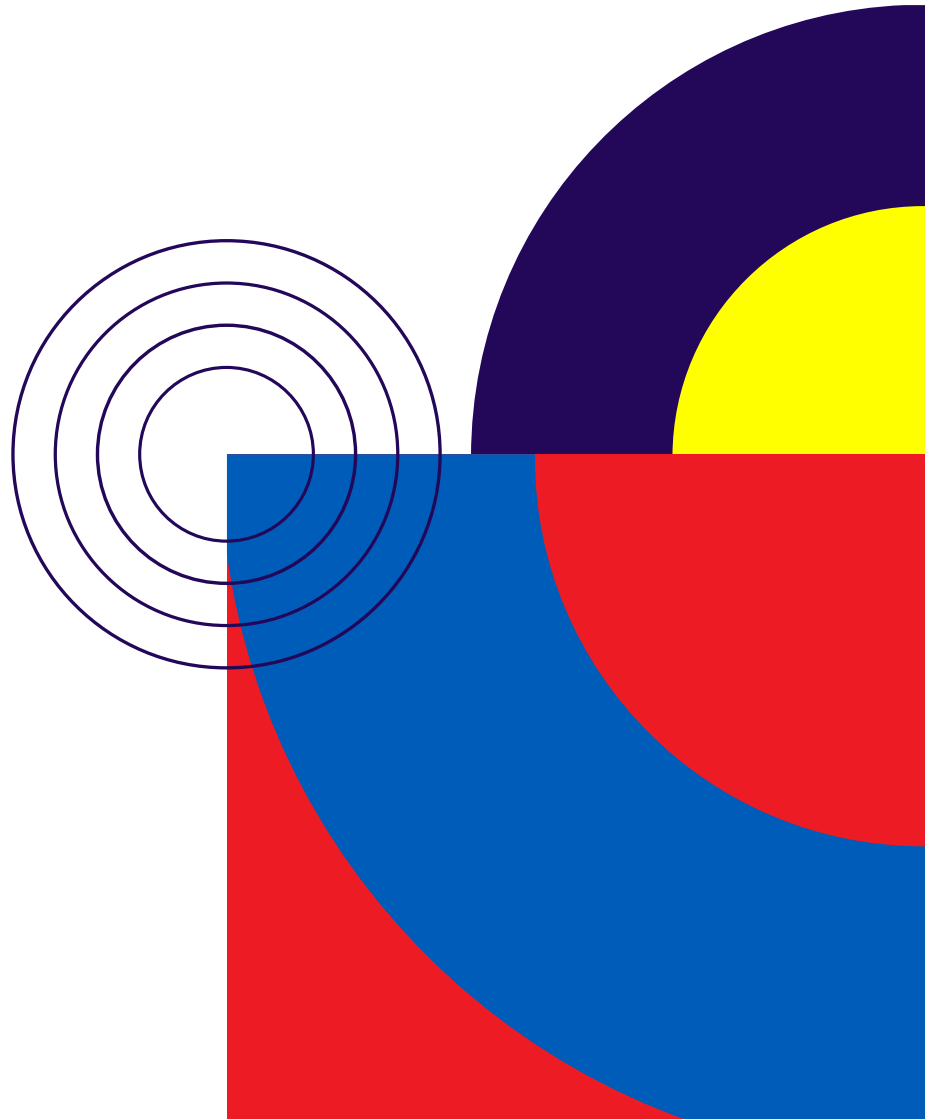

White Paper

Envisioning Gender Equity,
Diversity, and Inclusivity
for South East Asian
Higher Education

September 2023





Transformation is about building a more inclusive institution that respects equity, diversity, and inclusion

Abreu and Bulani, 2023:11



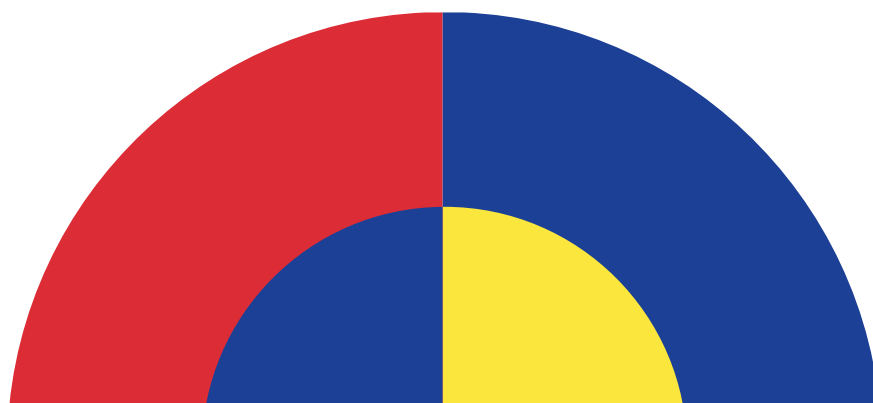
For academia to promote true equality (and ultimately equity), diversity, and inclusivity at a national level, the experiences of women in higher education must improve.

Ridgeway Report, 2023:45

This White Paper is produced as part of the “Strengthening Leadership with Gender Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in Higher Education Institutions in South East Asia Project” part of the Going Global Partnerships Programme funded by the British Council in partnership with SEAMEO RIHED.

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September 2023



Foreword from British Council

This initiative was inspired by a conversation with our future partner – the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education (SEAMEO) Regional Institute for Higher Education and Development (RIHED) - generated by the publication in 2022 of the British Council’s research on [Gender equality in higher education: maximising impacts](#). Higher Education is a vibrant space in East Asia, and there are deep connections between the UK and the region covering research, transnational education and mobility of student and staff. The 2022 report opened new opportunities for us to explore the specifics of how gender discrimination is manifested in Higher Education Systems across the region, not previously been explored in our research.

Dissemination of the 2022 report in the region inspired a number of conversations that set in motion two initiatives. The first initiative produced the White Paper you are about to read, of which more information is provided below. The second is a new report, to be published in July 2024, entitled “*Status of gender equality in higher education sector – an East Asia scoping study*”, which provides a deeper dive into the region. The research from the upcoming report has also been used to inform this White Paper.

The first initiative that has produced this White Paper was led in collaboration with SEAMEO RIHED and is referred to as the “*Strengthening Leadership with Gender Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (GEDI) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Southeast Asia*” Project. The aim of the initiatives is to bring together HEIs in the UK and South East Asia, to develop a better shared understanding of, and advocacy for, equitable access and inclusion for underrepresented groups in academia and leadership. The first phase of the initiative ran from January 2022 to October 2023 and informs the ongoing second phase of the initiative. By leveraging leadership as a transformative tool, it addresses GEDI challenges, facilitates the exchange of ideas,

and contributes to achieving key Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG4 (Quality Education), SDG5 (Gender Equality), and SDG17 (Partnerships for the Goals). Central to the British Council Council’s mission of fostering equality, diversity, and inclusion, the project underscores the role of higher education in nurturing the next generation of leaders and advancing gender equality and empowerment, demonstrating the practical realisation of these values globally.

The White Paper outlines our efforts to encourage leadership in higher education that reflects local context and seeks to bring equality and inclusion from aspirations into realities. It synthesises the insights gathered, challenges identified, and opportunities uncovered to pave a path forward for the continuous advancement of GEDI in higher education systems. This White Paper is not just an outcome but a call to action—a foundation for future work on GEDI, encouraging us to build upon the progress made, share our learnings widely, and engage with an ever-growing network of HEIs committed to this cause. The document sets out actionable recommendations across institutional, national, and regional levels. These recommendations serve as a blueprint for nurturing established relationships, expanding our network, and facilitating an ongoing dialogue on GEDI within the region.

We invite all stakeholders to join us in this ongoing journey, leveraging the insights and recommendations outlined in this document. The British Council, in partnership with SEAMEO RIHED and our network of collaborators, looks forward to continuing this vital work, guided by the belief that through collective effort, we can achieve a more inclusive and equitable future for all in higher education.

Leighton Ernsberger
Director Education East Asia
British Council

Foreword from Seameo

Southeast Asia is well known as a region of a long history, diversity, and living in harmony. With rich resource endowment and emerging economies, all 11 SEAMEO member countries have aspired to create a regional community to ensure security and resiliency, development and prosperity, sustainable future of the inclusive caring and sharing community. To create a sustainable future for the region, higher education plays a crucial role in transforming the sector into a more harmonized space, preparing global citizens and leading innovations in concertedly addressing critical challenges.

Considering more than 8,000 higher education institutions in Southeast Asia with 11 higher education systems, the diversity and inequality in higher education sectors is large. This diversity appears between different countries and within the same country. The inequality can be seen even more clearly following the multiple disruptions occurred from the nontraditional threats such as the pandemic, environmental crisis stemming from the climate change, socio-economic divide, racial discrimination, gender biases etc. The inequality gaps in higher education stem from both a bias on the structural level, which is socially and culturally constructed, and the context specific reasoning. Hence to address the issue effectively, it requires deep understanding and identify strategic entry to change both the status quo and structural transformation. Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity must also be seen as a process where leadership in higher education sector play significant role to lead the change not only for individual but also the learning and the wider society.

As Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) is an intergovernmental organization working as a partner for higher education and development, we are very honor to lead the Project on Strengthening Leadership with Gender Equity, Diversity and Inclusivity (GEDI)

in Higher Education Institutions in Southeast Asia with technical and financial support of the British Council. We strongly believe that it is crucial to strengthen the capacity of Southeast Asian higher education leaders with a futuristic leadership mindset to be gender equal and to embrace diversity and inclusivity. In that way, the higher education leaders can contribute towards collective and innovative learning, sustainable development and foster the human resources of the future with universal values of equality. We recognize the important of the tools to support leaders' decision making. With this, SEAMEO RIHED has worked closely with Institute of Development Studies (IDS) leading think tank for international development and gender equality based in the UK to prepare the White Paper in order to 1. Laying the foundation of the GEDI in higher education situation in the SEAMEO countries 2. Identify challenges and 3. Provide recommendation for the region, countries and universities. It must be underlined that GEDI is a process and a journey which needs to truly understand the contexts of each higher education system and institution.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors of this White Paper who are the Project Consultants from the well-known Institute of Development Studies. The authors conducted desk research for this White Paper for a long time as they would like to tackle the issues of GEDI with evidence-based analysis and to contribute to the initiatives of national and regional organizations on higher education and the Common Space of SEAMEO RIHED.

The policy recommendations presented in the White Paper are important to be applied in the institutional management, national and regional initiatives towards the development of GEDI in higher education sector and in the soul of higher education leaders who will provide knowledge to human resources of the future generation.

