



# HAPPY Newsletter



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Introducing the HAPPY Project

**Promoting the value of qualitative  
methodology in higher education and society.**

A conversation between two HAPPY partners

**“Good things can happen as a result of  
people talking to each other.”**

Esther den Hartog and Samir Patel

By Jamyang Choden

**Meeting new faces, experiencing a  
new journey**

The HAPPY Project enhances collaboration between higher education institutions in Europe and Bhutan and implements innovative qualitative research, teaching and learning approaches in Social Sciences and Humanities. It aims to sensitize different stakeholders about the added value of qualitative methods, modernize existing higher education curricula and enhance the competencies of academics in qualitative teaching and research.

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**[www.happy-project.eu](http://www.happy-project.eu)**

# PREFACE

## **Being happy about HAPPY.**

"I think HAPPY is the best name that a European project could have!" was a reply from another project coordinator at a virtual meeting that brought together different projects with the same key mission – improving higher education teaching and learning. But why HAPPY? The most obvious answer is due to the worldwide famous Gross National Happiness index that has been the most significant national development priority for Bhutan since the 1980s. But it is not only about that. We think that happy faces are the main driver of project success and should be therefore set as a key impact indicator of every collaborative project that connects different countries, cultures, organizations and – above all – its people. And we also hope that reading our newsletters will bring some smiles and other happy expressions to our readers' faces. At least this happened when writing this first issue of the HAPPY newsletter which provides some introductory insights into the HAPPY project.

And a final advice borrowed from Bobby McFerrin: Don't Worry Be Happy

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# Introduction to HAPPY Project

The enhancement of Gross National Happiness (GNH) has been the most significant national priority for Bhutan since the 1980s, and it has evolved into the guiding purpose of Bhutan's development. Qualitative research has been recognized as critically important to achieve well-being in line with GNH. But, scientific research teaching methods, as applied in the country's institutions for tertiary education, are strongly geared towards the natural sciences with a dominance towards quantitative research methodology - much of it being statistical analyses. These quantitative methods however do not suffice to engage with all the social and developmental challenges that Bhutan is facing.

Qualitative research methods allow researchers to investigate the challenges that people face in their everyday lives, the ideas they cherish, their beliefs, and the values which they adhere to. As an approach, qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore societal notions such as ethnicity, gender, religion, social class, and so on. The data elucidated by qualitative research are required to contribute to evidence-based policies which address social and developmental challenges in Bhutan such as the strengthening of democratic institutions, urban vs. rural disparities, climate change mitigation and adaptation, among others.

Still, there is a disjuncture between the desire for qualitative research data and the absence of knowledge, skills and technical infrastructure to teach qualitative research methods. Most academic staff do not have PhDs, and it may be more than a decade before this improves significantly. The HAPPY Project involves Bhutanese and European partners working towards developing capacity for the teaching-learning of qualitative research methods (QRM) with co-created curricula at relevant colleges in Bhutan.

The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that together offer all the Social Sciences and Humanities degree

programmes in Bhutan, all under the Royal University of Bhutan's (RUB) degree framework are: Royal Thimphu College (RTC), College of Language and Cultural Studies (CLCS), Sherubtse College (SC), and Norbuling Rigter College (NRC). These four HEIs will be supported through the Erasmus+ Capacity Building in Higher Education programme in partnership with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Netherlands), Leiden University (Netherlands), the Institute for Innovation and Development (Slovenia), and the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia).

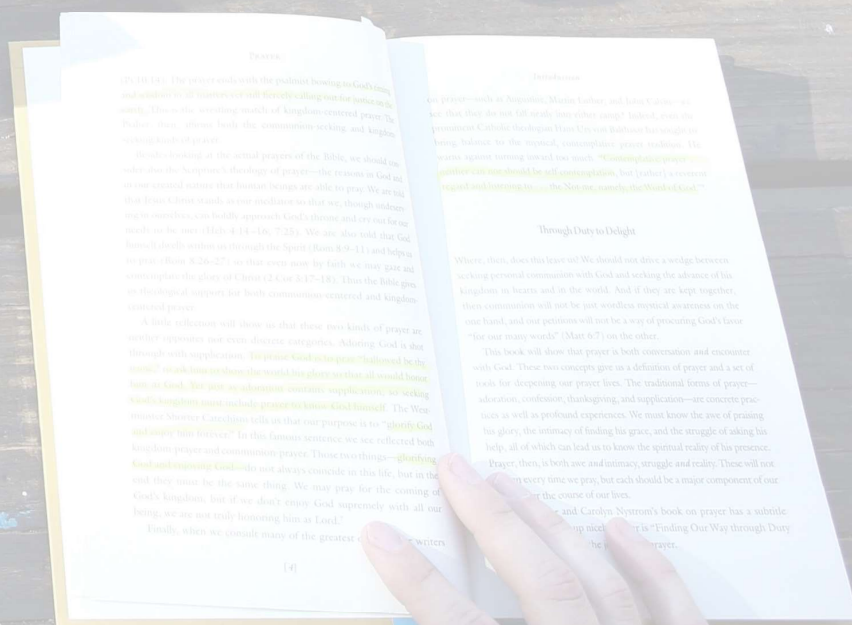
The main target groups are the academic staff and ultimately the students at the colleges. In addition to training of tutors on qualitative research methods guided by the EU QRM experts, the partners will work together to enrich, re-design, align and implement curricula and supervision with QRM to deliver employable graduates with increased transversal competencies able to address the needs of the labour market and society at large. Approximately 35 HE faculty members would be

