

ASEAN's flagship universities and regional integration initiatives

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) flagship universities in moving the agenda of regional integration forward through academic/research collaboration and cooperation.

Design/methodology/approach – Flagship universities are leading universities in the national higher education systems of countries that make up the ASEAN. This study on the ASEAN's flagship universities is based on a three-pronged strategy, namely, a literature review, analysis of websites contents, and citation of supporting pieces of evidence from other relevant studies to support arguments. Using the QS top universities in Asia 2016 listing, top 70 public universities in ASEAN were selected for investigation. In instances where public universities in a particular ASEAN country were not listed in the QS listing, a premier public university of that country was then selected for investigation.

Findings – There is a tendency for ASEAN's flagship universities to look beyond ASEAN, primarily to establish vertical collaboration, which is important to their efforts in creating their image and enhancing their reputation. As a result, academic/research collaboration among flagship universities and collaboration between these universities and other universities in ASEAN is glaringly on the low side. Interestingly, to move the regional integration agenda in ASEAN, other intermediary agencies outside of ASEAN, such as in the European Union, are very active in providing a platform for both flagship and non-flagship universities to collaborate.

Originality/value – While regional collaboration and cooperation within ASEAN and East Asia have been discussed elsewhere, this paper has utilised and expanded Douglass' (2016) idea of flagship universities to include regional relevance for the purpose of regional integration of ASEAN.

Keywords ASEAN, Quality assurance, Flagship universities, Harmonization of higher education, Regional integration, Universities collaboration, World class

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok, Thailand, with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by the founding members of ASEAN, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Secretariat, n.d.). With expanding membership, comprising Southeast Asian countries at various levels of development, ASEAN has evolved with a much-expanded scope of collaboration and cooperation in various sectors. Presently, this scope covers political-security, economic and finance, sociocultural fields, and higher education (HE). This evolution of the scope and coverage of ASEAN cooperation reflects the need to be relevant to the changing circumstances within and outside of Southeast Asia. Despite the periodic adaptation and adjustment, ASEAN still hold to the seven basic aims and objectives, with three of these continued to be expressed in terms of three thrusts, namely, collaboration, mutual



assistance, and cooperation in areas such as socio-economic, cultural, technical, and educational development. In the sphere of education development, for instance, cooperation and collaboration are pursued at all levels without affecting the structure of the respective country's national education system. However, at the individual country level, there are emerging trends to create greater awareness and understanding of the "One ASEAN" spirit. Notably, an examination of the websites of sister organisations in Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) revealed that the focus is on exchanges and specialised trainings. Cooperation and collaboration among HE institutions in ASEAN/Southeast Asia are initially focussed on the harmonisation of the HE systems in Southeast Asia but now this is being expanded to include East Asia (see Yavaprabhas, 2014). Hawkins (2012) has alluded to the difficulties of regionalisation and harmonisation of HE in Asia. Harmonisation of the HE systems is being emphasised as this is considered as important in encouraging student mobility for intraregional cultural competencies and understanding. In addition, a harmonised system would help in addressing gaps in human resources for development among many member nations of ASEAN. Mutual recognition of qualifications should facilitate mobility of skilled persons, and indeed some countries in ASEAN are in dire need of this category of workers in order to move ahead with the development agenda. Admittedly, there are lessons to be learnt from collaboration and cooperation among the more developed and the developing member nations in ASEAN. Today, there are ten Member States in ASEAN and almost all nations in Southeast Asia are in this regional grouping. Thus, in this paper, mention of ASEAN will read also as Southeast Asian countries.

