'SEAMEO RIHED and Higher Education Harmonisation'[1]

JSPS AA Science Platform Program Seminar
23-25 January 2009
Bangkok, Thailand

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1. Globalisation and Higher Education in the 21st Century

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 'economic resources' of the 21st century. This is partly because of two important factors: the transformation of the globalised world 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 drives that quicken the process of commercialisation of higher education, education liberalisation and higher education massification around the globe. Varied from region to region, these trends have emerged at different stages and diverse degrees due to regional diversity and higher education policy differences. Nevertheless, globalisation has somewhat re-shaped the nature of higher education and forced national governments and inter-governmental bodies to share some common values and development agendas. Also, HEIs around the world are required to actively adjust themselves to the shifted dynamics of global education which move towards the trends of open access for public scrutiny, especially with respect to their quality, efficiency and effectiveness in delivering 'higher education products.'

Globalisation has potentially contributed to the development and transformation of higher education in many respects as mentioned previously. The concerning issue is the extent to which HEIs and national governments could adjust themselves to best counter with transnational development and cross-border transition. HEIs in developed countries are coping well with the impact of globalisation by trying to adapt their HEIs to be of higher quality, more accessible and very equitable. The most common measure is the step towards *a greater degree of harmonisation and integration in higher education policies and practices* through concerted regional efforts. At the regional level, Europe has clearly established the policy connection between economic and social dimension by basing economic prosperity on 'knowledge' and 'innovation'. Europe is far more advanced than any other regions by starting to invest more in the area of higher education, especially on HEIs. As put it by Philippe Busquin, the Ex-Commissioner for Research, investing in universities and to place them as centres of research and education and poles of regional economic development is the key to European future in the globalised era.[2] Closer harmony or deeper harmonisation of higher

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[1] This paper was adapted from the paper titled 'ASEAN Higher Education Area', presented previously during the 2009 World Conference on Higher Education: 'Facing Global and Local Challenges: the New Dynamics for Higher Education', 24-26 September 2008, Macao SAR, PR China

[2] Busquin, Philippe (2003), Commission launches debate on how to turn European universities into a 'world-class reference', 05/02/2003, http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=IP/03/194&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=en, accessed 11/08/2008

education is therefore not an end in itself. On the contrary, it has prompted academic and non-academic activities spinning around HEIs in Europe to be more intertwined and also encouraged higher education sector to assume new economic characteristics. Under the Bologna Process, the development of higher education infrastructure for Europe, such as the quality assurance system, degree cycles, curriculum development, length of study and programmes or market structure are among the important issues being discussed for the future of higher education development in Europe.

While regional economic integration in the areas of trade, finance and investment has been established and well in good progress in most part of the world, the process o f regional harmonisation in the area of higher education is still at the embryonic stage, except for the Bologna Process in Europe. Among the developing countries in ASEAN, higher education systems in this region also face the same structural and demographical changes, that is, a relatively small numbers of high quality HEIs and flexible mobility programmes. As pointed out by Bloom, out of 40 million higher education students in developing countries, only a few are enrolled in high quality HEIs. The rest are taught by poorly-qualified, low-motivated, abysmal low-compensated faculties. The higher education sector in these areas also fails to prepare students for advanced studies because their curricula are basically outdated and so on.[3] Not only the internal structural problems that lay out the stumbling blocks for the development of higher education in ASEAN, the lack of a 'regional infrastructure' in higher education also make it difficult for HEIs to promote flexibility, mobility and accessibility of student and staff within the region.

In other parts of the world, staying relevant in the fierce competition of the global higher education sector requires national governments and HEIs to introduce restructuring programmes in the area of governance, curricula development, quality assurance and so on. These activities are more internationalised, cross-cultural and cross-bordered. Some involve close collaboration with other sectors, specifically social and business sectors. Most of them are monitored and held accountable by parties other than HEIs' own internal organs. These trends and challenges of 'cross-bordered,' 'cross-sectioned,' and 'cross-level' require significant degrees of harmonisation and integration all in the areas of instruction, research and services. Therefore, in the 21st century, it is fairly unlikely for any individual country, especially those in ASEAN, to fulfil these criteria alone without concerted regional policy cooperation and harmonisation efforts as well as serious supports from national governments and inter-governmental process.

