Final Report

**Thematic End-Term
Evaluation of the Nature, Role,
and Impact of Networks in
view of Higher Education for
Sustainable Development**

vliruos
SHARING MINDS, CHANGING LIVES

18 July 2023

Evaluation Management Response – VLIR-UOS

General

Evaluation title:	Thematic End-Term evaluation of the nature, role, and impact of networks in view of Higher Education for Sustainable Development.
Evaluation year:	2017 - 2022
Authors:	Syspons GmbH
How was this <u>management response</u> developed and validated ?	This management response has been prepared by an internal VLIR-UOS evaluation working group and was subject to validation by the BUOS during the meeting of 30 June 2023. After discussion with Bureau UOS, the management response was validated.

Appreciation of evaluation

What is your general appreciation of the evaluation report?   **Were there shortfalls or limitations in the process and/outcomes? Are there any additional insights not articulated in the recommendations?**
The process of the evaluation was quite challenging. Due to different reasons, the evaluation process faced delays, when deadlines were already quite tight. This was mainly due to a slower start of the evaluation and several periods of sickness within the evaluation team. This resulted in a suboptimal timing for the field phase, which resulted in a further delay. As the key lead of the evaluation team dropped out after the field study due to medical reasons, we feel more detailed information and nuances are missing in this report that might have been captured during the process of this evaluation. As a result, although the evaluation offers valuable insights, it sometimes lacks depth, and not all recommendations draw from solid evidence. During the restitution meeting, we received valuable input from the promotors, which were added to the recommendations. However, considering the scope and budget of the evaluation, more was expected in terms of documentation of the field phase, the quality of the analysis, and the robustness of the lessons learned/recommendations.

Management response to recommendations of the evaluation

For every recommendation, please fill out a table:

Recommendation 1:	If VLIR-UOS wants to put an emphasis on strengthened research capacities and enhance projects' sustainability, it should promote MSPs within future VLIR-UOS projects.
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree)**:**	In its new five-year programme, VLIR-UOS will place more emphasis on enabling broader collaborations, including interinstitutional collaborations among Higher Education Institutions. For this purpose, VLIR-UOS has already included a bonus system in its latest TEAM call. The Bureau UOS already decided in 2021 that this bonus system also needs to be explored for Multi-Stakeholder partnerships. In the meantime, the Bureau UOS has formally approved the modus operandi of a MSP bonus in the upcoming 2024 call for TEAM projects. More broadly, the focus in stakeholder engagement, and effective synergies/collaborations has been further strengthened in the new five-year programme. However, it needs to be highlighted that VLIR-UOS projects are not limited to promoting strengthened research capacities. We identified 6 outcomes (cf. VLIR-UOS ToC) in our five-year programme, implying that similar projects will rather focus on other outcomes, such as strengthening educational capacities. Related to this, recommendation 4 states that to enhance educational capacities, networks should be promoted, while strengthening research and educational capacities often go hand in hand. Furthermore, the recommendation insufficiently takes into account different programmes and their finality. An SI might be entirely research focused, but realising a MSP with co-creation during a project period of 2 years is not always realistic or helpful (cf. mid-term evaluation). VLIR-UOS considers this recommendation to be relevant for some, but not all projects. Consequently, VLIR-UOS will look for positive incentives to establish MSPs in VLIR-UOS projects, rather than obliging it for all projects

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	Partially accepted
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**
Discussion with Bureau UOS on including incentives for MSPs in next TEAM call	Discussed during Bureau UOS of 30/6/2023, which led to the approval of a bonus for MSPs in the upcoming TEAM 2024 call. This call will be launched in October 2023.

