

Part II: Challenges in the institutional context of EU-Asian academic collaborations

3. Recognition of Qualification in the Asian Region

Nantana Gajasen, PhD
Executive Director of ASEAN University Network (AUN)

In the globalisation era, it is important for higher education institutions to address emerging challenges by forging cooperation and building partnership. To forge such cooperation, the first essential step is to establish a framework of recognition of qualifications, especially at the inter-regional level. This process requires cooperation in establishing quality assurance systems and credit transfer systems that enhance academic exchanges and mobility issues. Sharing good practices will create a pool of knowledge in terms of academic cooperation which in turn will further the chance to cooperate successfully and sustainably.

Introduction

Thanks to globalisation higher education institutions, and universities in particular, the world over, are under pressure to become autonomous in terms of administration and financial management. Even today, academic freedom is highly essential in order to achieve not only international recognition for quality but also to realise the full potential of a higher education institution.

The major challenges are how to overcome all the different constraints in the Asian region.

- How is recognition organised in the Asian region?
- What are the main bodies?
- Who are the main actors?
- What helps develop good practices?
- How do we build trust in quality recognition between the EU and Asian region?

In developing and strengthening cooperation and partnership in higher education across regions, the recognition of qualifications has become the important aspect. It can be said that the recognition of qualifications is the first step towards achieving international partnership in higher education. To accomplish this goal, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed, including development of national and international qualification frameworks, quality assurance systems, credit transfer systems and academic mobility issue, for example.

As a result of globalisation, there is an increasing trend in the flow of academic and student movement across borders. International validity of qualifications recognition is of importance in taking this growth into a desirable level as well as in preventing

misinformation which may have serious implications for students and academic staff. What is needed is the issue of equivalence of qualifications obtained from different countries. Taking this point further, it also has implications for cross-border employment as employers need to be informed of and recognise quality of qualifications of prospective employees regardless of the country where these have received their academic degrees.

3.1. Globalisation and regionalisation in international collaboration

The advent of the globalisation era has made access to information and the movement of peoples much easier and has increased the high competitive environment of the educational sector. This is only one of the various aspects of higher education in present day. It is evident that while globalisation may benefit higher education in many ways with the help of ICT technology, developing and less developed countries may lag behind as a result of the fact that they are less equipped to grasp the opportunities available. This turns the issue to the question of the development gap between regions or countries.

Nevertheless, globalisation can be seen as the driving force of fostering cooperation between higher education institutions in responding to the increasing demands of our post-industrial economy which requires specialised skills and/or disciplines suitable for today's interdependent world. Academic staff and students are able to move to countries that can meet their aspirations. Therefore, a country would need to adjust its policy to meet the changes and projected mobility in a globalised world which, in turn, lead to educational cooperation based on recognition of qualifications. Thus, the region/ country that is well-equipped within a multinational environment and standardised quality framework will attract a higher calibre personnel and this will undoubtedly benefit the region/country as a whole. To achieve this requires international collaboration in higher education.

When looking at the different angles, developing countries may resist this phenomenon and seek alternative ways to adjust to the changes. As I have said, the less-equipped countries would benefit less from opportunities arising from the advent of a globalised world. In this regard, regionalisation could become a trend that is more suitable for such countries. Higher education is often characterised by a core and peripheral character where traditional leading universities, often in developed countries, are the core and the others are seen as the peripheries. The situation is exacerbated by this ongoing trend as a result of various factors including brain drain adversely affecting the peripheries especially in terms of the loss of opportunity to develop their institutions, faculties and human resources.

Regionalisation may favour the marginalised region in terms of higher education. This is because it is more suitable for those who do not have the right capacity for structural adjustment and it can attract foreign investment as the region integrates into the whole which, in turn, reacts positively on the reformation processes and development, including the increase of exchanges, participation, contributions in regional education to withstand the competitiveness of a globalised world.

