2021 CLA CASE COMPETITION

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Case Title:

Advance Program: Using CLA to Support Students to Complete Tertiary Education

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Photo Caption & Credit: Student completing practical coursework for an Advance-supported technical degree program in Honduras
Credit: Advance Program/Honduras

Summary:

Youth unemployment rates range from 18-25% in Latin American & the Caribbean, with economically disadvantaged youth falling at the higher end of this range. Regionally, one in five youth are out of school and not working. To meet this challenge, the Advance Program is strengthening the capacity of select two- and three-year technical tertiary education programs to provide market-relevant quality training to disadvantaged youth in the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Honduras and Jamaica.

The Advance Program engages with these tertiary institutions and the private sector to make technical training programs more relevant to the market based on country-specific workforce needs. Advance improves the capacity of target institutions in five key areas: curriculum and pedagogy, professional development of faculty and staff, labor bridging and career services, admissions, recruitment and student support services and scholarships.

In the fourth year of implementation, indicator performance reviewed during pause & reflect sessions revealed that a significant number of students in Guatemala and Honduras from Advance-supported degree programs were not on track to graduate on time. To deepen the program's understanding of the challenge presented, Advance launched a qualitative study to identify barriers to on-time graduation in Guatemala and Honduras. Using the collaborating, learning, and adapting approach, the team collaborated across country teams and university partners to design the study. The Program not only generated new learnings around what barriers students faced in reaching graduation on time, but also adapted activities across country and university contexts to address these barriers.

Think about which subcomponents of the Collaborating, Learning & Adapting (CLA) Framework are most reflected in your case so that you can reference them in your submission:

- Internal Collaboration
- External Collaboration
- Technical Evidence Base
- Theories of Change
- Scenario Planning
- M&E for Learning
- Pause & Reflect
- Adaptive Management
- Openness
- Relationships & Networks
- Continuous Learning & Improvement
- Knowledge Management
- Institutional Memory
- Decision-Making
- Mission Resources
- CLA in Implementing Mechanisms

1. What is the general context in which the case takes place? What organizational or development challenge(s) prompted you to collaborate, learn, and/or adapt?

In Latin America and the Caribbean, young people ages 15 to 24 are facing greater difficulty in finding a job and, in particular, quality jobs. While overall youth unemployment rate in the region is around 18%, this challenge is even more pronounced among youth in the lower income group, reaching over 25% unemployment rate. Youth from different socioeconomic backgrounds are eager to acquire the necessary skills to join the labor market, but higher education institutions in the region often struggle to provide them with the training they need to become employable. To improve youth employability, the USAID-funded Advance Program was launched in 2015 with the goal of strengthening the capacity of technical tertiary education programs to meet the needs of disadvantaged youth in Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic and equip them with the skills and opportunities to enter the workforce. In each country, Advance engages stakeholders from the education and the private sector to make technical training degree programs more relevant to the market based on workforce needs.

In one of the Program's pause and reflect session, where the technical and M&E teams routinely review M&E data on indicator performance, Advance noticed that a relatively high percentage of students in Honduras and Guatemala were not graduating from their degree programs on time. The data showed that in some cases, students were taking longer to complete their two-year degree programs. Consequently, this delayed students' entry into the labor market. To obtain an in-depth understanding of the reasons behind these delays and the barriers faced by students in Guatemala and Honduras, Advance, in close collaboration with partner universities, conducted a qualitative study to capture the voices and perspectives of youth and university personnel to inform decision making on how to best support students to finish their programs on time.

2. Why did you decide to use a CLA approach? Why was CLA considered helpful for addressing your organizational or development challenge(s)?

FHI 360 acts on "the science of improving lives" by rooting our development approaches in a robust learning philosophy. By infusing CLA into program implementation to better understand outcomes, we drive responsive programming and design solutions grounded in local experience. Advancing locally driven solutions is central to our organizational mission and a CLA approach provides a roadmap to shaping programs that prioritize collaboration across stakeholders, propel evidence-based learning, and allow for adaptive management. We often use formative research to learn and pivot—this type of research lends us a systematic approach to generating insights into the programs and their participants that allows us to not only practice CLA, but also continue cultivating the enabling conditions for integrating it into the program cycle.

