

Towards a common higher education space in Southeast Asia

 bangkok.unesco.org/content/towards-common-higher-education-space-southeast-asia

We have been seeking the internationalisation of higher education for decades, if not centuries. Initially this was because of curiosity and an early interest in cultural borrowing, then because of a drive for global intellectual solidarity and international understanding, and now due to a need for global and regional economic and social integration.

The previous softer driving forces might provide a less powerful case for governments and higher education institutions to take action. However, the social and economic consequences of not having a harmonised regional higher education space are more tangible and harder to ignore.

It is in UNESCO's DNA to promote the internationalisation of higher education as this can contribute to its ultimate mission of building a culture of peace in the minds of men and women.

Measuring levels of internationalisation of HE

It is helpful to develop an analytical framework to measure the levels of internationalisation of higher education. Global or regional harmonisation is clearly at the top of this framework.

Four keywords support this framework.

The first is 'transparency', meaning countries should try to make information about their higher education system available and accessible by whatever means, including online and offline, to enhance mutual understanding of higher education systems between and among countries.

Access to authentic, authoritative and up-to-date information on higher education systems in different countries is one of the basic requirements of UNESCO's conventions on academic recognition.

The Asia-Pacific Network of National Information Centres (APNNIC) online portal launched in November 2020 jointly by parties to the Tokyo Convention provides a shared infrastructure for promoting better transparency for the region's higher education systems.

With the increasing use of ICT tools and platforms, as well as the easing of the language barrier through the application of big data and artificial intelligence, the transparency issue has now become a matter of prioritisation and commitment on the part of higher education stakeholders.

The second keyword is 'comparability', which means that countries should go beyond transparency to work together for bilateral agreements on the equivalency of qualifications from their respective countries without changing anything in their own systems. It signifies a shift from mutual understanding to mutual recognition and is, therefore, a substantial step forward.

Then comes the third keyword of 'compatibility', for which convergent actions from countries are critical to reduce 'substantial differences' and ensure that different national systems are moving in the same direction. This requires changes in domestic systems at the national level and joint efforts among countries in the region in a more integrated way.

'Harmonisation' is the fourth keyword and represents the highest level of internationalisation of higher education. It can happen at regional and sub-regional levels and involves both top-down and bottom-up processes.

Common quality assurance and qualifications frameworks are the backbone of regional higher education harmonisation. However, this is not about a standardisation process but a process to promote 'unity within the diversity' of different higher education systems in a region.

The legacy of the Bologna Process

Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process for establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is a typical example of regional higher education harmonisation. It has provided rich insights and experiences for other regions to reflect upon, including effective processes, the enabling factors, the main supporting regional initiatives, national alignment mechanisms etc.

While brief and incomplete, the uniqueness of the European case can be summarised as follows:

First, Europe's increasing economic and social integration since World War II has laid a solid foundation for developing multi-dimensional regional integration, including when it comes to higher education.

One of the crucial freedoms EU citizens enjoy and which is enshrined in the 1992 Treaty on the European Union – also known as the Maastricht Treaty – is the free movement of people, including workers, which has tremendous implications for higher education. If there are gaps in economic and social integration, higher education integration is less likely to be a shared priority.

Second, there are clear divisions of responsibilities between the European Union and its member states, as seen in the three categories of competencies – exclusive competence, shared competence and supporting competence.

Education, including higher education, has been listed under the supporting competence, which means that the Union can play supporting, coordinating and supplementing roles in education.

Third, supranational, solid EU institutions, including their legislative, executive and steering bodies, provide the institutional commitment for regional integration initiatives to be appropriately planned, developed, consulted and implemented. Regional higher education integration initiatives in Europe have benefited substantially from the clear roles of the three key European institutions.

More important is the fact that the EU has fixed revenue sources from import duties on goods, VAT, Gross National Income-based resources and others, enabling it to collect formula-based taxes from its member states. This allows the EU to have financial resources and leverage to facilitate regional integration initiatives and to complement national budgets.

Fourth, the three-cycle-based framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area supported by the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and the European Qualifications Framework constituted the key tool for regional higher education harmonisation.

National alignments are critical in ensuring that qualifications obtained from different member states are comparable with one another under the common framework. The Tuning Projects at the subject level in Europe have provided opportunities for universities to develop common core learning outcomes for degree programmes.

Other supporting regional initiatives, such as the Lisbon Convention on academic recognition in the European region, regional and cross-regional student mobility schemes, the diploma supplements and the ENIC-NARIC network for information sharing and transparency have proved to be practical and beneficial.

Need for a common HE space in Southeast Asia

For Southeast Asia, regional integration efforts came much later, with the Philippines, Thailand and the then Federation of Malaya taking the lead to form the Association of Southeast Asia in July 1961.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was officially created in August 1967 with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration by the foreign ministers of five countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines.

ASEAN regional integration worked well on many fronts – for example, regional trade and security in its early years – and has become increasingly comprehensive in terms of coverage. However, the most crucial development relevant to higher education is the free movement of skilled labour and services, along with the free movement of goods, investment and capital, as set out in the 2007 ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint.

ASEAN currently has Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) for six sectors – engineering, nursing, architecture, medicine, dentistry and tourism – and framework agreements for two more sectors – surveying and accountancy. With these recognition agreements in place, workers with their qualifications recognised across ASEAN have more opportunities to work outside their home country.

The ASEAN Agreement on the Movement of Natural Persons and the ASEAN Comprehensive Investment Agreement can also facilitate the movement of professionals, from which higher education as a listed service in the World Trade Organization's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) can benefit substantially.

