



HAPPY Newsletter



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Reflection on workshop by Tashi Chopel, Sherubtse College
QRM Workshop: Through my eyes

Conversation with students of Social Sciences at Sherubtse College
“Qualitative research is exciting – but are there jobs for us?”

Focus group with faculty of Sherubtse College
How does college education prepare students for society?

Europe meets Bhutan

HAPPY Project Milestones

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ON THE COVER PHOTO: HAPPY Project team at CLCS

PREFACE

“So? How was your holiday?” “Oh, I would like to trade places with you”. These are the most common question and comment I get asked by default when I have been travelling for work. Yes, I get to places that most people associate with distant, exotic holiday trips. However, that is where the comparison ends in my view. Would most people really want to swap if they realised what a work trip entails? I think of the 2.5 weeks that **HAPPY team** from Europe recently spent in Bhutan. It took us 2 days (and hours of waiting in Delhi) to reach Bhutan. We didn’t have time for a jetlag as the first meetings were already scheduled on Sunday. Our suitcases were never unpacked because we usually only slept one night somewhere before travelling on again. We did that travelling in an old school bus in which we spent 27 hours to reach eastern Bhutan. 27 hours of continuous bumping, at an average speed of 10-20 km per hour along steep chasms, ravines and dizzyingly high mountain passes. And those 27 hours we also had to return. Every night there were dinners or meetings planned so we didn’t see our rooms until 11pm. And that for 2.5 weeks non-stop.

Is this a complete lament? No, it certainly isn’t! It was wonderful to finally meet all HAPPY partners live after 2 years of Covid, to better understand the context of our joint project, to laugh and cry as team members because that too is collaboration. An intensive trip like this reinforce the feeling of being ‘happy’ to be part of the HAPPY Project.

Esther den Hartog, Coordinator of HAPPY Project

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How does college education prepare students for society?

A focus group discussion with faculty of Sherubtse College

“Being trained as an academic in the Social Sciences or the Humanities contributes to becoming a critical thinker”, one of the faculty who participated in a focus group discussion held at Sherubtse college said. And “qualitative methodology”, another faculty member added, “allows for the exploration of how different people have distinct perceptions and views with respect to a variety of things”. These quotes characterize a focus group discussion we had with faculty teaching a variety of programmes at Sherubtse, one of the four Bhutanese colleges partnering in the HAPPY project.

The Happy project started during the covid-19 pandemic, and this was a first occasion in which we, as European partners, could visit the partner colleges in Bhutan. Starting out from the Bhutanese capital Thimphu, it took us a bus ride of some 27 hours, spread out over two days, to reach Sherubtse college. The journey took us across several mountain passes, revealing the breath-taking beauty of

the Himalayas. Unlike the preceding colleges we had visited, at Sherubtse we were able to spend three days, giving us more time to get to know students and faculty. The focus group discussion was one of the activities we organized. Our aim was to capture their views on how the university prepares students for the

future and what role qualitative research can play within this journey. Sitting at a round picnic table on an open balcony at the administrative building, Dr. Erik de Maaker and Dr. Lorraine Nencel conducted the

focus group.

It should come as no surprise for those who have been following the developments in the Higher Education Reforms in Bhutan, that our colleagues stressed how their programmes prepare students for the labor market: making them critical thinkers, becoming more aware of the issues at hand in broader society as well as developing their communication skills. At the same time, our interlocutors readily

Being trained as an academic in the Social Sciences or the Humanities contributes to becoming a critical thinker.

admitted that there were not enough jobs to go around, while also a mismatch existed between supply and demand. Many students wanted to become civil servants and teachers, only very few dreamed of becoming entrepreneurs. The Sherubtse faculty also recognized that despite the development of transversal skills at the university virtually no relationships exist between societal stakeholders and the college, while such connections would no doubt hold huge potential for future employment possibilities as well as increase the relevance of the substantive disciplinary knowledge. So, while our colleagues acknowledged that disciplinary knowledge increases student's ability to contextualize societal configurations, the discussion circled primarily around the development of transversal skills and whether students would get a chance to use them in an overcrowded labor market with limited job opportunities. Qualitative research methodology was recognized as complementary to quantitative

Qualitative methodology allows for the exploration of how different people have distinct perceptions and views with a respect to a variety of things.

research. Its modest but increasing presence in the hard(er) sciences was seen as evidence that its value was becoming more appreciated. The people centric approach innate to qualitative research methodology was identified as one of its foremost strengths, possessing the ability to increase civil engagement and most importantly to conduct research intimately related to Gross National Happiness. Happiness cannot be solely researched in numbers but needs a qualitative approach. While European partners have been using qualitative research for nearly our whole careers, and are aware of its benefits, this focus made us even more aware of the contextual significance and relevance of our HAPPY project in Bhutan. Nowhere in the world except for Bhutan can it be said that qualitative methodology can be used to provide evidence regarding Gross National Happiness. And it is this aspect which makes the collaboration between European and Bhutanese academics so exciting and unique.



