SHAPING UNIVERSITY'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN MYANMAR

CHINLONE

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This Report was developed within the framework of the CHINLONE ('Connecting Higher Education Institutions for a New Leadership on National Education') project, financed by the European Union, Erasmus+ Key Action 2 Capacity Building in Higher Education program.

CHINLONE's main goal is to support Myanmar universities in their quest to profoundly reframe the national Higher Education System (HES). In the heart of every citizen of Myanmar, the word "chinlone" holds a very special place, since it is the name of a traditional sport, very popular among local youngsters, based on a non-competitive mechanism whose objective is not winning or losing, but how spectacularly the game is played while passing the ball back and forth to each other using feet, knees, and heads. In other words, while enjoying the game of *chinlone*, the players' experience can be considered as a team-building exercise, as demonstrated by the way they support each other to keep the ball in motion.

As prescribed by the rules of this traditional sport, the CHINLONE platform aims to support the reorganization of Myanmar HES in a non-competitive environment where different institutions can actually work together for a shared goal. Accordingly, the project encourages local stakeholders to engage in the modernization of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by socializing all actors in the process (university governance representatives, faculty members, staff, and, above all, students) in a harmonious and integrated manner. To do so, the CHINLONE consortium includes three European universities — the University of Bologna (UNIBO), the University of Granada (UGR), and Uppsala University (UU); one EU university association, the Coimbra Group; five Myanmar universities — Dagon University, the University of Mandalay, the University of Yangon, Yangon University of Economics, and Yezin Agricultural University; along with the Ministry of Education of Myanmar. As a result, the exchange with EU universities is expected to put local HEIs in the position to be trained from different perspectives, ranging from university quality assurance management, the design and implementation of updated degree programs based on a "student-centered" approach, to the drafting of sound internationalization strategies that can lead to the development of fully functional International Relation Offices (IROs).

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Although the idea of "internationalizing Higher Education" has emerged in the agenda of the Myanmar Ministries and higher education institutions (HEIs) only recently, it has quickly become a hot and largely discussed topic. Academic governance, professors and students are currently persuaded that raising the international outlook of Myanmar universities is an issue of utmost importance. The necessity of internationalizing the higher education system is also a response to pressures coming from outside, especially from international partners looking to establish an active cooperation with Myanmar universities. On the one hand, this pressure is favorable as far as it fosters positive changes in Myanmar education system. However, on the other hand, it may lead Myanmar universities to shape their international strategies on the basis of other countries' and other universities' needs and drives.

Against this backdrop, the first challenge faced by Myanmar universities is the framing of a relevant, comprehensive and bottom-up vision for internationalization. Second, once internationalization strategies are defined, Myanmar universities ought to address the development of dedicated tools for their fulfillment, starting with the establishment of International Relations Offices (IROs). Third, in order to put in place the strategies mentioned above, officers of the new IRO would have to develop international relations activities as mobility schemes, capacity-building actions and third-mission (outreach) actions.

In 2020, CHINLONE project supported five Myanmar Universities in these tasks. In particular, CHINLONE has supported Myanmar universities in the framing of a relevant, comprehensive and bottom-up vision for internationalization that prioritize quality over quantity and in the strengthening of nascent IROs through dedicated policy, staff (with adequate training) and resources. Additional information on the specific activities carried out can be find here: WP4- Chinlone International Relation Platform –Connecting Higher education Institutions for a New Leadership On National Education –CHINLONE (unibo.it)

This policy paper is the one of the outputs of these activities and it aims at supporting additional Myanmar Universities in the same tasks. It starts defining what is "internationalization", why internationalization matters and the tasks and roles of an International Relations Office (IRO). Then it focuses on two important aspects of the work of every IRO: the strategic management of mobility and the strategic management of International Partnerships. These contributions are given in the belief that a better management of internationalization in the Myanmar Universities can positively support the education reform of the country.

