

Part III: Sustainability of EU-Asian academic collaboration

8. Financial sustainability - Aqua-Internship: A Model for Financially Sustainable Academic Collaboration

Ram C. Bhujel, PhD

Aquaculture and Aquatic Resources Management (AARM)

Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, Thailand

Program web: <http://www.aarm-asialink.info/index2.html>

Email: bhujel@ait.ac.th

Aqua-Internship is a programme initiated by the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) involving two European and four Asian partners. Under this programme, post-graduate students are placed for 2-6 months in local host organisations in Asia such as fish farms, government institutions, community organisations and private companies. The students served as employees or interns to learn and gain practical experience. Upon completion, they share their knowledge and experience by giving seminars at their Universities. This programme has been popular, attracting more students even from institutions other than the collaborating partners. Therefore, the partners of the collaboration have incorporated the internship as a part of curricula and committed to continue to work together.

8.1. Background

This article is based on an EC funded programme called “Aqua-Internship” (AIT, 2009a; 2009b) under the Asia Link programme for which the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) established collaborations with two European universities, namely: the University of Stirling (UoS), UK and the University of Aveiro (UoA), Portugal, and four Asian academic institutions, namely: the Institute of Agriculture and Animal Sciences (IAAS), Nepal; the Royal University of Agriculture (RUA), Cambodia; the University of Agriculture and Forestry (UAF), Ho Chi Minh City, the Vietnam and Research Institute for Aquaculture No. 1 (RIA1), Hanoi, Vietnam. The programme was launched in September 2007 to cover the gap between the theoretical knowledge that students receive from university education and practical skills required by the industries in the real field situation.

Under this programme, post-graduate students spend 2-6 months to assist host organisations after completion of course work. Students and the local coordinators choose suitable host organisations and make necessary arrangements. During the internship programme, students identify the problems of the real world while working with them, devise research plans for their thesis, and continue further to find and recommend the practical solutions. The main approach of this collaboration is to establish a mechanism to support students of European and Asian institutions to work closely with Aquaculture/Fisheries industries in Asia. As fish stocks in the natural water bodies is declining, more research on the wise use and proper management of aquatic resources, often known as “Fisheries” is needed. At the same time, promotion of farming fish or aquatic

animals, also known as “Aquaculture”, has been emphasised as a means to compensate the wild-catch decline.

8.2. Objectives

The main objective of the collaboration is to provide hands-on skills to post-graduate students in the field of aquaculture and aquatic resources management by encouraging them to work closely with its industries through internship programmes. The broader goal of the collaboration is to help reduce poverty or improve the livelihoods of the people in Asia through aquaculture and aquatic resources management. In addition, the culture of some fish species has emerged as a business. Asia has huge resources and capacity to grow. European partners are therefore keen to collaborate as they see an opportunity for producing more seafood cheaply in Asia and supplying it to Europe.

Present collaboration is also to raise the profiles of Asian institutions. European universities are collaborating with the developing countries in marketing and visibility as a large number of their students come from abroad. In fact, the present collaboration was initiated by the leading institution from a sense of responsibility in improving institutions within its area. As a regional leader in post-graduate education, AIT, for example, has its mission of capacity building of institutions in the region. Aqua-Internship is a result of this sense. Another purpose of developing collaboration is to maintain its leading status and visibility in the region.

The immediate objective of the collaboration was to improve post-graduate education in the Asian partner institutions thereby attracting more and smarter students. In theory, there is the possibility of developing a new collaboration among institutions with a common purpose but a functional or real collaboration is possible only when individuals of the different institutions are closely associated with their background and previous working relationships. Many Universities in Europe tend to collaborate with the universities in Asia because of the efforts of their alumni. The main reason is that they have a common understanding and some similarities in many aspects that make them work together.