This paper therefore stresses the importance of the establishment of a common higher education infrastructure through the process of harmonisation and the creation of *Southeast Asian Higher Education Area*. It discusses firstly about the concept of higher education harmonisation. The second section gives an overview of the existing harmonisation process around the world, that is, in Europe, Central and Latin America and Africa and the Arab states as well as recent development in Southeast Asia. The final section elaborates on the current efforts of SEAMEO RIHED in raising awareness about higher education harmonisation among key stakeholders in the region. It also goes into details about the Centre's attempt to start mobilising higher education partners to develop frameworks for cooperation in the area of quality assurance, which is perceived as the initial mechanism and a part of the 'regional infrastructure' for higher education harmonisation in Southeast Asia.

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[3] Bloom (2003, p. 21-24)

2. What is the Harmonisation of Higher Education?: Viewpoints from SEAMEO RIHED

Given the setting of the globalised world and the fact that many regions will eventually turn into the knowledge-based society, the attempt to create a process that leads to a better coordination and more efficient cooperation of higher education activities among governments, HEIs and normal citizens within the region is the emerging phenomenon in many parts of the world. On the one hand, the common problem facing HEIs around the globe is the lack of an agreed set of infrastructure in higher education that would facilitate the mobility of students and staff, cross-continent research collaboration as well as other higher education activities. For instance, while most of HEIs often encourage student mobility, the incompatible academic cycles, the quality assurance procedures (or the lack thereof), the recognition of qualifications provisions and also domestic regulations are the main obstacles deterring HEIs and students to move around despite the amicable transnational and liberal higher education environment. To respond to these underlying structural problems, national governments in many regions are putting a great effort to tackle these problems at the regional level by promoting policy harmonisation in higher education within their regions. A concerted effort to create a 'harmonised', if not a single higher education system in the region, by developing such mechanisms as credit transfer system, the system of common degree cycles or the regional qualification frameworks, is perceived by many as the tool to cope with the global trends of education liberalisation, transnationalisation and the transformation towards knowledge-based societies.

Put it clearer, the harmonisation of higher education is essentially a process that recognises the significance of regional education cooperation and the importance of establishing an 'area of knowledge' in which activities and interactions in higher education, mobility, and employment opportunities can be easily facilitated and increased. It is the process that acknowledges diversity of higher education systems and cultures within the region, while simultaneously seeking to create a 'common educational space'. Within the area, different cultures, languages and educational system can flourish through a common, but not identical, practices and guidelines for cooperation. As repeatedly echoed in Europe, a common space or higher education area does not intend to create a uniform or standard of higher education system. It intends to create general guidelines in areas such as degree comparability through similar degree cycle and qualification framework, quality assurance, lifelong learning, or credit transfer system and so on. These general guidelines will help enable student international mobility, lifelong learning, and free flow of employability movement around the region, which will strengthen regional economy in the long run. In other words, it will be the areas in which continuous interactions and mobility between students, faculty members and employment sector can be stimulated. The regional higher education area will be the space in which students, faculty members and HEIs are the key players promoting similar standards of higher education activities. Among others, the higher education area will be the pool of human resources in which employers take part in investing and recruiting high-calibre graduates.

Harmonisation will be a long complex process that requires the involvement of different key players at both the international and domestic level, ranging from national governments, HEIs, and stakeholders such as employment sector, students, regional organisations or industrial companies. The most important factor that will contribute to the success of the process of harmonisation in higher education is the participation and consensus building at the level of national agencies, the public and also the above-mentioned

stakeholders. The key element of the harmonisation in higher education will be the establishment of a mutually accepted roadmap that will consist of a vision of future goal (such as the establishment of a higher education space/area), areas to develop common frameworks (identified by key stakeholders such as credit transfer system, quality assurance guidelines, regional qualification framework or comparable degree cycle and so on), methods and the key players who will be responsible for framework development and information dissemination to the public. Normally, the process of harmonisation involves 3 levels of participation. At the governmental level, governments are to engage in an ***inter-governmental process*** involving series of discussion and negotiation to set out a ***harmonisation roadmap***. ***HEIs*** are also expected to play the central part in responding promptly and positively and to contribute actively to the process initiated by the governments. Both HEIs and students are expected to be involved in shaping a compatible and efficient, yet diversified and adaptable regional higher education areas as well as in developing common guidelines. Finally, the inputs from the ***public and employment sector*** play a critical part in creating an efficient higher education area that responds to the needs of future employment, economic and social development.

