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**‘Experiences of Asian Higher Education Frameworks
and their Implications for the Future’ (Draft)**

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Preface Asian Regional Integration and Education

Set against the backdrop of increasing economic interdependence in the Asia region, the idea of ‘regional integration’ is most often articulated as a policy instrument and political ideal. Arguably, this objective is being pursued to further promote regional competitiveness in the world economy and to bring about a new stable political order. Nevertheless, any move in this direction has been repeatedly challenged from perspectives that emphasize socio-cultural diversity in the region and shared histories. It is in this context that Waseda University received the Global COE research grant from the Ministry of Education of Japan. Waseda University was tasked with establishing the Graduate Institute for Asian Regional Integration (GIARI) to investigate problems and prospects relating to Asian regional integration. Issues of education are central to any dialogue that seeks to further integrate political, social, and economic systems in the region. Taking European integration as a precursor, it is clear that education plays a critical role in the integration process. It is certainly, therefore, within the purview and moreover, a responsibility of Waseda’s Global COE—sponsored research to examine the role education will continue to play in a more comprehensive integration of the Asia region.

There is not a single nexus of research where the study of Asian regional integration and education meet; rather, there exist a diversity of approaches that form a matrix of research. A first feature of regional integration studies is the empirical study of ‘de facto’ integration of the region’s education systems. From this approach, we conclude that education systems, economic systems and societal values are already intertwined and integrated to a certain degree. This first approach endeavors to take stock of the extent of actual integration. A second approach emphasizes the purpose(s) and governing principles which inform the integration process. It may then be possible to derive ordered conceptual frameworks that reveal future pathways of regional cooperation and integration. This approach asks why we need to integrate and the answers come mainly from historical and philosophical investigations of policy arguments. The third type of regional integration studies attempt to analyze existing frameworks and institutions for regional cooperation and integration of education systems. It is a political analysis that reveals practical and organizational implications for future regional cooperation and integration processes. The fourth approach focuses on the study of the actors involved in the regional integration process. Countries and governments are probably the most important actors in these processes, but educational institutions are also important. The fifth approach is best described as the comparative study of regional integration drawing on experiences from different regions; education regionalization in Europe, for example.

In doing these researches, we must share a vision concerning Asian regional integration and education that can foster mutual trust and a concept of people’s Asia, and strengthening the competitiveness of Asian human resources in the world. By comprehensively discussing and internalizing diverse views, rather than relying on a single model or ideal, it will be possible to build a regional framework for education in Asia that can be expected to contribute greatly to the formation of an Asian Community, and thus, to peace and prosperity in the region.

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1. Globalisation and Higher Education

In the contemporary liberal economic environment, higher education has been perceived by many developed countries not as a 'public good' but as one of the key tradable 'economic resources'. This is partly because of two important factors: the transformation of the globalised world from the 'information-based' to the so-called 'knowledge-based' society and the response to the institutionalised trade and services agreements or GATS. These two predominant factors have been the major drivers responsible for quickening the process of education liberalisation and quantitative massification, which naturally intensifies the demand for accountability of professional standards of higher education institutions (HEIs). HEIs around the world are therefore actively adjusting to the shift in global education dynamics and the trends towards open access for public scrutiny, especially with respect to their quality, efficiency and effectiveness in delivering 'higher education products.' On the one hand, HEIs in many parts of the world face a set of common problems; for example, ensuring quality in the courses offered, maintaining a proper academic environment, as well as the sustainable promotion of academic mobility between HEIs through the development of such mechanisms as credit transfer system, the system of common degree cycles or the regional qualification frameworks. On the other hand, individual national governments are also faced with the challenges of globalisation, whereby greater regional efforts are required to promote policy integration in higher education. To increase the competitive edge and leverage the higher education sector, a concerted effort to create a 'harmonised', if not a single higher education system in the region, is perceived by many as the tool to cope with the global trends of education liberalisation and transnationalisation.

In order to stay relevant in the fierce competition characteristic of the global higher education sector, national governments and HEIs are forced to introduce restructuring programmes in the area of governance, curricula development, quality assurance, as well as establishing a closer link between graduates and the market.¹ Also, another trend, adopted by both developed and developing countries alike in an attempt to thrive in the competitive higher education environment, is to introduce regional harmonisation processes in the area of higher education by national governments. While regional economic integration in the areas of trade, finance, investment and so on, progress in most parts of the world, regional integration in the area of higher education is still in the embryonic stage; a notable exception can be found in the European Bologna Process. To provide a better grasp on the future trends and possible framework of higher education development, which require a regional effort in promoting the higher education sector, the following section will contrast the development of regional integration in higher education in Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and West Africa to regional integration in the Asia Pacific. This paper further suggests future prospects for a framework for cooperation in higher education in the Asia Pacific, insofar as it can serve as the key instrument in this region to react to the force of globalisation and the demand for accountability in higher education.

