THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION PARTNERSHIPS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA TOWARDS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 2030

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the ninth in a series of Policy Briefs published by the EU Support to higher education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE), a seven-year initiative by the EU and ASEAN to support regional integration and boost the quality of higher education systems across Southeast Asia. Through its Policy Dialogue events, SHARE supports the emerging ASEAN higher education space by engaging with universities, policymakers and students.

This Policy Brief summarises the outcomes of Policy Dialogue 14 in March 2022 showcasing the contributions of Southeast Asia partnerships in higher education to support the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2030. The event attracted SHARE's many partners in the higher education sector from across the region and beyond, including representatives of the ASEAN Secretariat, the EU, SEAMEO RIHED, UNESCO, the ASEAN University Network, and many others.

The Policy Dialogue explored how best to promote partnerships between higher education, the private sector and civil society; with the aim of creating collective intelligence on how these stakeholders can work together towards the SDGs. The outcomes of this event fed into the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022) which took place in Barcelona between May 18 and 20, 2022.

This Policy Brief integrates case studies of good practice, as well as the voices of students, to share learnings for creating equitable and successful partnerships towards achieving the SDGs.

Context

The UN Sustainable Development Agenda encompasses 17 goals that provide a common framework for national alignment and international referencing of the goals, as well as data collection and analysis to support and monitor progress. While the SDGs are applicable to all countries, there are different

levels of engagement among different countries in the region.

The SDGs are fundamental to how ASEAN has developed its policies and initiatives for the region, by providing an overarching framework for governments to inform their research priorities and increase public investment accordingly. As an example of SDG-led policy papers in ASEAN, the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) conducted a study capturing the views of ministries of education in Asia and Europe on their policies to enable inclusive access to higher education.

The role of higher education partnerships in the promotion of the SDGs

To enable higher education to support achievement of the SDGs, partnerships with communities, employers, industrial professional bodies, civil society and international organisations are essential in ensuring that learning programmes are globally aligned and build a shared commitment towards the future. International higher education partnerships bring countries together to learn from and empower one another in the common course towards realisation of the goals. They enable both local and global alignment, cross-border mobility to drive engagement in SDG-related projects, and a culture of research in SDG-driven areas. Higher education systems in ASEAN have responded with SDG-focused agendas to integrate the targets into their teaching and learning programmes, research, and social outreach activities. For example, interdisciplinary communities of practice have been established to share learning on addressing the issues pertinent to the achievement of the goals, and training for

faculty staff is being provided to build capacity to integrate the SDGs into teaching practices.

The SDGs are interlinked and partnerships are relevant for all the goals, which means that they can address wider societal issues more efficiently than single organisations. The partnership model allows the mobilisation of more resources and complementary expertise, as well as opportunities for mutual learning and networking through sustained interactions between universities.

The following organisations are building employability in ASEAN through higher education partnerships:

- Generation Thailand works in partnership with other sectors to create decent work and economic growth. They bridge the gap between employers and learners by placing people into otherwise inaccessible careers, emphasising lifelong learning, and maintaining employer engagement across the programme lifecycle from curriculum design through to placement and mentorship. They also work with governments to gain funding and build capacity to expand throughout the country.

- In the private sector, B.Grimm (a large multinational conglomerate) collaborates with Thai universities to develop the new generation workforce.

- Skooldio - a leading educational technology company in Thailand - aims to help individuals master today's most in-demand skills and empower businesses to build the workforce of the future. They are delivering this

through blended learning courses, partnerships with companies to provide free learning content and training programmes, and collaborations with universities to provide a lifelong learning platform.

- Sime Darby Foundation partners with universities across the region to provide scholarships to low-income students, as well as to deliver long-term projects towards achieving various SDGs.

- The Joint Foreign Chambers of Commerce in Thailand partners with schools to realign the mismatch between skills and demand in Thailand through high quality vocational learning. They also work with industries including hospitality to develop sustainability competence through working groups; integrating sustainability goals into business to build a greener and upskilled economy.

- The OKP Climate Proof Vietnam project - an institutional collaboration for HE institutes in Vietnam - focuses on capacity building and collaboration to deliver educational development and research, strategy support and organisational development of the universities. Their community of practice and innovation encompasses government, institutions and SMEs, and is involved in higher education institute collaboration to align the curriculum with market needs. They maintain equitable partnerships through stakeholder consultations throughout the process, and ensure

sustainability through long-term relationships and co-ownership of all activities, outputs and outcomes.