Assistant Professor Romyen Kosaikanont
Centre Director
SEAMEO RIHED

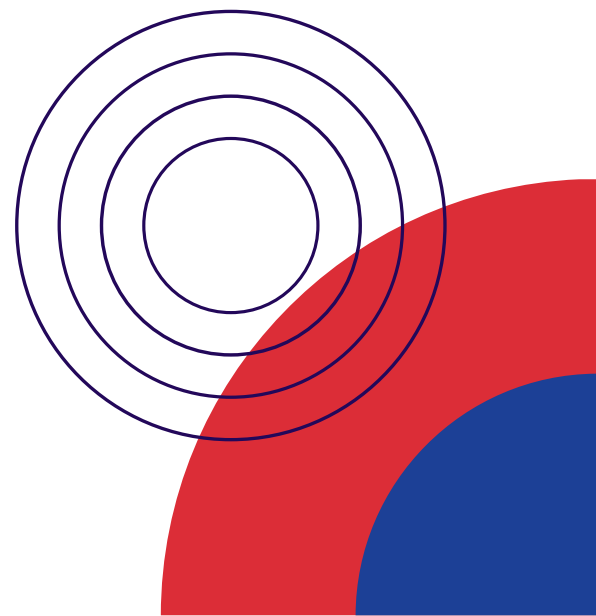
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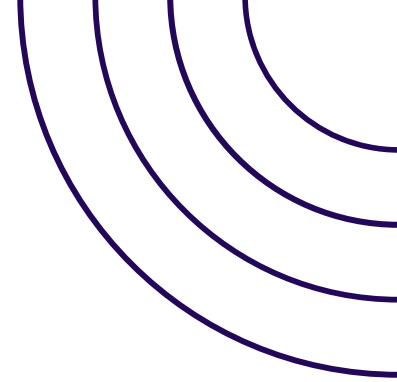
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Executive Summary

This White Paper examines how strengthening higher education leadership with gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity can contribute towards the development of enhanced spaces for collective learning and innovation contributing to Sustainable Development. It brings together the findings from the Project on Strengthening Leadership with Gender Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity in South East Asia implemented by the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) with the support of the British Council between January 2022 and October 2023. This Project was designed to take a regional approach to foster gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity by exploring their diverse interpretations across South East Asia and involved 35 universities from Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam, as well as five UK partner universities. In addition, the findings presented include data from a previous scoping study undertaken by Ridgeway Information published in March 2023 on South East Asian and East Asian countries.

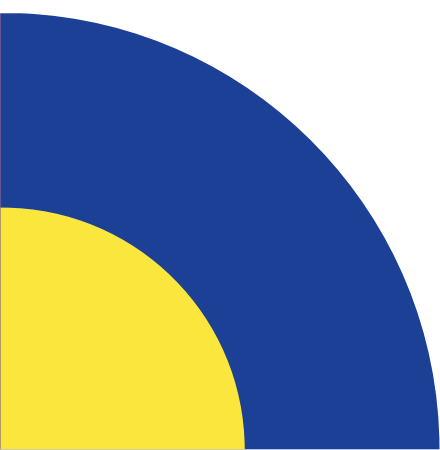
Political contexts and cultural diversity vary greatly across the region, but some commonalities were observed between both regional and global contexts. These were, that while there is a growing diversity in awareness of gender inequality and its importance, the conceptualisation of this is often simplistic and policies on other diversities, such as class, race, dis/ability and ethnic difference lag further behind. Structural and cultural discrimination form an intersectional process, where gender interacts with other markers of social difference in mutually reinforcing ways. Despite gender being enshrined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals as a prerequisite for peace, prosperity, and sustainability, HEIs have historically been structured as gendered and elite hierarchies, with deeply embedded inequalities. If HEIs are able to tackle this within their own institutions and leadership structures, they have the potential and capacity to make a significant difference within their local communities.





Governments within the Greater Mekong Subregion and Timor-Leste have offered varying levels of support to address these issues, and many HE institutions likewise have relevant policies in place to support gender equality. But many see their increase in the number of female students as an indicator of success and fail to look in more depth at the range of subjects in which women are well represented, their decision-making powers, and whether or not they are in leadership positions. Indeed, survey results of project partners revealed a lack of in-depth understanding or interpretation of existing data, with a growing recognition over the course of the project concerning the need to regularly collect, disaggregate and interrogate gender, diversity, and disability ratios, asking key questions about power relations, and control mechanisms. Without this, subtle and often unconscious views of who is eligible for university entry, what subjects they should study, and who is best suited to leadership and caring roles continue to make an impact. It became clear that within the region, as elsewhere, real change in GEDI is a journey, that starts with awareness raising, continues through policy change, and needs to be continually reinforced to affect change in attitudes and actions.

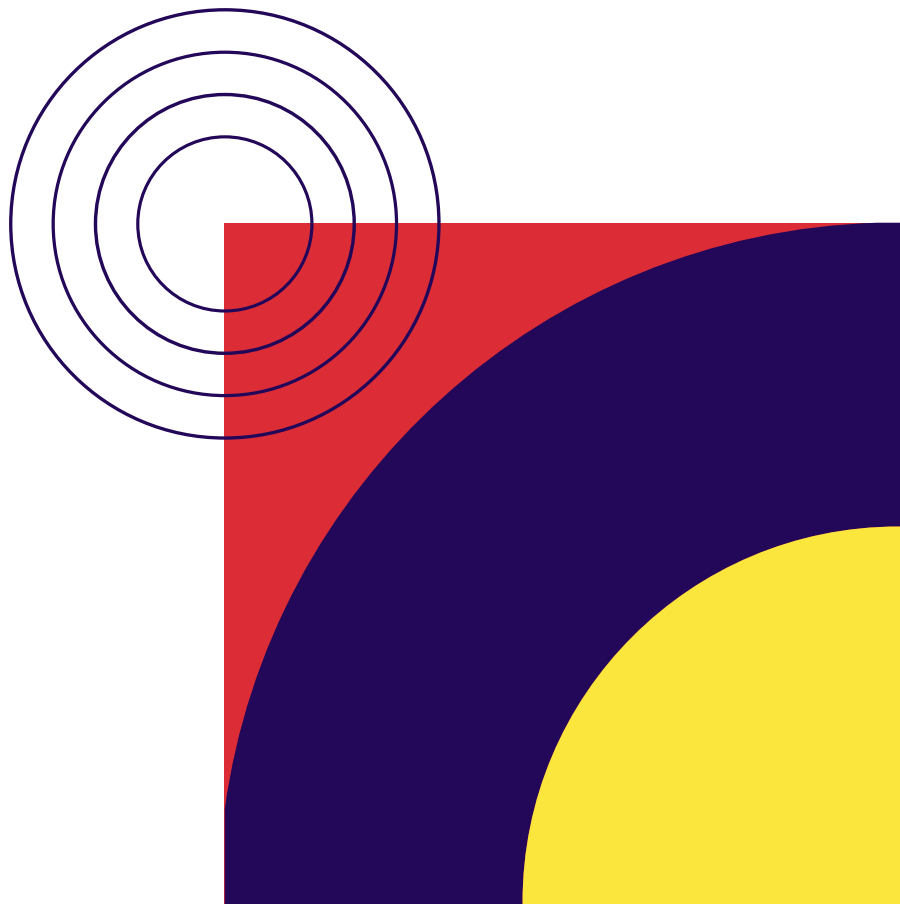
Regular data collection and the opportunity for HEIs to rigorously research their own institutions is an obvious place to start, taking into account sexual harassment and gender fluidity and sexual preference to show progress, effective approaches and stubborn areas slow to change. HEIs could also play a significant role in building capacity within their own institutions and within their local community. This could include integrating gender into the curricula, addressing gaps in internal promotion, publishing research showing the need for greater equality of opportunity, and influencing national and regional policies and the attitudes and values of communities through community-university partnerships. They could also play a role in creating epistemic communities, building on relationships between institutions formed as a result of this project. Partners stressed the value of being able to meet in person, to share learning between each other and UK partners learning from those who progressed further than they had previously been able to of the importance of peer collaboration in research and learning and the potential for developing a collective regional movement. They also outlined the potential for small grants which they could apply for jointly, opportunities to co-author papers, scholarships for marginalised students, an annual conference, or a women's prize for the best-published research. There was a growing commitment to working together for change.



Key points emerging from this report

1. Gender Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (GEDI) in Southeast Asia is strongly influenced by cultural, political and historical factors, and these vary significantly across the South East Asian region. Despite a growing recognition of gender, there is limited recognition of the need for female leadership in most countries, and less understanding of ways of addressing other markers of equality and diversity, such as race and disability. Hence, progress towards implementing change is slow and there is much work to do to translate this understanding into concrete actions. Most countries in the region also widened the gender gap during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Ridgeway, 2023).
2. Higher education has historically been exclusionary despite the massification of Higher Education across the world, and some universities in the region attract more female students than male. While there are obvious exceptions, female participation tends to be centred on particular disciplines and senior leadership is predominantly male.
3. The two surveys conducted during the project that have helped to inform this white paper did show some increase in understanding of the complexities of gender, the importance of visible and hidden power structures and influences, and the need to address other forms of discrimination, through the participation of HEI leaders. Feedback from participants identified recommendations for future work that they and their institutions might engage in together.
4. An important area for change is the need to increase data collection and improve data analysis, especially on disaggregated data to show the background of different respondents; to understand what categories of people conventionally occupy roles at HEIs (class, gender, age, religious/cultural identity), who is excluded; and the significance of different and intersecting vulnerabilities. It is recommended that universities are encouraged and supported to conduct research on themselves. It is also important for all to be aware of sexual harassment and to initiate programmes to identify and define harassment, as well as discuss and address ways of handling this, including policy development and implementation and workplace training.
5. There is also significant work to be done to build capacity within institutions, among staff in the understanding of GEDI, and ways to challenge negative attitudes; with students by bringing GEDI into the curricula; within specific departments such as STEM subjects to engage with gender concepts in their work as well as to encourage more women students; and in teacher education to look at how universities are able to influence schools. Universities are also in a position to influence wider community values and attitudes, and can learn from them by strengthening community-university partnerships. This involves working with and for community groups and supporting business, industry, and the public sector in examining their own policies for recruitment and promotion.
6. Universities also need to take account of how they publicise themselves on their websites in their mission statement; throughout social media; in published materials, and on campus, taking care to include images of and reference to all sectors of society.

7. With political will and strong leadership, universities may look at promotion processes and the use of positive discrimination for certain groups, requiring GEDI into curricula, reviewing access for persons with disabilities and including alternative assessment methods for students with impairments.
8. Both political will and strong leadership should be encouraged across the region, by continuing to support opportunities for cross-university collaboration and networking, in the form of specific online workshops (how to analyse data, understand visible, and invisible power, etc.) backed up with annual face-to-face conferences, where research and progress could be shared and relationships built. This could include a series of prizes and recognition of progress made by universities or joint presentations from university/community partnerships.
9. Initial connections and relationships have been established across the region as a result of the SEAMEO RIHED and the British Council project, and there is more to be done. The tendency to see quotas of women's and men's participation to indicate real change is not unique to the region, and it is common globally. Combatting all forms of discrimination at a personal and institutional level is a journey and that journey has begun. This project and paper have indicated some viable next steps.



