



ASEAN Declaration is Milestone for Regional Higher Education Space.

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On 25 August 2024, the 13th ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting in Buriram, Thailand, adopted the Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education. This ministerial statement marks a new milestone in regional efforts to transform an imagined space into a discernible regional space, bringing all Southeast Asian higher education systems closer together.

There is no shortage of declarations in ASEAN (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) ministerial meetings and many often merely express aspirations. However, the 2024 Buriram Declaration is a document that deserves particular attention, especially among Southeast Asia's higher education communities.

With over 7,000 higher education institutions and 12 million students, they hold the key to accelerating the momentum in developing a regional common space for higher education.

This declaration envisions the region as an inclusive and future-oriented higher education space fostering collective intelligence for sustainable learning and living. It promotes people-to-people connectivity, knowledge production and human development for peaceful coexistence in Southeast Asia, grounded in the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging.

Such a regional space does not exist on its own; it has been constructed through people's ideas and has been discussed for over a decade. By being talked and written about, it has begun to take form.

Initial ideas for creating a common higher education space in Southeast Asia were first presented by Southeast Asian senior officials and academics during the main session, "[Listen from within](#)", at a conference in November 2008 organised by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) Regional Institute for Higher Education and Development (RIHED).

Since then, this journey has been a work-in-progress, with the "idea of the common space" evolving significantly over time.

Inside-out strategy

It shifted to an outside-in approach during the 'Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region' (SHARE) project, funded by the European Union from 2015 to 2022, which concluded with [a Roadmap](#) – essentially a region-making manual.

Over the last 16 years, the 'imagined common space' has been shaped by ideas conceived from both inside and outside Southeast Asia. The 2024 declaration signals a shift towards an inside-out region-building strategy, guided by the core belief that a region's inner strengths and capabilities will build a sustainable future.

While an outside-in approach often privileges compliance and replication to meet external partners' expectations, an inside-out approach focuses on what a region already possesses and how it can leverage its strengths before seeking external ideas and resources.

In the 2024 declaration, the ASEAN education ministers explicitly mobilise existing regional architecture – both the ASEAN Secretariat (hosted by Indonesia) and SEAMEO (hosted by

Thailand).

As the name suggests, SEAMEO has played a pivotal role in strengthening regional education cooperation since its founding in 1965 by Thailand, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and South Vietnam shortly after these nations gained independence from colonial powers.

Two years later, in 1967, the ASEAN political bloc was established. ASEAN subsequently created new regional institutions, including the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting (ASEM) in 2006, tasked with contributing to the development of the ASEAN Economic Community. Since then, SEAMEO and ASEM have been operating in tandem, representing the same 10 member countries, with SEAMEO also including East Timor as its 11th member.

Seven ideas for a common space

The 2024 declaration reaffirms the position of the education ministers and officially articulates seven ideas for a tangible common space for higher education in Southeast Asia.

This space is envisioned as:

- A catalyst in accelerating educational, economic, political and sociocultural development agendas;
- A mechanism to uphold the quality of higher education across all member countries;
- A special zone to enhance the regional academic mobility of students, scholars and lifelong learners through regional initiatives (not only bi-lateral agreements);
- A way to strengthen the solidarity of the ASEAN community;
- A platform for the promotion of peace, prosperity, resilience and vibrancy in Southeast Asia through synergised collaboration among academia, industry, government, community and partners in higher education;
- A vehicle to foster sustainable internationalisation; and
- A project to increase the visibility of ASEAN and SEAMEO globally through enhanced partnership and shared leadership.

There has been a change in language relating to the policy over the years. While [the ASEAN Roadmap](#), launched in 2022 as the result of the SHARE project, refers to the vision to establish the *ASEAN Higher Education Space*, the 2024 declaration has carefully phrased it as “The Common Space in *Southeast Asian* Higher Education”.

This, essentially, is an act of enhancing the intra-regional strengths and complementarity of the ASEAN Secretariat's political importance and SEAMEO's higher education harmonisation initiatives over the years.

