# HIGHER EDUCATION AS A CENTRAL ACTOR IN SELF-RELIANT DEVELOPMENT: A PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

THE VISION: HIGHER EDUCATION AS A CENTRAL ACTOR IN DEVELOPMENT

Higher education (HE), as espoused in the 2018 USAID Education Policy and operationalized through higher education programming across the Agency, can be a central actor in driving and sustaining local development. Higher education has the potential to advance development because of its broad reach across sectors, communities, and intersecting systems. To capture this vision for its Higher Education programming, USAID has developed a Higher Education Program Framework that depicts USAID's common, sector-inclusive understanding of a higher education system, commitment to key higher education outcomes, and ways of engaging with higher education to achieve these outcomes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: USAID Higher Education Program Framework
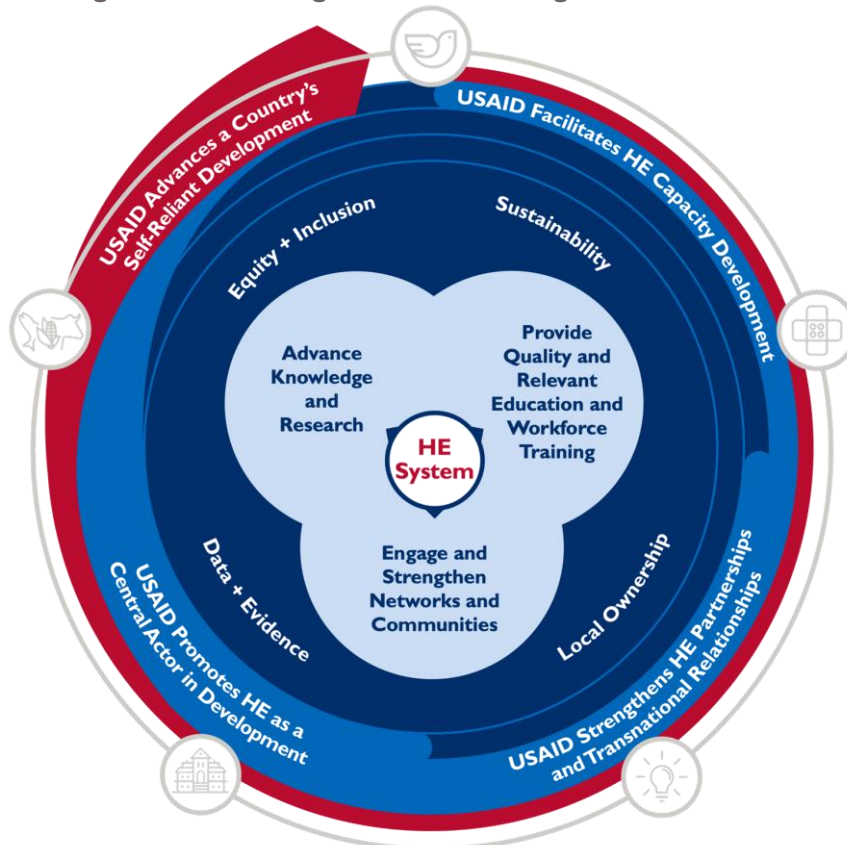
In a review of the diversity of the higher education landscape,[1] USAID's higher education programming takes place in a variety of sectors with funding from a variety of USAID operating units, including the Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance; Bureau for Economic Growth, Education, and Environment; Bureau for Resilience and Food Security; the Global Development Lab; and Bureau for Global Health. Yet each of these bureaus and sectors contributes to the common vision of positioning higher education as a central actor in development. Sector icons in the framework (see Figure 2) depict this sector-inclusive approach.

Figure 2: Sector Icons

THE HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM FRAMEWORK

The Higher Education Program Framework presents USAID's approach to three key outcomes that USAID programming promotes across sectors within a higher education system.

The Higher Education System

The higher education system, in any given context, includes educational policies and norms; the organizations that deliver or benefit from higher education; the individuals who create, operationalize, and implement policies and norms; and the individuals who deliver and consume education, training, and knowledge. Together, the higher education system has three core functions, depicted in the framework as three intersecting circles (see Figure 3), though any one actor might not invest in all three functions:

Figure 3: Core Functions of a Higher Education System

- **Provides quality and relevant education and training:** Higher education systems strengthen the workforce through continuous, market-relevant improvement of teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum, and pedagogical practices.

- **Advances knowledge and research:** Higher education systems advance generation of knowledge through basic and applied research, support its application, and develop solutions that contribute to development and innovation in a variety of sectors.