- The Asian Institute of Technologies is a postgraduate institution with the mission to produce qualified graduates who will play leading roles in sustainable development of the region. They partner with international universities to develop student employability for Thailand 4.0 through curriculums and faculty training programmes.

Ensuring sustainable partnerships between higher education institutions, civil society, and the private sector

1. Shared power

The key catalysts for ensuring more sustainability in these partnerships include aligning objectives to work towards the SDGs, by sharing power through equal roles and working towards mutual benefits. This can be achieved through maintaining trust-based internal relations among partners, embedding governance procedures and an appropriate distribution of leadership responsibilities, and engaging wider stakeholders and the community.

Understanding the mutual benefits from partnerships beyond funding helps to create sustainable, equitable value. Ensuring agreement with partners during the planning of projects on mutual contributions and expected outcomes, and sharing power across decision-making tasks, can help to maintain this.

2. Enabling cross-border student mobility

The SHARE Programme has provided students with international study and exchange learning opportunities that enable them to become global citizens and contribute towards the ASEAN region's sustainable development in their working life. These experiences include the development of soft skills and strong regional networks through working with people from diverse backgrounds, as well as understanding of stakeholder collaboration in other regions to work towards sustainable goals.

To ensure that student mobility programmes shape global leaders to create sustainable regions, they must be built on a shared vision and purpose; connect personal objectives to regional goals; maintain collaborative project management; and embed a sustainable leadership mindset.

3. Research-based knowledge sharing

Assessing and Improving the Research Performance at Southeast Asian Universities (REPESEA) is an Erasmus capacity-building project comprising 11 organisations which focuses on developing the research performance of universities in ASEAN. They assess the quality and impact of research, generate transferable research skills training, and cooperate with international partners to exchange knowledge and best practices. Value is gained at the ecosystem level through learning from institutions in other countries, as well as providing innovation in research to governments.

A key challenge in research on the indicators of the SDGs include a lack of infrastructure to collect the data, at both national and regional levels. Cultural norms and differences must also be overcome in defining the measurements in research. Consistent monitoring of progress to maintain momentum during projects is important, while co-financing between countries can help to enable shared power.

How inclusiveness and equity in HE is being addressed at national and institutional levels

The ASEF Education Department contributes to the SDGs through collaborations with higher education institutions to design training and capacity-building programmes, and raise awareness of inclusion and equity in higher education through their communication channels. For example, ASEF conducted a workshop series in collaboration with SHARE to promote the embedding of inclusion in the international activities of ASEAN universities. Their publications provide insights for policymakers and university leaders to highlight risks, opportunities and strategies for inclusion.

At the national level, countries have policies in place to implement inclusive education, such as tertiary education subsidies. Support for disadvantaged groups (including students with disabilities and those from rural areas) is provided through quotas to achieve their participation in higher education, as well as loans and scholarships.

Key challenges and recommendations for building inclusive partnerships in ASEAN higher education

Tackling the lack of data

There are major gaps in understanding equitable access and success in higher

education due to insufficient data on participation by background characteristics. The risk is that inequalities remain hidden because they are simply not known, making it difficult to secure resources both in higher education institutions and from policymakers. The lack of data on students who need specific types of support also limits the ability to make higher education accessible to students with different learning needs.

Advancements in technology are providing opportunities to improve access to and use of data. Higher education institutions should establish systems for data collection to ensure that the right information is gathered, particularly from target groups.

Achieving equitable access for students

Higher education institutions are often aware of the importance of inclusion, but this is not implemented in practice. The main barriers are financial (i.e. financial assistance measures in place to support students are often insufficient), institutional (i.e. the lack of institutional policies within ASEAN member states to accommodate marginalised groups contributes to their exclusion from higher education) and cultural (i.e. there is a general lack of attention to an understanding of the underrepresented groups within higher education). The issue of access needs to be addressed in parallel with the issue of inclusion.

Both top-down and bottom-up strategies can be implemented to choose the right partners for tackling issues of inclusive access to higher education, which could include student associations, the community, and local government units.

Improving student participation in internationalisation activities

There is low participation of ASEAN students in internationalisation activities, particularly among low-income students, due to structural barriers and an absence of an internationalisation inclusion culture within the institution. International mobility programmes can reinforce inequalities by failing to reach those with disadvantages on the basis of gender, disability and ethnicity. Students face additional constraints to accessing international opportunities, including information barriers and programmes being ill-suited to their needs. The source of the problem lies in a lack of basic resources such as funding, English proficiency, digital literacy, and IT infrastructure.

