

ASCENT project aims to reduce impact of disasters

In February 2016, over 30 experts from across Europe and Asia launched a new project funded by the European Union (EU) to strengthen research and innovation capacity for the development of societal resilience to disasters.

The project, called ASCENT (Advancing Skill Creation to ENhance Transformation), is supporting training, skills, leadership development, international collaboration and university–industry partnerships. It seeks to strengthen the ability of higher education to respond to research needs in disaster resilience. It will also empower individuals and organisations with the skills, competencies and credentials needed to continue to pursue research, and to lead research at institutions, aimed at reducing the impact of disasters.

ASCENT is co-funded by an EU Erasmus+ programme grant of €994,000.00, will run for three years and is led by the University of Huddersfield's Global Disaster Resilience Centre, based in the UK. They are joined by a consortium of 13 European and Asian higher education institutions from Bangladesh, Estonia, Lithuania, Sri Lanka, Sweden, Thailand and the UK:

- (1) Programme countries (Europe):
 - University of Huddersfield, UK (Lead Partner)
 - University of Central Lancashire, UK
 - Lund University, Sweden
 - Tallinn University of Technology, Estonia
 - Mid-Sweden University, Sweden
- (2) Partner countries (Asia):
 - University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka
 - University of Colombo, Sri Lanka
 - University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka
 - University of Naresuan, Thailand
 - Chiang Mai University, Thailand
 - University of Dhaka, Bangladesh
 - BRAC University, Bangladesh
 - Patuakhali Science and Technology University, Bangladesh

Over three years, the ASCENT consortium will identify research and innovative capacity needs across Asian higher education institutions in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand to tackle the development of societal resilience to disasters. It will develop research infrastructure; prepare researchers to undertake advanced, world-class and innovative, multi- and inter-disciplinary research; and increase international cooperation among higher education. It will also explore, promote and initiate opportunities for fruitful university–industry partnerships. In doing so, ASCENT will provide the link between the research and the public, helping to reinforce the connection between education and society.

The project was inspired by the Sendai Framework for Action 2015-2030, signed by 187 UN member states in March 2015, as a 15-year, voluntary, non-binding agreement which recognises that the State has the primary role to reduce disaster risk but that responsibility



should be shared with other stakeholders including local government, the private sector and other stakeholders.

The Framework identifies that international, regional, sub-regional and transboundary cooperation remains pivotal in supporting the efforts of States, their national and local authorities, as well as communities and businesses, to reduce disaster risk.

The first phase of ASCENT involved a detailed analysis of existing capacity for disaster resilience among higher education in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand. This resulted in a series of institutional research and innovation capacity reports, culminating in three national reports that highlighted capacity gaps across the three target countries. These were presented and finalised at a major meeting in Huddersfield, UK, in October 2016.

Subsequent workshop discussions provided a basis for detailed training plans to be developed around four core areas of research and innovation capacity for resilience building:

- (1) research methods;
- (2) supplementary and transferable research skills;
- (3) international cooperation; and
- (4) university and industry partnerships.

Functional requirements for the development of research infrastructure to support implementation of the project and provide sustainable capacity development were also documented.

The first major capacity-building event was held in February 2017, in Welligama, Sri Lanka, in proximity to areas that were devastated by the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami. A six-day programme of capacity-building training events and field visits was attended by over 70 researchers from across Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Future capacity-building activity will be delivered online and in at least three further intensive workshops. The next in-country workshop will be held in Naresuan, Thailand, immediately before the 7th International Conference on Building Resilience, which will take place in Bangkok from 27-29 November 2017 (www.buildresilience.org/2017).

For further information on the ASCENT project, contact Professor Dilanthi Amaratunga (d.amaratunga@hud.ac.uk) or visit the website at www.disaster-resilience.net/ascent.

The ASCENT project consortium receives financial assistance from the EU. The European Commission support for the project and its associated activities and outputs does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Dilanthi Amaratunga and Richard Haigh

School of the Built Environment, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Ezri Hayat

Global Disaster Resilience Centre, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK