



How Joint Advisory Groups have supported educational transformation in the TESCEA project

LEARNING BRIEF

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA)



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July 2022

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Acknowledgements:

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) is funded by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as part of its SPHEIR (Strategic Partnerships for Higher Education Innovation and Reform) programme.

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Cover image: An energiser exercise in the University of Dodoma's JAG meeting, July 2022

Credit: Iroko Official



Executive summary

The Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project (2018-2021) worked to redesign courses and transform teaching and learning in higher education in Tanzania and Uganda to help address the disconnect between the teaching and learning that students experience in university and the needs of the labour market or what they need to create their own entrepreneurial ventures when they graduate.

A crucial element of TESCEA's approach to ensure that students develop the skills they need when they graduate was to involve stakeholders from outside the universities in this process. This learning paper discusses a key approach to this, the Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs).

In the four universities in the TESCEA partnership, JAGs brought together representatives of university management and facilitators of learning with external stakeholders such as industry, community and public sector representatives. These groups were initially envisaged as a way to strengthen connections beyond the university and provide opportunities for students to do placements and take part in mentoring programmes. It was also expected that they would help universities to understand the key skills that graduates need. As the TESCEA project evolved, the remit of the JAGs expanded into other ways of supporting the institution's teaching and learning approaches.

The evaluation of TESCEA, which took place in the last year of the project, found that JAGs contributed more than anticipated to the project. It also found that JAG members had a wider impact across their affiliated institutions.

In the TESCEA project, JAGs played five key roles in their universities:

- Advising
- Brokering
- Mentoring
- Student employment
- Student engagement

Beyond TESCEA, JAG members have catalysed transformation and innovation in the universities by:

- Re-envisioning education
- Understanding the dynamics of graduate employment
- Expanding skills development
- Enabling government policy and collaboration opportunities

Overall, we found that the JAG approach was an important component for ensuring that higher education transformation is aligned with life beyond university. We found that successful implementation of the approach requires:

- Stakeholders who are aligned with the university's vision, mission, priorities and areas of focus and who appreciate the urgent need to transform teaching and learning experience in universities
- Stakeholders who have the capacity and willingness to exert influence across the Higher Education system
- Commitment by external stakeholders and by the university, including senior-level buy-in
- Openness by the university to engage with and learn from stakeholders in a new way
- An approach that is tailored to the university's and local priorities but also aligned with national and regional context.

There is commitment across the TESCEA university partners to continue the JAG approach within their institutions and ideally for the approach to expand to other universities in the region. Continuation and expansion of the JAG approach will require: strategic thinking in the university; senior-level commitment; a balance between implementing the new approach within the university structures and ensuring ongoing flexibility and innovation; and stronger national and regional connections.

1 Introduction and background

In East Africa and elsewhere there is often a disconnect between the teaching and learning that students experience in university and the needs of the labour market or what they need to create their own entrepreneurial ventures when they graduate. This is the challenge that the Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) project (see box) set out to address.

The seven partners in the TESCEA project (2018-2021) worked together to transform teaching and learning in higher education to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills in students and to be more gender responsive. In later 2021 the project released a model to enable sustainability and scale-up of this approach.¹

A crucial element to ensure that the TESCEA model was effective in helping students develop the skills they need was to involve stakeholders from outside the universities in this process. This is because lecturers' teaching and students learning is influenced by wider environment and has a bearing on the education outcome of a society. We were persuaded, therefore that to transform education experience we needed full participation of key stakeholders from across the ecosystem in the project.

TRANSFORMING EMPLOYABILITY FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN EAST AFRICA

Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa (TESCEA) helped 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 supported universities, industries, communities and government to work together to create an improved learning experience for students – both women and men. This improved learning experience fostered the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and allowed for practical learning beyond the classroom that improves a graduate's employability.

The TESCEA partnership was 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) and Ashoka East Africa (Kenya).

This learning paper discusses a key approach to this, the Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), and shares some insight from the evaluation of the TESCEA project into the effectiveness of this approach.

2 The Joint Advisory Group approach

Engagement with external stakeholders in the TESCEA project came about primarily via what the project termed Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs). These brought together representatives of university management and facilitators of learning² with external stakeholders such as industry, community, private and public sector personnel. These teams were initially envisaged as a way to strengthen connections beyond the university and provide opportunities for students to do placements and take part in mentoring programmes. It was also expected that they would provide input for the redesign of the courses.

As the TESCEA project evolved, each university developed its JAG slightly differently, as discussed in our set of case studies.³ The remit of the JAGs also expanded into other ways of supporting the institution's teaching and learning approaches.