Inclusive international mobility can be enabled through co-funding schemes from national governments and education institutions, international donors, English language courses and basic ICT training prior to the selection of programmes.

The role of international partners in supporting change on the gender equality agenda

Three interconnected issues remain under-explored in the gender equality, equity, diversity and inclusion (GEDI) agenda in ASEAN: equitable access, curriculum transformation, and staff development. While the agenda has been established globally at the macro level, the mandates need to be translated into the regional, national and institutional levels through international collaborations and mobility to remove cultural barriers. Institutions are addressing this agenda through international partnerships,

such as by teaching ASEAN delegates how to promote the localisation of SDGs; providing student summer camps with modules on gender equality; and events, forums and training programmes for marginalised groups.

The main barriers for GEDI initiatives are structural - such as the absence of a coherent regulatory framework and lack of affirmative policies and action within organisations - and cultural - such as state ideology and religion.

Enabling environments for GEDI initiatives in universities across ASEAN can be explored at the macro- (i.e. regional regulatory frameworks), meso- (i.e. institutional policies and programmes in universities that align with GEDI objectives), and micro-levels (i.e. graduates returning to their home institutions and collaborating with international partners to research GEDI topics).

Recommendations for ensuring all voices are heard

1. Implementing GEDI initiatives

There are several GEDI initiatives that could be explored further and mainstreamed into the university structure to enhance GEDI balance. These include research and advocacy on gender and disability; funding for inclusive mobility; and affirmative policies supplemented with scholarships and follow-up assistance to address specific needs and improve equal access to learning. ASEAN higher education institutions should seek alternative forms of internationalisation that are integrated into the curriculum to make it more inclusive and equal.

2. Gender mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming can promote gender equality in higher education through the integration of socio-cultural content in the curriculum, and translating the importance of GEDI issues into the classroom. This can also be achieved through resource allocation, facilities and planning, and the implementation and monitoring of education programmes that build awareness of gender equality as part of justice and human rights.

3. Inclusive leadership

Having an inclusive leadership programme built into any initiative is fundamental to creating more inclusive institutions. Mentorship programmes that nurture equality and inclusion in ASEAN higher education, such as the collaboration between British Council and SEAMEO RIHED, can become systematised to drive institutional change. Investing in mentoring and coaching for GEDI leaders from diverse backgrounds, and promoting inclusive mobility by engaging local GEDI leaders, are also key actions.

Supporting women in science through international partnerships

Research in Europe and ASEAN highlights low representation of women in education and professions particularly within STEM fields, with female participation rates decreasing further up the career ladder. Female researchers especially have faced challenges during the pandemic due to the precarity of contractual roles, with those in early career stages notably battling the tension between starting a family and achieving career advancement.

The European Commission's Gender Equality Plan is a mandatory requirement for public bodies, research organisations, and higher education institutions. It sets targets and actions to address five key areas:

- work-life balance and organisational structure culture
- gender balance
- leadership and decision-making
- gender equality in recruitment
- career progression.

The European Commission also provides funding opportunities and postdoctoral fellowships to support gender-balanced innovation.

The challenges of encouraging the involvement of more women in science can be even more pronounced in the ASEAN context due to historical background, social norms and stereotypes. ASEAN launched the Gender Mainstreaming Strategic Framework, proposing an implementation of gender equality commitment by member states. This includes disseminating sex aggregated data, undertaking gender analysis to inform policymaking, assessing the contribution of women, and encouraging participation in decision-making.

Organisations in the region are contributing to this agenda through partnerships. These include the Marie Curie Alumni Association - supported by the European Commission - which investigates and raises awareness around inequalities, and develops solutions for equity and diversity by acting as an intermediary between researchers, policymakers and decision-makers.

Recommendations for achieving gender equality in research and innovation

1. Providing different levels of support

There is a need for both institutional change and national action plans to provide support for the implementation of the gender equality plan - by addressing current systems' ability to provide equal access to opportunities, as well as policies. The disparate challenges at various stages in women's careers need to be addressed: from the recruitment of female students particularly for STEM subjects in higher education, to ensuring the successful completion of their studies and transition to an academic career path, and finally their retention of a job in the field and progression into leadership roles. In the workplace, policies to tackle gender bias can include reviewing selection criteria and ensuring diversity in review panels and hiring committees.

