1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a key component of the international development agenda. As low income countries move towards achieving high levels of access to education, they are beginning to grapple with the same issues that middle- and high- income countries have long faced: ensuring the quality of education provided, improving pedagogical methods, matching skills learnt in school to those needed for jobs and many others. This convergence in the type of issues faced by most education systems today has made regional and international cooperation in education all the more important.

In the context of a globalized world, countries have also recognized the economic importance of ensuring the mobility of their own citizens and the need to accept foreign professionals and skilled workers. The impact of education policies is therefore increasingly being felt beyond national boundaries. Benchmarking against other countries, meeting internationally recognized standards and greater understanding of other countries’ student evaluation systems are thus necessary to help each country design education as well as immigration and labour policies.

Even if education were not a driver of globalization, economic and technological imperatives will ensure that the international flow of goods, services, and people continue to increase. Building increased understanding of other cultures is thus necessary to promote peace and respect for diversity as people, cultures, and ideas from different provenances come into increasing contact. UNESCO’s Constitution states that “it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed”. Those words have never rung more true, and it is for this reason too that education has been and will continue to be a core part of the international development agenda.

In this sense, there is widespread consensus among countries that nations can cooperate to attain the same goals when it comes to education development by sharing their resources, whether financial, technical or human. While there is not an explicit definition of “cooperation” in this context, it can be broadly understood to encompass “not merely the transfer of resources and technical know-how but rather mutual learning and sharing of experiences,” involving “institutional and organizational development, reciprocal communication...as a mutually beneficial exercise between partners, for the purpose of enhancing...capacities.”² In this paper, cooperation in education is analysed against a backdrop of increasing regional economic and social integration, with an international and regional standard setting and normative framework as point of reference.

---

¹ Prepared by UNESCO Bangkok (July 2013).
Specific processes such as comparison and benchmarking, knowledge and information exchange and capacity development are examined, as illustrated in the figure below:

Figure 1: A framework for examining cooperation in education

It should be noted that these strands form part of UNESCO’s role as a specialized United Nations agency working in the field of education, as it strives to serve as an international catalyst in promoting these modalities of cooperation in education in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

2. REGIONAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

In looking at the increasing trend towards cooperation in education, especially at post-basic education levels, in the Asia-Pacific region, it must be situated within the move towards increased regional and global integration in the region. There are many reasons that scholars have used to explain this increased integration. The need to deal with complex global and regional challenges, the proliferation of technologies that facilitate increased flow of information, and the falling transport costs that promote increased movement in people and goods are just some of these. Regardless of the reasons, what is clear is that many governments have demonstrated a willingness to foster closer regional and international ties. This willingness is seen through the creation of new platforms for cooperation and the expansion of the areas covered by existing platforms. This has in turn led to significant economic and social integration both at the regional and international level.

The initiation of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Education Process 2008 – 12 years after the formation of ASEM in 1996 – is one example of the expansion of existing platforms. The ASEM

---


Education Process aims to increase transparency and compatibility of the various educational systems in the two regions. The Process currently focuses on higher education and technical and vocational education and training (TVET), and concrete steps have been taken to work towards the goals of the Process.\(^5\) The “Conclusions by the Chair” of the first ASEM Conference of Ministers Responsible for Education in 2008 articulate the impetus for the initiation of the ASEM Education Process. Amongst other conclusions, the report stated that “there is a growing need for more intensive relations and cooperation between Europe and Asia in a globalizing world”. On education, it stated that the “internationalization of education in general, and of higher education in particular, is an important factor for making education systems and institutions more attractive and competitive worldwide.”\(^6\) Clearly, despite the vast differences between the education systems amongst the ASEM Member States, globalization has been a key driver for the internationalization of education and that has in turn required international cooperation in education.

Within South-East Asia, the members of the Association for South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are working towards the realization of an ASEAN Community built upon three pillars: Economic Community; Socio-Cultural Community; and Political-Security Community. To support that goal, ASEAN released the Work Plan on Education (WPE) in 2012. The WPE overlaps with all three pillars of the ASEAN Community and defines ASEAN’s four strategic education priorities: ASEAN awareness; access to quality education; cross-border mobility and internationalization of education; and support for other ASEAN sectoral bodies with an interest in education. Collectively, these priorities cover all levels of education – from basic to tertiary education as well as lifelong learning programmes and TVET. The priorities also cover a broad range of themes in education such as promoting the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), teacher education, and quality of education.\(^7\)

