

Work education and educational developments around sustainable livelihoods for sustainable career development and well-being

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JF Caringal-Go

Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

SC Carr  and **DJ Hodgetts**

Massey University, New Zealand

DY Intraprasert

Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

M Maleka

Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa

I McWha-Hermann

University of Edinburgh, Scotland

I Meyer

University of Cape Town, South Africa

KP Mohan

Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

MH Nguyen

Massey University, New Zealand

S Noklang 

Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

VT Pham 

University of Economics and Business, Vietnam National University, Vietnam

P Prakongpan  and **P Poonpol**

Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand

J Potgieter

MAF Digital Lab, Fitzherbert Science Centre, New Zealand

R Searle

University of Glasgow, Scotland

M Teng-Calleja

Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines

Corresponding author:

S. C. Carr, Massey University, New Zealand.

Email: s.c.carr@massey.ac.nz



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Abstract

Covid-19, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and Climate Change, have disrupted work education, rendering sustainability of careers and livelihoods a concern. This paper outlines a collaborative response to that challenge, offering opportunities for sustainable livelihoods in a work education cloud collaboration, Project SLiC (Sustainable Livelihoods Collaboration). We have joined forces across nation states in the Global South/North to share cloud resources, focused on teaching a postgraduate course, Sustainable Livelihoods. Online modules are stored in a secure cloud site, from which local courses draw-down, autochthonously, whichever resources fit workforce development in context. We outline modules, and an evaluative process, in a proof-of-concept trial. Finally, we envisage how this initial collaboration may morph into a whole degree, including research supervision. We close with a call to career development professionals to share their unique expertise and experiences at the work education frontline, on how to develop this sustainable careers project, for the greater good.

Keywords

Sustainable livelihoods, cloud work education, international collaboration, interdisciplinary sustainability science education, UNESCO

Introduction

This proposal is based on three transformations. First, Covid-19 has transformed Higher Education (HE), moving distance modalities, often asynchronous, from being an exception to the norm (Cameron et al., 2022). This shift is especially dramatic perhaps at Postgraduate training level (Rad et al., 2021). There, students are often already working for a living and for whom asynchronous delivery may fit work-life-study balance (Chimbo et al., 2023; Rad et al., 2021). Second, generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) has transformed the HE marketplace, moving steady-state ‘jobs’ and careers from the norm to more of an exception (Carr et al., 2023b). Sustainable Livelihoods have thereby become not only a ‘topic’ for study, but also a *goal* for HE in general (Meyer et al., 2023). Third, accelerating ecosystem destruction, biodiversity loss, and even potential mass extinction have transformed student concerns about sustainability from peripheral to central – including sustaining their own livelihoods and future generations’ (Deloitte, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023). Recognizing the interconnectedness between all three of these transformations, this article documents lessons learned from a pilot cloud-collaborative transformation in HE, focused on *Sustainable Livelihoods* (e.g., Carr et al., 2023a; Meyer et al., 2023).

Sustainable Livelihoods transcend a number of conventional constructs in work education. Arguably an ancient idea, the modern English term *Sustainable Livelihood* originally grew out of a report on environmental sustainability in economically poor rural communities in the “developing” world (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1989). Since then, it has become more and more relevant to all societies, and regions, as encapsulated in its most commonly cited definition:

“a livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets...and activities required for a means of living, a livelihood is sustainable which can cope with and recover from stress and shocks, maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets, and provide sustainable livelihood opportunities for the next generation;

and which contributes net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long term” (Chambers & Conway, 1991, p. 6).

This definition is fit-for-purpose on a number of levels, and with respect to a number of challenges (and opportunities for sustainability) facing our species, and its whole world of work (Carr, 2023a,b; Chambers, 2009). First, unlike many of its predecessors, it engages with disasters, both manmade and natural. Second, it allows for the economic reality that many if not most students today are holding down more than one form of income stream, and may do so for the rest of their careers. Third, it recognizes and respects the fact that livelihoods are interconnected, along supply chains and into the future (Jyoti & Arora, 2023). My livelihood is connected to your livelihood, and vice-versa, in time and *across* time, over generations. Finally, it links the world of work to the overall imperative of sustainability as an overarching goal for both lives and livelihoods, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs (United Nations, 2024). The primary goal is SDG-1 - Eradicate poverty in all its forms everywhere, including through access to lifelong education (SDG-4), decent work (SDG - 8), through partnerships for development (SDG - 17). Thus, we can see that Project SLiC instantiates a range of SDGs, indeed all 17 of them, freedom from hunger (SDG - 2) to human security (SDG - 16) are addressed in one form or another through the linking concept of Sustainable Livelihoods.

