it's early days, it suggests that real change is possible, and is challenging the picture that I'm sure many of us are familiar with.

## Inspiring academic staff – and connecting with what they value

When we talk about improving teaching and learning in higher education, we acknowledge that significant change is hard to achieve. We often expect a degree of resistance – or at least initial enthusiasm but which quickly drops off as the difficult work starts.

We sometimes expect faculty to resist change, either because they don't see the need to change their practices or because they are reluctant to take on the additional work that re-developing curricula and teaching materials would entail. Given the constraints described here, that reluctance may be entirely understandable, and results from the convergence of systemic failures, rather than personal ones. We certainly shared some of these concerns when we embarked on the project together.

Even with some eager and enthusiastic faculty, we probably expect it to be slow to see changes in wider practice. We know that it can take considerable time to change policies and processes, which create incentives or pressures for change, and help to move institutions in positive directions. And we know that changing institutional cultures is an even more challenging goal – and that's what we need to do for new practices to flourish and for change to really stick. These were all issues which we thought about as we designed the partnership to foster development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in undergraduates in Tanzania and Uganda. And they are issues that we have returned to since in many conversations within the partnership.

We realized that, to begin with, we needed to inspire and to open-up thinking – rather than dive straight into the detailed work of re-designing courses.

Towards the end of 2018, the Association for Faculty Enrichment in Learning and Teaching (AFELT) organized a series of “transformative learning workshops”.<sup>i</sup> These brought university staff together to question what it was they were trying to do in their role as lecturers, and to support them to explore their potential as agents of change in the classroom. They focused not on methods and approaches, but on the underpinning philosophies of teaching and learning and the epistemic orientation of teaching staff.

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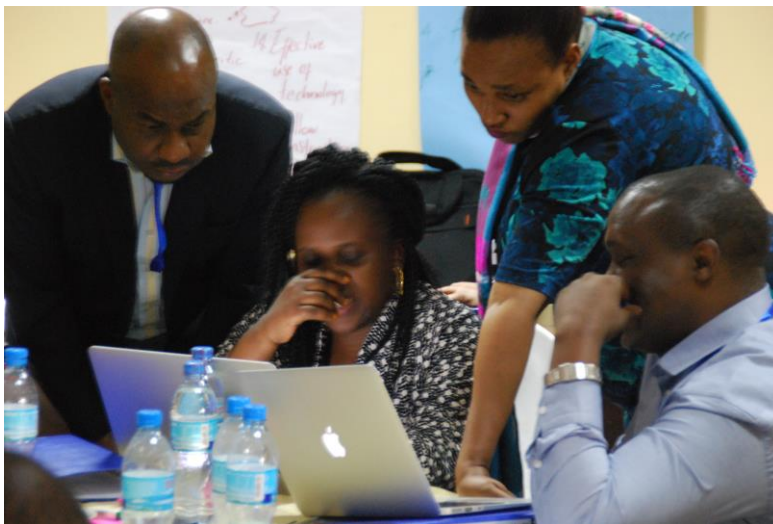
“I started to analyse myself: if what I've been doing was good and successful to my students, did I manage to create creative students who are free to express themselves and to work in different kinds of environment? I realized that I tried to do this to some extent but also to some extent I was trying to fix them in the way I wanted. This training changed my mind and now I have to find ways of enabling students to participate, interact and give their ideas. As a teacher you don't know everything.”

*Transformative learning workshop participant,  
Tanzania*

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The workshop itself wasn't part of our original plans – but the suggestion emerged during a kick-off meeting in June 2018 when we realized there was a missing piece to our change strategy. It was an important decision, and it has paid off many times. In fact, so powerful was it judged to have been, that we ran a further session in two universities, and there is wider demand, with colleagues keen that more staff can participate. Many participants alighted on the notion of 'banking' education – from the original work of the Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire. They were concerned that much of their teaching reflected this practice, and that they needed to shift their approach, if they are to engage students in their own learning.



In several cases senior staff attended – and that helped to emphasize that the university was backing the initiative, and to make it clear that the university's leadership team were open to learning too.

Alongside this, my Ugandan and Tanzanian colleagues began to build external advisory groups, to help to connect them and their staff and institutions to expertise and fresh ideas from outside of academia. A series of "joint advisory groups" have been created, to help guide the process of re-designing curricula, and to generate new connections between university programmes and wider society and business. It is rare that faculty, employers and students have the opportunity to talk together, and the input from these groups is already proving valuable: lecturers have heard directly from employers about the environments their graduates will need to be prepared for, and the challenges that they face beyond the university.