While the indicators were telling us that Advance-supported students were lagging and would not graduate on time, we only had part of the story. To fill in the gaps, we knew we needed to have a comprehensive view of the problem and look beyond the quantitative data to include the perspectives of those closest to the challenge: students and university staff. The study gave us an opportunity to inform the 'why' behind the lower number of students graduating on time. By obtaining these perspectives across universities and their campuses, the program distilled several recurring themes that represented barriers to on-time graduation. Findings from the study provided a foundation to guide ongoing collaborations with university partners and determine a set of recommendations to support students to graduate on time.

3. Tell us the story of how you used a collaborating, learning and/or adapting approach to address the organizational or development challenge described in Question 2.

The Advance Program incorporates CLA by collecting evidence and feeding it back to the program to adapt and pivot as necessary, to ensure that program activities are responsive to the student and partner needs. To inform evidence-based decision-making, Advance has developed a robust monitoring and evaluation for learning system, designed around 12 output and outcome performance indicators. The system tracks youth enrollment and graduation from Advance-supported technical degree programs across 12 higher education institutions in the four countries of intervention. In addition, the system monitors youth employment and education status three to six months after graduation. To facilitate reflections on the performance data collected through this system, Advance built in regional and country-specific participatory pause and reflect sessions that convened technical staff, Program directors and members of the MEL team from each country. In one of these reflection exercises, the team identified that the project was short of achieving the projected number of graduates. Further analysis of the data showed that students were not graduating within the projected timeline in Honduras and Guatemala, prompting conversations about potential impacts of this delay on project results, which included not being able to fully support students throughout their degree programs during the project life cycle as well as students' delayed entrance into the labor market. The program team started to speculate potential reasons behind the delays in graduation, but it become clear that a more in-depth analysis of the issue was needed.

Collectively, the team decided to collaborate with partner Universities on implementing a qualitative study using focus groups and interviews to collect students' and university staff's perspectives in both countries on barriers to on-time graduation. In total, the Program conducted 12 focus groups with 125 students and seven focus groups with 48 university staff, as well as six individual interviews, across six universities Through data analysis, the Program discovered that the most frequent barriers reported for both countries included high tuition fees and other education-related costs. In those cases, students accumulate outstanding fees, which often prevent them from registering for the next academic semester or from taking final course exams. Another frequently cited barrier in both countries was the length and complexity of the administrative process required for graduation. As the last step required after completion of coursework and internships, students are required to complete administrative tasks such as validating course grades and other certificates, notarizing documents for graduation ceremonies and/or taking the national anthem exam (in the case of Honduras). In both countries, there was a lack of clear and organized information on requirements, due dates, and the steps students must take to complete these requirements.

The Program completed full reports identifying specific barriers and including preliminary recommendations. To further collaborate with universities in jointly identifying solutions to the barriers identified in the reports, the Program convened participatory workshops. The objective of the workshops was to present on the findings from the study and create spaces for university leadership and staff to reflect on the barriers identified, respond to them, and identify synergies with the Program to address them together before project closeout in Honduras and Guatemala. As a result of these workshops, Advance and partner institutions jointly identified specific solutions and strategies to be prioritized. These included support to universities in elaborating youth-friendly guides to help students navigate the complexities of the graduation process as well as development of specific guidance on how to leverage alliances with the private sector to address students' financial constraints. Using an adaptive management approach, Advance made changes to its annual workplan to prioritize these solutions and strategies that were identified alongside universities.

4. Organizational Effectiveness: How has collaborating, learning and adapting affected your team and/or organization? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

By applying CLA to improve on-time graduation rates of students, Advance not only revised its annual workplan and activities, but it also engaged with universities in a collaborative manner. To communicate the findings, the Program planned virtual validation workshops to share results and reflect on findings and how the identified barriers impact students' academic trajectory. Advance facilitated participatory activities with university staff in these workshops to co-create strategies to mitigate barriers in both countries. In Honduras, the team designed two workshops held with over 30 participants, while in Guatemala, Advance hosted three webinars with participation from 42 university staff from all three universities. CLA improved the enabling conditions for the Program to collaborate internally and externally with universities by promoting open dialogue and idea-sharing, which resulted in more collaboration and adaptations of Program activities.