2. Current Frameworks of Higher Education Harmonisation and Integration: Europe, Latin and Central America, and Africa

¹ More details about the research on higher education and economic sector link in Asian Development Outlook 2007.

Harmonisation and integration of higher education in Europe, through the Bologna Process, is aimed at reforming and modernising the structure of the European higher education system to accommodate the rapid social and economic transformation caused by the increasing interactions of HEIs and multifaceted higher education activities. The ultimate goal of this process is to prepare HEIs and national governments in the European Union for the launch of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. Originated in 1998, the four biggest countries in the European Union joined together to sign the Sorbonne Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System.² The following year, 29 signatory countries signed the Bologna Declaration. The action lines prioritised from the onset of the Bologna Process included:

- (a) A system of easily readable and comparable degrees;
- (b) A degree system based on two main cycles (Bachelor and Masters);
- (c) A system of European Credit Transfer (ECTS);
- (d) Promotion of mobility;
- (e) A system of Quality Assurance;
- (f) Promotion of a European dimension in higher education;

As an inter-governmental effort, the ministers from participating countries carry out the legal basis and institutional arrangements at biennial summits. These summits are the most important forum in the decision-making process, which provides ‘supranational harmonisation’ in legislation³, policy direction and action lines pertaining to the structural reforms. Following the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the subsequent biennial summits, including the ones in Prague (2001) and in Berlin (2003), added four more action lines to the Bologna Process, which are:

- (g) Lifelong learning in higher education
- (h) The inclusion of higher education institutions and students;
- (i) Promotion of the Attractiveness of the EHEA; and
- (j) The establishment of the link between EHEA and European Research Area (ERA) and the inclusion of doctoral studies as the third cycle of the European degree system

The Bologna Process is a significant step towards regional integration because it is an attempt that involves many actors in the European higher education sector. At least 3 inter-related tiers of actors have been engaged in the process of European higher education reforms. At the *nation-state level*, high officials responsible for higher education of the signatory countries are members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, tasked with producing official working programmes and helping accommodate signatory countries to follow up with recommendations made at the ministerial summits. National governments also take part in overseeing the overall national reforms and legislations that help expedite the process of policy harmonisation and integration of priority issues. In many priority areas, such as the ECTS or QA systems, the parallel development of the so-called ‘European frameworks’ along with ‘national frameworks’ are the key to sustaining the process of harmonisation and integration by acknowledging

² The big four countries, including Germany, France, Italy and the UK, signed the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998.

³ Zgaga (2005, p. 4)

diversity, while promoting a common higher education architecture which European countries and HEIs can use as reference.

The Bologna Process is also special in more ways than one. It is a process that put a lot of emphasis on the *institutional level*. That is, HEIs are put at the centre of the effort, unlike many other regional attempts usually undertaken by national governments alone. At the initial stage, the lack of ‘genuine’ enthusiasm in HEIs in many countries, such as the UK, Spain, Greece or Portugal, raised much concern at the national level.⁴ However, the majority of HEIs in Europe saw the Bologna Process as timely in introducing reforms amongst their own institutions. The European HEIs that once treated the Bologna Process as peripheral to the development of HEIs, opting for selective action lines rather than over-arching principles on European higher education, have now become the prime movers in deepening the reforms. Germany, Nordic countries, France and the Baltic countries are among those in the frontline in promoting the reforms. This is partly due to the fact that the Bologna Process has contributed to a transition in several aspects of European integration, especially in the economic and social dimensions. It is not a process which focuses only on the higher education sector. The impact of the Bologna Process and the proposed reforms clearly serve the overall objective of creating a European knowledge-based society. In other words, because of the close connection between higher education and the economic sector, the Bologna Process is seen as a crucial mechanism to prepare graduates for the European market. Interlaced through the ten Bologna priorities, European HEIs have become the key actors in undertaking reforms, that is, instruction, research and services. The transformation of HEIs in these areas will be discussed in the subsequent sections.

Successful harmonisation and integration of higher education in Europe is also predicated on another significant factor: it includes the involvement of *students and external parties* in the process of reform. From the beginning, the active involvement of non-governmental and autonomous promoters has been integral to the Bologna Process. For example, at the European Level, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Union of Students in Europe (ESIB) or the European Employer Association, among others, have taken the leading role, sometimes as key resource persons, in drafting important guidelines and frameworks pertaining to the attainment of the priority areas. The involvement of students in the reform process could be seen, on the one hand, through pro-active participation in university governance. This is particularly the case in the area of quality assurance, where students, through student unions, could take part in presenting their cases to the key decision-makers at the departmental and university levels. In addition, national governments and HEIs also place more emphasis on ‘student-centred’ higher education. In the areas of instruction, research, and services, the objectives are to focus on addressing students’ needs, advancing students’ experiences and careers and placing them in suitable sectors of the European market. These issues will be discussed in detail through the examination of activities advanced under the Bologna Process.

