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Introduction

ASEAN covers a land area of 4.46 million sq km and has a population of about 600 million people or 8.8% of the world's population. As a single entity, it is the eighth largest economy in the world. ASEAN became a community in 2015, largely a response to the growing competition in global markets which makes it important for smaller countries to collaborate to compete with giant economies. Social and economic integration motivates harmonisation in ASEAN, thus effecting regional mobility of academic and professional sectors. Since becoming a community, there has been an increasing need for a greater commitment towards finding ways and means that lead to greater community building, including in higher education.

ASEAN Higher Education

In the last few decades, higher education around the world has undergone profound changes. Academic institutions and systems face pressures of increasing numbers of students and demographic changes, demands for accountability, reconsideration of the social and economic role of higher education, the impact of new technologies, among others. While academic systems often function in a national environment, the challenges play themselves out on a global scale. Internationalisation policies and programmes that universities and governments implement to respond to globalisation typically include sending students to study abroad, setting up branch campuses overseas, and/or engaging in some type of inter-institutional partnership. While this, for many universities, is an exciting and important trend, it is not without some serious consequences.

The mobility of international students, for example, involves two main

trends. One consists of students from Asia entering the major academic systems of North America, Western Europe, and Australia. The other is within the European Union, especially with the Bologna Process, as part of its various programmes to encourage student mobility. Globally, international student mobility largely reflects a South-North phenomenon. Students who come to study in Asia, especially in ASEAN, has been very small. For Asia, the preference is often for countries such as China, Japan and Korea, even amongst students from ASEAN countries. In recent times, there have been several initiatives that have contributed to the development of higher education in ASEAN. Universities and academic systems in ASEAN have begun to develop strategies to benefit from the new global environment to attract international students. The desire to improve rankings have led to established degree programs in English to attract students from other countries. Many ASEAN universities have established partnerships with academic institutions in other countries in order to offer degree and different academic programs, develop research projects, and collaborate in a variety of ways. Branch campuses, off-shore academic programs, and franchising arrangements for academic degrees represent only a few manifestations of such internationalization strategies (Azirah and Aliyyah 2019).

ASEAN places a huge emphasis on the importance of education in creating a strong regional identity. The ASEAN 5-Year Work Plan on Education (2011 to 2015) had four strategic priorities which included a focus on relevant and effective education for all citizens, cross-border mobility and internationalization of education. The subsequent Work Plan (2016 to 2020) had eight sub-goals spanning the promotion of ASEAN awareness, quality and access to basic education for all, the use of ICT, development of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), robust quality assurance mechanisms, University-Industry Partnership, and capacity-building programs for teachers, academics and other key stakeholders in the education community.

With very diverse historical experiences and in different stages of development in region, ASEAN countries' higher education reflects the

different levels of economic development between the member states. Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (or CLMV countries) have higher education systems that are currently focused primarily on national policy reform and system expansion, increasing enrolment and infrastructure development. The middle-income nations (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines) have higher education systems that emphasise quality improvement although we can say that Malaysia has moved to the next level in a number of ways. The high-income countries (Singapore and Brunei), especially Singapore, are more globally-oriented. Singapore's well-developed higher education system receives high international recognition as can be seen in its position in international rankings and Brunei has a number of global partnerships (Gajaseni 2016). ASEAN aims to promote greater educational cooperation among its member states in order to strengthen education in the region to narrow the development gap that exists, to prepare youth for regional leadership and to increase its competitiveness.