1. Introduction

Gender Equity,¹ Diversity, and Inclusivity (GEDI) in South East Asia is strongly influenced by cultural, political, and historical factors, which vary significantly across the region. Rich local cultures impact perceptions of gender and other forms of social difference, and societal expectations continue to shape the experiences of women and other marginalised populations in leadership positions across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and elsewhere in government and the private sector. Certainly, in higher education institutional leadership, traditional gender roles and stereotypes limit women's access to leadership opportunities.

However, there is growing recognition concerning the importance of gender equality leading to equal outcomes for women and men and other marginalised groups in the region. Progress towards implementing measures for gender equity and diversity varies between countries, with some doing very well in this regard while others lag behind, as is the case globally.

Gender should be understood as an intersectional process that constantly interacts with other markers of social difference in mutually reinforcing ways. Markers of diversity such as age, disability, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and geographic location can exacerbate marginalisations already occasioned by gender and power relations. Therefore, gender should be considered as only a starting point in addressing broader marginalisations in various spheres of life. This white paper focuses on gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity (GEDI) in the leadership of higher education institutions, in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and Timor-Leste. Many of its contents are drawn from the project funded by the British Council

and implemented by SEAMEO RIHED, which involved 35 South East Asia HEIs and five United Kingdom (UK) universities that facilitated networking and mutual learning between the UK and the South East Asian partners. The Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, one of the five UK HEIs, has provided the lead for the project which has sought to strengthen leadership with respect to gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity in HEIs in the GMS and Timor-Leste.

This project has aimed to support higher education institutions to nurture an environment where leadership is seen as transformative, creating opportunities for universities and their staff to achieve their full potential regardless of gender and other dimensions of difference.

However, it is important to note the limitations of data in the region. As data infrastructures on gender are limited, it is difficult to collect recent information, as well as data collected in the same format to enable comparison. As the research has relied on secondary sources of data, the paper provides succinct and general recommendations. Recent developments within the region could be captured better with more developed data infrastructures on gender and inclusivity within HEIs in the South East Asian region. First, the paper explores the literature on gender and inclusivity in higher education institutions. Secondly, it provides a brief explanation on the current context of GEDI in South East Asia. Thirdly, policy recommendations are provided for three different levels of policy making bodies – (1) institutional, (2) national, and (3) international settings.

¹ This paper uses both the terms “gender equality” and “gender equity”. Gender equality refers to the equal access to and enjoyment of opportunities by women and men, whereas gender equity refers to the process of being fair to women and men in order to achieve gender equality (UNFPA, 2005).

2. Literature Review

Gender Equality, enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, is both a fundamental right and a prerequisite for peace, prosperity, and sustainability. HEIs, historically structured as gendered hierarchies and elite preserves, have gender and other inequalities embedded within their curricula, management systems, and research procedures and are impacted by these inequalities (Mott, 2021). Yet HEIs also have the potential to be transformative agents of change. Addressing gender hierarchies and other exclusions is beneficial to HEIs. Greater equality and inclusion in scientific research

- a) promotes research excellence and improves the quality of research,
- b) encourages progressive management policies and practices,
- c) enhances innovation,
- d) maximises human development, talent and competitive advantage,
- e) helps develop sustainable development solutions for all members of society and,
- f) contributes to social progress (Mott, 2021; European Commission, 2012; Waldman et. al., 2018).

Across the world, HEIs are developing strategic plans to promote equity and inclusion and to maximise diversity within their academic staff and student populations (Wolbring and Lillywhite, 2021). Addressing GEDI is thus high

on the global political agenda² and offers an opportunity for HEIs to maximise their research potential, increase their opportunities of securing international research funding and enhance their reputation as powerful agents of innovation and social change.

Despite HEIs' emancipatory potential, HEIs operate with systems which, as suggested above, have historically been exclusionary and this can result in ongoing gender inequality and discrimination (Mott, 2021). HEIs often reproduce masculine privilege through both explicit, systematic, structural means and in subtle, hidden ways embedded in social norms, cultural values, and everyday practices (Acker, 1987). There are a wide range of mechanisms that marginalise women and other minorities within higher education, often reinforced by beliefs in a neutral meritocracy and a failure to recognise unconscious bias (European Commission, 2012). Universities continue to experience both horizontal and vertical segregation,³ including the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership and high status positions such as Dean, Vice-Chancellor, professor (the "glass ceiling" effect); in the persistence of part-time and precarious contracts for women academics; the way research and other academic work exceeds conventional work hours making it hard for women to balance homecare and work commitments; the lack of role models for women academics; the burdening of women academics with routine, un-rewarded teaching; lower appreciation of, and lower pay for women academics (Diogo et. al., 2021).

² With support from a wide range of national and multinational organisations, including UNESCO (1988) and the SDGs, USAID, the British Council, Athena Swan, the European Commission (Diogo et al., 2021), the African Research Universities Alliance (Diab and Bulani, 2023).

³ Horizontal segregation refers to the ways in which some subjects and disciplines are dominated by men or women scholars and are associated with particular genders, whereas vertical segregation is the tendency for senior management and leadership to be male dominated while women primarily occupy low prestige roles.

On the one hand, the exclusion of women from academic decision-making – how research should be funded, evaluated, rewarded, promoted, etc. – reinforces women’s exclusion and means that they do not have access to the networks and patronage that create opportunities and nurture academic careers. On the other hand, a series of microaggressions⁴ reinforces stereotypes and discrimination, leading women and other marginalised populations to believe that they deserve their subordinate positions within HEIs.

Bringing about change within HEIs has been challenging (Howson et al., 2018; Diab and Bulani, 2023), despite the fact that, “higher education is an ideal vehicle for perpetrating and challenging gender inequalities in the realms of policy, individual power, social norms and attitudes, fairer access to resources and dialogue, and building capacity for collective action” (Mott, 2021: 17). There are deep-rooted assumptions of academia as a meritocracy and of scientific expertise as gender neutral. Persistent stereotypes, and a lack of women academic role models, perpetuate an ideal of scientists and professors as male, absent-minded, and removed from day-to-day activities. Deeply embedded gender power relations produce and reproduce hierarchies within science, and this restricts resources and opportunities to certain categories of people. There are also institutionalised norms and barriers within HEIs: for example, women



Inequalities persist due to culture, processes, and practices that constitute the structural systems of contemporary organisations and therefore are taken for granted and mostly left unchallenged.

Parsons and Priola, 2013: 1

scientists pick up – and are allocated – certain kinds of labour (teaching, mentoring, pastoral activities), while men undertake strategic work (publications, high-profile committees) which accords them high prestige (Coate and Howson, 2016; Abreu and Bulani, 2023). Certain careers (engineering, mathematics, physics) continue to be seen as appropriate for men, while others (health sciences, nursing) are still seen as “naturally” suiting women; women academics continue to shoulder double or triple burdens. Many of these norms translate into deep-rooted structural forces, policies, and procedures which reinforce gender and other inequalities in HEIs (European Commission, 2012; Howson et. al., 2018; Mott, 2021).



The interesting thing is that inequality has roots in cultures, practices, religion, and traditions. This means that it is always going to challenge any society (and us). The weight on each of our societies is going to be different and there is a lot to be learnt in this workshop.

Abreu and Bulani, 2023:11

⁴ Microaggressions refer to small, seemingly insignificant, yet repeated slights that communicate a lack of value in a specific person, either because of their role in the institution or because of their individual markers of social difference (Young et. al., 2015).

3. Gender EDI in the South East Asia Region: **Current Context**

South East Asia is a highly diverse geo-political area with long-standing and rich traditions, cultures and political arrangements. This means that understandings of gender are contested and varied, and that the conditions

under which HEIs operate vary considerably from country to country and even within countries. A scoping study, undertaken for the British Council by Ridgeway Information in 2023, found that:

This is reflected in “the existence of specific government entities dedicated to women’s rights and development. This is also shown in the new policies and directives being implemented to improve gender equality” (Ridgeway, 2023: 11). However, despite this, few Gender EDI leadership initiatives in the Higher Education sector appear to have been successfully implemented with far-reaching effects. While women are increasingly going through higher education, few are being recognised as viable leaders (Ridgeway, 2023). Issues of gender equity, diversity, and inclusion – although important, timely, and pervasive are invariably influenced by local culture and traditions and governed by different national and local political arrangements. In keeping with the global scenario, high numbers of women students predominantly register in “gender appropriate” subjects (business, arts and humanities, and education). This is confirmed in the Ridgeway Report which states:

“Women’s education still seems to be directed into certain paths based on gender and societal norms and expectations. The most common fields of study for women are business, education, and arts and humanities, and their main occupations are sales and services” (2023: 11). In Singapore, 83.6% of females have graduated in Education, 79.2% in Communications, and 73% in Health Sciences but only 28.5% in Engineering. Myanmar has fared better for the past 30 years, and currently 73.5% of their post graduate students are female, but despite this, across the region a range of structural and cultural forces act as barriers to their career progression and ascension to positions of leadership. These forces, in addition to social norms, also work to exclude a wide range of people, often minorities, on the basis of religion, ethnic or racial identity, sexuality, disability and class (Ridgeway, 2023).



The current situation of gender equality, diversity, and inclusion in East Asia higher education varies from one country to another. Rich local cultures impact perceptions of gender, and there are contested and varying understandings concerning the concept of gender across the region. Despite these variations, gender equality is a highly important and timely issue.

Governments in South East Asia and elsewhere have supported international frameworks such as the current United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, (SDG 4 and 5 in particular as these call for gender equality, inclusivity, and equity in education) and the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) (Mott, 2021). In East Asia, there are more examples of successful policy change, cited in the Capitalize Report. Singapore has been particularly successful:

“Gender equality is enshrined in the Singaporean Constitution. The Ministry of Social and Family Development (MSF) is the principal political body which oversees all gender-related issues (MSF, n.d.). The government offers schemes and resources for women in many aspects of their life, including starting a family, work-life balance, business initiatives, skill development or health care, (MSF, n.d.). The White Paper 2022 on Women's Development (2022) established new workplace equity legislation, new tripartite guidelines on flexible work arrangements, and greater efforts to promote the values of respect and safety through education” (Ridgeway, 2023: 27).

This has had a positive effect on enrolment criteria, with numbers of women enrolling in higher education showing a marked increase over the past ten years. Data from UNESCO's Institute for Statistics (2022) shows that 31.7% of all Singaporean women aged above 25 had at least a bachelor's degree in 2020, increasing by more than 10% since 2010. Although 34.4% of men had similar education the rate of increase has slowed down and now plateaued.

