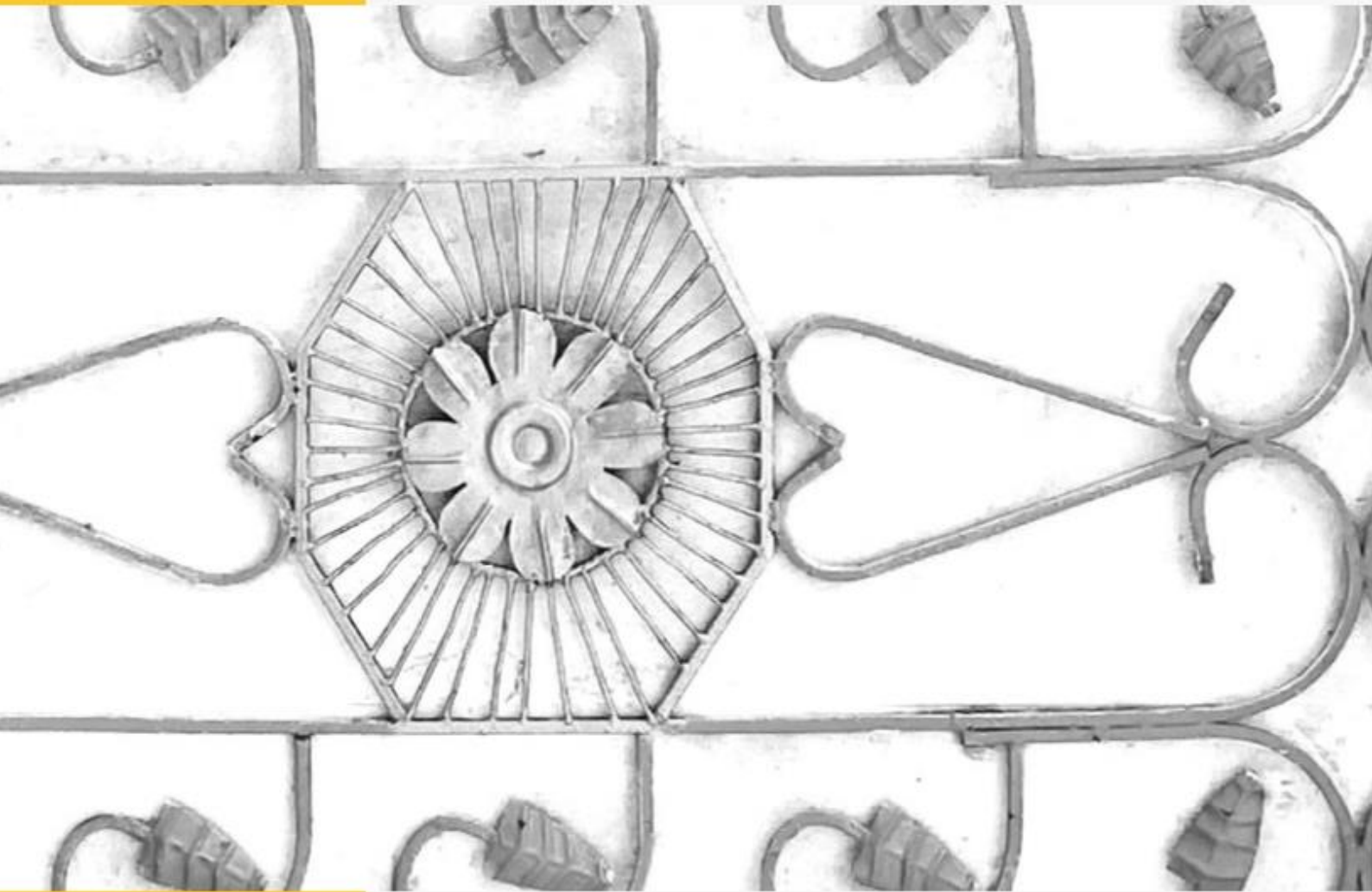




TOOLKIT EVALUATION REPORT

DECEMBER 2022





Disclaimer

This evaluation is supported and guided by the University of Bologna and presented by Barbara Lilliu. The report does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the European Commission.

Acknowledgments

The consultant would like to thank those who gave their time and their contributions throughout the evaluation. Staff at the Universities partners of the consortium as well as all the interviewed stakeholders, have all been very helpful and open. A special thank you goes to Jessica Fiorelli for providing technical support.

This project is funded by the European Union





Table of Contents

Report Highlights	5
Evaluation Purpose and Scope	5
Findings	5
Recommendations	7
About the evaluation	8
1.1 The project at a glance	8
1.2 Evaluation approach and methodology	9
Evaluation Findings	11
2.1 Key contextual issues	11
2.2 Staying relevant within the changing context	13
2.3 Reflections on Coherence and Complementarity	14
2.4 International Strategies in Asia and its practices: a baseline study	15
2.5 Skills Development on International Relations (WP2-3)	16
2.6 A South to South perspective on mobility (WP4)	21
2.7 The Cascade training (WPs 2/3/4)	23
2.8 Disseminating the “Asian way towards internationalization” (WPs 5/6/7)	26
2.9 The added value of adaptive management	28
2.10 Outlining the changes engineered by the project	31
Options for a way forward	32



List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
EU	European Union
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HES	Higher Education System
LA	Lao PDR
IROs	International Relations Offices
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MoE	Ministry of Education
MM	Myanmar
PMC	Project Management Cycle
SL	Sri Lanka
UNIBO	University of Bologna
WPs	Work Packages



Report Highlights

Evaluation Purpose and Scope

TOOLKIT is a 4 -year multi-country project (2019-2022) funded by the European Union, under the Erasmus+ programme (Capacity Building Key Action 2). TOOLKIT is coordinated by a Consortium of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). These include 3 European Universities – the University of Bologna (UNIBO), Uppsala University (UU), Vilnius University (VU)-; 2 Laotian Universities – National University of Laos (NUoL), Souphanouvong University (SU)-; 3 Myanmar Universities – University of Yangon (YU), Yangon University of Economics (YUEco), Yezin Agricultural University (YAU) and 2 Universities from Sri Lanka – University of Peradeniya (UoP) and University of Kelaniya (UoK).

In recent years, universities in the three partner countries (Laos, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka) have been undergoing complex reform processes of their educational systems, including, importantly, the enhancement of the international dimension of the HEIs. In this context, the main aim of the TOOLKIT project is to contribute to the process of internationalization which has been undertaken by HEIs in Laos, Myanmar and Sri Lanka, through a mutual exchange of expertise, practices and models of internationalization. This is especially in terms of the capabilities displayed by local governance and IRO staff in drafting efficient and sustainable strategies, in designing and supervising innovative education projects, and in managing growing networks of mobility flows within their respective regions and beyond.

The external evaluation process of the TOOLKIT project was a multi-phased process aligned with the overall project time period. It relied upon quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection from key project stakeholders. The objective of the TOOLKIT external evaluation process was to support the implementers to assess the progress made through the project's experience and to capture the learning and achievements. Particularly, the evaluation considers the overall project performance throughout the implementation period and its impact, by identifying its early signs of effects. Additionally, the evaluation aims to identify key lessons learned as well as the appropriateness of the implementation methodology and any emerging needs to inform future work.

Findings

The review of project documentation, background information, and feedback through surveys and interviews from key actors shows that the TOOLKIT project areas of interest and activities were **relevant** to the HEIs' needs, as well as coherent and consistent with national and European internationalization strategies and policies. Additionally, the support provided to the Asian HEIs remained in line with their needs, for instance in relation to developing the skills and experience of the recently established IROs.



