

# **Role of Regional Organizations in East Asian Regional Cooperation and Integration in the Field of Higher Education**

Nguyen Thuy Anh - PhD Candidate  
Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University  
[maichithuyanh@yahoo.com](mailto:maichithuyanh@yahoo.com)

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## **Introduction**

Since the last three decades, globalization has become an irreversible and the most influential process in which time and space has been compressed, the geographical borders between nations have been breaking down, not only for trade, capital and information but also for ideas, norms, cultures and values (UNDP, 1999). Globalization can open up both opportunities and/or challenges for each country, depending on the nation's specific circumstances (Knight, 2006). Nowadays, globalization takes place in almost all fields of the human life including politics, economics as well as the environmental, cultural, social issues and undoubtedly education is also one of these impacted sectors.

While globalization is seen as an objective and unalterable process (Altbach and Knight, 2006), internationalization is considered to be a response of countries and higher educational institutions all over the world to cope with or exploit globalization (Altbach, 2004). Internationalization of higher education can be either an aim itself whereas an international, intercultural, or global dimension is incorporated into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education, like being defined by Knight (2003). On the other hand, internationalization is also seen as a means to achieve wider goals, or in other words, it is "an important resource in the development of higher education towards, first of all, a system in line with international standards; secondly, one open and responsive to its global environment" (Qiang, 2003).

Together with internationalization, regional cooperation and integration in higher education has become an emerging trend in many parts of the world. Regional cooperation and integration can also be considered as a response towards globalization. Under the impacts of globalization such as the massification, commercialization, decentralization and marketization of higher education, countries in many regions of the world nowadays, especially developing countries are facing with the same issues of access, equity, broadened participation and quality in higher education (Supachai and Nopraenue, 2008) that go beyond the border of one individual nation or institution and need the concerted efforts of the whole region to effectively tackle. Moreover, the need to enhance the economic and educational competitiveness of one region as a whole and member nations and institutions in particular is also a strong motivation to enhance regional cooperation and integration in different parts of the world today. This process is also advocated by nations and institutions that are seeking to expand the education markets and attract an increasing number of international students into the domestic education systems. From the political and cultural and social point of view, higher education regional cooperation and integration is considered to be one of the important ways for peace building and mutual understanding within one region.

It can be stated that both internationalization and regional integration of higher education are responses to globalization. However, internationalization of higher education concerns with individual nations and institutions independently, whereas regional cooperation and integration requires efforts of not only these two actors separately but needs nations and institutions in the same region to come together in a concerted endeavor to reach the same targets. Moreover, nations and institutions are the main subjects of internationalization of higher education, whereas in the process

of regional cooperation and integration, not only these two actors are the key tiers, but regional organizations also need to act their important role in promoting and leading this process. These organizations can play as a platform and/or set up initiatives, programs, activities and networks that bring together regional countries, institutions and individuals in a consensus effort of harmonization and integration in the field of higher education.

The past ten years have witnessed increasing interdependence among East Asian countries (ASEAN + 3), especially in the field of economic integration and policy collaboration. However, in the field of higher education, compared to other regions in the world, East Asia is still lagged behind in creating and promoting the basic level of regional integration and policy harmonization to achieve common objectives and interests (Supachai and Nopraenue, 2008). The paper will focus on analyzing the role of existing regional organizations dealing with higher education in promoting cooperation and integration in higher education in East Asia. More specifically, the paper will try to find out whether there are differences in the approaches that these organizations are taking in comparison with other regions and further discuss on the findings withdrawn. Questions to be asked are: What and how these organizations are playing their role in promoting East Asian cooperation and integration in higher education? What are the strong and weak points in their approaches? What need to be done more to accelerate East Asian cooperation and integration in higher education? The paper will firstly present the ongoing processes that are taking place in other parts of the world. It will then discuss the context of East Asia, in which regional cooperation and integration in higher education needs to be promoted. The main part of the paper will focus on the activities, programs and strategies being implemented by three regional organizations namely the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific

(UMAP), the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED). Following parts of the paper will discuss the findings and then propose some solutions for these regional organizations to accelerate East Asian higher education cooperation and integration.

