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Activity Title: New Higher Education Activity

This USAID/El Salvador Request for Information (RFI) is issued for the purpose of providing academia, industry and stakeholders an opportunity to review, comment, suggest, and enhance areas in the attached Concept Note (CN) for a potential USAID/El Salvador Higher Education activity. As appropriate, USAID/El Salvador will incorporate responses to the RFI into the development of the final activity design that may lead to a formal solicitation or announcement. The duration of a potential award will be up to five (5) years.

The attached CN presents the current draft objectives and key elements of the activity. USAID/El Salvador may significantly revise this proposed activity and any planned solicitation based upon the comments received and further internal discussions.

This RFI is issued solely for information and planning purposes and does not constitute a Request for Proposals (RFP) or Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO). Responses to this RFI shall not be portrayed as proposals or applications, and will not be accepted by the U.S. Government (USG) to form a binding agreement. This RFI is not to be construed as a commitment by the USG to issue any solicitation or ultimately award of a contract/agreement on the basis of this RFI, or to pay for any information submitted as a result of this request. Responders are solely responsible for all expenses associated with responding to this RFI.

If the requirement is released in the form of an RFP or RFA, it may be synopsized in, but not limited to, the USG procurement information site FedBizOpps (Federal Business Opportunities: www.fbo.gov), Grants.gov, and USAID websites. It is the potential responder's responsibility to monitor the above forums for the release of any further information.

It should be noted that responding to or providing comment on this RFI will not give any advantage to any organization in any subsequent procurement. USAID/El Salvador will not provide answers to any question submitted in response to this request.

By issuing this request for information, USAID/El Salvador aims to consult with the broad community of actors involved with or affected by the higher education system, including but not limited to students, faculty, administrators, researchers, stakeholders, observers, users, regulators, partners, suppliers, customers, or beneficiaries in El Salvador.

Your comments are requested to help refine a potential intervention and to ensure maximum development impact, resolve a clear development challenge or need as expressed by the private or public sectors, facilitate sound coordination with existing activities, improve or promote relationships with key system enablers, share global best practices with the highest potential local impact, and align with the Government of El Salvador's priorities.

Please ensure that your comments are concise and specific to information included within the CN. Your comments must include information that is publicly available. Please do not submit any proprietary or confidential information. While there are no limits on the length of submissions accepted, we value concise, issue-specific responses with reference to page and section numbers in the draft program description.

Areas of particular interest include, but are not limited to:

HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

1. *(Systemic Change)* How can linkages between academia and industry be supported to help transform the higher education system into a driver of economic growth in El Salvador?

ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

2. *(Access to Higher Education)* What major barriers impede access to higher education for vulnerable Salvadoran youth, women and/or people with disabilities? What existing mechanisms could be enhanced or developed to overcome those barriers?
3. *(Transition to Careers)* What major challenges or issues prevent Salvadoran students from graduating and successfully launching a career? What existing mechanisms could be enhanced or developed to overcome those challenges?

QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION

4. *(Prioritizing Quality Improvement)* What aspects of the higher education institution (HEI) teaching and learning environment should be prioritized for quality improvement efforts¹? Please list in order of priority and explain your rationale.
5. *(Policy Considerations)* Which parts of the proposed [Higher Education Policy](#) (submitted to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology in 2018) should USAID focus on

¹ For example: updating curricula; new pedagogy competencies for faculty; student academic performance; number of faculty with masters and doctoral degrees; HEI management capacity; scientific research programs; scientific researchers; patent management; facilities; equipment; and HEI academic capacity to forecast and adapt curricula to industry high-demand needs; foster the academia-enterprise cooperation; and enable an innovation-led environment.

in order to promote an innovative education system in El Salvador, enhance the quality of HEIs, increase graduation rates and create opportunities for employment? Are there any areas not covered by the proposed Policy that should be considered?

HIGHER EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT MARKET ALIGNMENT

6. *(Areas of Study)* Which degree programs are most important to help Salvadorans enrolled in local HEIs gain formal employment in the short-term (5 years) or create a viable path to entrepreneurship, considering current gaps in workforce preparation? What consideration might be given to developing vocational degrees or recognized two-year degrees from universities to help prepare them?
7. *(Research Priorities)* Which private sector areas or industries are most likely to partner or co-invest with USAID to upgrade the teaching and applied research capabilities of local HEIs, and why? How can applied research capabilities be developed in Salvadoran HEIs to respond to productive sector demands such as developing products for the market? Should basic science-based research training be strengthened first and/or separately? If not, how can applied research activities targeted to solving private sector problems be incorporated directly in STEM-related degree programs in a sustainable way?

Please address your comments and questions to Ileana Párraga and send them to iparraga@usaid.gov with a copy to Sonja Stroud-Gooden at sstroud-gooden@usaid.gov no later than the closing date shown above. Please include the Activity Title: “New Higher Education Activity” in the subject of your e-mail.