UNESCO's approach is more focused on promoting academic recognition for further studies. It is fairly weak when it comes to opening access to employment opportunities as the latter is not within the exclusive remit of UNESCO and requires cross-agency efforts.

On the other hand, the World Trade Organization's (WTO) approach is more directed toward employment opportunities, with the movement of natural persons being one of the four modalities of delivery under the WTO-GATS framework.

It is nice to see that things are coming together favourably for the promotion of ASEAN higher education integration, including ideology-driven factors as well as reality-driven ones to ensure that the process of taking joint actions will not be a luxury but a necessity for ASEAN countries.

The MRAs have yet to expand further where sector coverage is concerned, and the degree of effective implementation also differs across the different MRAs.

In addition to efforts to increase the transparency and comparability of qualifications among countries in the region, ASEAN higher education integration is very much needed to support the more ambitious ASEAN integration process, particularly the consolidation of the ASEAN Community, which was officially established in 2015.

The ongoing referencing of member states' qualifications frameworks to the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework is a welcome development for ASEAN higher education integration.

It could support the implementation of current and future MRAs based on the principle of 'no substantial difference' in learning outcomes incorporated in the 2011 Tokyo Convention and the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention. It could also facilitate recognition decisions and the movement of students and professionals across the ASEAN region.

Issues and challenges

Reflecting on the European experience and the ongoing developments in Southeast Asia, the following issues and challenges should be considered when envisioning and planning for a common higher education space in Southeast Asia.

First, ASEAN and its member states need a clear division of responsibilities regarding ASEAN higher education integration. This includes how higher education integration tools are developed, disseminated and implemented.

Combining bottom-up and top-down approaches is highly recommended, with the process starting with a national situational analysis and needs assessment, followed by stock-taking exercises within and beyond ASEAN, the development of regional integration tools and frameworks and their adaptation and alignment at the national level.

Sometimes we skip steps due to financial and time limitations, resulting in a top-down approach and a lack of engagement with member states. This could end up undermining the collective ownership of integration tools and preventing their active and meaningful implementation at the national level.

The second issue concerns the budget and funding sources needed to implement regional integration initiatives. The ASEAN Secretariat currently has an annual operational budget financed by equal annual contributions from its member states.

More activity and a programme-based budget might be needed through broadened funding sources, as happens with the European Commission, so that all the regional integration initiatives can be supported internally with external development partners filling the gaps.

Third, we should emphasise the centrality of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) in developing learning outcome-based integration tools and initiatives.

Further national alignments with the AQRF at system and subject levels can harmonise learning outcomes and the ways to achieve learning outcomes, thus contributing to the recognition of prior learning, micro-credentials and full qualifications and facilitating the cross-border mobility of students and professionals in the Southeast Asia region.

Fourth, government-sponsored scholarships should be expanded for greater mobility of students among countries in the region. An ASEAN version of the Erasmus+ programme and the Erasmus Mundus programme should be considered by pooling resources from existing public and private scholarship providers in the region.

This also tallies well with the requirements of Sustainable Development Goal 4.b, which calls for providing more scholarships for students from developing countries for quality and inclusive higher education.

In the context of regional integration, the dual purposes of recognition and mobility for further studies and employment opportunities should be integrated rather than continue to be separated. With the expansion of MRAs to cover more sectors with fewer regulations and barriers at the national level, we would like to see more types of study plus employment visa packages offered by ASEAN countries in the coming years.

The way forward

With the support of EU-SHARE and other development partners, including the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre specialising in higher education and development (SEAMEO RIHED), ASEAN University Network and UNESCO, the ASEAN Secretariat has just unveiled a 'Roadmap on the ASEAN Higher Education Space 2025' and its Implementation Plan in Ha Noi in Viet Nam, with the following six areas identified for further action:

- Raising awareness and support for developing an ASEAN Higher Education Space.
- Raising awareness and support for implementing regional quality assurance mechanisms.
- Strengthening the AQRF and enhancing its implementation at the national level.
- Promoting the mobility of students, faculty and researchers and internship opportunities.
- Promoting the implementation of the MRAs to cover more sectors with diploma supplements, digital credit transfer systems and ratifying the Tokyo Convention and eventually the global recognition convention.
- Designing and setting the foundations with adequate technical, human and financial resources to ensure the sustainability of the ASEAN Higher Education Space.

Regional higher education harmonisation is not only about systems but also content, values and principles. While acknowledging the pivotal importance of the regional initiatives stated above, we must reconsider the fundamentals of higher education, as agreed at the Third World Higher Education Conference which UNESCO organised in May 2022.

They are to adopt an inter- and trans-disciplinary approach to research and innovation; to educate well-rounded professionals who are also fully-fledged citizens able to address complex issues like climate change; and to act with a sense of social responsibility, both locally and globally.

We hope that, with the implementation of this roadmap, the ASEAN regional higher education integration process can be inclusive and engaging, aligned with the global consensus, and with more technical, scholarship and financial resources from both internal and external sources to achieve their shared objectives.

By Libing Wang, secretary of the Tokyo Convention and chief of the section for educational innovation and skills development at UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education in Bangkok, Thailand.

This is an edited version of a keynote speech delivered at the EU-SHARE Policy Dialogue 15 on Envisioning the Future of a Higher Education Common Space in Southeast Asia, held from 27-28 July 2022 in Ha Noi, Viet Nam, [first published on University World News here](#).