Humanitarian Work Psychology includes a focus on Sustainable Livelihoods, and through a teaching and service network called GLOW (Global Living Organisational Wage) has established an interdisciplinary, North-South, South-South, North-North collaborative network, SLiC (Sustainable Livelihoods Collaboration). Informed by an ethos of research- and service-led teaching, SLiC now proposes the concept of cloud collaboration teaching, on Sustainable Livelihoods, via a cloud-based and online/hybrid, inter-institutional, Honours/ Masters/ Professional Doctorate-level course. The proposal is to trial

a proof-of-concept, in 2024, for one cloud-collaboration course (on Sustainable Livelihoods). If the concept is proven, it has a potential to be scaled-up to entire postgraduate degree(s), including research thesis supervision.

Each SLiC institution below already offers a postgraduate course, or related course that addresses the sustainability of livelihoods, through its own teaching platforms and modules, with fees and assignments administered in-house (*Participating Institutions*, below). Many of us also already offer guest lectures and practicals ('lecticals'), often online, with speakers from the same institution. We now propose to extend the radius and circumference of this collaboration, by spanning institutions, regions, and internationally. Each institution will contribute one or more modules, posted to the cloud as recordings, with readings etc., which will be shared (with passwords) with all members of SLiC. In keeping with notions of the intellectual commons, each member hub in turn is then free to decide which modules, with recordings, URL etc, will form part of their own particular course on Sustainable Livelihoods, when it will do so, and how. These modules may be offered asynchronously or synchronously, alongside in-class topics, depending on time zones and semesterisation. For example, a Guest Lecturer may participate in a live online seminar in another institution (one which has chosen their module), if they can and wish; or a semester later, in an asynchronous recording of the same event.

This is a no-disruption, no IP-implication model of the intellectual commons that offers students a diverse and inclusive palette. It exposes students to international perspectives in local context, under conditions determined and managed locally, to suit local course conditions, assessments, timings, course outline, and so forth. The contributing scholars below are already co-published in Sustainable Livelihoods, through GLOW, and will make their apt publications available to participating student classes, within legal copyright guidelines. As a UNESCO collaboration, grouped under the Massey University Chair on Sustainable Livelihoods, we aim to build this collaboration into a central plank within a UNITWIN Network, on Sustainable Livelihoods (in process).

In the remainder of this article, meanwhile, we outline the modular materials being placed under trial, proof-of-concept experiences from students and staff, and finally future directions for work education in general.

Process

Participating institutions

1. University of Cape Town, South Africa, Commerce Faculty, the SARChi (South African Research Chairs Initiative) Chair of Decent Work and Sustainable Livelihood.
2. Massey University of New Zealand, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, School of Psychology, Industrial and Organizational (I/O)

Psychology Programme. This includes a UNESCO Chair, and Chair group, on Sustainable Livelihoods.

3. Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines, Department of Psychology, Ateneo Center for Organization Research and Development (CORD).
4. Srinakharinwirot University, Thailand, Global Education Development and Research, Division of multi/interdisciplinary studies, Graduate School (GEDR).
5. University of Glasgow, Scotland, Adam Smith Business School, Masters programmes. People in Organisations, and International HRM (MBA Programme).
6. University of Edinburgh Business School, Scotland, UK.
7. Vietnam National University, University of Economics and Business, Center for Economic Development Studies (CEDs), Hanoi, Vietnam.