Recommendation 2:	**When funding MSPs, VLIR-UOS should support strengthening co-creation processes within MSPs.**
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Partially accepted
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	VLIR-UOS has always emphasised the importance of co-creation in academic partnerships for sustainable development, but since the start of this five-year programme and with the introduction of the SDG principles as a compass for VLIR-UOS projects, the approach has been broadened and aims at strengthening the engagement with non-academic actors through smart stakeholder engagement and network or through multi-stakeholder partnerships. VLIR-UOS actively promotes interinstitutional collaboration and MSPs in its project calls and platform activities. Furthermore, co-creation as an approach is valued by the organisation and has been integrated in one of the key VLIR-UOS outcomes: "Individuals co-create and apply relevant knowledge, skills, and attitudes". Furthermore, within the selection criteria, ownership by the local partner and co-creation, (e.g. a jointly written proposal and joint implementation) are arguments to evaluate a proposal positively. VLIR-UOS believes in joining forces, pooling together all available expertise and skills, working together and co-creating regardless of the structure of a collaboration. Every project is invited to reflect on how it can engage with actors in creating results, but projects will always develop this in line with the objectives and the context of the project.
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**

Further clarify concept of co-creation	VLIR-UOS will further clarify "co-creation" in upcoming calls.

Recommendation 3:	When funding MSPs, VLIR-UOS should support the identification of companies from Belgium / Europe as potential partners for MSP if appropriate for the project's context, at the proposal or early implementation stage.
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree)**:**	Partially accepted
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	This recommendation is not sufficiently supported by evidence. It is based on the simple finding that (a) Belgian/European companies are considered as innovative and (b) the observation that they are currently not participating in VLIR-UOS projects. While the idea merits further investigation, a thorough analysis is missing to claim such strong recommendations. As stated earlier, VLIR-UOS values MSP, with actors coming from the Global North as well as the Global South, as each has its merits and shortfalls. Though, in its new five-year programme, VLIR-UOS will place more emphasis on enabling broader collaborations, as MSP is one of the guiding principles for the organisations. This may include Belgian/European companies.
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**
No further action required	Completed

Recommendation 4:	If VLIR-UOS wants to focus on strengthening educational capacities, it should promote Networks within future VLIR-UOS projects.
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree)**:**	Partially accepted

If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	Within its ToC, VLIR-UOS identified six outcomes, one of them being 'HE&Sis provide higher quality and more inclusive education'. This outcome is not a stand-alone outcome, but is interconnected with the other outcomes. Improved quality and inclusiveness of education might e.g. also need improved organisational systems, processes or structures or even needs-oriented research to also offer practical training in the curriculum, depending on the institutional context. Looking at the evidence provided in the evaluation, we observe limited evidence to prefer networks above MSPs and too limited to draw such a strong conclusion. We interpret this recommendation rather as highlighting the importance of involving non-academic stakeholders in projects with a main focus on education (like all other projects), be it in the form of a network approach or in a multi-stakeholder partnership. In line with recommendation 1, VLIR-UOS will continue to stimulate collaboration within its portfolio, be it through regular stakeholder engagement (cf. networks) or multi-stakeholder partnerships, if relevant for the context and objectives of the project
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**
No further action required	Completed

Recommendation 5:	**When funding networks, VLIR-UOS should investigate to what extent the frequency of communication is aligned with the essential needs within these networks.**
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree)**:**	Disagree
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	This recommendation is not sufficiently supported by evidence. The recommendation is solely based on a correlation between projects with poorer results and the frequency of communication. A thorough analysis looking at the cause-effect relationship is absent. The evaluation assumes that frequent communication leads to weaker projects in a network context, while it may be that a more frequent communication might be due to challenges in a project. Other external variables and hypotheses have not been considered. Overall, communication has always been key in a multistakeholder project in view of efficient circulation of information and experiences.

