

HRP Alliance in action:

Building regional capacity through focused support in South East Asia





The HRP Alliance supports research capacity strengthening by bringing together institutions conducting research in sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). At the centre of the HRP Alliance are seven regional 'hubs' established to empower and stimulate the research capacity of SRHR partner institutions, providing regional leadership through scholarships, training, fellowships and institutional mentorship. This story underscores the innovative role taken by the South-East Asian hub in advancing SRHR research, proving that research capacity strengthening on SRHR is not only possible but can even advance in fragile and challenging contexts.

Myanmar is currently facing a shortage in skilled medical personnel. The availability of skilled birth attendants is far below the 60% of deliveries recommendation from the World Health Organization (WHO).

Every year, 2 800 women in Myanmar die in pregnancy and childbirth. Following the fragile political context, the quality and availability of sexual and reproductive health services were strongly disrupted. In the face of such challenges, medical

personnel need to be equipped with evidence-based guidance and tools to respond to the specific challenges in their country. To guarantee sustainable change and a meaningful improvement in maternal health outcomes, we need local solutions to these challenges.

The HRP Alliance regional research capacity strengthening (RCS) hub located at Khon Kaen University (KKU) in Thailand decided to take a distinctive approach by focusing on a single country—Myanmar—and intensively training individuals from a national research institution. Rather than dispersing efforts across multiple countries and institutions, the hub wanted to be intentional in its support of selected individuals affiliated with two departments within one institution capable of catalysing sustainable change in SRHR in Myanmar. As Pisake Lumbiganon, Principal Investigator for the regional hub explained, "Building research capacity means creating a network of experts who can work together effectively. One plus one is not just two—it becomes three or four when collaboration flourishes and is well maintained."

Key learnings and innovations

This focused approach emphasized quality over quantity by providing comprehensive training in research methods, systematic reviews and implementation science. The hub focused on training a small group of researchers with the potential to implement evidence-based solutions in their home institution. This targeted strategy not

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only avoided the dilution of efforts, but also fostered stronger relationships, enabling ongoing support for the researchers' work. Due to the continued meetings, involvement in follow-up training sessions and sustainable points of contact, the relationships and networks allowed the researchers to continue their work under difficult circumstances.