The following documents are attached for reference:

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| Attachment 1 | Concept Note for the El Salvador Higher Education Activity |
| Attachment 2 | Synthesis of Findings and Recommendations from the Final Performance Evaluation of USAID’s Higher Education for Economic Growth Activity (2014-2019) |

Attachment 1

Concept Paper for a Higher Education for Increased Productivity Activity

Purpose: To improve the quality of and access to higher education in order to create higher value added human capital among vulnerable youth to meet industry needs and enhance the innovation ecosystem in El Salvador.

1. Background

A lack of economic opportunity in El Salvador is a key driver of migration². This trend is especially pronounced among people of productive age--roughly 75 percent of returned migrants to El Salvador are 18 to 39 years old.³ Better economic prospects in El Salvador can deter young people from migrating; however, current annual job growth cannot fully accommodate new entrants into the labor market.

In the World Economic Forum's 2017 *Human Capital Report*, El Salvador overall scored 56 out of 100 points in the 2017 Global Human Capital Index, 29 for tertiary education enrollment rate, 15 for tertiary education attainment (average for all ages), 89 for skill diversity of graduates, and 21 for quality of education system. This demonstrates that despite a high level of skill diversity, the higher education system in El Salvador suffers from poor quality, low enrollment rates and critically low education attainment.⁴

According to the World Bank's 2019 *World Development Report*, in El Salvador, only one out of five workers is in the formal sector. On average, two out of three workers in emerging economies are informal workers.⁵ This is largely due to a lack of available formal jobs, which is partially attributable to shortfalls in higher education, and a lack of the skills that employers signal are most essential in today's job market. Combined with El Salvador's relatively low retirement age (55 for women and 60 for men), the skills gap within the Salvadoran workforce is likely to become more and more severe, thus further eroding the competitiveness of Salvadoran enterprises over the long term.

Manufacturing and industry account for 28% of GDP⁶, comprises 16% of all employment⁷ and accounts for 81% of all Salvadoran goods exports.⁸ Bourgeoning service sector exports (i.e.,

² Department of State Office of Opinion Research surveys consistently point to violence and lack of economic prospects as the two principal drivers of migration.

³ "Personas migrantes retornadas, género y acceso a servicios sociales – El Salvador," Inter American Development Bank, International Organization for Migration, 2018.

⁴ World Economic Forum. [El Salvador Human Capital Report](#). 2017.

⁵ World Bank. [World Development Report, 2019](#).

⁶ BCR, [IV.4 Cuentas de Producción por Actividad Económica. A Precios Corrientes](#), January 2019.

⁷ International Labour Organization, [ILOSTAT](#), January 2019.

information and communication technologies, tourism, etc.) can offer well-paying, formal job options that many universities are not adequately training students for.⁹ In order to ensure long term self-reliance, economic growth strategies must assertively position El Salvador as a competitive force in global markets for new products and services, such as software development, aviation support, and plastics. El Salvador has enormous potential to become a more competitive regional economic player and trading partner with the U.S. and other countries, but needs to develop a workforce far better prepared with both technical expertise and critical soft skills.

Workforce development in El Salvador must take gender disparities into consideration. Women are significantly underrepresented in key Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)-related degree programs critical for innovation and growth, such as technology and engineering (22 percent female student enrollment compared to 54 percent overall female enrollment in Salvadoran HEIs). Furthermore, five-year trend data for female enrollment in technology and engineering majors shows a worrisome decline from 26 to 14.2 percent from 2009 to 2017¹⁰.

USAID's Higher Education for Economic Growth activity (HEA, 2014-2019) has worked to directly address weaknesses in the alignment between El Salvador's higher education system and the country's evolving workforce demands. El Salvador has 41 higher education institutions (HEIs) of varying quality; 28 of these are in the metropolitan area of San Salvador (AMSS). Although HEA has focused its work on four anchor universities, it has more broadly worked with a total of 12 HEIs in three metropolitan areas, having an indirect impact on the quality of education for 138,248 students, which accounts for 74% of all Salvadorans enrolled in HEIs in 2017. There is timely opportunity for further investments by USAID to create powerful synergies between emerging employment opportunities and targeted higher education offerings.

Under HEA, in-depth relationships were formed with four leading (or "anchor") HEIs (Universidad Don Bosco, Universidad Centroamericana, Universidad Francisco Gavidia, and Universidad Catolica de El Salvador) using a "cluster" model -- an alliance where higher education institutions, industry and government representatives collaborate in areas of common interest to increase competitiveness and productivity leading to economic growth. These four "anchor" universities account for 35,352 (or 19 percent) of the 186,067 students enrolled in higher education in El Salvador in 2017. Engagement facilitated through the use of the cluster model has already created a trilateral team of champions with a vested interest in the success of USAID interventions and with well established relationships that are the foundation of self-reliance.