As part of promoting ASEAN awareness, members of ASEAN seek to build an “ASEAN identity”. Members will identify shared ASEAN values and build ASEAN studies into their primary and secondary education curriculums. To that end, an ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook has been developed by the ASEAN Secretariat with support from the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Sourcebook provides practical methods, lesson plan examples, and materials that teachers can use to introduce ASEAN to primary and secondary level students across seven subject areas. Some other efforts have also been made by individual countries to promote an ASEAN identity. For instance,


both Lao PDR and the Philippines conduct ASEAN awareness events during the week of August 8 (ASEAN Day) each year to promote greater public awareness of ASEAN. Through these efforts, ASEAN will enhance social integration at the sub-regional level.\(^8\)

As an example of sub-regional cooperation, ASEAN Member States have worked together towards the Education for All (EFA) goals. In 2008, the ASEAN and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Secretariats were tasked to collaborate with UNESCO in developing programmes for ASEAN Member States to achieve the EFA goals by 2015. By the time the WPE was released in 2012, the ASEAN and SEAMEO Secretariats had worked together with UNESCO to initiate ten collaborative projects to support ASEAN Member States in achieving the EFA goals.\(^9\) The WPE’s measures to support quality assurance at all levels of education and cross border mobility will also pave the way for further economic integration as they enable ASEAN citizens to join the international labour market of highly skilled and mobile persons. In addition, there are currently efforts underway to develop an ASEAN Common Reference Framework or Regional Qualifications Framework as a means to respond to the increasing cross-border movement of students and labour.

Through SEAMEO, countries in Southeast Asia are also working towards harmonizing their higher education systems. Whilst sub-regional diversity is a constraint that limits harmonization, SEAMEO is taking a “step-by-step” approach by utilizing small mechanisms to encourage integration.\(^10\) One such method is the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Program. Initially started as the Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand (M-I-T) Student Mobility Pilot Project in 2009, the project is currently being expanded to include additional ASEAN countries.\(^11\) The 4th Review Meeting of the AIMS Program saw participation by government officials and university representatives from Philippines, Brunei, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. AIMS seeks to provide opportunities for student exchanges within the ASEAN region by establishing close ties between the universities, enabling transfers of academic credit for students, and providing scholarships for student exchanges. In the initial two years since launch of the M-I-T pilot project in 2010, around 260 students across five disciplines from 23 universities in the three countries participated. The aim is to have 500 students from 10 disciplines and all 10 ASEAN countries participating in the program by 2015. These coordinated efforts to build up a pool of young people in ASEAN with experience living and studying in another ASEAN country could lead to closer cooperation in the future as the students go on to launch their careers in business, government, academia and other areas.\(^12\)

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^12\) Ibid.
In East Asia, Japan, China, and the Republic of Korea have also launched their own programme to increase student mobility between the three countries. Collective Action for the Mobility Program of University Students (CAMPUS Asia) aims to provide students with quality-assured exchanges. Modeled on the European Union’s ERASMUS student exchange programme, and similar to the AIMS programme, education officials and university leaders from the three countries will work together on issues such as academic credit transfers, quality assurance frameworks, and university evaluation.

The members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – a regional grouping which includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan – have also collaborated on an ambitious higher education project. SCO University is a “network university” launched in 2009. The University currently offers students from the SCO Member States the opportunity to pursue Masters programmes that will include courses from various universities within the SCO network. Students will receive their certificate from both the SCO University and the institution where they fulfill at least 60% of their course requirement. SCO University currently offers Masters programmes in regional studies, energy, ecology, information technology and nanotechnology. Whilst there are plans to expand the programme to offer bachelors and to include more areas of study, differences in policies, education requirements, and education standards have posed significant challenges to the project.

The decision by various governments to take the lead and cooperate in fostering closer ties between their higher education institutions – rather than leaving it up to the institutions to build their own partnerships – reflects the weight given to such forms of cooperation in education. The programmes that countries in the Asia-Pacific have initiated to increase the number of student exchanges in their respective sub-regions reflect definitive steps towards increased comparability of the universities and familiarity of the university systems within each country. Deeper regional integration of higher education could be built upon these early steps. In addition, as countries become familiar with the higher education standards and work together to provide quality assurance, students will become more mobile as their certificates gain wider acceptance and recognition. This could reduce the barriers to economic integration as the educated work force becomes more mobile and could very well be one of strategic intents of the various governments in cooperating in the realm of education in the region.

---


The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping has also made recent commitments to cooperate on higher education. The 20th APEC Leaders’ Declaration issued in 2012 includes an annex that lays out the areas of cooperation in higher education.\(^{17}\) In addition to encouraging greater mobility of students and researchers, the annex also covers the mobility of education providers and enhancement of the existing network of bilateral agreements. More branch campuses of educational institutions and enhanced channels of educational content delivery are some of the potential outcomes of the Declaration.