HEIs are increasingly aware of gender inequality as an issue raised by staff, students, sometimes governments and sometimes international partners, yet these conversations are, as the Ridgeway Report points out, “lacking structure,

and not followed by real action” in the form of implementation plans with specific aims, actions, and timelines (2023: 45).

There are some South East Asian countries where more women graduate from HEIs than do men. The Philippines is particularly exceptional, with high women's enrolment in HEIs, and ranking in the top 20 countries globally in the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report. In Myanmar, 76% of researchers and 67% of graduates (Mott, 2021) and, in 2018, 85% of all HEI staff were women (Ridgeway, 2023).⁵ More than half of Indonesia's students (56%) and graduates (56%) were women, which similarly has high levels of women graduates. Malaysia has actively sought to address gender inequalities, through a dedicated Ministry, its equality law, publishing extensive guidance, and protocols for gender-sensitive education in STEM subjects despite patriarchal and religious discourses (Pintilie et. al., 2023). Thailand, Vietnam, ... and the Philippines have closer to equal representation in academic staff (Ridgeway, 2023). This leads some to believe, erroneously, that Gender EDI is complete, and no further action is needed. However, as the Chulalongkorn University's Sustainability Report on Gender Equality points out, despite gender equality being “taken for granted” in Thailand's HEIs “gender inequality in the academic world has been rooted for centuries since universities both in Thailand and western countries were established mainly to provide higher education for male students” and “gender discrimination, in practice, is ever present, such as in regard to unequal pay, gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse” (2018: 4). Moreover, within the region's HEIs – including countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines – which have greater numbers of women tertiary students and graduates – women's education remains focused on “feminine” occupations, women are seldom promoted to senior management level, and they continue to perform undervalued, non-strategic work (Ridgeway, 2023).

⁵ Several factors have been identified as influential in these HEI gender ratios, including the expansion in tertiary institutes at the turn of the century; a strong tradition of distance learning (enabling women to continue caring responsibilities); the lack of other career options for women; the expectation that all teaching staff also undertake research and the fact that higher education salaries and high work expectations make this form of employment unattractive to men (Mott, 2021).

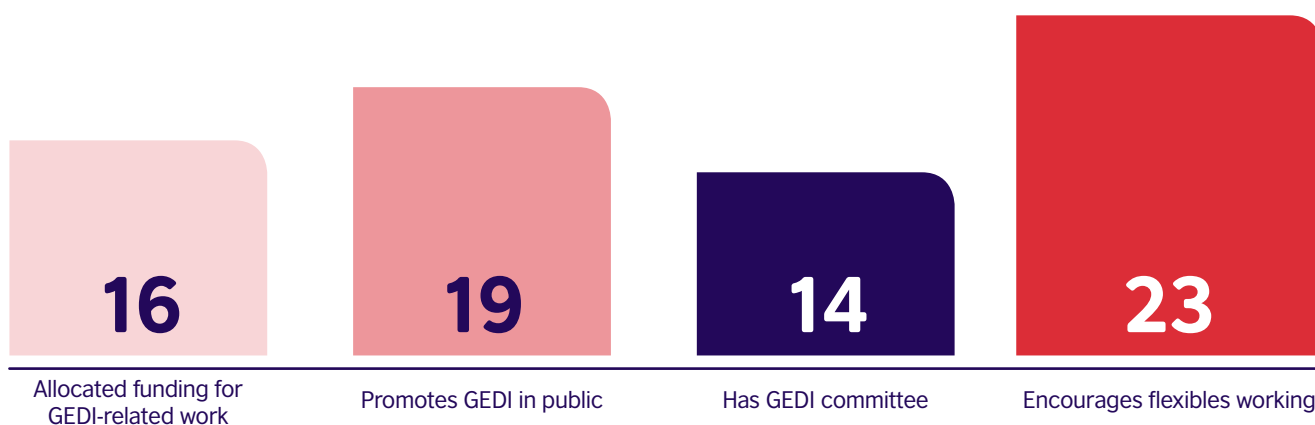
3.1 Partner institutions' survey results on GEDI integration in HEIs

In terms of actual written GEDI policies, considerable variation exists across the region with some national governments having specific policies while others have no such considerations. In the Philippines for example, gender disaggregated data are routinely collected by universities to monitor gender equality, diversity, and inclusion although a deeper gender analysis is seldom undertaken. The Philippine Normal University has a centre for gender and development implementing unit that foresees the integration of many gender equity and diversity⁷ themes and topics across sections of the curriculum. In Lao PDR, Vietnam, and Malaysia, data on GEDI are not readily available, for example in Savannakhet university in Lao PDR, there are no women centres or specific activities exist to promote gender equality. In most South East Asian HEIs, the process of decision-making is complicated and often male-led with little consideration for GEDI concerns. HEIs in South East Asia follow their respective national guidelines on gender equity, diversity, and inclusion as they are governed by ministries of education with little room for implementation of policies independent of ministry stipulations. However, there are also variations among the countries within the region in terms of autonomy and freedom. While national education ministries control authority over HEIs in many countries, HEIs in Vietnam, Thailand, and Singapore possess academic autonomy in institutional decision-making. Interestingly though, in the February 2022 survey of project partners,

many were unsure of the existence of GEDI policies in their universities, with 57% of respondents answering yes to the question: “Does your university have a written gender equality, diversity, and inclusion policy?” However, the second survey responses, 15 months later, in July 2023, show far fewer numbers of respondents acknowledging that they have written GEDI policies in their HEIs; just 36% to be exact. This discrepancy is perhaps due to the greater awareness of GEDI issues as a result of the project, or perhaps due to the inclusion in the initial survey of policies that were under discussion but not yet implemented.

On the question of support offered in HEIs to support GEDI work, responses to both surveys were similar despite the 15-month interval between them, perhaps an indication that change towards greater inclusion anywhere is slow and the emphasis in this project is on creating awareness, changing the knowledge base, and building confidence and capability to engage in GEDI activities rather than concrete change. The kinds of support offered included: Affirmative action policies; allowing flexible working; extended maternity leave for women; online libraries to facilitate easy access for people with disabilities; annual leave policies which include religious holidays; religious facilities on campus to allow for daily rituals; adapting infrastructure for people with disabilities and so forth. The most commonly found forms of support across all 11 countries are reflected in the graph below. However, the high number of universities indicated as “allocating funds” for GEDI work raises some uncertainty over how this question as interpreted.

GEDI-related support at HEIs



Looking at the support offered, it appears that most HEIs have some initiatives which are designed to increase GEDI. These policies are positively received by project participants:



In my context, being aware of GEDI as part of the university culture seems to have the greatest impact.

“Allocating funds for gender related activities enables us to do activities that will create awareness on gender and development thus making it easy for us to mainstream GAD in all our plans, projects, activities and programs.”

“My university promotes gender equity, diversity, and inclusion in public by holding various kinds of ceremonies such as traditional costume shows and fun fairs that sell various kinds of ethnic food. Moreover, my university encourages flexible working hours and situations for women, and it has specific strategies to enhance gender equity, diversity and inclusion in recruitment and classrooms such as planning a special stairway design for people with special needs. Among them, holding different ceremonies, shows, and food stalls have the greatest impact because students are happy, enthusiastic, and aware of the Gender Equity, diversity, and inclusion in my university.”

How effectively these initiatives operate and whether they encourage diversity or reinforce mainstream ideas of who “really” belongs in university requires further investigation. Across the duration of this project,

engagements with partners have shown that much still needs to be done to implement GEDI within South East Asian and UK HEIs. For example, flexible working is mainstream in many of the HEIs in South East Asia, allowing especially women to ostensibly work whilst raising families or carrying out care work. Yet, as indicated by the overwhelming majority (82%) of participants, senior leadership in HEIs continues to be dominated by men. Gender pay gaps are less visible although this could be because this data is not routinely collected and interrogated, and therefore there is no straightforward way of ascertaining pay information. What it does suggest is that, similar to what the European Commission (2012) realised after several years of seeking to integrate gender equality into research, GEDI policies are a step towards addressing inequalities yet on their own are insufficient to bring about change. Or, as the Capitalize Report argues, “the glass ceiling of academic advancement in South East Asia remains unbreakable without organisational transformation: the effect of any intervention will be continuously undermined by the ‘normalised’ gender inequality perpetuating processes in higher education” (2023: 40).

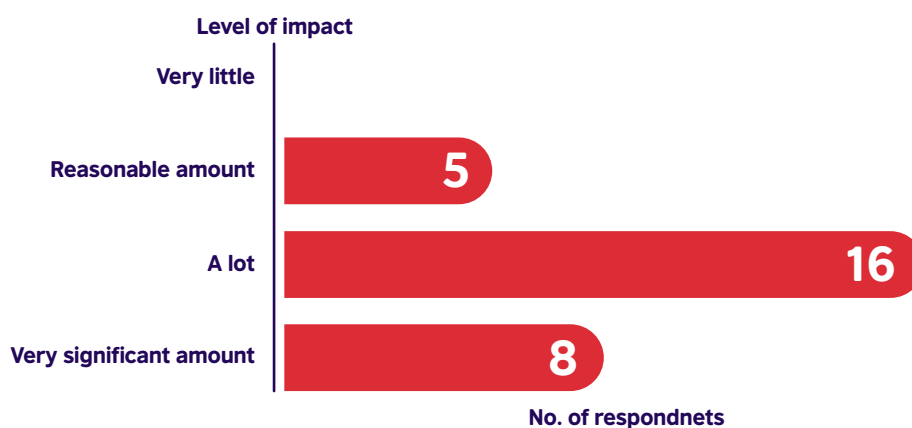


The policy to enhance GEDI in recruitment has the greatest impact as it reflects and responds to the gender unbalance amongst faculty members due to the largely different career/disciplinary preferences between men and women.

3.2. Project impacts on GEDI in HEIs

This project has had some clear impacts on participants, from increasing their personal awareness of GEDI to impacts on the institutions represented by partners. Many allocated scores of between 3 and 4 to perceived personal and institutional project impact.

Project impacts on individual partner's awareness of GEDI



Some respondents explained this impact as:

“It [my awareness of GEDI] has increased particularly in terms of how we could be inclusive of persons with disabilities in terms of their inclusion in research and how to communicate in a way that can reach them as well as a budget and plan for their inclusion. Other than that, policy that provides breaks for those with caring responsibilities or promotion that considers quality rather than quantity of work are an eye opener. Last but not least, the well-being and life balance programmes are the most needed.”

“As a result of this project, my awareness of Gender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has significantly increased. This project has served as a catalyst for deeper exploration and understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to gender EDI in the higher education landscape. Through activities of [this] project we have gained valuable insights into the current state of gender EDI in HEIs. We have examined existing policies, practices, and initiatives within our institution. This process has allowed us to identify areas of strength and areas that require improvement.”