Dr. Lorraine Nencel is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and expert in qualitative research design and methodology.



Dr. Erik de Maaker is an associate professor at Universiteit Leiden. He conducts his research mainly (but not only) in South Asia. Erik mainly uses video as his research tool.

Dr. Erik de Maaker and Dr. Lorraine Nencel

“Qualitative research is exciting – but are there jobs for us?”

On a sunny but rather chilly afternoon at Sherubtse College campus, we (dr. Ellen Bal and Gregor Cerinšek) had a lively and insightful discussion with ten students about their study interests, motivations, and future prospects. We decided to sit outside at a wooden table below a

sciences, qualitative research and future careers as social science graduates with the aim to acquire new ideas about how to plan and organize future HAPPY project activities for improving Bhutanese higher education curricula in qualitative research. The aforementioned quotation

“

“I see quantitative studies as rather boring since they do not allow much room for interpretation. It’s just yes or no – no room in between. With qualitative research methodologies you can dig much deeper. You can explore interesting and burning social issues. This is why I decided to study social sciences: to be able to understand the different societal challenges from a variety of perspectives.”

”

metal roof. The place, with green trees all around, created a vivid atmosphere and a safe space allowing everyone to relax and to speak openly. We jointly steered the group discussion about social

met a lot of appreciation and nodding from the other students. “Why did you choose to study social sciences?”, Ellen had asked. The answers differed from student to student, but most of them

emphasized how their studies had encouraged them to dive into unknown territories. One female student dressed in a light blue kira narrated that sociology had been an eye opener for her and that she could now understand lived reality from different perspectives.

In most cases, their parents, who had never studied themselves, had not been able to help with their study choice. The students had relied on advice given by school counsellors and university career advisors. And still they are unsure whether they will be able to get a job as a graduate of social sciences. They realize that their future careers and employment opportunities are not as secure as for those in engineering and computer science. Governmental jobs for social scientists are limited and being cut down further with the new education reforms focusing on science, technology, engineering, and maths subjects.

Yet all students vividly expressed their intention to pursue their interests and dreams in line with their studies: “I want to become a famous writer”, “I want to become a politician”, “I want to work for



Dr. Ellen Bal is an associate professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and expert in qualitative research design and methodology.

the United Nations”, “I want to continue studying abroad”, were some of their future expectations. “I have had only had two wishes since I was a small child”, one of the male students proudly shared with confidence in his eyes: “to study at Sherubtse and to become a teacher”.

He would not be able to forgive himself if he would not achieve both of them. As a student of history at Sherubtse college he is now living one dream and preparing for the second.

Obviously, we were not able to resolve the pending issue of skills mismatch on the labour market. Yet one thing was evident: without the enthusiasm and passion for their study programmes and respective knowledge domains, the sparks in the eyes of our students would not be as bright as they were at that very moment – when

they were speaking about their interests and future hopes as social science graduates. In this positive atmosphere we concluded our discussion, with the students already rushing on to catch their next classes in sociology, history, political science, and economics.



Gregor Cerinšek is a project manager from Institute of Innovation and Development of the University of Ljubljana, coordinating transitional university-business innovation projects.

Dr. Ellen Bal and Gregor Cerinšek



QRM Workshop through my eyes

**A participant's perspective on
attending the workshop**

The three-day workshop on Qualitative Research hosted at the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS), Trongsa has been extremely beneficial for my future research preparation. It has given me the opportunity to explore my interests in a unique way especially because there is rarely an emphasis on Qualitative Research. It was a valuable practical experience and it gave us the opportunity to form a strong relationship with the Bhutanese faculty members, which can be helpful if one were to seek advice on Qualitative Research grant applications in the future.

The workshop lasted from 24th October to 26th October 2022 with the project partner colleges participating in it, of which two colleges are affiliated to the Royal University of Bhutan (Royal Thimphu College, Thimphu; Norbuling Rigter College, Paro) and the other two are constituent (Sherubtse College, Tashigang; College of Language and Culture Studies, Trongsa). This workshop was guided by European experts from the Netherlands (Vrije University Amsterdam and Leiden University) and the Institute for Innovation and Development (IRI UL) of the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The College of Language and Cultural Studies (CLCS) hosted us for the entire workshop. The three-day long workshop was organized to learn how to critically review the existing curricula on qualitative research. Students need to have research skills in order to succeed in college. However, this is not yet recognized as a significant academic topic in Bhutan's universities. Only a few courses study research methods but

more attention is being paid to learning and conducting Quantitative Research. Therefore, the three-day workshop was intended mainly to review the existing social science and liberal Arts programme curriculum and to include qualitative aspects in the existing study modules.

