

Education in Southeast Asia: Shaping the Asian Intellectuals

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ABSTRACT

With the view that the quality of human resource is the greatest transformational asset, the education of the Asian region strives in building a critical mass of k-economy citizens. Stimulating the educational system to move toward this direction resonates the seriousness of Asian institutions in seiving their traditions, overcoming their intricacies, and embracing uncertainties with positive anticipation. The presence of a critical mass of academics postulates the urgency of changing organizational needs, and correspondingly increasing their absorptive capacity as they respond to the intense competitive pressures being generated by an increasingly global economy. This paper explores the transitional changes the education system have rendered to boost regional integration. More specifically, it highlights the initiatives higher education institutions have adapted as they align their development thrusts to regional and national expectations. Likewise, it challenges local intellectuals to develop a macro perspective of flexibility while the changing educational priorities converge toward acceptable global practice.

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1. Introduction

The Southeast Asian countries share the same vision of development. The ten member countries, namely: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam chart a combined population approximately 540 million, a remarkable pool of intellectuals. Each country carries distinct features in terms of culture, socio-economic level, political philosophies and literacy development. The ASEAN provides a platform where deepening regional integration and global connectedness as regional imperatives are achieved. Expanding the ASEAN platform, however, demands bridging the development gaps which by default, begins with quality human resource. cursory review of their national development agenda reveals that developing a human knowledge economy is the country's core transformational strategy.

Experts argue that global changes continue to threaten human resource management requisites in organizations (William, 1994). It is the same force that propels the workforce to strengthen its transformative capacity. Due to internationalization, transnational responsiveness has become valuable development strategies among nations and the Asian communities are no exception (Marginson, Kaur & Sawir, 2011). As the Asian region integrates and harmonizes more fully into the global system, each member nation will rely more and more on its human talents; hence shaping the Asian intellectuals becomes an inevitable force for the region to forward its endeavors (Newsweek, 2010; ASEAN 2017). Transformation and globalization remains the offshoot of a fast-paced and complex fusion of interconnected initiatives; the academics as purveyors of innovation upscale their foundational competence in order for them to meet the requirements of hyper-competitive markets. This paper expounds that the changes in the Asian education system manifest regional intensity to orbit the global sphere, and that this intensity urges the heightened transformation of intellectuals in the academe.

2. Emerging regional hubs and globalizing systems

Educational initiatives are the offshoots of globalization. As countless strategic responses toward national transformation took place in higher education institutions (Marginson et al., 2011), the reframing of the 'regional hubs' concept has emerged. Singapore and Malaysia codified the vision of developing their states as regional hubs. In Singapore, its adapted a comprehensive educational review and reform its higher

education system; introduced in different phases of reforms in adherence to international consultancy reports; and improved institutional governance through pro-competition policy instruments and transnational higher education expansion (Mok, 2008). In Malaysia, education provides clear cut directives under the six thrusts of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan (NHESP) 2007-2020 – all designed in transforming the country into a regional education hub (Abd Aziz et al., 2011). Also, the Ministry of Higher Education crafted the internationalization policy (MOHE, 2011), providing a broader leeway for institutions to leap forward their transnational potentials. Notably, the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) which was used to frame the regional development of quality assurance collaboration and sharing known as ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) is Malaysia's significant contribution in unifying the ASEAN organization. Despite current political and economic contingencies, Singapore and Malaysia remains the 'global village' showcase for their country counterparts. Brunei Darussalam, their small but rich country neighbor stood firm in its quest to internationalize its system. For so long, the country has partnered with and accommodated prestigious universities, thus advanced practices in education proliferate the system. Investment to further the quality of education in Brunei remains impressively high.

Also, Thailand is pulsated as a potential regional hub. The Bangkok Post of February 2017 expressed the projection that Thailand's educational constraints would be relieved tremendously when its massive infrastructure projects have been optimized. Also, Thailand's 4.0 Economic Master Plan envisages a competitive workforce whose skills are critically aligned with national economy and global thrusts (OECD, 2015). The same vision intends to spur innovative schools and universities into world-class institutions. For higher education institutions, priority initiatives propel capacitation of the future workforce and in doing so translates programs and activities that leverage functional literacy, increase the share of the top-performing students in the laborforce, allocate investments in research and development, and expand the countries technological absorption capacity. In short, Thailand 4.0 plan envisions highly-skilled workers who can make the nation a high-income economy state. Thailand institutions recreate flexible programs, adopt technology-driven delivery programs, institutionalize much sophisticated ways of learning and teaching, and engage greater autonomy in governance.

Compared to Thailand, Indonesia charts vast but untapped resources and latent potentials. The 2017 report of the London-based Times Higher Education (THE) university rankings has forwarded positive projections that Indonesia alongside Malaysia and Thailand could become a leading educational hub in Asia. The fourth-largest continent and fourth largest educational system in the world, Indonesia covers a very diverse ethnic and cultural linguistic groups. With 4 438 HEIs- all geographically distributed within the regencies of the country, human differences and social variation are immense. As cited in the 2014 Indonesian Ministry of Education Report, the erratic levels of development led to the stratification of higher education institutions according to the range of autonomy and quality status paved institutional alignment with world-class status. As one of the emerging economies of the world and holding the largest resource pool of potential skilled workers and professionals in the region, Indonesia must relentlessly innovate and capacitate its educational system.