### **Higher Education Cooperation and Integration in Other Parts of the World**

The process of regional cooperation and integration in higher education is now being implemented in different parts of the world at different paces and with various types.

#### *In Europe*

So far, the effort of European countries to promote higher education policy harmonization and integration is the most comprehensive and systematic one. At the core of this endeavor is the Bologna Process, a voluntary-based undertaking with clear objectives and timeline for implementation initiated by the first twenty nine signatory European countries. The Bologna Process aims to create the “European Higher Education Area” (EHEA) by 2010 along side with the Lisbon Strategy which focuses on the link between education, jobs market and economic growth in Europe (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008). By harmonizing or increasing compatibility, comparability and flexibility of the education systems in the region, the Bologna Process will help accommodate and accelerate free flows of student/staff mobility, education services, and research collaboration. This process will also contribute to the establishment of the so-called “Europe of Knowledge” capable of giving its citizens the necessary competences to face with challenges of the new millennium, together with an awareness of shared values and belonging to a common social and cultural space (Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), 2008 - Revised Draft). The Bologna Process also aims to enhance the global competitiveness of European higher education institutions.

Since 2003, the Bologna Process has been joined by 40 European countries and gradually added with key action lines through several meetings. The priority areas now include the following key aspects:

- 1) A system of easily readable and comparable degrees, using the Diploma Supplement
- 2) A three-cycle degree system (Undergraduate of at least three years full-time; Masters (1-2 years); and Doctoral)
- 3) A system of credits (based on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS))
- 4) Promotion of mobility of students and staff (through removal of obstacles)
- 5) Promotion of cooperation in quality assurance
- 6) Promotion of the European dimension in higher education (through curriculum development, institutional cooperation and integrated programs of study and research)
- 7) Promotion lifelong learning
- 8) Inclusion of higher institutions and students
- 9) Promotion of the attractiveness of the EHEA
- 10) Focus on Doctoral studies and the synergy between EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA)

Besides the Bologna Process which encompasses the majority of 40 out of 45 European countries, there are several other higher education collaboration initiatives within the European Union consisting of 27 nations. These schemes originally focused on the mobility of students and, more recently, paid greater attention to the 'Europeanization' of courses and their content (de Prado Yepes, 2006). The first comprehensive action focusing on promoting inter-university linkages for student and

staff mobility is the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus) which was established in 1987. Socrates is another broader program which continued and extended the Erasmus action in higher education. Socrates has also promoted a thorough comparative analysis of education systems and policies, the exchange of information, experience and good practices among EU to help formulate and implement educational policies across the region (de Prado Yepes, 2006). Besides these programs, there are several other initiatives which focus on different issues in educational cooperation in EU such as Lingua (language learning) and Minerva (open and distance learning and the use of information-communications technologies).

#### *In Latin America*

This region is also promoting regional integration in higher education through a number of initiatives. Some of them are being implemented with the support of UNESCO, for instance, the *Instituto Internacional para la Educacion Superior en America Latina y El Caribe*, (IESALC), or the Organizaci3n de Estados Iberoamericanos para la Educaci3n, la Ciencia y la Cultura (OEI). The precursors of these organizations can be traced back to earlier networks such as the Uni3n de Universidades de Am3rica Latina established in 1949, or subregional bodies, especially the Convenio Andre's Bello which was created in 1970 to promote cultural, educational and scientific collaboration among the Andean Countries, as well as the association of autonomous public universities, Grupo Montevideo in Mercosur, founded in 1991 (de Prado Yepes, 2006).