The implementation period called for **adaptability**, given the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and its impacts, as well as difficult country-specific circumstances. This mainly translated into moving activities, which had been programmed in-person, to online modalities. This was identified as a challenge, but also appeared to sow the seeds of new ways of working, according to survey respondents. Additionally, a rethinking of outputs in work package five (WP5) modified the initial plans of producing a MOOC (Massive Online Open Course), as its development encountered hindrances. Instead, an interactive donor map was developed to be used by the IRO Staff and other staff members dealing with internationalization, to be periodically updated by the consortium partners. Also, a Video Tool for Students' mobility was produced, with testimonies of study abroad experiences from Asia to Europe and vice-versa.

The TOOLKIT project can be said to have been effective as, by promoting a robust capacity strengthening pathway, the project has invested significant resources in increasing knowledge and developing useful tools for the modernization of the internationalization strategies in Asian Universities. In fact, evaluation results found that the WP1-4 were **effective** in reaching the expected outcomes, from designing internationalization strategies, to identifying specific needs and priorities of Asian universities in the context of modernization of international relations; to strengthening the expertise of Asian HEIs in project writing and management; to shared mobility management model.

The spillover effects have been maximized through the cascade training approach directed at Asian partners' faculties and staff involved in international activities. A bottom-up approach is present throughout the project implementation and its activities, and is particularly notable in the development of the mobility handbook, a participative and inclusive practice which allowed for the development of a resource which exactly meets the Asian HEIs' needs and one which has already been replicated by a partner university. Early **effects** of the project can already be observed, as confirmed by the analysis of the evaluation survey.

TOOLKIT's methodology was well designed and achieved significant impacts. Adaptive management, as an overarching framework, warranted quick learning, greatly enabling the adaptation required and guaranteeing a good level of **efficiency**. The methodology first focused on ensuring an 'Asian way' of doing internationalization, by collectively identifying the main needs and using training as a way to empower the Asian partners to gain the expertise necessary to be able to transition into better practices and attitudes on modernization and internationalization. This was especially facilitated by the mutual exchange elements of the project's activities where the partners learnt from one another, in a relation based on equal footing.

The TOOLKIT project has taken **sustainability** aspects into account since its early stages, as from the project inception partnerships were developed relying on a comprehensive capacity strengthening path, support and production of long-lasting tools. The evaluation has found that the project has already achieved a good degree of sustainability in action, which will continue to offer benefits after the project's lifespan. The sustainability and impact of the project is also shown by the fact that some of the Asian partners have already applied as lead for several projects, including the University of Bologna as a partner. It can be assumed that the universities are showing the skillful employment of the knowledge acquired throughout the TOOLKIT project, a good indicator of a long-term



sustainability effect. The capacity building element of the project has provided a solid foundation for long-term sustainability in at least two of the three target countries - given the volatile situation in Myanmar, it is too early to judge long lasting changes or sustainability trends.

Recommendations

Based on the considerations elaborated in the findings section, and to ensure consistency with the dynamics of change that have emerged, a list of recommendations follows:

1. **Standardizing the methodology used for the production of the tools and sharing understanding and best practices:** In order to capitalize on the experiences gained and the good practices established by this project - and captured in the case study - it would be important to standardize its methodology. This will guarantee the availability of a tested step-by-step guide to working with Asian Universities. TOOLKIT's approach, which includes elements of adaptive management, is indeed replicable. The suggested methodological document could be useful to all partners of the Consortium.
2. **Continue building on Asian Partners' existing synergies:** The TOOLKIT project established a strong partnership with the Asian partners that should be capitalized on in future initiatives. Some projects are already in the pipeline, which shows the legacy this project is leaving behind; however, it will be important to expand on the existing collaboration level, dedicating more time to co-creating projects with the Asian partners, especially at the design phase.
3. **Advocating to keep Myanmar high on the European agenda:** Although this project refers to several Asian partners, it would be important to consider the hypothesis of sustaining coordinated advocacy actions towards the EU institutions, to clarify their position towards the implementation of international cooperation projects in Myanmar. The aim should be to highlight the importance of keeping Myanmar high on the European agenda and to open a discussion on finding alternative approaches to continue the dialogue on Higher Education and beyond.
4. **Capitalizing on the tools produced by the TOOLKIT project:** As explained in the findings section of this report, the tools produced by the TOOLKIT project are considered useful and effective by the Asian partners. Therefore, to further promote them they could be translated into national languages and distributed to other universities as well as other faculty members.



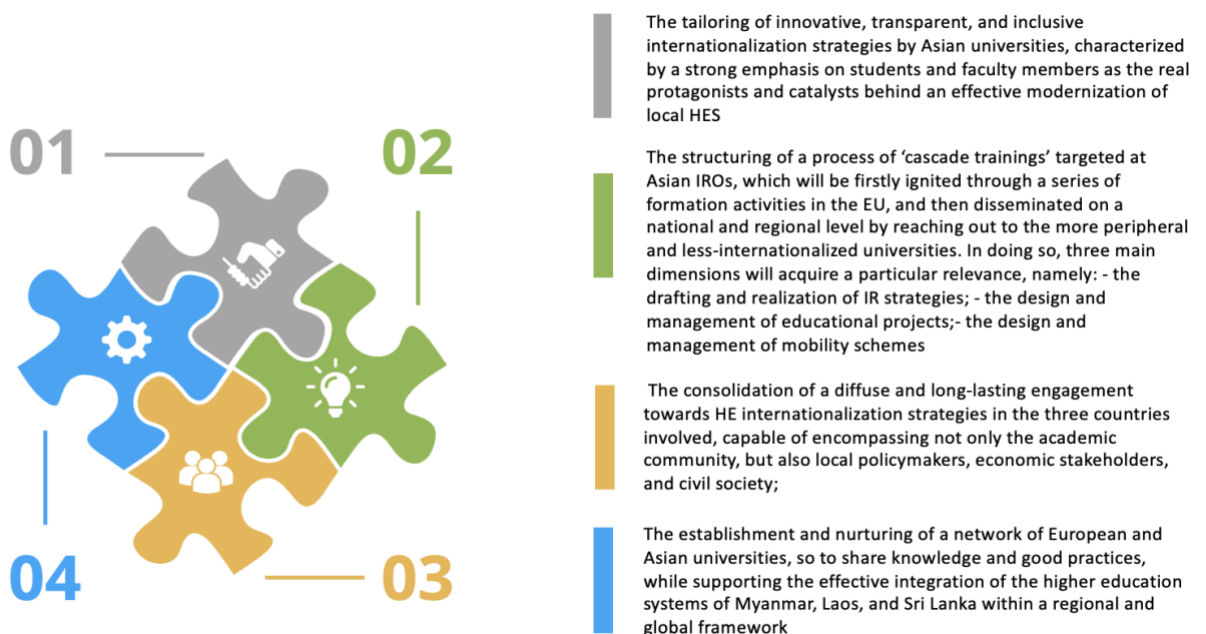
About the evaluation

1.1 The project at a glance

TOOLKIT is a 4-year¹ multi-country project, funded by the European Union in the context of the Erasmus+ (Capacity building Key Action II) and coordinated by a Consortium of Higher Education Institutions (HEI). These include 3 European Universities – The University of Bologna (UNIBO), Uppsala University (UU), Vilnius University (VU)-; 2 Laotian Universities – National University of Laos (NUoL), Souphanouvong University (SU)-; 3 Myanmar Universities – University of Yangon (YU), Yangon University of Economics (YUEco), Yezin Agricultural University (YAU) and 2 Universities from Sri Lanka – University of Peradeniya (UoP)-University of Kelaniya (UoK).

TOOLKIT's general aim is the enhancement and modernization of the internationalization strategies pursued by Asian universities, especially in terms of the capabilities displayed by local governance and International Relations Office (IRO) staff in drafting efficient and sustainable strategies, in designing and supervising innovative education projects, and in managing growing networks of mobility flows within their respective regions and beyond.