In the Philippines, the number of private higher education institutions and students enrolled is greater than the public or state universities. With the 2017 government free tuition policy, education has become more accessible, and inclusive especially to students from low-income families. Its educational outlook sees functional reforms that match national and global requirements with goal-driven outcomes that boost socio economic mobility, system alignment with international standards, open pathways in higher education, and strong support to R&D. All these are done in the attempt to elevate the profile of the academic community and generate short- and long-term benefits to the country. A significant milestone, the Philippine K to 12 Program which took effect in 2012 set the comparability of education with the rest of the world, and rationalises the desired competency levels of the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF) with that of the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf). Guided by transnational education framework, the system has commissioned autonomous institutions to build partnerships and networks with regional and international bodies. Cambodia, Vietnam, Myanmar and Laos are underway rebuilding their educational systems and reportedly, majority of the national initiatives centered toward structural reforms approximating the emergent needs and demands of stakeholders (UNESCO, 2015). It is worthnoting that their past domestic histories left a big dent to the societal growth and development of the education, particularly the higher education institutions. For survival, their academic ecosystems fend much on government investment, so meager that seeking support and initiating partnership from external and foreign bodies becomes an alternative strategy. Compounding this reality is heaped upon the scarcity of visionary leaders and the non-readiness of the academics. For a more detailed discussion, the educational status of these four ASEAN nations will be presented in the succeeding discussion.

Cambodia's educational vision-mission in 2030 decries its commitment to raise the quality of higher education system that bolsters human excellence befitting the challenges of globalization (UNESCO. 2015). A critical look into the higher education plan points to the progressive unfolding of the VMGO into the articulation of strategies and activities from national to the school plans. Building the monitoring system and continues documentation of programs using the Higher Education (HE) framework was highlighted as well. To support the Ministry's 2030 vision, the government created the Supreme National Council of Education as an overseer of the 2014-2018 national plan implementation and HE 2030 vision, respectively. All these initiatives shows Cambodian education changing orientation in improving its internal systems and operations and organizing the entire system toward quality and relevance, access to advanced higher education programs, and good governance.

Vietnam's aspiration to become a vibrant middle-income economy requires a societal transformation. Since the last decade, its education has been pushing structural reforms and rationalizing resources to alleviate domestic conditions. Because the country is one of the most open economies in the world, expanding regional and global opportunities which means furthering its international presence is an advantage. Consequently, the government started the **UniBridging delivery platform, an alternative feature of Transnational Education (TNE). This delivery mode connects the institutions with noted universities worldwide, enabling stakeholders expand networks and access support.** While it is true that UniBridging is considered a global touchbase, only a few institutions claimed they benefitted from it. This evidence places access to tertiary education exclusionary. In the workplace, the increasing sophistication turned out more as a display of incompetence and employment gap. Current issues such as poor quality and irrelevant programs, knowledge and skill mismatch, and loose regulatory guidelines for providers turned out deterrents for institutions to move their aspirations higher. It is thus arguable that if Vietnam's commitment to further its economic status stems from a series of transformation, then a massive integration of its social agencies is a must.

Myanmar's Higher education is an important sector of government reform. MOE Higher Education controls 66 of the 163 higher learning institutions. With the urgent desire to help rebuild the country, MoE has acceded much from its foreign allies for support and assistance. The flow of support paved the establishment of Myanmar International Higher Education Association (MIHEA), the training provider for effective international activities (e.g. exchange ideas & network) and promote international education in and outside the country. It is worth noting that national quality assurance is still underway and in aid of putting the education reform agenda in place. In aid of the process, the government recently has created the National League for Democracy (NLD) with the aim of building Myanmar's 21st century education system as the upper-middle-income nation by 2030. It is posited that if Myanmar will reap gains in its transitions and optimizes its economic potentials, the country calls for a much higher educated workforce. Thus, the higher education institutions seek quick wins and long-term solutions to upgrade the quality of education and services they render.

Laos has also been strengthening its higher education to meet regional and international standards as expressed in its 2013 IIE Report. Its educational system has expressed great concern over status of higher education, which to date, is still plagued with interrelated conditions such as weak leadership and administration, outdated curricula, irresponsive industries, relatively inexperienced teaching force, obsolete learning and teaching devices, lack of pedagogical and research training, low post graduate entry qualification of faculty, incompetent and unskilled graduates, and budget allocation deficit demand a drastic change in the system as. In response, the Sector on Higher Education Program in 2016 (SHEP) was then commissioned to carry out strategies that advanced HEIs status level. Falling to meet the Asia quality standards, Lao PDR through its SHEP is bridging the gaps in the aspects of educational access, quality and relevance of services, professional development of the teaching force, relevant programs, and good governance.

