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## FINNISH ONLINE EDUCATION COOPERATION WITH ASIAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

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### INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH MATERIAL

#### INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic that hit the world in 2020 forced us to rearrange educational programmes in unexpected ways. This has accelerated new thinking and innovation in education. In order to gauge how Finnish education cooperation projects with Asian partner institutions have met the challenges and identified good practices, a survey was conducted by the Finnish University Network for Asian Studies as part of the Digitree project funded by the Finnish National Agency for Education.

This report summarises management and cooperation practices that have worked well, as well as issues that could be improved upon for the benefit of future projects. Since the sample size was rather small, this report does not claim to have any definitive answers. However, it hopes to provide some perspectives for potential future education cooperation projects and shed light on new forms of online education cooperation that many projects have been

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driven towards due to the pandemic. Some of the responses to the survey contained generally applicable points that are usable not only with Asian, but other international cooperation partners as well. They could also be applied to both online and offline forms of cooperation.

## **RESEARCH MATERIAL**

The survey was conducted during September 2022, and it was sent out to various projects that have received funding from the Team Finland Knowledge programme of the Finnish National Agency for Education and the Internationalisation programme of Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture through their respective coordinators. To gather additional respondents, the survey was also distributed through the China, East Asia, and Asia mailing lists of the University of Turku. The report also features points brought up in a panel discussion on new practices for online education cooperation with Asian universities held on 26 October 2022 at the Asian Studies Days at the University of Turku.

There were a total of 17 anonymous survey respondents from various disciplines, primarily from education, health and nursing, and business and industrial management, each with 4 respondents. There were also respondents from engineering, social sciences, and architecture.

Partner institutions were primarily from China and Hong Kong, that being the case with 10 respondents. Additionally, 2 respondents had partner institutions from Malaysia and 2 from India, as well as individual respondents with partners from Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam. The questionnaire is attached to this report as an Appendix.

The survey asked the respondents how long they had cooperated with their partner institutions in Asia, what online teaching activities their project has included, and what were the impacts of various external and internal factors on their project. Respondents were also asked which project management and online education practices have worked well and which have not, what online platforms and software they have used for their projects, and what their data management and sharing practices for private information have been like. Lastly, the respondents were asked what kind of support they would like to receive from their universities and partner institutions and what sort of advice they would give to future projects with Asia based on their own experiences.

## **RESULTS**

### **GENERAL OBSERVATIONS**

Various forms of online teaching and cooperation were reported on, including online lectures, courses, seminars, workshops, and hackathons.

### **REGULATORY AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT**

Generally speaking, external factors had no major impact on the projects. The most influential external factors were "National level support in partner country for online education" and "New laws and regulations in partner country". Based on additional comments, the latter can be interpreted as travel restrictions that came with the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Deteriorating economic situation” and “Lack of network infrastructure” had very little impact in general: 88% and 82% of the respondents, respectively, reported that they had no impact. Given that the pandemic had a significant impact on the global economy, Asia included<sup>1</sup>, it was thought that the economic situation could have affected education cooperation, but this does not seem to have been the case. The network infrastructure issues that were mentioned by 3 respondents were limited to Vietnam and China. Although this is not a large number, it serves as a reminder that any prospective project should keep in mind that they may encounter network issues depending on the country or when working with a less developed region within a country.

#### WORKLOAD, SUPPORT, AND FUNDING ISSUES

Regarding internal factors, the most prominent issue was “Increased workload and stress due to the pandemic”, which had an impact on the projects of 82% of the respondents, making it stand out clearly from the rest of the factors. This is very much in line with other surveys and research conducted on the well-being of educators during the pandemic in relation to the transition from contact to online teaching and the technical challenges it posed<sup>2</sup>.

One additional source of stress was the limited number of paid working hours – a problem rooted in the type of funding given to these types of projects that covers travel and other expenses but not wages. Hence, participation often requires extra work from teachers outside of their work plans. In this situation, the question is how to motivate teachers to participate, and how to actually include the hours into the work plans.