directly benefited with capacity building activities through the project. The student flows impacted by the project (counting all the programmes and their relative sizes) would be approximately 200 distinct students each year in each of RTC, CLCS, and Sherubtse, and approximately 100 distinct students each year at NRC.

**The overall project aim is to improve qualitative research methodology (QRM) by introducing new pedagogical approaches to contribute to sustainable development at the level of state, civil society, business, and local communities, in dealing with rapid social change, cultural preservation and promotion, and climate change.**

The aforementioned initiatives will be supported by development of an ICT-based online Learning Management System (LMS) focusing on QRM, language-sensitive QRM training and resource development, strengthening of academic support services, and QRM-related procurement to enhance research tools.

The partners look forward to their work together on the HAPPY project over the three year period January 2021 – January 2024.



# MAIN PROJECT ACTIVITIES

- A kick-off meeting in April 2021 brought the project partners together to establish a common understanding of the project's aims, activities, management, and processes.
- Sensitization workshops will advocate the significance and value of integrating QRM in curricula in HEI and will demonstrate the applicability of QRM data in sustainable development within the Bhutanese context.
- A Training of Teachers (ToT) will be deployed to university-level instructors and provide a range of qualitative research methods training. It is intended to meet the needs of individual institutions and faculty who are working to build this capacity.
- Curriculum development workshops will work towards the redesign of existing curricula by using traditional and innovative QRM components into existing courses and by developing new modules/building blocks that can be integrated into these courses.
- The development of an ICT-based online Learning Management System (LMS) focusing on QRM will provide a means for communication between staff and students, between partner country and program country Partners, and between teachers from the involved Colleges to engage in a continuous process of learning, sharing and developing research and teaching tools contributing to QRM teaching and methods in the partner country.
- Language-sensitive QRM training will be adapted from the developed materials. HEI teaching in Bhutan takes place in English whereas the national language of Bhutan is Dzongkha.
- Academic support services will be strengthened: a well-equipped library and library/ research/ admin staff who have adequate competencies to support staff and students with access to (online) resources is key to develop, implement and sustain new and innovative courses on QRM.
- QRM will be integrated into the redesigned curricula where appropriate and deployed for students, who will also benefit from improved and innovative teaching approaches by skilled academics.
- QRM related procurement will address the issue of qualitative research methods still being fairly new to the Bhutanese HEI context. This will facilitate qualitative data collection, management, analysis and reporting necessary for the modernisation and implementation of existing curricula.
- A final conference and dissemination activities will involve academic staff, students, and societal stakeholders and allow project partners to present key-outcomes and to share lessons learnt.

# HAPPY Project Partners

## A Conversation Between Esther den Hartog and Samir Patel.

Good morning Esther and good afternoon Samir.

You are both the project managers of the HAPPY Project in Bhutan, and today I am going to ask you some questions to know a little bit more about the story behind the HAPPY Project.

### Why the name “HAPPY”?

**Samir:** As you know, Bhutan is famous for its development paradigm of Gross National Happiness. We wanted to align the name with the core objectives of our project, which is improving capacity for qualitative research methods.

The wider societal impact should be across all kinds of sectors and contribute to the overall development of the country. This will be guided by improving conditions to reach the target of Gross National Happiness. So, the acronym HAPPY – standing for qualitative research in Higher education teaching **AP**proaches for sustainability and wellbeing in Bhutan - was engineered in a way that it captured the essence of the project as well as its broader impact.

**The countries participating in the HAPPY project are Bhutan, the Netherlands and Slovenia. Not only are these countries geographically different, but there are also cultural differences. Can you share how the collaboration in such a diverse group is going so far?**

**Esther:** The collaboration is going very well. Although, I think that the challenges

in the HAPPY Project are more Covid-related, so far, than cultural-related. We developed this proposal before any of us had even heard of Covid. We made a nice project design, including well-thought activities. Little did we know that

we would not be able to implement the activities as we had envisioned.

