ACHIEVING THE ASIAN CENTURY THROUGH THE HARMONIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST ASIA: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POLICY AND PROCESS IN THAILAND AND VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Public policies that encourage regional, integrated higher education areas are emerging in Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab Gulf, and South East Asia. This research study examines the latter by exploring the policies and processes of harmonization in Thailand and Vietnam. The foci are (1) an assessment of the status of efforts to harmonize the higher education systems in Thailand and Vietnam with those of other ASEAN member nations, and (2) an analysis of the implications of these efforts for educational leaders. The study was conducted using qualitative methodologies and data sources that included document analysis, interviews, and focus groups; 36 government and educational leaders participated. The study produced multiple findings. First, participants in both nations shared similar perceptions regarding the benefits of harmonization. Second, minimal coordination and cooperation existed between governments and between governments and their universities. Third, multiple barriers impeded harmonization. Fourth, there was an absence of an agreed upon quality assurance framework. These findings reveal significant implications for Thailand, Vietnam, and the ASEAN region, including but not limited to the need to: expedite degree recognition efforts, increase funding for harmonization at national and institutional levels, expand reciprocal relationships with ASEAN universities, and develop educational theories that emphasize the strengths and traditions of South East Asia.

Keywords: Asian century, high education, Southeast Asia, policy and process, harmonization

The lights in the auditorium are dimmed and the conductor raises a baton. The musicians ready their instruments. The baton begins to move and the violins gently play the first notes. Soon they are joined by cellos, violas, and basses. Flutes, clarinets, and piccolos quickly contribute their unique sounds. A variety of wind and percussion instruments join the score. Within minutes a harmonious symphony is produced by musicians masterfully playing divergent instruments.

Hoping to emulate the beauty of a symphony, nations and regional alliances across the globe are joining together to harmonize higher education

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systems within economic and geographic regions. Like a flute, violin, or trumpet, the intent is to maintain the distinctive qualities of national systems while enjoying the strength of an integrated whole. This process represents a rapidly emerging phenomenon within higher education. Motivated by goals that include the creation of regional higher education areas to facilitate the movement of students and faculty across borders, the mutual recognition of academic programs, the unification of educational policies and structures, the development of human resources, the production and dissemination of research, and, ultimately, the growth and enhanced competitiveness of national economies, such areas are emerging in Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the Arab Gulf, and South East Asia (Gaston, 2014) [1].

This paper examines the status of harmonization efforts in the latter, focusing specifically on Thailand and Vietnam. The paper begins with an overview of regional harmonization initiatives, followed by a description of both the conceptual framework and the methodology employed for the research study. The findings of the study are then reported and their meanings are discussed in terms of theory, research, and practice. Based on the findings and their meanings, the paper concludes with specific recommendations for educational leaders in Thailand and Vietnam, and potentially for educational leaders in South East Asia.

REGIONAL ARMONIZATION INITIATIVES

Higher education reforms are often driven by perceived national needs. Foremost among these are meeting local demands and building competitive national knowledge-based economies (Chen & Dahlman, 2005 [2]; Forest & Altbach, 2011 [3]; Stromquist & Monkman, 2000). Within developing nations, higher education models from the West are often adopted and adapted to achieve system reforms (Altbach, 2011; Forest & Altbach, 2011 [4]; Hazelkorn, 2014) [5]. The following paragraphs—starting with the Bologna Process in Europe—briefly highlight the proliferation of regional harmonization initiatives, often through the adaptation of Western models.

Europe

Much has been written about the European Union's Bologna Process so minimal space is devoted to it here. However, it is apparent that since its inception in 1999 the Bologna Process has become the primary model for regional integration and higher education reform (Benelux Bologna Secretariat, 2009) [6]. The unified system of the Bologna Process, with its articulated guiding standards, appeals to many nations and regional or para-

governmental agencies (Gaston, 2014). The subsequently discussed regions—to which more attention is given within the paper—clearly appear to be adapting the Bologna Process to harmonize higher education systems. Some, as will be noted, appear to be merging the Bologna Process with aspects of the American model of higher education.