Besides these initiatives, one notable action taken by Latin America and the Caribbean countries is that they have promoted the inter-regional integration in higher education with the European Union. In June 1999, a decision was reached that a

common space of higher education should be created for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean nations by 2015 (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008). The steering committee now consists of five countries namely Spain, France, Brazil, Mexico and St. Kitts. These countries have met periodically during the past years and have decided upon these key areas of cooperation between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean:

- 1) Dissemination of academic collaboration and experience
- 2) Comparability of study programs
- 3) Mobility of students and staff
- 4) Joint degrees
- 5) Identification of financing sources and mechanisms
- 6) Quality Assurance

Besides the endeavour to establish a common space in higher education, Latin American countries are also expediting area-based and discipline-based regional cooperation and integration. Quality assurance (QA) is one of the areas which are gaining good progress in this region. QA systems have been established and strengthened in many countries and a regional network of QA, the Central American Council on Accreditation (CCA) was established and came into play in 2004 as a regional second-level accreditation organization. As for the discipline-based cooperation, regional accreditation agencies are available in engineering (REDICA), agriculture and resource management (ACEAS) and in medicine (ACAFEM-RECAEM) (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008).

#### *In Africa*

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC), created in 1992 to advance economics, politics and social issues signed in 1997 a Protocol on Education and

Training with the purpose to promote regional cooperation and integration in the education sector including higher education and research and development which is referred to in articles 7 and 8.

Another important initiative proposed by the Association of African Universities (AAU) is the creation of the “African Higher Education Area” (AHEA), which is now under discussion at both inter-governmental and institutional level. The key objectives of the AHEA proposed by the AAU are to promote the following areas:

- 1) An African quality culture
- 2) Curricular reforms that address the priorities of both national and regional labour markets
- 3) Academic mobility to improve circulation in the region
- 4) Harmonization of regulatory framework and higher education policies
- 5) Collective response and strategies towards GATS and other elements of globalization
- 6) Pool of resources for graduate studies and research on African studies and in Africa
- 7) The attractiveness and competitiveness of African higher education institutions for migratory African students

(Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008)

Besides these initiatives, with the effort to promote regional integration in higher education, the African Development Fund (ADF) has proposed and conducted a study project which focuses on identifying the whole structural problems of higher education systems in countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). This will help to implement reforms to improve higher education systems

in these countries as well as to promote regional integration in this field. Priority areas identified by the governments of WAEMU include:

- 1) The increase of students and staff mobility between WAEMU member countries
- 2) The system of mutual recognition of degree titles
- 3) The revised curricula in common field of specialisation among universities in member countries

Countries and institutions around the world have increasingly recognized the benefits and rationales for promoting regional cooperation and integration in higher education and have had various initiatives to realize these efforts. So far, the Bologna Process and other programs implemented by the European countries are the most comprehensive and systematic ones. This process in Europe is said to play as a model for other regions to follow. The following part of the paper will try to explore how regional organizations in East Asia are doing to promote regional cooperation and integration in higher education and what approaches they are taking to realize this process in the specific context of East Asia.

### **Role of regional organizations in promoting higher education regional cooperation and integration in East Asia**

#### *The context of higher education in East Asia*

East Asia is a vast and diverse region in terms of ethnicity, culture, language, religions, political regimes, socioeconomic development and topography. In the field of higher education, varieties between East Asian countries are also remarkable. These higher educational systems have different historical backgrounds, possess different characteristics and are now standing at different stages of development. The diversity in higher education quality level exists between countries and among