European Integration in the Area of Higher Education

The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 to create the ‘European Higher Education Area’ (EHEA) by 2010. Given the diversity and variety of cultures

⁴ Berndtson (2003a, p. 3). The UK institutions were quite satisfied with their existing systems while some other smaller countries, especially in Eastern Europe, believe that there is still much work to be done, in terms of their own higher education structures.

among 45 states in Europe, the ideas behind the initiative are to increase compatibility, comparability and flexibility of the education systems in Europe without harmonising them. This inter-governmental process involves several layers of participation, from the European national governments through the Ministry of Education. Other key players include representatives of the European University Association (EUA); the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE); the European Student Union (ESIB); the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA); the ENIC-NARIC Network; and UNESCO European Centre for Higher Education (UNESCO-CEPES). At the supranational level, the Council of Europe and the European Commission act as consultative bodies which do not have direct involvement in decision-making matters of the Bologna Process.

From 1999-present, key actions to be accomplished by 2010, in order to prepare European countries to enter into the EHEA, have been gradually added. The first three areas that were prioritised in the early stage of the Bologna Process are the establishment of an easily readable and comparable degree system across Europe, a system of two-cycle undergraduate and post-graduate levels and a system of European QA. In later years, through several meetings in Prague, Berlin, Bergen and London, the priority areas have been added to, and now include the followings action lines:

- a) Establishment of a system of credits (ECTS);
- b) Promotion of mobility;
- c) Promotion of the European dimension in higher education;
- d) Focus on lifelong learning;
- e) Inclusion of higher education institutions and students;
- f) Promotion of the attractiveness of the EHEA; and
- g) Focus on Doctoral studies and the synergy between EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA)

The Bologna Process is, on the one hand, the mechanism specifically created to cope with the trend of globalisation. It is also the immediate response to the impact of increasing numbers of HEIs as a result of Eastern European integration into the European Union. It is an excellent example of how positive regional integration is set to achieve the common interests among the members of the European Community. As clearly indicated in the original aims, the Bologna Process was launched to develop a coherent higher education space, as well as to foster employability and mobility in Europe. In a way, this could be seen as an attempt to accommodate the free flow of student/staff mobility, education services and investment for developing human capital to serve the future European market. The process of regional integration in higher education through the Bologna Process in Europe has set a standard platform that other regions could utilise as a model.

Regional Integration in Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the same initiative to promote the regional integration of higher education has also developed. However, to expedite the process, Latin American and Caribbean countries have cooperated with the European Union in creating a cross-border regional integration for higher education on both sides of the continents. Immediately after the signing of the Bologna Process, the decision

was reached in Rio de Janeiro in June 1999 that a common space of higher education should be created for Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean nations by 2015. A steering committee was established, responsible for coordinating with the rest of their respective regions, participation in the activities leading to the establishment of the common educational space. Those countries consisted of Spain, France, Brazil, Mexico and St. Kitts. These countries have met periodically throughout these past years to consolidate the ideas and concepts pertaining to the establishment of a common higher education space (Cetina, 2005). The key areas touched upon during several Meetings of Ministers of Education by the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean countries include, for example:

- a) Dissemination of academic collaboration and experience;
- b) Comparability of study programmes;
- c) Mobility of students and staff;
- d) Joint degrees;
- e) Identification of financing sources and mechanisms; and
- f) Quality assurance, etc.

Although these priority areas are very similar to the key actions mentioned in the Bologna Process, some objectives and characteristics of the European, Latin America and Caribbean common space for higher education are more generalised and not as technical, as has been the case with the Bologna Process. For example, this common space will focus on the development of mechanisms and networks for cooperation between institutions and academic bodies, the promotion of students and staff mobility as well as the establishment of joint studies and centres. As rightly put by Cetina, the initiative could be seen as a strategic element for providing a solid framework for the development of higher education in which further bilateral and multilateral ties between states across the two regions could be effectively cemented.

Regional Integration in Higher Education in West Africa

Another key example of how governments in many regions are coping with their internal educational problems and the impact of globalisation through the promotion of regional integration, can be found in West Africa. In this geographical area, the most important problem of the higher education sector is that the quality of HEIs was so low that it could no longer contribute to the development of economic and social sectors. This was partly the result of the growing number of students and the lack of quality in providing necessary knowledge and innovation by the HEIs in West African countries. Like in many other countries, due to the growing demand for higher education more and more HEIs were established as one immediate response. However, the massification of HEIs, especially private ones, did not necessarily mean better quality in higher education sectors in West African countries. Economic and social sectors, especially the labour markets in these countries, had suffered terribly from the low-level quality of graduates. These students simply failed to create new knowledge that addressed the contemporary challenges both inside and outside their countries. These shortages and management failures in the higher education sector, coupled with the trend of globalisation which forces countries to act in response to the market's demands, compelled West African countries to develop strategies for the development of higher education through internal reforms and the promotion of regional integration.