Student exchanges in the manner described above require greater cooperation between the institutions involved as students on exchange programmes for a short period need to be assured that their academic credit is transferrable and courses taken can fit within their existing academic plans. To encourage foreign students to study in a country’s own schools but without the level of cooperation needed for student exchanges, some countries in the Asia-Pacific region also fund scholarships for foreign students. Examples of this include Japan, China and Singapore. China provides scholarships for citizens from Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States.\(^{18}\) Students at all levels of tertiary study, up to and including doctoral candidates, can apply for funding. Singapore provides scholarships for citizens from other ASEAN Member States, as well as Hong Kong (China) and India.\(^{19}\) Scholarships are provided for students from as early as lower secondary level and up to the tertiary level.

Regional social and economic integration is a broader trend in which education is both a component and a key driver. The many regional and sub-regional programmes that governments have collaborated on, particularly in the last few years, reflects an awareness of the need for deeper integration in education. Although challenges abound in deepening integration of education systems, tackling them is crucial if countries are to prepare their students for new opportunities and the challenges that they will face in future.

### 3. STANDARD SETTING AND NORMATIVE FRAMEWORKS

As regional and sub-regional integration brings countries and jurisdictions closer together, it is worth noting that collaboration between them in the realm of education is situated within the broader frame of a set of international and regional standards and normative instruments. In discussing the

---


establishment of such standards and instruments, UNESCO notes that ‘when, cultural differences and traditions notwithstanding, States agree to common rules, they can draw up an international or a regional instrument: an agreement or convention, which is legally binding, a recommendation, declaration or a programme of action’\(^{20}\). In essence, standard-setting is one of ‘the main constitutional functions of UNESCO’ and is actively deployed by the Organization to reach its goals.\(^{21}\) These standard-setting instruments ‘promulgate principles and norms intended to inspire the action of States in specific fields of activity,’ including promoting and developing cooperation for the increase and progress of education. Frameworks discussed here (which by no means represent an exhaustive list) have been set at the international level (3.1) or with a more region-specific scope at the Asia-Pacific level (3.2).

### 3.1 International Frameworks

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, proclaimed the right to education as a common standard of achievement for all people and all nations\(^{22}\). Furthermore, the UNESCO Constitution (1945) expresses the belief of its founders in ‘full and equal opportunities for education for all’. To that end, UNESCO is entrusted with the mission of ‘instituting collaboration among the nations to advance the ideal of equality of educational opportunity without regard to race, sex or any distinctions, economic or social’ (Article 1)\(^{23}\). Principles and norms for the right to education laid down by international instruments provide a normative basis for action to that end\(^{24}\).

#### 3.1.1 Normative Framework of the Right to Education

In 1960, the Convention against Discrimination in Education (CADE) was adopted and the right to education was strongly affirmed in international law, which not only banned all forms of discrimination, but also indicated measures to be taken by States to promote equal education opportunities\(^{25}\). Among the core UN human rights treaties, the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (1966) contains similar provisions recognizing the right of everyone to education (article 13).

\(^{21}\) Ibid.
3.1.2 The 1990 World Conference on EFA (Jomtien, Thailand)

More than 40 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that "everyone has a right to education", which was followed by genuine progress toward peaceful detente and greater cooperation among nations to improve access to education. Yet, the reality up to 1990 was that more than 100 million children, including at least 60 million girls, had no access to primary schooling. In 1990, UNESCO led preparations and coordinated the efforts of delegates from 155 countries, as well as representatives from inter-governmental organizations and NGOs, to agree at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand to make primary education accessible to all children and to massively reduce illiteracy before the end of the decade. The delegates adopted a World Declaration on Education for All, which reaffirmed the notion of education as a fundamental human right and urged countries to intensify efforts to address the basic learning needs of all by the year 2000. However, the Jomtien EFA targets were not achieved by the year 2000.

3.1.3 From the 2000 World Education Forum (Dakar, Senegal) and Beyond

Since the millennium, substantial efforts have been made to make cooperation more effective and reaffirm the basic global strategy of universalizing access to quality basic education. In order to review and discuss the global assessments on EFA during the 1990s in terms of achievements, causes of failures, difficulties and remaining barriers, more than 1,000 participants convened at the World Education Forum (2000) in Dakar and reiterated their commitment to education as being a fundamental right and set objectives for achieving EFA goals based upon political commitments and cooperation by the international community to achieve the right to basic education for all. A key finding of the EFA 2000 Assessment report on basic education showed educational progress had been made but at uneven rates, especially slower in developing countries. The Dakar Framework for Action calls to dramatically expand educational opportunities by 2015 through six goals - from early childhood, access for all children, youth and adult learning, literacy, gender equality and quality education for all.

The Dakar Framework recognizes that achieving the goals of EFA is the concern not only of governments but also of international agencies, development banks and civil society. The Dakar Framework established the importance of forging partnerships and alliances between all stakeholders, therefore making cooperation inevitable and critical for the achievement of the EFA goals. Moreover, in the same year, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were established at the UN Summit and echoed several similar goals to also be achieved by 2015 - providing universal primary education.