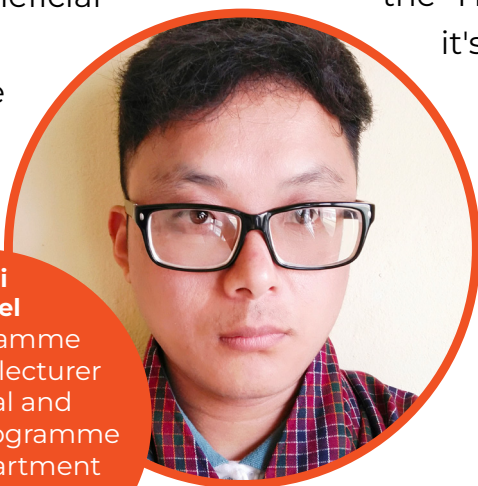
The session gave attendees actual experience with a variety of qualitative research methods while keeping things clear and doable. I found it helpful as a participant to develop my qualitative research abilities and methods by using both practice scenarios and real-world tales. I also learned more about leading a team of researchers in the field and handling ethical dilemmas when conducting research. These lessons on different aspects of cooperative qualitative research were re-energized by various ice-breaking fun activities as a brain break during tiring day-long lessons. With various games implemented in between, it was pros on its part to create an interactive lesson which made it easy to communicate better during the educative discussion. The workshop provided insights into qualitative research strategy for academics and for 'professionals and researchers' development. Building and maintaining relationships with individuals who engage in activities that are similar to your interests is the greatest method to get experience in research. I was able to get a clear understanding of how to do qualitative research and design modules on qualitative issues by getting in touch with people I knew and



asking what I could do to learn more about it. The conversations I've had with specialists from both European and Bhutanese HEIs have been beneficial to my personal development. According to appropriate qualitative approaches, I believe that understanding research as a humanistic or idealistic approach will be very beneficial for the field of educational research in the future. Moreover, we can use qualitative research to investigate issues that are difficult to answer with numbers. Answering major problems requires looking at the practical applications

of particular social phenomena and understanding crucial issues as they are really applied. So, as a member of the HAPPY team, we think it's critical to integrate qualitative research into the curriculum and we want to make it feasible for future programs to do the same.

Tashi Chopel
is a programme leader and lecturer of political and sociology programme at the Department of Social Science at Sherubtse College.



Tashi Chopel, Sherubtse College

Europe meets Bhutan



Erik de Maaker talking to a local man that we met on our way to visit the Paro Dzong.

In October 2022, after more than a year and a half of waiting in uncertainty, we were finally able to travel to the Land of the Thunder Dragon, otherwise known as the Kingdom of Bhutan.

The HAPPY project started right after the outbreak of COVID-19, which caused that every project activity had to move online. We only got to know our project partners from Bhutan through little squares on our computers, which made it much more difficult to form real connection. With time, we adapted to the new reality, and we made the project go on.

In 2022, things started to look much more optimistic and we started planning our trip to the east. In October that year, our dreams became reality. The purpose of our trip was not only to meet all our

project partners in person, but also to gather as much information as possible that would enable us to design future activities.

After landing in Paro, we visited Norbuling Rigter College (NRC) and Royal Thimphu College (RTC). Despite our visit to NRC was on Sunday (holiday), they gave us a warm welcome and impression of how the college includes QRM in their education. In Thimphu we had the opportunity to meet with external stakeholders from various companies and institutes which business could benefit from Qualitative Research Methodologies. Then the real adventure began as we started our journey towards the east of Bhutan to Sherubtse College, which took us 27 hours in total. But we didn't mind, since this way we could experience Bhutan in





all it's realness. In Sherubtse we spoke to students and the faculty to learn about their perspective and fears. You can read more about what we learned in previous articles. Our next stop was the College of Language and Culture Studies (CLCS) near Trongsa, where we stayed for a couple of days. This was also quite a special experience since all other project partners got together to attend a 3-day workshop on Curriculum design. It was quite intense, but very productive and all the participants learned a lot.

We are all extremely grateful that we got an opportunity to visit Bhutan, and we wish that we can get another chance to meet our Bhutanese friends again.

Written by Tilen Šoštarič, IRI UL



Milestones & what is still to come

Milestones

October 2022

- First external stakeholder seminar on added value QRM for society
- Assessment of QRM status at each HEI by European partners
- Training workshop on QRM curriculum revision'
- Joint coordinators meeting in Bhutan
- Collection of communication materials in Bhutan

September 2022

- Opening of QRM labs at each of the HEIs
- Dutch Project Manager guest presenter at 35 years celebration of Erasmus+ in the Netherlands
- Interview by Erasmus+:HAPPY as inspirational story
- Quality Action Plan finalized

November 2022

- Submission of 21-month report to CBHE
- Submission of formal request to extend project period with 12 months

Still to come

Advanced ToT on QRM in Europe

QRM Curriculum revisions

Publication of an article

Lecturer recording for LMS

Finalization of second phase of procurement

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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HAPPY

The word 'HAPPY' is written in a bold, rounded, sans-serif font. The letters are primarily orange, with the final 'Y' transitioning into a bright yellow. Below the word is a large, decorative swirl that starts with a thick orange line, loops around, and ends with a smaller, more intricate swirl in a lighter orange/yellow shade. A small orange dot is placed near the center of the main swirl.