The initiative to promote regional integration of higher education in Africa was proposed by the African Development Fund (ADF) to sort out a myriad of structural problems. The Bank has conducted a study project to improve higher education systems and to promote regional integration in higher education within the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). In terms of strengthening higher education systems, the governments of the WAEMU and the WAEMU itself, comprised of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Togo and Senegal, are encouraged by the ADF to coordinate and implement the reforms to improve higher education systems, especially in the area of internal performance, higher education training, and the management of human and financial resources. With regard to the promotion of regional integration, key priority areas identified by the governments of WAEMU include:

- a) The increase of student and staff mobility between WAEMU member countries;
- b) A system of mutual recognition of degree titles; and
- c) A revised curricula in common fields of specialisation among universities in member countries

According to the Appraisal Report of the project on Multinational Support for Higher Education in WAEMU Countries, the initiative to promote the regional integration in higher education is consistent with the regional economic programme of the WAEMU. The integration process is perceived by the ADF and the governments of WAEMU as the indispensable framework through which further development of higher education in terms of human resource development, investment of light education infrastructure, and academic management and an information network, could be built up.

3. Future Trends of Regional Higher Education Framework in Asia Pacific

Although the Asia Pacific consists of both developed and developing countries, who share many similar features in higher education as other regions, it would seem that the Asia Pacific has lagged behind in their attempt to promote regional harmonisation and integration in the area of higher education. While the cooperation at the level of higher education institutions in promoting research collaboration and staff/student mobility is evident, a framework that promotes closer and more harmonised policy interaction between national governments is inexistent. Take ASEAN, for example, it is not to say that the idea to establish the so-called 'ASEAN Integration' does not exist. Much on the contrary, ASEAN has floated the notion of cooperation well beyond AFTA in the area of trade and services. In other areas, especially in higher education, however, the concrete move towards regional integration is still lacklustre. As a matter of fact, the ASEAN leaders have agreed to launch an Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) in 2000, with the core objective being to narrow the gap between the original six founding ASEAN members and the newly admitted CLMV countries. Another key objective was to combine efforts among member countries to promote dynamic and sustained growth in the region. The IAI focused mainly on such issues as:

- a) Economic integration;
- b) Human resource development;

- c) Information and communication technology; and
- d) Infrastructure development

The Work Plan consisted of at least 100 projects, to be implemented between 2000-2006, and was funded by dialogue partners and development agencies, such as the governments of Japan, Korea, Australia, JICA and UNIDO and so on. However, it is interesting to note that of all the programmes and projects funded to promote the above four mentioned criteria, only one project under the human resource development area was designed to promote higher education development in the region, that is, the project on Higher Education Management in CLMV sponsored by the government of Brunei Darussalam and the ASEAN Foundation.

In view of the straining force of globalisation which requires HEIs in the region to adapt themselves to accommodate the free flow of student/staff mobility, adaption to the increasing transnational nature of educational services as a result of GATS, and the common education provisions allowing the systems of comparable degrees and accreditation, the framework under which common guidelines and roadmaps for higher education policy in Asia-Pacific develop has never been more important or relevant.. At the moment, many developed countries in the region are taking an active role in establishing specific frameworks, such as in quality assurance, and HEIs are also very active in research collaboration and establishing mobility programmes. However, inter-governmental cooperation at the level of higher education policy and closer interaction between national governments in this region to promote policy harmonisation is still not well developed. At the current stage, inter-governmental efforts in the Asia Pacific can be summarized as follows:

a) ASEAN: In the context of ASEAN, higher education in the region has been mentioned in many official declarations as one of the important keys to enhancing human resource development in the region. In recent years, after the consensus among ASEAN countries to establish the ASEAN community, education has been treated as the core action line in promoting the ASEAN-Socio Cultural Community.

b) SEAMEO: As for the promotion of higher education in SEAMEO, both the SEAMEO Conference and the ASED Meetings have also focused along the same line as ASEAN, in promoting ASEAN identity and the diverse aspects of the ASEAN community. In parallel, functional cooperation to promote quality in general and higher education have been emphasised through the strengthening of language education, vocational and technical education and school leadership.

c) Australia: In an attempt to emulate the Bologna Process in the Asia Pacific, the Brisbane Communiqué, emitted in 2006, was aimed at promoting the collaboration on a QA framework, as well as recognition and common competency-based standards for teachers. An overall framework that thoroughly addresses most of the aspects of higher education activities is non-existent. Other Asia Pacific countries, such as New Zealand and China, are also interested in cementing their educational ties with Europe by taking steps parallel with the Bologna Process. China, in particular, already secured observer status in the 2007 ministerial meeting in London.

d) Others: Initiatives ventured upon by exclusive university networks such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN), Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU), an independent network of quality assurance agencies (APQN – Asia Pacific Quality Network) as well as a few SEAMEO Centres could be found, especially with regard to internal frameworks for QA, and in specific disciplines such as

open and distant learning (currently developed by SEAMEO SEAMOLEC) and in agriculture (SEAMEO SEARCA).