Africa

National economies in Africa often became less competitive during the decades that followed decolonization (Charlier, 2007 [7]; Global University Network for Innovation, 2007; Onana, Oyewole, Teferra, Beneitone, Gonzalez, & Wagenaar, 2014). To revitalize not only economies but also societies, the reform of higher education frequently became the focus of national leaders due to the significant role that higher education plays in "the development of modern societies, enhancing social, cultural and economic development and training the leaders of tomorrow" (Tuning Africa, 2014, p.1). Member nations of the African Union began to benchmark their higher education systems against the Bologna model (Charlier, 2007). The desire to create an integrated higher education system was driven both by a transnational African sense of shared histories and language and by historical connections with former European colonizing powers (Gaston, 2014). Thus the

Tuning Africa project, in collaboration with the European Union, was initiated in 2008 (Tuning Africa, 2014). The purpose was to develop policies and practices that facilitate regionally comparable academic programs and degrees, not only within Africa but also with Europe. Structural reforms were also implemented to adopt various Western-based postsecondary practices. Some of these reforms—such as the three-year baccalaureate and the curricular changes associated with adopting such a degree—emulated the Bologna Process (Racelma, 2012). To date, however, there is extensive variance across the continent regarding the adoption of all components of the Bologna Process.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Similar reforms occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean, where government and educational leaders were quick to respond to the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. They cooperated with European nations to promote regional integration in higher education and they agreed to establish by 2015 a common area for higher education between Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean. National representatives continue to meet regularly to speed the full creation of a common space for higher education, focusing primarily on institutional cooperation, student and faculty

mobility, and joint degrees. As Cetina (2005) [8] notes, such close cooperation may enable the ongoing development of higher education on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

The Arab Gulf

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region consists of six Arab nations: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [which is commonly referred to as UAE]. The GCC was formed in 1981 (The Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf, 2014) and based on the belief that "organizational cohesion depends on close similarity among group members" (Tetreault, 2013, p. 152). Lawson (1997) [9] describes these similarities as "identical systems, identical internal and foreign policies, identical ideologies, identical aspirations, and identical human, social, and political problems" (p. 15). In 2012 the founding member nations proposed unifying the region to enhance cooperation and to protect the area from upheaval occurring in the Middle East (Saudi-US Relations Information Service, 2012). Article 15 of the Economic Agreement between the GCC States indicated that member states were to take measures to "achieve integration between GCC universities in all fields" (The Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf, 2001, p. 10). In addition, the council

encouraged the mobility and exchange of students and faculty members to maximize the integration process (de Prado Yepes, 2006) [10].

The Arab Gulf nations are now implementing a wide range of educational reforms on both the national level and the regional GCC level. Throughout the region American-based educational policies are seen as preferable to other Western models. Consequently, the American model of higher education is being widely adopted to create a reformed, modernized, and knowledge-based GCC society. According to Mazawi (2010, p. 212) [11], "Gulf educational policies are drawn into the orbit of American educational policy making through the active involvement of think tanks and consultants." Adaptation of the American model thus appears to be increasing throughout the Arab Gulf, and is coupled with movement toward—although inconsistent at times—the regional harmonization of higher education.

South East Asia

Regional harmonization initiatives have occurred in South East Asia under the auspices of multiple organizations. In 1965 the Southeast Asia Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) was established to promote regional cooperation in education, science and culture. Shortly thereafter, in 1967, the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded to promote economic growth, accelerate social progress, and protect stability in the region. Although there were efforts after the creation of ASEAN to find common ground for educational systems, not until the year 2000 did ASEAN member nations launch an initiative related to the promotion of higher education development in the region. The Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) was an effort, at the macro level, to narrow the gap between the six initial member nations and the four newly admitted nations. In addition, the ASEAN University Network (AUN), worked since its establishment in 1995 to strengthen member institutions through seminars, workshops, and technical forums for international cooperation (Ratananukul, 2009). Finally, regional centers under SEAMEO—such as the Thai SEAMEO Regional Institute of Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED) and the SEAMEO Regional Language Center (SEAMEO-RELC)—have been extensively involved in activities related to training, research, and policy analysis.

Current macro level activities include the engagement of ASEAN with other regions to promote educational cooperation. Among these initiatives are University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP, 1993), Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM, 1996), ASEAN-EU University Network Program (AUNP, 2001), Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN, 2004), and relations between ASEAN and the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (2009). At the micro level, numerous universities within ASEAN member nations are attempting to integrate higher education systems through projects that promote academic cooperation, student and faculty exchange, information dissemination, and joint research. Interestingly, Yavaprabhas (2009) argues that although universities are actively involved in promoting research collaboration and student and faculty mobility, the cooperation between national governments for a closer regional integration of higher education is yet to be emphasized. Perhaps the most discussed initiative in South East Asia though is the AUN effort to create the Credit Transfer System in 2015 to enhance mobility and to facilitate student exchange among member universities. Not surprisingly, the participants of this research study frequently mentioned this initiative.

