

Harmonizing Higher Education at the Regional Level: The Case of ASEAN and the Philippines

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Abstract

Education is in the heart of Southeast Asia's quest for equitable human development throughout the region. This has never been more pronounced than when the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) formed the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) in 2003, ushering in a number of regional directives and initiatives to harmonize higher education among ASEAN member states. Yet, the process has not been easy due to fundamental differences in higher education structure, quality, and processes among member countries. In light of this, the study traced the institutional arrangements and policy responses that have taken place at both regional and national levels in pursuit of integrating higher education in the region. First, it reviewed the key mechanisms that ASEAN has established to foster harmonization. It then discussed the experience of the Philippines in relation to the three components of harmonization, namely, qualifications framework, quality assurance, and credit transfer. It showed that while the government has shown sufficient response to its regional obligations through legislation and administrative issuances, it needs to do much more to show its commitment and ensure involvement of all higher education institutions in the integration process.

Keywords: higher education policy, Philippines, ASEAN integration, harmonization of higher education

1. Introduction

A great deal of importance has always been placed on higher education's capacity to foster growth and contribute to regional development. In 2002, a World Bank report underscored the critical role of tertiary education in the construction of knowledge economies and building democratic societies (Peters and Besley, 2006). In Asia, Altbach (2004) echoed the same observation about higher education playing a significant and inevitable part in the region's largely service-based and technologically-drive economic growth.

In 2007, at the 13th ASEAN Summit held in Singapore, the Chairman's Statement in relation to the preparation of the ASCC Blueprint was unequivocal in extolling the importance of education in the region's competitiveness and in ensuring that social impacts are minimized in the face of globalization, especially as ASEAN exerts more efforts towards integration (ASEAN, 2007). Since then, numerous institutional and national higher education policies across ASEAN have been formulated and implemented pursuant to the demands of creating a harmonized higher education system based on agreed regional principles and initiatives. Yet, the process has not been easy due to fundamental differences in higher education structure, quality, and processes among member countries.

In light of the foregoing, this study sought to review ASEAN's approach to regional harmonization of higher education and take a closer look at how a member country, in this case the Philippines, has responded to the call for regional integration in the higher education front. The discussion particularly revolved around three aspects of harmonization, namely, qualifications framework, quality assurance, and credit transfer. Primary data were culled through key informant interviews and desk review of official policy documents on higher education.

This qualitative study is divided into three parts. The first part provides the context of the study through a historical review of the evolution of ASEAN integration over the years and its corresponding implications on higher education in the region. The second part then zooms in on the experience of the Philippines's higher education system as championed by the government's higher education arm, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), in response

to regional initiatives for harmonization. The paper ends with a recapitulation of issues and challenges that the country has encountered in the process of implementing policies pursuant to the abovementioned elements of harmonization. By and large, the study hopes to emphasize the role of government education agencies in preparing its people for the challenges and opportunities of a changing higher education landscape through the provision of policies that are reconcilable with the available network of regional partnerships towards ASEAN integration.

2. The Role of Education in Building an ASEAN Community

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, was established on August 8, 1967 by the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand to bring about cooperation across economic, cultural, and educational fields, among others, as well to promote peace and stability throughout the region. Membership was initially limited to the five founding members but from 1984 to 1999, it expanded to include Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia in its roster of member-states (Acharya, 2013).

Formal meetings dominate the manner by which dialogues take place among its leaders. On the Second Informal Summit in Kuala Lumpur in December, the seed for the establishment of an ASEAN Community was planted in the consciousness of its leaders. This vision was reinforced upon the signing of the Declaration of the Bali Concord II which coincided with the adoption of the three pillars of ASEAN Community as the framework for achieving dynamism, resilience, and cohesion in the region (Weatherbee, Emmers, Pangetsu, & Sebastian, 2005). These pillars are named ASEAN Security Community (ASC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). The economic and security pillars concentrate on the promotion of economic growth, peace, and security in the region, ensuring that economies are competitive, able to reduce poverty, and affirms the region's preference for peaceful settlement of intra-regional differences, a practice that is unique to the ASEAN region.

The socio-cultural pillar, on the other hand, plays a more central role in pushing for a community that is people-centered, inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic. These traits are important in preparing people to be more welcoming of both the challenges and the opportunities that come with the process of consolidating and integrating an outward-looking region. In particular, the ASCC is committed to promoting a better standard of living of the peoples in the region "through cooperative activities that are people-oriented, people-centered, environmentally friendly, and geared towards the promotion of sustainable development." (ASEAN, 2016, p.1) What sets the socio-cultural apart from the economic and political pillars are its unique action lines, one of which is human development.