The specific objectives, are depicted in the infographic below:



¹ Originally the project was 36 months (3 years) but a non-cost extension was approved due to external factors delaying the implementation of the activities. The project run from 2019 to 2022



To achieve the above-mentioned objectives and outcome, the Toolkit project involves a broad spectrum of activities encompassed in nine interrelated work packages (WPs) listed below:

- WP1: Baseline study on International Strategies in Asia and its Practices
- WP2: Modernization of Asian International Relations Strategies
- WP3: Effective project Writing and Management in Asian Universities
- WP4: Effective Mobility Flows Management in Asian Universities
- WP5: Promoting Engagement in International Relations
- WP6: TOOLKIT Exploitation
- WP7: Dissemination of the Project's Results
- WP8: Quality Assurance and Monitoring
- WP9: General Project Management

1.2 Evaluation approach and methodology

This Evaluation report of the TOOLKIT project is the final step of a multiphased process, aligned with the overall project time frame. The overall purpose of the almost two-year process was to support the implementers to assess the progress made through the project's experience and to capture the learning and achievements.

The process included the development of several tools, including ad hoc questionnaires to ensure robust data collection and analysis. Regular follow-up and support was streamlined across the implementation of all project activities through regular meetings, analysis and learning. Key stages included the WP3 reflection embedded in the online meeting in November 2021 and the active participation in online coordination meetings.

The Final Evaluation objectives, in line with the OECD/DAC criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability as well as coherence and gender as cross-cutting issues, are:

- To review the overall project performance throughout the implementation;
- To assess the impact of the project by identifying early on its effects at different levels;
- To identify key lessons learned;
- To identify the appropriateness of the implementation methodology and any emerging needs to inform future work.

The final rounds of consultations to consolidate the Evaluation report were conducted between May and December 2022. The methodology used primarily focused on the process through which the intended outcomes were expected to be achieved and on the early impact of the project intervention. This evaluation draws from project-driven data – generated through the monitoring of each project activity – supplemented by the employment of quantitative and qualitative methods aimed at capturing evidence, insights, views and inputs from diverse actors and stakeholders involved in the project. The consultation process examined the level of participation of various stakeholders in the



design and planning of project activities, utilization of project tools, and changes generated at different levels.

The final evaluation methodology is based on the following activities and steps, also illustrated in the diagram below:



- **Desk Study:** Review of project’s technical documentation, including training materials, project reports, and other relevant EU and country-related policy documents on International Relations of HEIs, which were instrumental to refining the evaluation methodological approach, work plan and evidence gathering tools.
- **Consultation and Evidence Gathering:** Direct consultations were conducted with key informants from all those involved, including project staff, and other actors who took part in the project activities at different levels. The direct consultations took place remotely through Zoom and Teams. The evaluation developed semi-structured, in-depth interviews which were used to discuss implementation methodologies and outcomes. A total of 22 stakeholders were involved in this exercise.
- **Analysis and Restitution:** Through this step, thematic coding (grounded theory) was employed. The coding was carried out primarily based on frequency: for example, how many respondents had a “similar” answer or stated similar ideas, and how could those then be logically understood and labeled. The lists of emerging trends and themes were finalized once saturation was reached, meaning that no additional themes were emerging from new sources. The themes were then grouped under the main work packages of this project to further elaborate them through the lenses of the evaluation criteria. The findings were then shared, discussed, and validated in online meetings with the project lead.
- **Report Finalization:** The evaluation report, commented on and validated by all project partners, was finalized highlighting learning outcomes and approaches to inform future programming.



Evaluation Findings

2.1 Key contextual issues

The key contextual issues that have influenced the implementation and approach of the TOOLKIT project need to be analyzed from both a regional and single-county perspective.

The impact of internationalization on higher education in Asia has been the subject of some continent-wide analyses [1]. Some scholars argued for a rethinking of the mission of internationalization across the Asia-Pacific region against the tide of excessive market-centered values, commercialization of higher education and the danger of the propagation of postcoloniality in terms of knowledge and technology transfers [2]. Many highlight the need for Asian HEIs [higher education institutions] to strive to enhance their engagement with and contribution to the wider community through restructuring their curricula and visions of education without simply replicating Western patterns of internationalization [3].

Besides the regional considerations and trends on internationalization, the TOOLKIT project interacted with the additional complexities linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, which generally and greatly impacted the internationalization of education. This is due to the global experience of restricted student and academic mobility, lockdowns and associated educational institutions closures, as well as the unpreparedness for the emergency [4]. However, certain regional collaborations were born out of the virtual space created to keep connecting and cooperating across borders. Nevertheless, the Covid-19 pandemic had different repercussions in each target country, alongside abrupt political turmoils as described below.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a strong impact on **Lao PDR (LA)**, with people's livelihoods threatened, food insecurity looming over many families, and impacting the government's capacity to provide decent healthcare and education. The hardest hit were predominantly women as informal economic sectors dominated by female workers had the most difficulty [5]. Economically speaking, rising inflation, increased debt, amongst other issues, have led to fears of public repercussions such as austerity, as the government could limit state spending and raise taxes [6]. The socio-economic backdrop had direct effects on the functioning of HEIs, especially impacted by lockdowns and closures which happened in all of the 18 provinces [7]. Some opportunities though have arisen in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic for digitalization of the education sector [8].

Since its independence, LA has been transforming its education system, focusing on quality and relevance of higher education, paying attention to widening access and to labor-market relevant skills [9]. However, HEI reportedly suffer from weak institutional autonomy - LA ranks amongst the bottom 10% for academic freedom [10].

Through the 9th Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan, LA has been making progress in its higher education which features rather prominently in the Plan as a source for improved human



resources in the country. Achievements have been made in relation to enrollment rates, availability of courses, reformed curricula in line with labor-market oriented skills, among others [11]. Additionally, significant steps have already been achieved in implementing internationalization strategies: improving curriculum development and teaching, introducing English language programmes, improving quality assurance, and providing regional and international student and staff mobility opportunities as well as joint research [12]. With the current difficult economic situation, the education sector will face further challenges to support the donor-funded interventions [13], which could undermine the achievement of the 2025 Socio-economic Development Strategy and Vision 2030.

February 2021 saw the end of the democratic transition of **Myanmar (MM)**, following the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces military coup. What followed was a surge of country-wide protests and a strong Civil Disobedience Movement met with repression from the Junta government. The security crisis has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, contributing to a multifold food and job crisis with mass migration to neighboring countries [14].

The education system was a key reform area for MM following the 2015 elections, as education was recognised as a strong socio-economic driver. This commitment was followed with a five-year National Education Strategic Plan (NESP) (2016-2021) [15], strongly supported by international donors like the European Union. The Plan foresaw a reconstruction of the entire education system covering all levels of education. For higher education it detailed strategies to strengthen governance and management capacity to improve the relevance, quality and access to higher education. It included significant changes to teacher training, new curricula aligned to international pedagogies that would facilitate academic mobility as well as scholarships. The NESP 2 (2021-2030) drafting which was under review prior to the coup, has been halted.

Moreover, Internet shutdowns, arbitrary arrests of journalists, revoked media licenses, curtail liberties like freedom of expression and academic freedom - for which MM ranks in the bottom 10%, according to the Academic Freedom Index. Universities were officially shut down for about a year following the military coup, only reopened in January 2022 for third-year students exclusively. Since the coup, there has been no new intake of students. Additionally, students and teachers attending protests have been sentenced to jail under section 505A of the penal code. Fear of prosecution and arrest keep students away from campuses [16]. For higher education this has meant that some foreign engagements have been put on hold and will remain challenging in the foreseeable future, with project funding dwindling in the short term. Despite the difficult situation in the country, the interest and demands for international cooperation in higher education have not been abandoned.