“Before, I could not see GEDI is a problem. Now I and my GEDI team should be aware through multiple workshops provided.”

“This project has significantly boosted our confidence in engaging with Gender Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Through various activities and experiences, we have developed a deeper understanding of the importance and impact of gender EDI, which has empowered us to take meaningful action and drive positive change.”

“After participating in many workshops, I gained more knowledge and insight on methods and approaches to design activities on promoting Gender EDI. I better understand techniques to conduct research on Gender EDI. Therefore, I am more confident to engage with different people at the different level at HEIs”.

These findings reinforce a general conclusion that real change in GEDI is a journey, that starts with awareness raising, continues through policy change, but still needs to be continually reinforced in terms of attitudes and actions.

4. Capitalisation needed. Gathering Evidence for Change and Acting on that Evidence

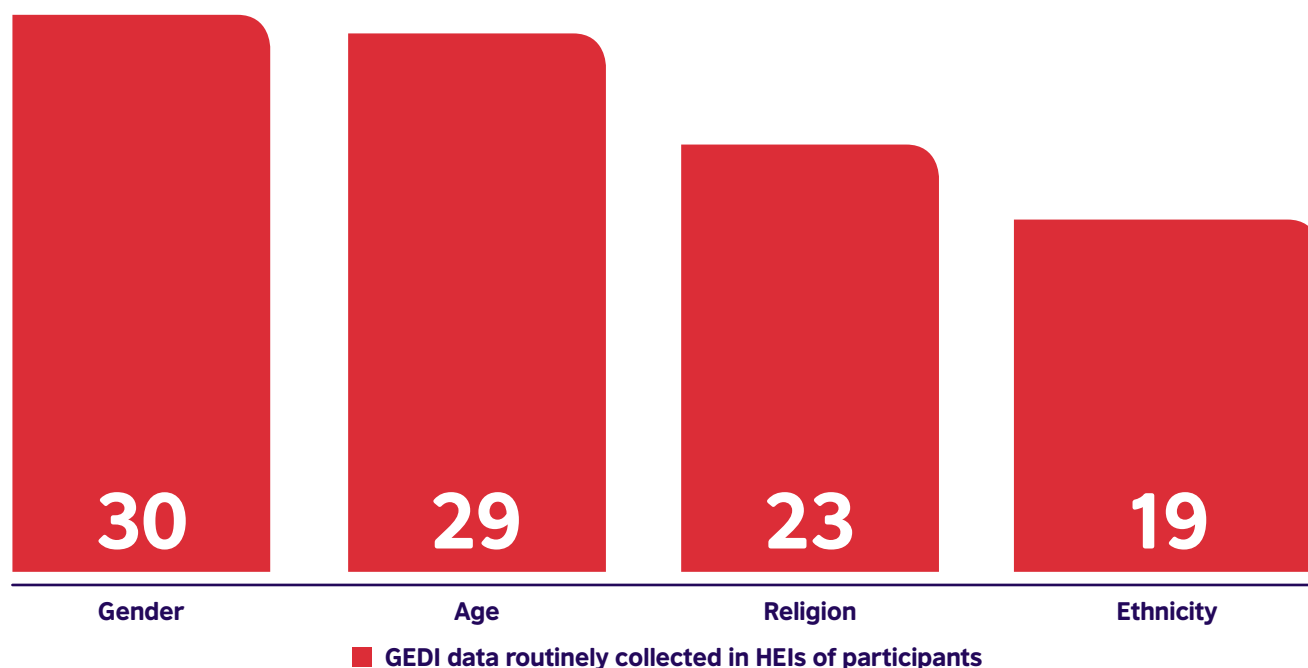
In order for transformation to occur and be recognised, building towards more inclusive HEIs that respect equity, diversity, and inclusivity, policies need to be accompanied by the collection of GEDI data. Data collection must be routinely undertaken and integrated into university policies and procedures. Such data collection can help build better understanding towards the needs and priorities of different departments and enhance both individual and collective performance and welfare. For many project partners, there are no baselines to inform gender transformative change within HEIs and their communities. Without an updated evidence base, marginalisation can be ignored and even reinforced as data on these groups is missing and so are their perspectives. This is what some have called a form of “epistemological injustice” (Fricker, 2007; Bacevic, 2022).

It is important to go beyond the male/female binaries in data collection as these can mask inequalities by suggesting that equal numbers of men and women equals gender equality. Without gender-disaggregated data on GEDI indicators, there can be no monitoring and evaluation mechanisms or gender-specific indicators, or even procedures to measure and monitor results and performance in HEIs. This in turn maintains the status quo, ensuring things stay the same with limited scope for change.

The Philippines, Malaysia, and Thailand have assembled baseline data on GEDI but this is mostly disaggregated by sex rather than gender, with other marginalisation such as disability, sexual orientation, race, and religion not receiving much attention. In the universities of Malaysia, Universiti Malaya, and Philippine Normal University, data on sex ratios in student composition, including by subject area, and on senior university leadership management are readily available, yet seldom analysed.

A respondent during the IDS face-to-face workshop, assuming that the respective HEI had achieved gender equality commented, “There are more female than male students in my university even though it is a science and technology university because the recruitment does not have gender bias. It depends on students’ competence.” This is a typical approach for many HEIs in South East Asia, heard often during the course of this project, and across the world, and reflecting the renowned phrase, “add women and stir” – a term used by Harding who, in the 1990s, recognised that the inclusion of “a few elite women” to existing science and technology departments and projects was not transformational. Rather, the “S&T sites that the women entered remained structured by the understandings and interests of men” (1995: 297). Although other components of GEDI such as religion, disability, and ethnicity are occasionally collected, there is no analysis of these data with a view to addressing gaps towards greater gender equality and inclusion. Moreover, it is not just the numbers but the nuances in these numbers and what lies beneath them that tells the whole story, yet a deeper analysis into questions such as, which women are leaders (with regards to race, religion, disability, and sexuality), or whether or not they influence gender policies, is missing. The graph below shows that South East Asia HEIs are collecting GEDI-related information, yet the data tell us nothing about underlying power dynamics as they do not ask questions of why, how or who is included in the “women” or “male” brackets and who is excluded.

GEDI data routinely collected in HEIS of participants



Representation, viewed through a gender lens alone without paying attention to intersecting vulnerabilities that exclude people, can mask other causes of marginalisation and reinforce these by making it look like adding women will solve the problem. In reality, while “adding” women is important, and needed to achieve critical mass, this is only one aspect of gender analysis and the more difficult task is to think about how structural issues, socio-cultural and political contexts, norms, and attitudes shape gender inequality and inhibit inclusion, and to address these. As one participant commented during the Power and Power Relations workshop, “equal participation of men and women hides other marginalisation around low income, culture, and religion.”

While this project has raised awareness of the need to further interrogate gender metrics and data, there has been little scope for deep dives into the data collected by respective partners’ HEIs which seek to understand how GEDI policies interact with underlying structural, socio-cultural, and political contexts, norms and attitudes, and what the data means. In order to achieve this, it is important to identify seed funding for reflexive research on HEIs, in conjunction with trusted relationships of mentoring and collaboration, enabling participants to review and scrutinise their own institutions.

4.1. Intersecting vulnerabilities

Much of this project has focused on gender with less attention to broader equity, diversity and inclusion issues in HEIs. Within South East Asia, there is very little literature on the ways in which personal markers of social difference – such as disability, religion, migration, sexuality, marital status, language, cultural background or others – can marginalise and exclude women and others from accessing higher education (Ridgeway, 2023). As Chang (2021), for example, has argued, stereotypes of difference extend the hurdles that women academics must overcome and further entrench inequalities. Disabilities are often not visible and other markers of difference not seen or recognised. Not only is there a dearth of material on these intersecting forms of difference and their effects, in some South East Asian countries and the UK, these are very difficult topics to talk about. One UK participant explained that when she openly shared her disability experiences and challenges, she experienced micro-aggressions.



People applying to work at the university are much less likely to come from an ethnic minority background. There is also variance in the performance of students from different ethnic backgrounds.

Workshop Participant

In some South East Asian countries, LGBTQI issues are highly stigmatised and often extremely controversial (Martin, 2016).⁶ In the first survey (February, 2022), senior leadership was only classified in terms of binary male: female categories. The second survey had two entries identifying LGBTQI members of senior leadership. This reflects either greater awareness of intersectional factors as a result of this project and/or greater trust in the project team. Other project participants reflected on how women academics from different religious or racial backgrounds can experience microaggressions including delays in their requests for equipment, failures to grant their requests for leave, comments that “their type” did not belong in academia, refusal

to accommodate dietary prescriptions and subtle messages telling them to know their place and not cause trouble. Underlying this is the recognition that not all women academics are the same and that they experience exclusions and marginalisation in a wide range of ways. Some personal markers of social difference mean that, even when some women have access to HEIs as staff and students, they can feel alienated and are constantly reminded of their liminal position in ways which undermine their work (Ridgeway, 2023). Finding ways to extend analysis beyond gender and into politically sensitive topics is not easy and requires a significant amount of trust between participants to share information and insights (discussed further in section 4.2).



People with disabilities tend to have limited access to the facilities provided by the university. Not all the buildings at the university provide access to disabled people. It should be a regulation which obligates all parts of the university to guarantee access to all people, including disabled people.

Workshop Participant

⁶ Same sex relationships continue to be criminalised in some South East Asian countries. This stems, in part, from the legacies of colonial rule and in part from religious and cultural convictions. Yet initiatives such as the Sustainable Development Goals’ call to action, the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights, and the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review have raised the political profile of this issue (Sciortina, 2020; Martin, 2016; Wilkinson et. al., 2017). The Universal Periodic Review, introduced in 2006, requires for example that all UN Member States’ human rights records are peer-reviewed every 4½ years and this has led to some South East Asian countries receiving recommendations on the promotion and protection of LGBTQI rights. There is also, and has been for many years, considerable civil society and social movement activism campaigning to remove the legal restrictions and recognise people’s rights to be gender fluid. Not all countries have tackled these issues as not all of them have ratified the relevant UN Conventions and implementation of these recommendations is not binding (Martin, 2016). Moreover, where countries have sought to implement change, they have often been met with very strong opposition (Sciortina, 2020).

4.2. Sexual harassment data

The prevalence of sexual harassment within HEIs is being recognised as a global problem which, along with other forms of gender-based violence, negatively impacts women and people with gender fluid or non-binary identities. Some South East Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines, have introduced legislation to address such behaviours and universities have recognised their responsibility to create safe campuses (Ridgeway, 2023), yet many others have not.