Some of the prioritized recommendations to reduce financial barriers involved Universities continuing to build on alliances with the private sector facilitated by Advance to leverage incentives from businesses so they can finance scholarships, stipends, and/or work-study programs with flexible schedules. This was the highest priority for universities in Honduras, so the Program adapted the workplan to include the design of a practical "how-to" guide laying out the steps on how to build, scale-up, and replicate engagements with strategic businesses. Other prioritized recommendations incorporated into Advance's annual workplan include designing digital and hard-copy guides that explain the steps and complexities of the administrative process that students must complete for graduation, including language and visualizations that are accessible and comprehensible to students and teachers who can mentor them through this process. This collaborative process helped establish better engagement and communication with universities and gave Advance an effective strategy to incorporate student and universities' feedback on a specific component of the Program: strengthening career and student support services.

5. Development Results: How has using a CLA approach contributed to your development outcomes? What evidence can you provide? If it's too early to tell, what effects do you expect to see in the future?

It is too early to tell if the new strategies implemented by the universities in collaboration with Advance will ultimately have an effect on students' overall graduation rate and on on-time graduation. However, the CLA approach was successful in bringing awareness to universities of the different issues and barriers that students face to attend and complete tertiary technical degree programs. It also strengthened universities' student and career support services and their capacity to develop tailored approaches to support its students to overcome the barriers identified and graduate on time. More importantly, it built staff's capacity and shared resources that will allow them to continuously track student academic outcomes and progression to graduation, while also incorporating their voices and perspectives to inform decision-making around support services during key phases of students' academic trajectory.

As the Advance program expanded to the Dominican Republic in 2020, it took into consideration the successful CLA approach from Honduras and Guatemala and considered barriers to on-time graduation right at the start-up phase. Specifically, through an initial assessment Advance worked in collaboration with partner universities to identify, from the on-set, context specific barriers students face to accessing and completing tertiary education on time. The findings from this assessment will provide feedback to Advance and partner Universities to inform the design of specific activities on strengthening career and student support services.

6. What factors enabled your CLA approach and what obstacles did you encounter? How would you advise others to navigate the challenges you faced?

Advance began its CLA approach by using M&E for learning to unearth a challenge and expand the technical evidence base through formative research. The data generated through this formative research suggested that an adaptation to Program activities was needed. Moving this evidence to action, however, relies on a delicate harmonization of diverse stakeholders and shifting priorities as well as an openness from all stakeholders to apply learnings by iterating and adapting.

Strategic coordination across all stakeholders and Program leadership was one of the primary enablers of our CLA approach. Conducting the formative research required both internal and external collaboration between Advance's staff at headquarters, country offices, and university partners in Honduras and Guatemala. This collaboration was made possible by the strong relationships with Universities established through Advance's leadership and local teams over the years. These relationships enabled us to organize focus group discussions (FGDs) across the universities and campuses with a representative sample of students and faculty to discuss an issue associated with personal, academic, and institutional challenges.

While Advance's relationship with universities provided the means to organize the formative research, the relationship also presented an obstacle in some cases. Given the sensitivity of the topic, particularly as it related to the university's role in supporting on-time graduation, some universities were reluctant to allow focus group discussions without a university representative present. In addition, we had to frame the findings with careful consideration of our close relationships with universities. To navigate this, we tapped into our country local teams' knowledge to contextualize findings through the validation workshops and separate findings by university to tailor recommendations and avoid exposing sensitive information externally. Finally, we presented results back to the universities and co-created recommendations, using it as an opportunity to strengthen our collaboration to support students to graduate on time.

7. Was your CLA approach prompted by a response to the COVID-19 pandemic? If so, how?

While, the CLA approach was designed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the approach was affected by it. As the pandemic hit and COVID-19 cases started to increase in both countries, university partners closed its campuses and shifted to distance learning which affected the feasibility of conducting validation workshops and implementation of prioritized recommendations in person. Advance had to shift to virtual modalities for engagement with universities using Zoom, email, and WhatsApp, while also focusing the discussions and prioritization exercises with university staff on those strategies that can also support students to overcome barriers that might be exacerbated by COVID-19. For example, to overcome delays related to completing administrative tasks for graduation, some of the prioritized recommendations and adaptations in Program support included identifying virtual alternatives to certain in-person tasks, including providing data coverage so students could access internet to complete them. As part of these adaptations, Advance also worked with university staff to approve these virtual processes and support students to complete them.