In short, regardless of the globalised or regionalised frameworks, universities would need to prepare and adjust themselves to the transnationalising trend and embrace the challenges through international education collaboration. The development gap is one of the major

concerns needing urgent attention as the world of education needs the spirit of partnership which allow various regions to grow and develop together.

3.2. Recognition of Qualifications in Asia

Region-wide recognition of qualifications is evidently an essential step both in developing academic standardisation and further academic collaboration towards partnership as can be seen by the striking example of the Bologna Process. When one addresses the issue of recognition of qualifications in the Asian region, despite efforts to push forward for developing a qualification recognition framework, there is still much to be done.

As far as higher education in Asia is concerned, a number of limitations in promoting recognition of qualifications as the first step towards academic partnership exist. Massification of higher education has become the trend in responding to the demands of rising service industries and the knowledge-based economy. While massification of higher education can benefit the public in terms of access to education, the ability to maintain a well-balanced scale regarding quality is viewed with caution, especially in developing countries. The dilemma between providing access and ensuring high quality poses one of the major challenges which in turn compels one to re-address the standardisation of education at a national level.

The issue of a national standard of higher education in many Asian countries poses a major challenge. The implementation of a quality assurance framework across Asia is not yet fully developed. There are many factors contributing to this, including low performance in domestic economy which leads to a limitation of resources, a relatively inadequate infrastructure, policy failure in prioritising the education sector and a lack of human resources.

There are attempts to establish and forge cooperation in qualification recognition in Asia. The multilateral framework can be seen through the various UNESCO initiatives in establishing a qualifications recognition framework. Also, some bilateral frameworks are evident in some cases such as Thailand and China who have concluded an agreement on mutual recognition of academic degrees in higher education. Nevertheless, in order to develop Asian-wide qualifications recognition fully, it is the national-level that needs to be addressed.

As mentioned, quality assurance on the national level is of importance in establishing regional qualification recognition. A quality assurance framework is the first step towards region-wide recognition of qualifications as this ensures the standard of each higher education institution in a country. A good example can be drawn from the experience of a number of countries such as Australia. Australia has established a set of national quality standards, Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000, requiring each institution seeking to open for international enrolment to meet these qualifications. This is to ensure the standardisation at the national level. Together with this, there is also the Australian Qualifications Framework which serves as a qualification recognition system to ensure the attainment of recognition of the Australian educational system from overseas governments.

This system can serve as a preliminary step towards further international collaboration and makes it feasible to proceed with academic partnership with other countries.

In the case of Southeast Asia, in particular, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) is focusing on the harmonisation of higher education quality among the leading university members in 10 ASEAN countries. The highlight of AUN activities is “AUN-Quality Assurance” which has been developed and has stimulated the quality assurance system by setting up the priority of programme assessment such as engineering, business and economics. However, unquestionably, the majority of countries still need a more effective quality assurance system nation-wide. To be sure, there are elite universities in the Asian region. Currently, they are few in number and the step towards standardisation in quality, albeit promising, remains unsatisfactory, especially in the poor countries. The next section will explore some options which could foster the growth of Asian higher education towards the prospect of inter-regional collaboration.

3.3. Moving towards partnership

There is room for improvement in reducing development gap in the Asian region. Sharing good practices among higher education institutions in the Asian region is one of the most promising strategies in achieving academic improvement and international collaboration. Higher education institutions may work together and conduct exchanges in various areas where cooperation is possible. By doing this, it, in turn, would allow the cooperating institutions to learn from each other’s experiences. This would help create a pool of knowledge in developing a higher standard of education sectors among the cooperating parties which would consequently help strengthen the academic cooperation so as to allow the less resourceful institutions to grow together with the better equipped ones and thus reduce development gaps in the educational sector in different countries.