3. Current Frameworks of Harmonisation of Higher Education

European Integration in the Area of Higher Education

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 the 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.[4] In the following year, the Bologna Declaration was signed by 29 signatory countries. The action lines prioritised from the onset of the Bologna Process included:

(a) A system of easily readable and comparable degree;
(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 European dimension in higher education;

As an inter-governmental effort, the legal basis and institutional arrangements are carried out by the Ministers from participating countries at biennial summits. These summits are the most important forum in the decision-making process, which provides 'supranational harmonisation' in legislation[5], 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:

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[4] The big four countries, including Germany, France, Italy and the UK, signed the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998.
[5] Zgaga (2005, p. 4)

(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 the attempt which 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 *nation-state level*, high officials responsible for higher education of the signatory countries are members of the Bologna Follow-Up Group whose tasks are to produce official working programmes and help 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 on 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 sustain the process of harmonisation and integration by acknowledging diversity while promoting common higher education architecture to which European countries and HEIs could made some references.

The Bologna Process is also special in more than one ways. It is the process which puts a lot of emphasis at 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 worries among national levels.[6] However, the majority of HEIs in Europe saw the Bologna Process as timely in introducing reforms into their own institutions. The European HEIs which once treated the Bologna Process as peripheral to the development of HEIs and opted for selective action lines rather than over-arching principles on European higher education, has 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 the transition in several aspects of the European integration, especially economic and social dimensions. It is not the Process which focuses only on higher education sector. The implication of the Bologna Process and the reforms clearly serve the overall picture of the future creation of the European knowledge-based society. In other words, the close connection between higher education and economic sector has been tied up and the Bologna Process is seen as a crucial mechanism used to prepare graduates to the European market. Interlaced through the ten Bologna priorities, European HEIs have become the key actors in undertaking reforms in the key areas, that is, instruction, research and services. These transformations of HEIs in these areas will be discussed later in the following sections.

The success of harmonisation and integration in higher education in Europe has also consisted of another significant factor. It includes the involvement of *students and external parties* in the process of reforms. From the beginning, the active involvement of

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[6] 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.

non-governmental and autonomous promoters has been the integral part in driving 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 and so on 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 particular the case in the area of quality assurance in which 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 the suitable sectors of the European market.

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 the increasing numbers of HEIs as a result of the Eastern European integration to the European Union. It is an excellent example of how positive regional integration is set to achieve the common interests among the members of European Community. As clearly indicated in the original aims, the Bologna Process was to develop a coherent higher education space to foster employability and mobility in Europe. In a way, this could be seen as attempts to accommodate free flow of student/staff mobility, education services and to invest on 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 from which other regions could utilise as a model.

Harmonisation of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the same initiative to promote the regional integration in higher education has also been on the way. However, to expedite the process, Latin American and the Caribbean countries have cooperated with the European Union in creating a cross-border regional integration for higher education at both sides of the continents. Immediate 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, which would be the nations responsible for coordinating with the rest of their respective regions to participate in the activities leading to the establishment of the common space, was 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 the common higher education space.[7] The key areas touched upon during several Meetings of Ministers of Education by the European Union and the Latin America and the Caribbean countries include, for example:

a)   dissemination of academic collaboration and experience;
b)   comparability of study programme;
c)   mobility of students and staff;
d)   joint degrees;

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[7] Cetina (2005, pp. 3-5)

e)   identification of financing sources and mechanisms; and

f)   quality assurance, etc.

Although these identified priority areas are much similar to the key action lines mentioned in the Bologna Process, some objectives and characteristics of the European, Latin America and the Caribbean common space for higher education are more generalised and not too technical as it has been the case of 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 on the development of higher education in which further bilateral and multilateral ties between states across the two regions could be effectively cemented.

