

*ASEAN Community: Development, Challenge and Change for Thai Higher Education Sector*

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**Abstract**

The emergence of ASEAN has changed and inspired ideas and expectations for Southeast Asian countries in many ways. As small or developing countries, the members of ASEAN need to be together for stronger in the global context. The collaboration and coordination between member countries are frequently mentioned in several aspects, including higher education (HE), in order for developing the region. An important concept announced by ASEAN concerns more attempts to promote higher degree of collaboration among HE sectors within the region. In Thailand, the HE sector was officially founded with the establishment of the first university in 1917. It could be considered as one of the very first HE sectors in the region. At present, there are approximately 160 higher education institutions (HEIs) across the country. Although the number of HEIs in Thailand has increased, the quality of them seems relatively questionable, especially at international level. In comparison to HEIs of other countries in the region such as Singapore, Thai HEIs always receive lower ranks in world rankings more and more. This difference could probably be a crucial challenge for Thai HE sector in order to successfully collaborate or coordinate many tasks with other HEIs from those member countries. Therefore, in my perspective, it is necessary to increasingly pay more attention to Thai HE sector in some aspects, particularly international language aspect, in order to adapt to the rapid changes within the region these days.

Keywords: ASEAN, Higher education, Thailand

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## **Introduction**

According to the development of modern technologies such as information and communication technology (ICT) and transportation technology, the world seems to be reduced and smaller. People can communicate and transport rapidly and conveniently and also they can trade goods and other things better than before. However, people also have to compete to each other in several ways at global scale unprecedentedly. The small countries to some extent have unavoidable disadvantages in terms of international competitions; thus, the ideas of union have occurred in some regions, particularly Europe and Southeast Asia.

Particularly, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which has approximately 630 million population (Aseanstats, 2017), is the third biggest population in the world and a crucial choice to reckon for any potential kinds of collaboration worldwide. Additionally, the GDP per capita of ASEAN is about 4,030 USD (Aseanstats, 2017). The above information might imply that this region has a pivotal role to play at global scale and might be one of the most important players in the near future.

## **The Emergence of ASEAN**

According to the geographic location that is located in between India and China, the Southeast Asian region has been being a crucial gateway for traders and pilgrims travelling between these two civilizations since the ancient days. Therefore, this region has another name, called Indo-China. Nowadays, the ASEAN community, comprised of ten countries, covers the area about 4.5 millions square kilometers (Aseanstats, 2017) including both in the mainland and islands. Due to the increasing political and economic competition worldwide, the Southeast Asian nations seemed to realize several challenges as an individual small country and commenced the notion of establishing a regional integration.

At Saranrom Palace in Bangkok, the formal establishment of ASEAN, called Bangkok Declaration, was signed on 8<sup>th</sup> August 1967 by five representatives of country members, including Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak of Malaysia, Narciso R. Ramos of the Philippines, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore and Thanat Khoman of Thailand (ASEAN, 2018b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). Earlier in 1967, Thanat Khoman, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Thailand at that time, invited his counterparts from other four countries to an informal meeting at Bang Saen district in Chonburi, which probably led to an agreement of ASEAN's inception in Bangkok thereafter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). The declaration aims and purposes to promote collaboration and assistance of common interest in economic, social, cultural, agricultural and industrial, scientific and transport aspects, as well as standard of living of the people in ASEAN (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). After that, five more countries joined ASEAN: Brunei Darussalam in 1984, Vietnam in 1995, Laos and Myanmar in the same year 1997, and Cambodia in 1999 (Office of the Education Council, 2013).

The ASEAN member countries, in 1992, established the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) to increase trade, investment and reduce tax among the members (Office of the Education Council, 2013). Later, the leaders of ASEAN member countries signed

the Bali Concord II, in 2003, for creating the ASEAN Community by 2020 (Office of the Education Council, 2013). The ASEAN Community has 3 main pillars including: (1) ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC); (2) ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); (3) ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) (Office of the Education Council, 2013).