institutions in the region as well as within one nation. However, despite these diversities and varieties, higher educational systems in East Asia, especially in developing countries, are also facing with similar problems and challenges such as the explosion demands, budget constrains, quality assurance or the internationalization of higher education. Therefore, it is meaningful to build up closer constructive and effective cooperation within the region in order for these countries to develop mutual understanding, share lessons of experience as well as to support countries in need to solve persistent problems and overcome obstacles to develop their higher education systems (UNESCO, 2006). The recent years have witnessed remarkable growth of student mobility among East Asian countries and increasing number of inter-university linkages within the region. Many regional countries have become emerging destinations for overseas study and are having national and institutional plans and strategies to attract more and more international students into the domestic higher education systems. According to statistics from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan (MEXT), in 2005, international students in Japan reached the number of 94,521, among which 91.8 percent are from Asian countries. Korea is experiencing the same situation where in 2006, 89.6 percent of nearly 30,000 international students are Asian ones (Korea MEHRD, 2006). This number is also growing rapidly in other East Asian countries like China, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Japan. Japan is now implementing its second plan to recruit 300,000 international students by 2020, most of who are from East Asia. Malaysia and Singapore are declaring themselves to be educational hubs and are competing with each other to appeal Asian and international students into joint educational programs and offshore campuses of prestigious universities all over the world who are now operating within these two countries. Most of the countries in East Asia are now

in the process of internationalization of higher education with the increasing presence of international dimensions in their development programs, strategies, the growing number of international cooperation activities with foreign countries and institutions and greater mobility of staff and students. The thirteen nations of East Asia are now aiming to establish an East Asian Community in which social/culture, including higher education is one of the three pillars of cooperation. The Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the East Asia Summit emphasizes the role of integration in higher education for peace and mutual understanding, promoting interaction between students, researchers and academicians among East Asian countries. Other initiatives and efforts have been made by countries and regional organizations to promote cooperation, integration and harmonization in higher education in East Asia. However, compared to other regions, East Asia is still much lagged behind in promoting even basic level of policy harmonization to achieve common objectives and interests in the area of higher education (Supachai and Nopraenue, 2008).

In order to accelerate this process, apart from the necessity to have the commitment and involvement of individual nations and institutions, it is also very important for regional organizations to actively play their role in promoting regional integration in higher education. Currently, there are a number of regional organizations dealing with higher education in the region of East Asia such as Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning (ASAIHL), the Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education which belongs to UNESCO Bangkok, the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO), the Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (RIHED), the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN). This part of the paper will focus on the case of three regional organizations which are having much effort in promoting higher

education regional cooperation and integration in the region, namely UMAP, AUN and RIHED.

*The University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP)*

During the 1990s, East Asian countries linked to America and Europe to explore further liberalization ((de Prado Yepes, 2006). The University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) was proposed in 1991 by Australia. It was then conceived in 1993 to be a voluntary association of government and non-government representatives of the higher education sector in the region. By 2008, UMAP has consisted of 34 eligible countries and territories with more than 356 participating universities. The general aim of UMAP is to enhance international understanding among countries and territories of the Asia and Pacific region in terms of the cultural, economic and social issues through cooperation between higher education institutions and increased mobility of students and staff. In order to achieve this broad goal, UMAP sets up a number of specific objectives as to identify and overcome impediments to student mobility, to move beyond bilateral to multilateral arrangements as well as to develop and maintain a system for granting and recognizing academic credits earned by exchanged students. In order to provide a greater number of students an opportunity to study abroad, UMAP concentrates on short term exchange programs in which participating students spend a minimum of one semester or a maximum of two semesters in a host foreign university. The credits for study undertaken while on exchange by students are to be transferred to and accepted by the home university. Given the fact that different institutions in the region have different types of credit systems and different ways of evaluating the study performance of students, UMAP has developed and put into use the so-called UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS). This credit transfer system is expected to help increase student mobility by

overcoming impediments to credit transfers and ensuring that the study achievement of exchanged students is recognized by sending universities by providing a common scale to converse credit points and grades.