The enormous challenge confronting higher education in ASEAN is how it can attract students from a more diverse range of countries. Within ASEAN itself, the different levels of development makes intra-ASEAN mobility even more challenging. With students, scholars, degrees and universities moving about the globe freely, there is a pressing need for international cooperation and agreements between ASEAN universities and ASEAN universities with universities in other parts of the world. Although different from the EU in many respects, the region has shown significant progress in higher education developments that are in some ways in tandem with the Bologna Process. The aspirations for a higher education area in ASEAN vis-à-vis the European Higher Education Area underpin the principles of higher education as a catalyst for economic integration (Azirah and Yee 2017). Regionalisation and harmonization of ASEAN higher education systems are seen to be crucial for the creation of this common space and this facilitates mutual understanding and helps promote regional identity. An increased growth in intra-ASEAN collaboration among universities, international mobility within and beyond ASEAN, and knowledge exchanges with the EU to tackle global challenges, are some examples of the significant impact that are benefiting the ASEAN region tremendously

(Azirah and Aliyyah 2018).

The Cham-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community (2009–2015) highlighted that the education sector had a pivotal role in "ensuring the solidarity and unity among the nations and people of ASEAN" (ASEAN Secretariat, 2009). Therefore, regional cooperation in higher education was emphasized and very much encouraged and promoted during this period. Internationalisation of education and the external dimension similar to the EU's Erasmus+ programmes was further explored within the ASEAN 5-Year Work Plans on Education (2011–2015; 2016-2020). Subsequently, the Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education in 2015 (accepted when Malaysia was Chair of ASEAN) further supports the cross-border mobility theme by enhancing and intensifying regional cooperative efforts in academic, research and community development. The Declaration encourages all ASEAN member states to share good practices of higher education in the region, and to explore the intra ASEAN mobility phenomenon that involves students and scholars (Mohd Ismail et. al. 2016).

Over the course of higher education developments in ASEAN, both ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOM-ED) and ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (ASED) which are formed within the ASEAN Secretariat of the Education,Youth and Sports Division, conducted a series of programmes to promote ASEAN cooperation in higher education according to blueprints and work plans referred to earlier. Working closely with these mechanisms, other key players involved include:

- the ASEAN University Network (AUN);

- the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN);

- the South East Asia Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) and SEAMEO-RIHED (Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development);

- individual ASEAN member states (education ministries, institutions and bodies);

- various Dialogue Partners of ASEAN+3 (Japan, China and Korea),

> East-Asia Summit nations, the EU, the US, etc.;

- global institutions such as UNESCO and UNICEF; and

- other stakeholders, industry players as well as the civil society.

Similar to European initiatives and strategies undertaken to modernise and harmonise higher education, these ASEAN key players have also put in place various mechanisms for:

- international mobility (notably the AIMS programme, ASEAN-China and ASEAN-ROK academic exchange programmes, AUN/SEED-NET education network with the Japanese government, etc.);

- harmonisation of higher education in ASEAN (such as AQAN and the developed ASEAN Qualification Assurance Framework or AQAF, the ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework or AQRF, the AUN-QA programme), and a few credit transfer systems including AUN-ACTS (ASEAN Credit Transfer System), UMAP-UCTS by the University Mobility in Asia-Pacific, the ACTFA (Academic Credit Transfer Framework), etc.;

- intra-ASEAN cooperation in higher education (scholarships via bilateral and sub-regional agreements, leadership building programmes, research collaboration, TVET training), etc.; and so on.

In spite of the above initiatives, mobility within ASEAN can still be considered rather low.

In this paper, we suggest a way forward through the establishment of an ASEAN mobility centre which would serve as a focal point for ASEAN mobility. Such a centre would have specific roles and functions as well as processes involved. It would develop, document, monitor, evaluate and promote mobility and advise and provide information to support national mobility strategies as well as be a source of best practice examples in Southeast Asia. It could act as a cohesive repository for inward and outward mobility in ASEAN and have key personnel who would innovate strategies as well as generate valuable findings or knowledge/information to inform policy and financing decisions at both the national and regional

level. It would be the focal point for the promotion, monitoring, and sharing of best practices in mobility, develop a typology of mobility and a means to monitor and record mobility. These activities would contribute to the wider objectives of capacity building and addressing barriers to mobility.

