

Part III: Sustainability of EU-Asian academic collaboration

7. Sustainability: Key findings from evaluations and reviews of international academic partnership programmes

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In this paper it is investigated how international academic partnerships can be made more sustainable. To this end the findings of two comprehensive evaluation studies are discussed that can shed light on this issue. The studies show that there are three key lessons to be learned for making international academic co-operation sustainable. These are:

- (1) Cooperation between universities in Europe and Asia has to make sense to all parties concerned.*
- (2) A very central challenge lies in the establishment of mutual trust. Essential in this is effective communication.*
- (3) If continuing cooperation through the launch of new projects is not possible at first, there are numerous ways open to continue co-operation such as through mutual participation in seminars and conferences.*

Introduction

In this paper we will discuss the findings of two comprehensive evaluation studies dealing with academic exchange and partnerships programmes from the EU towards Asia. The studies concern the evaluation of Asia-Link, a programme run by the European Commission and a programme run by the Dutch government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) through NUFFIC. It concerns the Netherlands Programme for Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT). Both studies have been drawn up by ECORYS. In this paper we will first touch upon the background and main questions the studies sought to answer as well as the results. The main focus of this paper will be on the lessons learned from these evaluations. More specifically, using the data gathered we will address three questions:

- What are the conditions influencing decisions on establishing international academic partnerships with institutions abroad?
- What are the opportunities and challenges involved in initiating and maintaining sustainable academic partnerships?
- What are the institutional benefits (e.g. in terms of academic quality enhancement, access to research grounds, brains and funds) that result from such partnerships.

We will especially focus on the sustainability of academic partnerships: the issue of how partnerships can be made to last also after funding through the programmes has stopped.

7.1. Background of the studies

Every programme or project that is run by the EC is evaluated once mid-term and once at the end. Dutch programmes are also periodically evaluated. The purpose is always to find out if the programme is delivering what it was supposed to deliver and what lessons can be learned from the evaluation. A typical question addressed in the evaluations concerns *the intervention logic of the programme*. Determining the intervention logic involves establishing how exactly the programme is expected to produce its intended effects. It also concerns determining what the Programme's relationship is to any related policy interventions and to relevant external factors. Then there are five basic questions that remain to be addressed. These concern (a) the relevance of the programme, (b) the effectiveness, (c) the efficiency, (d) the impact and (e) the sustainability.

Establishing *the relevance* of a programme involves determining to what extent the programme's objectives, principles and actions are pertinent to the overall goals as set for the programme. Important questions are also: Are the needs of beneficiaries fulfilled? Is the programme consistent with EU / EU member state policies?

Establishing *the effectiveness* involves determining to what extent the objectives formulated in the programme been achieved and what successes and difficulties have occurred, how these have been solved and how appropriate are the solutions that have been chosen.

The efficiency involves establishing to what extent the inputs of the programme been used efficiently. Questions on *impact* are concerned with how the programme has affected the wider environment? Lastly, *sustainability*, is concerned with establishing whether the expected or unexpected effects are in any way satisfactory and whether the positive changes or trends induced by the programme can be expected to last if it were terminated?

7.2. Approach and methodology

Evaluation studies such as these typically start with a literature and document review, followed by site visits (randomly sampled) and sending out questionnaires to the beneficiaries to study findings at project level. At programme level interviews are held with policy makers and personnel active in the management of the programmes. The methodology followed in the studies to assess the performance of the programmes falls within the tradition of qualitative programme evaluation methods (Patton M.Q. 2003 *ibid.*). The basic feature of these methodologies is the predominant reliance on information from persons that are in one way or another involved in a programme. Such methodologies are often used when a controlled or semi-controlled research design to gauge the effectiveness of a programme cannot be implemented due - for instance - to legal, ethical or budgetary constraints. These qualitative methodologies contain a number of features that aim at reducing the possible bias associated with information from stakeholders, much as the use of control groups does when controlled designs are used. The most central feature in this is the use of what is called triangulation. Triangulation means that information gathered from persons involved in a programme is consistently being corroborated with other information

sources. These sources vary from (1) identical information from other persons involved in the programme or closely associated with it, (2) written information on the performance of the programme as can be derived from progress reports, notes, minutes of meetings etc, (3) performance monitoring systems in place and (4) observations by an evaluator. As a general rule, the less information gathered through these different sources is contradictory, the more unlikely it is that the information on the performance of a programme is biased.

7.3. Results

General results

As indicated, results are presented for the Asia-Link evaluation study as well as the evaluation of the Netherlands Programme for Institutional Strengthening of Post-secondary Education and Training Capacity (NPT). On the Asia-Link study, 30 projects have been studied. Most projects were completed. A random selection was made. A total of 155 projects have been funded under this programme.

The results of the evaluation are quite encouraging: All projects have been found to be highly **relevant** to the developmental goals and higher education needs of the countries visited. They are also relevant to the identified missions and goals of institutions visited.