Although UMAP has been established for fifteen years and has been promoted in 34 countries, the popularity of UMAP among universities and students in the region is still very low and its credit transfer scheme has not been utilized by a majority of institutions to facilitate students/staff mobility. According to the “Report of UMAP survey on student exchanges in Japan” (2005), from 2000 to 2005, the numbers of incoming and outgoing students in Japan who take exchanged programs with credit transfer were 7,336 and 8,573, respectively. However, only 6 percent of the 171 responded Japanese institutions are participating in UMAP and another 8 percent (13 institutions) know UMAP well. Meanwhile, 12 percent (21 institutions) did not know about UMAP at all. The remained 74 percent (126 institutions) indicated a limited amount of their familiarity with UMAP. As for the importance of the credit transfer scheme UCTS, according to this survey, 42 percent (71 of 168 responded institutions) recognize its necessity in promoting student exchanges, while 53 percent (89 institutions) do not perceive UCTS to be necessary and another 5 percent even express their opinions against the use of credit transfer schemes. In fact, only a few number as of 19 among 171 responded institutions are actually using UCTS in their student exchanges. The biggest reason for not using UCTS identified by informant universities is that these institutions have their own scheme to transfer foreign credits into their credit systems. Another two reasons pointed out by responded institutions which are considered by UMAP to be problematic to its activities are the lack of knowledge in implementing UCTS and the complicatedness in using this scheme.

In its strategic plan for the period 2006-2010, UMAP identifies its vision to be recognized as the quality leader in higher education mobility within Asia and the Pacific. UMAP has the potentials to realize its targets since it has wide regional networks in Asia-Pacific countries, both under APEC umbrella and beyond. The diverse cultures of the UMAP members are also an attractive point where students and faculty will have opportunities to enrich learning and intercultural experiences as well. However, UMAP has to deal with the issue of identity in which it needs to differentiate itself and the strengths of its programs and scheme from other exchange activities and arrangements that universities could undertake and implement by themselves. Besides, one of the impediments in promoting student/staff mobility within UMAP framework is the lack of sufficient financial supports to offer a good number of scholarships to students. Currently UMAP does not have funds to assist individual exchanges and funding arrangements for exchanges are agreed between the home and host universities. The host institutions are expected to waive tuition fees for UMAP students on exchange and assist them to obtain accommodation at reasonable cost. However, students and staff have to pay for other living expenses using their own budgets. This is really a big matter for many students and staff especially when they are from developing countries and it hinders them from participating in the exchange programs. The lack of effective communication tools to provide data and information to member countries, institutions, students/staff and interested individuals is also another challenge for UMAP. This may be doubled with the low commitment and inactiveness of the participating universities and the contact persons in charge of disseminating information related to UMAP's activities and the organization itself. Besides, the fact that government policies in each member country do not responsive to UMAP exchanges and differences and diversity in education systems among

members is also identified as hampering factors to UMAP's activities. UMAP is now paying much effort in promoting student/staff mobility within the region through exchanging programs and the utilization of UCTS credit transfer scheme. However, in order for this process to be accelerated, it is vital to increase the commitment and active involvement of member countries and institutions in realizing these mutual objectives.

#### *The ASEAN University Network (AUN)*

As mentioned above, East Asia in general and ASEAN in particular is a diverse region in many aspects. In the field of higher education, varieties between countries are also remarkable. Diversity in higher education quality and institutional development exists not only between institutions of different countries but also among universities one country. This situation makes it difficult to promote cooperation and integration among all universities in the whole region, given the fact that they have different ability and capacity to follow common plans and activities, they may also have different targets to reach and not the same priority areas of development, let alone the trend that good universities usually prefer to collaborate with similar or higher quality level institutions. Therefore, it is meaningful for the ASEAN sub-region to promote cooperation and integration among leading universities first and then creating an impetus and basis to extend the network and integrate other universities in the region to the process. One of the approaches that ASEAN is now taking to promote regional integration in higher education is the "elite approach" which is most clearly manifested in the ASEAN University Network (AUN).