Harmonisation of Higher Education in West Africa

Another key example of how governments in many regions are coping with its internal educational problems and the impact of globalisation through the promotion of regional harmonisation of higher educaiton is in West Africa. In this geographical area, the most important problem of 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 innovations by the HEIs in West African countries. Like other countries, the growing demand for higher education, more and more HEIs were established as an immediate response to the growing demand for post-secondary education. However, the massification of HEIs, especially private ones, did not necessary mean better quality in higher education sectors in West African countries. Economic and social sectors, especially the labour markets in these countries, had been terribly suffered from the low-level of quality in graduates. These students simply failed to create new knowledge that addresses the contemporary challenges both inside and outside their countries. These shortages and management failures in higher education sector, coupled with the trend of globalisation which forces countries to act in response to market's demands, had 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 on higher education in Africa was proposed by the African Development Fund (ADF) to sort out the whole 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, which comprise of Benin, Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Togo and Senegal, are suggested by the ADF to coordinate and implement the reforms to improve higher education systems, especially in the area of internal performance, higher education trainings and management of human and financial resources. In the area of the promotion of regional integration, key priority areas identified by the governments of WAEMU include:

a)   the increase of students and staff mobility between WAEMU member countries;

b)   the system of mutual recognition of degree titles; and

c) the revised curricula in common field 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 on which further development of higher education all in terms of human resource development, investment of education infrastructure, and academic management and information network could be built up.

Another important proposal put forward to the African countries by the Association of African Universities (AAU) in 2007 is the launch of the so-called 'African Higher Education Area (AHEA), which is now under discussion in several inter-governmental and HEI venues. According to the AAU, the key objectives of the AHEA are intended to promote the followings:[8]

a) an African quality culture;
b) curricular reforms that address the priorities of both national and regional labour markets;
c) academic mobility to improve circulation in the region;
d) harmonisation of regulatory framework and higher education policies;
e) collective response and strategies towards GATS and other elements of globalisation;
f) pool of resources for graduate studies and research on African studies and in Africa; and
g) the attractiveness and competitiveness of African HEIs for migratory African students

Harmonisation of Higher Education in Arab States

The initiative to develop a regional framework for cooperation in Arab states has been originated back in 1970s in key higher education areas, including degree recognition and quality assurance. In 1978, an elaboration of a Convention on the Recognition of Higher Education Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in the Arab States was started. The Convention was later ratified during 1980s-1990s by 14 states, with the other 4 states including Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Palestine taking part in the Convention as observers. Later in 1998, during the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education held in Beirut, the ministers of higher education further agreed that the main issues in regional higher education were to prepare the sector to accommodate high rates of population growth and social demand for access to HEIs as well as to promote the new teaching/learning processes that serve the development of ICT, scientific thinking and the impacts of globalisation.[9] It was unanimously agreed in this 1998 conference that the key features of higher education development should embody the principles of 'relevance' (increasing access, concern about labour market, social awareness and regional integration of higher education), 'quality', 'good management and financial

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[8] African Union (2007)
[9] Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education, Beirut, Lebanon, 2-5 March 1998, http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/file_download.php/8911590b3e6c3ee44eae70c797690771Arab-E.pdf p.2-3

resources' and 'cooperation.' These principles were translated into concrete actions including:[10]

a)   higher education is essential factor for sustainable and global development and also the enhancement of social cohesion, mobility and harmony;
b)   increased access and participation to HEIs and open learning system are the sector priorities;
c)   quality of higher education including programmes, teaching and outcomes must be commensurate with international guidelines;
d)   ICT and scientific knowledge are the major elements of higher education development;
e)   Life-long learning is the key to increase learning opportunities for workforce to upgrade their skills and new competencies;
f)   The involvement of key stakeholders in higher education is of utmost importance; and
g)   Student mobility must be encouraged.

Following the above recommendations made during the Arab Regional Conference on Higher Education in Beirut in 1998, the initiative to move on in the area of quality assurance by establishing QA mechanisms and quality enhancement programmes in the Arab states has emerged. UNESCO (Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States) has been the key international player supporting the initiative to develop higher education in these states. The most important one is the promotion of a 'Common Area/New Charter for Higher Education in the Arab States'. The Common Space in the Arab States focuses on the following action lines:[11]

a)   adoption of compatible qualifications frameworks (unification of the duration of studies of the 1st level university diplomas at 4 years, automatic mutual recognition of diplomas granted by the universities members of the Association of Arab Universities and establishment of national bodies for equivalences);
b)   enhancement of the attractiveness of higher education systems, institutions and programmes (controlling brain drain from Arab states to other countries and reversing it towards the region);
c)   abolition of all obstacles to academic and professional mobility;
d)   implementation of specific programmes to increase mobility of students within the Arab states; and
e)   establishment of joint higher education programmes;
f)   quality assurance (on-going efforts to establish a network of national bodies for QA, the promotion of a process leading to the culture of quality within HEIs institutions)