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“It has been a dream to bring together in one room, students, employers, industries and lecturers who are facilitators of various courses. Lecturers got to hear directly from employers about the challenges facing graduates and students at the same time heard what is expected from them with employers. It was really an amazing experience.”

*Dr Perpetua Kalimasi, Mzumbe University,  
Tanzania*

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## Putting it into practice

From building interest through the “transformative learning” workshops, the next steps were intended to be resolutely practical: to work with academic staff to appraise the courses they were teaching, and see how the courses could be improved so that students were really learning how to think, and were supported and encouraged to do so.

In January I spent a week with one of the four partner universities, the University of Dodoma, in central Tanzania. It followed similar sessions at the other three universities – Mzumbe, also in Tanzania, and Gulu and Uganda Martyrs in Uganda. The aim – over the course of seven days – was to take a group of lecturers through the process of rethinking, and then re-structuring and re-designing one of the courses which they would be teaching in the upcoming semester. Lecturers – led by the AFELT team – began by looking at the alignment with the overall programme of study, moved onto mapping the key concepts to be covered, considering learning outcomes, and then looked at assessment strategies – with a particular focus on formative assessment, so that they could track and support learning over the duration of the course, rather than simply at its end.

Discussions on gender responsive teaching were woven through the sessions<sup>ii</sup> – although it is an aspect we know we need to deepen for future rounds. Towards the end of the week we used Learning Designer,<sup>iii</sup> an online tool developed by the UCL Knowledge Lab at the UCL Institute of Education, to build a picture of the course which could then be viewed in different ways and shared with others.

## What makes for engagement in change?

We're probably all familiar with the common workshop scenario – a room full of tables, people sat at their laptops, presenter or facilitator at the front. It's not unusual to find a good number of people are checking emails – either because they are trying to juggle the pressure of other work, or because they simply aren't that engaged – or drifting in and out to attend to other business.



The sessions in Dodoma were very different – as they have been in other institutions. Instead, we had a room of lecturers who were evidently committed to improving the learning experience for their students. Their energy, even after so many days, was impressive. By the end of the week, the room was decorated with flipcharts, mapping out courses and connections between concepts, and when lecturers were sat at their laptops they weren't replying to emails but we're poring over course designs, or grappling with the Learning Designer. There were similar stories brought back by INASP colleagues who had participated in

other workshops, and by my fellow project leads, who were excited by the enthusiasm with which their staff had engaged, and their eagerness to put into practice what they were learning. Partners have spoken of a real shift in mindsets that they're observing amongst their own colleagues.

I've pondered why that was since. The sessions were well designed, and the group had been inspired by the initial transformative learning sessions, but I think it was more than that. I had not anticipated such energy. It seems evident that we're benefiting from a broader conversation in each university, from aspects of its institutional culture, and from the ability of the leadership – at the partnership level, and at the institutional level – to inspire their staff towards changing practices.

Is this just good fortune? Perhaps partly, but I think a certain dimension of it is also the result of very deliberate practice. Here are some key themes that I have observed:

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## 1. The need is real and recognized

It's perhaps ought to go without saying, but the problem we're trying to address and the need we're trying to meet is one which is clearly felt by all partners, and by the staff and leadership of their wider institutions. There may be some debate as to the most important dimensions of the problem, and what needs to be done to address it, but few would question the need to improve undergraduate education. This has been discussed on campus and through academic fora, but it is also a wider conversation which has been amplified through opinion pieces in national newspapers, by business and employer groups, and by national visions and government policy statements<sup>iv</sup> – many of whom have pointed to the poor quality of graduates, who are perceived to be full of theory but lacking the ability to translate it into practice. It's also a problem that, for many lecturers, has a personal dimension – they are teaching large classes, and they want to see their students learning. The pressure to act has increased as enrolments have climbed and graduate numbers have swelled, but many are unable to find jobs in labour markets not well able to absorb them.