Membership of the JAGs

Members were drawn from a range of stakeholder sectors, aligned with the interests and priorities of the universities. **Gulu University**, for example, particularly reached out to community organisations and

¹ See [TransformHE.org](https://www.transformhe.org) for the TESCEA model

² In the TESCEA project we used the term 'facilitator of learning' instead of 'teacher', 'instructor' and 'lecturer' to reflect the learning philosophy and pedagogical approaches promoted by the project.

³ Mutonyi, H. and Dryden, J. (2021). The TESCEA approach to Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), TESCEA case study. Available from www.transformhe.org/case-studies/categories/jags

businesses in its focus areas of agriculture, business, and medicine. **Uganda Martyrs University** took a similar approach with faculty leads of programmes (Business Administration and Management Science, Education and School of Arts and Social Sciences) identifying the organisations and the contact persons most suitable to participate in its JAG.

In forming its JAG, **Mzumbe University** placed a strong emphasis on engaging those involved in youth empowerment, drawing membership from the Prime Minister's Office - Youth Empowerment; National Economic Empowerment Council (NEEC) and Tanzania Youth Coalition (TYC). Mzumbe also involved young entrepreneurs who have successfully created their own jobs or businesses, as well as the Forum of African Women Educationalists (FAWE) to align with the TESCEA emphasis on gender-responsive pedagogy.

University of Dodoma also drew membership from national bodies in Tanzania. These included Ministry of Education Science and Technology, The Commission of Science and Technology (COSTECH), Small Industry Development Organisation (SIDO), Association of Tanzanian Employers (ATE) and Confederation of Tanzania Industry (CTI). The university's JAG also involved local government, including District Councils (Mpwapwa and Bahi) and Dodoma Municipal Council. There was strong involvement of FAWE, who did support placement of students in Gender studies.

How the JAGs worked

The frequency of JAG meetings varied between the universities and at different stages of the project. University of Dodoma's JAG met bi-annually for two consecutive days during the TESCEA project. In contrast, Uganda Martyrs University's JAG team met on average once every six weeks. They also shared information through mailing groups and a dedicated WhatsApp group. At Gulu University, the frequency changed over the lifetime of the TESCEA project – from twice per quarter, then quarterly and then bi-annually – but the most important engagements happened in between meetings. This included, for example, bringing JAG members to workshops designed to identify crucial employability skills and issues around gender and employment. JAG members were also involved in course redesign sessions and in the classroom as guest speakers. In addition, the university created a community of practice for lecturers, students and community members.

The importance of commitment

All the universities emphasise the need for commitment as part of successful JAGs. This commitment was part of the initial selection of JAG members. It is also important on an ongoing basis, with JAG members being replaced if they are unable to commit to the group and the related activities.

For more about the JAG approaches, see the collection of case studies.⁴

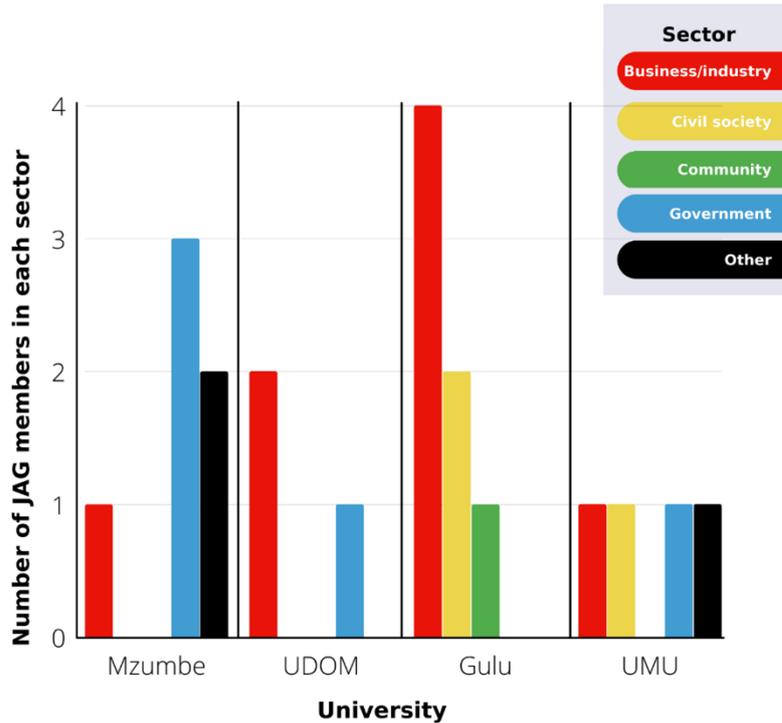
⁴ Mutonyi, H. and Dryden, J. (2021). The TESCEA approach to Joint Advisory Groups (JAGs), TESCEA case study. www.transformhe.org/case-studies/categories/jags

3 The impact of the JAG approach

This learning brief summarises some of the learning from TESCEA's JAG approach. It draws on findings from the TESCEA evaluation.⁵ This consulted with 20 JAG members from the four universities, with a distribution of different types of sector roles as shown in the graph on the right. The JAG members provided open-ended qualitative feedback.

