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# Higher Education Integration in ASEAN: ASEAN University Network Case\*

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## Abstract

*Higher education has an important role in the region's economic growth, with talents and ideas developing in the process. ASEAN University Network (AUN) is the institution that facilitates cooperation among ASEAN universities and beyond. This research attempts to describe the role of AUN in enhancing regional integration in the higher education sector in ASEAN. This research uses qualitative method to get depth information and the bigger picture in the governance of AUN's role and mechanism in regional integration of higher education system. The results of this research showed that AUN helped enhancing regional cooperation.*

*Key words: AUN, regional integration, higher education, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).*

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## Introduction

Education is one of the sectors that have a crucial role in regional integration. It is a backbone for development and regional integration, as it has been proved, in Western Africa, which helped to further regional integration (Guannu, 2010). This research argued that such experience is also relevant in ASEAN.

ASEAN integration process has shown its greater importance following the establishment of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) in late December 2015. The integration process consists four pillars of economic integration; single market and production base, competitive economic region, equitable economic development, and integration of the global economy (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015). This integration has proceeded with a new phase after ASEAN Charter in 2008. With the new phase of integration in the economic sector, hopefully, it will begin to advance in integration and boost development in a region.

In ASEAN today, only eight occupations received mutual recognition agreements among ASEAN countries (Fukunaga, 2015). Therefore, there is a demand to produce more capable skilled labor to increase or maintain its education sector quality and contribute to regional integration with an equal and fair standard.

The regional integration process in EU countries could be a set of an example of regional integration in the education sector for ASEAN. In Europe, the Bologna Process helped to support the modernization of education and training and helped to better integrate the countries inside EU (Papatsiba, 2006). It shapes European values and knowledge that form European identity also increase

competitiveness and capability of human resources.

The cooperation in the education sector in Southeast Asian level particularly higher education has been established since 1956. Mustajarvi and Bouchon (2014) explained it narratively with the first establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL) in 1956, followed with the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) in 1965 (Mustajarvi & Bouchon, 2014). Thirty years later, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) was established in 1995. Mustajarvi and Bouchon also described the comparison later compared the higher education integration in Europe and ASEAN. The pattern of higher education integration in ASEAN more likely suitable with neo-functionalist approach and accompanied with legal formal and political initiatives.

## Research Question and Methodology

The fact is ASEAN has not yet fulfilled the complete integration among stakeholders of higher education. Although the stakeholders such as policy makers and institutions have established the regional organization, in the process, has not involved all universities in ASEAN, or at least the state universities.

The purpose of this research is to highlight the regional integration of ASEAN in higher education sector. It uses the theory of regional interdependence for regional integration. This theory is originated from interdependence theory which developed as a critique of realist theory in the 1970s and emphasized non-state actor in international relations (Wilkinson, 2010). The term of regional interdependence is more familiar with economic development in a region. The

non-state actor has bigger role in regional integration and economic prosperity.

The questions that arise in this article are:

1. How is the quality of the higher education sector in ASEAN countries?
2. How can AUN contribute in regional integration in the higher education sector?

The method of this research uses descriptive analytical method, and get data incorporate primary data coming from ASEAN Secretariat, and secondary sources coming from academic journals dealing with the development of AUN.

This research is divided into two parts. The first part is to describe the overview of higher education in ASEAN countries. Each of ASEAN countries will be described in this part. The second part is to discuss regional integration process of higher education sector in ASEAN particularly AUN and analyze how AUN contribute for regional integration of the higher education sector.

### **The Overview Condition of Higher Education in ASEAN Countries**

Nowadays, with the introduction of AEC in 2015, ASEAN tried strongly to narrow the gap among ASEAN countries, proved with the growth of the higher education system in ASEAN. Here is the brief overview of higher education in ASEAN Countries.

#### *Philippines*

There are 2,060 higher education institutions until 2008 in Philippines (ICHEFAP, 2011). Most of them are satellite campus. The political structure of

higher education governance in Philippines has put the main policy maker in one institution that is the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) which was established in 1994. It is an autonomous institution that has authority on higher education policy in Philippines. The unique thing about the higher education system in the Philippines is that the quality assurance or accreditation based on an internal request and then to be accredited by the external auditor and the higher education institution pays the accredited agents. The regional cooperation of the higher education institution in Philippines is very extensive but mostly only located in five best universities in Philippines.

#### *Indonesia*

Indonesia has 3,000s higher education institution until 2013, and the majority is college type campus (Moeliodihardjo, 2014). Recently, in 2014, the new administration has established a new ministry dealing only with research and advance education, with its own budget. Before that, the higher education was put merely under the directorate general level, under the Ministry of Education and Culture. Today, the higher education in Indonesia has begun to show greater trends to conduct extensive international networks. In terms of regional cooperation, every university has its own policy with so many association and organization but in this part, only AUN that been described.