8.3. Approaches and Strategies

Project concept development

Various ideas for collaboration were discussed during field visits and face-to-face meetings with partners organised under previous collaborations. As a follow-up action, a concept note was prepared by the Lead Partner and circulated to all the selected partners for their comments. After incorporating the suggestions of all the partners, the final proposal was developed and submitted to the EU in response to a call for proposals. In the proposal for the collaboration, an organisational set-up was clearly defined, such as a steering committee made up of a Project Coordinator and Project Manager from AIT, European key experts and Asian Country Coordinators. Their responsibilities were also clearly described in line with the collaboration’s goal and objectives. Although the basic framework was outlined, some of the methods were decided later based on the local conditions at the time of implementation.

Partner selection

AIT and the University of Stirling were promoting small-scale fish culture in the region with Asian partners. Therefore, there already were working relationships between them. The University of Stirling (UoS) was selected because of its well established academic programmes and laboratory facilities in this field. Another important reason was the past working relationship based on the fact that some of the faculty members of AIT were University of Stirling graduates. UoA was selected because of its expertise in environmental and eco-toxicology programmes and also because it was involved with a previous EC project. However, the selection was due to a faculty member who is a UoS alumni and was already well-known to other partners.

Among the Asian partners, Vietnamese and Cambodian partners were selected because of the past collaborations through Aqua Outreach and their several faculty members were alumni of AIT, including the Country Coordinators for the project. RUA and UAF were particularly selected because of their needs to upgrade academic programmes and to produce qualified human resources for their country or locations. IAAS (Nepal) was selected because their post-graduate education was quite new and was in need of strengthening. In addition, the head of the department was an AIT alumnus who was a well recognised and well trusted scientist.

In addition to the institutional partners, under this collaboration, partnership has been extended to private companies, fish farms, community-based organisations, and government and non-government organisations (NGOs). Asian partner institutions in their respective countries/locations explore and scrutinise these local organisations based on their needs to serve as hosts for interns. These organisations have been convinced that they benefit in many ways by engaging post-graduate students as employees without salary. For examples, it boosts the image of the organisations. Interns can help in day-to-day work as their employees, conduct research to solve their problems, can publish articles as free advertisement and so on. Many of them are then happy to offer food and/or accommodation.

Implementation

The project was launched in September 2007. An initial meeting was organised in November at the Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand, the Lead Partner of the project. Selection and scheduling of activities were finalised at this meeting. The roles and responsibilities of partners, intern host organisations, interns and their supervisors were clearly defined. Potential risk factors were also discussed. Formal collaboration was established at the institutional level signing Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) by the Lead Partner with all the collaborating partners separately. A progress meeting of the steering committee was organised during 8-9 January 2009 in Kathmandu. All the Country Coordinators presented their progress. At the same time, a plan of action for the year 2009 was discussed. Necessary changes in strategies were also made.

During the whole period of the project implementation, any good and bad news from a partner, the message was passed on to all other partners. Therefore, all the partners were made aware of the situation. More importantly, provision was made for frequent visits to all the partners by the Project Team together with the European experts involved and

sometimes even with external evaluators. During the visits all the beneficiaries were met to discuss the situation and understand the problems they faced. At the same time, the authorities of the partner institutions were met with a view to providing feedback and possible improvement in their own systems. This has created direct linkages of the Project Team with the beneficiaries at ground level. This has helped in better understanding the problems and reporting more realistically. More importantly, Project Team has met various intern host organisations in each country.

Results

More than 30 internship organisations interested in hosting interns have been set up making their details available on-line (<http://www.aarm-asialink.info/Placements.html>). Perspective interns can go through the list and select based on their interests.

Under the internship programme, over 30 Asian students have been supported so far; 10 in Nepal and 20 in Vietnam. For example, almost all interns in Nepal e.g. Nabin, Hare Ram, and Sadharam and Kamala worked with women's groups/cooperatives in Chitwan, Lamjung Nawalparasi and Nuwakot. Similarly, most RIA1 students e.g. Chien, Chung, Hoa, Thanh and Yen, worked for Government stations and conducted research to develop techniques of breeding and feeding of crab, clam and other economically high value species. Applying their techniques, poor farmers can get better returns from their limited resources. UAF students e.g. Binh, Thanh, Tu and Tam are tied with private companies such as Alltech, Bayer, Biomin and NOVUS Aqua. Most of these Asian interns have already found new jobs while others those who returned to their previous jobs have gotten promotion. Most of these interns are likely to remain in the sector after their graduation.