Viewed from a global perspective, the number, scope, and vitality of regional harmonization initiatives appears to be growing. This paper contributes to the body of literature devoted to the harmonization of higher education. Because little has been

written about the phenomenon in South East Asia, and even less about it in Thailand and Vietnam, our intent is to add to the literature, explicate the policies and processes associated with the harmonization of higher education in Thailand and Vietnam, and hopefully inspire further academic analysis across the region.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework employed for this research study is an amalgam of Bess and Dee's depiction of planned and emergent change. Bess and Dee define planned change as "an intentional effort to improve organizational processes through the implementation of new ideas based on scientific knowledge" (2008, p. 797) [12]. Conversely, they define emergent change as "decentralized local adaptation" to external situations (p. 798). Whereas planned change is implemented "top down" by senior administrators, emergent change typically begins "bottom up" and reflects the actions and participation of individuals at all levels of the organization. As Bess and Dee note, in emergent change "the role of leadership shifts from directing and controlling change to facilitating creativity and experimentation among others" (p. 809). Although planned and emergent change may appear to be mutually exclusive, when conceptualized

together they offer an analytical lens that contributes to both theoretical and practical considerations.

METHODOLOGY

A case study research design was utilized for this research study. The study was accordingly conducted using qualitative methodologies and data sources that included document analysis, interviews, and focus groups. For document analysis the researchers analyzed governmental and para-governmental (e.g., ASEAN, AUN, AEC) documents. For interviews and focus groups the study employed criterion sampling; only key national and university leaders with critical knowledge of harmonization initiatives were selected. To date, 36 individuals have participated in the study. The researcher used a standardized interview protocol for all sessions and audio-taped each interview and focus group. The audiotapes were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. The researcher observed multiple steps for coding, including the identification of preliminary codes by all researchers, the selection of a single list of codes agreed upon by the research team, and the coding of all transcripts by two researchers. Two research questions guided the study: (1) What is the background and current status of efforts in Thailand and Vietnam to harmonize higher education with ASEAN, and (2)

What are the implications of these efforts for Thai and Vietnamese educational leaders?

FINDINGS

Analysis of the data revealed the presence of four primary themes: (1) participants shared similar perceptions regarding the benefits of harmonization, (2) minimal coordination and cooperation existed, (3) multiple barriers impeded harmonization, and (4) absence of a quality assurance framework. These themes emerged under two broad categories that span both government and education in Thailand and Vietnam, namely, the *policies* associated with the harmonization of higher education, and the *processes* associated with the harmonization of higher education. Themes one and two reflected policy considerations, while themes three and four highlighted process considerations. The findings are subsequently reported under these categories.

Policy

In Thailand, three organizations are involved in the implementation of national higher education policy: The Office of Higher Education Committee (OHEC), university councils, and professional councils. According to a national policy maker who participated in the research study, OHEC prepares the long-term strategy (15 years) for higher education, university councils

direct the program approval process, curriculum development, and oversee student enrollments, and professional councils, as national agencies, were initially responsible for quality assurance within the disciplines and are currently highly influential organizations when universities seek to launch new academic programs. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education implements policy for nearly all colleges and universities. However, policy for specialized institutions is implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and by Post and Communication.

As mentioned in the methodology section, key government and educational leaders were interviewed for this research study. The participants were highly knowledgeable about regional harmonization and often preferred to speak about policy considerations connected to harmonization. Not surprisingly, their comments included public policy considerations at the national level and institutional policy considerations at the university level.

Similar perceived benefits

The first primary theme revealed that similar perceptions existed among government and educational leaders in Thailand and Vietnam regarding the benefits of harmonizing higher

18

education in South East Asia. Multiple benefits appeared within the theme, including the perceptions that harmonization will: better prepare students for regional and global competition, increase student and faculty mobility, expand trans-national degree recognition and joint degree programs, strengthen economic competitiveness, and enhance the global status of ASEAN. Each perceived benefit consequently represented a sub-theme. According to the participants, the perceived benefits collectively and individually inspired the creation of public and institutional policy initiatives to facilitate harmonization.

A senior executive at a leading Thai university succinctly addressed the perception that harmonization would better prepare students for regional and global competition, while also acknowledging the fourth benefit (enhancing the global status of ASEAN members), when he stated:

> Higher education is important in producing manpower to work in the ASEAN era. We need to do the paradigm shift because we are not now working for only Thailand but for 600 million people of ASEAN…. We must emphasize quality that can compete among ASEAN countries.