However, these action lines are adopted and implemented only by some states while some others are still considering the possibilities, especially in the areas of the harmonisation of qualifications frameworks. There are also some other challenges to overcome in the Arab states such as the question posed by some states as to whether a process similar to Bologna

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[10] Ibid, pp. 8-11
[11] Salamé (2006), Towards a New Charter/Common Area for Higher Education in the Arab States, DAAD Conference, 2 July 2006, pp. 9-13, http://cairo.daad.de/imperia/md/content/kairo/sonstiges/02_dies_salame.ppt, accessed 11/08/2008

should be initiated in the region. Meanwhile, UNESCO (Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States) has been promoting the harmonisation process in some agreed areas, for example, by proposing a new version of the Convention on Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the Arab states to embed transparency, quality assurance and harmonisation of qualification frameworks into the Convention. UNESCO's endeavour, together with the Ford Foundation, also includes the promotion of Regional Cooperation and Coordination in Quality Assurance at the level of national agencies, between HEIs, and at the level of scholars interested in QA.[12] Despite the good progress in some of the action lines, especially in the development of a common qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanism, both the Arab states and UNESCO (Regional Bureau for Education in the Arab States) also acknowledge that the adoption of a common area of higher education in the region requires much deeper understanding of the challenges of globalisation and also deeper political will to unify higher education in the Arab states. However, comparing to the development in other regions, the harmonisation process in the Arab states seems to be one of the most promising endeavours.

4. Higher Education Harmonisation in Southeast Asia: Past and Present

Despite the regional diversity, higher education sector in Southeast Asia shares many features and is facing the same challenges as the rest of the world. However, it would seem to many policy makers and scholars that this region is still lagged behind in the 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 which promotes closer and more harmonised policy interaction between national governments is almost non-existent. Not that the idea to establish the so-called 'ASEAN Integration' does not exist. Much on the contrary, ASEAN has well floated into the cooperation beyond AFTA in the area of trade and services. In other areas, especially in higher education, however, the concrete move towards regional integration is far too still. As a matter of fact, the ASEAN leaders have agreed to launch an Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) in 2000, with the core objective to narrow the gap between the original 6-ASEAN founding 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 important 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 integrating one of the above core priorities was 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.

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[12] Ibid, pp. 22-29

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, the increasing transnational educational services as a result of GATS, the common education provisions allowing the systems of comparable degrees and accreditation, and the common guidelines and roadmaps for higher education infrastructure in Southeast Asia are among the key necessities. At the moment, many developed countries in the region are undertaking active role in establishing specific frameworks, such as in quality assurance and each HEIs are also very active in research collaboration and 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 and system harmonisation is still not well developed. At the current stage, inter-governmental efforts in Southeast Asia and Asia Pacific are, for example:

a) ASEAN: In the context of ASEAN, higher education in the region has been mentioned in many official declarations as one of the important steps to enhance human resource development in the region. In recent years, after the consensus among ASEAN countries to establish 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 context, both the SEAMEO Conference and the ASED Meetings have also focused along the same line as ASEAN's in promoting ASEAN identity and the diverse aspects of 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) Brisbane Communiqué: is Australia's attempt to emulate the Bologna Process in Asia Pacific. The process was established in 2006 and aimed at promoting the collaboration on QA framework, recognition and common competency-based standards for teachers. 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) UMAP: is now the key player promoting mobility programmes and developing credit transfer system scheme (UCTS). Founded in 1994, UMAP is currently developing a trial programme to promote student mobility in Asia Pacific. 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 system of credit transfer 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.

e) Others: Initiatives ventured upon by exclusive university network such as the ASAIHL, AUAP, AUN, APRU, an independent network of quality assurance agencies (APQN – Asia Pacific Quality Network) as well as a few SEAMEO Centres could be found, especially in internal framework for QA and in specific disciplines