DEFINING
INTERNATIONALIZATION

Internationalization has connected and shaped the world we live in. In regard to universities, internationalization has contributed to shared knowledge. Students, staff, researchers, and professors from different backgrounds and cultures, bridge exploration and understandings to the world that surrounds us through shared knowledge. In this text, internationalization can be defined as:
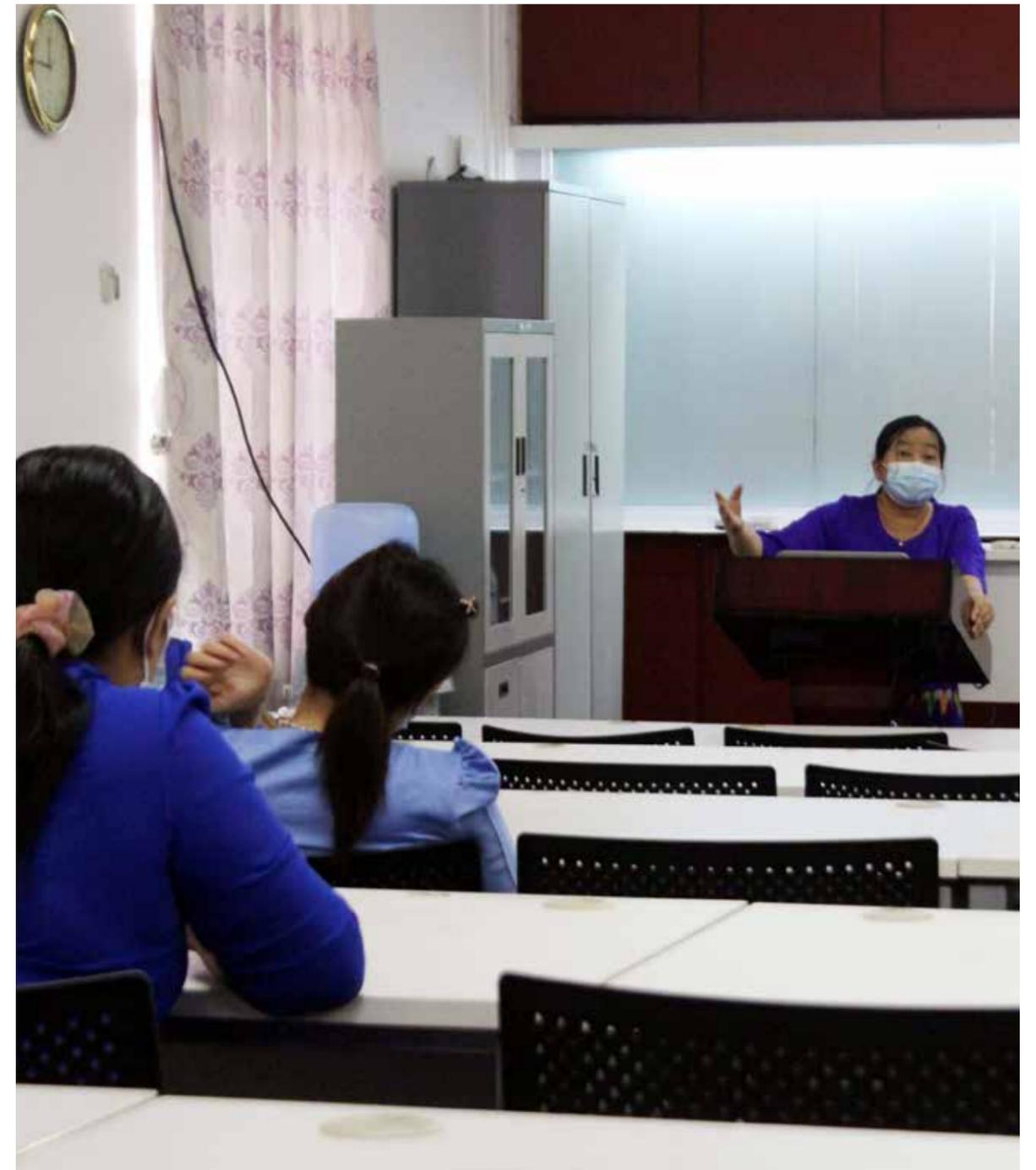
"A process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society".
(De Wit et al, 2015)

Comprehensive internationalization is based on integrating internationalization in all levels of the higher educational system. It is shown through the values of the institution and proven actions taken for diversity and inclusion. Comprehensive internationalization is defined in this text as:

"… a commitment, confirmed through action, to infuse international and comparative perspectives throughout the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education. It shapes institutional ethos and values and touches the entire higher education enterprise. It is essential that internationalization is embraced by institutional leadership, governance, faculty, students, and all academic service and support units".
(Hudzik, 2011)

Internationalization is also a dynamic process. There is a give and a take, or a push and a pull between initiatives on a local level (departmental/faculty level) and on a central level (university leadership). The interaction between both parties, local and central, demonstrates how the structure within higher education must emphasize internationalization, as it impacts the direction of what is valued and taught within the university system.