So, to me this has been a greater challenge than any potential cultural challenges. It is worthwhile to mention here that this project builds upon earlier collaboration, in

which cultural differences have never been hindering. In fact, as a project manager I would like to highlight the commonalities we have rather than the differences.

**Samir:** Yes, the Covid pandemic has definitely given us the challenge to adapt the work packages and align the project activities with the natural strengths of the countries and different institutions in an online setting. For example, in Bhutan, our natural strength is being a good host and having very good in-person interactions. Unfortunately, we have not been able to show this as much as we would have liked to our partners. But in terms of everyone's commitment to doing the best they can despite the



**Samir** is the Dean of Development and External Relations Department at Royal Thimphu College in Bhutan and Project Manager in HAPPY.

new way of online working, I think everyone has done an amazing job.

**Both of you are the project managers of the HAPPY project. Can you tell how the partnership between VU Amsterdam and the Royal University of Bhutan was established?**

**Esther:** Samir and I already met a couple of years ago when I was in Bhutan for another project. Samir then invited me to their campus, I still very vividly remember going to the RTC campus, which is a little bit outside of the capital. We had such a nice encounter, exchanging so many ideas and thoughts. Although at that time, we didn't see any concrete opportunity to collaborate, we immediately recognized that there was mutual interest to do something together. Soon after, we got the opportunity for staff exchange through the Erasmus+ Mobility programme. Two VU Social Sciences faculty-members went to visit RTC and at VU Amsterdam we received Bhutanese staff members from RTC's Faculty of Social Sciences. During these visits, a lot of ideas were exchanged and there was a clear need identified for Qualitative Research Methods in Social Sciences in Bhutan. From here, the ball kept rolling and here we are.

**Samir:** What I found very promising in terms of our collaboration potential was the fact that the development of a larger project idea came simultaneously with the staff visits. Usually, it takes some time getting to know your partner and

understanding the needs. But in our case, it all happened naturally, which I believe is very special.

**What was your personal motivation to make this project happen?**

**Samir:** As part of my professional responsibilities I look after partnerships, particularly those that can help with institutional development efforts.

One of our current partners, dr. Erik de Maaker from Leiden University, was part of a previous project. We got to interact through that project about Qualitative research and we identified some clear gaps. Personally, I think I have seen enough

to confirm that good things can happen as a result of people talking to each other.

The idea of multilateral collaboration with multiple countries and multiple institutions, which

is the essence of Erasmus+ capacity building projects, is what appealed to me the most. Even within Bhutan, we often get too busy and don't have the time to talk with the different institutions about the long-term strategic goals like this type of project allows us to do. So, getting this type of network of people talking together and learning from each other was my personal motivation.

**Esther:** Like Samir, I have a personal motivation and a professional motivation. Personally, I was waiting for a new challenge. I have been coordinating international capacity-building projects for years. But this EU modality which requires a lot of partners to work together, is quite a new challenge. And



**Esther** is a senior Project Manager at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and the Coordinator of the HAPPY project.

having this nice collaboration with Samir and his colleagues was also a motivation, because sometimes you invest a lot in building relationships and trust, and then sometimes it just ends, because there are no other collaboration opportunities anymore. Concerning my professional motivation, I believe that all universities in the world have three pillars: Research, Education and Social outreach. The third pillar, however, is often forgotten, while for VU Amsterdam this pillar is essential. We want to make sure that we put our knowledge and competencies to use for societal challenges anywhere in the world.

**This project lasts until 2023. How do you envision higher education in Bhutan to be developed at the end of this project?**

**Samir:** While our country has this extremely rich culture and traditions, the documentation, the leveraging of culture for broader goals in society, and the building of skills to recognise aspects of society and culture and use these in a variety of occupations, are aspects that have still been underdeveloped in Bhutan. I imagine, through our HAPPY Project, at least amongst the 4 campuses, that we would develop academic capacity for these aspects. The nice thing about building academic capacity is that these are institutions that are very long-lived, stable, and have a clear social outreach mandate. So, the knowledge we build will continue to benefit the society. We would like to see that the capacity built in the academic institutions will feed our students. The other part of this project is to elevate qualitative research methods and outputs amongst wider society and to create impact in the wider society. We hope to generate in the long run outputs that will benefit

the society, for example through better policy-making or societal goals that contribute to Gross National Happiness, like environmental sustainability, equitable socio-economic development, good governance, and so on.