As a focal point/mobility centre, there would be a formal mechanism to track emerging trends and developments in academic mobility in the region by working together with organisations in all ASEAN member states. The centre would incorporate all the following roles, functions and responsibilities geared towards an enhanced intra-ASEAN mobility of students and scholars; thus it would help to realise the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 by embracing the diversity and solidarity of the ASEAN community.

Its specific objectives would be as follows:

Collecting, identifying and disseminating good practices.

1. To become the focal point for ASEAN mobility- in terms of students, scholars and academic staff- this expands networks for exchange of good practices and promotes a central avenue for sharing and cross fertilisation of mobility schemes in the region.

Identifying barriers to mobility by monitoring trends and patterns.

2. To explore the impact and developments of internationalization policies and infrastructure to support and facilitate models for enabling mobility- the conditions for cooperation and mobility between higher education institutions, industry partners, governing authorities, qualifications and quality assurance agencies, and ASEAN-led mechanisms and entities. This includes models and infrastructure for mobility funding, implementation between the sending and receiving ends, conditions for mobility e.g., visa, living concerns, instruments for credit transfer, etc.

Contributing to the development of harmonized frameworks.

3. To research and discover means of harmonising the existing credit transfer systems in ASEAN (e.g., AUN-ACTS, UMAP-UCTS, SEAMEO-RIHED AIMS, etc.) to promote credit transparency in higher education- this relates to the national qualification frameworks, and possibly the alignment of common structures among the ASEAN member states with the ASEAN Qualification Reference Framework (AQRF) and other benchmarks for credit-bearing mobility programmes.

Engaging with and building trust among stakeholders in the promotion of mobility.

4. To research and innovate effective models of collaboration with stakeholders to facilitate students and scholars mobility by expanding its scope and scale of implementation in the higher education ecosystems in ASEAN- this entails a rigorous study and understanding of the process of curriculum development and the internationalization process in higher education which involves awarding credits based on learning outcomes and academic workload, flexible pathways of qualifications including virtual mobility and online learning, meeting the enterprise/workforce needs by examining competencies and work-based training, and so on. Ideally, mobility in higher education would ease the articulation of qualifications and promote global (or regional) recognition for employment purposes. This will also enable the cross-fertilisation and free-flow of recognized knowledge and skills needed by the ASEAN community.

Building an evidence base to support mobility.

5. To further explore the frontiers of intra-ASEAN mobility by appraising existing and potential inter- and multi-disciplinary research projects of various disciplines across the region to discover

(a) the mobile experience of credit mobility (of students, scholars, etc.); (b) success stories and best practices on mobility enhancements; (c) components and elements of mobility for inclusion in research endeavours involving credits accumulation or otherwise; and so on.

In terms of its operational procedures, an appropriate responsible body would provide a clear direction on the establishment of a data management system; an ASEAN country would lead with identified ASEAN collaborators to:

(a) conduct stock taking and a general scanning of current data management practices in the region;
(b) propose appropriate mechanisms to report and manage data to the body concerned; and
(c) establish a publicly accessible platform, such as a website for dissemination of information and analysis mobility patterns.

Based on the above mechanism, the centre would, firstly, undertake various pilot initiatives to address these concerns with systematic approaches. To facilitate this initial phase, the centre would need to work very closely with Ministries of (Higher) Education and all interested parties from ASEAN member states for information gathering, data collection, policy dialogues, ASEAN networking, mobility stock-taking, etc. Education on "mobility" would be essential at this point because mobility is not effective without a comprehensive and in-depth knowledge of its underpinning concepts, principles and the current status quo. Thus, various seminars, workshops and intra-ASEAN dialogues would be part of this endeavor to facilitate the spirit of "sharing and caring" of the ASEAN community and the "people-centredness" focus in mobility. Subsequent and in tandem with this phase would be the establishment of a mobility centre that would be vital for research development, coordination of mobility in higher education in ASEAN, and ultimately, a common higher education area where mobile students and scholars may prosper and benefit from the ASEAN community by 2025.