Another issue that reduced teachers’ motivation to participate in international collaboration was the lack of support from superiors. One respondent mentioned that despite the strategies of the universities that put emphasis on international collaboration, these kinds of small-scale projects do not receive appreciation from higher levels of hierarchy. This reduces the motivation to work on them.

Accordingly, there were calls among the respondents to change the funding to be more supportive of paid working hours, with one of the respondents stating that “it is old fashioned thinking just to finance traveling and onsite mobilities.” In the panel discussion, the shortness of the funding cycle was also mentioned as a problem, and that extending it would allow the projects to be more flexible and reduce work-related stress.

#### DIVERGENT LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Another notable issue brought up was “Problems in multicultural communication”. While it was classified as an issue in a project by only 35% of the respondents, a number of respondents referred to problems such as cultural differences in other sections of the survey. This could mean that while a large majority of the respondents did not face major issues in communication itself, some issues rose from different learning environments and teaching cultures.

The importance of understanding the culture of the cooperation partner was emphasised by several respondents. Thus, any project would greatly benefit from having members who are familiar with different features of the partner country. This was specifically pointed out by one respondent who estimated that the support of one Finnish teacher knowledgeable about

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1 IMF 2021.

2 Marek et al 2021; Bruggeman et al 2022.

China was crucial to the project's success due to the teacher's knowledge of the Chinese learning environment and communication practices. However, as Johanna Lampinen from the University of Oulu pointed out during the panel discussion, all of this responsibility should not be assigned to a single person, and international cooperation projects should instead be seen as an opportunity to learn and develop intercultural competencies for all project members.

A number of differences that require attention were brought up by Johanna Lampinen: divergences in culture, educational regulations, curriculum design, communication practices, learning environments, and activities and course work expected from the students, as well as "course etiquette" that was prepared for students in one panelist's online learning project. Hence, it is advisable to have in-depth conversations at the beginning of the cooperation regarding the kinds of activities and coursework that are expected from the students and how to make the joint courses available in both countries.

An example of these different expectations placed on students in different learning environments was also provided in the panel discussion. In this example, at the beginning of a course, Chinese students were quite quiet and disengaged – probably because of the tradition of teacher-led classrooms, lack of attention on students' learning process, and increased focus on exams. In order to shift towards student-centred learning, the teacher introduced regular check-ups and allowed the students to practice different ways of asking questions during online lectures. Gradually, the lectures became more interactive.

"Technical issues, lack of access to technology, lack of digital competence" and "Lack of e-pedagogical competence" were not major issues, with 94% and 88% of the respondents respectively indicating they had no impact on their projects. Although stress was identified as a major factor among the respondents, it did not seem to be the type of technology-related stress that has been pointed out as an issue among educators by Bram Bruggeman and others<sup>3</sup>. This lack of reported issues with e-pedagogical skills was considered surprising in the Asian Studies Days panel discussion. It could be that issues that were common in the early stages of the pandemic have decreased as more experience has been gained on the use of online platforms and other technology.

#### DIVERGENT PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Regular online meetings, constant communication, coordination, trust building, transparency and sharing of documents were all brought up as elements that made cooperation and project management more functional. These are by no means unique to cooperation with Asian institutions.

Curiously, at least within the framework of this survey, a longer background of cooperation does not seem to necessarily mean that cooperation in online education will be smoother than with newer partners. For example, every respondent who indicated that "Differences of opinion with partners on how to redesign the project due to the pandemic" had an impact on their project had been cooperating with their partner institution in Asia for 3 years or more. In general, there were no major differences in internal factors selected by respondents based on how long they had cooperated with their partner institution.

As to what may explain the seemingly greater differences in opinion between partners that have been cooperating for longer periods of time, it could be that as the cooperative

relationship matures, more small differences emerge as both sides grow increasingly bolder in voicing their differences in opinion.

Respondents stressed the importance of good planning and division of work in the early stages. As pointed out earlier, this calls for regular communications, meetings and building of personal trust already at the early phases. Especially the trust building aspect is something that some respondents emphasized as being more important in cooperation with Asian institutions than with Western ones.

There was also some regret that the international partners in one project were not very communicative and did not take active initiative in the project. In this situation, the project coordinator in Finland had to take responsibility for all initiatives. This might relate to another aspect that was raised, namely the divergent resources and different goals for collaboration among the partners.