In addition, the evaluation consulted with university senior management and academic staff.

The study found that JAGs contributed more than anticipated to the TESCEA project. It also found that JAG members had a wider impact across their affiliated institutions. In the following sections we discuss their role and impact, first within the project and then within the wider institutions.



A more detailed discussion of the learning from the JAG approach can be found in an upcoming journal paper.⁶

3.1 The role of JAGs in TESCEA

As previously mentioned, initially within the TESCEA project, JAG members were invited as industry link partners to help strengthen the universities' connections with local and national industry and government bodies and to create opportunities for students to take part in placements and mentorship programmes. It was also envisioned that the JAG committee members would act as guest speakers to aid industry exposure within the classroom environment – to students and teachers alike – and would advise on skills needed.

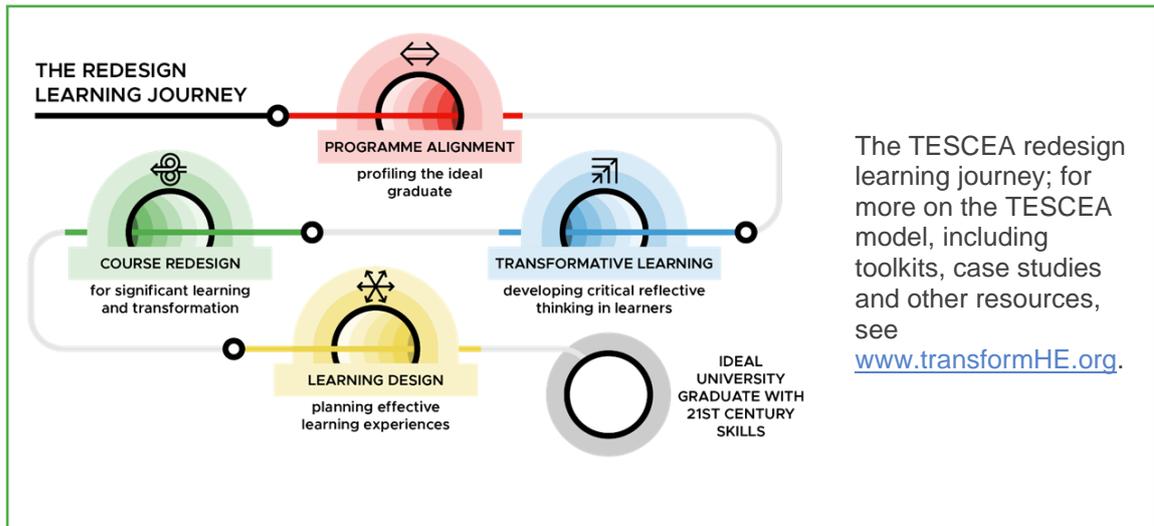
As the project progressed, JAGs contributed significantly more than originally conceived. They played an integral part in facilitating transformative learning practices across the institutions they were affiliated with.

The TESCEA evaluation identified five key roles in which they are involved:

⁵ Dooley, G., Luswata, A., Malagala, A., Milanzi, M., Ngowi, E., Nzegwu, F., Printer Otieno, A. and Sikalieh, D., (2021), Transforming Employability for Social Change in East Africa: an Evaluation, INASP report. www.inasp.info/publications/transforming-employability-social-change-east-africa-evaluation

⁶ Nzegwu, F., Wild, J., Idraku, F., Nkandu, J. The roles and impact of the JAGs in educational transformation: TESCEA case study, forthcoming

- **Advising** - JAG members advised their respective universities on external stakeholder engagement and on opportunities to enable new partnerships. JAG members were also significantly involved in the course redesign process in all universities.⁷



The TESCEA redesign learning journey; for more on the TESCEA model, including toolkits, case studies and other resources, see www.transformHE.org.

- **Brokering** - JAG members facilitated public, private and community sector engagements, with an aim to develop closer ties and wider knowledge exchange plans and opportunities.
- **Mentoring** - JAG members mentored students and provided opportunities for students to participate in external skills development. Some JAG members also provided mentoring to academic staff around presentations and engagement skills.