⁸ World Bank, [World Integrated Trade Solution](#), January 2019.

⁹ U.S. Department of Commerce. [El Salvador Country Commercial Guide, 2017](#).

¹⁰ Ministerio de Educación (MINED). [Resultados de la Información Estadística de Instituciones de Educación Superior, 2017](#), pg 101.

2. Development Challenge, Development Hypothesis & Strategic Alignment

2.1 Development Challenge: An educated, skilled workforce is crucial for the development of a competitive economy. El Salvador's education system must more effectively develop human capital, and higher education institutions must graduate students with more relevant, marketable skills to meet labor market demands and increase productivity in selected sectors.

Although enrollment in HEIs has increased since 2000, the economy continues to face challenges concerning the quality of education, and it appears employment prospects fail to convince most Salvadorans - especially those from families that historically have not attained tertiary education - that enrolling and earning a degree will improve their lives in the short or medium-term.

In 2017, MINED reported 186,067 students enrolled in HEIs in El Salvador¹¹. Of the 64,534 students who graduated from high school in 2016, 51% enrolled in a university. Roughly half of the high school students - 31,609 Salvadorans- did not pursue tertiary education, chose to stay at home for domestic work, or did not have access due to financial constraints. When considering that approximately 9,000¹² formal jobs were created that year, and not all of those went to recent high school graduates, we could infer that more than 25,000 youth were left behind, increasing the pipeline of likely illegal migrants.

The curricula of HEIs in El Salvador must be updated to incorporate the technical needs of Salvadoran industries, and teachers themselves are often underqualified--33 percent of faculty members hold a postgraduate degree, of which only about 2.3 percent have a PhD¹³. Furthermore, the education system governance structure and regulatory framework do not apply consistent accreditation standards across institutions, focusing on oversight of the business processes of higher education rather than on skill and competency development.

This situation could be changed, and the number of likely illegal migrants could be decreased, with USAID programming to increase access to higher education for vulnerable youth 18-24 years of age, and change the perception for Salvadoran youth to see their enrollment in HEIs as a viable path to social mobility in the short to medium term by improving the quality of the education received.

2.2 Development Hypothesis: If purposeful interaction between private sector, academia, and government continues, research and teaching capabilities in HEIs are strengthened and obstacles limiting student access to the higher education system are mitigated, then the Salvadoran higher

¹¹ Ministerio de Educación (MINED). [Resultados de la Información Estadística de Instituciones de Educación Superior, 2017](#).

¹² Instituto Salvadoreño del Seguro Social. [Anuario de Estadísticas, 2017](#), Pg. 20.

¹³ Ministerio de Educación (MINED). [Resultados de la Información Estadística de Instituciones de Educación Superior, 2017](#). Pg. 153.

education system will become a catalyzer of innovation, better able to position graduates to lead fulfilling and productive lives in-country. Increased access to better quality higher education for youth who are talented and likely to illegally migrate will provide a better supply of skilled workers for enterprises that compete in export-oriented sectors.

2.3 Strategic Alignment:

The activity contributes to several foundational guidelines, as described below:

CDCS: If approved, the Activity will be included under the Increasing Business Productivity PAD, which contributes to Development Objective 2 of USAID/El Salvador's 2015-2019 Country Development Cooperation Strategy: Economic Growth Opportunities in Tradables Expanded.

Journey to Self-Reliance (J2SR): This Activity contributes to USAID's 2018 Education Policy¹⁴ priorities by supporting HEIs to become central actors in development by conducting and applying research, and delivering quality education. As stated by Administrator Green, "This policy puts education as the foundational driver of a country's journey to self-reliance. Investing in high-quality education for all children and youth builds the human capital partner countries need to lead their own development and growth." The Activity also aligns with USAID's 2012 Youth in Development Policy,¹⁵ particularly with the Policy's conceptual framework which entails preparing and engaging youth to build competencies (in this case through higher education) to become informed, healthy and productive citizens. The Agency's new Private Sector Engagement Policy will drive the technical approach to this Activity. The private sector is the engine in innovation and in the adoption of new technologies. Alignment to the workforce needs of the private sector will improve productivity and expands the possibilities for El Salvador to create jobs in higher-skilled production.

The Activity will also directly respond to the essential Journey to Self-Reliance metrics, specifically in citizen capacity (which includes education quality), and inclusive development, by addressing social group equality and the economic gender gap. The Activity may have secondary impacts on economic policy, specifically business flexibility and entrepreneurship. It will also continue the work done by HEA to improved the quality of education received by students.

PESS: The Activity will work with HEIs serving youth in fourteen PESS municipalities around the urban hubs (AMSS, Santa Ana, and San Miguel). According to 2017 MINED statistics, these three urban hubs concentrate 143,206 students--77% of all Salvadorans enrolled in HEIs.

¹⁴ See [USAID Education Policy](#), 2018.