At the Fourth ASEAN Summit in 1992, the ASEAN leaders decided that cooperation in the field of higher education and human resource development should be strengthened and promoted. Particularly, ASEAN should consider ways to further

develop the existing network of the leading regional higher education institutions. The idea was eventually realized with the establishment of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) in 1995 when the heads of 11 countries signed the organization's Charters and representatives from participating universities signed the related Agreements. The main objective of the AUN is to strengthen the existing network of co-operation among leading universities in ASEAN, by promoting co-operation and solidarity among ASEAN scholars and academicians, developing academic and professional human resource, and promoting information dissemination among ASEAN academic community. As of June 2007, the AUN has become a network 21 members of which are one to maximum three key universities in each of the 10 ASEAN countries. Currently, the AUN undertakes a variety of more than 20 collaborative projects within ASEAN and with its dialogue partners such as China, the European Union, Japan and Korea. These activities can be divided into three main groups. The first group of activity includes programs that aim to foster the sense of ASEANness, raise the profile of ASEAN among the region's next generation of leaders, to deepen and develop knowledge and understanding of diverse educational, social, cultural and geo-political environment among ASEAN youth and students in particular and ASEAN people in general. These activities consist of the AUN Educational Forum and Young Speakers Contest, the AUN Educational Forum and Young Speakers Contest, the AUN Youth Cultural Forum and the ASEAN Youth Summit. It can be seen that the "elite approach" is also applied to these activities in the sense that they are open to only a few number of bright representatives from each member university who are expected to become the leading people playing important role at institutional, national and inter-governmental level in the near future and will

contribute extensively and intensively to the promotion of regional cooperation and integration.

Another main group of activity includes those that focus on promoting student and staff mobility among member universities, enhancing collaboration in academic research and sharing of information. These programs are the ASEAN Studies Program, the Student and Faculty Exchange Program, the AUN Distinguished Scholars Program, the Collaborative Research, the Information Networking, the ASEAN Graduate Business and Economics Program (AGBEP) Network, the AUN-Southeast Asia Engineering Education Development Network (AUN/SEED-Net) and the AUN Intellectual Property (AUNIP) Network. These programs include both discipline-based or functional and general collaborative initiatives.

With an aim to enhance the overall academic standards of member universities and consequently lead to mutual recognition in the ASEAN region, the AUN has developed the AUN-Quality Assurance network which is the first of its kind in trying to establish a sub-regional networking on QA in ASEAN (Supachai and Nopraenue, 2008). The AUN Secretariat has published the first manual for the implementation of internal quality assurance, not only for its member universities but also open to other universities in ASEAN if they are interested in using this guidelines and applying for the AUN-QA Label. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) is a project with the core objective to narrow the gap between the original 6-ASEAN founding members and the newly joining CLMV countries. This initiative focuses on assisting the CLMV countries in four strategic sectors namely, infrastructure, human resource development, information and communication technology and infrastructure development.

On a broader scope, the AUN has extended its collaborative activities with dialogue partners helping to enhance cooperation and integration in the field of higher education throughout the whole East Asia. The establishment of the ASEAN-China Academic Exchange Programme helps to further more people-to-people contacts and exchanges between ASEAN and China in higher education. The AUN/SEED-Net mentioned above is an autonomous sub-network of the AUN which composed of 19 engineering higher education institutions from 10 ASEAN countries receiving support of 11 leading Japanese Supporting Universities. The Republic of Korea is also a close partner of the AUN, developing cooperation through a number of programs: the ASEAN-Korea Academic Exchange Programme (KASEAS), the International College Student Exchange Programme, the Promotion of ASEAN and Korean Studies and the AUN-GIST Scholarship on Science and Technology.

With the variety of activities and endeavours, the AUN has actively contributed to the build-up of a robust and renowned ASEAN community in higher education. The AUN is expected to play a major role in broadening the integration of the ten member countries into one cohesive ASEAN Community and narrowing the development gap among them.

*SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED)*

The Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (RIHED) was jointly conceived in 1959 by UNESCO and the International Association of Universities (IAU) in collaboration with the Ford Foundation. It was then officially founded in Singapore in July with 7 Member States, namely Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. In 1992, after a period of being inactive, RIHED was reconstituted under the umbrella of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and hosted by the Thai Government. Unlike the

AUN which deals with higher education cooperation at institutional level, SEAMEO RIHED works with member states at ministerial level. The main objectives of the organization are to “assist the Member States in fostering efficiency and effectiveness of their higher education, with a focus on policy and planning processes, administrative and management systems”. RIHED also aims at serving as “the regional centre and clearing-house for higher education information and documentation, promoting the exchange and dissemination of information and research findings on higher education planning and management, both within and outside the region”. By promoting collaboration among Member States its goal is to establish institutional linkages, and assist these countries in the strengthening of institution building and development. The Second Five-Year Development Plan of SEAMEO RIHED has identified the following seven priority areas on which its programs and activities will focus on:

- 1) Management and Administration
- 2) Quality Assurance and Benchmarking
- 3) Applications of Information and Communication Technology
- 4) Effective Learning-Teaching Methodology
- 5) Building up Research Capabilities
- 6) Promoting Collaboration with Private Sector and Industry
- 7) Involvement in Regional Groupings

During the recent years, SEAMEO RIHED has been very active in promoting regional cooperation and integration in the field of higher education with an especial focus on the policy harmonization among member countries. Recently in February, 2008, RIHED issued the first lecture series, titled “Harmonisation of Higher Education: Lessons Learned from the Bologna Process”. This publication can be seen

as a guideline and framework for closer harmonization in higher education in Asia. The book identified that “Given that inherent constraints of regional diversity and disparity in higher education systems, the safest line in promoting regional higher education integration and harmonization might be through small mechanisms, such as the QA and comparable and readable degree systems. These lines of actions might be chosen as an alternative to the overarching regional framework, which usually invites doubts and a suspicion among Asian countries” (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008).

This perspective presents the “step-by-step” approach that is being used by this regional organization in particular and East Asian countries in general. At the first place, it is necessary to develop concrete mechanisms in certain aspects of higher education activities which are interrelated, such as mobility, recognition, credit transfer system and quality assurance. These activities will gradually familiarize countries and institutions in the region with regional cooperation and integration, raising the awareness among them of the necessity and significance of this process and helping to overcome the perception that regional diversity is an obstacle to the harmonization process (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008). The region will then consider the possibility of having a more comprehensive and systematic framework for regional integration in higher education as to be discussed in the coming “International Conference Series on Raising Awareness: Exploring the Ideas of Creating Higher Education Common Space in Southeast Asia” held by RIHED in November, 2008.

As proposed by RIHED, the priority areas for closer harmonization in higher education in the region should be a System of Quality Assurance and a System of Readable and Comparable Degrees. Regarding the harmonization in quality assurance, RIHED strongly advocates the promotion of a common understanding of QA systems

in the region and especially the establishment of internal QA and external QA sub-networks in order to increase the sharing of information and best practices among the regional countries and institutions.

Together with the reliable and accountable QA system, a readable and comparable degree is also an important area to be promoted in the region in order to encourage collaboration among higher education institutions in the region, increase the attractiveness of regional higher education and accommodate freer flows and more sustainable mobility among students/researchers and graduates. This system of readable and comparable degrees can be promoted through the development of a regional credit transfer system (UCTS), regional and national qualification framework and a degree supplement mechanism.

Another approach to promote regional integration and harmonization in East Asia being recruited by RIHED is the “pilot-project approach”. As identified in the publication, the level of disparity of higher education institutions and QA development in the region is significantly high. While a number of East Asian countries like Japan, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines have established national QA mechanisms, others is still on the way to develop quality assurance infrastructure. Singapore is an exceptional case where the government utilizes the external QA systems from developed countries (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008). Facing the various stages of QA system development in the region, RIHED has initiated to undertake a pilot study project in which it picks up only 5 out of 10 ASEAN countries namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam to come together to deal with QA issues in the region. The organization disseminates questionnaires to all stakeholders related to higher education in these countries such as ministries of education, universities, civil service sector, industry sector and foreign affair

departments to collect their opinions and perspectives on regional harmonization in this area. RIHED also successively holds the ASEAN Quality Assurance Agencies Roundtable workshops in each participating country in order for the five countries to share experiences, good practices by showing “who is doing what” in QA and express their desire to have QA harmonization in the region. The organization is now also aiming at setting up a Human Network of QA Agencies People to further strengthen the regional collaboration and coordination in this field.