---

education and gender parity and empowerment of women in education. This initiated a move towards a more targeted approach through a framework agreed to by all the world’s countries and all the world’s leading development institutions.\textsuperscript{29}

In addition to the normative instruments initiated by UNESCO and other UN entities (see Box 1 below), other stakeholders have coordinated frameworks with an overall goal to further improve cooperation and exchange in education. The \textit{Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2005)} organized by the OECD, and then later building on the commitments laid out in the \textit{Declaration, the Accra Agenda for Action (2008)}, both set out to reform the way development aid is processed and managed in the recipient-donor setting in order to strengthen its effectiveness and impact on development, including in education. Both agreements mapped out a framework for development cooperation with the following five key principles: 1) national ownership, 2) alignment with partner country systems of rules and procedures, 3) harmonization through the use of budget support, 4) managing for results and 5) mutual accountability.\textsuperscript{30} These principles provide a framework for effective recipient-donor relations and promote a common agenda for global, regional and country level dialogue on aid effectiveness. In particular, harmonization requires a greater level of trust and coordination between aid agencies as there is a growing number and wide range of donors, which will make the need for cooperation even greater than before in order to strengthen alignment, simplify procedures and share information to avoid duplication.\textsuperscript{31} These principles were also highlighted in the declaration of the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation as well, formulated in 2011.\textsuperscript{32}

### Box 1: Key International Normative Instruments in Education

- **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006):** States recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education (Article 24).
- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989):** protects children's rights by setting standards in health, education and legal, civil and social services (Article 29).
- **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979):** States shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in order to ensure to them equal rights with men in the field of education (Article 10).


\textsuperscript{31} IIEP (2013). The new modalities for development cooperation in the Education Sector. \url{http://www.iiep.unesco.org/news/singleview/hash/1eafecf2a0.html?tx_ttnews%5Bp%5D=1371705170&tx_ttnews%5Btt_content%5D=737&tx_ttnews%5Bt_pid%5D=81} (Accessed on 03 July 2013)


International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (1965): States adopt immediate and effective measures, particularly in the fields of teaching, education, with a view to combating prejudices which lead to racial discrimination and to promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among nations and racial or ethnical groups (Article 7).

Source: UNESCO, UNHCR

3.2 Asia-Pacific Regional Frameworks


The 1983 Convention aims to ensure that studies, diplomas, and degrees in higher education are recognized as widely as possible, considering the great diversity of education systems in the Asia-Pacific (AP) region and the richness of its cultural, social, political, philosophical, religious and economic backgrounds. It ensures that teachers, students and working professionals have greater mobility and also alleviates the difficulties encountered on return by people who have been trained abroad. With China's vision for accelerated GDP growth in the 1980s under Deng Xiaopeng, the economic emergence of the four ‘Asian Tigers’ (Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong (China), Republic of Korea and Singapore) in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Philippines and Vietnam coming out of economic stagnation in the 1990s, the countries in the AP region started to integrate and align with one another by directly investing into each other's economies. This, as well as the perceptions of better quality higher education, job opportunities and higher remuneration abroad, and also the desire to have international experience have all had an impact in the increase in mobility of students and workers. This now plays an increasing role in capacity building and economic development throughout the region, and the Convention plays a critical role in the recognition of qualifications.

However, significant developments in higher education, including the exponential growth of private and public providers and cross-border providers, have led to dramatic changes in governance, qualifications earned through distance learning and a new focus on quality assurance. A need to


build national capacity, sustainable systems and assessment tools to measure learning outcomes are all factors that have added pressure in ensuring that qualifications are recognized in other countries. In November 2011, 26 AP countries meeting in Tokyo responded to these new challenges by revising and extending the 1983 Regional Convention. The revised agreement aims to make degree standards and quality more compatible throughout the AP in order to help students continue their studies within the region and to promote academic exchanges.

### 3.3 Looking Beyond: Monitoring and Cooperation

As the world prepares for 2015, the target year for achieving the EFA goals and MDGs, the international community has already started to discuss the challenges that will need to be addressed for the post-2015 era. Even with noticeable achievements in the context of EFA, significant challenges remain throughout the AP region. A glaring challenge is that the region still contains the largest number of illiterate adults of any region in the world despite improvements in youth and adult literacy levels. Moreover, vast disparities still exist between and within countries concerning access to schooling, equity and quality of education and in resulting levels of learning achievement.