¹⁵ See [USAID Youth in Development Policy](#), 2012.

CEN Strategy (Stemming the flow of illegal migrants to the U.S.) and Alliance for Prosperity: The planned interventions contribute to the achievement of Objective 1 of the U.S. Government Strategy for Central America (CEN Strategy) of “Prosperity and Regional Integration” through education and workforce development, and to the second strategic line of action in the Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle,¹⁶ building human capital.

A key impact of this Activity is that youth will view higher education as a route to improving their livelihoods in the short to medium term, as they acquire the skills they need to lead productive lives, gain employment, and contribute positively to society, another focus of the Agency’s Education Policy. This perception will incentivize even more youth between the ages of 18-29 to remain in-country rather than migrate. Participation of the private sector throughout the activities will increase the probabilities for job placement.

Clear Choice Framework: Renewed engagement and support of higher education programs to further self-reliance is one of the new tools which will be used to operationalize the Clear Choice framework¹⁷. The Activity will utilize the Clear Choice tools (see Section V.C. of the Framework) of support to higher education programs through links with American universities and South-South exchanges to further Journey to Self-Reliance and Clear Choice objectives.

3. Results to be Achieved

The new Activity will help HEIs align themselves more closely with industry, developing scientific and technological solutions to industry needs and offering more pertinent and better quality programs providing current and future students with the competencies required for professional education requirements and technical degrees in high-growth fields. Linking targeted career counseling and job placement services with innovative academic activities such as applied research is expected to stimulate private sector innovation, ultimately generating new lines of production and increasing job creation and strengthening El Salvador’s economic competitiveness. Furthermore, an important result is that HEIs will consolidate long-term relationships with industry and government, using the cluster model¹⁸ around key sectors.

By carrying out these interventions, USAID will be contributing to El Salvador’s advancement on important World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Index metrics, including “skill set

¹⁶ [Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle: A Road Map, 2014.](#)

¹⁷ [Clear Choice Framework, 2018.](#)

¹⁸ For HEA, a cluster is an alliance in which higher education institutions, industry and government representatives collaborate in areas of common interest (e.g. the quality of human resources, solutions to industry problems or curricular development) to increase competitiveness and productivity leading to economic growth. The HEA selected four industry sectors for their economic growth potential: Information and Communications Technology, Energy and Energy Efficiency, Light Manufacturing, and Agro-Industry and Food Processing. By working collaboratively in sector-focused clusters, stakeholders create a common vision and sustain mutually dependent relationships that contribute to higher levels of productivity.

of graduates,” “ease of finding skilled employees,” and “critical thinking in teaching,” global indicators where in 2018, El Salvador consistently ranked near the bottom (#108 for skill set of graduates, #110 for ease of finding skilled employees, #135 for critical thinking in teaching; all) of the 140-country lists.¹⁹

¹⁹ World Economic Forum. [El Salvador Country Profile](#), 2018

The main expected results for the Activity are:

Expected Result	Measurement
Purpose: To improve the quality of and access to higher education in order to create higher value added human capital among vulnerable youth to meet industry needs and enhance the innovation ecosystem in El Salvador.	El Salvador Global Human Capital Index (World Economic Forum).
C1. Quality of HEIs improved to better prepare students for success in growing economic sectors.	Score of the quality of education system (World Economic Forum sub-index)
C1.1 Curricula of degree programs improved to respond to industry needs.	- Number of students enrollment in degrees with improved curricula. - Number of degree programs with curricula revised with private and/or public sector input or on the basis of market research.
C1.2 HEIs improve teaching and research capabilities.	- Number of faculty with advanced degrees in their field of instruction. - Number of tertiary institution faculty participating in USG-supported specialized training relating to the improvement of teaching skills, curriculum design, and/or applied research.
C1.3 Market-relevant applied research, development and innovation (R&D+i) programs developed by anchor universities using private sector leverage.	- Number of applied research initiatives responding to current productive sector challenges whose findings are replicated, applied or demonstrably used in the private sector. - Amount of research funding leveraged from the private sector for research, development and innovation.
C1.4 CDCs strengthened and established in order for HEIs to upgrade their ability to provide effective job placement services and support for entrepreneurship.	- Number of graduates who obtain formal employment. - Number of monitoring/tracking systems at the CDCs established or improved.
C2. Expanded access for youth to market-relevant higher education.	Score of tertiary education enrollment rate (World Economic Forum sub-index).
C2.1 Prioritized higher education policy reforms drafted, action plan for implementation developed, and implementation supported.	Number of tertiary education policies, regulations, or plans presented, approved or implemented.
C2.2 A sustainable, centralized hub for higher education access including a national scholarship fund	ES.2-2 Number of individuals attending tertiary education institutions with USG

and other financing and tutoring mechanisms to help increase access to tertiary education for youth likely to migrate.	scholarship or financial assistance. ● Centralized hub established: ○ Dollar amount of scholarships available through centralized hub. ○ Number of institutions supporting tertiary education opportunities through centralized hub. ○ Number of users benefiting from centralized hub. ○ Number of employer sponsored loan reimbursement programs offered through hub. ○ Scholarship fund established or strengthened with minimum 30% other funding leverage.
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4. Illustrative Interventions