Southeast Asian education is undergoing complex transition. The adoption of the regional hub concept and the adaption of globalized features depict a flourishing state of education in the region. More than ever, higher education institutions are continuously morphing into contemporary institutions, the features of which are akin to world ranking quality institutions, international accreditation and partnership, adaption of internationalized curriculum programs, provision for upgraded years in formal education, transnational education, and competency alignment. To this end, this movement signals the emergence of a new breed of Asian intellectuals.

3. Shaping the Asian intellectuals

The Asian diaspora has gone boundless, endless and seamless following the trend of globalization. Anywhere in the world today, there thrives an Asian who, in the process, has developed a complex legacy of insularity. The Asian lived experiences, cultural differences, political subordination, and social movements emerge

normative issues that have been changing the conditions of society (Yancy & Kim, 2015). Globalizing intellectuals their responses to varied policy shifts the Asian institutions tremendously (Shattock, 2010). Looking into the various trajectories of systemic transition, the practitioners stand centerfold. Playing multiple roles, practitioners display more critical views in their work and increasingly, they broaden their perspectives. They are the intellectuals who respond with immediacy, process unprecedented contingencies, and catalyze organizational traditions. It is then safe to argue that shaping local intellectuals into global practitioners is a difficult phenomenon to define and understand.

Given the current political and economic conditions of the region, higher education institutions would undergo varied and erratic levels of development. The countries which have been devastated with long standing civil unrest, political upheavals, and unprecedented calamities would rely much on government and foreign assistance while the countries which enjoy stable and vast resources would generate opportunities for transnational cooperation and networking. To the intellectuals, these are seen as vantage points of flexibility. For the institution, engagement and enhancement- the product of local and global fusion serves the system a multi-level exposure to local to the global spheres. It has been argued that renewed human thoughts and organized ways of doing configure through active experience, experimentation (Kolb, 1984) and sooner creative production and social formation begin to emerge (Islam, Zatman, & Islam, 2014). Here, sophisticated levels of thinking develop. This is to say that any form of initiative that governs and builds the academic lives of practitioners form part in shaping their intellectual resilience. Despite variation in institutional though The impact local context local context pummels a 'live' ecosystem to go through transitions of change.

Within the same vein, the Asian intellectuals are drawn to approximate their attributes to global expectations and indices, thereby drawing the line for participating institutions to sieve and raise the bar for practitioners before they can legitimately engage in international cooperation activities. While policymakers and educationists frequently consider education as a key driver in Southeast Asia's success, the wide spectra of regional variation in educational development takes little account of the idea that organizational traditions and practices can impede further development unless they are similarly filtered and rationally clarified (Halligher, 1998). Multi-level transitions demand congruency of practices. This simply requires a display of multicultural competences viewed as a way of thinking, an orientation, a concurrency of multi-level transitions however trigger practitioners to display play multiple roles. When they are confronted with rich, diverse and challenging opportunities, practitioners display intuitive and creative ways of doing. As practitioners move toward global practice, their level of competence and autonomy more and more deviates from the mandated view of professional practice.

As education systems move from the conventional state to the international sphere, higher education institutions tend to assume that the faculty resonates the desired intellectual dispositions. It is a conditioning assumption making practitioners responsible for themselves as they transit mindsets, overcome intricacies, and embrace uncertainties calls for a conscious reinterpretation of leadership in managing and leading a globalized context. If any, newer dimensions of optimum use of local resources and expertise cultivate focused-initiatives fit for the local, national, and global functions (Chirico, 2014). Thus, all institutions shape into responsive and well-developed systems featuring not only the local initiative but also approximating their quality based on global standards. Initiatives such as program accreditation, ISO, center for excellence, and world rankings put higher education institutions into social scrutiny and critical evaluation, a compelling transition where the informed choices of stakeholders influenced by global labels and brands become internal priority concerns. These initiatives confirm that Asian HEIs orbit globally.

On a personal level, practitioners strive to bring in new dimensions of practice as they blend their ethno-cultural attributes and global stance (Abeysekera, 2007). For instance, the hassle-free movement of talented workers within the region does not only elevate professional competence but also strengthen regional economy and global positioning. Collective reasoning commences that macro flexible mindset starts to flourish when the Asian intellectuals approximate the international profile index, engage in mobility programs exchange, work for degree comparability through similar degree cycle and qualifications, engage in activities related to quality assurance, lifelong learning, or credit transfer system (Matzler & Abfalter, 2013). From an analytical lens, shaping the Asian intellectuals with a reference to the country's competitive edge in international markets stand as a primary driver and a collective reason why educational reforms are considered strategic regional imperatives.

In conclusion, changing priorities locally and converging practices globally (Morrisey, 2012) load the current initiatives of higher education. As institutions remain responsive to the needs of global audiences, organizational tensions and uncertainties continue to build up. To mitigate this systemic concern, higher

education requires global strategies to effect new patterns of workforce behavior and to enhance appreciation of the dynamics of change in which two or more national cultures are involved. (Lane, Spector, Osland, & Taylor, 2014). It is thus realistic to argue that a shift from centrally-mandated practices to inclusive-oriented and inter-cross region practices can develop the system's capacity for continuous innovation and bolster the reflective mindsets of Asian intellectuals.

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