- **Student employment** – Through the JAG members, students had the opportunity to work in a range of businesses relevant to their area of study (from urban-based industries to rural farming facilities). These experiences offered real-life exposure to creative thinking and problem-solving skills.



Gulu University agriculture students at a pig farm.
Image credit: LIWA

- **Student engagement** – JAG members engaged with students as guest speakers, presenting students with real-life problems and seeking their ideas on creative solutions. They spoke to them about skills essential for professionalism and work etiquette within a work environment.

⁷ <https://www.transformhe.org/course-redesign>

3.2 The impacts of JAGs on their institutions

Beyond TESCEA, JAG members have contributed more widely to their respective universities. In particular, they have supported their universities in:

- **Re-envisioning education** - Across the four universities, the JAGs embraced the underlying philosophy of TESCEA. They also actively advocated for the need to ‘rebrand’ higher education to a wider national audience of policymakers and influencers. Because of this, the universities have seen strong support for the fundamental shifts that they have made in their teaching and learning philosophies and practice towards developing students with greater levels of analytical skills and greater interest in entrepreneurship.
- **Understanding the dynamics of graduate employment** - JAGs helped the TESCEA universities understand youth employment-related challenges and what roles universities could play to make graduates more employable. JAG members advocated for a more practice-based learning curricula and encouraged universities to engage with industry. They also increased industrial opportunities for students doing internships, strengthened partnership between the university and the members of industry and wider society.

“The platform provided us a chance to discuss youth employability challenges and possible solutions provided by academia”

TESCEA JAG member
- **Expanding skills development** - JAG members helped to grow a collective understanding of the enablers and challenges of graduate employment and entrepreneurship.

“The JAG external members have already earmarked for enterprise members to provide guest lectures and are now working with the university to prepare for sites and mechanisms for students' productive fieldwork. Seems that the spirit is high for both sides.”

TESCEA JAG member
- **Enabling government policy and collaboration opportunities** - The JAGs, to differing levels in the four institutions and the two countries, facilitated connections between universities and senior government and policy officials. Some of these relationships were rooted in high-level national government education, youth employment and youth disability agendas. These initiatives provided universities with a greater awareness of local and national challenges and the university’s role in driving social change and creating impact.

“As we gradually pull the industry-university [linkages] closer together we hope TESCEA will be a hit and impact the national discourse of Higher Learning Institutions.

“The university stands in a better position to get awareness of issues relating to local content implementation as an avenue to harness opportunities for students to undertake practical attachments with strategic projects and international investors etc.

“... there has been a change in approach when it comes to teaching, assessments and even assessments of teachers. Questions are being asked – the trend has changed. Working with the JAG has really changed the mindset – of management, of lecturers who are now job shadowing to understand exactly what happens in that [relevant] area of work and students are growing a better understanding of what it means to be a university graduate.”

Felix Idraku, UMU’s JAG focal person

4 Components of success

Although it was obvious from the start that stronger links between universities, industry and wider society was necessary to ensure that any transformation of higher education was aligned with social needs, we underestimated how important that engagement would be. Over the course of the TESCEA project, this component grew and became more deeply embedded in the whole TESCEA transformation process than originally anticipated.

We identified three inter-related key components of success with the JAG approach:

- **Unified vision across an institution** - The JAG approach was successful where there was a unified vision and effort to bring about transformative teaching and learning across a university. They thrived with strong backing from the highest levels of leadership within the universities.
- **Tailored to specific institutions** - The overall JAG approach was embraced by the four universities. However, although unified visions across institutions were important, there was no standardised blueprint for how to do this stakeholder engagement. As we discussed earlier, universities varied in how they selected JAG participants, how they scheduled meetings and what aspects of the TESCEA project and the institution more widely the JAG members contributed to. What proved to be a real strength of these JAGs was their capacity to respond to the unique and individual needs of their universities. In some institutions the main target was community engagement, in others it was high-level policy at national level.
- **Adaptability on both sides** - The combination of the previous two success components strongly hinged on the JAGs' – and the universities' – capacity to be flexible and adaptable, responding to the specific needs of their affiliated universities. This capacity to adapt was not just about adaptability by the JAG members directly. It also involved drawing on and extending their individual reach through their personal and professional networks as required. The universities responded by giving them great latitude to operate across all aspects of university life.

5 The sustainability challenge

Being part of JAGs gave members a strong sense of the commitment that universities have to transform the teaching and learning process. It also gave them a desire to continue to be part of that process.

