

ASEAN student, academic mobility is patchy – Report

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Student and academic mobility, particularly within the Southeast Asian regions, underpins the region’s globalisation of higher education, with concerted efforts to streamline visa procedures across the region to aid student mobility. But other social and political hurdles remain, according to a British Council study.

Student and academic mobility, particularly within the Southeast Asian regions, underpins the region’s globalisation of higher education, with concerted efforts to streamline visa procedures across the region to aid student mobility.

However, significant social and political hurdles are still to be overcome, according to a new report by the British Council.

The study, [The Shape of Global Higher Education: Understanding the ASEAN region](#), released at the British Council’s Going Global conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia last week, looks at policies to promote internationalisation in higher education among the 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN.

It notes that nine out of the 10 countries score highly or very highly on cross-border openness generally. The scoring in the study measures national-level strategies supporting inbound and outbound mobility of students and academics, openness of academic programmes, and collaborative research.

Of the 10 ASEAN countries – Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam – only Myanmar scored ‘low’ on this measure while Malaysia and Thailand scored ‘very high’ on openness of the higher education system, including student and academic mobility.

Countries in the region were working to make the recognition of foreign qualifications more transparent. Cambodia, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines score well on this, according to the study.

“Interestingly, the recognition of TNE qualifications is not as advanced as that of foreign qualifications, although work is under way to improve this across the region,” the report says, referring to foreign qualifications delivered to local universities, known as transnational education or TNE.

Choltis Dhirathiti, executive director of the ASEAN University Network Secretariat in Bangkok, which for some years has been working on credit transfer mechanisms to boost student mobility, recently told *University World News* it was a long drawn-out process, not least because of the huge disparity between countries in the region, and within countries between universities themselves.

“Quality and standards are very obvious in the eye of the beholder – you can see clearly that this student has a higher quality [education] while that student doesn’t, and this hinders our universities’ exchange programmes through credit transfer mechanisms in a multilateral framework, meaning among universities in a big group like ASEAN,” Choltis said.

Universities in ASEAN “still prefer to do exchanges bilaterally and prefer to negotiate with their counterparts one-to-one and set up customised exchange programmes, maybe without credit transfer or with transit transfer, or sometimes with only credit and no letter grades,” he said.

Student mobility

Within ASEAN, Malaysia and Singapore are in the top 20 countries worldwide for incoming international students, with students entering from within ASEAN and from outside, according to the British Council report.

Nonetheless, “despite Brunei, Cambodia and Vietnam all having relatively low numbers of international students, there is evidence of efforts being made to develop clarity in the entry and selection criteria for international students,” the study says, adding that “much of this work is being undertaken at the level of higher education institutions themselves in developing their own policies, rather than at the sector-wide level.”

All 10 ASEAN countries have some form of study-abroad scholarship programme, but these vary greatly in size and extent, the study says.

In Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam, the national government takes the lead in offering scholarships, while in other countries foreign aid plays a bigger role – particularly from countries like Japan extending mobility outside the region – although the Malaysian Technical Cooperation Programme offers ASEAN masters scholarships for ASEAN member states’ citizens.

The Cambodian government offers scholarships for Vietnamese and Laotian students to study the Khmer language and engineering. Singapore also has a well-funded ASEAN Scholarship Scheme and the Singaporean government also provides scholarships for Indian nationals to study at Singaporean institutions.

Academic mobility and brain drain

The study notes that there is “as yet, less evidence of policies to actively support academic mobility through preferential visa policies or working opportunities in the ASEAN region”.

However, academic staff working abroad is seen as a way to improve the academic capacity of the domestic higher education system.

The majority of countries have some form of programme in place to enable outbound academic mobility, or in the case of Myanmar, are working towards such a programme. “Where inbound academic mobility is concerned, there is less activity evident,” it says.

Many countries sending academics abroad have “safeguards” to ensure they return home.

“Understandably, there are anxieties from ASEAN nations regarding the impact of expansion of IHE [international higher education] on their internal capacities if it leads to more academic staff moving abroad and not returning,” the study says.

Brain drain is an issue in Malaysia, Cambodia, Brunei, Indonesia and the Philippines, and it is also a concern for Myanmar, where anti-‘brain drain’ policies feature heavily in the National Education Strategic Plan for 2016-21.

Cross-border research collaboration

“Limitations in the ability of ASEAN nations to fund academic mobility does not imply, though, that they are not willing partners in working with each other and those outside the region on international research collaboration,” the study says.

ASEAN countries are not significant funders of research collaboration-building, with the possible exception of Malaysia. “But they are devoting resources within their capabilities, and some countries – Malaysia again, Thailand and Vietnam – are taking a strategic approach to partnership development.”

Singapore’s A*STAR, the national agency for science, technology and research, funds scholarships for postdoctoral training at leading overseas laboratories.

“Research collaboration in Southeast Asia is a huge challenge and we still cannot perform well in this,” the ASEAN University Network’s Choltis admitted.

While funding for collaborations is an issue, another is building trust, Choltis says. “You need to know each other very well, otherwise it is very difficult to manage cross-border research collaboration projects.”

Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines and Singapore have dedicated units to further such collaborations, but this is not the case in other ASEAN countries.

In all the countries of the region, “research collaborations tend to be led by particular institutions which have the necessary capacity originating from their histories and-or size,” the study says, adding that “the leading role these relatively more prestigious universities play is usually supported by policy-makers”.

Noting the development of a few elite world-class universities that conduct international collaboration in research, the study warns: “An approach to international research collaboration that prioritises the development of a small number of universities that will rank highly in particular global ranking systems may inevitably come at the expense of the development of international research collaborations across the whole of the higher education system.”

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