

A culture of partnership and cooperation: Key to shaping the future of higher education in South-East Asia

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Partnership and cooperation are words that are easy to say but hard to match with deeds. However, they are more than just rhetoric. The interconnected nature of the current challenges facing humanity and the planet requires collective and concerted actions from all of us, including higher education actors and stakeholders.

The alternatives are isolationism and competition. Common sense should quickly rule the former out, but the latter seems to be quite popular in underlying many policies and practices in higher education.

Regional integration

Let's start by looking at the bigger picture of the region. The creation of the ASEAN Community in 2015 was a milestone in South-East Asia's journey towards regional integration. Partnership and cooperation in regional trade and security seem to have been the early starting points for producing tangible outcomes.

However, as we progress deeper into regional integration processes, the integration of people, their mindsets, and skillsets would inevitably emerge as the foundations required to consolidate the ASEAN Community.

The enabling role of education, including higher education, has been widely recognised by governments and stakeholders in South-East Asia. Higher education should not divide; rather, it should unite countries in the region towards a shared future of peace, prosperity and sustainable development.

Unless higher education systems can work together regionally in a harmonized way, we will not be able to lay the most critical foundation for nurturing an ASEAN identity, which will be required to sustain the ASEAN Community from the political, economic and socio-cultural perspectives.

Bilateral and/or multilateral

Regarding partnership and cooperation between and among countries in the region, countries can utilise bilateral and multilateral platforms, which will contribute to better mutual understanding and cooperation between and among higher education systems in the region.

There are significant and growing motivations for ASEAN countries to learn the best policies and practices from other countries, especially within the region. Mutual inspiration and mutual learning have become a norm, as evidenced in the inclusion of international referencing and benchmarking into national policy-making processes in many countries in the region.

Bilateral study visits, joint workshops, and institutional agreements on specific issues and areas of common interest may be planned and budgeted as part of the routine work of ministries and higher education institutions. Staff and officials in charge of international partnership and cooperation should be well trained to acquire the requisite professional knowledge and expertise to carry out their duties.

Many multilateral platforms, such as SEAMEO, ASEAN, UNESCO, and other development partners operating in South-East Asia, can play an essential role in bringing countries together for better transparency, comparability, compatibility and the harmonisation of higher education systems in the region.

Bilateral and multilateral platforms should be mutually supportive, since bilateral efforts can upscale into multilateral frameworks while multilateral arrangements can be localised and implemented through bilateral channels. Bilateral and multilateral efforts should align and complement each other so that all higher education systems in the region can have shared frameworks for policy development and action.

Stakeholder engagement

Higher education stakeholders can be understood from either the supply or the demand side. There is a need, nevertheless, to encourage stakeholders' partnerships and cooperation towards being more inclusive and complementary, ensuring their contribution to both the supply and demand sides of higher education.

Despite the context of competition as suppliers of higher education services, partnerships and cooperation between and among higher education institutions is relatively common, with staff and student exchanges, infrastructure sharing, joint research, and other joint initiatives all taking place fairly frequently.

There are gaps, however, in engagement with stakeholders from the demand side. To address this situation, HEIs should expand their engagement with students, parents, communities, employers and industries in setting up their institutional agenda.

While we stay committed to the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy, we also need to promote the collective ownership of HEIs to ensure that their provision is more responsive to the needs of the demand side, thereby delivering social

accountability for HEIs.

Government has a critical role to play in balancing the principles of institutional autonomy and social accountability, as well as managing concerns from both the supply and the demand sides. Partnership and cooperation among different stakeholders are key factors that will drive the future of higher education in South-East Asia.

Higher education governance

The relationships between governments and HEIs have been dynamic and constantly evolving. South-East Asia has seen efforts to corporatise universities – for example in Malaysia – to lend more autonomy for better accountability. However, governments in the region generally have more financial or regulatory tools to leverage and direct the development and policies of colleges and universities within their respective national contexts.

There is no apparent dichotomy between centralised and decentralised systems, since institutional innovations and alignment have increasingly supported national regulations. This situation requires stronger partnerships and cooperation between governmental and external regulatory bodies and HEIs.

In terms of quality assurance, external frameworks such as national qualifications frameworks have been operating for some time in many ASEAN countries. These are useful benchmarks, but they should be institutionalised by HEIs into internal regulations, templates, and workflows. Frontline teachers should eventually use them in their programme development and course planning at the faculty level.

In the Shenzhen Statement, UNESCO Bangkok and key stakeholders in the region highlighted the need for a living quality culture in higher education, which remains critically important to ensuring the quality and relevance of higher education in this region and beyond.

Higher education finance also benefits by dynamic partnership and cooperation among different stakeholders to create cost-sharing mechanisms on top of investment provided by governments. The introduction of affordable tuition fee systems supported by student loan schemes and public-private partnerships is essential to the financial sustainability of higher education systems.

Reshaping teaching, research, and social service

The key message from UNESCO's third World Higher Education Conference of May 2022 is clear: there is a need to reshape and reimagine the three traditional missions of universities through fresh lenses. These include adopting inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches to research and innovation, educating well-rounded professionals who are also fully-fledged citizens able to address complex issues cooperatively, and acting with a sense of social responsibility at the local, national, regional and global levels.

To achieve our shared goals, partnership and cooperation in higher education must happen at many levels and in many domains related to the teaching and learning activities in a diverse range of HEIs. This could include, for instance, in-person or virtual mobility of students and teachers, recognition of qualifications including micro-credentials, development of regional subject-specific quality standards through stakeholders' engagement, the democratisation of teaching and learning processes with more participation by students and stakeholders, and so forth.

Short-term student mobility should, when possible, be a part of higher education programmes in order to expose learners to different cultures in the region, as well as to develop their ASEAN identity accordingly. We have seen many good initiatives throughout the region, including those managed by the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the SEAMEO Regional Centre specialising in Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED), and the ASEAN Secretariat. More scholarships are needed, both from public and private sources, to support the further expansion of student mobility within the region.

In terms of research, ASEAN should consider establishing regional research facilities and infrastructure to support joint research projects, boost research culture and capacity, and turn colleges and universities, especially the top-tier institutions in the region, away from teaching-oriented towards research-oriented HEIs.

Regarding the aspect of social service, working with local communities and industries should be the primary mode of outreach work for colleges and universities. Activities such as awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy, technology transfer, and incubating local industries and entrepreneurs are all promising outcomes of partnership and cooperation between HEIs and local partners.

In regard to content, the three missions of HEIs – teaching, research, and social engagement activities – should integrate and prioritise content related to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to ensure their relevance and that partners contribute to the achievement of the SDGs in their respective countries.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, partnership and cooperation should take place between and among different countries, stakeholders, and other relevant actors, not least of all teachers and students. Partnerships may also be multi-dimensional across domains and content; indeed, a holistic approach is necessary to ensure that no areas and stakeholders are left behind.

In the context of ASEAN integration, partnership and cooperation in higher education can prepare learners to acquire relevant skillsets and achieve a collaborative mindset as they move towards the cultivation of an ASEAN identity and support the consolidation of the ASEAN Community.

There is a pressing need, therefore, for higher education systems to be more receptive and responsive to all potential forms of partnership and cooperation if we are to establish a culture of partnership and cooperation as an integrated and overarching strategy for not only shaping but transforming the future of higher education in South-East Asia.

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