

regulations allowing private banks to join the financing market for prospective students.

Experiencing the direct impact of the economic crisis, the private education sector is the best and most active partner of the government in searching ways to provide society with access opportunities to higher education, and to sustain economic growth. ■

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2017.90.9933>

Higher Education Regionalization in East Asia

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Three prominent organizations have emerged as drivers of regional higher education (HE) cooperation in East Asia: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), and a recently formed trilateral grouping between the governments of China, Japan, and South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea). While these regional actors share some history of collaboration, in part driven by a desire to create a common East Asian HE space, they implement regionalization schemes largely based on different needs, goals, timetables, and customs. This phenomenon has resulted in a fragmented landscape of East Asian HE regionalization. In considering this state of affairs, several questions emerge. Why are there multiple regionalization schemes in East Asia? For nations with multiple regional memberships, is it possible that some regionalization schemes have priority over others? If yes, are there any adverse implications for East Asian regionalization schemes, both as separate initiatives and, more broadly, as schemes working toward a common East Asian HE space?

ASEAN AND THE ASEAN UNIVERSITY NETWORK

Initially (roughly in the period 1967–1989), ASEAN drove cooperation on the twin premises of political stability and security. Thus, its founding members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—shared a mission focused on the containment of communism in Indochina and cooperative nation-building, especially in the years following successful national independence

movements in the region. However, events of the 1990s, particularly the Asian financial crisis of 1997, prompted a shift in rationale as a wave of political discourse around economic integration swept the region. The financial crisis highlighted the need for cooperation not only among ASEAN member countries, but also among other afflicted nations—namely China, Japan, and Korea—to find economic solutions to prevent future recessions from devastating the region. This grouping of countries became known as ASEAN Plus Three.

Throughout ASEAN's evolution—from an exclusive grouping of Southeast Asian countries, to the inclusive ASEAN Plus Three configuration, and later the ASEAN Plus Six arrangement (with the addition of Australia, India, and New Zealand)—policy dialogue around HE regional cooperation materialized slowly. The conversation began with the first two ASEAN Committee on Education meetings in the 1970s; together, these meetings promoted higher education, particularly the labor potential of HE graduates, as the primary engine driving economic prosperity. The meetings also advanced a compelling argument in favor of an international pipeline to secure qualified and highly motivated students. What resulted was a subregional grouping known as the ASEAN University Network (AUN), which, assisted by the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) framework and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), facilitates exchanges of faculty, staff, and students among 30 member institutions.

SEAMEO AND THE SOUTH EAST ASIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

Whereas ASEAN's AUN operates on a subregional platform, the SEAMEO Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (RIHED) seeks to achieve a higher-order objective of establishing a South East Asian Higher Education Area (SEA-HEA). To date, three primary regionalization processes have advanced this work: the Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand (M-I-T) mobility pilot project and two regional harmonizing mechanisms, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) and the Southeast Asian Credit Transfer System (SEA-CTS). Assisted by the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Credit Transfer System (UCTS), 23 universities under M-I-T facilitated the exchange of 1,130 undergraduate students during the initiative's four-year rollout (2010–2014). M-I-T is now moving forward under a more inclusive branding, the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS), and plans to expand its remit to include four additional countries: Brunei Darussalam, Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam. In contrast to M-I-T, AQAN and SEA-CTS activity has been difficult to measure; however, it is likely that these two regional mechanisms will

have increased visibility under AIMS.

CAMPUS Asia

The newest arrival on the scene of regional cooperation in East Asia is a trilateral student mobility scheme called the Collective Action for Mobility Program of University Students in Asia (CAMPUS Asia). Launched in 2012 as a pilot project under the direction of China, Japan, and Korea, CAMPUS Asia facilitates both undergraduate and graduate student mobility through credit exchange, dual degree, and joint degree programs, and aims to develop a pool of talented “Asian experts” through a shared resource and knowledge platform. These experts are expected to become ambassadors of an internationally competitive, knowledge-based Northeast Asian region. As perhaps a secondary objective, the mobility scheme may be regarded as a means to alleviate China and Korea’s brain drain problem (the loss of intellectual capital to popular study and work destinations such as North America and Europe), while simultaneously creating international demand for HE sectors faced with the prospect of diminishing enrollment rates (Japan and Korea).

THE CONUNDRUM OF REGIONALIZATION IN EAST ASIA

Taken separately, all the regionalization schemes described above have the potential to yield considerable benefits within their respective geographic purviews: a deepening of cross-cultural understanding; knowledge sharing; an international pipeline to skilled labor; and regional stability and peace. However, viewed as a whole, they represent a fragmented landscape of HE regionalization, comprised of mutually exclusive and, in some instances, overlapping cross- and intraregional economic and political interdependencies. These uncoordinated dynamics are bound to cause geopolitical tension, as regional networks are likely to engage in political maneuvering and other posturing behaviors, especially as programs expand into neighboring territories and endeavor to recruit member nations that are already committed to other initiatives.

For example, the trilateral Northeast Asian grouping has plans to include some ASEAN and/or SEAMEO member countries in CAMPUS Asia, while both ASEAN and SEAMEO have entertained the possibility of expanding AUN and AIMS, respectively, to the northeast, namely to China, Japan, and Korea. As the prospect of new regional partnerships opens up, countries with multiple memberships may choose to honor or devote more resources to cooperative arrangements that either yield the most benefit (e.g., in terms of prestige, political endorsement, or resources), are most feasible, or both. The maturing of spinoff ASEAN Plus One arrangements (e.g., ASEAN-Japan), perhaps at the expense of developments in the larger ASEAN Plus Three grouping,

may illustrate this point. In other cases, regional networks may find themselves fighting over resources that become “spread too thin” as member nations devote funding, manpower, and time to multiple regionalization initiatives. In sum, prioritization activities may thwart the cultivation of enduring regional cooperative ties and hamper the progress of regionalization schemes that share multiple member nations. Perhaps also at stake is the creation of an all-inclusive, single East Asian HE community.