How can this be addressed? This may mean the new post-2015 framework chosen will need to incorporate existing goals in addition to the new ones reflecting on the changes occurred since 2000. This may mean a call for new standard-setting instruments or the revision of older ones. But, more importantly, in order not to repeat past mistakes, it signals a need for greater cooperation. Greater cooperation calls for Member States to strengthen the exchange of experiences and expertise, enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of cross-country cooperation, improve reporting on measures they take for implementing standard-setting instruments, while concurrently requiring international organizations to properly monitor and follow up on the implementation of those instruments under their purview (see Box 2 below). This is because the realization of educational goals is dependent upon not only effective implementation and accountability but also effective monitoring, for which international standards and instruments are a valuable tool.

#### Box 2: The Case of the ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers

The ILO/UNESCO Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers, adopted in 1966 at a special intergovernmental conference convened by UNESCO in Paris in cooperation with the ILO, essentially represents a charter for the rights of teachers worldwide. It sets forth the rights and responsibilities of teachers and international standards for their initial preparation and further education.

---

recruitment, employment, teaching and learning conditions. Although all Member States claim to support the values and principles of the Recommendation, this is quite varied in reality. Therefore, UNESCO and the ILO established a Joint Committee of Experts on the Application of the Recommendation on the Status of Teachers (CEART), which meets every three years to monitor Member States’ compliance with the Recommendations and to provide guidance to countries as well as to UNESCO and the ILO. The CEART also maintains a Working Group on Allegations, which receives and responds to any allegation of non-compliance to the Recommendations made by teachers’ organizations. In addition, the two organizations published a user-friendly version (including questions & answers) of this recommendation and the UNESCO Recommendation concerning the status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel (1997) in 2008 and have translated the text of the two Recommendations into seven languages. The annual anniversary of the 1966 Recommendation’s signing (5 October) is celebrated internationally as World Teachers’ Day.

4. BENCHMARKING

In the context of increasing regional integration and against the backdrop of international and regional standards and normative frameworks, there has been a rising interest in benchmarking among countries in the Asia-Pacific as they seek to compare the performance of their education systems with that of their neighbours. Benchmarking in education, as defined by the World Bank, can be understood as a practice by which different countries seek to compare the performance of their education systems and thus create a baseline to monitor improvements as well as compare against international standards. Evidence shows that such benchmarks not only play a role in international policy debates, but have also been used as a tool in improving the quality of education.

While the concept of benchmarking is not new, the rising interest in benchmarking has resulted in the development of new tools and publications that facilitate this process for countries looking to compare themselves with others. Traditionally, international assessments such as IEA’s Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) have provided means for comparative analysis. With an increasing trend of participation from the Asia-Pacific in these assessments, it seems clear that countries are concerned with where their education system stands in relation to others around the region, if not the world.

---


Concern over ranking in international assessments has seen countries pay closer attention to education policy matters. The World Bank, leveraging on this trend, developed the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) initiative, which consists of a diagnostic tool which allows countries to benchmark their education policies against international practices and trends. The pilot report, *Strengthening Education Quality in East Asia*, based on 14 economies in the Asia-Pacific region, provides a snapshot at how this tool could be used by countries to identify relevant systems to benchmark against in various policy domains. Through this systematic examination of education systems, SABER aims to guide policy-makers on improving the quality of the education they are providing to their citizens.

Another response to the increasing focus on benchmarking is publications that build on data from international test scores to draw policy implications for education systems. The McKinsey Reports, *How the world’s best-performing school systems come out on top* (2007) and *How the world’s most improved school systems keep getting better* (2010), are two such examples. Using information from OECD and IEA as the starting point, these publications consolidate findings from interviews and analyses of interventions to develop policy recommendations that can be relevant across varied contexts. Other examples from the region include *Catching up: learning from the best school systems in East Asia*, published by Grattan Institute.

Moving away from international student assessments, other ways of approaching benchmarking include examining comparative education statistics, analyzing comparative topics in education and sourcing for best practices. In regard to these approaches, UNESCO has produced numerous publications that serve as references to countries looking to benchmark. For example, the *Education for All Global Monitoring Report* (GMR), published annually by a team based at UNESCO, presents comparative information on the educational progress of countries worldwide. Not only does this report play an important role in standard setting and in enforcing normative frameworks, but by providing comparative data on how countries are working towards the education goals agreed upon internationally, it provides a form of monitoring the progress of each country towards these. By examining progress and mapping trends, this report aims to identify priority areas for education policy reform and strategies and therefore plays an important role in promoting international cooperation in education development worldwide. The Global Education Digest from UNESCO’s

---


Institute for Statistics (UIS) is another annual mechanism that presents comparative statistics on topics such as educational attainment, the quality of education and education financing.\textsuperscript{43}

At the regional level, the \textit{Education for All End of Decade Notes} serves as another reference for the purpose of benchmarking for cooperation in education by monitoring the progress of countries in the region in achieving the EFA goals ten years after their inception\textsuperscript{44}. In addition, the Education Systems Profile (ESP) portal coordinated by UNESCO Bangkok also serves as an information base for countries who would like to explore and compare overviews of education systems in the Asia-Pacific, covering for example the structure of the system, major challenges, management, financing, national policies and strategies for the different education sub-sectors.