(Guiding Principle #4) The new Activity will support the transformation of traditional HEIs into “third generation universities”²⁰ and self-reliant development actors, going beyond just “enrolling and teaching” by partnering with the private sector and government to focus on applied research and quality education. These partnerships create natural opportunities and incentives for developing market-based solutions as universities work to meet the needs of the private sector. This kind of investment will allow students to prosper after graduation and strengthen their ability to contribute to El Salvador’s economic growth, while serving as catalyzers of innovation across sectors. Not only will the private sector find HEIs responsive to their needs, but with access to quality higher education based on industry priorities, Salvadoran youth will obtain the knowledge and skills needed for dignified employment in El Salvador, thus providing a strong deterrent to irregular migration. Some of the interventions that may be considered under the Activity include:

Update pedagogy and curricula

- Train faculty from participating universities in sector-specific subject matter and pedagogical practices and technology.
- Provide technical assistance to improve curricula and increase academia’s alignment with private and public sector needs.

Coordinate applied research with industry needs

- Provide technical assistance to increase HEIs’ capability to finance and develop applied research projects in coordination with selected private and public sector

²⁰ A third generation university is a system in a hybrid structure where government, industry, and higher education are engaged to foster university-industry cooperation to develop research and technology that can be patented and used by the private sector.

interests, ensuring that students receive significant exposure to new technology and learn first-hand from industry needs.

Improve job placement services and entrepreneurship

- Provide technical assistance to strengthen career development centers (CDCs) created under the current Higher Education Activity and to create two new ones. Help improve their job placement services and career counseling capabilities, particularly to increase interest in STEM careers among women, and ensure that CDCs are integrating and prioritizing gender considerations in all of their activities.
- Strengthen established CDCs' ability to monitor program changes demanded by industry, and to track employment outcomes for students and graduates.

Ensure sustainability of the cluster model

- Provide technical assistance to help HEIs maintain and nurture working relationships with government and industry using the cluster model developed under USAID's current Higher Education Activity. This may include technical assistance for the Higher Education Steering Committee already formed or a new entity to perform that role.

Create conditions to improve access and complete tertiary education in-country

- Support local stakeholders in developing or strengthening a national scholarship fund. Issue scholarships to vulnerable but talented students (including a minimum number of scholarships for women) in coordination with the private sector.
- Prioritize policy reforms in the Government of El Salvador draft higher education policy, develop an action plan for implementing top-priority reforms and support implementation of selected activities. This includes the standardization of academic credits to facilitate transfers between national universities and recognition or certification of credits or diplomas earned abroad.

5. Analyses

(Guiding Principle #5) The following analyses inform USAID's current understanding of the development challenge identified and the interventions proposed to address it.

1. USAID Higher Education Year 5 Annual Work Plan (October 1, 2018 - June 5, 2019) - Draft. (Prepared by RTI)
2. USAID Higher Education FY 2017 Annual Report (October 1, 2016 - September 30, 2017). (Prepared by RTI)
3. Final Performance Evaluation of the Higher Education for Economic Growth Activity (May 2018). By USAID/El Salvador Monitoring and Evaluation Initiative.
4. Creating a Sustainability Plan for Industry-Higher Education Clusters in El Salvador (August 2018) -Draft. (Prepared by RTI)

5. Propuesta de Política Nacional de Educación Superior de El Salvador (August 2018). A joint effort by Institutions and members of the Pacto Multisectorial para la Construcción de la Política Nacional de Educación Superior, supported by USAID Higher Education for Economic Growth Program.
6. Evaluación del Sector Educación de El Salvador (November 2017). By Mendez England & Associates (MEA).
7. Plan El Salvador Educado. (July 2016). By Consejo Nacional de Educación (CONED).
8. Estrategia y Modelo de Escalabilidad Vinculada a la Ruta del Ecosistema de Innovación en El Salvador (January 2018). (Prepared by the IDB)
9. USAID Higher Education for Economic Growth Gender Analysis, July-August 2015.
10. USAID Education Policy.

6. *Partner consultations*

During the implementation of the current HEA, many assessments and events have taken place. USAID used these opportunities to get information from private and public sector stakeholders within academia, industry and GOES about the sustainability of the current initiatives and future needs to match higher education programs with private sector needs. High-priority issues articulated by both private and public stakeholders include the reform of the 20-year old education law, establishing a higher education policy in support of the higher education national system, increasing the number of Salvadoran doctoral degree opportunities, improving women's access to STEM careers, developing national scholarship policies and programs, and supporting the development of applied research programs linked directly to local industry. By considering these concerns, the new Activity will have a quantifiable positive impact on increased productivity, increased competitiveness, and reduced migration.