Sri Lanka (SL) has been hit by a deep economic crisis dragging into its fourth year - much worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic - which has led to an economic collapse and political crisis in the country. Power cuts and long queues to buy basic goods mark Sri Lankans' daily life. These circumstances have had a direct impact on HEIs. Mostly peaceful protests erupted in March 2022 as a consequence of economic hardships, which were met by a crackdown on human rights. In fact, the multifold crisis has had an unprecedented impact on all levels of education in SL: from preschools to



universities, affecting students, teachers and staff. Academic activities were halted in the country for over 18 months due to the Covid-19 crisis and subsequently due to the economic crisis. Although many educational activities have resumed, they largely remain online which is problematic as there's poor internet connectivity, unstable power grids and lack of access to electronic devices; above all, 70% of students have neither access to the internet nor to devices [17].

Two main issues dominate the **Sri Lankan** higher education landscape. The first is the lack of capacity to accommodate the number of students who wish to enroll. The second is the overrepresentation of qualified Sri Lankans amongst the unemployed. To address these issues the country is looking to increase the private higher education providers, and increase the labor market relevance of higher education, as well as the quality of the education and research. The National Education Policy Framework (2020-2030) addresses these issues by tackling some 11 core areas for the sector, such as access and equity, quality assurance, research and innovation, financing, quality of teachers and infrastructures, and governance among others [18].

Concerning the internationalization of higher education, SL enjoys high student mobility partly due to a culture of migration; and partly as it is promoted by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Higher Education [19]. In 2014, the Sri Lankan government started opening up higher education to private overseas investors in a bid to attract more international students and increase the number of (private) universities. The same year, SL joined the Asian Universities Alliance for the promotion of educational mobility within the region.

2.2 Staying relevant within the changing context

The TOOLKIT project areas of interest and activities were highly relevant, both at the time of adoption and over time. The support provided to the Asian HEIs on their path towards internationalization, both on theoretical and practical grounds, was in line with their needs. Although all Asian Universities had established international offices and named people as international officers, they needed to work on networking skills and experience, first hand, how to work with international partners.

The result chain of the project is appropriate to tackle the mentioned lack of expertise and know-how to frame efficient and coherent internationalization strategies. There are clear and logical links between outputs, outcomes, and impact. Additionally, the vertical intervention logic was sufficiently flexible to adjust to changing circumstances, such as external factors or sector-related topics to be tackled.

A practical example is illustrated by the way the TOOLKIT project dynamically evolved and adapted throughout the pandemic, Myanmar's political unrest and the dire economic crisis in Sri Lanka. Adaptation took the form of employing technology to ensure continuation of communication links, training and accountability, as illustrated below:



Switch to online modalities: pros & cons

“When the pandemic came and all the face-to-face work had to come to an end, it became very difficult for all of us. But maybe we managed to sow the seeds of new ways of working” affirmed one of the international experts working for the TOOLKIT project. These words effectively summarized the opinion of all the interviewed people. It is undeniable that getting through the pandemic required a shift to online modalities to which people were not used to, especially in the Asian countries. They had to familiarize themselves with Zoom, Teams, and other platforms. Back in early 2020, communication between Asian and European partners was done either by email or by Skype which was complicated by the unavailability of facilities, such as video conferencing. Three years later, it seems perfectly normal to be able to communicate through these various platforms. Therefore, the pandemic enabled both Asian and European partners to move ahead quickly from the point of view of communications and networking. Currently, they are working on projects in a way that would not have been possible before and online tools are a core part of the implementation process, even though connection issues still persist.



Restrictions on in-person meetings

COVID restrictions directly impacted the ability to conduct meetings, training, and dissemination events in Asian countries severely, until 2022. Often, this had a positive impact on the attendance to online events - with a high number of registered participants - as was the case of the cascade training organized by the University of Peradeniya. However, respondents pointed out that face-to-face training is still preferable and that a sort of drop in effectiveness regarding online training is perceived.

2.3 Reflections on Coherence and Complementarity

The TOOLKIT project alignment with international norms and standards shows the consistency and coherence of the intervention. The project aligns with the European Commission Communication on Achieving a European Education Area by 2025 (EEA), which under the geopolitical dimension sets out the goal to strengthen EU international cooperation globally, supporting peer learning and international comparison for excellence in teaching and research. Under the EEA, two policies in particular build on the internationalization of higher education: the Commission Communication on a European strategy for universities and the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on building bridges for effective European higher education cooperation - part of the EU Higher Education Package. Additionally, the EEA is supported by the Erasmus Plus programme (amongst others) which is related to the project in its aims to promote learning mobility of individuals and groups, cooperation, quality, inclusion and equity, excellence, creativity and innovation at the level of organizations and policies in the field of education and training. Additionally the project is aligned with the European Commission Communication on a New European Research Area for Research and Innovation (ERA) which also has a geopolitical dimension which promotes international cooperation in



relation to the EU External actions priorities and the Sustainable Development Goals. Through its approach and activities the project clearly promoted the EU added value that is embedded in these policies.

At the country level, the project is also in line with several national policies on education, such as: the Myanmar NESP (2021-2030) which has a pillar dedicated to Internationalization & Partnerships with the aim of strengthening international relations through the networks between Myanmar HEIs and international universities/institutions/organizations [1]. The Sri Lanka National Education Policy Framework (2020-2030) with the objective to increase access to higher education and quality [2]. The Lao PDR 9th Five Year National Socio-Economic Development Plan has been developing internationalization strategies to improve curricula and teaching, quality assurance, and to provide student and staff mobility opportunities [3].

Moreover, the TOOLKIT project has been benefiting from complementarities with other projects implemented by the University of Bologna - as a lead. The overall proposal and initial implementation, for instance, was based on the lessons learned of a previous project implemented in Myanmar called Chinlone. The project, implemented over a span of three years (2017-2020), aimed at contributing to the modernization and internationalization of Myanmar (MM)'s Higher Education System (HES) through capacity building and the establishment of the International Relations Office (IRO) office. Other synergies could be also found with other similar projects implemented in other countries (e.g.: Iraq) and another on- going project: ENGAGE. The aim of this project is to promote and support students' engagement within the HES in Cambodia, Lao PDR , and Myanmar. It builds and expands on both CHINLONE and TOOLKIT, including working with the existing Consortium. Specifically, ENGAGE intends to address direct student engagement from different perspectives, using the three platforms that constitute their main agency avenues: the classroom, campus, and community.

2.4 International Strategies in Asia and its practices: a baseline study

The strategic premise underpinning the implementation of the TOOLKIT project was to employ techniques of adaptive management to guide the Consortium partners (see 2.9 for more details). From this evaluation point of view, the research/baseline study carried out throughout Work Package 1 (WP1) was ascertained as a first step of this process.

The research/baseline study aimed at capturing the Asian partners' status on: internationalization strategies, the IRO's structure (ad hoc personnel, budget, organizational charts), tools and type/number of actions pursued. Through this research, which involved the analysis of existing policies produced by Ministries and International organizations and the administration of several questionnaires to professors, students and admin staff, the TOOLKIT coordinator was able to identify the Asian partners' main needs and priorities in the field of modernization of international relations.



“Although grouped together, the three Asian countries are in fact very disparate, which, I think we showed very clearly in our initial report. They have different histories, systems, and very different stages of development” (A TOOLKIT International Relations Expert)

The data collected through the research/baseline study was compiled in a report entitled *“Developing an Asian way to Internationalization: needs and priorities in Laos, Myanmar and Sri Lanka”*, which was the outcome of this WP. Interviewed participants explained that the research was really useful for both the European Partners and Asian Partners who especially appreciated the opportunity to learn about their peers’ work and strategies. Moreover, the approach underpinning the research was: *“Not high income countries coming to low income countries, telling them how to do things, but trying to assess where they were and trying to support them to do things to enable them to engage more fully with international education projects” (A TOOLKIT International Relations Expert)*

The findings of the research constituted the basis for the follow up activities, which were tailor-made on the surveyed needs, and were presented in several workshops (for more information, please see: <https://site.unibo.it/toolkit/en/conferences-1>).