In practical terms, internationalization is focused on people and their effect on another person or organization in a global context. Sharing experiences and knowledge in a setting that encourages internationalization, such as a university environment, creates value in what is being taught. Every person, from across the globe has their own experiences and knowledge that can contribute to breaking barriers, creating open-mindedness, giving perspective, and providing understanding. Internationalization allows for the opportunity of unification. People can connect on a personal level through shared values and understandings, no matter where they originally come from. Universities have the opportunity to provide a safe setting for this to take place, through classrooms or online platforms. It is about finding out about existing activities/actions and building on them. It is about working out why people do not want to get involved and maybe changing their minds. It is about making small differences. Here the number of recruited students or the number of projects does not matter as much as the quality of the output.

WHY SHOULD WE GET INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONALIZATION WORK?

It may occurred that university staff inquire what the benefits are of investing in international partnerships or programs. They might pose the question, "Why should we have partnerships or participate in international programs?" It is indeed not self-evident that internationalization is beneficial in itself. Instead, if managed well, internationalization work might bring benefits to areas of university education, research, and administrative work. This includes the acquisition of intercultural competences, broadening views, and increasing proficiency of local staff. In addition, increased internationalization in education allows for an enhanced, wide range of courses offered through partnerships and international programs.

Internationalization in educational settings have allowed countries to be unified in creating shared knowledge. Essentially, this relationship could be coined as, "educational or soft diplomacy", where countries can build friendly diplomatic relations with one another. The universal respect for education and known importance contributes to the global unity that is proven through international relations and universities.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE INTERNATIONAL RELATION OFFICE

The range of responsibilities that the International Relation office (IRO) has is highly dependent on the university's internationalizations goals. This office has a general responsibility to promote internationalization in education and research. It coordinates and supports the university's initiatives on internationalization. The IRO coordinates and supports university-wide networks, partnerships, and regional representations abroad. This office has the responsibility for the management of international cooperation and exchange agreements with other institutions. In addition, this office develops, administers and informs about various programs, tools, and activities for international cooperation and exchange. Also, there is a focus on building vast networks that emphasize strengthening university's relations with key players in other countries, such as research funding agencies, ministries, universities, industry, embassies, and scholarship organizations. The IRO connects university's researchers with foreign counterparts and informs of opportunities to finance collaborations, in addition to providing support during application processes. Finally, the IROhas the responsibility for operational support to the international student recruitment, as well as ensuring that home university's content information is available in English. The enforcement of English, a universal language, for all of home university's informational needs enhances internationalization, as there is the ability to share information to the diverse, international student population at home university.

In many European countries, internationalization in the work setting is divided into two branches. The first branch focuses on student and staff mobility. The second branch involves the management of international projects and networks.

The first branch is often called "Unit for International Mobility" (or similar names) focuses on the mobility of students and staff. This unit' responsibilities include outbound and inbound mobility, international student recruitment, operational support throughout application processes, support for program coordinators, bilateral programs, and educational information in English. Mobility has various forms: exchange studies, minor field studies, practical placements, summer- schools, and staff weeks.

An example of the second branch of internationalization is a unit that can be called "Unit for Global Partnerships". This unit focuses on international collaboration and capacity building projects that emphasize research, education, and innovation. The Unit for Global Partnerships initiates various international projects, which include among others: Erasmus+ Strategic partnerships, Erasmus+ Capacity building for higher education projects, nationally funded University projects, strategic projects and networks, regional representation, and bilateral programs. This unit can also works with international networks, which are often funded by ERASMUS+.

FOCUS I
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF MOBILITY

HOW TO MAKE YOUR UNIVERSITY MORE ATTRACTIVE FOR INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY

There are several components that can make a university more attractive for potential international partners. Firstly, the courses offered at the university impact its attractiveness. Essentially, the quality of the courses, over the quantity is focused on. In addition, it is recommended to have courses taught in English. Secondly, supply and demand thinking is useful when planning courses. It could be potentially useful to see what courses your current students want and compare their interests to what is offered at the university. Thirdly, it is beneficial to create ready-made informational "packages" about courses. These packages can be offered to key student groups. Lastly, information availability is of great importance. Potential partners would want answers to pressing questions, such as:

What are the accommodation possibilities?
How safe is the university environment?
How is the student life?
What can students see, experience and learn outside the classroom?

A good way to structure the mobility work is to start using special software designed for this purpose. One such program is MoveON database, which is essentially a well-structured Excel document. A simple online application form can also be useful.

QUALITY OF INTERNATIONALIZATION WORK

The quality of the internationalization work will certainly depend on the internal organization of international offices. For this purpose, several issues might be worth examining.