Actions Planned	Implementation stage + timeframe:
No further action required	Completed

Recommendation 6:	To achieve the greatest impact in terms of effective uptake of project results, VLIR-UOS should put emphasis on funding TEAM and JOINT projects.
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Disagree
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	It should be noted that VLIR-UOS no longer funds JOINT projects, as the concept has been integrated in the TEAM format. VLIR-UOS funds change, so 'uptake of project results' is fundamental. A typical project will combine different outcomes, in the case of an SI/TEAM project this could be a combination of strengthened research practices (outcome 4) and creating the conditions for uptake (outcome 5), or a focus on educational innovation (outcome 2) and creation of the conditions for uptake (outcome 5). For an SI, which is a short-term project of 2 years, we also aim to create the conditions for uptake. However, we are well aware that 2 years is too short to go very far in this respect, whereas a TEAM project, with a broader scope and longer time frame, provides more possibilities to engage with stakeholders and start realising uptake. This, however, does not lead to the conclusion that SIs should not be funded anymore, as the SI format has its own merits (as an entry point for new academics, or as a way to start with a small project with specific results to explore a partnership, etcetera). As highlighted in earlier evaluations, the complementarity of the VLIR-UOS portfolio, and the possibility to have follow-up projects, is a strength of VLIR-UOS (cf. SEO impact evaluation).
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**
No further action required	Completed

Recommendation 7:	In general, when VLIR-UOS funds project, it should support applicants on financial sustainability in their project design and to effectively monitor the progress and achievement of these strategies.
Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree)**:**	Partially agree
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	SI and TEAM projects primarily focus on supporting human capital and to a lesser extent on (physical) investments which bring about recurring operation and maintenance costs. Projects are stimulated to pay sufficient attention to activities (e.g. grant-writing workshops) that can strengthen HE&SIs' capacity to successfully compete for and attract other financing opportunities. Sustainability is more than only financial sustainability. The VLIR-UOS selection criterion 'impact and sustainability' covers different elements. Depending on the scope of a project (IUC, ICP, TEAM, SI, etc.), the level of reflection on sustainability issues is differentiated. VLIR-UOS does not expect SI projects to elaborate strongly on this, but expect clarity on institutional embeddedness that allows benefits to continue after the funding. Example: an SI project that focuses on updating a Master programme curriculum, needs to demonstrate institutional embeddedness rather than financial sustainability. On the other hand, a long-term institutional cooperation is expected to pay more attention to reflection and actions related to financial sustainability (and is included in the proposal format). Still, VLIR-UOS will consider integrating this more strongly for TEAM projects where this is relevant and feasible.
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage + timeframe:**
Maintain, and consider strengthening, the integration of (financial) sustainability in the TEAM-project proposals.	Planned for next TEAM 2024 call
Considering including this element of financial sustainability in ex-post monitoring of projects.	Planned for 2024

Recommendation 8:	Also, when VLIR-UOS funds projects, it should encourage applicants to embed strategies on environmental sustainability in their project design, if applicable to the project's context, and to effectively monitor the progress and achievement of these strategies.

Management Response (Agree, partially agree, disagree):	Agree
If recommendation is rejected or partially accepted, report reasons:	In its new five-year programme, VLIR-UOS adheres to the strong and active sustainability model (also known as the Doughnut model of social and planetary boundaries), which aims to ensure meeting the needs of all people within the means of the planet. This implies that project proposals and reporting formats invite project applicants to consider the environment and environmental sustainability during the project identification & formulation phase. Additionally, they are asked to monitor and reflect upon the project's effects on the environment and the risks posed by the environment on their project. Furthermore, as a university cooperation for development community, we monitor our CO2 emissions and compensate them, while monitoring and reconsidering ways to travel. Starting from the interconnectedness principle of Agenda 2030, we invite projects to reflect on how their projects connect with environmental sustainability. This was already integrated in proposal formats for the 2017-2021 programme, though VLIR-UOS recognises that more needs to be done to engage more meaningfully with 'environmental sustainability' in VLIR-UOS projects and project proposals.
Actions Planned	**Implementation stage** (not started, underway, completed, cancelled) **+ timeframe** (action finalised)**:**
VLIR-UOS will set up a learning trajectory, in which together with our academic community, we will collect and develop tools to support the promoters to better integrate environmental sustainability in their projects, in each phase of the project cycle.	Trajectory planned for 2023-2024. This may include, among others, offering concrete good practices as examples, offering tools to integrate environmental sustainability, offering trainings, or dedicating Community Talks specifically to this topic.