#### *Malaysia*

With 600 higher education institutions in 2011, Malaysia has proved itself to become an advanced institution of higher education sector in Southeast Asia (Arokiasamy, 2011). Public institutions in this country received massive support from the government, and later developed

themselves to becoming international reputed universities. Earlier on, Malaysia operated a system called National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP). In 2014, NHESP was in phase 2, with the merging of two ministries, focusing on internationalization, to become a hub for international higher education. The existing activities in internationalization among others are international mobility program, international service learning, and international cooperation in education and training, and boosting and trust to Malaysia partners (Knight, 2013).

#### *Singapore*

With only six universities, Singapore has the best higher education institution in ASEAN (Ministry of Education of Singapore, 2015). Two of them are Nanyang Technological University and National University of Singapore is the major reputed global university and even the best in Asia. The Ministry of Education is the major policy maker of higher education institution in Singapore. The country has successfully utilized its long national stability and economic growth, and successfully integrated and centralized all areas of education. The universities in Singapore have also maintained enormous cooperation with world class universities such as Harvard, Cambridge, and made themselves the global hub of education in Southeast Asia.

#### *Thailand*

Thailand had 645 higher education institutions in 2000 (Kirtikara, 2001). The Ministry of Education holds the authority in running the education system. Following the Second 15-year Long Range Plan on Higher Education and the 11th Higher Education Development Plan, the country conducted an internationalization

of Thailand higher education system and paid attention to the use of English as the medium of communication.

#### *Brunei Darussalam*

Brunei currently has 18 higher learning institutions (Ministry of Education of Brunei Darussalam, 2015). The public institutions are predominantly in Brunei and administered by the Ministry of education of Brunei, aiming to educate its citizens. Most of Brunei citizen are studying in tertiary education abroad and prefer to choose advance education in advance APEC. In internationalizing its higher learning institutions, Brunei provided scholarships for foreigner to study in Brunei's universities.

#### *Vietnam*

Vietnam is developing countries with rapid growth in the economy and needs progressive advancement in the higher education sector to support its economic growth. There are 498 institutions of higher education in Vietnam (Nguyễn & Vũ, 2015). The main administrator of higher education sector in Vietnam is the department of higher education under the authority of Ministry of education and training. Vietnam is improving and restructuring its internal quality.

#### *Laos*

Laos began its commitment to developing its higher education in the early 1990s (Ogawa, 2008). Previously, the government focused on improving the primary education sector. Until 1995, the country had only 10 public higher education institutions. Today, it has grown to 91, including the rapid number of private institutions (Lie, Kaur, & Sirat, 2014). The rapid development of private

institution was driven by decree of government that allows private institutions to be established. The Ministry of Education holds the power to govern higher education sector in Laos. The focus of Laos is the internal quality improvement within the late development of higher education sector. Considering the need to support international student mobility, the Ministry of Education continued to send the local students overseas to study, aiming to come back to the country to improve the quality of education in Laos. However, Laos also accepted international student from abroad.

### *Myanmar*

The transition from the military regime to a more democratic regime in 2011 helped to reform the higher education system in Myanmar, with government launched a comprehensive review of the education system in 2014 (Win, 2015). That review aimed as a foundation for the betterment of higher education sector in Myanmar. Nationally, there are 164 of higher education institution in Myanmar, with 96 institutions located in Mandalay and Yangon (McCord, Simon, & Weil, 2013). The main authority in ruling higher education sector is the ministry of education, visioning international cooperation for Myanmar higher education system mainly focusing on aid preferably coming from overseas to improve the local education quality. At the same time, Myanmar also sends the local student abroad to transfer the knowledge and practice in Myanmar's education.

### *Cambodia*

Soon after the end of the Khmer regime in 2009, the new government in Cambodia began to improve the qualities of the local 134 educational institutions (Kitamura et al., 2016). The Ministry of

Education holds main authority in ruling the higher education, focusing on the improvement and enhancement of its internal quality. Specific attention had been given to, in reaching young generation to participate in tertiary education. Like Laos and Myanmar, Cambodia also preferred to attract foreign sources to develop its higher education system.

### **The Role of AUN in Integration of Higher Education in ASEAN**

In November 1995, AUN was established. Following the development in 1997 to 1999, the membership of AUN was expanded in line with the increasing member of ASEAN. Today, AUN incorporates 30 universities (AUN Secretariat, 2016) (**Table 1**).

AUN establishment was based on the ambitions of the leaders of ASEAN and the ASEAN Sub-Committee on Education (ASCOE) in establishing ASEAN universities. But the idea failed due to constraints of cost, location, and leadership. Therefore, in 1994 ASEAN initiated began initiated ideas leading to the establishment of networks between universities in ASEAN so that cooperation in the field of education can be improved. In 2000, the AUN Secretariat set up in Bangkok, Thailand (Beerrens, 2004). While most of AUN member are public universities, only two universities are private, namely De La Salle University and Ateneo de Manila University.

