

Chapter 1

Higher Education and Regional Integration in South–East Asia

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ABSTRACT

Harmonization of higher education institutions (HEI) has a potential to build up a cohesive South East Asia. The Kuala Lumpur declaration on higher education has provided a suggestive framework to promote collaborative activities in higher education, which can have a far-reaching impact on the geopolitical scenario of the Southeast Asia. Moreover, the growing threat of climate change, need for disaster management, promotion of lifelong learning, and the mandate for SDGs also call for increased collaborations among HEIs. A well-integrated South-East Asian region with collaborative mechanisms for student exchange, academic collaborations, collaborative research projects, and common educational programmes aimed at people to people contacts has a potential to achieve the common goal of the region. This chapter examines these possibilities, highlights some important cases, and makes recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

South East Asia presents a challenging situation for implementation of Sustainable Development Goals due to vast capacity gaps, diverse socioeconomic situations and disparities in economic standards. For example Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand are newly industrialized countries. However, on the other hand Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam are countries in transition (e.g. from an agricultural economy to an industrialized economy). GDPs per capita wildly vary, ranging from US\$1,100 for Cambodia to US\$41,000 for Brunei and US\$56,300 for Singapore (UN-ESCAP, 2017). The infrastructure and Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) in higher education has sharp variations which call for, a proactive and innovative role of Higher Education. Moreover there is an increasing realisation that higher education can be a means of promoting competitiveness and economic growth (Asian Development Bank, 2012). A har-

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monized system of Higher Education within a region can help to realize unmet potential for intra-region trade and thereby generate employment; create a peaceful and congenial atmosphere for development and reduce hard diplomatic interests of big powers. Higher Education Institutions have to identify common challenges through effective networking and share available resources to raise quality and efficiency in higher education. It is in this backdrop that Regional Cooperation and Cross Border Collaborations is a coming up as a strategically framework for higher education institutions.

The Southeast Asia region has a sensitive geopolitical environment which has been drawing the attention of the world with several major powers of the world trying to exercise soft and hard diplomatic interventions in the region. Moreover, region has also peculiar sensitivities for climate change with most of the countries having large coastline. Keeping in view of the strategic interests of the region it is utmost important that individual countries of the region should explore the possible areas of collaborations, share experiences and develop more of soft diplomatic relations among themselves. Different countries can also showcase their culture, language or lifestyles which will definitely help them to develop a collective ASEAN identity. ASEAN can be a vital platform to encourage such initiatives as ASEAN as a regional entity will be in the strategic interest of all these countries.

The British Council Report titled “*The shape of global higher education: Understanding the ASEAN region*” has highlighted the vital role which Higher Education can play in international relations, diplomacy and in supporting an integrated and aligned South East Asian countries (British Council, 2018). During this decade there has been a consensus within South East Asian Countries to take collective initiatives to be modeled on the alignments in European higher education developed via the Bologna Process (Sirat, Azman and Abu, 2014)

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 with objective to promote cooperation among the Southeast Asian countries. ASEAN formed out of a declaration in Bangkok (Bangkok Declaration, 1967). This declaration was signed by five countries namely: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei Darussalam then joined on 7 January 1984, Viet Nam joined on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar joined on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia joined on 30 April 1999. Member States of this association are presently Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Viet Nam with its Secretariat located at Jakarta, Indonesia. The key vision of ASEAN has been to establish a globally competitive region with a single market and production base—one that embraces the free flow of goods, services, investment, and skilled labor (World Economic Forum, 2019).

Table 1. The Aims and purposes of Bangkok Declaration

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. To accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region through joint endeavours in the spirit of equality and partnership in order to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community of South-East Asian Nations;2. To promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries of the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter;3. To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields;4. To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres;5. To collaborate more effectively for the greater utilization of their agriculture and industries, the expansion of their trade, including the study of the problems of international commodity trade, the improvement of their transportation and communications facilities and the raising of the living standards of their peoples;6. To promote South-East Asian studies;7. To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves. <p>SOURCE: Bangkok Declaration (1967)</p> |
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