In the area of HE, the Cha-am Hua Hin Declaration on the Roadmap for the ASEAN Community (2009-2015) has drawn up a list of joint initiatives to promote regional cooperation in cross-border education. The Declaration specified that regional cooperation in cross-border education was aimed at improving the "well-being and livelihood" of ASEAN citizens, enhancing ASEAN human resources and building an "ASEAN identity" based on friendship and cooperation (Association of Southeast Asian Nations Secretariat, 2009). To achieve these objectives, HE institutions in ASEAN are expected to enter into collaborative and cooperative agreements covering academic, research, and cultural exchanges. As a matter of fact, joint working groups comprising senior officials of ASEAN countries are actively working on government-to-government agreements in the development of cooperation in HE, which would facilitate collaborations among universities. Arguably, the opportunities for cooperation and collaboration are made increasingly easier by the initiatives of various intergovernmental agencies within Southeast Asia such as the ASEAN Secretariat, ASEAN University Network (AUN), the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED), and the UNESCO Bangkok Office. These agencies have and continue to provide working secretariat and platforms to facilitate collaborative and cooperative arrangements among HE institutions in Southeast Asia. Working closely with the European Union (EU), Japan, South Korea, and China, academic/research cooperation among HE institutions within and beyond ASEAN was also made possible, particularly with respect to resource mobilisation and the availability of experts. The East Asian Summit comprising countries from ASEAN, Japan, South Korea, and China is an important platform for East Asian harmonisation of HE initiative. This is in the context of the present and future role of the leading universities in ASEAN in intra- and inter-regional collaboration and cooperation in HE development.

It is axiomatic to expect long established, premier public universities in each of the ASEAN countries to spearhead collaborative and cooperative projects related to HE. Individual governments in ASEAN have high expectation of these institutions as they are the "agents" for their respective governments in ASEAN to push the agenda for region wide collaboration. As such, effectively, these premier public universities are the leading or

“flagship” universities of each member countries in ASEAN in a sense that they have a trigger or catalytic function. Notably, these universities are now operating in a transformed national socio-economic and political environment, but at the same time they have also to function in the context of ASEAN’s aims and aspirations, specifically to realise regional integration. Arguably, therefore, common aims and aspirations then would be the trigger for regional collaboration in HE. This paper will examine whether the premier universities in ASEAN that have been regarded as flagship universities are acting as flagship universities, based on emergent literature on the role and functions of flagship universities in the changing HE scenario. It is necessary to determine if these so-called flagship universities are performing their leadership roles as the nodes for the dense regional collaborative academic/research efforts which are important for regional integration.

It can be visualised that within ASEAN there would be several ASEAN universities acting as the regional nodes and it can be hypothesised that their network of collaboration and cooperation with universities in the EU, the UK, the USA, or even in East Asia would be very intense too. Nevertheless, in the spirit of regional integration, more intense intra-ASEAN collaboration would be more meaningful for regional integration objective. However, because of the nature of the aims and roles of sponsor organisations based in the EU, Japan, South Korea, and China, for instance, it is not far-fetched to believe that leading national universities in lower and low-middle income countries in ASEAN would be the main beneficiaries of the collaboration and cooperation. This is because these universities urgently need to build their capacity in their HE systems. However, on the more practical level, in this network of cooperation and collaboration, it is hypothesised that flagship universities of the more developed HE systems in ASEAN are critical intermediaries connecting the national universities in the lower and low-income countries with universities in the EU, Japan, South Korea, and China. Arguably, the flagship universities based in the more developed HE systems in ASEAN are exemplars for good practices in academic and research development. At the programming level, the platforms provided by AUN, SEAMEO RIHED, and UNESCO Bangkok are the critical success factors for such initiatives in the HE sector (Molly Lee, 2012; Sugimura, 2012).

Following on from the preceding propositions, therefore, this paper would specifically address the following:

- RQ1.* What are the roles of ASEAN’s flagship universities in terms of intraregional collaboration for the purpose of regional integration?
- RQ2.* Are there discernible patterns of interuniversity collaboration, which may impede regional integration?
- RQ3.* What are the main influencing factors which have given rise to such a pattern of interuniversity collaboration?
- RQ4.* Are inter-regional frameworks such as ASEAN plus 3 or ASEAN plus 6 important contributing factors in inter- and intra-regional collaboration and regional integration efforts?

The following arguments are the motivations for this paper: world class and global ranking ambitions among flagship universities, which only very recently were mandated for them by their respective national government, have diverted the attention and focus of these universities from ASEAN to global-wide engagement. Arguably, this situation could have slowed down or at worst, worked against regional integration objectives based on collaborative activities of ASEAN flagship universities. Therefore, in such a situation there is a need to reprise the important role of the flagship universities, giving priorities to national and regional relevancy for regional integration rather than for global image and reputation.