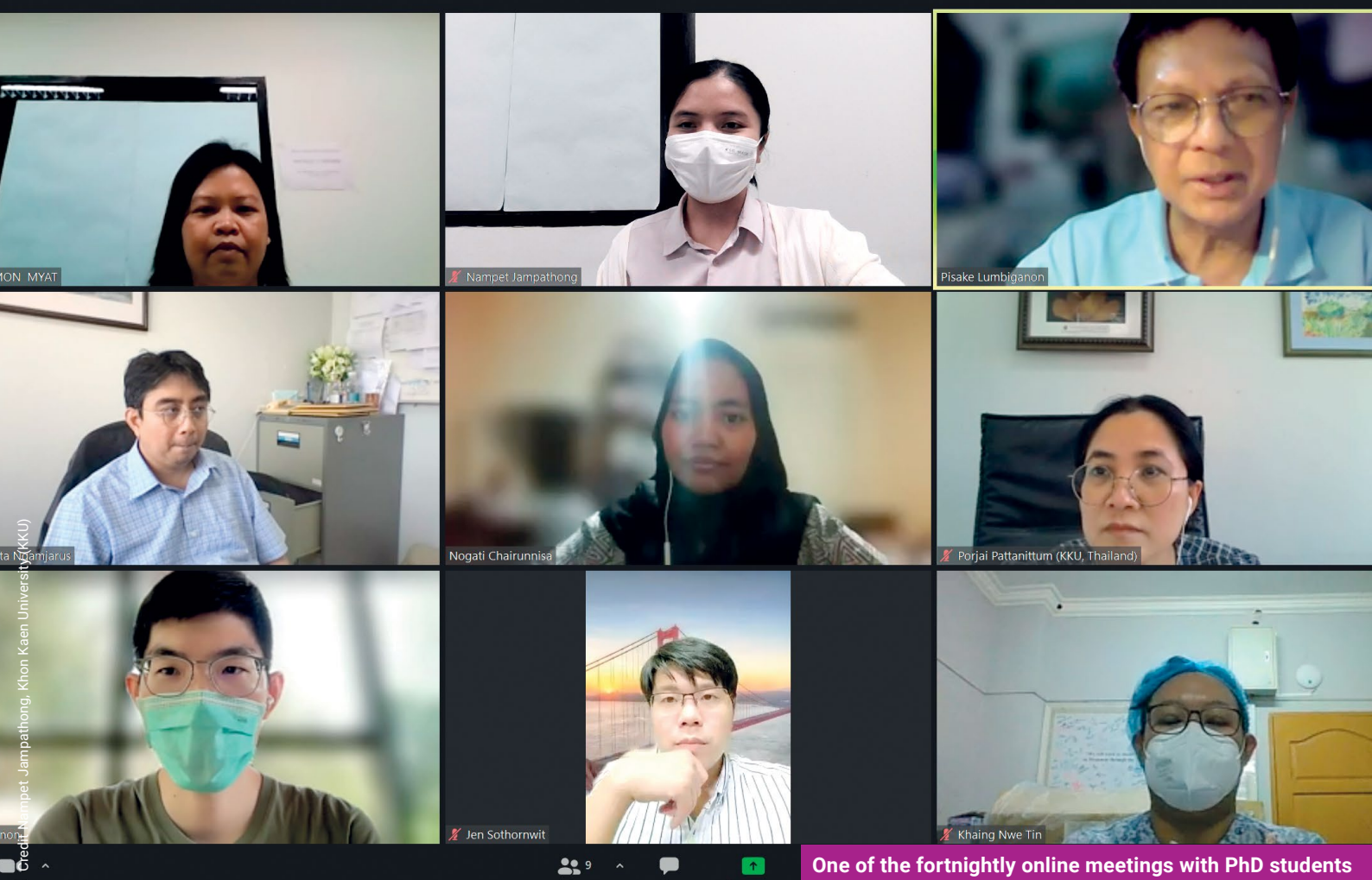
The onset of political instability tested the resilience of the programme. Despite the challenges, the hub continued their critical work with the team in Myanmar. They worked closely with their partners to monitor the situation in Myanmar and find innovative ways for collaboration, ensuring that selected scholars had the institutional backing and resources to implement what they learned under the multiple research training sessions provided.

The key to success

The efforts from the hub based in Thailand resulted in tangible outcomes. Researchers participated in comprehensive short courses on systematic reviews, implementation research and meta-analysis, equipping them with the skills to design focused research questions, to analyse data and apply findings to health systems. A month-long virtual course on implementation research emphasized

proposal development and ethical considerations; at the same time, PhD candidates selected to receive scholarships through the HRP Alliance focused their research on the UN's Special Programme in Human Reproduction (HRP) priority areas, such as comprehensive sexuality education, respectful maternity care and cervical cancer. "The funding from HRP Alliance enabled me to fulfill my dreams to conduct my PhD at KKU, coming from Myanmar. There was a really good culture with our supervisors and the university. We had regular meetings where we could pose any questions we might have. We also had to show our progress," said Kyaw Lwin Show, one of the PhD Students receiving HRP Alliance's sponsorship, who investigated the impact of a [caesarean section on breastfeeding](#).

The studies conducted by the PhD students and supported by the Thailand HRP Alliance hub addressed critical issues in SRHR research and policy implementation in Myanmar. Their work included exploring mistreatment during childbirth and its negative impact on patient satisfaction and care-seeking behaviour, identifying gaps in cervical cancer screening and interventions to increase uptake through innovative approaches like self-sampling for human papillomavirus, as



well as community engagement, and assessing the feasibility of implementing the [Robson Classification](#) to monitor caesarean section rates in Myanmar's public hospitals. For example, Khaing Nwe Tin, one of the HRP Alliance fellows, completed a [study](#) on the uptake of cervical cancer screening in low- and middle-income countries. Thae Maung Maung was also one of the PhD students receiving sponsorship from HRP Alliance: "Part of my PhD was an investigation on [mistreatment of women](#) during

childbirth. After my PhD, I had the privilege to serve as the principal investigator for significant HRP-led projects, such as the [CoTISIS initiative](#). I was also the co-PI for the global maternal sepsis study."

The success of this hub offers a different perspective for future research strengthening initiatives. Concentrated efforts within a single country or institution can lead to deeper, more impactful changes, laying the foundation for scalable and sustainable regional advancements in SRHR.

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