4. Possible Framework for Closer Harmonisation in Higher Education in the Asia Pacific

It is important to note that the process towards greater policy harmonisation in higher education, wherever it is, will be a voluntary effort. It would still take time for national governments in Asia Pacific countries to mutually agree on the fact that the region would have much to gain in these concerted efforts. Overcoming the perception of regional diversity as an obstacle to the harmonisation process is indeed necessary. In this regard, continuous campaigns to raise awareness of the significance of a coordinated policy process in higher education are constantly promoted by SEAMEO RIHED. This would be the most conventional way to approach this issue, which SEAMEO RIHED is pursuing through the development of a framework proposal submitted to the SEAMEO High Official Meeting and the Director General/Secretary General/Commissioner Meeting.

On the other hand, there is still a serious need for the development of concrete mechanisms that promote certain aspects of higher education activities, which are usually interrelated, such as mobility, recognition, credit transfer system and quality assurance, all of which must be pursued by national governments, HEIs or independent networks and organisations. This line of promoting regional higher education integration and harmonisation through small mechanisms might be an alternative to the mere focus on establishing an overarching regional framework that invites doubts and suspicion among Asia Pacific countries.

4.1 A system of Quality Assurance

As a result of the massive expansion of higher education, resulting from the liberal economic regime and the force of globalisation, the issue of quality and quality assurance have become major concerns, both among HEIs and national governments around the world. The continuous efforts of each individual government in this region, although not as far-fetched as those in Europe, are somewhat impressive. Australia and Thailand, for example, have launched ambitious initiatives to establish systems of quality assurance. Australia has established the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) to be responsible for academic audits of both universities and those state agencies responsible for accreditation of private providers. The same kind of external QA agencies have also been established in Thailand in 1999, following the revised National Education Act. The Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment(ONESQA) was established as an autonomous body and tasked to assess universities, both public and private, every five years. In other Asia-Pacific countries, the number of QA agencies has been on the rise since the first half of the 1990s. As of 2004, 14 countries in the region were reported to have at least 1 national QA agency. There are, however, several types of QA systems depending on the agencies responsibility for the operation of the system. Four predominant modes of organisation include centralised governmental, quasi-governmental, non-governmental and parallel governmental and non-governmental agencies. Australia and China are two major countries that state ministers of education, and they are responsible for overseeing national QA bodies. National QA bodies that are sponsored by national governments, but are allowed certain degrees of autonomy to manage their QA activities, can be seen

in Thailand, Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia. The third type of QA agency in the Asia-Pacific, the non-governmental type, is rarely seen in the region except in the Philippines. The final type of QA system, a combination of governmental and non-governmental bodies sponsored by the profession association or the universities themselves, as seen in Canada or the Netherlands, can be found in New Zealand.

Regarding the state of regional QA networks in the region, the key network is the APQN, which is a part of the IQAAHE international network. In the past, the only QA network in which countries in the Asia-Pacific were members was the INQAAHE. However, many countries in this region perceive the INQAAHE as ‘too big’, as the number of country members has swelled from 20 in 1991 to 60 in 2003. In order to create a more close-knit network that represents the geographical QA problem and characteristics, the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) was created to work in informal collaboration with the INQAHEE in 2003. The key objectives of this gathering are to promote good practices and provide advice and expertise to assist the overall running of QA systems in member countries. Secondly, the APQN network is to assist members in the development of credit transfer systems, and improve mobility and standards of cross-border education activities.

AUN-QA is another network at the sub-regional level. Members belong to one to three key universities in each country in ASEAN. At the geographical level, AUN-QA is the first of its kind in trying to establish sub-regional networking for QA in ASEAN. Their QA objective, which has been embraced by the member universities since its inauguration in 1997, is to ‘harmonise’ and ‘create a general guideline’ of IQA for its member universities. Recently, the AUN Secretariat published the first manual for the implementation of quality assurance to support other universities in ASEAN, if they are interested in using AUN-labelled QA guidelines.

Key Initiative: the Brisbane Communiqué (2006)

The Brisbane Communiqué is the key initiative launched during the inaugural Asia-Pacific Education Minister’s Meeting in 2006. Although the initiative is meant to help strengthen the overall education structure in the region, and not higher education per se, it could be said that the initiative has established a kind of structural engagement and development of QA among Asia-Pacific countries. Its main objectives are to facilitate the mobility of students and faculties as well as to collaborate in developing a QA framework that is on a par with international standards. Unlike the ideas behind the European’s initiative as evidenced by the Bologna Process, which aims at establishing a compatibility and comparability of QA systems, the Brisbane Communiqué focuses on promoting greater transferability in education cooperation. In order to establish greater transferability in the region, ensuring transparency and mutual trust between countries is essential. However, this can only be accomplished if the QA systems in the region are better developed.