Public universities as flagship universities in the ASEAN context

In the introductory section, the discussion has alluded to three important terms – leading, premier, and flagship to describe public universities, which were established in ASEAN with specific national socio-economic and political agenda as their *raison d'être*. It is important to note that in the context of ASEAN no public university has been established solely for the purpose of competing in the global universities rankings. Many public universities in ASEAN were established primarily for the purpose of producing human resource for the socio-economic development of a newly independent nation, for instance, in Malaysia. Such was the context of public universities in the HE system and in relation to socio-economic reforms. The latter is exemplified by the role of public universities in Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam in the transition from socialist to market economy. Therefore, at the outset, the use of the terms premier, leading, and flagship to describe ASEAN public universities in this paper should not be construed as alluding to the idea of “world class” universities in the context of global universities rankings. Unfortunately, many flagship universities in ASEAN have assumed this role on their own or after being directly or indirectly guided by their respective HE ministries towards achieving that status. Arguably, for public universities, there are advantages associated with world class status. Indeed, in countries such as Malaysia, the performances of the public universities in the global universities rankings are debated in the Parliament, and those that have moved up the global universities rankings are showered with accolades from the prime minister (see The Star Online, 2017).

This paper subscribes to Douglass' (2016) idea of flagship universities as public universities with “national relevancy” and not as universities preoccupied with global university ranking. However, this paper extended further Douglass' idea of flagship universities; instead of confining arguments to national relevancy notion of flagship universities, this paper argues for a regional/ASEAN relevance of these universities. Such argument provides the right contextualisation and conceptualisation of these flagship universities in the regional integration initiative.

It is important to note that no official definition has been given to the concept of a “flagship university” (Douglass, 2016). Berdahl (1998) explained that the original notion of flagship universities and its usage could be considered as elitist and boastful. On the contrary, it is argued that its usage is no less boastful than the term “World Class” or “Global University” in the HE literature. As a working definition to discuss the role of premier public universities according to what have been conceptualised by Berdahl (1998) and Douglass (2016), the following characteristics may be useful to identify or isolate the so-called flagship universities from the many public universities in ASEAN. First, flagship universities are the now fully matured public universities, with substantial state financial support for their operating and development expenditures. Second, these public universities have been established by and for the nation. Third, they have been established during the extraordinary period of university building for the newly emerging nation states, particularly in the immediate postcolonial era in Southeast Asia. This broad understanding of what defines flagship universities is subsequently adopted to examine the role of ASEAN's premier public universities in spearheading regional academic/research collaborations for regional integration agenda. In other words, it can be proposed that these universities are the leading universities in the respective national HE system in ASEAN.

Douglass (2016) argued that in the context of the US HE system, “The New Flagship University” model provides an expansive vision for leading national universities to explore pathways to reshape their missions and academic cultures, and to pursue organisational features intended to expand their relevance in the societies that have given them life and purpose. This is the national relevancy context of these universities. Damtew's (2016, 2017) investigation of flagship universities in Africa reconfirmed the salient *raison d'être* of Africa's

premier universities; they are universities established at the time leading up to and immediately after independence during the 1960s; and were mandated to become their respective countries' leading institutions. In the case of Southeast Asia, some leading universities in the national HE system appear to be reshaping and re-envisioning their mission and strategies to maintain their relevance, not only to ASEAN but more important, their relevance in the context of ASEAN relationship with other regional groupings. Admittedly, in the context of re-envisioning, which is also in line with Douglass' (2016) model for new flagship universities, Southeast Asia's leading or flagship universities should not project their relevance and excellence solely on research productivity. Equally important, the mission and strategic intent of these flagship universities should be framed within the context of a university's larger social purpose and outcome of research activities. In other words, research activities should not be an end unto itself, which is the typical strategic intent of world class universities actively pursuing global rankings (Douglass, 2016; Hazelkorn, 2017). In fact, the relatively recent phenomenon of global university rankings is fixated on a narrow band of data and prestige scores, an unfortunate paradigm not achievable or not useful for the economic and socio-economic mobility needs of their countries (Douglass, 2014). In the context of the preceding arguments in this paper, flagship universities in ASEAN should be working towards developing a dense network of collaboration and cooperation among universities at all levels aimed at achieving both national and regional societal development objectives. Ultimately, regional integration is the larger mission and the pursuit for ASEAN flagship universities and to which they have to answer positively.