The Philippine Normal University, for example, has procedures in place to deal with discriminatory offences. There is a committee on decorum and investigation (CODI) that investigates discriminatory complaints. There are also rules and regulations on how such complaints are handled to ensure that due process is followed. Pursuing due process is however a daunting task and participants pointed out that such a process can result in the loss of social capital and goodwill. Although the right thing to do, one can “make enemies and lose friends” if tasked with investigating and implementing a disciplinary process. As one participant in the face-to-face workshop noted, “it depends on the leader of the working units (e.g., faculties, departments, study programme) [where the complaint is lodged]. Some working units immediately respond to the complaint and proceed to make decisions”, suggesting that perhaps there is no systematic way of dealing with harassment and that people deal with it at their own discretion, and depending on who is involved and who they may not wish to offend.

Participants also stressed the importance of anonymity in any harassment cases both for safeguarding victims and people identified as offenders. Yet they also saw anonymity in reporting as a possible hinderance to addressing complaints. For example, leaving anonymous complaints in a comments box did nothing to address sexual harassment as the complaints could not be traced back to the complainant in order to gather evidence, yet at the same time, such identification of “perpetrators” could cause permanent stigma, especially when a case was false or had insufficient evidence. One participant also

noted that, “An issue [of sexual harassment may be] discussed or complained [about] behind closed doors but thus far I have not heard of any such cases being lodged formally. When it comes to ethnicity, the institutional set-up with the dominance of the majority of a particular ethnic group and national policy that privilege them makes this difficult if not impossible to address.”

This participant’s comment suggests that there are other barriers to dealing with sexual harassment and reveals a lack of inclusivity within these processes. These barriers, and dealing with these issues behind closed doors, can hinder routine collection of data and the scope for mitigating actions based on evidence as this evidence would be missing. Such procedures reinforce the status quo and limit any interventions to address gender equality, diversity, and inclusion. As one participant pointed out, to challenge the patriarchal system, it is necessary to “monitor the implementation of such policy and to lobby for the gaps to be addressed”. It is also important to “build systems that are survivor-centric and from a gender lens to enable survivors to speak out”.

Dealing with sexual harassment is inevitably politically difficult and contentious, involving the kinds of challenges described above and because of the cultural, religious, and legal contexts of South East Asia. In countries where Islam forms the basis of law and policy, it is especially challenging to recognise and deal with sexual harassment. Yet the public commitment to try to deal with these issues is vital because, as the Ridgeway Report (2023) makes clear, sexual harassment is a key influencing factor in women’s decisions to pursue careers in HEIs. Not recognising or acknowledging, and thus not needing to deal with, sexual harassment may however be the conventional practice of most Southeast Asian HEIs. Finding ways to begin to open up safe spaces for these difficult discussions – that recognise sexual harassment rather than downplaying it as “trivial”, “appreciative” or “normal” (Iftakhar, 2020: 128) and for considering how HEIs should define, identify, and address sexual harassment in order to enhance inclusion and address gender discrimination and gender inequity is critical.

4.3. Conducting research on our own HEI organisations:

Transformation of HEIs cannot occur without knowledge and understanding of the institution undergoing change. It is vital to collect data in order to know one's own institution.

Transformation of HEIs cannot occur without knowledge and understanding of the institution undergoing change. It is vital to collect data in order to know one's own institution. This includes creating a statistical database with sex-disaggregated data which is regularly updated. All project partners are able to provide the gender balance of the senior leadership team and most partners collected further data on the gendered balance within their institutions. Data collection – which reflects Gender and EDI information on recruitment, pay, student numbers, student representation and achievements, staff promotion, research, and publication achievements, etc. – is a necessary and relatively manageable process. Yet this alone cannot and will not guarantee GEDI transformation, perhaps not even where there are gender quotas in place (such as Laos or Thailand) other processes of exclusion operate (meetings happen at times that are hard for women to attend, women's ideas are not valued, etc.) and women face other hurdles (domestic responsibilities, etc.). At the project launch, some participants reflected that even when affirmative policies are in place, women do not take up these opportunities. Other participants stated that “there was no issue with gender inequality” because their HEIs had

some women in leadership positions, because there were maternity policies or because the HEIs were gender neutral in that there were no policies specifying either men's or women's progression.

Data collection has to be accompanied by visibility of the aim to bring about change, of the data itself, and, most importantly, by serious discussion about the patterns shown in the data. This needs to take account of the underlying power relations, whether there are processes (both formal and informal, visible, and hidden) that impede success for some, and the seemingly gender-neutral processes which underlie the data. Not only, for example, is it necessary to collect data on appointment panels and the genders of staff appointed, it is also vital to examine the processes (who is on the recruitment panel) and to reflect on how participation is encouraged from some people, while limiting participation for others (are there photographs of women senior leaders in the institution?). Moreover, the cycle of data collection: discussion/reflection: action (changed policies and/or approach to encourage transformation) needs to be followed by more data collection to review change. As some participants reflected in the partnership exchange activities, while it is one thing to put policies in place, change requires accountable, measurable, and practical actions. When policies are ignored, there is often pressure to overlook transgressions and to allow undesirable behaviours to continue. It requires strong political will and having champions to take action.

Conducting reflective research on their HEIs and understanding how policies and processes play out within HEIs, is an important step for leaders wishing to implement institutional change.

5. Building Capacity within Institutions and beyond

Across Southeast Asia, there are increasing numbers of women HEI graduates and evidence indicating that more women are working both before and after maternity leave. In Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, between 1990 and 2021, more women have enrolled to study in HEIs than men.⁷ Higher education enrolment, however, continues to follow gendered patterns, with women over-represented in education and health, and men in science and engineering disciplines. Traditional gender hierarchies also continue to dominate within university teaching, management, and research (Ridgeway, 2023). This provides a good basis on which to implement change and reinforces the need to address GEDI and ensure that women's experience at university is as good as it can be, that they maximise their educational achievements and through this, respective countries can make the most of their human capital. Activities during this project showed HEI leaders' considerable willingness to address GEDI in their respective HEIs.

Two perspectives on gender and leadership exist in HEIs and came across during this project. The first is that academic achievement and prestige are defining factors in men's and women's ability and all men and women have equal access to the resources that shape this. *"I don't see the difference between men and women"* announced one HEI leader in the training workshop. The second is that men are "natural" leaders. This correlation between leadership and masculinity, assumes that women's "natural" caring behaviours and

empathy undermines their ability to make "rational and objective" leadership decisions and, when or if assigned leadership positions, women academics are expected to act like other male leaders (Ridgeway, 2023).

These perspectives are not isolated and are common in many countries, including the UK, where continued gender imbalance in senior HEI positions persists despite decades of feminist research in this area. Coate and Howson (2016) suggests that this might be due to what they call a "prestige economy"⁸ where academics are motivated by status and esteem accrued through advancing their careers, and that prestige, authority, and status are more easily acquired by male academics. In Hong Kong for example, the Capitalize Report found that "the gender gap is more acute at HEIs that are publicly funded". Data from the University Grants Committee, in 2017–18 showed that

"Only one in five senior academics in the eight publicly funded universities were women (Lam, 2018) ... (and that) faculties are less male-dominated in the lower ranks, suggesting women are struggling to rise in their careers. Recent research (Aiston, 2022) suggests that women academics do not feel supported to enter a leadership role, given that being male was the unifying variable of being a fitting leader. Other considerations, such as nationality, age, rank, and length of time in academia compounded on the patriarchal power systems that disadvantage women academics" (Ridgeway, 2023: 15).

⁷ Around the world, the Covid-19 Pandemic has negatively impacted on gender advances made over the past decades. It has exacerbated gender inequalities as women have been most affected by the pandemic and by measures to control and respond to it: women were more likely to be laid off work, women bore the brunt of caring responsibilities; they were more constrained in terms of physical movements and girls' education was curtailed before that of boys.

⁸ Prestige accrues in promotions, publications, higher pay, invitations to give keynote addresses, etc.

Korea has sought to address the gender balance in Higher Education leadership. Its gender imbalance in senior HEI positions persists, despite undertaking the following initiatives:

“(1) strengthening the basis for promoting gender equality nationally, (2) enhancing women’s representation (in the public sector) and decision making-power, (3) strengthening prevention of gendered violence, as well as (4) increasing support for vulnerable women, and (5) improving gender-based discrimination in employment. Most notable in the context of HEIs is achievement 2: progress had been noted in the increase in numbers of female professors at national universities from 14.5% in 2014 to 16.6% in 2018” (Ridgeway, 2023: 18).

Both the Hong Kong and Korea examples, although not Southeast Asian, reflect several well-known themes on gender equality which project participants explained also occur in Southeast Asian HEIs. Women often fail to view themselves as capable of leadership without significant support and can be too self-critical of their skills and capacities so less likely to apply for promotion, especially if they feel they do not meet all the criteria for eligibility. Specific actions may be needed to deal with this bias, such as: adding clauses that encourage women to apply; putting mechanisms in place that ensure automatic promotion once women academics meet set minimum criteria; providing academic mentors to women academics, etc. Change to say: The second issue, however, is more insidious and has to do with cultural attitudes in the home and workplace. As women experience greater domestic workloads at home including unpaid care work and are often expected to fulfil societal expectations of care at work (nurturing, caring for those in need, being unassertive, etc.), they may be unable to advance their own academic careers sufficiently to be eligible for promotion.

This unfortunately fits into a global pattern of inequality in HEIs’ senior leadership (Morley, 2014). Rich (1980: 136) described this as follows:

“The university is above all a hierarchy. At the top is a small cluster of highly paid and prestigious persons, chiefly men, whose careers entail the services of a very large base of ill-paid or unpaid persons, chiefly women: wives, research assistants, secretaries, teaching assistants, cleaning women, waitresses in the faculty club, lower-echelon administrators, and women students who are used in various ways to gratify the ego.”

The persistence of continued inequalities is due, in part, to the vicious cycle in which stereotyped views of women result in fewer opportunities for advancement, and the lack of women role models in senior positions helps perpetuate these stereotypes. Some IDS face-to-face workshop participants reflected these stereotypes in their assessment of why there are gender gaps in HEIs’ leadership structures. One suggested that, despite being given opportunities within HEIs, “women like being mothers and don’t like to take up leadership roles as they want to care for their families”. While it might seem logical that women would choose more stable roles that can easily overlap or function alongside their care roles, this project has emphasised the need for deeper analysis which looks at why women may not wish to or be able to take up opportunities. Further research can reveal underlying power structures or other factors that bar women from advancing their academic careers. Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) suggest that the ways in which authority, status, expertise, scholarly standing, and so on are perceived in academia are remarkably gendered, and yet these are all important factors within the prestige economy that are “traded” in exchange for even greater status. Thus, while prestige factors as a highly motivating aspect of academic work, stereotypes and other factors make it much more difficult for women to acquire prestige factors and this disadvantages them throughout their careers.