JAG members interviewed as part of the project evaluation expressed a desire for increased dialogue with universities, and also for further practical change, for example in things like course structure. However, some were concerned about whether the approach could be sustained beyond the wider context of the TESCEA project and raised questions about the future sustainability of individual universities' perceived ambitions.

In the interviews several factors emerged to help ensure sustainability. These included a need for regular "open and honest" discussions to take place between universities and external stakeholders, on an ongoing basis, to define and refresh future visions and objectives. Members suggested that more proactive and strategic conversations should be initiated by universities to develop extensive networks of external stakeholders.

JAG members also suggested that greater engagement and mentorship opportunities across universities would be important in sustaining this transformative approach in the future. Key to this would be infusing the JAG approach right across the universities, with universities open to receiving feedback from industry and the community.

6 Future of the JAGs

We have discussed in this learning brief the clear benefits of the JAG approach for the TESCEA project and the wider institutions. We have also discussed the recognition of the need for strategic development to ensure sustainability. So what are the future opportunities for JAGs? These hinge on two main opportunities: preserving and expanding existing approaches and scale-up to the East African level.

6.1 Preserving and expanding

As discussed, there is a strong commitment on the part of both universities and JAGs to preserve and expand the valuable relationships that have been established as a result of TESCEA. There is a mutual respect and enthusiasm to work together.

Part of this, as discussed in the previous section, involves strategic conversations at a university level. However, there is a need to be careful to ensure that the flexibility and innovation that has been seen with the JAGs during the TESCEA project is not lost in an attempt to formalise these groups within university systems. The lessons of flexible setups, free rein to contribute to and provide support to any area of agreed need, great communication, regular and ongoing engagement and a unified vision underpinned by mutual respect and commitment could expand to other institutions.



"[In five years' time] we can see [Uganda Martyrs University] with the newly reformed curricula attracting more and more students and then the employability and entrepreneurship of young people graduating out of this institution creating jobs for themselves and others. I see this as something potentially contributing to absorbing many of the young people we have in this country. Assuming all factors remain constant, I am assuming this will happen because the interest from the university administration is huge, but there are even other stakeholders who are very interested. Also, policy changes within the university and nationally, I think, will move us in this direction [transformed teaching and learning; better equipped students]."

Joseph Nkandu, Executive Director of Nucafe, Uganda and UMU JAG chair

6.2 Regional scale up

The TESCEA partnership is now working to scale-out, nationally and regionally in East Africa, and subject to interest, beyond the region. Within individual countries a level of coordination would need to occur to ensure that JAG resources are deployed in the most effective and efficient way across a range of universities which may share similar interests and needs. Before the TESCEA project ended this was already beginning to happen, for example in Tanzania:

“Our JAG was great, the buy in is so high, impressive - we also invited representative from Mzumbe University of which their Depute Vice Chancellor - Academics and TESCEA Mzumbe representative attended, Representative from the Ministry and TCU. We are happy we did it this time around. Our Depute Vice Chancellor - added in his closing remarks ‘this can be the end of the project but not the end of TESCEA activities, we still need TESCEA’.”

Rehema G. Kilonzo (PhD), Senior Lecturer, Department of Sociology, The University of Dodoma

The benefit of engaging with national policymakers in education and youth employment via the JAG clearly extends beyond one university. How to navigate that space will require some thought. Greater collaboration across these institutions to extend the reach of the JAGs may also be necessary to ensure their students benefit from the range of skills and capacities of these JAGs.

“We must take ownership at the university but also as a country. With UMU, we need to meet a committee of parliament to share with it what we’ve done, so it [transformed teaching and learning] doesn’t stop with UMU but it [becomes] something that can be taken up by government. So that’s how I look at this continuing to move forward.”

Joseph Nkandu, Executive Director of Nucafe, Uganda and UMU JAG chair

Key lessons learnt

The Joint Advisory Group approach was an important component for ensuring that higher education transformation is aligned with the needs of society. Successful implementation of this approach requires:

- Stakeholders aligned with the university’s priorities and areas of focus
- Commitment by external stakeholders and by the university, including senior-level buy-in
- An approach that is tailored to the university’s and local priorities but also aligned with national and regional context.
- Intentionality in building a diverse team
- Aligning on the required changes/transformations/innovations and/or shared goal
- Recognizing and elevating complimentary skills, experience, knowledge
- Agreeing on the pathways to success

Continuation and expansion of the JAG approach will require:

- Strategic thinking in the university
- Senior-level commitment by university leaders and representatives of JAG-member organisations
- A balance between embedding within universities and ensuring ongoing flexibility and innovation
- Stronger national and regional connections