On reflection, to a large extent, the global university rankings have, impacted on how policy makers viewed the role of flagship universities and on how they self-reflect on themselves (Hazelkorn, 2017). In addition, following the arguments of Feuer and Hornidge (2015), HE in the larger national and regional system such as ASEAN need to take into account the following points: the sociohistoric embedding of the HE and integration discourses as well as the local rationales of the ASEAN member countries for subscribing to them; the construction of HE integration as social imagery for a better future for ASEAN and Southeast Asia; the social and material resources for action mobilised with the aim of fostering integration, primarily through official/governmental channels such as AUN, SEAMEO RIHED, UNESCO Bangkok Office, and some of the (un)intended power effects of the imagery noted above. One of the immediate unintended power effects at play now is summarised as "politics first, and then education" (see Morshidi *et al.*, 2016).

ASEAN regional integration explained

Much has been written on ASEAN regional integration (see ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.). Briefly, from an economic perspective, the most widely recognised argument in favour of regional integration is the benefits from expanding markets and promoting competition through the elimination of barriers to trade among member countries (Guerrero, 2009). In the course of the development of ASEAN integration and cooperation, regional perspective reigned high in terms of programme priority and policy thrust. In the past, ASEAN successes have been usually presented in terms of cooperation in economic and infrastructure projects. In fact, as Chao (2016) highlighted, ASEAN regionalism has evolved from its security rationale to economic regionalism, and eventually to other areas such as education and culture. However, this paper is not to discuss the economic perspective of ASEAN regionalism. Instead, its focus is on regional integration from the perspective of HE, revolving around the notion of harmonising over 6,000 HE institutions in ASEAN (Cervantes, 2016). Yavaprabhas (2011) has alluded to a more concerted effort in the SEAMEO and ASEAN context for a vision of regional integration through the harmonisation process of HE. ASEAN regionalism from the perspective of harmonisation of HE took a queue from the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area.

The mechanism for achieving regional integration objective from a HE perspective is via cooperation and collaboration in the academic and research spheres including mobility, exchanges, and engagements. The platforms for these are the disparate initiatives in HE integration in ASEAN through various consortia involving ASEAN, AUN, SEAMEO RIHED, and UNESCO Bangkok Office among others, including quality assurance agencies and related national and regional mechanisms. Arguably, such efforts and initiatives underlie several initiatives to expand cooperation in regional HE, most notably with respect to regional mobility spaces, academic cooperation, and mutual recognition under the general umbrella of quality assurance networks. Thus, the critical role of intergovernmental institutions in these initiatives has to be acknowledged (see Chao, 2016). This has been so for over the past 20 years; the HE landscape of Southeast Asia has been transformed by social transformation, political realignments, rapid economic growth, and marked demographic transitions. Notably, member countries in the region, especially with respect to HE, have been shaped by three levels of institutional set-ups, namely, intra-Southeast Asian institutions for regional cooperation, ASEAN institutions for regional integration, and extra ASEAN/SEA institutions for collaboration and cooperation. In the context of the role of flagship universities, there are several initiatives to expand regional HE cooperation, most notably, cooperation within the quality assurance networks such as the AUN, ASEAN Quality Assurance Network, Asia Pacific Quality Network, UNESCO Bangkok Office, and SEAMEO RIHED.

Methodology

This study on the ASEAN's flagship universities is based on a three-pronged strategy, namely, a literature review, analysis of websites contents, and citation of supporting pieces of evidence from other relevant studies to support arguments. The selection of public universities in ASEAN for investigation was based on an examination of the QS top universities in Asia 2016 listing. Using a cut-off point of top 70 public universities in Asia, public universities for investigation were then identified. In instances where public universities in a particular ASEAN country were not listed in the QS (2016) listing, a premier public university of that country was then selected for investigation. Inevitably, for some ASEAN countries, more than one public university were selected for investigation. Arguably, for some ASEAN countries, public universities in the global university rankings are considered as their premier universities. In fact, some ASEAN governments have allocated substantial resources for their public universities to be listed in global university rankings (see Hazelkorn, 2017).

Official websites of universities under investigation were interrogated in order to determine patterns of collaborations in various academic and research activities. Arguably, since 2010 many public universities were working on regional and global visibility through various medium. In fact, many of the public universities under investigation have been updating their website periodically. Factually, in Malaysia, for instance, the Ministry of Higher Education would write to the public universities concerned if their official websites have not been updated periodically. For many public universities in ASEAN, concern over regional and global visibility since 2010 could be attributable to the importance of the internationalisation factor in global university rankings. Taking into account this visibility argument, it is believed that public universities would want to exhibit all their activities on their website. Updating university websites with facts and data on international collaborations began in earnest in Malaysia since 2007. For public universities in the less developed HE systems within ASEAN this activity is a very recent one.