2.5 Skills Development on International Relations (WP2-3)

Most of the capacity strengthening activities of the TOOLKIT project took place during the implementation of WP2,3 and 4 and were based on the findings of the research. The capacity strengthening strategy focused on the spillover effect, namely: target groups were trained by experts and then these trainees would share the newly acquired knowledge through internal and national cascade training as well as other events in their own countries.

This paragraph takes into consideration the outcomes and effects of the training sessions for the target groups conducted within WP2 and 3 whilst the cascade training and the activities conducted for WP4 are analyzed in separate paragraphs (please see 2.4 and 2.5).

Updating Asian Universities’ strategic plans on internationalization

The first of the three capacity strengthening events took place at the Vilnius University. The activity's aim was to support Asian partners through the process of updating or developing their international relations strategies.



“The first training was about a strategic plan in Lithuania. Personally, I did not know how to write a strategic plan before, but now I got to know a lot from the training. I know how to start and where to go and what to do and what should be included in the plan”. A participant from Souphanouvong University

The one-week training organized and delivered by the Vilnius University, was structured taking into consideration the Asian countries' characteristics. Main topics ranged from different approaches to the internationalization strategies - including priorities, indicators, activities, to how to use a SWOT analysis on international relations, internationalization, defining the gaps in international strategies and how to involve staff and students in designing the strategy.

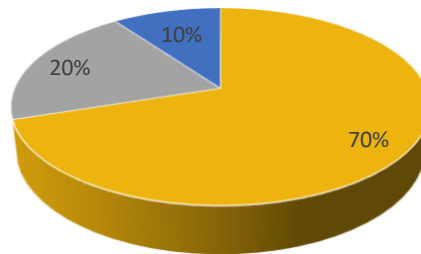
“What we tried to provide in our training was useful tools for the Asian partners like a SWOT analysis, to show what to look into in preparation for the strategic plans”.
One of the organizers of the training at Vilnius University

The training was highly appreciated by the Asian partners whose feedback was highly positive, for instance a participant from the University of Kelaniya reported that: **“We had one on site training in Vilnius, Lithuania- which was very well done. And we gained a lot of insight into how to prepare the strategy for the university and how to collate that with the strategy plan of the university to do a SWOT analysis. And we did it together with the other partner from the university of Peradeniya for Sri Lanka. But then we had different strategies at our universities. So it is also good to learn from these differences in how to come to some common ground. And it was very flexible and the training team at Vilnius did a wonderful job. So very well-organized. We had a lot of time to get into breakout rooms with other groups and then decide and discuss everything, discuss with the others as well and listen to the other partners because you can always learn from the others. So not only from the European partners, but also from the Asian partners how they get about these things. So it was really rewarding for us, we learned a lot and shared our information also, our strengths also with the other partners”.**

This is also confirmed by the data gathered at project level as shown from the chart below, which indicates that 70% of the respondents considered the training structure and the objectives useful and clear:



The training structure and objectives were useful and clear



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

“We were lucky we could do the training at the institute. We were lucky because they had the opportunity to visit and I think that the impact is different. We took them to the faculties to see about faculty strategy and for them, it was great and quite interesting also to have this opportunity to discuss and talk directly with the people working in the Institute”. One of the organizers of the training at Vilnius University.

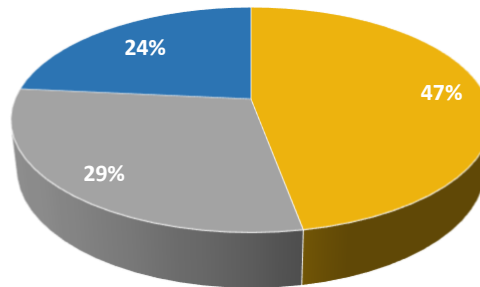
Each capacity strengthening event had a practical follow-up focusing on revising or developing internal documents useful for the modernization of the internationalization practices and strategies in the Asian HEIs. In this case, the Asian partners were tasked with the updating of their University’s strategic plan for internationalization. Partners worked together with the IROs staff at their University to complete this task employing the new knowledge acquired through the training, starting from the SWOT analysis and action plans drafted during the week in Vilnius and taking into account examples of good practices from other countries. The updated strategic plans were subsequently presented at national workshops. In Myanmar and Laos these events took place in January 2020 and could still be organized in person; whilst in Sri Lanka, internal events (please see paragraph 2.1) and then the outbreak of Covid-19 forced the organizers to postpone the event to the end of 2020 and organize it online in the end.

According to the TOOLKIT project internal data, the overall feedback on the WP2 was positive. 47% of the respondent strongly agreed with the statement “the results/outcomes of the WP are relevant of the work of the IRO staff in my Institution”, whilst 30% Agree and 24% is Neutral, as shown in the chart below:



THE RESULTS/OUTCOMES OF WP2 ARE RELEVANT FOR THE WORK OF THE IRO STAFF OF MY INSTITUTION

■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral



Project writing and management: a complete shift to online modalities

"I feel that all of us are still learning how to deliver effective training online. Although it's been happening in some ways, taking a course that's offline and putting it online, not entirely sure how to deal with all of the interactions in an entirely different way, was a big learning. I think we developed that as we went along. The use of the chat function, for example, rather than sort of waiting for formal questions, just pinging things up in the chat and also getting involved in more difficult sort of group work activities took some time to adjust. But that did enable people to work in their own university. Groups say there was a group from each University. They could work in the group and then come back into the plenary virtual space". TOOLKIT International Consultant

The above quote effectively describes some of the challenges faced by the TOOLKIT team when a total shift to the online modalities was required to continue the implementation during the pandemic and the turmoil in some of the Asian countries. The training delivered to strengthen the expertise in project writing and management was supposed to take place at Bologna University, but it was delivered online instead with some delays compared to the original work plan. This training is part of WP3 which aims at enhancing the ability of Asian Universities to write and manage international projects and to promote the spreading of the culture of good and effective project management in Asia through to Cascade Trainings (see 2.7) involving other Universities and the Ministries of Education of the partner countries.



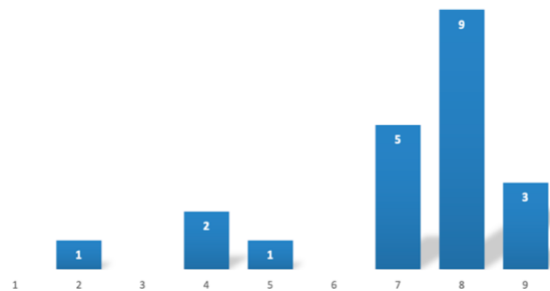
The project management training was very well received by the Asian partners who described it as extremely useful for their institutions:

“Yes, I think my team is better able to write international proposals. It's really important this kind of programs and all these international relations, that give you new strategies, how to conceptualize and put the ideas and how to meet the budget requirements/standards . It was a really good exposure of our team and also the University staff”. A Participant from the University of Peradeniya

“Now, we know we know more about the things that we need to put in the application form for projects. And also we are learning about internationalization. Since the training I have written several proposals and I am happy about it” A participant from Souphanouvong University

Most of the participants in the training expected to make a difference in the way they do their job, as shown in the chart below (scale of 1 to 9):

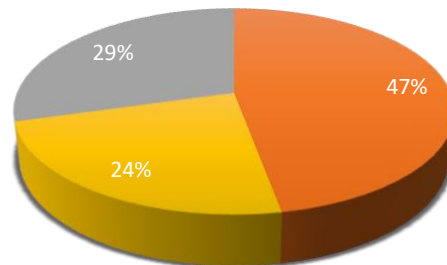
To what extent do you expect this training will make a difference in the way you do your job?



WP3 produced a guide on project writing and management, considered useful by the majority of the respondents to the final evaluation questionnaire.



