

# Transforming higher education through regionalisation

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ASIA

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Over the past decade or so, we have witnessed the rise of transnational higher education and a call to internationalise higher education in Asia. In an increasingly borderless world, some Asian countries have begun the quest to become regional educational hubs by establishing university cities and inviting overseas universities to implement offshore programmes or set up offshore campuses.



*This article is part of a series on  
Transformative Leadership published by  
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Perceiving education as both a trade and an industry, a few Asian economies in India, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea, along with other economies in the Middle East, have embarked on education hub projects. The emerging regional education hubs in Asia have inevitably led transformative change in international student mobility patterns and induced intense competition among universities in the region that are vying for students.

## **Growing trends of transnational higher education**

The internationalisation of higher education and increasing student mobility are not new social phenomena. According to Professor Jane Knight at the University of Toronto, the internationalisation of higher education is “the process of integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of institutions”.

Similarly, the process of internationalising higher education could be seen as a strategic response to the demands and challenges of social, economic and labour market globalisation, vividly characterised by the global flow of people, information, knowledge, technology, programmes, education services and financial capital.

To enhance their students’ global competitiveness, governments around the world, particularly in Asia, are placing more emphasis on internationalising student learning to foster the global knowledge, skills and languages necessary for their graduates to perform professionally and socially in international, multicultural environments.

Unlike patterns of international student mobility in the 1970s and 1980s, which were characterised by study destinations in Europe, the United Kingdom and North America, since the late 1980s more students have begun studying in the Asia-Pacific region, especially since the 1996-97 Asian financial crisis.

International student mobility patterns have witnessed a fundamental shift in which students who were moving from the periphery (developing economies) to the core (developed economies) for overseas learning experiences have instead begun to travel from the periphery to the semi-periphery (emerging economies).

According to the British Council, two-way travel has begun, with a growing number of students from developed economies in the West pursuing their educations in less-developed economies while students from

Asia diversify their destinations for overseas study.

The expansion of higher education in the Asia-Pacific region in recent years has resulted in more of its students choosing to stay home or attend local universities when pursuing a higher education.

More interestingly, internationally renowned universities such as the University of Nottingham from the UK have off-shore campuses in Malaysia and Ningbo China, while New York University has set up branch campuses in China and the Middle East.

Moreover, a number of Australian universities have successfully launched their off-shore operations in Malaysia, Singapore and China. With the rise of transnational higher education in Asia, there has been an increase in students enrolling in these branch campuses, offering curricula and alternative learning experiences based upon the offering countries from the West.

### **Deepening regional cooperation**

Given the rapid expansion and improvement of higher education in East Asia, particularly the prosperity of the region's transnational higher education network together with a gradual convergence of the modes of higher education governance, this trend in East Asian regulatory regionalism is expected to persist.

Moreover, China may gradually become the centre of this regional drive to reposition higher education due to its remarkable size, its aggressive strategies for achieving world-class status and its application of higher education as a means of exerting its cultural soft power.

The most probable platform for further integration, in this respect, may be the ASEAN Plus Three or APT process. As argued in recent research, regional cooperation has not been confined to education but has also been linked to cultural and social developments among different countries in the Asia and Pacific region.

Apart from the APT process involving China, Japan and South Korea, other forms of regional cooperation have emerged, such as the ASEAN-sponsored East Asia Summits and the added participation of India, Australia and New Zealand in the APT.

ASEAN – the Association of Southeast Asian Nations – further extends beyond East Asia by organising multilateral consultations through participation in the 21-member Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting. ASEAN also sponsors the 27-member ASEAN Regional Forum to promote dialogue and consult on political and security issues of common interest in the Asia-Pacific region.

The rise of Chinese universities should not be seen as a threat to Asia, but rather as an opportunity for deep cooperation in the region. Compared with what has been achieved in Europe toward establishing a common academic/qualification framework for promoting student mobility, the mechanisms to promote East Asian integration in higher education have not yet been fully developed.

However, there have been signs of regulatory regionalism in related collaborations via certain regional organisations or in the institutional interactions undertaken within a wider framework of ASEAN Plus One. For example, ASEAN's formation as a regional collaborative framework is a case in point.

Recent research on how regional cooperation has emerged not only in economic but also in educational and cultural aspects has clearly suggested that new modes of higher education governance are emerging in Asia, characterised by evolving features of 'regulatory regionalism'.

ASEAN – as an organisation with formal collaboration between 10 member countries and involving coalitions with the East Asia Big Three and other forms of regional cooperation – clearly indicates not only the growing stature of this regional international organisation but also the emergence of regional forces fostering a more consolidated regional cooperation platform.

It is particularly true when the Chinese government has made serious attempts to promote regional cooperation through its 'Belt and Road' Initiatives, fostering trade, cultural and educational exchanges by offering handsome scholarships to promote student mobility across the continent.

In conclusion, given the rise of glocal students – who are willing to pay for a global experience while staying in their home country – and the impact of global political shocks like Brexit and the increasingly unstable socio-

political conditions in Europe and the UK, Asian students may choose to stay in their countries or in the region for education or else choose to deepen academic exchanges as proposed by the Chinese government for deepening regional cooperation under the 'Belt and Road' framework.

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