The emphasis here was "manpower," a synonym for human capital development. The initial rationale for this emphasis—found in the second sentence of the quotation—was that higher education must prepare students who will compete as ASEAN citizens on the global stage. He quickly noted, however, that ASEAN nations compete with each other. Thus higher education in Thailand—and, concomitantly, higher education within each ASEAN nation—must enable students to compete globally and regionally. When both of these are achieved the status of ASEAN members will be collectively raised, a benefit that is more fully addressed later in this section.

Participants in Vietnam often framed the benefit of preparing students for regional and global competition within the context of prestige. According to the participants, Vietnam committed itself to harmonization so the nation must fulfill the obligation to avoid losing prestige. As one participant noted, Vietnamese people "try not to lose prestige in the eyes of other people." Thus, while prestige keeps Vietnam on track to integrate its higher education system into ASEAN the resulting benefit is better preparation of students. Participants frequently stated that this benefit extends to all levels of education, ranging from pre-school to higher education.

The second benefit was the perception that harmonization will increase student and faculty mobility. Nearly every participant spoke about this benefit. The president of a Thai university noted the importance of a program launched in response to harmonization:

Student and faculty mobility—a target number of students going out to experience in the countries of the region was set up as a policy of our university and gradually increased to achieve networking and knowing the leading universities in all nine countries of ASEAN. There were road-trip programs giving opportunity for students to interact with other country's universities such as Vietnam. In addition, a more academic action like bilateral courses of comparative culture among four diverse-culture ASEAN countries (namely Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, and Cambodia) brought students to visit village inside the countries. These helped improve students' view of educational achievement and benchmarking.

Another participant added:

When these people [visiting professors] came to visit the university, there was an obvious change in university circumstance owing to these people brought new ideas, life styles, and more English communication.

The concept of student mobility was strongly supported by a national policy maker in Thailand, who emphasized that students studying abroad, particularly in ASEAN countries, would significantly strengthen the internationalization of universities. To achieve these goals, policy makers aim for as many as one-third of all university students to study abroad in the near future. In addition, national policy makers stressed the importance of high quality student experiences, as echoed by a participant who stated, "It will be useful for students if they can learn how people think of their lives, because this is a benefit to learn how to work with other people."

The data revealed a strong desire in Vietnam to explore higher education beyond the country. Participants stated that faculty and student exchange with other ASEAN nations would make people better aware of their own system, i.e., comparison with other systems would offer the chance to improve higher education in Vietnam. They also indicated that student and faculty exchange—in an era of increasing communication capabilities and the movement of people across borders—would better facilitate subsequent mobility for economic

purposes. Because of these perceived benefits, the Vietnamese government is working to ensure that higher education curricula are increasingly compatible with those of other ASEAN nations.

This leads to the third perceived benefit that harmonization will expand trans-national degree recognition and joint degree programs. Although participants in Thailand and Vietnam acknowledged that universities within their nations increased the number of joint degree programs in recent years, they uniformly declared that regional harmonization would broaden trans-national degree recognition and burgeon the number of joint degree programs. Concerning the latter, they especially anticipated growth within the region. Participants in Vietnam, for example, indicated that ASEAN higher education institutions could learn more from each other than from Western institutions, and at much lower expenses. This was despite the facts that many universities within ASEAN collaborate with Western institutions, and that ASEAN students and families often prefer Western universities over those in South East Asia. A government official in Vietnam indicated that for a variety of reasons it is worth collaborating with prestigious ASEAN universities to discover "how they got the current status." This included the rationale that Vietnamese and ASEAN universities share similar cultural heritages, are

located in the same geographic location, and, perhaps more importantly, prestigious ASEAN universities achieved status recently whereas Western universities typically gained prestige decades and even centuries ago. In Thailand, trans-national degree recognition and joint degree programs were seen as crucial components for economic development. Participants pointed to the national strategic policy known as "Education Hub" which provides funding for these programs and for other educational initiatives such as graduate scholarships for foreign students and summer camps for student and faculty exchange.

The fourth benefit—the perception that the harmonization of higher education would strengthen economic competitiveness—was evidenced in prior quotes. The data demonstrated two facets of this perception. First, harmonization will enable ASEAN to leverage the individual economic strengths of member nations. For example, a Vietnamese participant suggested that the regional harmonization of higher education would leverage oceanography in the Philippines, services and finance in Singapore, and industrial growth in Malaysia. Second, because ASEAN is composed of nations with relatively small economies, cooperation in the area of higher education would expedite the ability of the region to compete as a

block with China, India, and other areas.