The "Guide for project design and management" is a useful tool for the IRO of my Institution



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

2.6 A South to South perspective on mobility (WP4)

The work on WP4 was led by the Universities of Uppsala and Yezin and aimed at strategizing, promoting and managing students' mobility schemes. Through a bottom-up participatory approach a shared mobility management model was identified and presented in a Handbook. The process included an online training about mobility management - done by the University of Uppsala and focusing on international mobility flows organization, practices and offered services - and the writing of the Mobility Handbook.

This evaluation considers the methodology employed for the implementation of this WP significant due to its replicability implications. The Handbook is a product perfectly in line with Asian universities' needs and the methodology ensured the focus was on what the Asian universities involved really wanted. The process, explained in detail in the case study annexed to this report, included collecting and revising all the materials which had been developed for the training session on the topic and continuous deliberation on what to include in the manual and how to organize it.

The collaborators were split into focus groups (initially for the training and the division remained also during the writing of the handbook), which included participants from different universities, and an appointed focal point. In phase I, each group was given a section of the handbook which was then redistributed in phase II and subsequently in phase III. Every group had the chance to work on each section, enriching it and improving it until a first draft was made, which was sent to European universities for feedback. This was discussed and integrated into the handbook, with each group working on the chapter they were originally given in phase I. Finally, Uppsala University provided final editing support.

"About the handbook, we did not have a term of references for the mobility management, now we have it, which is very good for our office and we get to use the guidebook on our daily work and also we can develop it further to be our specific terms reference for our office as well. [..] Writing the handbook was very good



actually because we got some time to get together to express our ideas. I mean, everybody working for the project has had time to express their ideas, and it's quite inclusive. I mean, we have ideas from Laos, we also have ideas from Myanmar and Sri Lanka. So we included the ideas from different perspectives, different experiences that we have from different countries, which is a very good thing. And we took turns to check and edit each other's work, which makes the handbook more useful and context based". A participant from Souphanouvong University

"And the handbook is, I would say, very, very helpful for anybody, not only the partners of the project, but for anyone who would like to know how to manage mobility. It was going into my new details for the students and. Everything is very nicely explained in detail, it's very comprehensive. So, I'm really amazed at this final outcome and I think it shouldn't be limited to our universities only. I think it should be promoted. Yes, everybody can learn from that." A participant from Kelaniya University

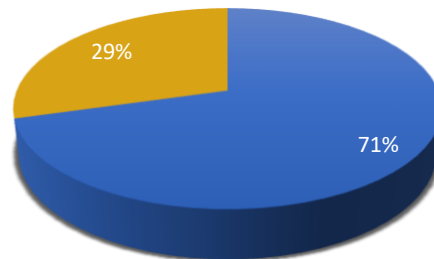
"The Toolkit project forced all partners to consider their own way. Usually, the West group conditions and the Asian countries' conditions are really different, so we have to consider our future by our own effort. So the manual is really good for us because it helps with this." A participant from Yezin Agricultural University

From the evidence gathered by the evaluation, this experience could be considered a good learning curve for all those involved. The methodology developed can be replicated in different settings and contexts (please see the case study document for more detail), and it could be further developed and adjusted. The handbook is a solid product that fits the purpose for which it was developed. If and how it will be further embedded into the Universities' rules and organizational culture remains to be seen and it could be assessed in the future through other follow up projects and collaborations.

The findings of this evaluation on the WP4 have been further confirmed by project data, especially by the final evaluation questionnaire administered to the partners. According to 71% of the respondents the Manual on Mobility is a useful tool for their IROs, whilst almost 65% considered the outcomes of the WP relevant for their work, as depicted in the charts below:

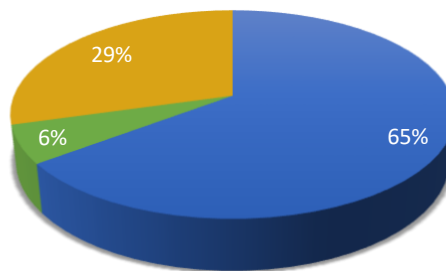


The "Handbook on Mobility Management" is an useful tool for the IRO of my Institution



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

The results/outcomes of the WP are relevant for the work of the IRO staff of my Institution



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

2.7 The Cascade training (WPs 2/3/4)

As highlighted above, the capacity strengthening methodology consisted of training, production of tools and subsequent cascade training to further share the newly acquired knowledge and tools and discuss how these experiences could be applied to their specific needs. The cascade training sessions took place during WP2 (Internationalization Strategies), WP3 (International Projects Design and Management), and WP4 (Mobility Flows Management). The cascade training primarily targeted Asian partners' faculties and staff involved in the international activities. The cascade training activities were organized by the Asian Project Partners in Laos, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, mostly online.

According to the interviewed actors, the experience of the cascade training was extremely formative. All the people interviewed praised the assistance received by the University of Bologna during the preparation of the training, both in terms of material provided as well as the continuous support.



“Participants in the cascade training were very happy and interested in joining. it's just new for them. So it's very useful. We showed them and presented our strategic plan and mobility management and project writing. For our staff, our teachers, obviously our strategic plan and the handbook on Mobility are new. They were very impressed with the training and the new thing that we have from the training is that now we have a direct communication channel. We did not have this before, for communication between our office as the main office for international relations with the faculties after the cascade training. We have a group chat now, which we are using when we have something concerning the faculty and international relations”. A participant from Souphanouvong University

“For the cascade training we had a national workshop in October 2020. So with the experience we got for the Toolkit project, it was easy to organize the training. It was easy for us to conduct this training and it reached a large audience. I think because we kind of conducted that virtually and we were experts in conducting this jointly from the Peradeniya and Kelaniya. By this time, we were very confident that we could manage this. It was attended by 200 participants, including the students, which I have included to get an exposure to international relations and mobility experience”. A participant from Kelaniya University

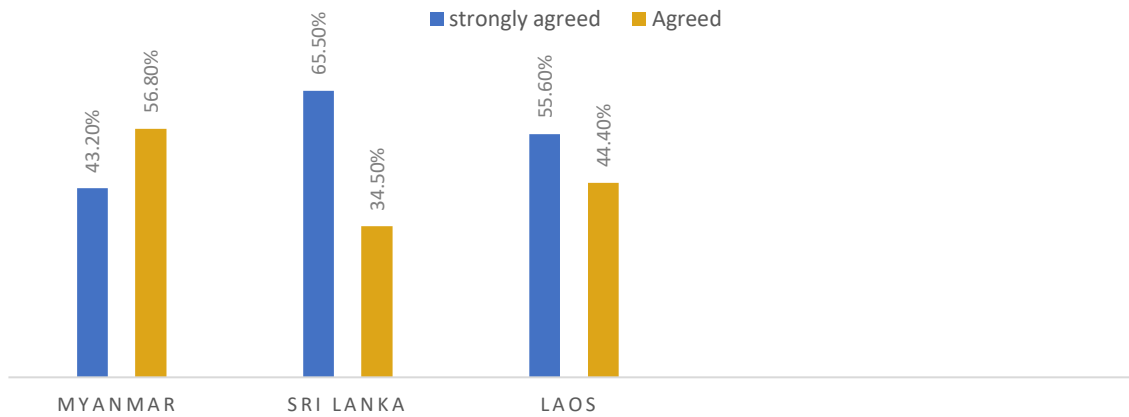
One of the interesting suggestions emerged during this evaluation concerned the materials provided for the cascade training. All participants said that it was useful, however some pointed out that it would have been better to have bilingual materials so that cascade training could be conducted for a larger audience: **“Materials provided to us were very useful, but still they are written in English. Presentation is also in English, and if we would like to do cascade training more widely to our staff or younger junior teachers, though, there might be some language barrier so that cascade trainers will have to use bilingual or may be they have to use their mother tongue so that the subject matter will be understood better”**. A participant from *Yangon University*

This is something the European Universities could take into consideration for future similar initiatives to produce tools that are both in English and in the national language.

