

University in the World's Fourth-Largest Economy: The Question of Acceleration

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The title of this talk is *"University in the World's Fourth-Largest Economy: The Question of Acceleration"*. However, it may also be read as *"An Observation on the Current State of Strategic Thinking of Higher Education Institutions in Southeast Asia"*. It is in this light that I would like to frame our discussion. Here, I do not claim to know how each university in Southeast Asia is developing its own strategies. The observation is based on my past 16 years of service in managing the collaboration among the leading universities in the ASEAN region, the ASEAN University Network, or the AUN.

My remarks are organized in four parts: we shall begin with the regional context; then turn to the present challenges; next, we shall consider institutional responses; and finally, we shall reflect on the role of strategic alliances and international cooperation.

Let us begin with the first part.

The Context - ASEAN on the World Stage

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN, comprises ten member states: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Timor Leste is set to join very soon. Collectively, ASEAN has a population of over 680 million people and a combined GDP that roughly USD 3.9 trillion in 2023.

If current economic trends continue, ASEAN is projected to become the world's fourth-largest economic bloc by around 2030. This projection is based on demographic strength, increasing domestic consumption, sustained investment in infrastructure, and deepening trade and production networks across the region. It reflects the combined momentum of ten (plus one soon) diverse economies, each undergoing rapid structural transformation, industrialization, and technological adoption.

This economic trajectory creates a significant context for higher education. Economic growth is expected to bring increased public investment in research and innovation, more resources for universities, and greater demand for high-level skills. Political leadership in the region has begun to recognize the strategic role that universities must play, not only in supplying human capital but in shaping the knowledge economy.

However, we should acknowledge that this promising context also contains internal contradictions. Each ASEAN Member State maintains its own policies, priorities, and limitations. National self-interest often constrains meaningful cross-border collaboration. Furthermore, the higher education landscape within ASEAN/Southeast Asia is marked by what may be described as a condition of *uneven and hybrid development*.

While several universities have achieved international recognition, others face significant structural barriers. This unevenness poses real challenges for the kind of regional academic integration or harmonization that economic convergence would ideally support. And for those who want to catch up, and catch up fast, the hybrid approach or combined development seems to be their intention.

The Issues - Shared Challenges Across Borders

Turning now to the issues that our universities are presently facing.

Contemporary challenges are no longer confined to the national sphere. They arrive without regard to borders and demand urgent, sophisticated responses. Among the most pressing are the rapid developments in artificial intelligence and digital technologies, which are reshaping pedagogy, research, and institutional operations.

In parallel, there are increasing questions about the relevance of existing academic programmes to the demands of the modern labour market. There is a growing imperative to align educational outcomes with employment realities. Furthermore, universities are expected to make concrete contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), advancing social, environmental, and economic objectives at both national and global levels.

These demands are accompanied by pressure on universities to enhance their capacity for multidisciplinary research, research that addresses complex real-world issues and does not remain confined within traditional academic boundaries.

For some institutions in the ASEAN/Southeast Asian region, these are new and unfamiliar demands. The scale and complexity of the required research, the level of digital transformation needed, and the need for academic and administrative agility are greater than what many have previously encountered. In this regard, collaboration, both within the region and beyond, is not merely beneficial but essential.

The Response - Institutional Adaptation and the Question of Acceleration

Let us now consider how higher education institutions are responding.

The university, as an institution, has shown over centuries its capacity to adapt to changing historical, social, and intellectual conditions. In Southeast Asia today, we observe this adaptive tendency once again.

Some universities in the region, especially the catching-up ones, are now undertaking reform initiatives with the express aim of accelerating their institutional development. There is widespread recognition that the pace of change must increase. Universities are no longer content to make gradual improvements. Instead, we see concerted efforts to modernize systems and processes to meet the demands mentioned earlier.

Examples include projects focused on quality assurance and academic standards, the integration of digital platforms into teaching and administration, reforms to curriculum and qualifications frameworks, and the expansion of multilingual capabilities. Efforts to enhance research capacity, particularly in

interdisciplinary and applied research, are also evident.

Underlying all of these efforts is a commitment to continuous learning and the exchange of knowledge. This is particularly notable in how universities are seeking out partnerships, both within ASEAN/Southeast Asia and internationally, aimed at mutual development.

The *Times Higher Education Impact Rankings* have become an important measure in this regard. These rankings assess universities based on their contributions to the SDGs. Encouragingly, several ASEAN universities, notably in AUN, have performed admirably. Institutions from Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines have ranked highly in various SDG categories, such as Quality Education, Climate Action, Gender Equality, and Partnerships for the Goals. This performance indicates that universities in the region are not only responding to global challenges but are beginning to shape their identity through active societal contributions. Not to mention how they also mirror the economic drivers that push the economic growth of the ASEAN region.

The question of acceleration thus emerges not as a vague aspiration, but as a concrete institutional aim. It raises important strategic considerations: How quickly can reform take place? How can it be sustained? And to what extent can collaboration and internationalization support, rather than hinder, this acceleration?

Strategic Alliances - Rethinking the Home Base

Finally, let us turn to the matter of strategic alliances.

At the core of effective strategy lies the question of perspective. One can ask: where is the university's home base? This is not simply a geographical question, but a strategic one. It concerns how an institution defines its environment, its primary point of orientation, and its field of engagement.

A narrow national focus may provide clarity, but it can also limit strategic options. By contrast, a broader regional or global orientation may unlock new opportunities - for funding, for research, and for impact - but also introduces complexity.

Strategic alliances that stretch beyond the familiar require institutional

readiness. They must be pursued with clarity of purpose. Otherwise, there is a risk of what some call *collaboration fatigue*, where partnerships are pursued without clear goals, monitored poorly, and deliver limited value.

Thus, universities should consider how internationalization and cross-border partnerships can be integrated into their core strategies. These should be based not on imitation or trend-following, but on the pursuit of clearly identified institutional goals. When pursued with intent, internationalization can become a lever for institutional transformation.

ASEAN/Southeast Asian universities have shown that they are capable of developing meaningful partnerships. Increasingly, they are participating in networks that support shared research, student and staff mobility, and regional benchmarking. But the effectiveness of these partnerships depends on strategic clarity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the rise of ASEAN/Southeast Asia as the world's fourth-largest economy presents an extraordinary moment for reflection and action. Economic development brings with it not only resources and opportunity, but also expectations. More universities in our region can rise to this moment.

The challenges are considerable, but so too is the capacity for renewal and reform. Some universities in the region are beginning to accelerate their development. They are adapting, reforming, and contributing to global goals. Some already advanced universities have also been helping others in this catching-up endeavour. For some other universities, their performance in the THE Impact Rankings shows that they are not only aware of their responsibilities but are acting on them.

My conclusion is that rethinking the university's home base, identifying strategic alliances, and managing internationalization in the way that sees opportunities that can be incorporated in the university's strategic framework, may help chart a path forward that is both sustainable and meaningful. The ASEAN Way has always been the way of partnership without borders and without discrimination.