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

5. Harmonisation of Higher Education and SEAMEO RIHED's Initiatives

Background of SEAMEO RIHED's Initiatives on the Harmonisation Process

The concept of higher education harmonisation is a new thing for many people in Southeast Asia. Since the mid-2007, SEAMEO RIHED has therefore embarked on the project to raise the awareness among key players in higher education sector within the region on the significance of promoting a common space in higher education in Southeast Asia. Despite the invaluable efforts of both ASEAN and SEAMEO in addressing the importance of 'ASEAN identity/awareness' at the levels of basic and higher education, SEAMEO RIHED is convinced that it is also a time for the region to start discussing about the creation of a regional higher education area/space to facilitate and enhance better cooperation among individuals and HEIs in Southeast Asia. In the years to come, Southeast Asia will have to face 'together' the challenges of globalisation and the transformation into a knowledge-based society and economy. For this reason, a harmonisation process of different higher education systems in the region is the fundamental assurance that different cultures and academic traditions will be well respected and balanced. At the same time, the recognition of other systems in terms of quality, qualification, degrees as well as closer cooperation and greater degree of mobility must also be enhanced.

As agreed by other regions, it is important to note that the process towards a greater policy harmonisation in higher education, wherever it is, will be rather a voluntary effort. It would still take time for national governments of Southeast Asian countries to mutually agree on the fact that the region would have much to gain in these concerted efforts. To overcome the perception about regional diversity as obstacles to the harmonisation process is indeed necessary. Also, 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. The development of these mechanisms must be pursued by national governments, HEIs or independent networks and organisations as well as other stakeholders in higher education.

To reach these aims, SEAMEO RIHED has submitted the proposal on *'The structured framework for regional integration in higher education in SEA: the Road towards a Common Space'* to the 15th Governing Board Meeting in August 2007, the 30th High Officials Meeting and the 2nd Director General/Secretary General and Commissioner Meeting in early and late November 2007, respectively. The main objectives outlined in the proposal are to raise awareness of policy makers and high ranking officials in SEAMEO Member Countries on the significance of an inter-governmental process leading to a regional framework for higher education integration and harmonisation and to help facilitate possible development and future establishment of 'a common space in higher education' in Southeast Asia by 2015. The process also includes the development of mechanisms or frameworks for regional higher education integration/harmonisation based on the areas prioritised by key stakeholders and high-ranking officials responsible for higher education in member countries.

The proposal has been well reciprocated by many organisations and national agencies responsible for higher education in Southeast Asia. In the 2nd Director General/Secretary

General and Commissioner Meeting in November 2007, the Meeting agreed that the key mechanisms or areas that the region should join force in developing a general guidelines or frameworks, as part of the harmonisation process, include:

a) ASEAN Quality Framework and Curriculum Development;
b) Student Mobility;
c) Leadership;
d) E-learning and Mobile learning; and
e) ASEAN Research Clusters

Also just recently, the 43rd SEAMEO Council Meeting endorsed the proposal and encouraged SEAMEO to take the initiative to raise awareness among key stakeholders in the region regarding the ideas about the promotion of regional space for higher education. Following the endorsement, SEAMEO RIHED has later successfully secured the funding from the Japan Foundation to organise a conference series on *Raising Awareness: Exploring the Ideas of Creating Higher Education Common Space in Southeast Asia*.[13] The project will last for about 6 months from May 2008-December 2008. In this project, the activities include pre-conference workshops in 5 countries, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, to gather inputs from key stakeholders in the governmental, private and academic sector in these respective countries. The country coordinators will compile the information and write up country reports. These coordinators will also attend the International Conference on the same topic in Bangkok later in early November 2008, along with key countries interested in the harmonisation process such as Japan, Australia and New Zealand. Finally, the conference proceeding will be published and distributed to the public and interested parties in February 2009.

As a result of the Conference on Raising Awareness, the important findings from the key Southeast Asian coordinators from Malaysia, Indonesia, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam indicate the following Table 1[14]:

Table 1: Key findings about the Future Process of Harmonisation of Higher Education in Southeast Asia

Issues Discussed	Outcomes
1) **Ideal form of Higher Education Area**	• A system or an area that become a reference or one that can be fitted into with strong recognition of cultural diversities and national identities
2) **Priority Areas (to develop guidelines or frameworks)**	• QA guideline • Education and research link • Credit transfer system • Mobility system • Lifelong learning system

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[13] Up to the moment of drafting this paper, SEAMEO RIHED is also trying to secure additional funding from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, Australia.