Constituent courses

1. Honours level course on Humanitarian Work Psychology, including Sustainable Livelihoods. Originally a MOOC proposal, entitled, Work Psychology and the Greater Good (Meyer & Thompson, 2015), the course includes a focus on Humanitarian Work Psychology, the Decent Work Agenda, Minimum and Living wages, and (micro) Enterprise development, including in the informal sector. This course has been developed in partnership with (2), following a Visiting Scholarship in 2017, which was funded by the Knowledge Innovation Collaboration Fund.
2. Masters-level course (MA and MSc), called Sustainable Livelihoods, offered by distance only (online). Topic modules include Decent Work & Sustainable Livelihoods, New Diplomacies (Module 1 - Conceptual Foundations), Minimum wages, Living wages, Maximum wages (Materiality of Work), Radical Commerce, Digital Automation, Social Enterprises, Sustainable Ageing (Future of Work), and Human Mobility (Spatial and Digital).
3. Ateneo CORD's Certificate Courses and Graduate-level Courses/Modules on Enabling Employee Wellbeing and Resilience (EEWBR), Mental Health in the Workplace (CARES and CARES 2.0), and Planned Change/Organization Development for Civil Society Organizations (OD for CSOs) are geared towards capacitating organizations to promote decent work, respecting workers' rights, and taking care of workers' wellbeing. It is through these that workplaces are able to ensure organization effectiveness and sustainability. The OD for CSOs, in particular, aims to enhance capabilities of those who work with marginalized sectors and communities in the Philippines to strengthen their organizations. Strengthening the organizational capacities of NGOs, people's organizations, and cooperatives enhances their capacity to help facilitate positive community transformation and promote sustainable livelihoods at the grass-roots levels. Ateneo CORD is also in the process of

developing a Certificate Course on Sustainable Livelihoods (SL) for HR/OD Practitioners and Master/Master of Arts in Psychology students. The course seeks to introduce the concept of SL and to discuss literature and cases to promote SL in three major sectors in Philippine society - employees in the manufacturing and service sectors (urban areas); agricultural workers (rural areas); fisherfolks (coastal areas).

4. Global Education Development and Research (GEDR) is a doctoral degree program at the Graduate School Srinakharinwirot University (SWU), Thailand. The SWU_GEDR offers a course entitled "Foundations of Global Education Development." This course promotes the integration of sustainability, inclusiveness, diversity, and equity for education development programs or projects in the context of schools, organizations, and communities. Through discussion with experts and a critical review of related literature, learners will write and present their project framework for education development. Choosing among research activities of comparative education, intervention research, and action research will help students use education policy, program, and technology for a better living in school, organization, and community. In addition, the next step will be a collaboration between SWU_GEDR and Mahidol University, Thailand for a course entitled "Seminar in New ERA of Leadership for Global Education Developments for Sustainability, Diversity, and Equity."
5. Masters-level courses in People in Organizations, International HRM (MBA Programme), and Managing resources. The contribution from Adam Smith Business School also draws heavily from its resident Impact Incubator, which is funded by the European Association of Work and Organizational Psychology (EAWOP).
6. Undergraduate and Masters-level courses in international and applied human resource management at the University of Edinburgh. These courses include two focal topics, fair reward and diversity/equality/inclusion in international work spaces, including aid and development contexts; and the psychological impact of living wages and decent work for workers, their families, organizations and society. Their overall focus is thus on social justice and diversity.
7. The Center for Economic Development Studies (CEDS) provides specialized training for social enterprises, impact-focused organizations, and offers elective lectures on sustainable livelihoods within undergraduate and graduate courses at the University of Economics and Business, Vietnam National University. CEDS is dedicated to advancing sustainable economic development through programs that integrate inclusive business strategies, circular economy principles, social entrepreneurship, and decent work initiatives.

Collaborative process

This venture was embarked on by a group of long standing colleagues with a history of shared research and guest

teaching during inter-institutional visits. As such, we were able to leverage our existing collaborations and trusting and mutually beneficial relationships to embark on project SLiC. From later 2023 through 2024 to-date, representatives from the participating institutions and co-authors of this paper, have met on a monthly or bi-monthly basis, online, synchronously, to conceptualize the cloud collaboration, articulate its elements, and combine these to form the following tentative modular structure, for Project SLiC (Sustainable Livelihoods Collaboration). It is important to note that because most of the participating academics had collaborated with each other on research and teaching, we know how each one understood and worked to advance sustainable livelihoods. We also knew what we have taught and had written about sustainable livelihoods, and could draw on these existing materials (including, a shared volume entitled, *Tackling Precarious Work: Toward Sustainable Livelihoods* (2023) in working through the synergies necessary to produce a coherent and diverse common course. We also knew that we could draw on the handbook published by the Society for Organizational Psychology (SIOP) Frontiers Series, for example, because it is available online as well as in hardback, and thus readily accessible to lecturing staff and students. It was logical to adopt the handbook as a shared recommended/advised reading resource for the cloud-based course as a whole, along with other key readings and reviews, depending on autochthonous decisions made by the offering institutions as they responded to the particularities of their local contexts.