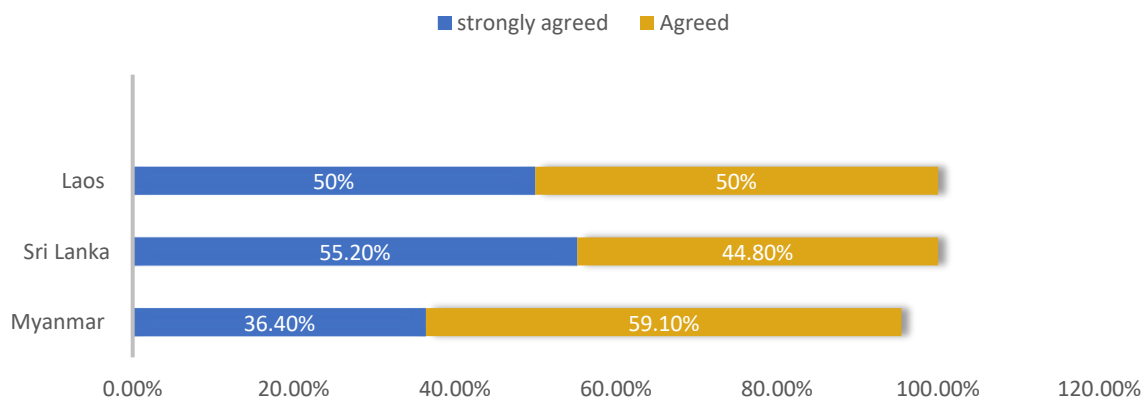
The project data confirms that the cascade trainings were well received and deemed as useful and applicable by participants. The following graph depicts participants' answers on the topic of the training. Only two were chosen due to data coherence and availability: International strategies and mobility.



THE CONTENT OF THE CASCADE TRAINING ON INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIES WAS USEFUL AND APPLICABLE



THE CONTENT OF THE CASCADE TRAINING ON INTERNATIONAL MOBILITY WAS USEFUL AND APPLICABLE



Overall the capacity building strengthening path implemented by the Toolkit project was effective and provided the Asian partners with skills and tools to be used after the lifespan of the project.



2.8 Disseminating the “Asian way towards internationalization” (WPs 5/6/7)

WP5/6 and 7 were characterized by some common features linked to the dissemination of knowledge. Specifically, WP5 aimed at sharing the newly consolidated expertise at the service of the local academic communities, WP6 at developing additional tools that could be used by the HEIs in the future and WP7 at further upgrading communication means and platforms.

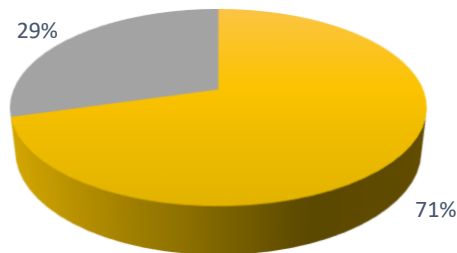
Due to the external challenges faced during the implementation period these three WPs achievements were different from those identified at the initial proposal stage, especially in the case of WP6. Whilst it was possible to conduct all the conferences and info days with the students planned for WP5 using the online modalities, the MOOC (Massive Open Online Courses) modules for both Faculty and students could not be developed. Instead the TOOLKIT management team decided, in agreement with the Asian partners, to develop an interactive donor map (available [here](#)) to be used by the IRO Staff and the other staff members dealing with internationalization. The rationale behind this tool is that it will give the Asian Partners the opportunity to keep track of the available opportunities from different funding bodies and to easily access them. The tool will be periodically updated by the consortium partners. The project also produced a Video Tool for Students' mobility instead of the MOOC modules targeting students. The video shows the testimony of students who experienced a mobility period abroad, from Asia to Europe and vice versa and it is meant to function as a guide for the students who are considering the possibility of applying for a study-period abroad.

As for WP7 the focus was on disseminating the project's results through TOOLKIT's website and social networks, the updating of web pages on participating Universities' websites dedicated to international relations. This WP was implemented through the project as it comprised the design of promotional materials on WP3 and WP4's activities - such as leaflets and brochures - during the Info Days (WP5).

According to the data gathered by the project, the activities implemented on WP5 were useful to raise awareness amongst the faculty members on the importance of the international activities to enhance the quality of the education provided at the HEIs (please see graph below):



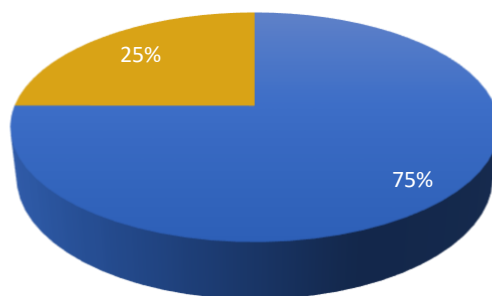
Round Table on internationalization helped me to involve the Academic Management, Governance and Staff in the international activities



■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

Likewise the majority of respondents affirmed that the Info Days -implemented during WP5 -were a good opportunity to involve students and share information about mobility at the international level with them.

Student's information Days on internationalization helped my institution to involve students and to inform them about the international opportunities available.

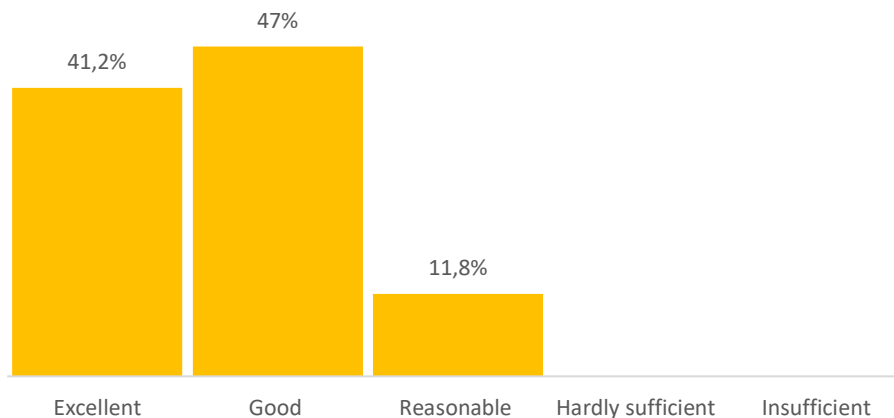


■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neutral

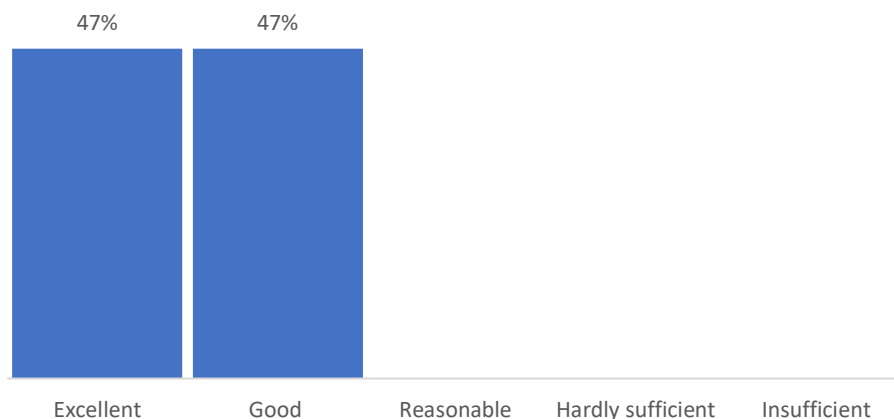
Finally, the following graphs show the ratings provided by the respondents over the exploitation activities in WP6 and the dissemination activities in WP7:



Quality and impact of the exploitation activities- WP6- (i.e Toolkit Map of International Donors, Video tool for students)



Quality and Impact of the core dissemination activities (website, promotional video, brochure, presentations at conferences)-WP7



The majority of the respondents rated the activities and the tools between excellent and good, which is a clear indication that even if the implementation had to be adjusted due to unforeseen circumstances, that was appreciated by the Asian partners. However, whether the map and videos will be effectively used in the future, considering the high turnover within the Asian Universities, remains to be seen.