2. Inclusive partnerships

Gender equality policies should take into account intersectional factors and inclusiveness between different regions and partners, such as looking at sectoral inclusiveness to better involve the private sector and innovation partners. There is also a need to ensure geographical inclusion by involving all countries in the process, and mainstreaming the global approach through international cooperation.

The future role of higher education partnerships in achieving the SDGs

While there is an evidence base gap and lack of progress on many indicators to achieve the SDGs in ASEAN, there have been many good practices and initiatives by various sectors. The

main challenges include equipping young people to be job-ready; the quality of learning, teaching and research; and the practicality of partnerships in facing quality assurance and continuity challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Higher education partnerships can improve their contribution to the sustainability agenda through the following actions:

1. Improving student awareness of SDGs through implementing different forms of student partnerships. These can include capstone projects which provide exposure to real-world problems and enable disruptive thinking.

2. Concentrating partnerships in a particular field to create a community of practice and subject matter collaborations.
3. Collaborations between multiple stakeholder groups including other institutions, industry, organisations, and the community.
4. Investing in researcher capacity-building and multidisciplinary research programmes.
5. Creating inclusive partnerships with structure and shared vision.
6. Building understanding of what the SDGs mean in local contexts.
7. Generating comparable data to drive collective intelligence and actions.

SHARE POLICY DIALOGUE 14'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE UNESCO WHEC2022

The following recommendations are made for higher education partnerships to promote the wellbeing of humans and sustainability of societies:

1. There is a need for more synergy among stakeholders within higher education partnerships to driver greater human and social impacts. These partnerships should look beyond socio-economic development outcomes while respecting diversity within the region and staying future relevant. This requires the articulation of shared goals and a common purpose among partners, as well as embedding the SDGs within the foundations of new projects while maintaining understanding of mutual benefit.

2. The future role of higher education partnerships must be more representative and equitable through multidisciplinary collaboration and a diversity of voices, to help ensure that regional challenges are met with an inclusive, innovative response.

3. There needs to be a universal understanding of the SDGs across communities and their stakeholders, with articulation that the global goals can be addressed at local levels.
4. A key challenge for higher education partnerships to achieve the SDGs is the gap in data availability, which affects the possibilities for generating awareness, research, and evidence-based policy and actions. Deeper understanding of data is also required to build student mindsets of lifelong learning and solve future global challenges.

5. Greater consensus among partners, higher education institutions, governments, and learners is required to create alignment with a unified vision. To facilitate this process in Southeast Asia, there is a need for integrated structures at the regional level to drive international cooperation, challenge fixed mindsets, and engender a sense of belonging on a regional scale among all stakeholders.

6. To ensure inclusivity and equitable access for all learners and stakeholders, there must be improved awareness of the SDGs throughout the higher education sector. This will involve breaking down barriers between disciplines and co-creating programmes with a variety of flexible learning options. Streamlining processes for student mobility, and co-designing multidisciplinary projects for learners to gain competencies they desire, will help to expand learning opportunities for a wider and more diverse audience.

7. Despite the resource requirements to empower higher education institutions and stakeholders and overcome the numerous challenges, the Southeast Asia region should learn from disruption to chart a new course towards a more sustainable future.

PREVIOUS SHARE POLICY BRIEFS (AVAILABLE AT WWW.SHARE-ASEAN.EU)

Policy Brief 1 – Towards Greater Harmonisation of Higher Education in ASEAN. May 2016.
Policy Brief 2 – Enhancing Internationalisation in ASEAN: Credit Transfer Systems and Student Mobility. October 2016.
Policy Brief 3 – Towards a Shared Understanding of Quality Assurance: Policy Recommendations for Implementing a Regional QA Framework in ASEAN. January 2017.
Policy Brief 4 – Degree Structures and the Harmonisation of Higher Education in the ASEAN Region. February 2017.
Policy Brief 5 – Making National Qualifications Comparable Across ASEAN: The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework. May 2017.
Policy Brief 6 – Studying Abroad, Becoming ASEAN: Regional Student Mobility As a Driver of the ASEAN Community. August 2017.
Policy Brief 7 – Capitalising on ASEAN: Internationalisation Strategies for CLMV Universities. December 2017.
Policy Brief 8 – Boosting ASEAN Student Mobility: Towards a Comprehensive Approach in Credit Transfer. August 2018.