Another equally important point in building partnerships is mutual trust building. Mutual trust may come from quality recognition which would bring about the foundation of mutual respect as an equal partnership. This may be done by promoting co-peer quality assessment. Building trust and the promotion of recognition can be seen in various academic collaborations including credit transfer between two regions, establishing of joint programme / curriculum development. Also, this would need to take into account the facilitation of student and academic staff mobility and employability. Several research collaborations could help achieve this element such as establishing a research area between two regions with strong financial support both at governmental level such as ASEM Scholarship or EU-Asia Scholarship and at higher education institutional level such as EU-Asia Research Consortium. Valuable experiences may be learned through the promotion of university-industry partnerships which would bring together a high quality education that also serves the needs of the labour market in both regions.

Inter-regional collaboration can also benefit from seeking possible synergy. Both joint quality assurance and accreditation programmes would help promote inter-regional dissemination of ideas, best practices and knowledge. Also, it would promote the standardisation of procedures that would consequently support the strengthening inter-regional collaboration.

In addition, it would provide networking opportunities both for practitioners and policy makers.

In short, the key success factors in inter-regional academic collaboration for forging academic partnership should be based on constructive mutual trust with a sound understanding of each other's backgrounds. A series of quality assurance and accreditation programmes should help build and strengthen recognition of qualifications which also brings about a better understanding and mutual trust. Additionally, strong operational plan and policy support as well as agreement on clear mutual and equal sharing of benefit should be taken into account. Hence, the recognition of qualifications would be the basic foundation to build inter-regional collaboration. Then, the process would be able to take a step further with all the required elements in trust building and mutual respect in place in order to forge a strong academic partnership.

3.4. Role of ASEAN

ASEAN is moving towards a prospective ASEAN community strengthening a multi-dimensional cooperation which includes higher education. ASEAN University Network (AUN) has served as the educational nexus cooperating in the higher education sector at both intra- and inter-regional levels. The solid experiences in bringing about recognition of qualifications in ASEAN higher education can be seen in various programmes including AUN-Quality Assurance which actively engages a number of universities / higher education institutions in ASEAN. Also, ASEAN Credit Transfer programme is another promising feature in promoting intra-regional collaboration which in turn would facilitate mobility among students and faculty staff.

AUN has been moving towards internationalisation in both intra- and inter-regional cooperation. In this regard, AUN has forged partnership among universities in ASEAN as well as dialogue partners including China, Korea, Japan and the EU through a series of academic collaborative programmes. In particular, experiences in forging partnership between ASEAN and the EU can be drawn from the various network initiatives and partnership projects under ASEAN-EU University Network Programme (AUNP) during 2000 – 2006.

Key success factors in AUN's partnership programmes are drawn from various points. Firstly, the vision towards internationalisation is the main strategy in forging partnership. This also includes the identification of potential synergies with the partners. Compatibility between partners' strategic plans and mutual complementarities are also another contributing factor. Resource availability and financial stability is another vital element in promoting sustainable partnership. Last but not least, the partnership programme should correspond to policy support at the government level.

AUN can not only serve as a hub of higher educational cooperation in ASEAN, but also has potential to emerge as the core of quality recognition in the Asian region through its long experience and success in academic collaboration and inter-regional partnership programmes.

Conclusion

In forging international academic collaboration, although the Asian region still in a fledgling stage in pursuing the recognition of qualifications, there have been enormous efforts and ongoing projects to strengthen this area with the aim of fostering inter-regional partnerships. From ASEAN perspective, AUN has strong potential to become the educational cooperative nexus not only in ASEAN but also in the Asia-wide region. Together with the experiences and strong commitment in promoting higher education, quality assurance and credit transfer programmes have been established in order to achieve the recognition of qualifications as the foundation leading towards mutual trust building between the regions.

The Asian region has witnessed strong cooperation in the academic realm through various partnership and collaborative programmes. Continuing in this direction, Asia will emerge as one of the attractive partners in building strong cooperation of equal partnership globally. Determined efforts in strengthening qualification recognition is vital for Asia to move forward as this will allow educational improvement at the national level as the basis for international level, both intra- and inter-regional. With the strong basic foundation attained from this direction, the region should have a bright future in forging inter-regional partnerships and this should benefit the whole region through the high quality in education in the globalised world.