



POLICY BRIEF

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DEGREE STRUCTURES AND THE HARMONISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ASEAN REGION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is one of a series of Policy Briefs issued by the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme, a four-year initiative by EU and ASEAN to support harmonisation and raise the quality of higher education (HE) systems in Southeast Asia.

This brief presents an overview of higher education degree structures in the ASEAN region, including major degree types, how they are defined (e.g. degree descriptors), and loosely maps similarities and differences. It explores implications of degree structures with regards to student mobility and regional harmonisation efforts and touches upon issues such as progression paths, recognition of prior learning and online learning, credit transfer schemes and mobility programmes.

While students and stakeholders interviewed felt degree structures in ASEAN were broadly comparable and not a main source of concern when it comes to recognition and educational mobility between countries, it is clear that deeper

research needs to be conducted; the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR) is a promising tool, however, there is still no clear consensus in the region on the expected learning outcomes of specific degree types nor on a coherent and inclusive system of credit transfer (with exception of university network schemes such as that of AUN and regional pilot programmes).

Though sector specific Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) exist between countries, degree recognition policies throughout ASEAN are diverse and not fully transparent. Continued work to expand mobility opportunities in the region, the provision of structures and support to assist higher education institutions and national authorities regarding recognition, and consistent investment in the development of learning outcomes will all be essential for ensuring that degree structures align and do not become (or continue to be) barriers to regional harmonisation objectives.



CONTEXT AND FINDINGS

The aim of the study *Degree Structures in the ASEAN Region: State of Play*, which was completed in 2016, was to present an overview of higher education degree structures in the ASEAN region and to map the similarities and differences between systems of higher education. The study also explored implications of degree structures with regards to student mobility and regional harmonisation efforts. Given the size and complexity of the region as well as the topic, this state of play report only provided a first overview to guide future research and harmonisation efforts in and between ASEAN Member States.

Some of the main observations are:

- At the level of higher education, degrees in ASEAN are structured around **three main degree cycles**, including bachelor's, master's and the doctoral level. The two different tracks – TVET and higher education – do not always allow students to cross over from one track to another. However, Cambodia, Singapore, Thailand and to a certain extent, Malaysia have integrated systems where a link between vocational and higher education has been clearly mapped.
- At this stage, there are no ASEAN mechanisms to compare and correlate degree structures as such, however **qualifications frameworks (QFs)** are an emerging phenomenon in many systems: Common purposes of QFs include the ordering and specification of qualifications, the promotion of multiple pathways for learners, and international recognition (please refer to the SHARE report of Bateman and Coles, 2015).
- Most QFs in ASEAN are still at the early stages of development or implementation. At the regional level, ASEAN Member States have worked in parallel to develop a regional referencing tool – the **ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)**. However, ASEAN Member States have not yet refer-

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enced their national qualifications to the generic level descriptions of AQRF.

The study also explored a number of issues related to degree structures and how they may impact student and professional mobility between systems:

- **Alternative pathways to higher education and the recognition of prior learning:** Malaysia developed formal guidelines for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and Singapore has also developed alternative pathways to nationally recognised credentials. However, this is a nascent field in most countries.
- **Regional credit transfer systems:** Mutually recognised credit transfer systems in ASEAN are not yet in place, or are in preliminary developmental stages. The ASEAN Credit Transfer System (AUN-ACTS) supports students from AUN's 30 member universities. However, this is not consistently applied and only reaches the institutions in the AUN network. SHARE is supporting ASEAN and AUN-ACTS in further developing the credit transfer system and is testing it with an ASEAN-wide student mobility scheme.
- **Diversity of recognition policies in the region:** In ASEAN, recognition policies and practices in higher education are diverse and not fully transparent, which make it difficult for students and other stakeholders to gain access to official information about how a particular qualification is evaluated. The UNESCO regional conventions on the recognition of qualifications in higher education aim to provide a common framework to ensure credentials are assessed in a fair and transparent manner. No ASEAN countries have ratified the revised regional 2011 convention. Heads of State have adopted MRAs (Mutual Recognition Agreements) in certain sectors, aimed to facilitate the alignment of national standards with international standards within the ASEAN region, however little is known on their application and impact.