Attachment 2

**FINAL PERFORMANCE EVALUATION OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH ACTIVITY**

May 17, 2018

ABSTRACT

The purpose of the final performance evaluation of the Higher Education for Economic Growth Activity (HEA) is to provide recommendations to: 1) the Activity for the final year; and 2) the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) for future programming.

The evaluation focused on five evaluation questions (EQs), including: assessing results (EQ 1); the role of clusters (EQ 2); the government and higher education institutions (EQ 3); gender (EQ 4); and analyzing the extent to which results will be sustained (EQ 5). The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach, including document review; analysis of HEA's monitoring and evaluation data and performance indicators; key informant interviews and surveys for faculty/staff; focus group discussions; and direct observation.

Key illustrative findings include: 1) teachers consider diploma programs available, high quality, and well-facilitated; 2) trust has been established via positive and significant effects from collaboration; 3) while there has been an established approach to construct a higher education policy, the approach needs to be broader in terms of participants (including the government); 4) there is improved access to science, technology, engineering, and math for women and girls; and 5) the Centers for Career Development, which promote student engagement with the private sector, are the most likely to sustain.

The evaluation recommends that USAID continue to support the investigations, curriculum reform implementation, teacher training, and scholarships, as well initiate the construction of an entity to strategically integrate and give continuity to the cluster model.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the final performance evaluation of the Higher Education for Economic Growth Activity (HEA) is two-fold: 1) provide an evaluation of and recommendations for the Activity in its final year; and 2) provide the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with recommendations for future programming.

HEA is a US\$22 million project, implemented from 2014-2019 by Research Triangle Institute (RTI), with support from two subcontractors, World Learning and Rutgers University, and one grantee, the Salvadoran Foundation for Integral Education (FEDISAL). Within USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) 2015-2017, the HEA contributes to Development Objective (DO) 2 "Economic Growth Opportunities in Tradables Expanded." HEA builds partnerships between industry sectors and local higher education institutions (HEIs) to develop demand-driven educational programs and research. The purpose is to train highly-qualified professionals and contribute to industry growth and productivity, as well as help stimulate the economy and social development.

The evaluation of HEA focused on the five evaluation questions (EQs) detailed below. They ranged from assessing results (EQ 1) to analyzing the extent to which they are sustainable (EQ 5). There were specific questions that examined the role of clusters (EQ 2), the government and HEIs (EQ 3), and gender (EQ 4).

The evaluation used a mixed-methods approach that included key informant interviews (KIIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), direct observations, analysis of secondary data, and literature review. The evaluation team (ET) conducted over 25 KIIs as well as a total of seven FGDs with professors and students in seven universities. In addition, the ET consulted a range of stakeholders, including the implementers, RTI and its subcontractors; the client, USAID; the government; other implementing partners (IPs); and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A wide range of literature was reviewed, including project documentation and outside research, particularly of clusters. These sources afforded the ET the ability to triangulate findings and therefore build their reliability and validity. This process led to the conclusions, which clearly align with and support the recommendations being made. For a detailed table on the intended and unintended results, see EQ 1, and for clear guidance on areas where USAID could focus for a new design see the recommendations section.

EQ 1: What have been the most significant intended and unintended results achieved to date?

- 1.1. What have been the main internal and external factors that have influenced the achievement or non-achievement of the Activity's expected results as planned?

According to participants, the most significant result from the project relates to completion of applied research that will be used by the relevant industry within a short period of time to improve commercial competitiveness. Twenty-six (26) studies were funded that allowed for applied research. Importantly, Rutgers also trained 100 researchers on how to complete applied research studies. KII participants stated that they had never received trainings on applied research before and felt that this training allowed them to better conduct applied research that was relevant to the economy of El Salvador. Furthermore, the training and completion of applied research allowed the academics to link directly with industry representatives on 26 studies, strengthening skill sets for academic-private sector research collaboration and setting a precedent for this sort of joint work.

The most significant unintended result came about due to the project's cross-cutting focus on gender and due to the fact that the project promoted communication, both within and between the universities. This joint focus resulted in the development of Girls Science Camps and the Network of Women Leaders, which were not initially planned to be part of the project but which have contributed significantly towards HEA goals and towards the DOs in the CDCS. There is more information on these in EQ 4.