However, it is believed that the establishment of ASEAN was probably influenced by the European Union, which had been launched earlier. Since early 1950s, many countries in Europe attempted to set up regional integration (Cameron, 2010). Constantly, the European Union has been developed and become the best model for other regional integrations worldwide such as African Union (AU), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and also ASEAN (Cameron, 2010). Having said that, there is some difference between EU and ASEAN, which is, for example, an attempt to use the same currency. In ASEAN, the member countries remain using their own currencies and it is still unclear about merging them together at this moment. This probably implies that the EU and ASEAN might have different purposes from their integrations. In my perspective, to some extent, the EU might aim to merge the European countries into one large country as similar as the US, whereas the ASEAN might just prefer to stick together slightly closer than before, in order to have more benefits from economic, political and socio-cultural aspects. Although the objectives of these two regional integrations might be slightly different, the ASEAN frequently sends delegations to EU in order to observe important experience as a model (Cameron, 2010). Particularly, in this article, the education issues which is in the socio-cultural pillar will be discussed in the following sections.

### **Education Cooperation and Development of ASEAN Community**

Since the beginning of establishment, ASEAN has paid attention to education via social and cultural aspects. It started from Bangkok Declaration in 1967 that the education cooperation was mentioned in the item four which is “to provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres” (ASEAN, 2016). Moreover, ASEAN has one of the three main pillars named, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which relates to promote educational cooperation among ASEAN member countries (Office of the Education Council, 2013).

Later in 1992, the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit required the member states to help  
*“hasten the solidarity and development of a regional identity through the promotion of human resource development so as to further strengthen the existing network of leading universities and institutions of higher learning in the region (ASEAN University Network, 2018b)”*.

Thereafter, this notion brought the establishment of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) in 1995 (AUN, 2018b). The AUN arranges activities and programmes to boost and support higher education cooperation and development to increase regional collaboration in accomplishing world standards. The present activities can be divided into five categories: (1) Youth Mobility, (2) Academic Collaboration, (3) Standards, Mechanisms, Systems and Policies of Higher Education Collaboration, (4) Courses and Programmes Development and (5) Regional and Global Policy Platforms (AUN,

2018b). Furthermore, The main focuses of AUN are based on those mentioned by ASEAN to support regional cooperation including: (1) to improve the current network of cooperation between universities in ASEAN and further; (2) to encourage collaborative research, study and educational programmes in the crucial areas mentioned by ASEAN; (3) to encourage cooperation and unity between academics and researchers in ASEAN member countries; and (4) to work as the policy-oriented organization in higher education in the ASEAN region (AUN, 2018b).

In 2009, the Cha-am Hua Hin declaration, which emphasizes on strengthening cooperation on education for developing human resources, indicates the roles of education into three main pillars, including: (1) political and security, (2) economic, and (3) socio-cultural (ASEAN, 2018a). In terms of the political and security aspect, the declaration aims: to promote understanding and appreciation of the ASEAN Charter; to emphasize on the principles of democracy and respect for human right; to realize the different cultures; and to create a school leader's network (ASEAN, 2018a).

For the economic pillar, the declaration aims: to create national skills framework that corresponds and support an ASEAN skills recognition framework; to facilitate better mobility of students and skill workers within the region; to create an ASEAN competency-based occupational standard focused on supporting the development of ASEAN human resources for the needs of industries; and to support the creation of a common standard of competencies for vocational and secondary education for benchmarking based on mutual recognition (ASEAN, 2018a).

Thirdly, in terms of the socio-cultural aspect, the declaration aims: to create a common content on ASEAN for schools including in teacher training and teaching; to provide courses on ASEAN arts and cultures at university level; to provide ASEAN languages as choices for foreign language subjects at school level; to support regional outreach programs emphasized on raising ASEAN awareness amongst the youth; to facilitate broader access of rural communities to quality education; to support life-long learning in ASEAN member nations according to the Education for All (EFA); to create an ASEAN educational research convention to facilitate collaborative research and development within ASEAN; and to approve that ASEAN member nations should share their resources and establish a regional education development fund (ASEAN, 2018a).

### **Higher Education Sectors of ASEAN Country Members**

This part explains general information and details about higher education of each member state of ASEAN by using data from UniRank, an international higher education directory and search engine (UniRank, 2018a). The UniRank includes only the higher education institutions (HEIs) that are recognized by local governments and offered four year undergraduate programs or higher degrees (UniRank, 2018a). Each country is alphabetically presented as follow.