5.1 Addressing gaps in the promotion system

There is ample research supporting the idea that exposure to various platforms both within the institutions, at national, regional, and international levels can inspire women to take up leadership positions. Identifying skills gaps and providing avenues for women and marginalised groups to access training in a flexible way; for example, online training, can also help women bridge the skills gap and meet the criteria for promotion (Coate and Howson, 2016). All staff need training in GEDI principles and facilitating processes of inclusion within HEIs, which includes training unconscious bias, recognising micro-aggressions, dealing with female harassment issues, and accommodating disabilities.

Colin Shipp, presenting at the IDS workshop, has been working with universities to help address gender imbalances in senior leadership. He explained that the only thing that works, is to be relentless in the pursuit of change. In his words “if it doesn’t work this year, try again the next year”. He noted, in keeping with Van den Brink and Benschop (2011), that the term “excellence” is gendered, and that academic selection and promotions processes tend to favour male candidates even with transparent criteria. This is particularly relevant in the HEIs promotion system, which prioritises competitive promotion for senior leadership roles. Yet, these processes are inherently discriminatory because women do not meet the standards required for promotion (Coate and Howson, 2016), and fare better when promoted in non-competitive, competency-based systems.

Addressing gender imbalances therefore requires a multifaceted approach which includes preparing and upskilling women academics for promotion, providing time for women to publish research; encouraging women to apply for senior positions; reviewing the promotion criteria, and ensuring diverse representation on selection panels. For these reasons, such processes take time to implement and produce positive results. It is necessary to ensure that everyone can access mentoring and support, rather than turn this into a deficit model which states that women academics receive additional support because they lack certain criteria. It is also necessary to review failure to recruit women looking at how many women vs men applied and failed, what underlay unsuccessful attempts, whether the mentoring programme requires review, asking about the diversity of the selection panel and the gender division of work in the department/school? It is necessary to explore carefully what explains the failure to recruit women academics to senior level and to ask what additional interventions can be made? Results and gender metrics can remain stubbornly disappointing from one year to the next, making it all the more important to demonstrate relentless commitment to the overall aim of addressing gender inequality in HEIs. At present, many South East Asian universities collect data, yet, as one participant noted when presenting HEI data from their university:



In terms of implementation cycles, there were no established monitoring and evaluation mechanisms indicating gender specific indicators or systems and methods to measure results. Thus, reviews of accomplishments and plans for the succeeding academic year lack the support of substantive data generated from the previous academic year through a monitoring and evaluation instrument.

5.2 Introducing gender curricula

Discussions on gender in HEIs have focussed on creating gender and development centres or departments that act as focal points for all GEDI matters including reporting harassment. More recently, there has been discussions around the integration of gender in all instruction and curricula as a means to GEDI and ensuring more gendered approaches to science. However, the Capitalize Report (2023) noted that, in Indonesia for example, the implementation of gender-responsive curricula is weak and the educational sector has been critiqued for strengthening women's negative stereotypes rather than bringing about reform. The Act of the Republic of Indonesia, 2003 on the National Education System requires that Indonesian educational organisations that Indonesian educational organisations promote diversity; yet this was seen as being “merely a discourse” and not addressed through concerted attempts at implementation (Ridgeway, 2023: 20; Mustofa & Halim, 2021). This reinforces women's lack of confidence in their achievements and inhibits them from applying for leadership positions (Muhammad et al., 2021). But the caveat to both these approaches (gender departments or mainstreaming gender) is that neither guarantees transformation (Peterson and Jordansson, 2022; Morris et al., 2022), in part because of the poor recognition given to gender studies. Senior leadership in HEIs often do not view gender training as “value for money” or academically desirable and rank this discipline poorly against the “market value” of courses such as business, and against the scientific excellence of STEM subjects. A survey respondent noted that in her university:



Science is preferred to gender studies which is relegated to the lower end of the ladder. This has implications for admin work, [we in gender] have to do more.

Historical research shows the hegemony of the natural sciences within HEIs worldwide, as these disciplines are prioritised in terms of funding and staffing (Morris, et al., 2022). This affects the work and morale of those in Gender Studies aspiring to bring about change. For there to be meaningful progress towards gender equality, the recognition of gender studies disciplines as a crucial discipline that contributes towards science and solutions of societal challenges. In the project launch, the online workshop on Gender and EDI Essentials delivered by the University of West of Scotland, and the IDS face-to-face partnership workshop, the importance of developing curricula to address GEDI issues came up. The majority of our survey respondents argued for an integrated gender curricula in all facets of teaching and training.

Teaching gender as a standalone degree or diploma and simultaneously integrating GEDI concepts and learning material in all departments, including natural science is a means of communicating HEI leaders' commitment to transformation. It will also ensure that everyone has access to GEDI information which can impact attitudes and perceptions on gender at all levels. As many respondents also recognised, this has to be complemented with the ongoing training of HEI managers, senior leaders and departments or units that may not be exposed to the GEDI curriculum or its inclusion in scientific disciplines. Teaching gender studies – whether in Gender departments or mainstreamed – can also enhance dialogues on women's and minority issues and rights, and foster empowerment, but it will not do so automatically.

Many barriers exist to establishing gender curricula in HEIs. One is a lack of dedicated funding for gender research, with many funding bodies far more likely to fund natural science training and research. This funding bias means that a deeper analysis of gender issues does not happen, and therefore action is not taken to address these issues, reinforcing the status quo. This lack of funding also means that securing gender experts is challenging and departments are understaffed. Gender staff also frequently take on additional, emotionally demanding, stressful, time-consuming, under-recognized, and uncompensated work within HEIs, including frequent representation on Gender Committees, being involved in the drafting of policies, overseeing complaints, etc. For example, in one participant's HEI, there are three gender specialists out of 670 academic staff. This of course leads to these specialists becoming overloaded and can lead to burn-out as they often have to do all the (unremunerated) gender work for the university alongside meeting their regular academic targets.

A respondent from the Philippines explained that;



I am afraid there is no course or module offered that focuses on gender EDI. If we have proper training and opportunities, we will try our best to offer these courses and modules.



Our university is a multidisciplinary university in engineering and economics, not in social science.

Another issue is how to make science curriculums GEDI sensitive. Most are too technical and gender or social science expertise is both unwelcome and lacking. There is a need to enhance institutional capacities to teach GEDI concepts relevant to scientific endeavour. Introducing curricula on Gender EDI provides ready access to current theoretical paradigms, such as intersectionality, and comparative perspectives which can be drawn upon and used in collaboration with other disciplines.

5.3 Addressing visible and hidden power dynamics in HEIs

“Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change” (Martin Luther King, US civil rights leader).

The concept of power is vital for understanding and addressing GEDI issues in HEIs. Often intangible, yet effective power is dynamic, fluid and shifting. It can be experienced as both negative and positive. Power and power relations frequently underlie HEI processes and work to reinforce discriminatory practices. Yet power is also always contested, it can be resisted or transformed (Gaventa, 2019). In the online IDS workshop on Power and Power Relations, women participants reflected on their own experiences of power within HEIs, and women described feeling “unable” to speak or “less powerful” when talking to or addressing men.



I feel powerful when I work with the president and i.e. departments I am responsible for but powerless when I work with men who have the same level of power as me.”

Although power often operates through rules and regulations, but also informal networks that ensure certain people get to or stay in certain positions. For example, “old boys” informal networks’ work in tangible ways (men meeting up in male-only spaces to discuss positions, citing each other’s publications) and intangible ways (exchanging favours) to prioritise their favoured individuals. This fundamentally undermines the meritocratic ethos of higher education. As Coate and Howson (2016) explain, social networks can yield official rewards such as title, academic rank, and salary; honorary fellowships and keynote speeches; and sometimes these rewards can be informal. The latter are often socially based, and “traded” and “exchanged” for more formalised rewards (and vice versa). In their survey of factors that enhance career progression, male respondents noted that;



Many important decisions regarding the allocation of resources, etc. are made in an ad hoc manner based on conversations over coffee, golf, etc. Again, this leads to unfair bias against certain members of staff (often age and gender-based).

These examples demonstrate that power can operate quite oppressively yet do so in ways that are not reflected in data and metrics and subtle enough to be missed by researchers investigating inequalities, especially if there are limited funds to examine how hidden and invisible power may interact with other factors to marginalise certain groups and favour others.

In this project, South East Asia partners shared similar experiences with hidden and invisible power:



Other factors outside the university affect how powerful we feel, so personal and professional factors are very important. I feel powerless when seeing a 13/14-year-old girl who should be in school but lost the right to education because of religious belief.



I am here on behalf of the president, but I am not the president and I have to be careful. Even though this is private, I still have to be careful, manage many hidden and invisible power– understand that my job responsibility comes with boundaries, and you can go beyond this.

As these examples demonstrate, hidden power operating both in HEIs and in society can lead to cycles of cumulative disadvantage, where certain categories of people – often women, ethnic, religious, racial and sexual minorities, and people living with disabilities – are perennially unable to forge past barriers to achieve leadership in HEIs. Consequently, there is an urgent need for funding research that enables HEI leaders to explore and understand how power operates within their respective institutions: how decision-making is informally influenced, who benefits from decision-making, how conventional activities reinforce power relations; where power is likely to be hidden or invisible and so forth. However, such activities require a high degree of trust, working with partners who can support reflexive analysis in a sensitive and meaningful way.

6. Building a Collective Movement for GEDI in Southeast Asia

6.1 Enhancing research excellence through collaborative and gendered science

Universities in South East Asia have many reasons for wanting to produce excellent research in addition to the genuine love of research and quest for knowledge. HEIs strive to contribute towards the SDGs through evidence-based policy making and solve the pressing challenges experienced in their country and of our time – climate change, wars, pandemics, hunger and food scarcity, aging populations and effective medical treatments, etc. – in order to bring about a better world. There is increased demand – and funding for – interdisciplinary, collaborative research, working with partners around the world to understand societal and environmental challenges comparatively, and how processes of globalisation, digitisation, migration and nature play out locally and globally (Vienni-Baptista et al., 2022). There is also global recognition that science is not gender-neutral and many international projects now require a gendered and intersectional research lens (Editorial, 2022). Finally, global ranking systems can influence HEIs' funding potential; marketing to future students and individual researchers' own pursuit of prestige and excellence.

Research collaboration is an excellent means of growing academic expertise in GEDI and this project has shown that many HEIs' leaders and researchers are keen for regional and international scientific collaboration.

This project has also, in conjunction with other work in the region, laid the groundwork and helped develop a nascent body of GEDI leaders. This body of leaders has to be nurtured and their efforts to grow GEDI expertise within their HEIs supported. Nurturing these leaders will help universities provide important resources, evidence, and allyship to governments in taking forward a GEDI focus, carrying out research to identify key challenges and needs and promoting change. Universities can also be highly influential within their countries, providing visible evidence of best practices and leading societal transformation. HEI leaders who are internally connected, with influence, and access to research and evidence, should be encouraged to be national champions for GEDI transformation. These roles can be particularly significant for promoting continuity in the contexts of changing government and HEI personnel.