- **Mobility within ASEAN:** Mobility is primarily aided by a limited number of scholarship programmes that tend to only benefit elite and reputed institutions. Little data is collected on credit mobility beyond that of these programmes. Students primarily perceive financial barriers as an obstacle to their mobility and not degree structures or in recognition practices. SHARE is supporting ASEAN to build an inclusive and ASEAN-wide student mobility scheme.

Mobility programmes and viable credit transfer models could be used as starting points to ensure adequate access and training is available to all higher education institutions, as well as to other appropriate and recognised educational institutions offering non-formal learning. To meet this need, an innovative and inclusive approach to credit transfer, including non-formal learning (e.g. via open and distance learning), may need to be further researched. ASEAN is using SHARE as the instrument to build a more inclusive student mobility scheme with an integrated credit transfer system.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implementing recognition policies:** While all recognition decisions remain with national governments or recognition authorities, a common set of principles of good practices may provide a baseline consensus to facilitate deeper regional cooperation in higher education. These good practices include ensuring competent recognition authorities are trained and well-supported, and establishing a national information centre (NIC) to provide relevant information on the national higher education system and qualifications. In addition, ASEAN Member States could conduct national-level reviews and continue to work towards established international best practices in recognition policy. While cooperation across the region would add value, targeted capacity building in least developed countries Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, is crucial to develop and implement country-specific recognition policies and effective practices.
- **Expanding access to mobility and credit transfer schemes:** Despite the successes and continued growth of both AUN-ACTS and SEAMEO RIHED’s AIMS Programme, ASEAN does not yet have a regionally accepted framework for credit transfer. Further, the current state of play suggests that perceived top-tier institutions reportedly have greater access to student exchange opportunities.

As credit transfer and NQF systems evolve throughout ASEAN and beyond, the recognition of degrees may be tied more explicitly to learning outcomes. The shift to outcomes-based teaching and learning recognised across the region will require significant and long-term efforts.

- **Defining and applying learning outcomes in ASEAN higher education:** As credit transfer and NQF systems evolve throughout ASEAN and beyond, the recognition of degrees may be tied more explicitly to learning outcomes. Greater transparency is needed to better understand the expected outcomes of post-secondary degrees. The shift to outcomes-based teaching and learning recognised across the region will require significant and long-term efforts. Support for faculty and higher education institutions to develop new courses and degree programmes and assess learning outcomes will be crucial to ensure that higher education qualifications across the region are relevant and recognised.

REFERENCES

Bateman, Andrea and Mike Coles (2015). ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework and National Qualifications Frameworks: State of Play Report. SHARE project publication, Jakarta. [<http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/AQRF-NQF-State-of-Play-Report.pdf>]

Teter, Wesley and Nopraenue Dhirathiti (2016). Degree Structures in the ASEAN Region: State of Play Report. SHARE project publication, Jakarta. [<http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Degree-Structures-in-the-ASEAN-Region-.pdf>]

PREVIOUS SHARE POLICY BRIEFS

Policy Brief 1 - Towards Greater Harmonisation on of Higher Education in ASEAN. May 2016. [<http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PB1-190516.pdf>]

Policy Brief 2 - Enhancing Internationalisation in ASEAN: Credit Transfer Systems and Student Mobility. October 2016. [http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/SHARE-Policy-Brief-2_October-2016.pdf]

Policy Brief 3 - Towards a Shared Understanding of Quality Assurance: Policy Recommendations for Implementing a Regional QA Framework in ASEAN. January 2017. [<http://share-asean.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Share-Policy-Brief-3-January-2017.pdf>]



SHARE IS PROUD TO SUPPORT 50 YEARS OF ASEAN AND
40 YEARS OF ASEAN-EU RELATIONS IN 2017

SHARE, the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region, is a four-year initiative by the EU and ASEAN. Launched in Jakarta in May 2015, SHARE aims to support ASEAN in harmonising regional higher education by sharing European expertise. It does this through strengthening regional cooperation, enhancing the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education for institutions and students, and thereby contributing to a closer ASEAN community. SHARE is implemented by a consortium of Europe's major international education agencies, led by the British Council and comprised of Campus France, DAAD, EP-Nuffic, ENQA, and EUA. More information on SHARE at www.share-asean.eu