## **Brunei Darussalam**

The first member country is Brunei Darussalam, located at the north-west coast of the island of Borneo. The ASEAN approved Brunei to be a member in 1984. The country size is 5,765 square kilometers, which accommodates about 417,000 population (Aseanstats, 2017). In 2016, the GDP of Brunei was 11,206 million USD. Although the country is not the largest, the adult literacy rate of Brunei is the highest in ASEAN at 97.6% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

At present, there are overall five HEIs in Brunei (UniRank, 2018b). The only university in Brunei that is a member of AUN, is Universiti Brunei Darussalam (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). According to the QS world ranking 2018, the highest ranking university of Brunei is also the Universiti Brunei Darussalam, which is at 349<sup>th</sup> of the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Cambodia**

The second country of this list is Cambodia, which is situated in the Indochinese peninsula, and bordered by neighbor countries such as Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. One of the countries with long history, since Khmer Empire, became the newest member of ASEAN in 1999. In terms of size and population, the country covers 181,035 square kilometers and about 15 million population in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017). Moreover, the Cambodia's GDP was 19,194 million USD at the same year (Aseanstats, 2017). And, the adult literacy of Cambodia was at 78.1% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

In Cambodia, there are now fifty two HEIs in total (UniRank, 2018b). And, two member universities of AUN from Cambodia are (1) Royal University of Phnom Penh and (2) Royal University of Law and Economics (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). None of universities in Cambodia has been ranked in the QS world ranking 2018, but there is one university in the QS data that is Zaman University (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Indonesia**

One of the first five member countries of ASEAN is Indonesia. As the largest country of ASEAN, the size of Indonesia is about 1.9 million square kilometers and the population is around 260 million (Aseanstats, 2017), which makes this country the largest Muslim population in the world (BBC, 2018). Furthermore, the country also has the largest economy in ASEAN according to the GDP at approximately 931,000 million USD in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017). The rate of adult literacy of Indonesia was at 95.9% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

There are 581 HEIs in Indonesia, which is the largest amount of HEIs in ASEAN member countries (UniRank, 2018b). The AUN has four member HEIs from Indonesia including: (1) Institut Teknologi Bandung, (2) Universitas Airlangga, (3) Universitas Gadjah Mada, (4) Universitas Indonesia (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). The highest ranking university of Indonesia in QS world ranking 2018 is the Universitas Indonesia, which is at 277<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Lao PDR**

The next country is Lao PDR, which is a landlocked country in Indochinese peninsula, among by Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Viet Nam and China. Although the GDP of Lao is only 15,903 million USD (Aseanstats, 2017), this country has become one of the fastest growing countries in economy as well as a crucial energy exporter. The area of Lao PDR covers around 236,800 square kilometers, which accommodates about 6.6 million population (Aseanstats, 2017). In terms of the adult literacy rate, Lao has 79% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

According to UniRank, there is only one university in Lao PDR that is National University of Laos, established in 1995 (UniRank, 2018b). Thus, this only Laotian university is a member of the AUN (ASEAN University Network, 2018a).

## **Malaysia**

Another country of the first five ASEAN members is Malaysia, which has two regions separated by the South China Sea. In terms of the size and population, this country covers 331,388 square kilometers and the population is about 31 million (Aseanstats, 2017). As one of the most advanced countries in ASEAN, Malaysia has GDP about 299,632 million USD (Aseanstats, 2017). However, the adult literacy rate of Malaysia was excluded from the source of data used in this article.

In total, Malaysia has forty five HEIs according to the UniRank (UniRank, 2018b). However, there are five HEIs of Malaysia that are members of the AUN including: (1) Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, (2) Universiti Malaya, (3) Universiti Putra Malasia, (4) Universiti Sains Malaysia, and (5) Universiti Utara Malaysia (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). According to the QS world ranking 2018, the highest ranking university of Malaysia is the Universiti Malaya at 114<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Myanmar**

The next country is Myanmar, also known as Burma, which is the largest country in the mainland Southeast Asia and the second largest country in ASEAN. The country is bordered by Bangladesh, China, India, Lao PDR and Thailand. Myanmar covers 676,576 square kilometer area and the population is about 53 million people (Aseanstats, 2017). In terms of the GDP and literacy, this country has 68,636 million USD in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017) and the adult literacy rate was at 95.1% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

There are all 82 HEIs in Myanmar (UniRank, 2018b). Three of them are members of the AUN including: (1) University of Mandalay, (2) University of Yangon, and (3) Yangon University of Economics (ASEAN University Network, 2018a).