These economic advantages, when coupled with the perceived benefits specified in the preceding paragraphs, manifested the fifth benefit, namely, the perception that harmonization will enhance the global status of ASEAN. In numerous interviews participants stated that educational cooperation will not only benefit member nations but also strengthen the region as a whole. Although participants proudly spoke about their home countries and universities they were aware of and empathized with the growing ASEAN identity. They consistently connected regional integration of higher education to the status of ASEAN within the global community. A Vietnamese policy maker effectively captured the dual nature of national and regional identity when he declared that policy makers should "consider Vietnam in its relation to other ASEAN countries."

Minimal coordination and cooperation

Despite the importance placed by participants on enhancing ASEAN status through the harmonization of higher education, the data revealed that minimal coordination and cooperation existed in Thailand and Vietnam. This included intra-national (government-to-universities) realities and international (government-to-government) realities.

As the second primary theme that emerged in the study, this finding seemingly countered the benefits outlined by participants in the preceding section.

Multiple reasons were offered for the discrepancy. In Thailand, the foremost reason proffered by the participants was the duplicitous nature of the governance structure for higher education, which was previously detailed. For example, although the OHEC maintains an executive position with regard to higher education it does not have budgetary authority for higher education, leaving universities the autonomy to decide whether or not they will comply with OHEC harmonization initiatives. When coupled with the oversight roles played by university councils and professional councils, the end result—according to the participants—is that the harmonization process in Thailand will be driven by individual universities whose leaders recognize the value of OHEC harmonization initiatives. Stated one participant, "The situation [conflicting roles] undermines flexibility and caps the creativity of the education system." Duplicitous governance means Thai universities will determine if and how to transition toward regional harmonization.

The structure of the Vietnamese government translated into less

duplicity with regard to higher education governance. However, the participants indicated that minimal cooperation and coordination for harmonization exists between the government in Hanoi and other ASEAN member nations. They attributed this to the frequency with which Vietnamese representatives are assigned to ASEAN and other regional organizations. Coordinating harmonization initiatives with other governments was seen as problematic, and trans-national cooperation as ultimately impaired, because representatives are changed potentially on an annual basis.

Process

We turn now to the two primary themes associated with the processes of harmonizing higher education in South East Asia: the presence of multiple barriers and the need for quality assurance.

Multiple barriers

The third theme that emerged from the data was the indication that multiple barriers impede harmonization in Thailand and Vietnam. The following paragraphs briefly highlight the eight barriers identified by the participants. Barriers are presented according to the frequency with which they were mentioned by participants, with the most frequently mentioned barrier occurring first.

Participants in both Thailand and Vietnam overwhelmingly stated that the largest barrier to regional harmonization of higher education is the lack of degree recognition. Simply put, they stated that harmonization cannot occur unless degrees are consistently and completely recognized throughout the region. They typically attributed the lack of degree recognition to minimal cooperation and coordination—again both intra-national and international—which was previously addressed as a sub-theme.

Second, participants pointed to the use of multiple languages in the region. Although divergent languages are a reflection of the historic and cultural diversity of the region, they noted that student and faculty exchange are particularly complicated by this reality. Connected to the use of language was the third barrier, namely, insufficient knowledge of English. Because English is increasingly becoming not only the international language but also the language of the academy, government and educational leaders in Thailand and Vietnam frequently stated that minimal proficiency in English inhibits ASEAN students and faculty from competing on the global stage, diminishes regional economic competitiveness, and restricts the harmonization process.

Fourth, participants identified the lack of funding for harmonization initiatives as an obstacle. Similar to the

first barrier, this was associated with the reality that within the region minimal cooperation and coordination exists with regard to harmonization. Specifically, participants indicated that more financial resources should be made available for harmonization initiatives by governments and universities, and that funding should be coordinated between the two entities to maximize efficiency.

The fifth impediment to the integration of higher education was captured in the phrase of one participant who stated that there is "much talk but little action." Numerous others in Thailand and Vietnam echoed this comment. They highlighted the plethora of meetings held by regional organizations but decried slow or nonexistent progress.

The sixth, seventh, and eighth barriers to harmonization were related but distinct. The Thai and Vietnamese participants in this study repeatedly stated that ASEAN member nations are at different levels of educational development (sixth), different levels of economic development (seventh), and are governed by a diversity of political systems and beliefs (eighth). These factors individually and collectively impeded progress toward regional harmonization of higher education. Participants acknowledged the impact of these differences but did not offer

recommendations to reduce the hurdle they create.