### **Conclusion and suggestions for promoting East Asian cooperation and integration in higher education**

Regional organizations have been actively playing their role in promoting higher education regional cooperation and integration in East Asia through a variety of programs, projects, activities and initiatives. Policy harmonization, particularly in certain aspects like mobility, recognition, credit transfer system and quality assurance, is considered as a crucial means to build up and prepare the “infrastructure” for further regional cooperation and integration in higher education and is one of the main targets of these organizations. Despite significant endeavours taken by these organizations, results achieved so far are not as satisfactory as expected as East Asia is still lagged behind other regions in promoting the basic level of regional integration and policy harmonization in higher education to achieve common objectives and interests (Supachai and Nopraenue, 2008). Among the impediments to this process are the diversity and disparity of countries and higher education systems in the region, the variety of languages, the differences in credit, curriculum and grading systems, the disparity in education quality and recognition of higher education institutions in the region, the lack of sufficient financial resources, the capacity and ability of regional organizations, national bodies and higher education institutions in promoting

cooperation and integration and the lack of commitment at both national and institutional level in many regional countries.

Given the specific context of countries in East Asia and its higher education institutions, regional organizations have taken a number of various approaches to promote regional integration and harmonization in higher education. The region has a network of leading universities gathering to achieve mutual goals with an expectation to spread the effect and play as a basis to gradually integrate other universities the region into the process. At the same time the region has an organization dealing with higher education at the national or ministerial level and includes the majority of universities in the region which belong to their national ministries of education. These arrangements may better tackle the problem of disparity among universities in the region and help speed up the integration process. However, one question raised concerning this “Elite approach” is that whether there will actually be an effective spill over effect in the future? This means whether “the AUN could play a major role in broadening the integration of the ten member countries into one cohesive ASEAN Community and narrowing the development gap among them” as stated in its objectives. Another issue is how to increase the awareness of ASEANness and achieve mutual understanding not only among the bright representatives participating in these activities but also among the wider scope of the whole ASEAN community. There should be mechanisms for these participants to play their role in realizing the spill over effect in their community upon returning from these events. Definitely, the activities and initiatives to increase the awareness among the “already-aware” is not enough to promote further regional integration.

Regional organizations also have activities and programs that target various groups of countries at certain points of time, as in the case of the “pilot-project approach” and

the Initiative for ASEAN Integration that focuses on the CLMV analyzed previously. As for the “pilot-project approach”, the problem is in the end of the day whether other contemporarily excluded countries and institutions will be able or eager to join after a period of time in order to have a consensus effort and mechanism for the whole region. The step-by-step approach is another significant point in the approaches taken by East Asian regional organizations. This can play as an alternative to an overarching regional framework which usually invites doubts and a suspicion among Asian countries (Supachai and Nopraenu, 2008). However, the problem in of this approach is how to raise consensus efforts among countries and institutions without a long-term overall strategy for the whole region that sets up specific targets, concrete schedule and timelines to implement? Moreover, it is significant to have an overarching regional framework so that countries and institutions can take into account and integrate these regional plans and settings into their own development strategies and reforms.

In order to promote regional cooperation and integration in higher education, it is important for regional organizations to have continuous campaigns and activities to raise the awareness on the significance of this process among countries and institutions in the region. These key actors should fully recognize and understand the rationales and benefits they can gain from further regional higher education integration so that the commitment and involvement will be effectively increased at both national and institutional level. Although regional organizations play very important role in promoting higher education regional integration, it is the nations, institutions and individuals who are the deciding actors of the success of this process.

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