The promotion of human development has always been part of prioritized actions towards deeper collaboration among ASEAN members. It is this emphasis on human development that the key role of education in building a regional community is highlighted. Education, along with other components such as health, human rights, and sustainable environment are acknowledged as essential variables in preparing the region's people to be competent, productive, and culturally sensitive members of the community. Such is the value given to education that correspondent actions meant to advance and prioritize it, specifically the higher education sector, are included in the action line meant for Human Development. Some of these correspondent actions include effort to:

- Promote education networking in various levels of educational institutions and continue university networking and enhance and support student and staff exchanges and professional interactions including creating research clusters among ASEAN institutions of higher learning, in close collaboration with the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN);
- Strengthen collaboration with other regional and international educational organisations to enhance the quality of education in the region;
- Promote the options of university placements in an institution of higher learning in a second ASEAN Member State through "a semester abroad" or "a year abroad" programme (ASEAN, 2009, pp. 2-3).

3. Harmonization of Higher Education in Southeast Asia

Creating a successful ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community demands the institutionalization of practices and mechanisms that would prepare its peoples to aim for a higher standard of living in a sustainable, environment-friendly and people-centered region. Since higher education is considered the final step in a formal academic setting prior to entering the workforce of any economy, harmonizing the higher education system assumes a critical role in ensuring that individuals develop the skills needed as future members of the region's human resource pool. Harmonizing higher education systems could also contribute in deepening one's cultural awareness,

enhance attitude towards diverse social beliefs, and provide avenues for closer interaction among peoples from different socio-cultural background.

Yavaprabhas (2014) defines the harmonization of higher education as having a reference point “for the comparison of the qualities and capabilities of students from different universities in different countries” (p.87). Not to be equated with the concept of regionalization of higher education, which is more a process that facilitates, promotes, builds, and strengthen collaboration and higher education alignment among a designated region’s higher education key actors (Knight, 2011), harmonization of higher education offers instead a common platform for collaboration without pushing for sameness or uniformity.

Achieving the harmonization of higher education can be done through harmonizing of a region’s degree, quality assurance, credit, and academic calendar systems (Yavaprabhas, 2014). Degree systems can be referred to as the needed time needed in completing a certain degree and the corresponding grading system that comes with it while quality assurance system is the mechanism that would allow countries to define the quality of students in a comparable and compatible way (Yavaprabhas, 2014). SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED, n.d.) refers to credit transfer systems as a mechanism that enables higher education institutions to facilitate the horizontal mobility as well as vertical progression of students with that of other institutions by sharing the students’ workload and accomplishments with one another. Academic calendar systems come into play with the fact that as of the moment, there is no singular academic calendar in place among the HEIs in the ten Southeast Asian countries. Yavaprabhas (2014) mentions that “harmonizing academic calendar systems will facilitate the flow of student and staff in the region and also the harmonization of higher education as a whole” (p.101). Current areas that are actively pursued in the region are qualifications framework where degree system could be addressed, quality assurance, and credit transfer.

3.1 Qualifications framework: Development of National Qualifications Framework

The International Labour Organization published in 2007 An Introductory Guide to National Qualifications Frameworks (Tuck, 2007). The publication defined qualifications framework as a tool or instrument for developing, classifying, and recognition of skills, as well as knowledge and competencies in a continuum of identified levels, allowing for comparability of different qualifications and the corresponding information on how to move from one level to the next (Tuck, 2007).

The global underpinnings for the development of National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) include countries being concerned about the incompatible qualifications of the population in the workplace and actual skills needed such as the case of African countries like in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago (Tuck, 2007). In Europe, such as in the case of England, the fragmented nature of qualifications system is a big concern while in countries such as South Africa and Slovenia, it is more on the issue of how to seamlessly integrate non-formally acquired skills into the countries’ more formal academic structure (Tuck, 2007).

While African and European countries have already developed their national qualifications frameworks, still only a few in Southeast Asia have developed their own namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Yavaprabhas, 2014). With the ASEAN Economic Community looming in the horizon, developing frameworks among member states seem to be a sound policy move as comparability of qualifications becomes pivotal with the possible increase in mobility of students and professionals alike.

3.2 Quality Assurance

According to SEAMEO-RIHED, the introduction of quality assurance as a mechanism in the higher education system recognizes the value of enhancing existing programs as well as the quality of education among HEIs. .