As for the key players involved in the implementation process, the ministries responsible for education in 27 signatory countries are expected to be the prime movers. The primary objectives of these initiatives are to create a QA framework that could be used to better assess courses available on-line, to develop competency standards for teachers, to create a system of recognition of education and professional qualifications and technical skills. In the meantime, Australia has been responsible for establishing a taskforce and a secretariat of the Senior’s Officials’ Working Group. The taskforce’s major task is to ensure that there would be no duplication of QA attempts undertaken earlier by other regional networks.

QA in the Sub-Regional Context: Southeast Asia

It could be said that the current stage of QA development in Asia is more or less similar to those in other developing countries; in a sense that most of the QA systems have been originated by or operated as formal national mechanisms. Half of the countries in the region, including Brunei Darussalam (BDNAC), Cambodia (ACC), Indonesia (BAN-PT), Malaysia (MQA), Philippines (AACCUP, PAASCU, etc.), Thailand (ONESQA) and Vietnam (GDETA) are reported to have national external QA agencies operating either under the umbrella of the MOEs or the national government or are partly funded by the government. In Japan, the quality assurance system prior to 2000 had been rather fragmented, involving several actors and activities such as supervision from the MEXT, accreditation by the Japan University Accreditation Association (JUAA), self-monitoring and evaluation by HEIs and accreditation by various professional organisations, such as JABEE. Unlike other regions where cultural and geographical diversities are not much a problem to QA system development, in the Asia Pacific there are a number of structural impediments.

Firstly, the level of disparity between HEIs and QA development in this region is extremely high. Although many countries in this region have already established national QA mechanisms such as Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, and Viet Nam, the rest are still at the stage of developing quality assurance infrastructure; except for Singapore where the government makes use of external QA systems from developed countries and the QA system in education is incorporated within the framework of the Ministry of Trade. Such disparities have contributed to the inefficiency in developing formal or common QA cooperation within the area, let alone a general QA guideline or framework.

Secondly, unlike Europe and some other developed countries, in the Asia Pacific, where 'third-party or external evaluation' systems and agencies (such as in Japan via the restructuring of the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Universities Evaluation (NIAD-UE)) are well-developed and have played a key role in developing national QA systems, the status of EQA agencies in the rest of the region is still uncertain. In fact, most EQA agencies in Southeast Asia are said to be operating outside the parameters and the mandates of the MOEs. They were mostly established by the governments and are actually state-funded agencies, except for the Philippines where there are non-governmental independent EQA agencies. The status of independent and autonomous EQA agencies is important to the overall development of national QA systems, because of the need for unbiased inputs from external agencies. The lack of variety in EQA agencies also creates a condition in which these countries must rely solely on IQA run only by each HEI.

Having laid out some of the structural problems, it does not mean that nothing could be done with regards to the development of QA systems in these sub-regions. Apart from the favourable fact that many funding agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank are interested in assisting the region to develop QA infrastructure, the Southeast Asian region also has a strong institutional link with SEAMEO RIHED and the AUN, where QA has been one of the major missions of these organisations and where coordination in the specific area of QA is possible. Several initiatives could be implemented through, for example, the promotion of a common understanding of quality assurance systems in the region and the establishment of IQA and EQA sub-networks.

The promotion of thought sharing and system comparison processes among Asia Pacific countries with regard to the national QA system is deemed necessary. There is a serious need for a common understanding of key quality assurance terminologies and systems adopted in the region, so that the best practice in each system can be effectively benchmarked. For instance, the former British colonies in Asia usually adopt the European style of quality assessment, while other countries, such as the Philippines, have been strongly influenced by the US system of accreditation, that is by professional organisations or university associations. In Japan, recent reform since 2000 has suggested the country's interests lie in moving towards quality assessment rather than accreditation through the changing role of the JAAA and the new structure and function of the National Institution for Academic Degrees and Universities Evaluation (NIAD-UE). The extent to which the future direction of regional QA systems could be pursued or harmonised therefore depends on this initial step towards (re)defining the common understanding and the sharing of systems of practice on QA among Asian countries.