For detailed information on research collaboration, a recent bibliometric analysis undertaken by the Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN) is a good source for the relevant data. These data covering a period between 2009 and 2013 were interrogated to establish pattern of research collaboration within ASEAN.

ASEAN flagship universities – pattern of collaborations

This section attempts to establish the roles of flagship universities in ASEAN in terms of intraregional collaboration. Presumably, any collaborative efforts in university-related activities are aimed at regional integration based on some common purpose and objectives endorsed by ASEAN and SEAMEO. In this regard, it is pertinent to establish some patterns of interuniversity collaboration; an intense network of collaborations and cooperation among ASEAN flagship universities would presumably facilitate or smooth out the journey towards regional integration. Table I is based on data as reported in the website of universities under investigation. Specific interuniversity collaborations within ASEAN are determined based on the Institut Penyelidikan Pendidikan Tinggi Negara (IPPTN) (2017) study on ASEAN universities collaboration. The IPPTN (2017) study has utilised the bibliometric data for the period 2009-2013 to determine interuniversity research and academic collaboration of flagship universities within ASEAN. Connecting the resulting patterns with other pieces of evidence from various studies could isolate the main influencing factors, which have given rise to such a pattern in interuniversity collaboration and cooperation. Arguably, inter-regional frameworks such as ASEAN plus 3 or ASEAN plus 6 are important contributing factors in inter- and intra-regional collaborations and regional integration efforts.

Table I illustrates a very broad pattern of academic/research collaborations expressed as percentage of total collaborations of each ASEAN flagship universities on four items, namely, percentage of collaborations with HE institutions within ASEAN, percentage within East Asia (Japan, China, and South Korea), percentage of collaboration with EU, and percentage of collaboration with universities in North America. It could be gleaned from Table I, collaborations between HE institutions within Southeast Asia is markedly high for Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (at 30.8 per cent), and at a low 7.7 per cent for Universitas Indonesia. Other flagship universities intra-ASEAN collaborations fall between the above range of low and high figures. The case of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) is very interesting that its mandates are primarily national in emphasis, such as the usage of Malay as the medium of instruction and the championing of the other national aspirations. It appears that even though Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's patterns of intraregional collaborations and cooperation are very encouraging for regional integration, the

Table I.
ASEAN's flagship
universities –
collaboration and
cooperation

No.	Country	University	ASEAN (%)	East Asia (%)	Europe (%)	North America (%)	Overall
1	Malaysia	Universiti Malaya (2016)	15.2	46.0	18.0	4.8	787
		Universiti Putra Malaysia (2016)	19.5	27.2	35.5	7.1	169
		Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (2016)	20.3	34.1	13.4	12.5	232
		Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (2015)	30.8	29.3	16.5	6.0	133
		Universiti Sains Malaysia (2016)	26.3	24.7	26.3	3.6	194
2	Singapore	National University of Singapore (n.d.)	7.0	19.0	40.7	21.8	427
		Nanyang Technological University	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
3	Thailand	Chulalongkorn University (2015)	6.3	38.5	29.5	16.2	457
		Mahidol University (2015)	18.6	30.7	24.9	18.8	345
4	Indonesia	Universitas Indonesia (2016)	7.7	44.5	27.5	4.9	182
5	Vietnam	Hanoi University (2013)	8.0	44.0	34.2	6.7	225
6	Cambodia	Royal University of Phnom Penh (2012)	23.5	42.0	23.5	10.1	119
7	Philippines	University of the Philippines (2016)	16.0	40.9	22.4	10.3	281
8	Brunei	Universiti Brunei Darussalam (2016)	17.5	42.7	13.6	15.5	103
9	Lao PDR	National University of Laos	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
10	Myanmar	University of Yangon	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a

Source: Websites of universities under investigation

directions of collaboration and cooperation within ASEAN are primarily with universities in Indonesia and Singapore (IPPTN, 2017). The IPPTN (2017) study indicated that there is a tendency for ASEAN flagship universities to have a typical horizontal collaboration within ASEAN and vertical collaboration globally.

