

# Higher Education in ASEAN – Working Paper

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## Overview

The level of integration within the field of higher education in ASEAN and the EU are reflections of their respective levels of regionalisation. Furthermore, both regions suffer from diversity of culture and languages. The ambitious idea of a Higher Education Area in ASEAN involving 6500 higher education institutions and 12 million students in 10 nations by 2015 is part of the Education for All (EFA) in support of the Attainment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted at the 14<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit.

## Major trends in ASEAN higher education development

The benefits of creating a higher education space in Southeast Asia include greater mobility, widening access and choices, academic and research collaboration, enhanced collaboration on “knowledge economy” and on human capital investment, and the promotion of an ASEAN identity both within the region and outside it, as a region for higher education.

Higher education systems in various Southeast Asian countries are highly diverse. Asian students involved in an intra-regional mobility programme face adjustment problems with regards to instructional practices, cultural diversity and barriers to communication due to linguistic differences, as well as curriculum incomparability. Regional differences in education targets and requirements make any assessment of quality of education in Asia difficult.

The current debate on the path towards the Asian version of the Bologna process is the issue of harmonisation versus standardisation of higher education frameworks. The idea of standardisation implies subscription to a single set of framework while harmonisation merely requires the comparability of these diverse systems. The latter presents a more viable path towards the creation of a higher education space as it will take considerably much longer to impose uniform standards on each tertiary institute in every country. The desire of each member state to preserve its national identity and cultural diversity – as reflected in its education systems – will also pose a challenge to the complete reform of its systems.

Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMO RIHED) asked 5 ASEAN nations – Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines in 2008 to conduct pre-conference workshops to survey the idea of harmonisation in their countries. The results, presented at the Bangkok Conference, showed that many students in various institutes are not aware of the idea of harmonisation and its potential benefits to ASEAN.

## Regional ASEAN players and their ambitions

Most ASEAN member states have become aware that the creation of a common higher education space is a critical step towards the greater regional integration objective, and more importantly, a link to economic growth. This is crucial to a region where most have developing country status.

Brunei Darussalam has now launched the new education system called “The 21st Century National Education System (SPN 21)” which will gear the nation towards a quality education and a better economic performance. Under the new system, Brunei is aiming to increase the percentage of students’ enrollment into higher education from 14% to 30% by 2011. Recently, Brunei has implemented several strategic planning for higher education including: Wawasan Brunei 2035, the Strategies and Policies for

Development (2007-2017), National Development Plan, and MOE Strategy Map (2007-2011). The Division of Higher Education was also established in April 2008 and the new university – Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University – was established in 2007.

In 2007, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia issued the BRAKAS No. 1435 (a regulation) on the conditions and detailed criteria for the establishment of HEIs in the country. It is regarded as the minimum standard for internal quality assurance in higher education. In the years 2007/2008, the MoEYS also completed the Mid-Term Review of Educational Strategic Plan (2006-2010) highlighting the equitable access to education, improvement of quality and efficiency of education service and institutional development and capacity building. In late 2008, Cambodia established 3 new private institutions – 1 institution in Preyveing province, 1 university in Kampot province and Sihanukville City.

Indonesia is now implementing Higher Education Long-term Strategy (HELTS –2003-2010) and on the track to completion of HELTS 2011-2020. The Ministry of National Education is focusing on integrating internal and external quality assurance in higher education institutions and also developing HEI data base. Recently in late 2008, the Indonesian Parliament has passed a new law called the “Law of Education Legal Entity”, which addresses the issue of legal entity and status of higher education institutions in the country. The law ensures the transparency and accountability of autonomous HEIs in Indonesia, particularly state universities/HEIs. Higher education has suffered from a lecture-based system, poor laboratories, a shortage of adequate textbooks in Indonesian, and a poor level of English-language proficiency, which keeps many students from using such foreign textbooks as are available. Research in universities is limited and mainly serves government projects or private enterprise and allows researchers to supplement their salaries.

Malaysia has launched “Malaysia’s National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) in 2007, expected to be achieved by the year 2020. The rationales of the NHESP are to make Malaysia a “Hub of Higher Education Excellence” in the region and internationally, to development human capital with “first-class mentality” and to reposition the country’s higher education to meet current and future challenges. The newly established departments/institutions in the past few years are: the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA –2007), National Higher Education Fund Corporation (PTPTN), Tunku Abdul Rahman Foundation (Yayasan TAR) and Higher Education Leadership Academy (AKEPT –2008). Currently, Malaysia has 20 public universities, 24 polytechnics, 37 private universities, 34 community colleges and around 488 private HEIs. In August 2008, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) was granted an APEX university (Accelerated Programme for Excellence). The other 4 leading research universities are Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Higher education in Malaysia has increasingly become a terrain for marketisation agendas. This is particularly pertinent in relation to Malaysia’s ambition of becoming a regional education hub with education export accounting for a substantial figure in its national account. Since the incorporation of state-controlled universities in 1997, affected universities have been urged to adopt commercial models of knowledge, skills, curriculum, finance, accounting, and management organization. Arguably university education has become more synonymous with training for ‘employability’ at the local and international level.