Another initiative, as proposed by SEAMEO RIHED in the previous HOM and DG Meeting as well as in many academic meetings is the establishment of sub-regional IQA and EQA Networks, such as in the GMS or in SEA sub-region. On the other hand, this proposal includes actions to establish a subject or discipline-based QA system, which could be further developed into a regional pool of reviewers of program-based QA for HEIs in the region, thereafter extended to other countries in the Asia Pacific. Furthermore, SEAMEO RIHED will further explore the possibility of setting up priority areas, as suggested in the Bologna Process, such as in the areas of degree comparability and the development of a Regional and National Qualification Framework as well as EQA and IQA Networks. The latter activities are specifically emphasised by the SEAMEO RIHED, as the lack of a sub-regional IQA and EQA networks are the major factor preventing the process of sharing information and best practices among the countries in developing areas. This sub-region QA network would consist of countries with considerable QA experience that can help advise neighbouring countries, as well as benefit from participation in capacity building opportunities themselves.

4.2 A System of Readable and Comparable Degrees

Apart from reliable and accountable quality assurance systems that encourage greater mobility, along with better research and teaching collaboration among HEIs in the region, a readable and comparable degree is also to be promoted through the development of a comparable qualification framework, in the form of a degree supplement. Given the diversity of degrees awarded in HEIs within the region, effectiveness and flexibility cannot be enhanced, if the degrees and contents of the qualifications obtained by graduates are not easily readable and recognised by other institutions in different countries. The following mechanisms are, to some extent, put forth to accommodate a freer flow and a more sustainable mobility among students, who want to pursue their future education outside their own countries or to seek employment elsewhere. In other words, it does not aim at promoting mobility on a short-term basis as most existing exchange programmes often do. On the contrary, it addresses the structural connection between HEIs within the region, as well as between education and the market sector, by creating a tool that enables both HEIs and employers to recruit students more effectively. These tools include:

A Regional Credit Transfer System

The credit transfer system is considered one of the most important components in facilitating a greater degree of mobility among students of the Asia Pacific region. At the moment, the key actor undertaking the task of developing and implementing a credit transfer system is the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP). Founded in 1994, UMAP is currently developing a trial programme to promote student mobility in the Asia Pacific region. Participating universities are now voluntarily taking part in the trial process of implementing the UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS). Similar to other endeavours in many parts of the world, the credit transfer system aims at creating a more sustainable mobility programme that enables students to earn credits during their studies in other universities. According to the UMAP, host and home universities are required to complete a credit transfer agreement in advance of the enrolments, both at graduate and post-graduate levels.

The UCTS developed by UMAP consists of 3 key components: the UMAP Study Plan, the UCTS Credit Points Scale and the UCTS Grading Scale. The UMAP Study Plan represents the courses and credits agreed upon by both home and host universities. The UCTS has adopted a 60-credit point scale, which is capable of operating under a 3-term and a 2-semester academic year system. The 60-credit point scale usually represents a full-time student's workload for a full academic year. The workload includes the activities required for completion of a full academic year/semester/term such as lectures, tutorials/seminars, fieldwork, private studies, and examination and so on.⁵ The grading scale of the UCTS shares the same characteristics of other credit transfer systems. It consists of seven grades from A to F, with E meaning the lowest passing grade. The scale is aimed at establishing a norm-referenced grading scale and a guideline for member universities, enabling them to make the conversion.

A Regional and National Qualification Framework

According to the OECD, a National Qualification Framework is 'a way of showing relationships between qualifications in a country or education or occupational sector. It is an instrument for the development and classification of qualifications according to a set of criteria for levels of learning achieved [...]'.⁶ In essence, the development of a national, and possibly the future regional qualification framework, is in fact directly connected to the issue of quality assurance. As for national qualification frameworks, they will increase the confidence of the general public, employers, HEIs in other countries, and other stakeholders, in students' and graduates' academic standards and achievements. On the one hand, the framework enables a closer and easier link between 'education' and 'economic/society' sectors, both at the national and regional level. It makes it easier for employers to understand the attributes of the qualifications attained by students, while at the same time creating more opportunities for graduates to obtain transnational employment. On the other hand, a greater flexibility in student mobility among graduates in the region could only be pursued through the development of a better understanding of the body of knowledge and academic disciplines in each individual country. The framework will also assist HEIs in the region in determining the direction of mobility programmes, in relation to other

⁵ UMAP, p. 10 Further information can be found in UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme: Users' Guide

⁶ Based on the OECD definition in 'The role of qualifications systems in promoting lifelong learning.'

HEIs' programmes and will assist students and learners to identify potential programmes available throughout the region.

The Regional Qualification Framework (RQF), on the contrary, is an umbrella structure that enables an easy and readable translation of different qualification systems in the region. According to the European QF Consultation Process, the role of EQF is to act as a benchmark for the any level of learning recognised in a qualification or defined in the NQF. Inter-governmental processes, in pushing forward the development programme of a RQF, may involve the defining of agreed components, such as:⁷

- a) The number of levels: to be determined by reference to international studies and generalised stages in learning across all contexts and across all countries;
- b) The types of competencies: relevant to regional learning settings;
- c) Qualification descriptors: which exemplify the outcomes of the main qualification at each level and demonstrate the nature of change between levels will provide clear points of reference at each level of the existing qualifications.