Similarly, seven European students have completed internships in Asia. Ben Belton and Farah from UoS studied the technology transfer and causes of disease problems in tilapia in Thailand. Two students from UoA (Sonia and Susana) from Portugal conducted research at AIT collecting samples from Nam Sai Farms Co. Ltd., to assess the residues of the methyltestosterone (MT) hormone used for sex-reversal of tilapia fry. A few students from universities other than the partners joined the internship at their own cost. For example, Mikael Chavelly from Montpellier, France, conducted a trial to compare two strains of tilapia. Gladys from Ghent and Naomi from Menno Simons College in Winnipeg, Canada, helped staff at RIA1. More attempts are on-going especially advertisement through emails and internet, targeting students especially from western universities and presenting it during conferences and this has resulted in more than 25 inquiries in just a few months.

More than 30 instructors from all partners involved in internship have also benefited in terms of knowledge through field visits and seminars given by the interns after completion. The activities of the student during the internship itself have increased the involvement of academics which in turn has helped to improve the transfer of knowledge and technology to the community.

Realising the scope for internship, all the Asian partners have incorporated internship into their curricula as 1 or 2 credit courses specifying the number of hours to be spent in the field. It will take time to show how the collaboration can help in achieving the broader goal

of the project i.e. poverty reduction and improvement of people's livelihood through aquaculture development and aquatic resources management.

8.4. Challenges

Establishing any collaboration means creating some challenges and be prepared to face it. The challenge is even greater to make the collaboration sustainable if it is established with time-bound donor funding.

The formalisation of partnerships with private farms and community organisations has been a challenge as small companies and farms are not familiar with formal processes and documents. They worry about signing any documents and going through legal processes. Therefore, signing the MoU with them has been a problem although they generally accept interns informally.

During the implementation, one of the partners did not perform to the expected level and was, therefore, replaced. Many of the collaborations, however, tend to continue even so because they are based on close friendships. But when it comes to the implementation, this is counterproductive. It reduces the chances of future collaborations because other partners may not be keen to continue and donors may not be willing to support them further.

There are still more challenges to this collaboration although there are indications that it can be continued. For example, internship has been incorporated in the existing curricula in Asian partner institutions agreeing that the cost of transport for internship will be borne by the students and accommodations by their host organisations. However, these have created some feelings of burden to them.

At the same time, as the collaboration was initiated with the donor's support, most beneficiaries and some of the people working closely with partners expect more support rather than helping and sharing the costs. For examples, when we advertised for intern positions clearly mentioning they were unpaid, many applicants expected that stipends and living allowances would be covered by the project. This misconception has been one of the hurdles for sustainability. Similarly, there are still some doubts whether the partners will give of their time and efforts to continue this collaboration in the future even though a clear commitment has been made.

8.5. Sustainability

The uniqueness of collaboration for aqua internship is that partners are committed to run the internship programmes in the long-run on the basis of cost sharing among the parties involved such as students, institutions and host organisations. This means the fund provided by the EU is only for starting the process or establishing the well-functioning collaboration. For internship programmes the cost sharing idea has been adopted. For example, host organisations are happy to provide accommodation for interns as they work free for the hosts. Interns are happy to go out to work and cover their own travel costs because they get good experience and exposure to the real industry. Travel costs for Asian interns are minimal. For western interns it is an Asian tour they would like to have even if it is not the part of

university programme. Some of the universities even have some funds to support them. In such cases, interns get three-fold benefits free of charge. Asian institutions which organise these also get direct benefits. For example, within a year of our collaboration, IAAS (Nepal) was able to attract more students for its M. Sc. Programme from a staggering 1 or 2 per batch to 5, which is the maximum the institute has set as the target. A Vietnamese partner (UAF) is working with private companies to test their products. As a result, it was able to establish a good laboratory funded by NOVUS International. All of these have helped UAF increase its M. Sc. enrolment by 300% from 9 to 27 in 2009 compared to 2008 (AIT, 2009b). This has even created greater needs for collaboration as UAF has a shortage of qualified lecturers, needs more research ideas, better facilities and other support.