Higher education system in Myanmar is operating under “Myanmar’s Vision of Education” which aims at creating an education system that can generate a learning society capable of facing the challenges of the knowledge-based society. The “30 Year Long Term Education Development Plan 2001/02-2030/31” focuses on key areas for higher education, including: development of human resource; utilization of ICT; expansion of research: development of life-long learning society: promotion of quality of education and

preservation of national identity and values. Currently, there are 64 HEIs under the Ministry of Education and also another 92 HEIs under other ministries.

Philippines is currently implementing the 'Medium-term Development Plan (2004-2010) and developing the 'Long-term Development Plan' for 2010-2020. As for the Medium-term Development plan, it focuses on broadening the access of disadvantaged groups to higher education, redistribution of some public resources to students to promote greater purchasing power and freedom of choice of educational opportunities, expanding alternative learning systems/modalities of higher learning, improving the quality of HEIs, programs and graduates to match the demands of domestic and global markets; strengthening research and extension activities in HEIs; and rationalising governance and financing higher education to encourage institutional creativity and entrepreneurship. As of 2008, there are 1,726 HEIs in the Philippines.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore has committed to providing subsidised university education to 30% of every Primary 1 cohort by 2015. The original target of 25% was achieved in 2008, ahead of the original target date of 2010. To help provide the additional number of publicly-funded university places necessary to achieve the new target, Singapore will establish a new publicly-funded university, which will take in its first batch of students in 2011. The feasibility of establishing a liberal arts college to add diversity to Singapore's university landscape is being studied. In 2008, the Singapore Government also started to provide funding for part-time degree programmes offered by the National University of Singapore (NUS), NTU, and SIM University. The Private Education Division was set up in 2008 to oversee the regulation of the private education sector, including private education organisations offering external degree programmes as local agents.

Thailand has been focusing on the development of quality assurance system in higher education, including the development of 44 quality assurance indicators and the development of the Commission on Higher Education Quality Assurance Database System (CHE QA Online). Thailand also stresses the importance of HEIs in being the prime movers to increase the country's competitiveness. Based on the 15-year Long-term Higher Education, Phase 2, HEIs in Thailand were categorized into 4 groups: research-intensive HEIs; special or comprehensive HEIs; 4-year liberal art HEIs and community colleges. Each of these groups will have different systems of quality assurance and serve different higher education mandates. The new Minister of Education also emphasized the higher education reform with special focus on education ethics; the close link between education and employability; the development of Thailand as a regional hub for higher education; the support on new innovation to improve national competitiveness; the revision on loan schemes and the measures to decrease the rates of unemployment.

Vietnam is now developing the 2008-2020 Education Development Strategy, in which higher education is included (the strategy is the extension of the Resolution No.14, issued in 2005). The Vietnam International Education Development (VIED) has been established at the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). It is in charge of training overseas, sending Vietnamese students abroad and receiving students coming to Vietnam.

### **Regional bodies and initiatives**

The first ASEAN+3 Higher Education Policy Dialogue took place in Phuket, Thailand on the 21 and 22 March 2009. It discussed the ASEAN+3 Cooperation Work Plan (2007-2017), under which the ASEAN University Network (AUN) is tasked to promote higher education, increase linkages between universities

and encourage credit transfer in ASEAN+3 countries. The two-day meeting aimed to establish the official platform for higher education policy issues between ASEAN+3 countries in order to enhance academic collaboration and increase student mobility in the region. The Dialogue highlighted the need to enhance collaboration among universities in the ASEAN+3 region, as well as suggested frameworks to promote regional identity and solidarity in the region. The participants include AUN member universities and Universities from China, Japan and Korea.

The Dialogue recommended the AUN support the East Asian community building process based on common interests; to provide financial support to the Collaborative Academic Programme which aims to promote greater mobility of students, staff and researchers; to consider establishing an ASEAN+3 Ministerial Meeting on Education. These were presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) which took place in Phuket, Thailand on 5-6 April 2009, as well as at the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN+3 Summit on 11<sup>th</sup> April 2009 in Pattaya.

The AUN Charter will be amended at the fifth ASED to complement the role of the AUN as an ASEAN body in the new ASEAN structure under the new Charter. The representatives of 31 universities from ASEAN+3 countries agreed to establish an network and meet regularly to foster joint collaboration, research and development as well as promote greater mobility of students and faculty members. The first ASEAN+3 Rectors' Conference will be held at Peking University in 2010.

### **Prospects for regional higher education collaboration with external partners**

In the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) in Phuket, the ministers supported the decision of the ASEAN Senior Officials on Education to explore with other East Asia Summit (EAS) countries namely Australia, India, Japan, Republic of Korea and New Zealand, how to harness regional cooperation among the countries to raise quality of education and community building. A regional study has been commissioned to identify the existing educational resources and cooperation in the EAS region.

Australia has expressed keen interest in participating in the regional harmonisation development. It has already funded some scoping studies that could potentially benefit the harmonisation process. It has also declared support in the achievement of MDGs in ASEAN by 2015, to continue cooperation in education through scholarship programmes, regional student and academic mobility, cooperation in science and technology through exchange of information, knowledge and researchers. Australia also pledged to support the activities and projects promoting ASEAN integration and ASEAN awareness.

### **Possible cooperation with European partners**

Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window aims to achieve better understanding and mutual enrichment between the EU and third countries through exchange of students and academics at higher education level, with a view to fostering sustainable development in line with the MDGs. Presently phase 2 (Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013) is being implemented.

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