[14] Table 1 is the summary of the findings gathered from 5 countries based on a set of standard questionnaire developed by SEAMEO RIHED.

Issues Discussed	Outcomes
3) **The role of key players**	• <u>Government</u>: to raise awareness and identify priority areas • <u>HEIs:</u> to help the government identify priority areas, develop framework and guidelines • <u>Employment sector</u>: to help government and HEIs identify priority areas
4) **The role of IOs (ASEAN or SEAMEO)**	• Facilitating initial discussions between member governments • Dissemination of information • Coordinating funding activities with members
5) **Key Benefits**	• Greater student mobility • Widening access and choices for students both in terms of quality and cost • Provide greater opportunity for HEI cooperation (e.g. joint programme and academic research) • Widening regional pool of human resources and greater chance for collaborative investment on human capital • ASEAN or SEA dimension of higher education which will attract more international students • Easier to align with other higher education areas in the future • Better understanding in the region
6) **Future Scenarios**	• Students spending a year in a receiving institution/country • Mobility of employment • A multi-cultural workplace • Closer collaboration (knowledge creation and employment) • Students from different countries being offered the same quality of education • More adult learners in the system • Curriculum revision

Pilot Project: Identify Priority Area – Quality Assurance Guidelines

Apart from trying to raise the region's awareness on the overall concept of the harmonisation in higher education, SEAMEO RIHED has also attempted to work on the area where a regional guideline or framework for references and practices could be developed. The issue of quality assurance has always been the main concern of SEAMEO RIHED and is always perceived as the key mechanisms to promote the process of regional harmonisation of higher education. In terms of the player, this region has a wide variety of QA agencies. Regarding the state of regional QA network in Asia Pacific, the key network is 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, the INQAAHE has perceived by many countries in this region as being '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 geographical QA problem and characteristics, the Asia Pacific Quality Network (APQN) was then 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 condition of QA systems in member

countries. Secondly, the APQN network is to assist members in the development of credit transfers, improve mobility and standards of cross-border education activities. Finally, the link between QA agencies and the promotion of interests in this region are also effectively carried out by the network.

AUN-QA is another network at the sub-regional level of which its members are one to three leading universities in each country in ASEAN. At the geographical level, AUN-QA is the first of its kind in trying to establish a sub-regional networking on QA in ASEAN. Their QA objective which has been embraced by the member universities since its inauguration in 1997 was to 'harmonise' and 'create a general guideline' of IQA for its member universities. Recently, the AUN Secretariat has 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. Another QA network in Asia Pacific is under the framework of the Brisbane Communiqué, which 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 the 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 QA framework that is on a par with the international standards. Unlike the ideas behind the European's initiative seen in the Bologna Process which aims at establishing a compatibility and comparability of the QA systems, the Brisbane Communiqué focuses on promoting greater transferability in education cooperation. In order to create the greater transferability in the region, ensuring transparency and mutual trust on the education systems between countries could be accomplished only if the QA systems in the region are better developed.

Looking back to Southeast Asia in the context of the cooperation in QA, the region still possesses a few structural impediments, the most important one being the problem about disparity of QA development. One could not argue differently that the level of disparity of HEIs and QA development in this region is extremely high. It could be said that the current stage of QA development in Southeast 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 national formal mechanism. Half of the countries in the region, including Cambodia (ACC), Indonesia (BAN-PT), Malaysia (MQA), Philippines (AACCUP, PAASCU, etc.), Thailand (ONESQA) and Vietnam (Department of Education Testing and Accreditation) are reported to have national QA systems operated either under the umbrella of the MOEs or partly funded by the government. Although the majority of Southeast Asian countries in this region have already established and developed their national QA mechanism such as Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines, the rest is still in the stage of developing quality assurance infrastructure such as Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR.[15] Such disparity has fundamentally contributed to the inefficiency in developing a formal or common QA cooperation within the region. However, this does not mean that Southeast Asia could not do anything to promote mutual development of QA systems within the sub-region.