Firstly, what are the goals and key words that guide effective teamwork? Some of the issues that could be central for office for internationalization are being friendly and approachable, in addition to being mindful in correcting information and providing correct information, timely responses.

Secondly, the internal and external communication that takes place are factors that influence the efficiency of teamwork. It could be useful to have designated team members with expertise in communication tools, such as: social media, design and layout, webinars, and customer relation management systems.

Enforcing strategies and focusing on the management of mobility programs includes various components, such as partners search, agreements, databases, and projects.

When a university is choosing potential partners, they evaluate their current associates, establish if they satisfy present partnerships at the university, as well as investigate if new partners could complete their tasks. A way to start the search could be by looking at the pool of potential recruits, related subject areas, and university ranking. Proactivity plays an important role in this process. In the case that there is still further information needed, preparatory visits are a great way to evaluate if a potential partner fits the needs of the home institution.

Once the potential partner is identified, the next step is signing a partnership agreement. A sustainable agreement always involves mutual interest. Usually, the partnership starts small and gradually grows to greater responsibility that includes students, teachers and research staff, and administrative staff. Also, a prerequisite for a sustainable partnership is the increased support buy-in within the home organization. This essentially means that in order to make partnerships work, each institution needs to invest time and resources into the partnership. Following this mutual investment, the next step would include assigning a coordi-

nator, and building clear administrative structures. Openly defining the needs and expectations from the partnership is essential throughout the process.

There are different types of partnership agreements. A common way to formalize a partnership is to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). There are several notes to be made about MoUs. They are not legally binding, nor are they strictly necessary to be able to collaborate with another institution. Its purpose can be viewed as symbolic; however, the existing MoUs might encourage future collaboration.

Within the mobility branch, there are, among others, Erasmus KA103, Erasmus KA107, Nordplus, Bilateral (non-EU programs), Linnaeus-Palme, and Erasmus Mundus. These agreements can be associated with the university, specific faculty, or an assigned department.

There are several mindful tips that are helpful when designing these agreements. Firstly, only include clauses your organization can actually deliver on. Secondly, in some cases, it might be good to include a neutral third party to solve possible disputes. Thirdly, it is essential to incorporate flexibility in the contract. Finally, be prepared to be open with communicating how you, as a representation of your university, would prefer to do things.

FOCUS II
STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

FINDING PARTNERS, HOW TO PROMOTE AN IDEA?

A university can conduct several steps to successfully recruit potential partners for a project idea. These steps are not set in stone; however, it is valuable to find a fine balance between giving too much information and giving enough information, as people have busy working days and limited time to read several pages of long project descriptions. To help effectively promote an idea, a university can start by planning the following steps:

» A short pitch clearly explaining the purpose of the project this includes a:
  – Short version in an e-mail – no more than one paragraph
  – Long version attached – no more than two pages
» Suggested role for involved partner

What expertise are we looking for that this university/person/organization has? Here, in an email, the more specific the role is stated, the more attractive the proposal will seem. This is because the proposal will seem more thought through, and for the approached part, it will be easier to look for potential resource person at home institution. In this email, include a:

» Short overview of the most important deadlines, details, and funding information
» Suggested next step
  – Skype/Zoom meeting to explain the details

WHAT ARE INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS LOOKING FOR?

International partners look for expertise and skills. Specifically, expertise can include regional knowledge or topical knowledge. In addition, partners look for commitment to making a change for the better within a local or global context.

WRITING APPLICATIONS

The best way of learning something is by doing it. This means that getting better at acquiring funding for projects requires writing numerous project proposals. A proposal does not have to be perfect. If a funding agency is fond of the idea you have proposed, they could become increasingly generous in their funding. In the process of proposal writing, it is beneficial to take all opportunities to learn from more experienced partners. Lastly, the person(s) writing the proposal needs to be able to prioritize their written work, as they will be selling the idea through written content.