**Working in diverse groups always brings interesting experiences. What do you think that the European Universities will take out of the HAPPY project?**

**Esther:** I think a lot of cultural learning, especially for us Dutch people, being less blunt (\*laughs\*). What I really look forward to, and I think all academics involved in this project do, is strengthening this community of academics who will ask questions. By looking around and observing the challenges of Bhutanese society and shedding light on these challenges through research. I can really envision that this project will just be a steppingstone towards a longer-term collaboration among all the institutions who will become part of this community.

**Any last words before we close this interview?**

Only that we are very grateful to the EU for this opportunity to realise the HAPPY Project. So, a big thanks to Mrs. Alba and her colleagues.



**Led and written  
by Mekky Zaidi.**

**Mekky** is a junior project manager at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and project assistant in HAPPY.

# Meeting new faces, experiencing a new journey

The 'HAPPY Project' has a joyful connotation to its name - when I first heard about it, I assumed that I was going to be part of a 'social project' that looked into the welfare of communities, of course, in an educational spectrum. Whenever I brought up the topic of the project, people would often ask and comment whether this project's goal is to make people happy. I would answer with contentment in a genial tone explaining how HAPPY came about. Learning about the project now, what it entails, signifies, and represents made me grateful. In the manner of speaking, it is a project that will benefit the educational system in the colleges of Bhutan. The project is the first of its kind to take place at a national level with a core focus on improving Qualitative Research Methodologies. Or beyond that.

During the kick-off meeting in Thimphu, Bhutan, we met new faces - in person and via Zoom. How enthralling is it when people from different parts of the world get together for the same purpose? I was delighted to meet each and everyone and talk about our vision for the project. Often it happens that people meet over a meeting for work and they talk for hours but as soon as the meeting gets over, the social connection is no more. I personally hope that all the members of HAPPY stay in each other's contact even after the project ends. Now that the project has officially started, the excitement in me is immense.

Laughter and conversations that clicked during the zoom was yet another lively moment - the break-out rooms during the meeting really helped us connect especially. We found out what our name meant and what the partner countries' cultures

represent! It may sound plain but it was the most interesting part of the meeting. Drinking tea and munching on cookies in between our breaks, listening to Esther's music collection before starting our virtual meeting was wholesome. Zoom is the new normal now, the fact that some people would literally just wake up and attend a meeting minute after, seems so relaxing yet empty. Hours of zoom meetings would let me be snug but I would still wonder about the current scenario without COVID. Meeting people in large groups and travelling without risks is a privilege now, we humans learn by experience and I guess in a way - this is a lesson but what keeps us up is hope. In expectation of hope, we are simply living by.

*written by Jamyang Choden*



**Jamyang**  
is an Assistant  
International  
Relations Officer  
at Royal Thimphu  
College in Bhutan.

# Milestones & what is still to come

## Milestones

**December 2020**

Signing of Grant Agreement

**January 2021**

Attendance of a one-week CBHE conference by the project coordinators to learn about detailed issues related to the implementation of the CBHE projects, the operational management of the grant agreement and the financial rules applicable to the CBHE grant.

**March 2021**

Launch of the HAPPY website

<https://happy-project.eu/>

**April 2021**

5-day online Kick-off of the HAPPY project with representatives of all partners. It created a joint understanding on the project, project management, and financial regulations were learnt and detailed plans were made for the various Work Packages.

**May 2021**

Gatherings with QRM experts to align questions for the baseline assessment + brief capacity building workshop on how to conduct interviews and organize focus group discussions.

**June 2021**

Signing of the Partnership Agreement which will function as the formal base for our project.

## Still to come

Joint thorough baseline assessment of current QRM situation at each of the Bhutanese Colleges.

Training-of-Trainers in QRM methodologies.

Start of procurement process for QRM related investments.

QRM sensitization workshops for Higher Management and Academic Staff.

# HAPPY Project Partners:



## The Netherlands

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU)

<https://www.vu.nl/en/>



## Slovenia

Institute for Innovation and Development of University of Ljubljana

<http://iri.uni-lj.si/en/domov-2/>



## Bhutan

Sherubtse College

<https://www.sherubtse.edu.bt/>



## Bhutan

Norbuling Rigter College

<https://www.nrc.bt/>



## Bhutan

Royal Thimphu College

<https://www.rtc.bt/>



## The Netherlands

Universiteit Leiden

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/>



## Bhutan

Royal University of Bhutan

<https://www.rub.edu.bt/index.php/en/>



## Slovenia

University of Ljubljana

<https://www.uni-lj.si/eng/>



## Bhutan

College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS)

<https://www.clcs.edu.bt/>



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