## 2. It's all in the partnership

As I've written about at length before,<sup>v,vi</sup> the process of identifying the right partners, building the partnership and designing the project was taken seriously by all of us in the TESCEA project. Responding to a competitive funding scheme meant that it wasn't a perfect exercise – INASP developed the initial connections, and did a lot of the coordination; there was a limit to how much money and time we could all invest upfront in design workshops; we were scattered across four countries; and we all had other work and responsibilities. However, we did design the project collaboratively. It was difficult at times – made more so by a lengthy process of negotiation over the project design with the funder. It would be unfair to claim it was a perfectly equitable process within the partnership, since navigating that 're-design' process pushed more decision-making to INASP than we would have wished, and left the partnership with many issues to resolve once we started work. But the process brought us together as a partnership, and that foundation has helped us since.

Despite the foundations, we have still encountered difficulties along the way, and have had to work together to understand each other's ideas, experience and expertise, even where it hasn't been immediately obvious to each of us. We have needed to negotiate and navigate the many relationships as the project has unfolded. We have also encountered obstacles, or needed to address confusions and uncertainties in responsibilities, roles and priorities – inevitable in a partnership spanning so many organizations and individuals.

Our original core team has grown to encompass new colleagues leading different components of work, as well as many more lecturers participating in the course re-design programme. That has meant new teams forming within the partnership, around functions such as monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) and communications and around key issues to be addressed, such as our responsiveness to gender. These teams are binding the partnership together in new ways, and providing an infrastructure to design, to do and to make decisions together. While this adds complexity to the 'delivery' of the project, it also embeds it much more firmly in the life of each institution. In each case, it has relied on team leaders ceding control to colleagues and allowing the project to evolve in new ways. The partnership is open, and power and authority have been deliberately dispersed. As one colleague said when we met in Dar es Salaam: "Everyone leads in TESCEA."

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**"Everyone leads in TESCEA."**

*Vincent Otieno Odihambo,  
Ashoka*

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Making time to meet face-to-face – both virtually through Zoom calls, and physically when we can – has been critical, and we are making efforts to sustain and nurture that sense of partnership across multiple teams through regular internal news updates.

### *3. The partnership has opened-up new thinking and relationships*

One of the features of the partnership and one of our core assumptions is that the change we seek – transforming teaching and learning, and, through this, preparing students to be able to make a greater contribution to their society and communities when they graduate – is sufficiently complex that no single organization can achieve success when acting alone. Systemic change therefore requires a relatively complex partnership – one which can create something distinct by bringing organizations and their teams into new conversations with fresh ideas on all sides.

While the universities all have deep expertise in teaching and learning, each was keen to escape the trap of ‘business as usual’. Universities are full of academic subject experts, but knowledge of pedagogy is rarely part of an academic training. The partnership therefore connects the universities to a group of Kenya-based academics that has formed to bring new ideas and expertise to bear on the day-to-day practices of teaching.



Despite the challenge that this might have presented – academics from Kenya coming to show their peers in Tanzania and Uganda how to improve teaching – the opportunity has been embraced. That is credit both to the university teams – willing to open themselves up to learn from others – and to AFELT – which moved quickly to show what ‘transformative learning’ really meant, and what it could offer. On occasion that ‘opening up’ has depended on individuals pushing firmly, embracing difficult conversations in the process, but having the conviction to do so when they feel something really matters to the overall success of the project.

The particular institutional mix also helps as it brings different perspectives to our conversations about pedagogy and curriculum change, and how to gain traction. We have three public and one private university, and additional private university perspectives are brought from AFELT members. That helps us to understand different possibilities and strategies for change according to wider institutional contexts. Each of the four universities is based some distance from major cities – Dodoma is the slight exception, based in Tanzania’s national capital, but a much smaller centre than the commercial hub of Dar es Salaam. So many initiatives, and many international partnerships, have concentrated on universities in capital cities and principal urban centres, so again this brings new perspectives.

Two further Kenyan partners will, we believe, play an important role – LIWA and Ashoka East Africa – although a combination of unforeseen pressures, changes to the original workplan which were required by the wider SPHEIR programme of which TESCEA is part, and the challenges of bringing organizations together into new working relationships has delayed their substantive involvement. Nevertheless, there have already been some early contributions, with Ashoka matching social entrepreneur fellows into roles in the various university advisory groups.

### *4. Institutional leadership has been vital, and allowed each team to navigate the change in their own context*

Some of our success is the result of very intentional thinking at the institutional level. At each university, teams have identified who they need to influence, who they need to involve, and – where there is fertile ground – the departments and groups of academics who are most likely to take this forward. They have also worked to build teams to drive the initiative forward, and to inspire and encourage them in the process.