- **Engages and strengthens networks and communities:** Higher education systems develop and engage with local, regional, and international communities to both ground their work in local challenges and connect to the most cutting-edge ideas the higher education community has to offer.
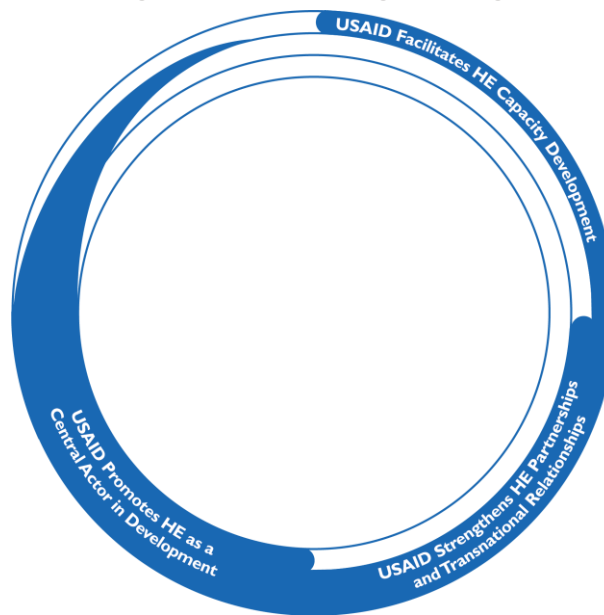
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[1] Jennifer L. Lebrón, Dr. Anne Griffin, and Dr. Robin DePietro-Jurand, *USAID Higher Education Landscape Analysis 2014-2018* (USAID, 2019), https://www.edu-links.org/resources/usaid-higher-education-landscape-analysis-2014-2018.

Three Key Outcomes

To achieve a vision of self-reliant development in which higher education plays a key role, USAID's investments in higher education focus on **developing the capacity** of individuals and higher education institutions (HEIs)[2] so that they can improve their performance, **strengthening partnerships and transnational relationships** that can sustain performance improvement, and **promoting higher education as a central actor** in locally led development (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Three Outcomes of USAID-Funded Higher Education Programming

- Through **capacity development**, HEIs improve their administrative, research, and instructional performance, thereby affecting higher education systems and the individuals who engage with them through achieving a range of sector-specific outcomes. HEIs with improved performance are better positioned to achieve a variety of developmental outcomes, both within the higher education system and within broader systems that affect a country's development.

- Through **strong partnerships and transnational relationships**, HEIs (and the individuals affiliated with them) are able to sustain and continue to improve performance across the three higher education functions. Transnational relationships, however, are about mutual engagement: they promote cross-learning and capacity development that produces stronger academic, research, and professional bonds.

- USAID is also committed to promoting higher education as a **central actor** in developing local solutions to local problems regardless of sector or education level. USAID uses its convening power to make a place for HEIs in policy discussions. Indeed, while HEIs are often a target of USAID capacity development support, they are just as often—and often simultaneously—partners or key stakeholders in USAID programming in a variety of sectors and for a variety of outcomes.

USAID's Approach

USAID understands—as do partner country governments—that HEIs can be galvanized for the purpose of driving forward self-reliant development or holding it back. Thus, key USAID principles (see Figure 5) guide its engagement with HEIs:

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[2] Per the 2018 USAID Education Policy, a higher education institution is an organization that provides educational opportunities that build on secondary education, providing learning activities in specialized fields. It aims at learning at a high level of complexity and specialization. Higher/tertiary education includes what is commonly understood as academic education but also includes advanced vocational or professional education. This may include public or private universities, colleges, community colleges, academically affiliated research institutes, and training institutes, including teacher-training institutes.

- **Equity and Inclusion**: Inclusivity and equity are always the right choice, regardless of context or challenge. Wherever USAID engages with higher education, USAID promotes inclusive and equitable practices as it develops capacity, strengthens relationships, or promotes higher education as a driver of development.

- **Evidence and Data**: Data and sound evidence— not anecdotes and "what we've always done"— should and must guide best practices for higher education programming, regardless of sector. In particular, USAID's capacity development and partnerships with HEIs should be built on evidence of what works.

- **Local Ownership**: While USAID can provide access to key resources—financial and otherwise—it cannot replace an HEI's understanding of its local context and will always operate with local HEIs as owners and drivers of the development agenda.

- **Sustainability**: USAID strives for sustainable, locally led development solutions. Every engagement with higher education is articulated and implemented with the goal of sustainable outcomes.

Figure 5: Guiding Principles for USAID Engagement in Higher Education
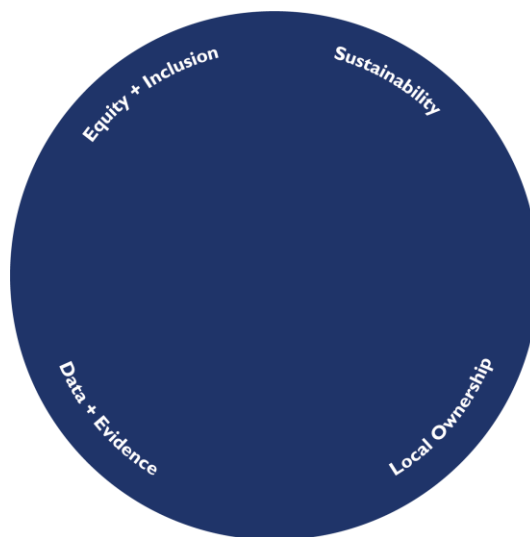
Engage with USAID's Higher Education Programming

USAID and its partners are continuously engaged in developing and implementing cutting-edge programming and in designing and publishing new research to strengthen the sector. To learn more about USAID's higher education programming, visit Education Links at https://www.edu-links.org/topics/higher-education. To learn about and get involved in USAID's Higher Education Learning Agenda, visit https://www.edu-links.org/HELearningAgenda.