

INTERNATIONALIZATION IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

The Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education

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This article examines the promise and challenges of the Common Higher Education Space in Southeast Asia following the 2024 Joint Declaration signed by ASEAN and SEAMEO. While the declaration marks a key milestone in regional cooperation, persistent disparities in resources, readiness, and regulatory alignment reveal a collective action problem. The article argues that sustained political will, coordinated implementation, and inclusive engagement are essential for turning regional ambition into meaningful, long-term impact.

The Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education, adopted in August 2024, marked a historic step in regional cooperation. Two regional organizations—the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), a political and economic bloc of ten member states aimed at promoting regional stability and integration, and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), a long-standing intergovernmental body dedicated to regional collaboration in education, science, and culture—jointly signed the declaration. Their joint endorsement is significant not only because of their respective influence in policymaking and capacity building, but also because it symbolizes a long-awaited convergence of political will and educational vision.

The declaration marks a commitment to support regional quality and mobility efforts in order to achieve a vision of “an inclusive space of collective intelligence in Higher Education for sustainable learning and living in Southeast Asia.” While the declaration signals a strong regional commitment, it is important to note that it is not a legally binding instrument similar to the 1997 Lisbon Recognition Convention, which set formal standards for the mutual recognition of qualifications in Europe. Instead, the Joint Declaration operates as a soft agreement, reflecting consensus and shared aspiration, but relying on voluntary alignment for implementation due to varied levels of educational development. Nevertheless, the declaration marks a shift from the long-envisioned idea of a shared higher education space to a tangible regional framework. It underscores the strategic importance of pooling collective expertise, cultivating essential skills for sustainable futures, and deepening people-to-people linkages.

The declaration represents a major milestone but also exposes significant challenges. The vision of a truly harmonized regional space continues to face substantial obstacles. Differences in national education systems, uneven quality assurance, resource

disparities, and fragmented recognition frameworks persist. Aligning regional aspirations with domestic priorities demands sustained political will and institutional capacity, both of which vary widely. This article explores these implementation challenges, arguing that, while the declaration is symbolically powerful, its impact will depend on how Southeast Asian governments, institutions, and stakeholders translate shared goals into coordinated and sustained action.

Southeast Asia’s Pursuit of Higher Education Harmonization

The signing of the Joint Declaration was the culmination of nearly two decades of incremental progress in regional higher education cooperation. With the inclusion of Timor-Leste at the ASEAN Summit in October 2025, the region now covers over 670 million people across 11 countries. Despite its diversity, ASEAN and SEAMEO have steadily fostered collaboration to enhance connectivity, economic integration, and shared development goals. Higher education has been recognized as a key enabler of these aspirations since at least the 2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on Higher Education, which underscored its role in building the ASEAN Community.

Momentum began to build in the early 2000s, with initiatives led by the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) exploring the idea of a common higher education space. The 2007 ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint laid further groundwork, highlighting the need for skilled labor mobility and regional harmonization in education. Subsequent ASEAN Work Plans on Education introduced mechanisms for aligning credit transfer systems, quality assurance frameworks, and mobility schemes. These efforts, while often compared to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), have unfolded through ASEAN’s distinct mode of consensus-building, known as the “ASEAN Way.”

Recent developments also reflect growing institutional readiness in some member states. For example, in 2024, Lao PDR issued formal guidelines for credit transfer and expanded English-medium instruction to promote mobility. Such national-level reforms, supported by regional coordination, illustrate how policy aspirations are beginning to translate into institutional change. The Joint Declaration thus builds on a foundation of sustained, though uneven, collaboration. While symbolizing a shared commitment to harmonization, it also signals the beginning of a more complex phase, turning regional ambition into coherent, inclusive, and implementable practice.

A “Collective Action Problem” in Southeast Asia’s Regional Higher Education Harmonization

Despite strong rhetorical support for the Common Higher Education Space and flagship initiatives such as the ASEAN Global Exchange for Mobility and Scholarship (ASEAN GEMS), persistent disparities in national capacity, institutional readiness, and stakeholder priorities reveal an underlying collective action problem. Stakeholders, though supportive, struggle to coordinate or contribute effectively due to misaligned interests, perceived inequities, or insufficient incentives. This manifests in inconsistent regulatory frameworks, unequal participation, and uneven distribution of benefits, all of which hinder progress toward regional integration.

A key barrier is the reluctance of some Member States to undertake structural reforms, such as aligning academic calendars or harmonizing credit systems, when these pose domestic political or administrative costs. For countries with limited visibility, capacity, or outbound mobility, the perceived benefits may be too low to justify sustained engagement. This risks a “free rider” dynamic, where some actors disengage or contribute less, diluting effectiveness and legitimacy.

Compounding the problem is a lack of shared clarity on the Common Space and its programs’ overarching purpose. While some stakeholders frame it as a tool for advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through strategic, state-led mobility, others view it as a platform for building mutual understanding and regional identity via grassroots, student-driven exchanges. These competing visions—top-down versus bottom-up—result in diverging expectations about program design, scholarship allocation, and metrics for success. Without

convergence around a common theory of change, ASEAN’s efforts to build a cohesive regional higher education space may continue to fall short of their transformative potential.

Realizing the Common Space: What Will It Take?

Collective action problems have direct implications for the successful implementation of the Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education. Although the declaration articulates a bold and shared vision, persistent disparities in capacity, policy alignment, and institutional readiness threaten to fragment the region’s path forward. Core goals such as enhancing academic mobility, upholding quality provision, and promoting shared regional development agendas remain difficult to achieve without more coordinated and equitable participation.

Given that the Declaration relies on voluntary alignment, policymakers must move from rhetorical support to sustained resource commitment and enforceable coordination. This is difficult under ASEAN’s principle of “non-interference.” Strengthening the governance role of SEAMEO RIHED and the ASEAN Secretariat could drive momentum, including creating regional incentives to offset domestic political and administrative costs.

Effective governance also requires strategic leadership and stakeholder buy-in. This involves active engagement from member states, particularly when they hold time-bound leadership roles such as the rotating ASEAN Chair. With stronger coordination and leadership, it becomes possible to develop a coherent, shared theory of change, helping to address the current lack of clarity around the Common Space’s purpose and its flagship initiatives.

Institutional leaders, supported by national reforms, must engage in deeper, sustained dialogue with faculty, employers, and civil society to establish clear, unified metrics for success and guarantee universal upholding of quality provision. Ultimately, the Common Space’s potential rests on the collective ability of governments, institutions, and stakeholders on the ground to translate the shared vision into coordinated and sustained action. Without this commitment, efforts to promote collective regional intelligence and increased global visibility risk being limited in their long-term impact and confined to grand visions but toothless implementation.

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