As to the **effectiveness**, projects were rated on a 10-point scale ranging from 10 (excellent) to 1 (very bad). All projects rated six or higher on this scale. Most projects (around 70%) rated as good to excellent. The objectives in these projects are reached in a (very) satisfactory way. Projects differ in effectiveness on account of the diverse backgrounds of institutions and countries. Some projects have progressed at a much faster pace than others and shown visible results in setting up new centres, development of new courses and the initiation of joint research programmes. In others, the project has succeeded in bringing the Asian partners to a particular level of preparedness and can start to interact as equal partners.

Most respondents believe that their projects have operated **efficiently** in terms of finance and time and attribute this also to the cooperation in the project. They do point out that a little flexibility would always be necessary anyway in projects that cover a number of institutions, several quite distinct regions and vast distances. In all cases, however, the full repertoire of activities has taken place. Value addition to the project has been high for both Asian and European countries in terms of academic exchanges and the visibility gained by all partners in their respective countries. By and large projects also reflect high economic potential arising from the courses introduced and curricula developed through the collaboration.

Around three quarters of the projects attain a significant **impact** in terms of improvements in the quality of Human Resources and labour market participation of students. The impact is somewhat less for student exchanges. Examples of areas where impact is achieved are:

Sensitisation of municipalities, local governments to relevant issues; strengthening the export sector and enhancing business contacts between Europe and Asia; modification of

existing courses in other departments; extending course material to other Asian countries; better employment opportunities for Asian students; enriched experience of European students through student projects; increased research collaboration with the existing partner and other European Institutions; new opportunities for academia-industry interaction.

In terms of *sustainability* of the results, it appears that all projects have created international networks –in three quarters of the cases even quite strong international networks– that ensure that results of the projects are sustained and expanded. These partnerships are reflected in various forms: participation in seminars and conferences; placement of PhD students in partner countries and joint supervision of theses; joint undertaking of training programmes and participation as guest faculty in partner institutions; joint research programmes with existing partners and joint research programmes with other institutions in Europe.

Regarding the NPT none of the projects were yet completed. Indications are, however, that results will be positive and that the projects will probably be effective.

Conditions influencing decisions on establishing international academic partnerships with institutions abroad

The most central condition guiding such decisions is the relevance of these partnerships for the various stakeholders involved. There are a number of perspectives on this. The first is the perspective of the European Union in the case of Asia-Link and the Dutch government in case of the NPT programme. The second is the Asian perspective, the perspective of the governments in the countries in Asia concerned. Next there is the perspective on the HEIs concerned, both European and Asian.

NL Government / EC interests are typically concerned with the question of whether the projects launched contribute to the global goals of the programmes and have served their interests. Typical goals are to help poverty reduction through economic growth; supporting greater economic cooperation and trade between Europe/NL and Asia; raising the profile of Europe in Asia and vice versa and creating mutual awareness and understanding between the two regions. At government level on the Asian side interests typically concern the need to foster economic growth, to combat poverty and to upgrade human resources capabilities in the region.

The needs/wishes of HEIs in both Europe and Asia are also important. European HEIs claimed that they learnt more about the various Asian ways and culture. The exchange of students and staff is also welcomed, especially in the various engineering fields. Asian HEIs note the generally weak HE institutional capacity in large parts of Asia, the under-qualified teaching staff they have, the inadequate research, and poor teaching skills. There is a clearly felt need to do something about these conditions and Asian HEIs consider that these issues can be addressed by international co-operation.

A few examples may illustrate these points:

The relevance: wild life management in China

The project had relevance for China in the sense that (1) a new integrated approach to wild life management was introduced that proved to satisfy the needs of the region (Sichuan) more in this respect, (2) a project or student centred approach to teaching was introduced replacing the old classical teaching in the University and (3) they were introduced to how EU universities are nested within their field of study as they usually have relevant contacts with wild life managers 'on the ground'/ governments responsible for wildlife management. For the EU it was quite worthwhile to learn exactly what problems the CN University faces in terms of sheer number of students to be taught, for instance.

The relevance of wireless communications: study and graduate teaching for India and Indonesia

The project is relevant for both India and Indonesia as there is a growing need in both countries to develop their manufacturing infrastructure and strengthen graduate teaching and research exclusively in the field of wireless and mobile communications. Both countries have a need to strengthen their international profile in mobile wireless, multi-media communications, and also their cooperation with industry. The need for qualified graduates and researchers is felt at all levels: university, industry, government and private sector telecom bodies.

What are the opportunities and challenges involved in initiating and maintaining sustainable academic partnerships?

A central objective of the programmes we studied is the promotion of regional and multilateral networking in Europe/NL and Asia, the issue of the project's sustainability is therefore of immediate importance. Here we noted a number of opportunities that are conducive to reaching some form of sustainability. An important one is keeping an appropriate pace in projects: even where projects are slow to perform, European institutions have frequently confirmed their willingness to continue and to undertake newer projects thanks to the professional cooperation with Asian HEIs that had occurred during the project. This has cemented a good relationship and has laid the groundwork for future cooperation. Another important point is to seek collaboration with governments in the region: in a number of cases such collaboration has already been initiated which gives a greater chance of sustainability and acceptability for mainstreaming even for future funding and other support. Starting in time to secure continuation is a third point to be heeded: a number of projects that were midway through their implementation have been exploring opportunities for establishing twinning courses and joint activities and with success. These projects were able to continue also after funding by the EC had stopped.