Despite the obvious disparity, SEAMEO RIHED has constantly promoted the idea in both governmental and academic venues about the establishment of the sub-regional EQA Networks, either in the GMS or in SEA sub-region. This also includes the proposed actions to

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[15] Singapore is the only country in ASEAN where the government makes use of external QA systems from developed countries and the QA system in education is incorporated within the framework of Ministry of Trade.

establish a subject or discipline-based QA system which could be further developed into a regional pool of reviewers of subject-based QA for HEIs in the region, which can be extended to other countries in Asia Pacific. SEAMEO RIHED has made it our interest to point out the importance of the establishment of *a sub-regional grouping of QA agencies in Southeast Asia* in several academic and official venues. This is to address the lack of a close-knit QA network at sub-regional level, especially the network for sharing and developing experiences among national and EQA agencies. The existing international and regional groupings, the INQAAHE and APQN, are consisted of only a few members from Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand). The AUN-QA now serves only a few leading universities in the region (AUN members) and has been focusing only on IQA at university and institutional level. A network similar to those in Europe or in the Nordic countries, such as ENQA or the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education, with the appropriate number and type of membership, is certainly necessary.

Following our earlier vision, SEAMEO RIHED, in close cooperation with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), has successfully co-organised the 1st ASEAN Quality Roundtable Meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, during 6-8 July 2008. The Meeting has resulted in the **'Kuala Lumpur Declaration'** that recognises the crucial role of quality assurance in promoting harmonisation in higher education and encourages active movement towards the development of quality assurance collaboration and sharing. In this meeting, it was also agreed that the network of quality assurance agencies among Southeast Asian Countries, known as ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) will be established. Within this sub-regional QA network, QA agencies in Southeast Asia will share best practices of quality assurance, develop an ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework, collaborate on capacity building and facilitate recognition of qualifications and cross border mobility and so on. Although the AQAN is still at its embryonic stage, the future prospect of developing a regional QA guideline under the umbrella of the new sub-regional network is fairly promising.

6. Conclusion

Similar to the attempts seriously pursued by many countries in other regions, the moves towards the establishment of a common space in higher education or a deeper level of higher education harmonisation in Southeast Asia may take a fairly good amount of time and resources to accomplish. This paper largely emphasises how globalisation would be the major force in transforming higher education sector around the world and how important it is for ASEAN to start looking out at what other regions have initiated. It clearly shows that the many HEIs and national governments in many parts of the world have already ventured on to tackle the force of globalisation by reforming their higher institutional structure as well as embarked on regional effort in establishing 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 and also by building up a common higher education 'infrastructure' (such as degree cycle, quality assurance guidelines, qualification framework and so on) via the establishment of a common space/area in higher education. The Bologna Process is the model which has been widely observed and adopted by other regions, both by developed and developing countries in many parts of the world. Those experiences in trying to establishing the harmonisation process in other regions including Africa, the Arab states or Central and Latin America, also echo an undeniable fact that the process of harmonisation of higher education

systems within the region and the development of common higher education guidelines are indeed the way of the future. ASEAN cannot afford to be left behind in the journey towards the regional higher education development and the serious discussion and investment on the process must be soon started. They key players in Southeast Asia to be involved in this process are not only national governments, but also other stakeholders including employment sector, the public and also regional and international organisations working towards the betterment of higher education in this region.

That is to say, the current trend that must be taken into account both by national governments and HEIs is not only to increase the level of academic excellence and accessibility as well as to assure the level of quality in higher learning institutions. The most important thing is to take on a far-sighted approach and explore the possibility in promoting higher education cooperation at both the HEIs and between national governments. Equally important, the new understanding about the close relationship between 'knowledge investment' and 'economic prosperity and social cohesion' must be emphasised and thoroughly assessed. Cooperation in higher education, including mobility of manpower both at the level of HEIs and social mobility must be made sustainable. 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 Southeast Asia as well as the establishment of an inter-governmental process which will stimulate the harmonisation of higher education policy. Some mechanisms have already been developed by many key actors and networks in the region, especially in two main areas of quality assurance and mobility promotion. In this respect, SEAMEO RIHED would continue to be the key player to raise the awareness among policy makers and other stakeholders in the region on the importance of this regional concerted effort leading to the future establishment of the 'ASEAN Higher Education Space' and 'Southeast Asian (SEA) of Knowledge.'

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