6.2 Creating community partnerships

Many South East Asian HEIs have, embedded in their constitutions, the requirement to serve society and as a consequence, established relationships with local communities. Work in local communities can be an important way of influencing communities and societal change. In countries like Lao PDR, Thailand, Singapore, and Vietnam a range of factors negatively impact on women's access to HEIs. These include cultural norms that emphasise women's caring roles; girls not aspiring to attend HEIs; language barriers; the lack of available family income and dearth of scholarships to attend HEIs. As one candidate at the launch meeting reflected, this means that "as well as policies, there needs to be quite a lot more in place to help women take up these opportunities." HEIs recognised that they needed to engage with communities, to talk more with families to tackle cultural beliefs that say that "women are not able to do this and stipulate that women must take on family responsibilities". Launch participants saw opportunities to integrate awareness and inclusion into school curricula, to work with schools and "encourage girls throughout basic and elementary schooling". In keeping with this perspective, and underscoring its importance, many women leaders of large science projects reflected that, as schoolgirls, they had been told that they should not be interested in maths, or science and that it had required a particular stubbornness on their part to reject their prescribed roles (Waldman et al., 2018). Mott (2021) similarly argues that subject choice needs to be addressed long before girls make applications to HEIs and schoolteachers also need support to address GEDI issues. Indeed, Rakhmani et al., (2022: 30) argue that



One of the best ways to put theories of GEDI into practice and take it into the next level is by integrating it into the curriculum and that translating GEDI-sensitive and inclusive pedagogy into the classroom to assist children in questioning traditional social roles and stereotypes as well as understanding privileges and constraints...could lead to empowerment.

South East Asian participants saw potential in GEDI curricula delivered at school level as a means to change community and student mindsets, and as a way to increase girls' access to higher education.

Universities in South East Asia, particularly those with pre-existing local community relationships can make a useful contribution, designing and running training programmes to raise awareness of GEDI and gender-sensitised handling of inequalities and exclusions, which can have long-term knock-on effects on community perspectives on women's abilities and roles. For example, one HEI has made it clear to local rickshaw drivers that all girls studying on the campus must be able to travel safely between home and campus. The drivers have been trained and are now aware that these students should not be harassed, not only by them but other men as well, and the drivers go out of their way to ensure that campus and travel are safe activities. Universities can also, as some HEI leaders reflected, use community engagements as opportunities to incorporate respect for bodily integrity and address gender-based violence not only at university level but also primary and secondary school level.

Community engagements clearly extend beyond schools and some South East Asian HEIs have partnerships with local industries and companies. Some HEIs' engineering and medical departments are already doing considerable outreach. These could be enhanced through the incorporation of GEDI considerations. One HEI has a partnership with a local company which offers scholarships for women to study computing. At present, the potential for HEIs to partner more with the private sector, as an element of community engagement and building GEDI awareness and opportunities, is under-utilised. Partnerships with schools, communities and industry can include online joint webinar series, workshops, local training events involving civil society organisations, relevant ministries, companies, and local communities. HEI leaders who are committed to addressing GEDI issues have the status, knowledge, and connections to make further contributions in this area, yet this also requires additional support and funding to have maximum impact.

6.3 Building epistemic communities for GEDI

An epistemic community is a network of like-minded people, usually academics and policy actors, who have publicly recognised knowledge and expertise on a particular issue and who actively use this knowledge to address social problems and engage in policy-related challenges (Haas, 1992). Epistemic community members can also include social movements, committed community members, motivated private sector individuals or companies, whose activities are driven by a desire to see the issue tackled, rather than by prestige or material gain. Epistemic communities for addressing GEDI in HEIs cohere in "collaboration productivity and network participation" (McNeely and Schintler, 2010). Building a South East Asian epistemic community and collective movement for GEDI issues is key to sustaining interest and keeping gender equity, diversity, and inclusion at the core of policy and planning for HEIs. It provides a context, an awareness that many people in different parts of the world are also grappling with the same issues. It gives exposure to initiatives and policies that have been implemented and tested, insights into best practices, and recognition that bringing about

change is a long-term and challenging endeavour, but most of all, it offers moral support, empathy, and wisdom to researchers and HEI leaders embarking on GEDI transformation.

Participants echoed the importance of building strong networks during the launch and the online workshops that took place during the project. The participants of the IDS in-person workshop in the UK, similarly expressed the need to create a network of like-minded academics and policy makers who have a reason to interact regularly to build trust and collaboration within the region. In the surveys, participants spoke about having research groups to address minority identities in countries like Laos, Vietnam, and Cambodia; about their desire for research cooperation with international scientists and about the importance of networking. In keeping with the concept of epistemic communities, survey respondents reflected on the benefits of research networks and collaboration on GEDI in HEIs:



If we have opportunities to cooperate and collaborate with our beneficial universities, it will be best for us.

"Interacting with individuals from different backgrounds and cultures can inspire a broader understanding of various issues. Emulating the ability to appreciate and learn from diverse perspectives can foster inclusivity and collaboration."

"I have been to the UK and learned about a different culture and increased my networking on education and GEDI with Asia and a partner from the UK."

"Make a new network with other university members from ASEAN and Timor Leste."

"It allows me to talk to some academic leaders and exchange ideas with them."

In fact, across the whole project, the importance of peer collaboration, support, and sharing was emphasised again and again. Building GEDI research collaborations and networks in HEIs is directly related to the core business of HEIs namely, to accrue research prestige and academic excellence. Research excellence feeds into the metrics of evaluation used globally, has high returns for staff, both personally and in terms of career progression, and translates into state-of-the-art teaching. There are thus many reasons to promote the building of GEDI epistemic communities

through calls for funded research, regional conferences, and workshops; promoting publications on GEDI in HEI; and rewarding excellent performance. Developing these relationships takes time and requires a degree of familiarity, collegiality, and trust, yet finding ways for researchers to collaborate and interact through research is vital. The quote below, from a survey respondent, shows that there are HE leaders participating in this project who would be highly receptive to the benefits of epistemic community interactions:



We recognise that promoting gender EDI is not only a matter of social justice but also crucial for the overall success and growth of our community. We believe in the fundamental principle that everyone should have equal opportunities and rights, regardless of their gender. By fostering an environment that upholds gender EDI, we ensure that all individuals, regardless of their gender identity, can thrive and contribute to their fullest potential. We are committed to creating a safe, inclusive, and supportive space where individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered to participate actively in academic, professional, and social spheres. We are committed to continuous learning and improvement in promoting gender EDI. This commitment is reflected in our ongoing efforts to engage in dialogue, conduct research, and collaborate with external organisations and experts to exchange best practices and implement effective strategies. We understand that achieving meaningful gender EDI requires a multifaceted and sustained approach, and we are determined to make a positive and lasting impact.

7. Recommendations

While gender is very much on the agenda in South East Asia, as identified in the Capitalize Report (2023), this has, in many cases not been turned into concrete actions and conversations are still often lacking structure. In many South East Asian countries, awareness of gender and other forms of discrimination – race, age, disability, and an understanding of intersecting vulnerabilities lags even further behind. The Capitalize Report calls for better working conditions and cultural change to support women and time-bound action plans to achieve this. Heeding this call, “this” white paper provides a series of concrete recommendations that should now be taken up

in relation to gender and other broader areas of equity, diversity, and inclusivity. The Ridgeway Report also raises the importance of tracking and lobbying for the implementation of policy, as policies alone appear not to be sufficient. Finally, the need to go beyond collecting data and tracking markers of equality, and recognising that GEDI is more than the counting of men and women in particular positions has surfaced a number of times within this study. The recommendations below suggest concrete actions that could now be put in place at institutional, national, or regional level.

Institutional level

HEIs should be encouraged to review their own institutional policies, use the data they generate, and see themselves as leaders in gender EDI, working with their broader community to raise awareness and understanding of existing structural bias among their respective institutions.

1. Review and evaluate institutional policies to encourage gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity.
2. Provide resources for the creation of a network of GEDI-committed institutions who could provide gender and other EDI champions. This may provide support to universities across the region in the form of developing a pool of specialists who can offer training, support with rigorous approaches to data collection, and encourage in-depth analysis.
3. Identify opportunities to provide financial support for research into GEDI and into GEDI within higher education, at departmental or institutional level, so that universities are both funded and recognised for conducting research on themselves. Encourage large research funders in the region to include a GEDI stream in their calls and internal (HEI focused) as well as international or collaborative projects.
4. Consider opportunities for hosting a series of peer learning workshops, providing participants of this project with a scheduled opportunity to build on relationships under development and learn from each other, include in this an analysis of power, both visible, invisible, and hidden.
5. Work with university communications departments to review websites, social media and on-campus communication, looking closely at who is represented in university publicity and whether images include women, women as leaders, persons with disabilities or references to encouraging and welcoming diversity in applications from students and potential staff.
6. Work with teacher training departments in universities to look at how attitudes to marginalised groups are produced in schools and ways in which teachers might challenge this in curricula, pedagogy, or the use of materials.

National level

Governments are encouraged to promote not only gender EDI in line with their national contexts but also broader sustainable development issues which could lead to creating better learning spaces and learning outcomes in higher education.

7. Institutionalise gender equity, diversity, and inclusivity in higher education by formulating nationwide policies followed by effective implementation and monitoring.
8. Identify ways to protect or support staff who take on the role of change makers within their institutions, welcoming both men and women into this and encouraging a sense of allyship.
9. Produce national guidelines that encourage active recruitment of women to STEM subjects and the review of science curricula and materials to ensure these address gender, both by including examples and illustrations pertaining to women's lives and exploring the theory of GEDI in STEM subjects.
10. Build on opportunities for the development of community-university partnerships, which enable universities to work with civil society organisations, expanding out their growing knowledge of GEDI issues to broader community groups and learning more from them about the impacts and frequency of discriminatory actions.

Regional level

There should be continued opportunities for cross-university collaboration and networking in the form of specific workshops targeted at data and backed up by events on a regular basis that can be taken up as policy recommendations.

11. Host an annual GEDI conference in the region, so that face-to-face meetings are possible, strengthening relationships further and providing a platform for research undertaken on GEDI during that year.
12. Offer prizes for best research publications (written by women academics; for incorporating gender theory into science), perhaps awarding this at the annual conference.
13. Create hands-on data capacity enhancement workshops that cover data collection, and interpretation of data, to keep track of progress at the regional level, including the possibility of setting up a review of gender data which is standardised or effectively aggregated across the region and for benchmarking as there is currently no single framework in relation to gender EDI development and few opportunities for cross-country comparisons.
14. Complement 9 above with the creation of a common space at the regional level for dialogue and the sharing of practices to move forward, which could be taken up by regional governments, SEAMEO RIHED and the British Council through SEAMEO RIHED's Inter-Regional Research Symposium and RIHED SHARE platform.

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