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Showcase
Asia

2011



*Showcase*²⁰¹¹
Asia

Second Edition

Published by QS Asia Quacquarelli Symonds Pte Ltd





SPECIAL FEATURES

Cooperation in diversity: AUN's network approach

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During the 4th ASEAN Summit in 1992, ASEAN leaders called for the strengthening of the region through the promotion of human resource development and higher education. This aspiration has led to the establishment of ASEAN University Network (AUN) in November 1995, with the AUN Secretariat as the main coordinating and monitoring agency established in Bangkok, Thailand. Since its establishment, AUN as the network of leading universities has been serving as ASEAN's implementing agency in the field of higher education for the region's move towards an ASEAN Community.

Entrusted with the mandate to develop higher education in the region, AUN has undertaken a variety of programmes with much success. However, this is not without obstacles. One of the challenges is that ASEAN is a region of diversity. To achieve its mission, AUN would need to bring together all AUN member universities and steer them towards the path of regional higher education cooperation.

Success stories

To date, a number of implemented programmes have yielded fruitful results that benefit stakeholders region-wide, as illustrated in our success stories.

Policy forums

The foundation of our success in implementing AUN activities is based on the concrete commitment and unfailing support of university policy-makers. A number of conferences and meetings, organised by AUN and its partners, have been serving as fundamental policy platforms in formulating cooperative frameworks not only within but also beyond the region.

One such platform can be seen in the 2nd AUN Rectors' Meeting and the 3rd ASEAN-China Rectors' Conference held in Port Dickson, Malaysia in March 2010. The former served as a platform for presidents and rectors of AUN member universities to discuss and set directions for the network in the field of cooperation. The meeting discussed and set forth various

policies in regional higher education cooperation. In particular, an attempt to consolidate the scholarships among AUN member universities was the highlight of the meeting. The new proposal on granting annual scholarships to outbound students to spend their academic semesters abroad was also agreed upon. This attempt not only seeks to promote ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) but also to enhance student's development in terms of intellectual experiences and soft skills. It is believed that this exchange would have a positive impact in forging an ASEAN identity among the younger generations.

In parallel, a more formal setting could be seen in the 3rd ASEAN-China Rectors' Conference, which provided a platform for enhancing existing cooperation and exploring the possibility of future cooperation. The conference was set in concurrent sessions in an attempt to match the priority areas as well as to lay out the plan and necessary groundwork for the actual implementation of inter-regional cooperation. The event engendered several fruitful initiatives, including the China-AUN Scholarship and the China-ASEAN Education Cooperation Week.

The AUN's policy forums are the bedrock for its future implementation. All of the policies are carefully deliberated in sustaining stakeholders' benefits and expectations. These forums also demonstrate how AUN serves not only as the platform for exchanges of ideas but also as the venue for exploring future possible cooperation with several different counterparts.



AUN policy forums are the bedrock for AUN's future implementation.

Building the system

One of the flagship programmes of AUN is AUN Quality Assurance (AUN-QA). This programme is another success story in the development of quality system in regional higher education. Initiated in 1998 with the aim of promoting higher education standards among members, AUN-QA has developed its common policy, benchmarking procedures and AUN-QA Guidelines. In addition, cooperation with EU was sought for technical assistance under ASEAN-EU University Network Programme (AUNP). The cooperation effectively resulted in training courses and workshops in enhancing human capacity development and the formulation of AUN-QA Manual. Both internal and external expertise was utilised in building a team of QA assessors led by chief quality officers for further implementation of actual assessment programmes in AUN member universities. Since 2007, 23 undergraduate programmes of AUN member universities have been completely assessed, on a voluntary basis, by AUN-Assessor team. From this point onwards, the AUN-QA programme is moving towards enhancing quality system for quality recognition and standardisation in higher education.

AUN member universities in CLMV countries also gain benefit through the Training on Enhancing Quality Assurance in CLMV Countries, under the Initiative for ASEAN Integration. The programme aims at strengthening and reducing development gaps in quality assurance among member countries. The key supporters of this programme, both in terms of finance and expertise, are Japan-ASEAN Integration Fund and member universities, respectively.

The programme is also in line with AUN's mandate in serving ASEAN. The harmonisation of QA Framework in the region and the establishment of a recognised system of readable and comparable degrees would contribute to the envisioned free flow of workforce in ASEAN, as well as to the promotion of academic mobility and employability between regions.

People linkages

Education is not only about academic study. AUN also pays significant attention to the cultural aspect of education. As a result, AUN has initiated the ASEAN Youth Cultural Forum since 2003 and it has been one of the highlighted activities. Its venue is where young performers, who specialised in various kinds of cultural arts, including dancing, singing and musical instruments, gather together. Student participants will not only be able to express their own cultures, but they will also be involved in collaborative creativity such as through joint performance with friends from other countries.

Mirrored through this programme, this cultural exchange serves as a platform to increase the linkage among people and helps to promote identity, mutual understanding and values of the cultures and traditions of ASEAN countries. Touching upon the wider impact of mobility, it is also hoped that cultural enrichment would yield the positive influence to regional mobility, both in academic and non-academic areas.