2.9 The added value of adaptive management

As previously mentioned the TOOLKIT project employed, sometimes slightly forced by the circumstances, elements of adaptive management. This methodology delivers added value based on



the premise that projects continuously learn and adapt throughout the project period. The framework makes use of evidence-based learning which throughout the project implementation informs decisions and adjustments. This was the case on many occasions especially because the external evaluation accompanied the project throughout its lifespan and gathered some data that helped implementers to adjust the activities or reflect on where the project was going.



Ultimately, the TOOLKIT project was an opportunity for everyone to learn about their actual capacity to adjust, to employ new technologies - the shift to online activities was hard at the beginning especially for the Asian countries facing technological gaps, power cuts and connection issues - and to reflect on how to capitalize on the experience acquired for the future.

“So just looking at that, the way things adapted. Yeah. I think that's one of the benefits of the project that we all had to learn together, how to do things differently. And if the project had just proceeded straightforwardly with no pandemic, no military coup, no problems in Sri Lanka, then there would not have been that learning for everybody, for both the European partners and the Asian partners. But because things changed so quickly, we had to rethink the way to do things and how to achieve project objectives despite all these changes and that process. And doing it together, I think was probably a bit of an unexpected benefit of the project and an outcome that could not have been predicted because we didn't know it was going to happen”. Toolkit consultant on international relations



To grasp the partner's views on the above, the evaluation asked partners to describe their relationship with the University of Bologna and the type of support received from them. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The coordinators were praised for their ability to listen and understand the needs of the partners and for being the fulcrum of the Consortium. According to many, it was a co-creation process upon which the Consortium should capitalize on in the future, also by spending more time with the Asian partners on the design process. It is, however, undeniable that the relationship developed through this project will progress further also in the future, notwithstanding the continuous contextual challenges.

"I'm really grateful that we got involved in this. Of course, there were deadlines, but still they would understand the situations and difficulties that we had like this power cut issue. And so if you explain Team Bologna they'll understand. I think they're very sensitive to this kind of cultural issues that we are undergoing as well". A participant from Kelaniya

"The coordination I think was absolutely great. I really was amazed. It's just compliments, compliments on top of compliments. And they managed to organize all these training online and they managed to gather people. They managed to ensure that they were present. They managed to develop almost all the products". A participant from Vilnius

It is important to highlight that the TOOLKIT Coordinator took an informed decision to continue the activities also in Myanmar even if an official endorsement from the EU was never issued. The Coordinator contacted the responsible Project Officer in the EU several times but, evidently due to the delicate political situation, an official answer was never given. Therefore, amongst many logistical difficulties related to the bank transfers, and the high turnover of the people involved in the project (the current representatives are not the same ones that started the project) almost all the activities managed to be implemented. In some cases the official connection with the country was lost for months, because universities were closed after the coup, but then things started functioning again and the involved universities worked closely together to fill the gap and the time lost, achieving remarkable results.

The evaluation findings support the overall implementation strategy employed through this project and remarks that it would be important to include it in future similar projects.

2.10 Outlining the changes engineered by the project

This evaluation attempted to understand the effects of the TOOLKIT project towards the attainment of the overall objective through exploring the consequences of engineering changes in the Asian HEIs, in their attitudes towards more sustainable and efficient internationalization strategies and designing innovative education projects.



It is rather early to define TOOLKIT's long-term effects considering the fast changing contexts in which it operated. However, some initial trends can already be identified.

Knowledge to practice

Through promoting a robust capacity strengthening pathway, the project has invested significant resources in increasing knowledge and developing useful tools for the modernization of the internationalization strategies in Asian Universities. This final evaluation highlighted that the capacity strengthening strategy and methodology were well designed and successful in addressing some key challenges and gaps. Overall, the level of satisfaction about the usefulness and quality of the training expressed by the actors consulted through the final evaluation confirms that the project performed well.

More in depth, this final evaluation highlighted the evidence of change that could show a transition from the acquired knowledge and skills into better practices and attitudes through primary sources of information. Some examples referred to: employing the methodology learned during the development of the Handbook on Mobility with students, replicating the know-how acquired through this project - especially how to conduct online training - also to other fields, enhancing communications among departments after the project's events to share information at many levels.

“Everything was well done and well prepared for us to move forward. Especially on the visibility and the confidence we got. We have conducted more than, I think, 25 virtual projects and events during 2021 only” *A participant from Kelaniya University*

Moreover, the change in attitude from high university ranks was evidenced several times, especially in terms of internal buy-in and support for the modernizations brought by the project.

“I would say that everything was important to us to change the way we looked at things and change the attitudes of the other academic staff members, students as well as some administrative offices”. *A participant from Kelaniya University*

What emerges from the data collection is a multi-faceted picture of the situation, which tells us that change is happening to an extent that not only involves the capacity and the attitude of individuals who were directly exposed to the project but that is starting to spread beyond them. This is an important first step within a longer journey that aspires to bring about change at a more systemic level.

An overview on sustainability

The TOOLKIT project has considered sustainability aspects since its inception. The partnerships developed through the consortium rely on a comprehensive and a solid capacity strengthening path, support and production of long-lasting tools. Through this lens, TOOLKIT has already reached a good degree of *sustainability in action*, the benefits of which will continue after the project's lifespan.



Moreover, according to the University of Bologna's views on sustainability the project initially focused on developing Erasmus Credit Mobility projects with all the Asian countries. However, the current situation only allowed this possibility to be considered for Sri Lanka and Laos but not for Myanmar. Therefore, Bologna University is promoting and advancement of the existing partnerships also through other departments, for example, focusing on sustainable tourism webinars with the Myanmar Universities. Additionally, some of the Asian University partners have already applied, as a lead, for several projects, including the University of Bologna as a partner (e.g a project on the digitization of libraries) which shows that they are skillfully employing the knowledge acquired through this project and sustain a long-term sustainability effect.

Considering the spillover effect from the Asian universities to other members of the faculty, students and Institutions (ministries of education), capacity-building efforts are indeed sustainable in the medium term. The knowledge-building element as a whole, including training and awareness raising and dissemination events, provides a strong base for sustainability in the long term at least in two of the three target countries. In Myanmar the situation is still too volatile to consider long lasting changes or sustainability trends

Options for a way forward

Based on the considerations elaborated in the findings section, and to ensure consistency with the dynamics of change that have emerged, a list of recommendations has been developed:

Standardizing the methodology used for the production of the tools and sharing

understanding and best practices: To capitalize on the experiences gained and the good practices established by this project - and captured in the case study - it would be important to standardize its methodology. This will guarantee the availability of a tested step-by-step guide to work with the Asian Universities. TOOLKIT's approach, which includes elements of adaptive management, is indeed replicable. The suggested methodological document could be useful to all partners of the Consortium.

Continue Building on Asian Partners' existing synergies: The TOOLKIT project established a strong partnership with the Asian partners that should be capitalized on through future initiatives. Some projects are already in the pipeline, which shows the legacy this project is leaving behind; however, it will be important to expand on the existing collaboration level, dedicating more time to co-creating projects with the Asian partners, especially at the design phase.

Advocating to keep Myanmar high on the European agenda: Although this project refers to several Asian partners, it would be important to consider the hypothesis to sustain a coordinated advocacy action towards the EU institutions to clarify their position towards the implementation of international cooperation projects in Myanmar. The aim should be to highlight the importance of



keeping Myanmar high on the European agenda and open a discussion on finding alternative approaches to continue the dialogue on Higher Education and beyond.

Capitalizing on the tools produced by the Toolkit project: As explained in the findings section of this report the tools produced by the Toolkit project are considered useful and effective by the Asian partners. Therefore, to further promote them they could be translated into national languages and distributed to other universities as well as other faculty members.