Product

This section outlines a series of potential core course modules that might populate a degree. These will each contain one or more cloud options, which can each be drawn down by any of the partner teams, as part of their internal/online/hybrid course offering, in the broad and evolving field of Sustainable Livelihoods. The name given to the particular specific local course is freely chosen, and subsumed under the control of the local academics who teach it. Indeed, every aspect of what is drawn down, whether and how it is used, delivered, discussed and appraised, remains wholly a decision that is made in the particular local context, by the local offering team. The course product is therefore both global and local (glocal).

Conceptual foundations. Each institution will probably offer its own module in this space, although the option remains for each hub to store their own introductory module in the cloud, for potential use by any of the remaining participating teams as a guest lecture. Potential topics within this module include key *structures*, for example, the SDGs, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, and their Humanitarian Work Psychology *functions*, notably delivering a Sustainable Livelihood (defined in human relations terms, as above), and against the triple bottom line of people, planet, and economy. This is often referred to, in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and OR

(Organizational Responsibility) as Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). This module also includes the awareness, knowledge and skills required to move research evidence into socially, environmentally and fiscally responsible policy, for example through an organizational commitment to the Global Compact, or ISO standard concerning human rights at work, and respecting any form of collective employment relations agreement, in private as well as civil, civil society and not-for-profit sectors (Saner & Yiu, 2023).

Material foundations. Work is not just about these abstract principles and processes, but in functional terms, it must deliver material human security (Hodgetts et al., 2023), in the form of shelter, food, healthcare, and so forth, in order for it to meet the above definition of providing a sustainable livelihood. People work for a host of reasons, which include earning a living. Employment is the principal means through which shelter, food, and so forth are accessed (Carr, 2023a). Income to support human security can take multiple forms, including both money and benefits, wages and bonuses, which together form a work package. The size of this package is important for what it can secure. Core topics included in this module range include for example Minimum wages, Living wages, and Maximum wages, and the relation between these forms and functions of wages, in regards to key sustainability issues such as income and gender inequality, wage inequality, climate degradation, and everyday wellbeing, both now and for future generations.

Contemporary issues. Two thirds of the world's workforce already works in the informal economy. Frequently stereotyped in a negative light, work roles in this majority economy are highly diverse, often positive, and highly skilled, ranging, for example, from skilled artisan (Saxena & Tchagneno, 2023) to social influencer regarding everyday sustainable consumption and production ('produmption') behavior (Hopner & Carr, 2024). Training for enterprise development is often situated in the informal economy, for example, micro-enterprise start-ups, which many students will mention when asked what they would like to do for a livelihood, or see themselves doing in the future. How to make your own livelihood is a contemporary topic. It begs a serious question for workforce planning and policy, which has largely assumed that the direction of progress is to make the informal sector formal, even though the tide may be going in the opposite direction (Saxena & Tchagneno, 2023).

Likewise for Human mobility, whether as economic and/or climate refugees or as digital nomads, geographic and digital mobility are here to stay, and likely grow. Finding a more sustainable livelihood is a core motivation for geographic mobility (Cassim, 2023), just as technology has enabled digital nomadism to become a livelihood activity in/from any location that has good connectivity. Nomadism enables retirees to continue working past retirement age. Many people engaged in such work cannot afford to retire, and an aging workforce is an issue for them as well as for workforce planners, and

practitioners. Last but certainly not least is the nexus between Sustainable Livelihoods and Climate Action. Work impacts climate and climate impacts work, from mining to farming.