**Table 1. AUN Members in ASEAN**

Mandalay University	University of Brunei Darussalam	Ateneo de Manila University	Royal University of Phnom Penh	De La Salle University
Royal University of Law and Economics	University of the Philippines	Airlangga University	Nanyang Technological University	Gadjah Mada University
National University of Singapore	University of Indonesia	Singapore Management University	Bandung Institute of Technology	Burapha University
National University of Laos	Chiang Mai University	National University of Malaysia	Chulalongkorn University	University of Malaya
Mahidol University	Universiti Putra Malaysia	Prince of Songkla University	University of Science, Malaysia	Vietnam National University, Hanoi
Universiti Utara Malaysia	Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City	Yangon Institute of Economics	Can Tho University	University of Yangon

The objective of AUN is the wish for the establishment and strengthening solidarity networks between universities in ASEAN. So far, the cooperation involved the exchange of staffs and students respectively to increase the skills, knowledge, and ability of Human Resources (HR) at each university (AUN Secretariat, 2016). AUN also managed to establish cooperation with universities outside ASEAN such as EU, Japan, South Korea and China and invited them as an observer in meetings of the AUN.

For example, in the fields of geology, AUN and cooperation between universities in Japan conducted research on the potential development of geology in the area. Research and development of products successfully developed in this collaboration. Based on research conducted by Koichiro Watanabe et al, shows the AUN and Japanese cooperation

schemes initiated through South East Asia Engineering Education Development Network (SEED-Net) helped to strengthen the Japan-ASEAN Summit in 1997 and the ASEAN+3 Summit (Watanabe et al, 2006). This brings considerable benefits in utilizing geological potential in Southeast Asia, as well as exchange of students and staff. Another example in social sciences issues, AUN has the positive impact on its member by the enhancement of the Southeast Asian Human Rights Studies Network (SEAHRN). It involves other universities which are not AUN member.

Learning from the ideas of Thomas Friedman which highlighted the greater importance of globalization following the year 2000, it can be asserted that the increasing development of AUN, run in tandem with the ASEAN's path by establishing the what so called the ASEAN Community in 2015 (Friedman, 2005).

In fact, AUN continued to highlight the importance of human resources, manifested in the completion and innovation. In the process, universities inside ASEAN had begun to better interact, with experts and academics working together to improve the education qualities in various countries inside ASEAN at the same time (Ratanukul, 2009).

At the level of regional cooperation and the establishment of AUN is also attractive because it can improve the relationship between ASEAN countries. Education has been utilized as a tool of foreign policy, with member benefitting from permitting their universities to better interact with their partners inside ASEAN. In addition, education is a part of people to people diplomacy by doing international mobility student. Nowadays, there are 12 programs of scholarship that available for AUN member and will increase along with the capacity enhancement of AUN member (AUN Secretariat, 2016).

In line with the findings of Josef T. Yap, universities inside ASEAN had benefitted from the exchange of people, transnational education, information exchange, regulatory reform, and development cooperation. In this research, Yap mentions that the AUN and ASEAN Quality Assurance Network had played an important role in furthering the importance of ASEAN (Yap, 2012). Even though the ideas of quality of assurance and accreditation is yet to come, but integration processes inside ASEAN tend to work along this direction.

Even though, AUN alone currently covers only 30 universities from thousands of universities in Southeast Asia. There are still a lot of universities inside ASEAN that have the potential, to take advantage of this

scheme. In the membership issue, it is not easy to integrate quickly in adding the new member. Such difficulties can be overcome if every member of AUN play a role in practicing AUN mechanisms, and share their expertise to their fellow partners at the national level. AUN enhancement in SEAHRN could be the good model for collaboration beyond AUN member in ASEAN. In the same way, AUN can share its best practices in supporting the local governments inside ASEAN's provinces to better deal with globalization issues, such as finding the best ways to achieve all targets stipulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). By doing this, AUN's role will further strengthens ASEAN's path towards achieving all goals stipulated in the ASEAN Community 2015 and raise the reputation of its members at the global level.

### **Conclusion**

AUN has a network which runs in line with the ideas of ASEAN Community. In addition, AUN has a capacity to improve the quality of education and universities in ASEAN, especially changing the mind of universities which are outside the top 400 universities in the world.

Acknowledging there is a big gap on one hand between universities in Singapore and Malaysia, and universities in Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. On the other hand, it is advisable that AUN to better focusing on strengthening the internal cooperation using all frameworks inside ASEAN. There is a lot of potential of AUN to contribute in the regional interdependence of ASEAN. By doing this, AUN will help to narrow the current gap already exist, which will in the long run help to increase the sense of belonging and



sense of identity as an internal part of ASEAN.

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