3.2.1 ASEAN Quality Assurance Network

In 2008, cognizant of the need to further the quality assurance system in the region and to deepen the collaboration among national quality assurance agencies, SEAMEO-RIHED with the Malaysian Qualifications Agency, initiated the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN). Its establishment was meant to foster the sharing of good quality assurance practices that would eventually lead to the development of a regional framework designed for Southeast Asia. AQAN’s membership includes that of the EQA bodies and respective ministers of ASEAN’s member states who are in charge of the implementation of EQA frameworks at the national level (SHARE, 2016).

3.2.2 ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework

The ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education (AQAFHE) for Southeast Asian region was conceptualized in order to allow ASEAN member states to benchmark their respective QA systems against a

common reference point while maintaining the balance between member states amidst diverse higher education systems. The main purposes of setting up the said regional framework is

“to promote regional harmonization in higher education by developing a quality assurance framework in higher education with regional identities where the ASEAN countries could benchmark and align their quality assurance systems of higher education. Its development will also facilitate regional recognition of degrees and qualifications. AQAFHE will serve as a common reference point for quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions as they strive towards harmonization amidst the diversity of higher education systems, cultures and traditions within the region” (AQAF, n.d, pp.4-5).

3.3 Credit Transfer Systems

At the moment, there are four credit transfer systems that exist within and beyond the ASEAN membership. Each system was initiated by different regional organizations with membership reach that varies per organization. The overarching purpose of each includes an attempt to contribute to the harmonization of higher education in Asia.

3.3.1 University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Credit Transfer Scheme

UMAP as an organization currently boasts of a membership that extends to thirty five (35) countries with five hundred seventy (570) participating universities across the Asia-Pacific region. While UMAP membership does not include all member countries of ASEAN, it still aimed to simplify and facilitate an easier process of credit transfers for students who engage in exchange programs between partner universities, hence the initiation of the UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS).

A CHED briefer in 2015 stated that the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) is:

“an association of government and non-government representatives of the higher education sector that aims to achieve enhanced international understanding through increased mobility of university and staff. UMAP plays a vital role in enhancing cross-border services and promoting partnerships among higher education institutions in Asia and the Pacific.”

3.3.2 ASEAN University Network - ASEAN Credit Transfer System

AUN’s ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) is a credit transfer system that is student-centered with primary focus on student mobility among its members. ACTS is meant to “accommodate differences in the implementation of credit system among the member universities without any requirement to modify the existing institutional or national credit system.” One of the most primary objectives of the mechanism was to make student and academic mobility much easier and with lesser restrictions.

3.3.3 SEAMEO-RIHED: ASEAN International Mobility for Students

The SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED) is the organization’s special arm for higher education development in the region. In 2009, SEAMEO-RIHED initiated a student mobility pilot project called M-I-T involving the countries Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Since the AUN-CTS framework is not applicable to all HEI systems in the region, UCTS was tapped for the purpose of assisting in the facilitation of credit transfers for student mobility under M-I-T. M-I-T has since then evolved into what is now known as ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) programme with membership across 7 countries encompassing 60 HEIs. It aims to involve the rest of ASEAN members to further deepen the region’s student mobility programs.

3.3.4 ASEAN-European Union Credit Transfer System

ASEAN-European Union (EU) Credit Transfer System (AECTS) is a newly introduced framework for credit transfer that is part of the implementation of a partnership between ASEAN and EU called Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) and is run simultaneously with AUN’s ASEAN Credit Transfer System or ACTS. This system has a semblance to other credit transfer systems that are already in place in the region, with the hope of strengthening co-operation among HEI stakeholders and pushing for quality internationalization practices in the region.

4. A Look at Policy Responses from the Philippines

The bulk of responding to the harmonization challenges of higher education falls primarily on the lap of the Philippine Commission on Higher Education (CHED), an attached agency under the Office of the President responsible for all matters related to higher education in the country. Corollary to the ASCC action lines, CHED has

been active in pushing for reforms on areas critical to the harmonization of higher education in the region, namely, qualifications framework, quality assurance, and credit transfer systems. One of the key informants of the study maintained that:

“CHED’s role is primarily to provide the enabling environment through policies, programs, plans that would realize the goals of harmonization. If it’s needed to put in place the necessary policies to establish qualifications framework, quality assurance, or credit transfer, it’s CHED that does that. The implementation will always be on the level of the HEIs, but what we hope is to enable and empower the schools so that they can fully realize the benefits of these systems, so they can produce enabled graduates. CHED’s goal is for them to have graduates whose competencies and qualifications are both globally recognized.” (Key informant, personal communication, September 16, 2016)