The underlying principles of conduct for this centre would be in accordance with the "ASEAN Way" which emphasizes solidarity, constructive agreement and in favour of community building through mutual respect for sovereignty, equality, territory integrity and national identity of all AMS. Thus, it would respect the existing national practices and mobility initiatives in data collection. Database information (and all relevant mobility parameters), documentation on the following would be provided: mobility best practices, success stories and existing schemes (which include credit systems, national qualification frameworks, funding and scholarships for mobility, etc.), analytics on emerging mobility trends and typologies of mobility networks/cooperation in the region, research developments and debates on intra-ASEAN mobility, and policy as well as grass-root recommendations regarding conditions to facilitate mobility in higher education, and tactical measures to mitigate barriers in mobility.

The centre and other responsibility bodies would ensure the validity of data collection, analysis and reporting by maintaining high standards and quality in disseminating mobility information and knowledge that involves rigorous checking, verifications, quality control, consultations with all ASEAN partners, cross-referencing, data clean-up, peer checks, statistical validations, etc. The suggested steps in the set-up and implementation are as follows:

Phase 1

- Sourcing of key resources- manpower, expertise, consultants (who are specialized in the workings of mobility in ASEAN), instrumental tools and platform for data mining, and relevant infrastructure needs such as logistics and travel, equipment and supplies, and so on.
- Educational activities and endeavours to impart knowledge on mobility for key drivers of the mobility centre
- Pilot initiatives by the mobility centre (advised by the responsible bodies)- partners identification, initial scoping of existing mobility-related activities in the region, ASEAN networking (especially with

the mobility players), and infrastructure design for the mobility centre

- Reporting on progress and achievements to the responsible body (mobility data reviews, networks and cooperation, mapping of activities and achievements in support of the set-up of the mobility centre, etc.)

Phase 2

- Official establishment of the mobility centre.
- First milestones for (further) information gathering, detailed data collection, mobility stock-taking, and pooling of mobility knowledge-base (regional funding, schemes, credit systems, qualification frameworks, bilateral agreements on higher education, etc.)
- Framework design for analytics and reporting- including the creation of a sharing platform; and actual data mining works to discover knowledge
- Reporting of results to the responsible body (mobility patterns, emerging trends, conditions and barriers in mobility, etc.)

Phase 3

- An optimized functioning of the mobility centre among all AMS partners/mobility players
- Further scope of work to incorporate policy and grass-roots involvements at both the national and regional levels
- Advisory role on intra-ASEAN mobility in higher education- within and beyond the region
- Supporting a specific mission, and benchmarking achievements with the goals and statements of the KL Declaration on Higher Education (reality check reporting- challenges, problems, novel discoveries, etc.)
- Promoting and facilitating the "ASEAN Way" for mobility of learners, academics and other education stakeholders in the region

- Enhancing mobility research and greater education collaboration and cooperation among higher education institutions in all AMS
- Periodic reporting and co-planning with the responsible body for future plans of the mobility centre

Benefits to ASEAN higher education

As an entity that spearheads regional fields of research, the centre could function as a "think tank" to assist with the formulation of governmental policies that involves regional cooperation in ASEAN. It would produce high quality research and strengthen collaboration with external agencies including international institutions that encompass regional forms of research. The centre would also optimise the potential expert resources to establish a firm area of expertise within this region that focuses on interdisciplinary research.

By participating in the mobility research, the centre would help higher education institutions expand cooperation and partnerships in international research, as well as learning and skills development, with a clear emphasis on academic as opposed to personal development of the staff and students. In addition, it would expand the intra ASEAN mobility amongst ASEAN researchers whilst increasing the quality level of research output with the existence of an on-going cooperation network.

The centre would support ASEAN initiatives in taking further steps towards more widespread mobility programmes and increase mobility of people in the region and between regions. This new context places higher education in a pivotal role in the development of human resources capable of creating and sustaining globalised and knowledge-based societies.