Evaluation Question 1	
Findings	Conclusions
Teacher Formation	
Teachers reflect positively on the diplomas available [21 st century, Training of Trainers (ToT) in English, publishing in English, etc.].	1. The teacher training activities were considered high quality and well facilitated, although what participants learned can be shared more throughout the university.
Few teachers have shared what they learned with other teachers in the university.	
In some cases, training opportunities for teachers were not adequately detailed or given sufficient time.	2. There were information deficits on the training programs and more people want more opportunities. Despite gains, equal gender participation has not yet been fully achieved.
Teachers wanted to take more than one course but, in some universities, were restricted.	
Two hundred and fifty (250) men and 150 women took part in teacher training opportunities, indicating more men than women participated (although there are more males in the profession).	
Scholarships – Students and Teachers	
Students report they would not be able to afford all aspects of their studies without the scholarships, indicating a high demand and need.	3. Students and teachers greatly benefit from the scholarships, and there is demand for more—both in extended length of time and

Teachers are enrolled in Master's degree programs online/in person, and there have been five graduates to date.	the number of student beneficiaries. ²¹
Universities seek opportunities to establish PhDs in order to strengthen academia.	
Curriculum Reform	
Programs were reformed to include competencies and experiential learning (28 approved by February 2018).	4. Despite delays, the new fields of study are currently being implemented in the universities, although more support is required, especially on competencies.
There is a lack of implementation of teaching-learning based on competencies-based curriculum.	
There were delays in the approval on the part of the Government of El Salvador (GOES) of the new fields; however, this has improved within the 90 days from submitting the revised curriculum (see EQ 3).	
Applied Research	
Applied research was more systematic thanks to the Technical Assistance (TA) of the project.	5. Applied research is reportedly of a higher quality and based on industry needs. Now is the time to capitalize and share results with consumers.
Applied research was based on the demands and needs of industry, whereas before there was not the same direct link with industry.	
There remains great demand on the part of universities for their research to be supported. ²²	
Although all applied research projects are supported by HEA in methodology development, publishing, and general management, there is a gap in feedback loops and coaching is needed to improve research quality.	
HEA has not sufficiently disseminated research findings to date, especially within the industry.	

EQ 2: To what extent has the demand-driven model (clusters model) been an effective space to build dialogue within private sector, academia, and GOES in order to respond to private sector needs and priorities?

- 2.1 Are the four clusters already sustainable?
 2.2 To what extent has the cluster model been attractive to engage the private sector and obtain its commitment through leverage?

Evaluation Question 2	
Findings	Conclusions
Collaboration	
There are positive and significant effects from collaboration for clusters. Industry and university find it mutually beneficial to collaborate.	6. There is a strong collaboration and trust between universities and industry.
The consultative process for curriculum and program development strengthened trust and collaboration.	
Benefits and Barriers	
Clusters created collaborative research and development (R&D), joint projects, and a process for curriculum development.	7. There is solid collaboration in research, but the lack of timely implementation,

²¹ See body of report for gender disaggregation.

²² The evidence is that the project received far more proposals than it could fund, and these studies continue to need resources in order to be conducted.

Clusters are behind schedule to produce results such as research products. There is limited cross-fertilization of knowledge and best practices within and across clusters.	support on publication writing and knowledge sharing could compromise the collaboration momentum.
Sustainability	
Most interviewees were highly enthusiastic about continuing with the cluster model.	8. If well-implemented, the clusters could be a critical component of national innovation but creating a public policy and funding mechanism for research and innovation is strategically necessary to ensure sustainability.
The lack of public policy to support cluster growth presents a barrier (funds to R&D projects, intellectual property regulation, and business incubators).	
There are limited policy incentives to consider the promotion of university-industry linkages as part of a broader science, technology, and innovation policy program.	

EQ 3: What changes have been made in HEIs in terms of their institutional capacity to continue introducing and/or supporting educational reforms and/or academic programs in the future?

3.1 What changes have been made in the GOES in terms of their institutional capacity to continue introducing and/or supporting educational reforms and/or academic programs in the future?

Evaluation Question 3	
Findings	Conclusions
The dialogue and closeness between sectors are important project achievements because they facilitated the development of investigations, curriculum, and the Career Development Centers (CDCs).	9. There needs to be leadership from a neutral entity.
There has been an open and participatory process to construct the higher education policy and this process should continue.	
The GOES does not feel ownership of the project, which is crucial for sustainability. However, GOES does regard the project positively.	
There was little awareness of the bureaucratic aspects within the GOES in the design of new programs of study, especially on the part of the National Directorate of Higher Education (DNES).	10. The project was not fully conscious of the day to day challenges of GOES, which created unforeseen delays.
The written reforms are outlined in the higher education policy proposal, but they are not in operation/implementation (which requires commitment from government).	11. The policy needs to be assumed by the GOES and to do so they need to be included in the process (i.e., have ownership).
Human institutional capacity development (HICD) assessment was instrumental to identifying the gaps in administration on the part of universities and providing a direction to improve capacity; however, there is no endline to date to assess the gains.	12. More data are required to assess the final impact of the HICD training.

EQ 4: How were gender equality, female empowerment, and social inclusion integrated in the implementation of activity interventions?