Noticeably, many ASEAN flagship universities look towards East Asia for academic/research collaborations. Universiti Malaya, Mahidol University, Universitas Indonesia, University of the Philippines, Hanoi University, Royal University of Phnom Penh, and even Universiti Brunei Darussalam have more than 40.0 per cent of their collaborations with HE institutions in East Asian countries. From Table I, the National University of Singapore is not East Asian focussed; a low 19.0 per cent of its total collaborations are with East Asian HE institutions. But the National University of Singapore, together with Chulalongkorn University and Mahidol University have established collaborations with HE institutions in North America; ranging between 21.8 per cent of total collaboration (in the case of National University of Singapore) to about 16.2 per cent for Chulalongkorn University and 18.8 per cent for Mahidol University. For many flagship universities, extra ASEAN collaboration with HE institutions in North America is not very evident from the data. Collaboration outside of Southeast Asia specifically with HE institutions in Europe is highest for National University of Singapore and at only 13.4 per cent in the case of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Additional evidence for the above-mentioned patterns of collaborations of ASEAN flagship universities, which have implications for regional integration efforts, could be gathered from other studies.

The IPPTN (2017) study investigated research niche and research collaborative efforts among members of the AUN with regional integration based on regional collaborative research and publication as one of the main focus of concern. A bibliometric analysis covering the period 2009-2013 was undertaken and the highest number of collaborations was noted for AUN members in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia in that order of importance. Arguably, there is a tendency for flagship universities in these countries to engage in research collaborative initiatives among members within their circle.

Kumar and Jan (2013) investigated the patterns of collaboration in the business and management field, and this study concluded that Malaysian institutions collaborated more often with foreign partners than with institutions within Malaysia. For Malaysian institutions, including flagship universities in the Malaysian HE system, their top international partners are HE institutions in the developed countries. Evidently, minimal collaboration with ASEAN universities has been observed. Kumar *et al.* (2014) studied international research collaborations in economics, and concluded that universities in the USA were the most favoured international partners for ASEAN nations. Intra-ASEAN collaboration accounted for just 4.0 per cent of all international collaborations. Payumo and Sutton (2015), working on a bibliometric assessment of ASEAN collaboration in plant biotechnology, one of the main areas of cooperation for regional food security and sustainable development in ASEAN, found very limited evidence for regional collaboration or partnership. Such a pattern emerged despite a common aspiration for regional integration through research collaboration, raising concern for regional integration and S&T cooperation among ASEAN universities.

ASEAN flagship universities collaboration with universities in the EU need further empirical evidence to support the pattern indicated in Table I. For instance, Hassan *et al.* (2012) used Scopus database over the period of 2000-2008 to elucidate the structure of the ASEAN research landscape. Based on the results of two complementary types of analyses on projects which have been carried out in the course of the EU FP7 funded project, this study has provided important insights into the dimensions, patterns, and trends of cooperation between ASEAN and EU within the SEA-EU-NET project. The study covered seven FP7 thematic areas: nanotechnology; energy; health; food, agriculture and biotechnology; environment;

information and communication technology; and industrial technology. The study showed that EU is the most important copublication partner for countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, but not for Thailand, Singapore, and the Philippines. Thailand is the most important copublication partner for the EU in the fields of health, environment, energy and food, and agriculture and biotechnology. Again, in the context of ASEAN-EU collaboration, Gruber and Degelsegger (2011) investigated scientists' and policy makers' assessment of factors that act as important drivers for collaboration in the S&T fields. The study listed several motivating factors for scientists to cooperate. The study concluded that while having topics of mutual interest and relevance is important, other influencing factors including the desire to contribute to the development of a country or the solving of global challenges, access to a field, expertise and equipment, friendship or reputation are other important motivational factors.

Kakuchi's (2011) study on ASEAN-ASIA (Japan, China, and Korea specifically) collaboration based on an Asian model of HE integration in the context of the growing momentum to build university collaboration within the region, highlighted the need for the harmonisation of HE in Asia. Arguably, the harmonisation of HE systems would spearhead student mobility and exchanges in East Asia, in particular. However, harmonisation of HE as championed by ASEAN through AUN, the SEAMEO RIHED, and the trilateral groupings between the Governments of China, Japan, and South Korea is moving rather slowly. It is argued that while these regional actors share some history of collaboration, driven in part, by the desire to create a common East Asian HE space, they implemented regionalisation schemes largely based on different needs, goals, timetables, and customs (Choi, 2017).