4.1 Philippine Qualifications Framework

The development of the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF) aims to establish standards on skills and competencies, develop pathways and equivalencies, and ensure the alignment of Philippine standards with international qualifications frameworks that would contribute greatly in the mobility of and recognition of qualifications of workers (Bautista and Taganas, 2016). Issued in 2012, the said framework details an individual or learner’s level of educational qualifications along with corresponding standards for outcomes. This system basically provides for a way to recognize, develop, and award qualifications of both learners and workers based on a standard set of knowledge, skills, and values though the basis for acquisition of such qualifications may vary (Bautista and Taganas, 2016).

As of 2015, PQF’s institutionalization has only been through an executive order and not by way of legislation. However, while legislation process is still underway, it is worth noting that the PQF is embedded in an existing legislation which is Republic Act (RA) 10647 or the Ladderized Education Act of 2014. Corollary to the institutionalization of the PQF is the Philippines’ commitment to reference its education qualifications against the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) by 2018. The AQRF “is a common reference framework that serves as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across ASEAN Member States (AMS)” and “it addresses education and training sectors and the wider objective of promoting lifelong learning” (AQAF, n.d, p.6).

4.2 Quality Assurance: Voluntary and Mandatory Systems

The Philippines’ Commission on Higher Education defines quality by looking at how the learning environment is aligned and consistent with the institution’s vision and mission, as well as goals that are demonstrated by the development of culture that puts a premium on quality along with an outstanding display of learning and service outcomes (CHED, 2012).

Philippine quality assurance mechanisms currently in place are carried out both by the government through CHED and accredited private agencies. While the Philippine Accrediting Association for Schools, Colleges, and Universities (PAASCU) may be considered as ASEAN’s oldest accreditation agency, it is worth noting that the Philippines’ QA system is largely differentiated from that of other AMS due to the voluntary nature of its accreditation process. This system is unique in comparison to others members of the region where accreditation is mandatory. While accreditation is voluntary, the government provides for both voluntary and mandatory QA mechanisms to ensure quality among Philippine HEIs.

One feature of the voluntary QA mechanisms that CHED offers is its Centres of Excellence (COE) and Centres of Development (COD) programmes that academic institutions can apply for as a mechanism to promote quality and excellence in higher education. Application is a rigorous process and entails strict compliance with the commission’s requirements before a program is given either a COD or COE status. A 2016 report commissioned by the European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (EUSHARE) gave a succinct description of the application process and what it means for HEIs when their programmes become COD or COE:

“Institutions can apply with programmes from specific fields outlined by CHED to become a COE or COD. The applications are assessed according to criteria and by technical experts visiting the institution who then validate the documents submitted. Centres benefit from having priority in the selection of institutional partners, possibility to receive non-monetary subsidies and awards, such as graduate scholarships for faculty members. They also benefit by having priority for CHED research grants, which increases consideration for conversion to university status and identification as autonomous and deregulated HEIs. Also, COE, and COD can request financial assistance through project proposals” (SHARE, 2016, p.36)

Another CHED policy meant to introduce improvements in the quality of Philippine higher education is through the introduction of an outcomes-based and typology-based quality assurance policy. Labeled “Policy Standard to Enhance QA in Philippine Higher Education Through an Outcomes-Based and Typology-Based QA”, it states how the inevitability of establishing a regional community further underscores the importance of quality assurance in the Philippines’ higher education system. In hindsight, focus on quality and quality assurance is further underscored by several reasons including (1) the imminent reality of ASEAN community that facilitates the free flow of recognizable human resource or labor which can be seen as both an employment opportunity for graduates of Philippine HEIs or a threat even in their own home and (2) the Philippines’ commitment to develop a recognizable system of comparable qualifications, diplomas, and degrees not only in Southeast Asia but even across the Asia-Pacific region with ample support from multilateral bodies such as UNESCO, ASEAN, and APEC (CHED, 2012).

4.3 Multiple Credit Transfer Systems

4.3.1 UMAP- CTS

In 2013, CHED issued Memorandum Order No. 33 which provides for the policies and guidelines adopted by the commission in order to establish a formal credit transfer scheme that member HEIs of UMAP Philippines can use as they engage in activities that promote student mobility and necessitates mutual recognition of credits. The guideline supports the needed system that would allow participants in UMAP’s exchange programs to facilitate their credit transfer in a more structured manner. The CMO includes information on the requirements and obligations for parties involved which includes HEIs in their capacity as host or home institutions, students, the UMAP National Secretariat, and the UMAP Council Inc. – Philippines (UCIP).