While we're trying to follow a shared path as a partnership – because one of our aims is to develop a model for wider change that can be scaled out – we've recognized that we need to leave space to enable each institution to adjust the course to ensure it best fits their local contexts. Each university has taken a slightly different approach to our core activities.

Colleagues in several universities invited their Deputy Vice Chancellors and deans to participate in the transformative learning workshops and course re-design sessions. At Uganda Martyrs University, the team initiated a series of student engagement sessions, inviting guest speakers to explain what kind of graduates they want to employ and what skills students need to be successful in the Ugandan job market. In Tanzania, the teams at the universities of Dodoma and Mzumbe came together to organize a joint workshop with key, high-level business and government stakeholders to kick things off – knowing that by working together rather than individually they would have a better chance of engaging government and business successfully. In Dodoma and Mzumbe the university's quality assurance directors also participated in course redesign workshops, a recognition of the importance of engaging key authorisers in the change process. At Gulu University, colleagues eschewed a typical meeting format, and invited key stakeholders to share a dinner, forming relationships and discussing ideas in a less formal environment. The Mzumbe team make regular reports back to their senior management team – who are closely following the process and communicating their support. All of this has helped to achieve broader institutional ownership of the change process – beyond the departments that are immediately involved.

To ensure that we can follow the same broad path, but also do things differently in each institution – we've developed a 'critical path' for the project, a simple diagram showing how all the pieces link together – and where that requires us to work in a particular way and to a particular schedule so that we have the information we need to develop our model – and where there is room for local adaptation.

## *5. Creating interest and engagement, and bringing in fresh perspectives*



It's clear that providing a truly transformative learning experience for students needs new forms of partnership with employers (whether private or public), entrepreneurs, and with community-based organizations or groups. While there are myriad connections between each university and a range of external stakeholders, our emphasis has been on developing relationships which are more enduring – many such relationships, we've

learnt, begin well but falter, becoming temporary and transient and don't enable the kind of longer-term engagement in the design and delivery of learning. Bridging that gap – and ensuring it can be sustained – requires, we believe, some new ideas and expertise, including from core project partners, as well as the external organizations that can be brought into the conversation. It is also about shifting perceptions amongst business and community stakeholders of the universities, of how they can contribute to the wider needs of society and the economy – but also where they need partnerships that extend their reach and bring in different expertise from beyond the campus to help them to realize those ambitions.

