

Chapter 2

International Student Mobility in ASEAN: An Overview and Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the present context where international student mobility in the ASEAN region is concerned. It will look at how national policy, regional policy, and specific mobility initiatives are functioning to support the creation of an 'ASEAN Student Mobility' regional hub. In particular, the chapter will explore how these efforts relate to existing theoretical models that exist to explain student mobility and whether they are framed in terms of this theoretical thinking. The chapter will conclude by arguing that while there is the potential for increases in intra-ASEAN student mobility which can enhance the economic and cultural life of the region, a more coherent and coordinated approach is required by the key political stakeholders who lead in the area. It draws upon two recent major research studies undertaken by the team examining student mobility in the ASEAN region.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

Over the course of this century we have seen a dramatic increase in the numbers of higher education students who are defined as ‘internationally mobile’. The accepted definition of such students as put forward by UNESCO is: “An internationally mobile student is an individual who has physically crossed an international border between two Member States with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin.” (Migration Data Portal, n.d., para.3) (Note: the country of origin of a tertiary student in this UNESCO’s definition is the country in which they gained their upper secondary qualifications and foreign students are defined as those who do not have citizenship in the destination, i.e. the host country. For the purpose of this study, data collection involved internationally mobile students are exchange students, and also those without physical movement across national borders, such as studying in distance learning programmes and International branch campuses). Based on the analysis of UNESCO’s data in 2019, since 2000 the numbers of such students have risen from 2 million to over 5.3 million (Migration Data Portal, n.d.).

Commensurate with this increase, policymakers across the world have placed a greater emphasis on international student mobility when developing HE systems at both the national and regional levels. Such focus has itself helped drive increases in student mobility. The most obvious example of this work has been in European Union. The single Erasmus scholarship programme was introduced in Europe as far back as the late 1980s (Erasmus, 2019). The Erasmus programme sits alongside the benefits of visa free travel for the majority of European residents that students benefit from and concerted efforts to produce greater harmonisation in HE since the late 1990s through the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The result is that of the approximately 1.6 million students studying abroad in 2016, more than 40% come from Europe itself (Eurostat, 2019).

However, forecasts suggest that over this decade international student mobility while continuing to rise, will do so more slowly. Research undertaken by the British Council in 2018 suggests that growth in outbound mobility of international students is predicted to slow from 5.7% on average from 2000 to 2015 to 1.7% annually through the 2020s to 2027. There are also concerns from some that the broader geo-political environment in the later 2010s poses challenges for the internationalisation of higher education and hence student mobility. The shift to the political right in certain high profile countries with large HE systems combined with the strengthening of domestic provision in others suggests for some the need to revise what internationalisation in HE means, and look for new models that combine domestic and international provision differently (Altbach & De Wit, 2018).

Looking specifically at ASEAN, as outlined in detail in sections below, the vast majority of all outbound students study outside ASEAN while most inbound students come from non-ASEAN countries. Intra-ASEAN inbound/outbound mobility has increased over the 2013 to 2018 period. But in 2018 less than 10% of all inbound/outbound mobility was between ASEAN Member States. Inbound students are distributed unevenly across ASEAN. More than 80% study in Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia, with over 50% in Malaysia alone. Of outbound students leaving ASEAN, over 80% go to Australia, the US, UK and Japan.

This chapter, in examining the present international student mobility context in the ASEAN region and in considering existing policy frameworks at both regional/national levels looks at the role of theory and what the existing data illustrates regarding the extent of mobility in the region. The chapter in arguing that there are opportunities to increase internationalisation in teaching and learning for ASEAN

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