In 2007, there were 11 member HEIs in the UMAP Philippine Council. By 2014, the membership increased to 67. CHED recognizes that UMAP has been a key player in strengthening the country’s internationalization efforts mostly through mobility opportunities across the Asia-Pacific particularly to Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, Korea, and Japan.

4.3.2 AUN-ACTS

AUN membership in the Philippines extends to top-tiered universities based in Metro Manila. These are the Ateneo de Manila University (ADMU), De La Salle University (DLSU), and University of the Philippines (UP). All three are participating universities in the AUN-ACTS and benefit largely from the student-centered credit transfer system that corresponds to the AUN Exchange Program. As a framework meant to enhance and facilitate student mobility among its members, ACTS allows students to earn credits from their participation in mobility programs and expand their network and learning in the process.

CHED supports the mobility of students along with that of the faculty and researchers both through AUN and the AUN-CTS framework. In reference to the proposed policy framework on the Internationalization of Philippine Higher Education (IPHE), the commission emphasized its stand on and its support to initiatives meant to break the barriers of promoting student and academic mobility:

- “Mobility of students, faculty, and researchers shall be promoted by the CHED as integral to internationalization efforts. For this purpose, the CHED shall take proactive measures to address information, financial, academic and administrative barriers to academic mobility.”
- “Academic barriers will be addressed through transparent and standardized mechanisms for recognition of academic qualifications and awards, and credit transfer schemes.”
- “In particular, participation in regional academic mobility schemes shall be promoted; these include the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the ASEAN International Mobility of Students Programs (AIMS) and the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP), among others” (CHED, 2015, pp.10-11).

The above commitments by CHED are significant to the successful expansion of ACTS as seen by the collaborations it finds itself currently involved. Aside from being utilized by participating universities from AUN members, ACTS has started to be used for collaborating with AUN partner universities such as in the case of Re-inventing Japan where the partners are Kyoto University and ASEAN Foundation.

4.3.3 SEAMEO-RIHED AIMS

CHED recognizes the importance of student mobility in the development of a more harmonized environment for higher education, as well in the promotion of regional integration in ASEAN. Due to the limitation of covered HEIs of the AUN-ACTS, with the Philippines being one of only seven (7) countries with active participation in the AIMS

programme, it is the UMAP CTS (UCTS) that provides instead the mechanism for the smooth facilitation and recognition of credits earned through student mobility.

Like with UMAP, the CHED indicates its support to AIMS by also reaffirming its role in fostering cooperation for development in the region's higher education area. This can be seen through the CHED Memorandum Order No. 11, Series of 2014, which provides for the Guidelines for Participation of Selected Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Program. CMO No. 11, s-2014 lays down the guidelines on the following components concerning the AIMS initiative (CHED, 2014):

- Guiding Principles
- Definition of Terms
- General Objectives
- Implementing Guidelines and Procedures
- Approval and Effectivity

Under AIMS, the CHED identifies and decides on the selection of qualified HEIs based on the set requirements and criteria of the program. In the 2014 CMO, there are twelve (12) HEIs from different regions in the Philippines and across various disciplines that made it to the list of participating universities. These participating universities are required to follow the guidelines provided for in CMO No. 11, s-2014 to complete the Student Placement Process, such as the provision of transcript for credit transfer which is to be accomplished by the host university.

4.3.4 AECTS (ASEAN – EUSHARE)

Aside from its collaboration with Japan, ACTS likewise plays an important role in the partnership between ASEAN and the European Union called EU Support to Higher Education in ASEAN Region (SHARE) on the development of an effective credit transfer system that can be mutually recognized in ASEAN and Europe. This partnership highlights SHARE's use of the ACTS platform for its initial implementation involving just eight universities for its pilot group, with one coming from the Philippines.

With the ASEAN - EU-SHARE partnership on CTS as well as on student mobility that has a direct effect on Philippine HEIs, CHED's involvement is similar with that of AUN-ACTS in that the main drivers for these arrangements are the HEI partners themselves. CHED's visibility is apparent in policy dialogues and workshops that aim to strengthen HEIs' capacities to support student mobility and facilitate easier mechanisms of recognizing credits earned (Key Informant, personal communication June 23, 2017).