However, as was pointed out in the panel by Johanna Lampinen, maintaining flexibility in the project is important, and thus plans should not be rigid no matter how well and thoroughly laid out they are. Being flexible, considerate and accommodating with the cooperation partner and in changing situations, even when the plan or schedule does not work out perfectly, is important. Otherwise, the project can quickly become a nightmare to work with. It was also suggested that it would be healthy to question strict planning-oriented working styles. That could help create diverse working methods in our own working community and promote equity among partners.

When it comes to data transfers and management of private information, respondents reported that they followed GDPR standards in their projects. One respondent also wrote that their project had signed a mutually agreed project privacy statement with their project partner, and two other answers pointed out that they have letters of intent or agreements between universities on these matters. If possible, these kinds of agreements would be useful in all projects to ensure that there is mutual understanding on practices.

One of the respondents also suggested that once the new funding cycle starts, it would be good if new projects were provided with the chance to learn more about the experiences of the earlier projects funded by the Asia Programme and Team Finland Knowledge. Given that this survey has only been able to scratch the surface of their experiences, this would indeed be a worthwhile pursuit.

#### FUTURE MODE OF COLLABORATION

While 16 of the 17 respondents showed some level of agreement towards the thought that online education will remain a part of international cooperation practice in the future as well, some of the respondents stressed that combining online and face-to-face activities is still needed. Three of the respondents also specifically pointed out that they have found coordination, in-depth discussions or reaching decisions to be more difficult in online meetings or that they found face-to-face meetings to be more productive.

#### **COOPERATION WITH CHINA AND HONG KONG**

As pointed out earlier, most of the answers came from projects that had cooperated with Chinese or Hong Kong partner institutions. There are also a few interesting elements that differentiate these answers from others.

Firstly, there are a few interesting differences in external factors. For example, “New laws and regulations in partner country” was only ever selected as having an impact on a project by respondents whose partner institutions were from China or Hong Kong, and this accounted for 70% of all the respondents with Chinese or Hong Kong partners. This could reflect China’s relatively strict and ongoing travel restrictions due to its Zero COVID policy<sup>4</sup>, but as noted earlier, COVID-19-related travel restrictions were also remarked as having an impact by some of the other respondents who did not have Chinese or Hong Kong partners. This could be due to regulations in the Finnish end, as remarked by one respondent with an Indian cooperation partner who pointed out that it was the cumbersome visa application process for Indian students that ended up delaying onsite activities.

“Tightening political situation in partner country” was also more likely to be chosen as a factor in China and Hong Kong than in other cases. For comparison, 86% of respondents with non-Chinese partner institutions classified tightening political situation as having no impact, whereas if the partner institution was from China or Hong Kong, this number was 60%.

The changing political situation in China and Hong Kong was raised by one respondent who was concerned with issues in the relationship between China and Hong Kong and their possible impact on their project. The respondent hoped to have a contact person in their own university who could provide advice in case of political problems.

One interesting point brought up by a few respondents with partners from China were issues related to online platforms and programs. A couple of respondents pointed out that when working with Chinese partners, answers to emails tend to be slow, and that the WeChat application is the preferred or even outright essential means of communication. This could also be a potential security concern. As pointed out by Amnesty International in 2016, Tencent, the company that owns WeChat, has not made public assurances that it will not grant government access to encrypted messages via a backdoor<sup>5</sup>. WeChat has also continued to comply with the Chinese government’s regulations and policies at the price of the privacy of its users<sup>6</sup>.

Moreover, respondents pointed out that online platforms and usable applications for communications and sharing of materials are going to be limited when working with partners based in mainland China. Applications and platforms such as Dropbox and WhatsApp were mentioned as examples of services that are denied access in China, driving prospective projects to search for alternative platforms for communication or hosting materials. One respondent even said that their project was forced to develop their own platform to make their courses fully available in both China and Finland. This is an additional element that should be planned for when cooperating with Chinese partners.