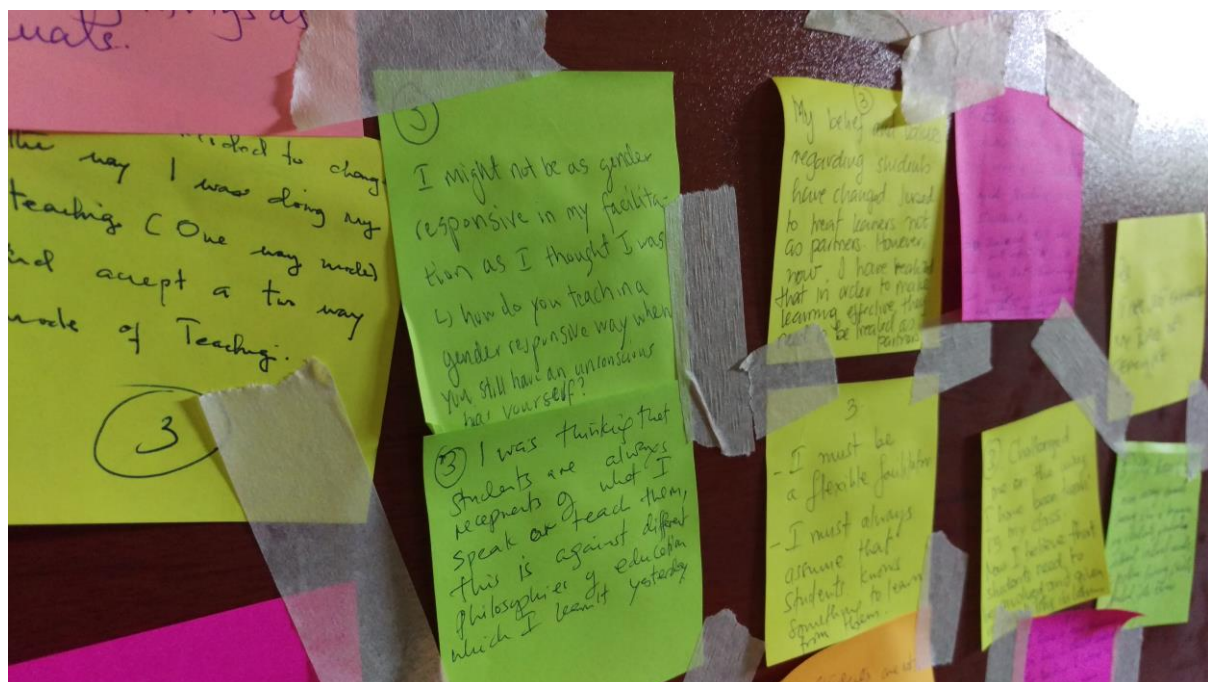


To that end, the partnership includes expertise in university-industry relationships (LIWA), and social entrepreneurship (Ashoka). Identifying and incorporating that expertise is only part of the challenge. For it to work, we need to develop a common understanding and language, and appreciation of different perspectives and strengths, and that takes time. For their own part, the universities have all formed their own advisory groups, drawing on diverse talents, from a union of coffee growers, to representatives of government bodies, to representatives of local banks, to community actors, to agencies responsible for young people's socio-economic development. These have been particularly important ways of signalling the university's intentions, bringing in fresh perspectives, and ensuring that, when we all go back to the 're-design table', we are doing so with broader insights. The next step is to build from this, to create practical learning opportunities for students outside of the classroom.

## 6. We haven't always got things right

Of course, no project or partnership is perfect. We still sometimes struggle with internal project communication (sometimes too much, sometimes too little), and we still have to make sure roles and responsibilities are clear to all. Time is always a challenge, particularly for university faculty trying to drive a change process alongside other work and commitments. We also haven't made the progress we had hoped to make to ensure we are gender responsive, although work is already underway to strengthen that in the coming year. There is still more to do to consolidate the links with industry and community partners, and to ensure that they translated into meaningful and practical opportunities for student placements, projects, or other ways to extend learning beyond the classroom. While the first round of course re-design was a great success, we were not ready with our plans for providing on-going mentoring and support to faculty who were subsequently embarking on the process and taking new curricula into the classroom. AFELT have since identified mentors to support lecturers who are in the process of re-designing their courses.

Partly this has reflected the demands of 'management', i.e. the regular reporting to funders. We have worked hard to try to keep it in proportion with the project, so that the change process is not compromised, while avoiding the temptation to centralize it as the lead partner in the process. To do so would remove agency in the partnership, so a shorter-term strain is, we hope, a longer-term gain in trust, capability, and genuine ownership. Of course, it also reflects the challenges of any ambitious process of change. In addition to building on our strengths, and working to support those lecturers who have enthusiastically embraced the change, affecting a broader institutional shift will require further efforts to support those who are open to new ideas but finding the shift more challenging to make.



## Learning better

These are very much personal reflections from what I've been observing, but a more rigorous learning component is helping us to test our assumptions, and to track what is changing, how and why. That will help us know more about why we struggle when we do, and why we're successful at driving change when we are. My colleague Femi Nzegwu has written elsewhere<sup>vii</sup> about how we're seeking to develop an adaptive MEL process to support this and other work. In the coming months I hope we'll be able to provide further insights, and a stronger evidence base, to understand the process of change.

While these are personal reflections, they are the result of many conversations with partners, and with my INASP colleagues, and I'm grateful to them for the opportunity to learn together, their tireless work, and for generously sharing their own observations and ideas.

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### **About the author**

*Jon Harle is responsible for developing INASP's programme strategy and for the overall delivery of INASP's projects. He is currently project director of the DFID-funded [Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa](#) project, and previously led INASP's [Strengthening Research and Knowledge Systems](#) programme.*

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<sup>i</sup> [Transforming teachers for transformed students](#), INASP blog, December 2018

<sup>ii</sup> [Gender responsive programming: the global gender gap in the context of East African higher education](#), INASP blog, April 2019

<sup>iii</sup> [Learning Designer](#), UCL Institute of Education

<sup>iv</sup> See, for example, [Uganda's Second National Development Plan 2015/16 – 2019/20 \(NDPII\)](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Getting beyond principles: partnerships are about people](#), INASP blog, July 2018

<sup>vi</sup> [Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa: the first eight months](#), INASP blog, December 2018

<sup>vii</sup> [Using adaptive monitoring, evaluation and learning in programme design](#), INASP paper, August 2018