5. Conclusion: Challenges and Way Forward

Successfully achieving the components of the harmonization of higher education entails the active participation of key stakeholders including the government sector and HEIs. The role of the government in this complex harmonization process includes getting involved in negotiations in the regional level on higher education policies that are deemed important for regional development, along with discussions on the framework with which to guide said policies that governmental leaders commit on (Yavaprabhas, 2014).

The premium ASCC gives to human development, and therefore to the advancement and prioritization of higher education, saw a dramatic increase in collaborations and institutional arrangements among ASEAN members. With efforts to harmonize higher education, the areas of qualifications framework, quality assurance, and credit transfer have become the platforms for cooperation of education-invested stakeholders such as regional organizations, participating governments, HEIs and the academic community in general.

This study has shown that in the context higher education, national governments may respond to ASEAN integration through policies such as legal statutes or through other forms like government agency-issued memorandum orders that signify, among others, the statement of support for the regional initiative, principles behind the partnership, detailed guidelines for its implementation, and expected deliverables from stakeholders. The role of the government is critical in translating regional agreements or initiatives into operational policies at the national level with HEIs and the academic community in mind. It rests not only on the commitment of the government itself with its partners in the region, but also on the mandate, power and function of the government agency that oversees the higher education sector. This means taking a closer look to how national governments bring agreed policies from the regional level down to the national level, often manifested by translating regional commitments to national policies in accordance to the guidelines and framework agreed on during the regional discussions. Various factors that normally influence

how policies take shape and eventually put into motion at the national level include institutional support, political will, people participation, stakeholders' influence, and the political process in general.

As the Philippine agency overseeing the country's higher education system, CHED-issued policies in the form of memorandum orders, along with other programs and initiatives, provide the context of how the Philippine government responds to harmonization demands in the context of ASEAN Integration. It also provides the enabling environment to help HEIs utilize the benefits of existing arrangements in the region so that they produce graduates whose credentials are recognizable in ASEAN and beyond.

This study brings to the fore some challenges in the Philippine higher education system that appears more glaring than others. One challenge is in the context of governance, where the delineation of roles and functional relationships among involved institutions may be weak or sometimes unclear. The hierarchy of institutions is not clearly drawn and the instruments used to harmonize need some clarity, as in the case of various credit transfer systems in place. The question of who drives the process also needs to be addressed (Key Informant, personal communication, June 21, 2017). Is it the HEIs or the government? Questions such as these lend to the organizational structure, mandate, sectoral reach, and stakeholders of these myriad institutions.

In the Philippines, the challenge is made more difficult by the fact that where harmonization of higher education is concerned, some HEIs are more involved in it than others. While harmonization mostly involves major universities like University of the Philippines, De La Salle University and Ateneo de Manila University, there are many other academic institutions which have yet to institutionalize practices towards the same endeavor. This reality draws attention to HEIs and what motivates them to be proactive in harmonization efforts. Likewise, attention is drawn to CHED, particularly on its own capacity as the lead agency that could institutionalize changes in the country's higher education system. As a regulator, the commission is confronted with the possibility of regulated HEIs being more powerful than itself (Key Informant, personal communication, June 21, 2017).

Despite the challenges, there are areas of opportunities that can be examined to improve existing harmonization policies. One would be on the area of overlapping credit transfer systems available for participating countries or HEIs. The expansive but overlapping initiatives on credit transfer systems make the system more complex than it should be. This is the case not only for the government agency tasked to formulate the corresponding policy for national implementation but also for the HEI that has to deal with a network of systems it subscribes to if only to get ahead or be at par with counterparts in the local and international arenas. A credit transfer framework that encompasses a wider membership in terms of HEIs or participating countries with more expansive program coverage could provide the region a more effective mechanism of facilitating credit transfers. Another area would be on doing voluntary accreditation. While this is unique to the Philippines given that it is the only country that has a voluntary accreditation policy in the region, it still demands attention as doing so could ensure that the quality of HEIs do not get compromised in the process. Communicating the advantages of undergoing accreditation such as being qualified for funding once accredited as COD or COE should motivate HEIs enough to do so voluntarily.

This study provides a broad stroke of the structure, issues, and challenges that affect regional harmonization of higher education in ASEAN, using the Philippine experience as a case study. In future studies, it is recommended to take into consideration other countries' policy responses for a comparative and comprehensive approach. Examining the factors influencing policy-making like political will, political environment, and policy stakeholders will also be an excellent take off point for succeeding efforts. Lastly, investigating institutional responses on the harmonization framework involving qualifications framework, quality assurance, and credit transfer system from the perspectives of faculty members, administrators, and students could add value to existing discourse.

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