Future work-worlds. The 2019–2021 Covid pandemic accelerated the rate of work automation, and generative Artificial Intelligence, to the point where it is being predicted as a potential destroyer of formal jobs. This prediction has in turn rejuvenated the discussion about various forms of Basic Income, from Cash Transfers and Participation (Carr, 2023a; Hiilamo, 2022) to Universal (UBI). What is a UBI designed to do, who would design it, and how, and how will it interface with wage levels and concepts like a living wage, are key future questions for global and local society, as well as making a livelihood, probably from multiple strands, in them. In turn, many societies will not have the formal tax base to pay for any form of social insurance such as UBI. Some of these societies have anticipated this economic consideration and have decided to invest in different options. A prime example is Social Enterprise, a growing hybrid form of business in which profits are shared and employment is often overtly inclusive of diversity (Nguyen et al., 2023; Nguyen, Carr, et al., 2021a; Nguyen, Hodgetts, et al., 2021b).

Social functions like these remind us that Humanitarian Work Psychology is often centrally focused on supporting Sustainable Livelihoods. The modules briefly outlined above are in dynamic flux, both in terms of the field and the choices being made, by the course team, on whether to include them in the cloud formation from which the course and its students and instructors will draw. The point of the above outline however remains to illustrate the content, depth and scope of sustainable livelihoods as a course heading, and title. Its fitness-for-purpose in the world of work is relatively visible to students, who (in our experiences) readily see themselves in the topics, and across Humanitarian Work Psychology as a Gestalt, from having to engage in precarious work to fund their studies, to not knowing, or trying to predict exactly, in which direction the world of work, and vocational opportunities, will continue to turn by the time they reach graduation.

One final point concerns assessment. We have made a collective decision that this, like all aspects of the actual course that is delivered on-site, whether it is live or delayed, recorded or discussed, presented for class discussion or as a classic lecture. Foundational practical exercises will be an integral component of class activities, and assessment. So too will be making the ethos for assessments applied. For example, we have made use of mock Policy Briefs across several country hubs, and have had the students exchange successful exemplars of their work, once one set was marked, and the other was in preparation (all with informed consent and anonymity/confidentiality). We have also held classes in hybrid mode across countries, meeting students in proximal time zones across Vietnam, Thailand, and New Zealand. Students and instructors alike found the experience motivating.

Discussion

A healthy criticism of Humanitarian Work Psychology, made from its outset, has been the extent to which there were ‘jobs’, or more recently livelihood opportunities, at graduation. Research careers were, and are one answer, but they are relatively few, and under threat themselves from automation and the hollowing out of human beings from the education delivery system. More broadly however, the idea of ‘Sustainable careers’ has grown in prominence in recent years, often linked with CSR (Bal, 2024). According to Bal, “careers of workers can only be regarded as sustainable when these careers contribute to greater environmental, social, human, manufactured and financial capital” (Bal, 2024, p. 193). But what kinds of roles do these five forms of yardstick entail?

Vocational fitness

One possibility is working in the role of a CSR Officer, sometimes called CRO, Sustainability Manager, ESG Analyst, Sustainable Procurement Manager, and many other roles. The plurality of these roles itself implies a range of work roles, in which awareness, knowledge and skills surrounding how to implement the SDGs, from paying living wages to possessing new diplomacy skills on governance structures such as the Global Compact, are germane. An example of such a role would be a Chief Diversity Officer for a large medical technology company, which provides syringes and pen needles to get insulin to people with diabetes. The job size in this role includes directing the sustainability arm of the company, including the sustainability and CSR strategy for 2,000 employees (actual case, with permission).

More widely, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2023), has warned that “the world of work is rapidly changing. Accelerating digitalization, the green transition and population ageing, are all profoundly impacting the skills required to perform in the workplace, if not the very meaning of a successful professional career” (p. 1). The implication here is that formal, steady-state, one-stop-shop jobs, and careers with them, are becoming more exception than rule. In such an eventuality, the role of making one’s own sustainable livelihood, which is a core topic in the modules above, becomes more and more central and important for teaching courses not just in sustainable livelihoods, but also about work itself. The course we have outlined above, and continue to envisage, is designed to speak to such transitional and dynamic labor market transitions - insofar as we *can* be prepared for what is yet to come in the future of work.