## **Philippines**

Another first five members of ASEAN is the Philippines, which consists of more than 7,000 islands, located between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The size of the Philippines is about 300,000 square kilometers, which accommodates about 103

million population (Aseanstats, 2017). In terms of economy and literacy, the country has GDP at 311,453 million USD in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017) and the adult literacy rate was at 90.2% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

Overall, the Philippines has 230 HEIs according to the UniRank (UniRank, 2018b). Moreover, three of them are members of the AUN: (1) Ateneo de Manila University, (2) De La Salle University, (3) University of the Philippines (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). The highest ranking university of the Philippines is the University of Philippines at 367<sup>th</sup> of the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Singapore**

One of the first five country members of ASEAN is Singapore. As a mighty small country, Singapore is an island country, which is situated next to the furthest South of Indochinese peninsula, covering 719 square kilometers and the country has about 5.6 million population (Aseanstats, 2017). In total, Singapore has GDP at 296,977 million USD; however, this country has the highest rate of GDP per capita in ASEAN at 52,963 USD (Aseanstats, 2017). And, the adult literacy of Singapore was at 96.7% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

In Singapore, there are five HEIs in total (UniRank, 2018b) and three of them are members of the AUN, which are (1) Nanyang Technological University, (2) National University of Singapore, and (3) Singapore Management University (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). Recently, the Singapore HEIs have been very successful in world university rankings. According to the QS world ranking 2018, the highest ranking university of Singapore is the Nanyang Technological University at 11<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018). Moreover, the second highest university of Singapore is the National University of Singapore, which is almost high as the highest university, at 15<sup>th</sup> in the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Thailand**

Next, another first five country member is Thailand, which is located in the middle of Indochinese peninsula and bordered by Cambodia, Lao PDR, Malaysia and Myanmar. Thailand's territory covers 513,120 square kilometers and the population is about 67 million people (Aseanstats, 2017). In terms of economy and literacy, the country has GDP at 407,048 million USD in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017) and the adult literacy rate was at 96.1% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

Thailand has 125 HEIs in total (UniRank, 2018b). There are five member universities of the AUN from Thailand, including: (1) Burapha University, (2) Chiang Mai University, (3) Chulalongkorn University, (4) Mahidol University, and (5) Prince of Songkla University (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). In the QS world ranking 2018, Chulalongkorn University is the highest ranking university at 245<sup>th</sup> of the world ranking (QS Top University, 2018).

## **Vietnam**

The last country of this list is alphabetically Vietnam, which is situated at the rightmost of Indochinese peninsula and next to three countries: Cambodia, China and

Lao PDR. The territory of Vietnam covers 331,231 square kilometers which accommodates approximately 92 million population (Aseanstats, 2017). Vietnam is one of the most rapid grown countries in economy and has GDP at 198,196 million USD in 2016 (Aseanstats, 2017). And, the adult literacy rate of Vietnam is 94.7% in 2014 (Aseanstats, 2018).

In total, Vietnam has 65 HEIs according to the UniRank (UniRank, 2018b). Furthermore, the AUN has three member universities from Vietnam, including: (1) Can Tho University; (2) Vietnam National University, Hanoi; and (3) Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (ASEAN University Network, 2018a). Although Vietnam HEIs are excluded from the QS world ranking 2018, but there are twelve HEIs of Vietnam in the QS database (QS Top University, 2018).

### **Development, Challenge and change of Thai Higher education**

According to those agreements from the declarations, particularly the Cha-am Hua Hin in 2009, the Ministry of Education in Thailand developed five new policies including (Chanbanchong, Thongthew, Boonsombuti, & Sangnapabowo, 2015):

- (1) improvement of appreciation and understanding of the ASEAN community, with more focus on the principles of democracy, respect for human right, and peace-oriented value in the school curriculum;
- (2) human resource development with the essential skills to meet the requirements of industries, free trade, and skilled labour mobility;
- (3) setting up ASEAN competency-based occupational standards to promote the mobility of ASEAN school leaders, teachers, and students;
- (4) preparing free flowing education to facilitate the AEC and promoting regional programmes to support ASEAN awareness between the youth;
- (5) and encouraging young volunteers to promote the learning centers in countryside and between indigenous people.