Six guiding principles for successful projects:

01. Added value
    – The project adds a clear value that ordinary day-to-day work would not be able to achieve
    – Results from the project can be implemented in regular activities
02. Commitment and passion
    – The project is creative and engages with committed key stakeholders both within and outside universities
03. Mutual benefit
    – The project has a clear purpose and is relevant to all parties involved
04. Co-creation and joint implementation
    – The projects takes different partner needs and resources into account during both planning and implementation
    – Process/products in the project are mutually created by design
05. Clarity
    – Projects are well defined and easy to understand
    – Projects follow a clear logic that enables evaluation and follow-up (both during and after the project)
06. Efficiency & transparency

Administration and coordination of the projects are completed in an efficient and transparent manner

MANAGEMENT OF THE AWARDED PROJECTS

In the management of the acquired project, division of work is of great importance. It is encouraged to utilize the university's experienced employees within the management team and resourceful researchers in the proposal and project; however, it is recommended to use them as experts for limited tasks within the project. The activities that are connected to project management and administration can be also done by other university staff that have less academic qualifications and more time. For example, young university staff that have not advanced in their careers yet, might be a great choice for the project coordinator position, as they may be open to the opportunity of taking on more responsibility and continuing to learn from the project. Established academic staff might be already be overwhelmed with their regular university duties, thus they may not have enough time to dedicate to international projects. Their lower commitment might then create negative reactions from their project partners.

PROS AND CONS OF APPLYING FOR ERASMUS + CAPACITY BUILDING (CBHE) PROPOSAL

Finally, it is useful to reflect upon probably the biggest source of funding for university-related partnerships, ERASMUS+. Although ERASMUS + is already known world-wide, it is good to know some of the positive and negative consequences of partnering with ERASMUS +.

Positive aspects of ERASMUS +:
» A program that all universities can apply to (EU and non EU)
» Possibility to combine universities in different regions (ex. EU – Asia- Latin America)
» Open to many different types of topics linked to education, research & innovation
» Not only capacity building focused, but strategic collaboration and mutual learning
» Great tool for enhancing collaboration with partners and creating new networks

Negative aspects of ERASMUS+:
» Application is complex and detailed
» Lots of negotiating with partners
» Competition for funding is tough
» Running projects involve demanding of administration work

CONCLUSION

How do you see your IRO office in 5 years?

- Promote and increase international collaboration (in terms of mobility and projects)
- Increase number of courses taught in English
- Increase collaboration within Myanmar
- IRO more independent and operative part of universities
- Appoint effective and skillful IRO office staff
- Acquire more funding via collaboration projects
- Facilities and funding
- Increasing scientific collaboration (seminar, conferences, capacity building for staff)
- Improve cultural offer for incoming students and secure their accommodation

What do you need to do in order to reach there?

- Propper training for IRO staff
- Connect with other international organizations
- Write more project proposals
- Sign more MoUs
- Change university charters, so that it accommodates IRO unit with permanent staff
- Get needed equipment and facilities
- Collaboration gives birth to more collaboration
- Acquire funding via contact with private sector and universities alumni
- Forming a strategic plan, action plan, and internal organization and coordination

What are the hindrances?

- In some cases no permanent staff
- Limited independence
- Administration in slow because everything needs to be approved by the Ministry
- Limited budget (sometimes no budget outside projects)
- Limited freedom to choose partners
- Sharing work between IRO members, internal coordination

What are enabling factors?

- Good attitude and willingness
- Promissing students that could get engaged in IRO work
- Have visited European partners, and got information on how they do things
- Established IRO teams
- A number of existing MoUs
- Commitment
- Existing project collaborations
- Student alumnis that could serve as contact points for other countries

In you need to prioritize, what are the 2-3 actions you will chose to do?

- Assign permanent staff and improve their skills, train them
- Attract, find, search connections. Be proactive about connections.
- Clear policy and procedures
- Attract domestic students interested in internationalization
- Facilitate staff and student exchanges
- Give authority to the staff to pursue internationalization

In Myanmar, the internationalization of higher education has recently witnessed progress through the establishment of embryonal international relation strategies and offices in some universities. In the figure below, Myanmar professors involved in international activities have underlined the challenges, opportunities and strategic goals of such progress.

In conclusion, there are several priorities and imperatives that should be attentively tackled in order to further nurture Myanmar's internationalization of higher education. It is critical that the international community support Myanmar universities in establishing their strategy for global actions with clear purpose and achievable objectives.

FURTHER READINGS

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5. The ERASMUS + CBHE TOOLKIT project offers additional materials on the INTERNATIONAL RELATION topics here: https://site.unibo.it/toolkit/en/conferences

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PROJECT PARTNERS

The CHINLONE consortium works under the supervision of UNIBO as Project Coordinator, and it gathers five Universities from Myanmar, together with three Higher Education Institutions and one University Association from the EU. The Department of Higher Education of Myanmar's Ministry of Education, moreover, acts as Project Partner.

Partners: University of Bologna, University of Yangon, Yangon University of Economics, Yezin Agricultural University, University of Mandalay, Dagon University, Uppsala University, University of Granada, The Coimbra Group, Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education - Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

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