Regional Policy Forum on the Promotion of ASEAN Regional Integration through Open and Distance Higher Education

23-24 November 2015; Radisson Blu Plaza, Bangkok, Thailand

Organized by
UNESCO Asia and the Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, Bangkok, Thailand

in collaboration with the
ASEAN Cyber University

Concept Note

Background

On its 30th anniversary, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the ASEAN Vision 2020, a "shared vision of ASEAN as a concert of Southeast Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies". ¹ASEAN has decided to establish the ASEAN Community by the year 2015, five years earlier than the original target year. One of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community is the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) which will: establish ASEAN as a single market and production base making ASEAN more dynamic and competitive with new mechanisms and measures to strengthen the implementation of its existing economic initiatives; accelerating regional integration in the priority sectors; facilitating movement of business persons, skilled labour and talents; and strengthening the institutional mechanisms of ASEAN.²

In view of achieving AEC, it is imperative for Southeast Asian countries to collectively strategize human capacity development that leads to a highly competitive and integrated region. This includes providing labour-market responsive human development opportunities, freeing mobility of skilled workers and professionals across the region, and innovating and diversifying deliveries of skill development programmes for the marginalized.

¹ASEAN Overview (http://www.asean.org/asean/about-asean/overview)
²ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint, p. 5 (http://www.asean.org/archive/5187-10.pdf)
As an effort to meet this demand, higher education institutions have sought innovative ways to accommodate needs of both students and employers. While traditional open universities continue to attract students who choose to study in a flexible way, an increasing number of conventional universities are now offering multiple modes of knowledge acquisition, such as distance courses, online courses, blended classes, and even a recent hype of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The International Centre for Distance Education asserts that “it is likely that ODL (Open and Distance Learning) is the only viable solution to future increasingly complex and diversified education demands, particularly in the tertiary, higher and continuing education sectors.”

UNESCO has prioritized enhancing access, equity and quality of higher education for the last decades, having launched the UNESCO Regional Convention on the Recognition of Studies, Diplomas and Degrees in Higher Education in Asia and the Pacific to ensure the coherent quality provision of higher education across the region. The Convention was revised in 2011 in light of the massification and internalization of higher education and to stress cross-border recognition of studies, diplomas and degrees as widely as possible. The revised Convention provides a solid foundation to devise Open and Distance Higher Education with regionally agreed, recognition, accreditation, and quality assurance framework in the ASEAN region.

UNESCO also organized the World Conference on Higher Education in 2009, the resulting communiqué states how, along with ICTs, ODL approaches “present opportunities to widen access to quality education, particularly when OERs are readily shared by many countries and HEIs”. Moreover, the communiqué states the support for fuller integration of ICTs and promoting ODL to meet increasing demands for higher education. The increasing importance of Open and Distance Education has never been clearer, especially after the World Education Forum 2015 (Incheon, Republic of Korea) and the International Conference on ICT and post-2015 Education (Qingdao, People’s Republic of China). The Incheon Declaration sets the stage, as it underlines the need to harness ICTs to “strengthen education systems, knowledge dissemination, information access, quality and effective learning, and more effective services provision”. On the other hand, the Qingdao Declaration specifically recognizes how a well-organized online learning can “build new pathways towards tertiary education and lifelong learning”.

In order for ODL to be a sustainable and mainstreaming solution to regional integration of the workforce in ASEAN, an urgent attention should be given to foster policy environments where studies and/or degrees from higher education institutions in one country are equally recognized in another country. This is not a simple matter. Indeed, there are a myriad conditions and requirements that the member states and institutions need to mutually agree on and continuously comply with. This includes rethinking of national frameworks for accreditation and recognition of qualifications that maximize benefits of cross-border provisions of higher education as well as prevent the potential downsides of its internationalization. At the institutional level, a commonly agreed framework should be in place to assure the quality of ODL courses and educational materials.

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3 ICDE. (2013). Open and Distance Education Policy Briefing
(http://www.icde.org/filestore/Regulatory_Framework/OpenandDistanceEducationPolicyBriefingMarch2013.pdf)
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In view of this context, the UNESCO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCO Bangkok), supported by the ASEAN Cyber University (ACU), has initiated a project to facilitate a policy-level dialogue among different stakeholders of Open and Distance e-Learning (ODEL) to promote cross-border provision and recognition of ODEL-based higher education. The dialogue will be built upon a comprehensive review of challenges, lessons learned and promising practices of ODEL in the ASEAN region and beyond. The comprehensive review is being conducted through a scoping study to determine the ODEL state-of-play in the ASEAN and determine how it can be tapped to promote regional integration. The study adopts a neo-positivist approach employing an integrated multi-level mixed methods design, involving quantitative (QUAN) and qualitative (QUAL) strands. The QUAN strands include an online survey and the analysis of secondary data. The QUAL strands are made up of: a Policy Delphi; key informant interviews (KII) and documents analysis.

Objectives
The Forum will serve as a venue to present the initial findings of the scoping study on the promotion of ASEAN regional integration through open and distance higher education, as well as contribute to the objectives of the study:

- create a better understanding of the current status of open and distance higher education in ASEAN member countries and beyond, offered by both OUs and traditional universities, focusing on national qualification frameworks (macro), recognition and accreditation of degrees (meso) and quality assurance of ODL courses (micro)
- provide a regional platform to deliberate on policy requirements that reinforce cross-border provision and recognition of open and distance higher education
- facilitate continuous collaboration and partnership among numerous stakeholders.

Expected Outcomes

- comments on the initial findings of the scoping study and updates on the status of Open and Distance Higher Education in the ASEAN countries, which will be incorporated in the final version of the scoping study
- initial deliberation on policy requirements that reinforce cross-border provision and recognition of Open and Distance Higher Education among ASEAN countries
- an engaged and active network of stakeholders who are able to contribute to current study, as well as in the follow-up study

Participants
The Forum will be attended by national researchers from each of the ASEAN countries who are participating in the scoping study, alongside officials from ACU and selected experts in the field of open and distance higher education.

Dates and Venue
23-24 November 2015
Radisson Blu Plaza, Bangkok, Thailand

Working Language
English
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