The form continued cooperation takes varies of course. It is not always in the form of a new project. Frequently continued co-operation takes the form of participation in seminars and conferences; placement of PhD students in partner countries and joint supervision of thesis; joint undertaking of training programmes and participation as guest faculty in partner institutions; joint research with existing partners and joint research with other institutions in Europe. It is remarkable that all these activities occur after funding by the EC had stopped.

However, there are also a good number of new projects that have emerged from the cooperation and that have started or continued after EU funding had stopped.

A few examples of such projects are presented below:

- Mechatronics. A new Project has been launched by NPU University in China with partners in France, Denmark, Pakistan
- Economic Management. Vietnam has continued this project with existing partners
- Medical chemistry. Again the universities in Vietnam have been building on project activity with EU –German and Ireland based universities
- Fudan University in China, The University of Eindhoven in the Netherlands and the Technical University in London have continued with collaboration and were about to launch a new project activity
- Aachen University has identified 2 projects with Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) relating to marketing strategies for new entrepreneurs and is taking steps to implement them
- The University TERI, India, had started an ongoing project with Greece in the area of Environmental Engineering. This concerns activated carbon. This was initiated after completion of the project with one of its partners
- New Research Programmes have been identified by India and Indonesia with European partners on low cost solutions-Emergency and Rural Communications, and New applications. This is with universities in Aalborg, Delft, Rome
- Two projects initiated in research and teaching within broadband satellite Communication and access technologies by technical universities in Italy and BIT in India
- Several ongoing research programmes have been identified by ITB Indonesia and Delft University in the Netherlands. They have founded the International Research Centre for Telecommunications-Transmission and Radar

Very central challenges lie in the establishment of mutual trust. Essential in this is the instalment of effective communication. Communication should be frequent and clear. In all cases there are cultural differences that make it difficult to operate a project. As one respondent puts it: “In general it is difficult to reach into other cultures”. In the beginning (of the project) students were completely lost. All subjects were quite new to them as they had been educated in classical engineering. There are also personal/individual factors involved as well as language problems, English is sometimes difficult. Students also lack assertiveness sometimes”.

Institutional benefits that may result from partnerships

Projects differ in terms of the institutional gains achieved on account of the diverse background of institutions and countries. Projects in China and India have progressed at a much faster pace than those in countries like Indonesia and Thailand. Countries like India and China are highly professional and participate mostly as equal partners; some of the projects have progressed at a considerably faster pace extending much beyond what was originally planned in their respective projects. Projects have shown visible results in the setting up of new centres, development of new courses and their mutual recognition with European universities, student and teacher mobility and the initiation of joint research programmes.

Projects in Indonesia, Thailand did not progress as far but have also shown results: the projects have succeeded in bringing the Asian partners to a particular level of preparedness. In countries like Indonesia a certain level seemed to have been reached whereby substantive gains could be expected to emerge in the near future.

A clear majority of benefits concern the successful introduction of new innovative courses in Asian Universities. Examples of such courses are:

- Wireless and Mobile Technology
- Software Defined Radio
- Technologies for Different Water Use
- Modelling & Visualisation of Water Treatment Processes
- Efficient Water & Energy Use in Pulp and Paper Industry
- Computer Graphics and New Technology in Environment Education
- International and Diplomatic Studies (European Studies)
- Start-Up Business Programmes
- Basics of Entrepreneurship Development.

Overall, there is evidence of an enhanced academic cooperation between institutions in the EU and Asia. The main benefit for all institutions is that they are capable of participating as equal partners as well as taking on the lead role in current projects as well as future ones. Invariably this leads to a higher quality of the HEIs concerned both in Europe and Asia. For Asia there is also evidence that brain drain is prevented.

Conclusions: key lessons learned

What now can be learned from all this? How can co-operation between universities in Europe and Asia and the results and impact that result from this co-operation be made sustainable?

There are three key lessons here:

Cooperation between universities in Europe and Asia has to make sense to all parties concerned. It has to make sense, be relevant for the universities themselves and to the governments in the countries concerned. When policies of governments are strengthened by the cooperation, it is very likely that co-operation and projects resulting from this will be embedded in national and local policies and in that way made more sustainable.

A very central challenge lies in the establishment of mutual trust. Essential in this is the instalment of effective communication. Communication should be frequent and clear. In all cases there are cultural differences that make it difficult to operate a project. So clear and frequent communication is a sine qua non not only for the beginning stages of any project, but also when continuation of the cooperation is wanted and strived for.

If continuing cooperation through the launching of a new project is not possible at first, there are numerous ways open to continue co-operation such as through mutual participation in seminars and conferences, placement of PhD students in partner countries

and joint supervision of thesis, joint undertaking of training programmes and participation as guest faculty in the partner institutions. In that way at least the cooperation remains intact until funding for new more substantial initiatives can be secured.

References

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