Bringing in a number of specialised performers and resource persons, with a session for collaborative performance, this forum creates a unique opportunity to learn and appreciate a variety of cultures in the region. With the attendance from various sectors including professional arts performers, this cultural forum has been benefiting students and their institutions as a channel of opportunities and a gateway to reach wider audiences. This in turn helps this forum of culture see continuous growth and broader cooperation.

Based on a cost-sharing principle practised by the member universities, the significant inputs from the host and active contribution of all personnel involved are the main success and sustainability factors of this programme.



ASEAN Youth Cultural Forum enhances people linkages and helps promote mutual understanding and regional identity.

Success under diversity

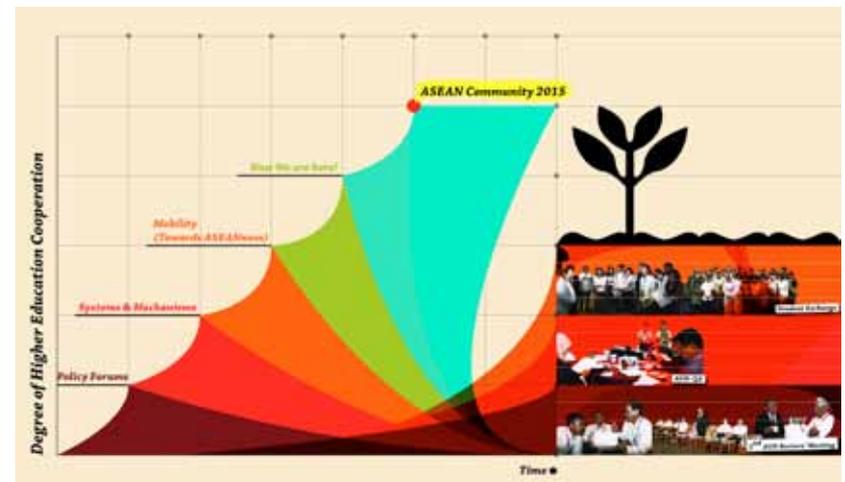
As mentioned above, ASEAN is a region of diversity. Distinctive characteristics are among common features of the 10 ASEAN countries and their higher education institutions are not without their uniqueness and differences. Taking into account this diversity, delivering a successful result of collective implementation is not a simple undertaking for AUN. This may lead to the question: How does AUN steer its course amidst this complexity?

The key element underlining AUN's progress can be found in the common values and unique management approach. Despite diversity and differences in the region, there exists a set of well-established common values among AUN member universities. One of the core components of the values is 'ASEAN-ness', which incorporates the spirit of equal partnership, togetherness and the realisation of regional belonging and identity. Stakeholders are also at the centre of AUN's development. Activities are implemented with the benefits of all stakeholders being taken into account, to ensure long-term positive impact and a constructive view of cooperation. These qualities are infused in the distinctive AUN's network management approach, encompassing member universities' unwavering commitment and active contribution in the form of cost-sharing, participation and expertise. Employing this management approach, AUN has deepened and widened networking cooperation into specific areas in the form of network of networks. This can be seen in AUN's thematic networks featuring a wide range of specialised areas, such as AUN/SEED-Net for Engineering, AGBEP for Business and Economics fields, AUNILO for Libraries and Information Networking, AUNIP for Intellectual Property Education, ACTS for the regional Credit Transfer System and the latest, coming along its course, USR&S-University Social Responsibility and Sustainability. Altogether, the experiences, core concepts and wisdom of these networks have been kept and collected in the AUN Institutional Memory, which shall then inspire the prospect of cooperation in the years to come.

From vision to mission, a gradual progress brings AUN to where it stands today. AUN's shared values and network management approach have brought about visible impact on higher education in the region. To this end, stakeholders are valued as the heart of the network's implementation.

While being the key driving force that the network's achievements could not be realised without, its member universities also enjoy the fruits of cooperation and the benefits of promising possibilities and opportunities through AUN's gateway. With this strong foundation, AUN has exhibited its potential to be the prime mover of higher education cooperation in ASEAN. Although the goal is an ambitious one, AUN has set its course for a strong ASEAN Community through educational development.

Dr Nantana Gajaseni was appointed Executive Director of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) secretariat in May 2009. With knowledge, leadership and experience gained from her previous posts as Deputy Executive Director of AUN Secretariat and Co-Director of the ASEAN-EU University Network Programme (AUNP), Dr Gajaseni has become a proficient practitioner in the field of higher education cooperation. Her role as Associate Professor at Chulalongkorn University's Faculty of Science allows her to utilise her expertise in freshwater ecology and environmental economics. She has been actively involved in environmental development as well as in promoting intra-regional and inter-regional academic collaboration, which has been recognised for its significant contribution to human capacity building and overall development, especially in ASEAN region.



AUN's implementation has contributed to the strengthening of higher education cooperation and the region's move towards an ASEAN Community.