While it may seem that benchmarking can take place without any cooperation and collaboration between countries, benchmarking solely through desk research and reading of reports would not be desirable. The information available through the public domain often lacks contextual background and essential details required for thorough understanding of various education systems and policies. This is where peer-review and cooperation between countries could make a difference in the effectiveness and impact of any benchmarking exercise for the improvement of education systems. In order to gain insight and in-depth understanding of various education systems, cooperation between countries to facilitate the organization of study visits, interviews, meetings or discussions are often indispensable.

Although many countries tend to benchmark globally due to improved connectivity and easy access to information on the Internet, it would seem that benchmarking regionally, or even sub-regionally, also has its advantages. Culturally, countries located within close proximity tend to have similar value systems, challenges and priorities, compared to countries in other parts of the world. Also, trends in regional and social integration also pave the way for more cooperation and collaboration that are important in the benchmarking process. With many systems of diverse profiles within the Asia-Pacific region, there is much that can be shared and learnt for the improvement of education in the region. Knowledge and information exchange is a key strategy in this regard.

5. \textbf{KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION EXCHANGE}

International and regional cooperation in education research and the sharing of knowledge ensures that policy makers, practitioners, and researchers can tap on intellectual resources and knowledge from other countries, jurisdictions and institutions. “Knowledge sharing” is distinct from

“knowledge transfer” or “knowledge management”. According to Korea Development Institute (KDI) and the OECD, “effective knowledge sharing is demand-driven and involves interaction amongst peers.”45 Through knowledge sharing, policy makers can learn from the successes and failures of others and adapt those lessons to implement policies in their local context. In addition, networks in specific areas can help ensure that practitioners and researchers are kept up to date on the latest developments and where necessary, can interact to further their understanding in their areas of interest. It allows research and knowledge to have practical benefit and avoid being locked up in “ivory towers”.

To respond to this need, UNESCO Bangkok established the Education Research Institutes Network in the Asia Pacific (ERI-Net) in 2009 to facilitate regional collaboration among education research institutions in the region. The network currently consists of 16 institutional members from 15 countries. Each year, members conduct research on one or two specific topics of significance to education in most countries of the Asia Pacific region. At the annual ERI-Net seminar, members discuss their research findings and design the research topic or topics for the year ahead. Since 2009, ERI-Net members have carried out research in the following areas: impact of the financial crisis on higher education in Asia and the Pacific, use of ICT in universities, international student mobility, public-private partnership in higher education and TVET and innovative approaches to human resource development as it relates to youth unemployment. By cooperating to coordinate research efforts, researchers from different backgrounds can each lend their own perspectives to enrich the knowledge base on the most pressing areas in education policy.

At the global level, the international education and development communities are increasingly concerned with establishing the post-2015 development agenda. The world has changed since the MDG and EFA goals were set in 2000 and the new agenda can only be set with the cooperation of multiple stakeholders in the international development arena. As the UN agency responsible for the education portfolio, UNESCO is helping to provide the platforms to discuss the post-2015 agenda. For example, UNESCO co-convened (with UNICEF) the “Post-2015 Global Consultation on Education” from December 2012 to February 2013.46 This web-based consultation was open to the public and culminated in the “Global Meeting of the Thematic Consultation on Education in the Post-2015 Development Agenda” in Dakar, Senegal.47 At the regional level, UNESCO Bangkok has held two expert meetings and one regional consultation to gather stakeholder perspectives on the path towards and beyond the expiration of the MDG and EFA goals in 2015. Ultimately, the global agenda

---

for development has to be built upon the collective needs and priorities of many different stakeholders. These consultations provide a platform for those needs and priorities to be voiced and for participants to also share and understand contrasting perspectives of other stakeholders in the process.

The widespread use of ICTs has increased the viability of online platforms to archive and exchange knowledge on education, either through the expansion of existing networks or creation of new platforms. By harnessing technology, such platforms have the benefit of being constantly updated and being highly interactive through the use of online forums. Two such platforms are UNESCO’s National Education Systems and Policies in Asia Pacific (NESPAP) Open Platform and the International Council for Education in Teaching (ICET)’s Global Education First Online Catalytic Community. Both of these platforms provide stakeholders in education a means of finding the right information, the latest developments, and even the right experts for issues in education that concern them.

To ensure that important areas in education receive continued attention, there are platforms that are specialized in particular focus areas. These facilitate international cooperation in areas that are of mutual concern and are useful to policy-makers, researchers and all other stakeholders in those areas. The Network for International Policies and Cooperation in Education and Training (NORRAG) and UNESCO’s Network on Education Quality Monitoring in the Asia-Pacific (NEQMAP) are two such examples.