Absence of a quality assurance framework

A standard quality assurance system for ASEAN higher education is believed to be requisite to bridging the gaps between individual nations and institutions with diverse cultures and resources (Ratananukul, AUN-QA, 2004). The standard would ensure that students from ASEAN nations receive high quality and relevant education while their qualifications are internationally recognized by governments, employers, and other institutions (Harman, 2000). Although the Bangkok Accord on AUN-QA was a hallmark effort to develop a quality assurance system for the overall academic standards of ASEAN universities, the persistent absence of a regionally accepted framework is the fourth theme that emerged in the data.

The quality assurance movement in ASEAN (AUN Quality Assurance Guideline, 2004) applies to multiple levels of higher education, including institutional, national, and international. According to the participants, however, there is a need for collective coordination among these levels. The benefits of coordination would span the creation of a solid platform for harmonization, the expansion of joint degree and dual degree programs

among ASEAN members, and student receipt of degrees that are regionally recognized and thus contribute to greater economic competition.

According to a policy maker in Thailand, movement toward quality assurance is occurring at varying speeds among Thai universities. The 2014 rescheduling of the academic calendar to correspond with the Western academic year (e.g., across Thailand the first semester now begins in August rather than June) will eventually better facilitate quality assurance. However, he adds that much remains to be done:

Thailand has done a lot and improved at the same time because some universities perform very well. However, we have some universities that are laggard. So we have a gap between universities in Thailand and we are working to reduce the gap.

Regional coordination, through an accepted quality assurance framework, would expedite the process.

Participants in Vietnam stated that like other higher education systems in ASEAN, Vietnam's higher education system must be accredited for quality, especially with regard to curricular development and teaching. Many universities in Vietnam use the ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance guidelines to design and assess curricula. In addition, English learners are currently assessed based on European standards, with higher education faculty also assessed by these standards. And although a number of university departments were assessed and deemed to have reached ASEAN standards, the departments were never officially recognized.

Together, these situations highlight the need for a regionally recognized quality assurance framework. While multiple ASEAN nations are working to establish their own national qualifications framework, Vietnam is cooperating with ASEAN to develop a common qualifications framework for the whole region. To this end a participant stated that the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework aims to specify "what a degree in one member country is in comparison with the same degree in other member countries."

Finally, the prevalence in South East Asia of two global trends—the adaptation of the American credit system and the influence of the Bologna Process—contribute to the need for a regional quality assurance framework. Participants observed, for example, that higher education in Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia was influenced by the British model, the Philippines adapted the U.S. model of higher education, and Vietnam was influenced by French higher education. One participant

declared that the American credit system and the Bologna Process "affect ASEAN education systems before these countries can affect each other." Consequently, nearly every participant commented that a quality assurance framework is essential to harmonize higher education in South East Asia.

DISCUSSION

The findings that emerged in this study hold meaning for multiple perspectives. The paragraphs that follow explore these meanings in relation to theory and research. Their meanings in terms of practice are discussed in the subsequent recommendations section. This section begins with an analysis of the findings through the lens of the conceptual framework.

Theory

Bess and Dee (2008) posit that organizational change may be described as planned or emergent. The former is associated with organizational leaders who implement change based on "scientific knowledge" (p. 797). According to Bess and Dee, leaders who implement planned change carefully analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, scan the external environments for opportunities and threats, search for proven methods to navigate the course ahead, and strategically exercise the desired steps. This description,

therefore, denotes forethought, intentionality, and a top down approach. The latter is associated with members of the organization who bring about change in response to external circumstances. With emergent change members of the organization, perhaps at every level of the organization, respond to situations beyond (and often within) the organization. They begin to exert leadership to enable the organization to adapt and ultimately to succeed in the midst of new circumstances. This description denotes adaptation, reaction, and a bottom up approach.

The findings of this study suggest that both planned and emergent change, with regard to higher education integration, are occurring in Thailand and Vietnam. Leaders within regional organizations and national governments are proactively and intentionally working to build the requisite frameworks for the regional harmonization of higher education. At the same time, university leaders—both administrators and faculty—are launching initiatives such as joint and dual degree programs, study abroad programs, collaborative research, and other forms of student and faculty exchange. The findings convey that both types of change are essential. They indicate, moreover, that planned and emergent change are not mutually exclusive. Consequently, planned and emergent change, as a blended

conceptual lens for interpreting the findings, collectively indicate that leaders at multiple levels of education and policy are involved in, and necessary for, the integration with ASEAN of higher education systems in Thailand and Vietnam. [Although beyond the scope of this research study, we suspect the findings imply that multi-level leadership is similarly critical for the harmonization process across all of South East Asia.] The fusion of planned and emergent change accurately reflects the findings of this research study.