As can be seen, these policies aim to develop several aspects of education sectors in Thailand from school level to university level. In my opinion, for the first two policies, Thai education sector is capable of applying them immediately; however, the third and fourth policies are relatively problematic due to the language barrier. Having said that, the occupational standards and the free flow education will improve the mobility of workforce and academics across the region and develop the regional economy and education rapidly.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, AUN aims to encourage higher education cooperation and development, which can enhance the regional prosperity by exchanging students, university staff and information from research. Particularly, the academic collaboration and higher education institution collaboration have high possibility to rapidly develop the higher education sectors within the region. However, it might be challenging for Thai context due to the language obstacle once again. It could be argued that many Thai academic staff can communicate in English, but it is not the case for the rest staff in general. Furthermore, it would be even more problematic for Thai higher education if AUN in the near future decided to follow the Bologna process of the EU. The Bologna process creates compatible academic degree standards and quality assurance standards across Europe, for example: a European



Credit Transfer System, in order to provide more mobility for students and academic staff throughout Europe (European University Association, 2018).

In addition, another challenge aspect for Thai higher education is the university league tables, which have increasing impact on Thai higher education institutions. The league tables continuously show that the performance of Thai higher education institutions needs to be adjusted if the institutions would like to climb up the ranks. It could be argued that the university league tables are unable to totally represent the genuine quality of the universities, nonetheless they have more impact on the students and the people in general. For Thai higher education institutions, in my experience, they often have less points in terms of research and internationalization. Once again, the obstacle probably relates to language barrier of Thai people in order to cooperate to international context.

Therefore, in my perspective, the language issue in Thai context really needs to be seriously consider as soon as possible. For example, in terms of English language skills, Thailand is ranked fifty-third by the English Proficiency Index, which is categorized as a low proficiency level (English Proficiency Index, 2018). However, the discussion about improving and using English in the Thai context usually ends up with sentences such as: “It is not our mother language why we have to worry”. However, at this moment, it might be unable to say that anymore because the ASEAN officially indicated that English is the medium language for communicate in ASEAN. Thus, Thai people have to consider studying English more practical and effective than ever before. Moreover, some studies have found that using international language is one of the most important issues for Thai higher education to improve in order to develop the quality of the sector (Thupa-ang, 2015).

Notwithstanding, the Ministry of Education (MOE) seems to realize about this international language issue and attempts to find the ways to improve English in all educational levels. For instance, in basic education level, the MOE launched a policy that the schools should add more teaching and learning time for English language. Meanwhile, in higher education level, the MOE suggested that the universities should try to find their own ways or systems in order to improve international language ability for the students. Therefore, some Thai higher education institutions have already responded to this language issue. For example, Suan Dusit University (SDU) has announced that the new students in 2017 must have TOEIC 500 marks in order to graduate from the university. In my view, this is a reasonable example for a quick response to resolve the language problem. As a mid-table university of Thailand, SDU inevitably needs more well-known organization to prove the language ability of the students rather than creates an own new system. Although it remains unclear for the result of this resolution and costs more budget to do so, the university has tried to deal with a long term problem of Thai people, the international language barrier. Having said that, there might be some countries that can use better English than Thailand, but they are still lacks of development. In those cases, they might have distinct factors that need to be study further individually. Nevertheless, in Thai context, the more practical solutions and changes for resolving the language issue remain unclear and need more careful consideration and collaboration from all stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

ASEAN community has brought many advantages in several ways for the Southeast Asian region and its people including: political, economic and socio-cultural aspects. However, in order to well participate and collaborate to each other, people in this region need an international language, which is English for ASEAN, to communicate properly. Especially, in Thai higher education, English becomes increasingly crucial. For instance, the English speaking students can search information for doing their essays via large amount of websites written in English on the internet, but most Thai students can only search relevant information via limited websites written in Thai. Furthermore, there are also many Thai academics, who have limited international language skills and are unable to properly communicate and collaborate with academics from other countries. These examples imply how different quality of education could be among these two kind of people.

In conclusion, therefore, a crucial challenge for Thai higher education is English language ability. And, in my perspective, if Thai people can improve their English skills, the competitiveness of the country and the region will be raised. Moreover, the collaboration among the ASEAN member countries will be more effective and bring more benefit for people worldwide to some extent.

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