NORRAG, for example, is a platform for the analysis of aid and international development in the education and training sector. It supports and promotes discussion and disseminates timely information on international education and training polices, especially in the context of international development cooperation. In line with global efforts to develop a post-2015 education agenda, NORRAG has made “post-2015” one of the key themes in its work. Whilst its primary tool remains its six-monthly publication, NORRAG News, the network has also started using a blog and social media (Twitter and Facebook) to improve engagement with its users and to provide a higher level of interactivity that was previously not possible.

NEQMAP was founded in 2013 in response to the need for more dialogue on issues of monitoring educational quality in the Asia-Pacific region. Whilst collaborative efforts were already taking place,
these often happened on an ad-hoc, bilateral basis or via regional seminars and research. NEQMAP serves as an institutionalized platform for countries and institutions to learn from each other and synergize efforts to look at how student learning assessments can be utilized to improve the quality of education in countries of the Asia-Pacific.\textsuperscript{52} By formalizing collaboration in a network, an institutional space is given to facilitate the exchange of knowledge on the monitoring of educational quality. Through NEQMAP, there could also be multilateral efforts to conduct research on specific issues, similar to the manner in which ERI-Net coordinates annual topics for research.

Whilst knowledge exchange has long existed through publications, seminars, bilateral collaborations, and other means, tackling the education challenges of tomorrow requires a level of knowledge exchange and sharing that is more interactive inclusive and structured. Advancements in ICT and – more importantly – the widespread use of ICT have created new methods of information exchange. However, formal networks like NORRAG and NEQMAP, as well as others such as the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (ANREC) that bring together multiple stakeholders from multiple countries to collaborate on areas of common interest and to provide additional support for countries that require it, are perhaps even more important. These networks allow the experiences and research from one institution or country to be consistently shared and debated with a wide audience and are in the interest of all who work in the field of education.

6. CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

Yet another modality to promote cooperation in education is capacity development. Capacity development has been a fundamental modality of international cooperation in education development for more than 70 years and continues to form a large part of the work of several development and aid agencies. However, there have been significant changes in the way that capacity development has been approached and interpreted through more recent international discourse as well as in its implementation through a variety of international development projects.

In recent years there has been an important debate among the international community on rethinking capacity development as part of the mandate of intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations and bilateral agencies. While there is a general consensus that capacity development remains essential to international development, it has been increasingly recognized that international efforts in this field must be in line with the national strategies of Member States. A prominent trend in thinking in this field is that there is a need to build on existing capacity rather than starting from scratch. There has also been a renewed emphasis on strengthening the capacity at the level of organizational management in order to create a greater and longer lasting impact in the education system as a whole. This change in thinking rose from the perception that too many

\textsuperscript{52} NEQMAP (2013). Inaugural Statement of NEQMAP.
activities focused on building the capacity of individuals rather than strengthening the systems and processes of organizations such as Ministries of Education\textsuperscript{53}. Much of this re-thinking has occurred in the context of the shift in development assistance towards sector-wide approaches (SWAps), which emphasize building the capacity of recipient countries for system management rather than for the management of individual projects. In countries with SWAps in place in the education sector, pooled funds are often established for this purpose.\textsuperscript{54}

According to De Grauwe (2009), there are three points in this fundamental re-thinking of capacity development. First of all, there is the need to shift away from the assumption that countries have no capacity and require technical assistance from other countries in order to build this capacity at a foundational level. Indeed, evidence from the OECD also supports the view that capacity is not enhanced successfully when starting from zero and suggests the change in terminology from “capacity building” to “capacity development”\textsuperscript{55}. Secondly, a multi-level approach to capacity development must be recognized. This suggests that the focus of capacity development activities must shift from the individual to look at the institutional and organizational levels. The lack of capacity at Ministry level has also been increasingly acknowledged. According to the World Bank, training at this level has not had the desired impact, especially in countries facing structural changes such as decentralization and high turnover in human resources\textsuperscript{56}. In addition, the wider socio-political context must also be incorporated in organizational change, notably “the social and political dynamics of organizational change, including the formal and informal systems that affect institutional capacity and change”\textsuperscript{57}. Finally the third aspect of re-thinking refers to placing the State at the heart of capacity development in its role as “an indispensable actor for development”\textsuperscript{58}.