An ASEAN senior official shared: “*We [the ASEAN Secretariat] offer policy guidance and technical advice on ASEAN cooperation [and] create links with ASEAN Dialogue Partners and access to funding opportunities. This is our political advantage because we are guided by the state leaders and we are representing the ASEAN people. However, we acknowledge that SEAMEO is a very important organisation. We see them as a brother in education.*”

The shift to an inside-out region-building strategy, as reflected in the 2024 declaration, was anticipated by the former SHARE project leader as a way of taking ‘ownership’ and ensuring the ‘sustainability’ of the common space.

Greater financial commitments

The declaration is also a gentle reminder that, after a long period of relying on external organisations for continuous funding, it is time for Southeast Asia to take on greater financial commitments to further develop the common space of its own accord.

There are ongoing discussions about establishing an ASEAN-branded scholarship scheme for academic mobility which would require active involvement in coordinating and implementing regional initiatives through committed investments from all Southeast Asian countries.

This proposed scholarship scheme is expected to adopt an innovative region-building approach to ensure the sustainability of the common space, drawing on lessons from SEAMEO RIHED’s experience in managing the regional initiative known as the ‘Asian International Mobility for Students’ ([AIMS](#)) since 2010.

Although AIMS does not include all Southeast Asian countries, it provides a multilateral platform where each member government is responsible for nominating their universities, providing financial support for their students and establishing a relevant policy or collaborative structure for implementation.

The ASEAN education ministers might also consider drawing on the long-lasting experience of the agriculture ministers in creating the pilot regional food security reserve initiated in 1979 and hosted by Thailand. This initiative later evolved into the permanent ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve ([APTERR](#)), with its secretariat based at Kasetsart University in Bangkok, a leading institution in agriculture.

APTERR aims to strengthen food security, alleviate poverty and eradicate malnourishment within the region without distorting normal trade. It may be worth exploring whether a similar mechanism could be adapted to support a regional higher education scholarship scheme.

University agendas

The common space is emerging, thanks to the efforts of many region-builders in the policy community, as highlighted in the special issue, “[Partnerships in Higher Education](#)”, published by the Singapore-based HEAD Foundation. However, complex tasks require even more contributors.

If the 2024 declaration constitutes a further step in developing this space, it will directly

impact universities, students, academics and professional staff across the region.

Yet, rather than being proactive agents, many seem to assume the roles of passive passengers with a muted or weak voice in this journey. Greater effort is needed to bring the development of the common space onto the regular agendas of universities, empowering them to amplify their voices.

Building sustainable academic networks, facilitating exchanges among students and staff, and enhancing knowledge sharing are the foundation of a sustainable common space. Partnering with sister universities in the region – regardless of their global ranking – may foster balanced collaborations that enable partners to grow together and deliver on the public good relevant to all involved.

Alongside the Buriram Declaration 2024, ASEAN education ministers are also weighing the importance of both inside-out and outside-in factors with the aim of bringing them together.

They “encourage fostering people-to-people connectivity among ASEAN member states and with [our Dialogue Partners](#)” (according to [the Joint Statement](#)).

At the seventh ASEAN Plus Three Education Ministers Meeting on 26 August 2024, regional initiatives were embraced. They included the ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship Programme, the ASEAN-China Education Cooperation Week and the 2024 ASEAN-China Year of People-to-People Exchanges; the South Korea-led Higher Education for ASEAN Talents (HEAT) Scholarships, and the ASEAN Cyber University Project; Japan’s International Fellowship for Research in Japan and the ASEAN University Network /Southeast Asia Engineering Education Development Network ([AUN/SEED-Net](#)) Programme. The new European Union-sponsored [Sustainable Connectivity Package](#) (SCOPE) and the [UK-ASEAN Chevening Scholarships](#) are also important examples of the ASEAN+1 partnership model.

In essence, the borders of the common space can be fluid and open to partners, but with a gentle reminder to prioritise ASEAN-wide collaborations over cherry-picking bilateral projects.

About the authors:

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