Research

As they do for theory, the findings of this study hold meaning for research. They suggest potential lines of inquiry that warrant further attention. Although space does not allow full explication of the meanings, the following paragraphs highlight lines of inquiry that are relevant not only for higher education in Thailand and Vietnam but also potentially for higher education throughout the region.

Leadership required at every level

The findings reveal, and the conceptual framework accentuates, the reality that leaders at every level of education and policy are required to implement change associated with the regional harmonization of higher education. Like a symphony, there are different instruments for leaders to play.

Leaders at regional organizations are important because they have the ability to establish frameworks for harmonization that are effective, attainable, and respective of cultural and national heritages. National policy makers are critical because they are in positions to steer the direction of higher education systems, build strategies, enact assessments to measure progress, and procure the funding that will enable institutions to succeed. And leaders at universities—both faculty and administrators—are essential because only they can implement the programs, degrees, exchanges, and collaborations that will truly integrate higher education across the region.

Universities, in fact, appear to be leading the way. As Yavaprabhas did in 2008, this study finds that universities within Thailand and Vietnam actively promote research collaborations and student and faculty mobility. In addition, the number of universities involved in these efforts is rapidly increasingly. This is in response to multiple factors, including but not limited to: the growing impact of the global knowledge economy, national policies that promote the development of human resources, the increasing emphasis on research production, the growing numbers of researchers trained in the West, and the escalating use of English as lingua franca (not only for the publication of

research but also for classroom instruction). Research exploring the potential linkages between each of these factors and harmonization, as well as possible reciprocal impacts, is worthy of attention.

Consideration of these factors and leadership roles warrants extensive, multifarious research. These factors and their impacts differ from nation to nation. The perception of how these roles should be defined also varies among nations and universities, particularly across university classifications such as teaching/research and public/private. Our study represents exploratory research; sustained, multidimensional research— that employs both quantitative and qualitative methodologies—is needed.

Cooperation and coordination needed

Like Yavaprabhas (2008), this study indicates that two ASEAN member nations still do not emphasize cooperation among national governments for greater regional integration of higher education. In addition, the study highlights that minimal coordination for harmonization exists between national governments and individual universities. So although regional policies are in place through ASEAN and other organizations, both inter-national and intra-national coordination and cooperation are

lacking. We proffer that additional research is needed to find ways to better facilitate cooperation and coordination. Although this study was conducted only in two nations, we suspect that the findings apply to much if not all of the region. Researchers need to discover mechanisms that enable cooperation and coordination while maintaining local and national identities.

LIMITATIONS

Qualitative research by nature represents substantive limitations. The paucity of literature alone, with regard to this topic, constrains the research. Framed as a case study, this study was conducted within a specific timeframe among participants who were selected based on their knowledge of the topic; the selection of other participants, or conducting the research study during a different timeframe, may have altered the findings. All of these considerations accordingly indicate that generalizability of the findings is not possible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion section explored the meaning of the findings within the context of theory and research. This section examines them within the context of practice. Specifically, the meanings of the findings are explicated in terms of recommendations that are relevant for practical application. Based on the findings and their

meanings, the researcher offers the following seven recommendations to strengthen the movement toward regional harmonization of higher education in Thailand and Vietnam, and, where relevant, in South East Asia.

First, governments and universities should increase cooperation to better facilitate harmonization. Cooperation should build on existing government-to-government and government-to-university relationships; there is no need to create new types of relationships. This preserves current institutional autonomies. For example, in Thailand the driver toward harmonization is individual universities, and the key role for the national government is building the platform through quality standards and other considerations. In Vietnam, however, universities are closely aligned with government, minimizing perhaps the need for new relationships.

Second, regional agencies, governments, and universities should collaboratively expedite degree recognition efforts. Numerous participants indicated that this is the most important step toward integration. We concur.

Third, governments should increase funding for harmonization initiatives. As many of the participants suggested, there is "much talk but little action." Although increased financial resources alone will not produce all of the desired results, and additional funds do not always equate to enhanced quality, the findings strongly suggest that more funds are needed to build frameworks, launch programs, and expedite the integration process.

Fourth, universities should prioritize harmonization initiatives. We saw evidence of this throughout Thailand and Vietnam. However, there is room for greater prioritization. The receipt of additional funds would certainly enhance the prospects.