Noting the slowness of harmonisation in ASEAN and East Asia, the EU has to come in to push this agenda among ASEAN member countries. It appears that the intermediary for HE collaborations and harmonisation in ASEAN is the EU. The EU-SHARE brought together ASEAN flagship universities in a collaborative effort with universities in the EU, guided by its objectives as follows:

- (1) to enhance the harmonisation of ASEAN HE area through the formulation of ASEAN HE frameworks, taking into account the EU experience and work already underway across ASEAN through international partnerships; and
- (2) to support mutual recognition and student mobility among HEIs in ASEAN to strengthen people to people connectivity.

It is important to note that EU has to come in to provide a platform for ASEAN flagship universities to collaborate. It appears that AUN and SEAMEO RIHED together did not have the necessary clout to push this agenda among ASEAN flagship universities. Most likely, the availability or rather, the unavailability of resource and expertise were the main constraining factors for AUN and SEAMEO RIHED to push this harmonisation agenda forward at a much faster pace. In this respect, the role of ASEAN flagship universities in promoting and facilitating regional cooperation and collaboration in activities related to HE development was somewhat muted.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper began with some pertinent questions. What are the roles of ASEAN's flagship universities in terms of intraregional collaboration for the purpose of regional integration? Arguably, the roles of ASEAN's flagship universities in moving the agenda for regional integration through intraregional collaboration appear to be at a very nascent stage for many public universities in the less developed HE system. The IPPTN (2017) bibliometric analysis has provided evidence to this fact. For the more developed HE systems, it is argued that the roles of flagship universities in moving the agenda of regional

integration are also rather muted; and this is based on an examination of the pattern of interuniversity collaboration and cooperation at the level of ASEAN and outside of ASEAN, as reported in the websites of the flagship universities. This statement is also corroborated by evidence from several studies investigating academic/research collaboration and cooperation among HE institutions in ASEAN. However, these studies, except for the IPPTN (2017) study, did not necessarily have regional integration issue as a major contention or thrust of the investigation.

Are there discernible patterns of interuniversity collaboration, which may impede regional integration? What are the main influencing factors which have given rise to such a pattern of interuniversity collaboration? It appears that there is a tendency for flagship universities in ASEAN to look beyond ASEAN, primarily to establish vertical collaboration, which is important to image-making and the enhancement of reputation. In this respect, it is tempting to argue that world class and global university ranking ambitions among flagship universities, which have been mandated to them only very recently by their respective national governments, have diverted the attention and focus of these universities to regions beyond the ASEAN region. Lane and Kinser (2017), for instance, pointed out that it is the pursuit of rankings that guide policy making, strategic priorities, and resource allocation. Arguably, global university rankings are used as limiting criteria to determine institutions with whom university may partner or students may study (Lane and Kinser, 2017). Malaysia, for instance, is very committed towards the world class university agenda and has been using global universities rankings to steer its flagship universities to that penultimate destination (Morshidi *et al.*, 2017). Inevitably, this pattern of collaboration and cooperation among ASEAN universities may impede regional integration in the HE sphere. Therefore, there is a need to reprise the important role of the flagship universities, prioritising both national and regional relevancy for regional integration, true to the underlying notion of the new model of flagship universities.

Are inter-regional frameworks such as ASEAN plus 3 or ASEAN plus 6 important contributing factors in inter- and intraregional collaboration and regional integration efforts? Interestingly, intermediary agencies based in Japan, Korea, and EU are coming in to provide the much needed platform and resources to bring together flagship universities and other universities in ASEAN in collaborative research and academic exchanges. Guided by the need for regional harmonisation of HE systems, these platforms have facilitated meaningful academic exchanges and student mobility between flagship universities and other universities in the ASEAN region, which in the longer term would bring the region closer in terms of HE development and cooperation.

In the final analysis, the preoccupation of ASEAN's flagship universities with global university rankings does not bode well with the spirit of regional integration in the HE sphere. Nevertheless, the efforts undertaken by quality assurance agencies in ASEAN and Asia Pacific are in line with the spirit of HE harmonisation and regional integration through synergistic approach to overall drive towards quality in HE.

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