

The History of ProSPER.Net

In response to the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD 2005-2014), the United Nations University Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) embarked in 2007 on a noble mission to build an alliance of leading higher education institutions in the Asia-Pacific region to promote the sustainability paradigm in postgraduate education and research. Inspiration for this initiative came from regional policy makers' calls for producing a new cadre of leaders for Asian sustainability, in recognition of the need to strengthen higher education for sustainable development and the importance of networking of higher education institutions (HEIs) in facing the challenges resulting from rapid and uneven growth in the Asia-Pacific region.

On 19-20 November 2007, an inception meeting was held in Yokohama, Japan among UNU-IAS, 11 HEIs that had a history of collaboration with UNU, and a number of partner organisations including the Ministry of the Environment of Japan (MOEJ). Participants at the meeting mapped out a strategy and pathway toward establishing what would become ProSPER.Net, an academic and research alliance. Under the leadership of UNU-IAS, the group developed the concept upon which the network charter was framed and the by-laws formulated. The timing was opportune since MOEJ was also shaping its own Environmental Leadership Initiatives for Asian Sustainability (ELIAS) and both UNU-IAS and MOEJ initiatives shared a similar vision. It was the consensus to name the network 'Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network' with the acronym 'ProSPER.Net', and for the network to be under the auspices of UNU-IAS. Participants were asked to develop joint projects aligned with the purpose of the network and addressing the goal of integrating a sustainability paradigm into postgraduate courses, curricula and research.

On 5-6 March 2008, an organisational meeting was held in Yokohama where further discussions on proposed joint projects were conducted and the by-laws discussed and endorsed. It was at this meeting where planning for the launch of the network began. By this time, the number of participating HEIs had risen from 11 to 18. Three joint projects were initially identified, namely 'Integrating Sustainable Development in Business School Curricula' led by the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), 'Developing a Postgraduate Curriculum on Public Policy and Sustainable Development' led by TERI University, and 'Training, Education and Awareness Programme for Researchers and Educators of Sustainability' led by Universiti Sains Malaysia. These inaugural joint projects have been completed and to a certain extent implemented.

The final organisational meeting was held on 19 June 2008 followed by the first meeting of the network's General Assembly on 20 June which, among its other actions, elected member institutions to serve on the Board which also held its first meeting on the same day at Hokkaido University.

It was on 21 June 2008 in Sapporo, Japan where representatives of all founding member institutions and partners gathered for the official launching of ProSPER.Net. The auspicious event was held in conjunction with Hokkaido University's 'Sustainability Week 2008 - G-8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit Round' celebratory activities leading to the G-8 Summit held in Hokkaido in the early part of July 2008. The heads of the following founding member institutions or their representatives expressed their strong commitment to the new alliance and formally approved the network's concept, charter and by-laws:

RMIT University, Australia

Tongji University, China
TERI University, India
Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia
Hokkaido University, Japan
Iwate University, Japan
Miyagi University of Education, Japan
Nagoya University, Japan
Okayama University, Japan
Rikkyo University, Japan
Shinshu University, Japan
University of Tokyo, Japan
University Sains Malaysia, Malaysia
University of the Philippines, Philippines
Yonsei University, Republic of Korea
Chulalongkorn University, Thailand
Asian Institute of Technology (Regional)
University of the South Pacific (Regional)

Present to witness the ProSPER.Net launching were representatives of partner organisations, namely UNU-IAS, MOEJ, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Ministry of Environment of Australia, Institute for Global Environment Strategies (IGES), Elsevier Japan, and Yokohama National University which later became a member of ProSPER.Net.

Great collective efforts were invested into the shaping and functioning of the alliance, but the vital question is, then and now, on how to make the network not only sustain but also thrive and prosper through cooperation and dedication of members and partners. The network, indeed, has withstood the test of time and the alliance has continued to expand and is getting stronger.