Fifth, universities should expand reciprocal relationships with ASEAN universities while maintaining existing relationships with Western universities. As stated, this is a two-prong strategy. Harmonizing higher education necessitates extensive, active relationships among regional universities. These relationships appear to be growing, but more are needed. Similarly, to further enhance the status of ASEAN, new and existing relationships with Western universities should be emphasized.

Sixth, universities should reward both research and teaching. For faculty who desire to emphasize research, collaborative, international research should be encouraged and funded. Teaching loads may also need to be reduced to facilitate research productivity. For faculty who desire to

emphasize teaching, universities should better reward and encourage teaching effectiveness. This includes funding for on-going training in teaching effectiveness. We proffer that rewarding both research and teaching is a practical means to develop regional perspectives while preserving local traditions.

Seventh, researchers should develop educational and leadership theories that emphasize the traditions, values, strengthens, and heritages of South East Asia. Although this recommendation is presented last it potentially represents the greatest need of all. The harmonization of higher education in South East Asia offers researchers the opportunity to: examine what is unique to individual nations and the ASEAN region, test and confirm concepts and theories that build on these particularities, and present them to the world as viable alternatives to Western-based theories. May ASEAN researchers respond.

In conclusion, the perceived benefits outlined in the findings are worthwhile, and the barriers to the regional harmonization of higher education in South East Asia are surmountable. Our hope is that effective leadership at every policy and educational level in Thailand and Vietnam—as well as throughout ASEAN—will be exerted to achieve the goal, and that broad-based research will sustain the process. Counter to the dimming of the lights prior to the performance of a symphony, the lights in South East Asia are shining brighter and brighter. The question is, will the musicians produce cacophonous discord or a harmonious masterpiece?

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KỶ NGUYÊN CHÂU Á QUA HỘI NHẬP GIÁO DỤC ĐẠI HỌC KHU VỰC ĐÔNG NAM Á: PHÂN TÍCH CHÍNH SÁCH VÀ QUY TRÌNH GIÁO DỤC Ở THÁI LAN VÀ VIỆT NAM

TÓM TẮT

Chính sách giáo dục toàn cầu hiện nay đang khuyến khích việc hình thành và phát triển các khu vực hội nhập giáo dục đại học ở châu Âu, châu Phi, châu Mỹ Latin, Vùng Vịnh và khu vực Đông Nam Á. Bài nghiên cứu này xem xét việc hội nhập giáo dục Đông Nam Á qua phân tích chính sách và quy trình hội nhập ở Thái Lan và Việt Nam. Trọng tâm bài nghiên cứu bao gồm: (1) đánh giá hiện trạng những nỗ lực

của Thái Lan và Việt Nam nhằm đưa hệ thống giáo dục đại học các nước này hội nhập với các thành viên khác trong khối ASEAN và (2) phân tích ý nghĩa của những nỗ lực này nhằm tham mưu cho các nhà lãnh đạo ngành giáo dục. Bài này sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính, bao gồm phân tích tài liệu, phỏng vấn các cá nhân nắm giữ trọng trách, và thảo luận trong nhóm đa chiều. Có 36 nhà lãnh đạo chính phủ và ngành giáo dục tham gia phỏng vấn. Kết quả phân tích cho thấy: (1) Người tham gia phỏng vấn ở cả hai quốc gia đều có chung nhận thức về những lợi ích của việc hội nhập giáo dục đại học khu vực, (2) việc phối hợp và hợp tác giữa các chính phủ với nhau cũng như giữa chính phủ và các trường đại học ở mức hạn chế, (3) nhiều trở ngại đã hạn chế việc hội nhập và (4) chưa có sự thống nhất về một bộ khung bảo đảm chất lượng. Kết quả này có nhiều hàm ý cho Thái Lan, Việt Nam, và các nước trong khu vực ASEAN, cho thấy có các nhu cầu phải tăng tốc những nỗ lực nhằm công nhận bằng cấp của nhau, tăng ngân sách quốc gia và ngân sách phân bổ cho các trường dành cho các hoạt động hội nhập, mở rộng quan hệ hợp tác giữa các trường đại học trong khối ASEAN và phát triển các lý thuyết giáo dục nhấn mạnh đến các lợi thế và truyền thống của khu vực Đông Nam Á.

*   **Từ khóa:** Kỷ nguyên châu Á, giáo dục đại học, Đông Nam Á, chính sách và quy trình, hội nhập*