While visiting other institutions for cooperation, several institutions have shown their interest to join. Attempts to link with other collaborations have also helped to continue as they also have similar objectives and may have some resources to mobilise. For an example, Ghent University in Belgium immediately showed interest in joining when the Project Coordinator presented the collaboration during a conference (Bhujel, 2008). They recruited a student in Vietnam (RIA1) and have also shown interest to send more. There are many more inquiries from other western universities and their students for joining the internship at their own cost.

An on-line application system has been developed within the project homepage (<http://www.aarm-asialink.info/apply.html>) to target western university students. Any interested person can send inquiries and apply on-line. The Project Team has established a separate Aqua-Internship unit at AIT which charges a nominal fee (management fee) to the individuals for the service. With this service fee, staff can be supported to facilitate internship so that it can run in the long run. Promotion of the internship has also been done during conferences and also via internet. It is hoped that more people will join. Depending upon the number of interns and income, more staff can be added later. Whereas for students of Asian partner institutions, internship has been developed as a course and incorporated in their curricula.

8.6. Lessons learned

Collaborations can be long lasting if all the partners feel the need and if the new collaborative activities are incorporated into the existing system. The most important factor in sustainability is the benefits to the stakeholders that convince them to share the costs; however, they also need to feel that they are treated equally and their roles are well recognised.

Formally, collaborations are at the institutional level; however they actually begin with like-minded individuals resulting from their good working relationship and mutual trust. In brief, collaborations are initiated and successfully run in the long run if the following points are addressed:

- Individuals involved in the collaborations expect either financial benefits or opportunities to upgrade their careers. Those who expect career upgrade are

interested to be involved with the collaborations which focus on more research and publication.

- In addition to financial benefits, individuals also expect other direct benefits in terms of travel and exposure to the new country and places.
- A prior working relationship is a key factor in selecting partners.
- In many cases individuals feel obligations e.g. alumni or former staff to assist their organisations or even their countries through collaborations. In such cases, neither career nor the financial benefits are very important. Indeed, they may have stronger commitments with higher chances of success.
- Many institutions compete for performance and presence in the region. Competition among the institutions for existence, growth as well as internationalisation has become the norm nowadays.
- Many collaborations are established just to keep continuity of relationships or linkages but they may not be performing well enough to produce actual outcomes.
- Most partners of collaborations expect to enhance the image of themselves or their institutions. This is true especially if they are newly established.
- Too rigid rules and regulations may not work especially in developing countries. Therefore, plans have to be flexible enough in terms of time and rules.

8.7. Recommendations

One of the most important notions to be established for any collaboration among the partners is that donor funding is only for the initiation of good collaboration, and not for long term support. Indeed, those collaborations must provide a clear sustainability plan even after the funding is ended. Partners of such collaborations have to clearly mention all possible ways for the continuation of activities. For this purpose, they have to have plans to justify the need of the collaboration to the stakeholders. Once stakeholders and authorities with resources realise this, they will incorporate such collaborative activities into their institutional annual programmes. In such cases, authorities will have to make provision in the annual budget to support those activities.

The most important avenue in achieving long-term sustainability is to make provision for cost sharing among the stakeholders. Benefits should be clearly shown in order to convince the stakeholders involved. In such a case, the relation of beneficiaries and donors do not exist. Although it seems difficult, it is achievable if it is carefully thought out while designing the collaboration.

Other methods of achieving sustainability are to mobilise local resources as described by Alexander (1996). Some of the collaborations may result in products and services. By marketing and selling them, collaborative activities could be continued e.g. books, reports, manuals, maps, videos, CDs, T-shirts and so on. Similarly, offering training programmes and consultancy services based on the experiences gained from the collaborations can also generate income in many cases. Other strategies could be creating a group (e.g. alumni club) from the collaboration and collecting reasonable membership fees or donations on a regular basis (monthly/annual). This can generate income to continue collaborative activities. Raising funds regularly by organising marathons, special dinner speeches, concerts, sports

competitions, and so on can also be ways of generating income locally to carry on the collaborative activities.

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