4.1 To what extent is the activity influencing changes in gender participation in higher education?

Evaluation Question 4	
Findings	Conclusions
There has been an increase in access to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) for women and girls. Most notable is the Girls Science Camp, with approximately 70 girl beneficiaries.	13. HEA has made substantial gains to improve access to higher education opportunities for women and girls. However, the project can be more expansive and

A Higher Education Network of Women Leaders in higher education is established and functioning, although there is no male involvement.	include both genders to promote more involvement (including awareness campaigns).
Research teams include some women, but can include more; to date, 78 males and 35 females participated on research teams (although, significantly, these are young women with growth potential).	
The HEA has offered workshops to other IPs on how to integrate gender and female empowerment into programming.	14. HEA plays a leadership role in terms of exemplifying how to incorporate gender, and more research and data will continue to demonstrate achievements and make convincing arguments for society at large. ²³
There is a lack of public messaging and convincing narratives on why girls should be educated, particularly about the benefits to industry and for their potential.	
There are no gender-specific indicators in the Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) plan.	15. Universities can be more inclusive to all students.
In terms of Social Inclusion (SI), universities are not accessible to students with disabilities.	

EQ 5: What approaches utilized and results achieved by the HEA Activity have the potential to continue to exist after USAID’s funding ends? Which ones should continue to be supported?²⁴

Evaluation Question 5	
Findings	Conclusions
Students who use the CDC reflect positively on the workshops [especially entrepreneurship as well as those on curriculum vitae (CV), interview, and soft skills].	16. Demand for the CDC is high on the part of all students and industry.
CDC staff confirm that interest is high for the workshops and internships.	
CDC staff report increased participation ²⁵ from industry [i.e., memoranda of understanding (MOUs), participating in role plays, job posts] in the CDCs, with no gender differences (i.e., equal participation).	17. CDCs are not isolated but are integrated into the universities, which implies they are sustainable with little funding.
CDCs are part of the budgeted plans, aesthetically pleasing, and aligned to curriculum (social service).	
Some CDCs are advanced while others are still being developed. ²⁶	18. There is an opportunity to capitalize on the tour and share more between CDCs in El Salvador so that they learn from each other and collaborate effectively and in a timely manner.
Participants in the CDC study tour to the United States (U.S.) find the experience was valuable.	
CDC staff are highly motivated and energetic vis-à-vis the goals of the CDCs. There is a lack of consolidated results of the CDCs that are ready to be shared and detail the benefits of the CDCs.	

²³ While the project’s purpose was not to change universities’ gender policies, in the act of requiring equitable participation in trainings, scholarships, investigation teams, the project was a leader exemplifying to universities equitable gender practices.

²⁴ Following the evaluation period, a sustainability plan has been developed for the Cluster model. The research units/labs have identified and further developed strategies for sustainability through their links with Industry.

²⁵ Industry has participated in CDC trainings serving in a role play capacity with student interviews, job recruitment, and signing MOUs.

²⁶ For example, in having staff to provide services, offering career development trainings, having a physical space adequate to meet with students, and including the CDC in university plans/budgets.

The full report provides more detail on EQ 5, which cuts across all questions, e.g., the clusters have attributes that will continue to exist, gender advances have some attributes that will continue, etc. In these questions (e.g., EQs 2 and 4) the project's aspects that will continue are discussed.

The recommendations below are based on the conclusions outlined above. The body of the report provides more detail, especially delineating between future programming and the project's actions.

Recommendation 1: USAID should support the construction of an entity or contract a local NGO or an organization with strategic alliances to integrate the cluster model.²⁷ This recommendation is based on conclusions 6, 8, 9, and 10.

Recommendation 2: USAID should continue to support (in order of importance) research, curriculum reform, teacher training, and scholarship opportunities. This recommendation is based on conclusions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Recommendation 3: USAID needs to continue to strategically incorporate gender equity and social inclusion into higher education programming. This recommendation is based on conclusions 13, 14, and 15.

Recommendation 4: USAID needs to include the government more in higher education policy development with USAID, and the process needs to be more open to include other government agencies, NGOs, etc. This is based on conclusions 10 and 11²⁸.

Recommendation 5: The HEA should improve data management and knowledge sharing and learning throughout the system; a clearinghouse website [different from the Development Clearing House (DEC)] should be created on which information is made available to more stakeholders. This is based on conclusions 7, 12, 14, and 18.

²⁷ Since the end of the evaluation, the ET understands HEA has developed a sustainability plan for the clusters.

²⁸ Following the completion of the data collection and the scope of this evaluation, the call to participate according to Federico Estrada was broad: 75 percent out of the 41 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) participated. The Strategic Committee also participated including staff from: Ministry of Education, Ministry of Economy, the Concejo de Educación Superior (CES), and the Comisión para la Acreditación de la Calidad en la Educación Superior (CDA). In all workshops, there was participation from the government, the private sector, the HEIs and students.