Future evaluation

Future implies some kind of - likely formative - evaluation of how the proposal above actually proceeds. To that end, we plan to run one course on Sustainable Livelihoods, across all of the constituent partners in this aspect of Project

SLiC. We anticipate inevitable speed bumps, including (for example) cloud certification from Amazon and Google, Compliance with legal statutes around privacy for login credentials, distinguishing public from private, access control, and so on. These we are now managing, with support from our respective institutions. The formative evaluation itself will include first and foremost student feedback from classroom mini-surveys, as well as tracer studies of where those students find work and vocational opportunities after graduation. We also plan to include employers in that process, as well as providers of education, specifically by working closely with the National Commission for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Future trajectory

If the above proof-of-concept is successful, allowing for and negotiating inevitable speed bumps along the way, we plan to work closely with UNESCO to facilitate its priority for North-South and South-North collaboration in education, research and cultural inclusion. In addition to the UNESCO Chair on Sustainable Livelihoods, and the SARCHi Chair on Decent Work and Sustainable Livelihoods, it is possible that we use the experience from cloud-teaching Sustainable Livelihoods, to offer an entire degree in Humanitarian Work Psychology, and its links to the sustainability agenda, for this round of SDGs, and the next round of global goals, which are scheduled for 2031.

Very importantly, that process will include opportunities for co-supervision of postgraduate students, in research and internships, across institutions and countries, and modalities. We have already made some progress in this regard, by running an international Observatory, including international PHD and Masters students based at Massey, and often studying internationally. This group meets on a monthly basis, in hybrid mode, and considers a range of issues across Psychology as a whole, related to sustainability and the UN SDGs.

A second, related possibility, is to propose a UNITWIN network of UNESCO Chairs, in the Sustainable Livelihoods space. Most importantly, the point and purpose of such Chairs is to facilitate global connections, which we have seen is actually a core element in the concept of Sustainable Livelihoods themselves. Paraphrasing Mahatma Gandhi, we aim to be the changes that the proposal seeks in the world.

Other promising lines of research

The Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development (Di Fabio, 2017a, 2017b; Di Fabio & Cooper, 2023; Di Fabio & Rosen, 2018, 2020; Rosen & Di Fabio, 2023) is a current research and intervention area within Sustainability Science (Komiya & Takeuchi, 2006; Rosen, 2009, 2017; Takeuchi et al., 2017;). Sustainability Science offers a framework for trans-disciplinary reflections considering natural and applied sciences, humanities, and social sciences to

address sustainability and sustainable development issues. The Psychology of Sustainability and Sustainable Development aimed at providing insights into research and interventions regarding Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) issues by using psychological lens.

Furthermore the reflection on decent work (Duffy et al., 2017), decent lives (Di Fabio et al., 2023; Di Fabio & Blustein, 2016), and healthy lives (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2023) is advanced, supported by the recent position of the American Public Health Association (Pratap et al., 2022) that connect ILO's definition of decent work with healthy work, for the construction of healthy lives (Kenny & Di Fabio, 2023). Also decent education (Duffy et al., 2022; Kenny et al., 2023) and equitable career development and counseling (Guichard, 2022; Maree, 2024) as well as sustainability in career (Di Fabio, 2024) are promising lines of research.

Call for advice

Connectedness is also the purpose in this article, and we would like to end with a call to career and vocational practitioners, to help us connect with you, and learn from your frontline experience of demand and supply, in the career and vocational development space. We have reached out, and been welcomed by, career development associations across Australia and New Zealand - by the Career Industry Council of Australia (CICA) and by the Career Development Association of New Zealand (CDANZ). Our understanding from these meetings (Carr, 2023b; Carr & Hopner, 2023) is that the concept of a course focusing on sustainable livelihoods has relevance, and traction with students, and counselors.

We now therefore call on your professional expertise to guide us further forward, in co-design, with this initiative. This evolving co-venture promotes inter-societal, inter-institutional, and inter-cultural dialogue, mutual support, and common learning for staff and students. We now welcome input from colleagues more broadly. In that vein, please contact the Corresponding Authors to share your details, advice and possibilities for further connection with SLiC.

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ORCID iDs

S. C. Carr  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2569-0365>

S. Noklang  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1645-1135>

V.T. Pham  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1821-4635>

P. Prakongpan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4557-963X>

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