The Framework for the Implementation of the Kuala Lumpur Declaration 2015 states the following:

By the year 2025,
i. ASEAN is an attractive, conducive and welcoming space for mobility of

students and academics. They participate in different types of mobility programmes with different duration of implementation, including but not limited to

a. Full time study outside of home country
b. Credit – bearing mobility programmes, such as semester exchanges and
c. summer programmes;
d. Non credit – bearing mobility programmes, such as study visits, conferences and seminars and cultural exchange programmes;
e. Mobility for research and professional development, such as schemes for visiting academics, internships, attachments, research visits, train – the – trainer programmes, networking sessions, training workshops for higher
f. education leaders, meetings and seminars, as well as education and training programmes; and
g. Mobility for community development, such as community engagement
h. programmes and volunteering programmes.

ii. ASEAN attracts greater collaboration in academic and research mobilitywith partners within and outside of ASEAN.

iii. There is a formal mechanism to track trends and development in student and staff mobility within ASEAN. This will encourage better decision and policy formulation among international organisations, national agencies, higher education institutions and stakeholders involved in implementing mobility programmes.

iv. ASEAN

a. uses a common credit transfer system for credit-bearing mobility programmes. In this respect, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) is the main credit transfer system for ASEAN.
b. acknowledges the different types of credit transfer systems in existence beyond the ACTS. In this respect, a mechanism should

be identified and implemented in order to manage comparability of diverse credit transfer systems used in the region.

v. Every student is given the opportunity to participate in intra-ASEAN mobility programmes at least once throughout their duration of study.

vi. Every academic staff is given the opportunity to participate in mobility programmes for academic, research and professional development.

vii. Every student and staff is encouraged to engage in community development activities within ASEAN.

The Framework also provides the following recommendations for implementation:

To achieve the above-mentioned aspirations, there is a need to

i.   acknowledge existing State-level efforts in mobility, such as the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) programme, initiatives under the ASEAN Universities Network (AUN), and the European Union Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (EU-SHARE); and draw success stories and good practices from the implementation to be shared across all ASEAN higher education institutions

ii. intensify mobility programmes through bi- or multi-lateral collaborations organized by individual institutions

iii. explore different implementation models that would mobilise greater numbers of students within the region

iv. capture data on mobility patterns of students and scholars within the region

v.   provide capacity building opportunities for staff managing mobility programmes

vi. develop guiding principles in intensifying intra-ASEAN mobility of students:

  a. "ASEAN first" with regard to international collaboration in academic and Research.

  b. Quality as a driver in the implementation of mobility programmes.

  c. Clear learning outcomes for student and staff participation in mobility programmes.

  d. Clear guidelines on implementation of a common credit transfer system and comparability of different credit transfer systems.

  e. Appreciation of diversity, the ASEAN identity and the solidarity of the ASEAN Community.

  f. Inclusiveness in participation of students in mobility programmes.

  g. Coordination and engagement of stakeholders involved in implementing mobility programmes.

  h. Comparability of academic qualifications.

  i. Mutuality in participation, with regard to inflow and outflow of students in mobility programmes.

vii. Work with respective higher education institutions to

  a. Increase the level of interest in mobility programmes within ASEAN among students and staff.

  b. Increase access to, and participation of, students and staff in various mobility programmes organised at both national and institutional levels.

  c. Promote mobility programmes among students, staff and employers.

  d. Design mobility programmes which provides meaningful learning experiences both within and outside the classroom.

  e. Design capacity building activities for staff involved in managing mobility programmes.

  f. Identify facilitative models to enable greater participation of students and staff in mobility programmes, such as tuition fee waiver, seed funding, allowance and subsidisation of accommodation, facilities and infrastructure, among others.

  g. Remove barriers on student and staff participation in mobility

       programmes at the national level, in particular barriers related to country admissions.

h. Develop assessment methods to evaluate learning outcomes for mobility programmes beyond credit-bearing mobility programmes.

i. Engage dialogue partners, international organisations and industry representatives to intensify access to, and participation of, students and staff in mobility programmes.

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