Discussion and interest in developing NQFs in the Asia Pacific region, has already been ventured upon by such countries as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam. Other countries, such as Australia and New Zealand have already established such systems. Therefore, the first and more immediate stage in creating a system of readable and comparable degrees among HEIs in the Asia-Pacific region is perhaps to firstly align the classification of qualifications in different systems to be more easily understood via the development of NQFs. This way, flexibility in mobility and the assessment of quality can be achieved. In the near future we may look to inter-governmental processes in the development of a regional QF to improve quality, accessibility and public-private linkages.

A Degree Supplement

Among higher education activities, student mobility seems to be the most common activity promoted by both national governments and HEIs. To accommodate and facilitate the process of student mobility, a system of 'readable and comparable degrees' is promoted through the development of the so-called 'diploma supplement.'

A degree or diploma supplement is a short document attached to a higher education qualification. It is a tool that adds transparency and ensures that higher education qualifications issued by each HEI are easily understood, especially outside the country where the students graduated. In other words, it is the concrete measure to move along the process of creating a system of readable and comparable degrees, which in turn, will enable the process of student mobility to be easier and more flexible, especially for continuing education.

The Council of Europe, the European Commission, and UNESCO/CEPES have developed a degree or diploma supplement issued in Europe. The template is designed to provide a description of nature, level, context, content and status of the studies pursued by students. The template developed by the above parties

⁷ The European Qualifications Framework: Consultation to Recommendation Conference, Budapest, February 2006

has been adopted widely, although not in uniform fashion. However, it largely includes the information listed in the table below.

Diploma Supplement Template

Items	Information included
1. Holder of the Qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal information
2. Qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name of Qualification, title conferred • Main Field(s) of studies • Institution warding and administering studies • Language and Instruction/Examination
3. Level of Qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level • Official length of programme • Access Requirements
4. Contents and Results Gained	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modes of Study • Programme Requirements/Qualification Profile of the graduate • Programme Details • Grading Scheme • Overall Classification
5. Function of the Qualification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to further study • Professional Status
6. Additional Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional and Further Information Source
7. Certification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date/Institution

Benefits of a Degree Supplement:

The advantage and benefits of developing the degree supplement are multi-faceted. At the level of HEIs, the degree supplement promotes internationalisation of higher education around the globe. It increases confidence and facilitates the increasing number of student exchange and mobility programmes among HEIs. It also lowers barriers to the recognition of studies, as the degree supplement provides a basis for assessment, and useful information on the qualification secured by students. The degree supplement promotes employability and flexibility at the student level. As it is designed to give employers more details about students' qualifications, it could be used in addition to the curriculum vitae. It also makes further study in other countries which consider the submission of the degree supplement, a lot easier; especially in Europe and the Oceania as it explains the nature, level, context and content of the study pursued by graduates.

Finally, at the market level, this may seem to be less relevant in the context of the Asia Pacific region, as employers might not be aware of its purpose nor how to interpret the document. In addition, the level of cross-border employment is not as high as it is in Europe. However, a new educated workforce seeking employment

outside their homeland can be expected in the years to come, given the globalised environment which encourages the free flow of people. In the future, additional information contained in the document such as the degree supplement, will help employers understand more about students' academic achievements, and will allow an easier transition to further employment across the region.

5. Conclusion

This paper largely emphasises the role of globalisation as a major force in transforming the higher education sector around the world. It clearly shows that many HEIs and national governments, in many parts of the world, have already ventured on to tackle the force of globalisation by reforming their institutional structures, as well as consolidating regional effort to establish a common framework for higher education. Europe seems to be the most advanced region in coping with the globalisation phenomenon by attempting to harmonise its member states' higher education policy and practices. The Bologna Process is the model that has been widely observed and adopted by other regions, both by developed countries in the Asia Pacific and in other parts of the world.

In the Asia Pacific, national governments and HEIs, must focus on an increase of academic excellence and accessibility, as well as assuring the level of quality in higher learning institutions. The most important thing is to take on a more far-sighted approach and explore the possibility of promoting higher education cooperation in both the HEIs and between national governments. While the existing cooperation at the level of HEIs is the foundation for mutual higher education development in the region, the next step to be contemplated by national governments is the increase of higher education policy interactions among the governments in the Asia Pacific as well as the establishment of an inter-governmental process which will stimulate the harmonisation of higher education policy. Key actors and networks in the region have been instrumental in advancing two key areas: quality assurance and the promotion of mobility. In this respect, SEAMEO RIHED will continue to be the key actor in raising awareness among policy makers and other stakeholders in the region of the importance of a concerted regional effort that will contribute to the sustainable direction of higher education in the future.

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