Another challenge facing regional organizations in East Asia is the inherent difficulty of attempting to harmonize an extremely polarized geographic area of cultures, languages, standards around HE quality, and national norms and regulations, specifically around visa protocols and academic calendars. Reference tools such as AQAN, UCTS, and ACTS have mitigated the most visible differences and successfully facilitated student exchanges for elite regional groupings such as AUN and pilot international mobility projects. But a need emerges to develop more broad-sweeping harmonizing mechanisms with the aim of equalizing educational benefits across East Asia as a whole. In recognition of this

This phenomenon has resulted in a fragmented landscape of East Asian HE regionalization.

limitation, SEAMEO RIHED and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have begun to develop what aims to be an all-inclusive, pan-East Asian reference tool known as the Academic Credit Transfer Framework (ACTFA). However, the question becomes whether the many regional networks that coexist in East Asia will embrace this framework, especially in light of their tendency to promote homegrown mobility schemes and harmonizing mechanisms native to their respective subregions. Currently, CAMPUS Asia seems to be exploring its own CTS and QA framework and AUN, as already mentioned, uses AUN-QA and ACTS.

Given this current state of affairs, now would likely be a good time to emphasize a greater level of interregional cooperation among regional networks in East Asia. The aim here would be to alleviate any geopolitical tension that is perhaps characteristic of East Asian regionalization today, and develop efficient ways to share knowledge and resources across regional networks to equalize HE benefits across the region. Perhaps in this way, East Asian regionalization can begin to move toward a more inclusive regionalization

agenda of creating a single, pan-East Asian HE community. ■

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2017.90.9805>

China: A World Leader in Graduation Rates

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In its April 2013 edition, *The Economic Observer* posed a simple question: “Are China’s Colleges Too Easy?” Although this question may be asked of many higher education systems, the answer given by *The Economic Observer* for China is an unambiguous and resounding yes. China has one of the lowest college dropout rates in the world, with sources from the ministry of education stating that less than 1 percent of students fail to complete their degrees. Rare instances of disciplinary action against students provoke outcries from the affected individuals and their families. While East Asian higher education in general is characterized by high entry requirements and low dropout rates, the latter still hover around the 10 percent mark in South Korea and Japan, a far cry from the situation in China, where failing college remains almost unthinkable.

THE NUMBERS

As part of my data collection for this article, using the “Quality Reports on Undergraduate Education” published by higher education institutions on the Mainland, I cataloged 187 universities and their four-year graduation rates, as well as the bestowal rate of bachelor degrees upon graduation. The mix of universities in the list is diverse, encompassing twelve provinces, rural and urban communities, and institutions of all qualities and sizes. Their average four-year graduation rate in 2013 stood at 97.3 percent. Five institutions allowed 100 percent of students to graduate, while the lowest percentage stood at 84. The rate of bachelor degrees bestowed during that same year stood at 96 percent, lower than the total graduation percentage. Usually, the Certificate of Graduation requires a passing grade in all mandatory courses plus a statutory number of total credit points, while a certain GPA might be required for the

bachelor degree.

The quality and ranking of a college do not seem to make a difference, as the graduation percentages for national key universities of the “211 project,” which have higher entry requirements compared with provincial ones, fall just less than half a standard deviation below the average. What does make a small difference seems to be geographical location, with Hebei—where a substantial proportion of colleges were upgraded to university status in recent years—reaching an average graduation rate of 98.8 percent, while for Shanghai it drops to a lower 95.9 percent. Several universities have departments that are jointly run with foreign partner institutions, and these tend to be harder to graduate from, averaging slightly above 90 percent.

ENSURING GRADUATION

Writing for the Chinese magazine *Time Education*, two lecturers from Jiangsu University of Technology, a provincial college with comparatively low entry requirements, touched upon several measures to facilitate timely graduation: lowering the difficulty of makeup exams, coupled with the possibility to retake exams in later semesters or even shortly before the projected graduation date. Another contributing factor is the general lack of competency within the ranks of faculty, together with their unwillingness to accept a greater workload if students were not to pass. The effect on students enrolled at less competitive institutions can be detrimental. In class, many of them play on their phones, read novels, or just sleep. While study outside of class is concentrated around exam weeks and materials relevant toward passing the course exams, even this is neglected if the students are aware that failing multiple exams does not carry sanctions.

Similar concerns were echoed by the authors of the only study on the subject of graduation rates in recent years. Li Zifeng and colleagues from Yanshan University in Hebei province observed that most universities have graduation rates close to 100 percent, with students not being reprimanded for cheating, and teachers choosing to avoid trouble by simply letting everybody pass. Students are not being “cultivated” to perform the functions that are theoretically demanded of them. The authors contrast these facts with Western universities, where requirements are more flexible, yet also more demanding, hypothesizing that these contribute to a higher quality of graduates.

A 2013 article in the *Workers’ Daily* reported the case of a university in Hainan, in which the faculty was instructed to let all bachelor students graduate, whether or not they had failed any classes. This also applied to master students, all of whom were allowed to graduate as long as their theses passed a run through plagiarism software. Academic administrators had opted to keep graduation rates high across