Drawing from the evolution of capacity development in international discourse, there is growing consensus that this multi-dimensional process requires the engagement and interaction between several levels: individuals, organizations, institutions and the wider context as four complementary dimensions as shown in Figure 2:

\textsuperscript{53} De Grauwe, A. (2009). Without capacity, there is no development. Paris: UNESCO-IIEP.
UNESCO as an organization has now placed its emphasis on systems and structures when it comes to its capacity development work and plans to continue in the future. For instance, the Capacity Development for Education for All Programme is an example of how UNESCO focuses on the institutional and organizational architecture for education governance, management and delivery. This is reflected in the programme’s four thematic areas of work, which consist of sector-wide policy and planning, teacher education policy, literacy and non-formal education and technical and vocational education and training.\(^{59}\)

Another trend in capacity development has been the increased use of volunteering programmes as a means to provide technical assistance at several levels. While in the past international volunteers were placed overseas to work at the level of service delivery such as English language training, they have become increasingly specialized and are often working within public institutions such as education Ministries, councils and teacher training institutes. Indeed, there is a growing recognition of volunteering as playing a key role in development cooperation and particularly in working towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.\(^{60}\)

Worldwide, leading volunteer-sending agencies such as the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and NGOs such as VSO have been placing highly skilled volunteers to work in education systems at various levels, to take up positions that are increasingly focused on strengthening the capacity of national government staff. Another unique aspect of these two organizations in particular is the

---


emphasis on South-South volunteering, whereby a highly skilled volunteer from one developing country volunteers in another and hence challenges the misconception that volunteering is solely based on the traditional North-South relationship.

Looking more closely at the Asia-Pacific region, there are a variety of major players in terms of volunteer-sending programmes that operate under the auspices of Ministries of Foreign Affairs or government aid agencies. The Japanese Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV), for instance, is just one of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency’s (JICA) volunteer programmes, which aims to work in accordance with its other development projects and is seen as complementary to its Overseas Development Assistance programme. Its focus on education has also increased over the years, growing from 9.1% of its focus in JOCV activities in 1975 to 44.9% in 2005. In Korea, KOICA’s World Friends Korea (WFK) programme, which is made up of several volunteer programmes, presents another example in the East Asia region where volunteers work on issues such as curriculum development, or establishing skills certification systems in technical and vocational education and training. Other examples also include AusAID’s Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) and Australian Volunteers for Development (AVI) programmes, as well as the New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad programme.

These trends in volunteering demonstrate how technical assistance and capacity development are increasingly taking place at a variety of levels, from the grassroots level to Ministry level, and that international volunteers are playing an important role in implementing national strategies and goals in international development. The link between volunteering programmes, capacity development and the broader theme of international cooperation in education is becoming increasingly relevant.

Not only do they allow for technical and human capital to be invested directly by engaging with national counterparts over longer-term periods of time, but they also highlight the relationship between countries in order to develop the capacity of national education systems.

6. CONCLUSION

As countries of the Asia-Pacific region move towards the post-2015 era, there is every indication that the forms of cooperation outlined in this paper will become increasingly prominent. Much of this is a function of growing regionalization and globalization which are impacting all sectors of development. But as argued by the High-Level Panel (HLP) of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015


Development Agenda, “the most important transformative shift is towards a new spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability that must underpin the post-2015 agenda.”\(^6\) According to the HLP, this renewed spirit of partnership is anchored in the simple fact that people and countries are linked together via the commonality of humanity. In order to advance the global development agenda, national governments must work closer together, along with local authorities, international institutions, the business sector, civil society organizations, foundations, scientists and academics and people themselves.\(^6^\)

In the realm of education, students and academics have long been crossing borders, while there has been long-standing interest on the part of national governments to examine their education policies in lights of international norms and standards and to compare their performance with that of neighbouring countries and jurisdictions. What is new is the intensity and growing reach of these efforts. Within a context of growing regional integration and against a backdrop of international and regional standards, countries/jurisdictions of the Asia-Pacific region (and beyond) are increasingly looking to benchmark their education policies with others in the region and beyond, to collaborate via knowledge sharing and networking, to benchmark and to support capacity development in a systematic manner. As we look towards 2015 and beyond, there is every reason to believe that these trends will continue.

---


\(^6^2\) Ibid
REFERENCES


China’s University and College Admission System (CUCAS).  http://www.cucas.edu.cn/HomePage/content/content_253.shtml  (Accessed on 04 July 2013)


IIEP (2013). The new modalities for development cooperation in the Education Sector.  http://www.iiep.unesco.org/news/singleg/1eafecf2a0.html?tx_ttnews%5Bp%5D=1371705170&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=737&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=81  (Accessed on 03 July 2013)


NEQMAP (2013). Inaugural Statement of NEQMAP.


NORRAG (2013) NORRAG Concept Note.


SCO University (2009).  
http://uni-sco.org/ (Accessed 10 July 2013)


UN (1948). The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.  


UNESCO Bangkok (2013) NEQMAP Concept Note prepared for the NEQMAP inaugural meeting.


World We Want Website for the Post-2015 Global Consultation on Education  