Regarding China’s Personal Information Protection Law, all of the respondents stated that it had not impacted their project in any way, or that they were not aware of what it is. This could be because the law is still very new, as it only became effective on 1 November 2021, and the Security Assessment Measures for Outbound Data Transfers, which is the practical application of the security assessment procedure of the law, became effective on 1 September 2022<sup>7</sup>. The first webinar to Finnish educators on its effects was organised on 27 September

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4 Li & Ke 2022.

5 Amnesty International 2016.

6 Liu & Liu 2020.

7 Chen 2022; Liu & Xia 2022.

2022 by the Embassy of Finland in Beijing, so awareness of its effects or even of its existence may still be limited. However, there is a need to spread information about the law. As noted in the panel discussion by Olli-Pekka Malinen from the University of Helsinki, this law will inevitably have an impact on cooperation projects with China, and it may even be that sharing private information with Chinese cooperation partners will become impossible because of it.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE SURVEY AND THE PANEL**

### TO-DO-LIST FOR PROJECTS

- course etiquette
- privacy statement
- exercises to improve interaction in online classes

### CHECK-LIST FOR PROJECTS

- synchronisation of learning practices
- synchronisation of curriculum
- available platforms and effective channels of communication
- data security (online activities, data sharing)
- engagement of partners in project planning and management
- inclusion of working hours into work plans
- flexibility of the plan

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FUNDING AGENCIES

- longer project cycles and decent funding for salaries
- lessons learned from earlier projects

### SUGGESTIONS FOR UNIVERSITY LEADERS

- legal and country-specific contact point for project coordinators
- actual support and appreciation for international small-scale projects

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## AUTHOR NOTE

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## APPENDIX 1.

### Online Education Cooperation with Asian Partner Institutions

This small survey collects information about good and failed practices in online education cooperation with Asian universities. The past three years have forced universities to rearrange educational cooperation programs in unexpected ways. We think it's now a good time to take stock of the experiences gained during this period.

You can answer the questions either in English or in Finnish.

The results will benefit both on-going and future online education projects.

Thank you for participating in the survey!

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1. Which country or countries are your project partners from?

2. Which disciplines does this project cover?

3. Where did your project acquire its funding from?

	Asia Programme/Team Finland Knowledge of the Finnish National Agency for Education
	Internationalisation programme of the Ministry of Education and Culture 2021-2024
	Other

5. How long have you cooperated with your partner institutions in Asia?

	1-2 years
	3-4 years
	5 years or more

7. Has your project already organized online teaching, courses or other online events? If it has, what has been organized and when?

8. What impact if any have the following external factors had in the project?

	No Impact	Moderate Impact	Large Impact
National level support in partner country for online education			
Tightening political situation in partner country			
New laws and regulations in partner country			
Lack of network infrastructure			
Deteriorating economic situation			
Other factors (please describe in the text field below)			

10. What impact if any have the following internal factors had in the project?

	No Impact	Moderate Impact	Large Impact
Technical issues, lack of access to technology, lack of digital competence			
Lack of e-pedagogical competence			
Lack of direction and support given by the member universities			
Problems in multicultural communication			
Differences of opinion with partners on how to redesign the project due to the pandemic			

Other factors (please describe in the text field below)				
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12. Which project management practices have worked well and which have not?

*For example, online working meetings, sharing of project documents, keeping schedules, division of work etc.*

13. Which types of cooperation in online education have worked well and which ones have not?

*For example, planning course materials, common curriculum, joint course with student discussions and group work, student supervision, seminar series, etc.*

14. Which online platforms, software and apps have you found useful for project management and online education?

*For example, Moodle, Padlet, Canvas, Zoom, Dropbox, Google Docs, WeChat, WhatsApp, etc.*

15. In regard to sharing and management of private information and other types of data, what arrangements and agreements do you have in place with your Asian partner institutions?

16. If your project has a partner institution in China, has China's new Personal Information Protection Law influenced the data management practices of your project? If yes, in which ways?

17. What kind of support from your university or national level institutions would be helpful in supporting online education cooperation with your Asian partner institutions?

18. Based on your experiences, what additional advice would you give to future online education projects with Asia?

19. What is your opinion on the following statement: online education will remain a part of international cooperation practice in the future as well.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Strongly disagree						Strongly agree