

CHALLENGES IN ENHANCING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN CROSS-BORDER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper shares the practices of enhancing quality assurance in meeting emerging challenges in cross-border education management. The scope of the paper is focused on internal quality assurance pertaining to recent initiatives which aim at promoting a culture of quality in regulating cross-border knowledge transfer. Further, it examines the individual components required to create an enriching academic environment. Cross-border education programs are confronted primarily in the early stages of their development with the challenge of motivating top-notch students and renowned professors to partake in their programs. As such, there is a need to ensure standards in infrastructure, facilities, resources as well as support services. Additionally, provision of grants must be ascertained to fund students, researchers and activities that would enrich culture, research, and publication. This paper is written in the context of the strivings and the experiences of the Asia-Europe Institute of the University of Malaya to establish itself as an educational and research institution on par with the highest international standards. In order to do so, governance, structure, and administration of resources are required to design, monitor, and enhance programs. All this is done in order to build a reputation for quality.

Keywords: Quality assurance, Cross-border education

1. INTRODUCTION

The impressive range of Asia-Europe initiatives in higher education collaboration needs to be understood against the background of rapid changes that are likely to have major implications for the future of education and training systems. In order to understand where the future of higher education collaboration may lead, it is worth taking stock of the significance of globalization as the intensification of economic, political, and ideational networks across the world has for its potential effects of education.

Changes in education and training policies over the last decade have been driven by a number of trends – in economics and culture – that are common or similar to Asia and Europe. Revisiting a working paper set forth by Shaharil Talib and Gareth A. Richards in 2005, we have found that there were several contributing factors that had direct effect on education and training. Globalization, for one, has undoubtedly intensified global economic competition, both in the race to create the conditions

which attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and in the struggle to improve productivity and market competitiveness in home-based industries and services. This shift implies an ever greater emphasis on information-rich, high quality production and services where the premium is on rapid change and innovation. These changes have faced education and training systems with new challenges. First, the need to reduce social costs to encourage competitiveness and to attract FDI has led to tight expenditure controls. These, in turn, have forced expanding education systems to be more cost-efficient. Second, there has been a generalized demand for higher levels of qualification and skills seen as vital to modern working environments such as skills that include the ability to communicate well, handle information, work in teams, solve new problems, and apply knowledge and skills in different contexts, to think conceptually and creatively.

No less important than economic changes have been the effects arising from widespread changes in cultures, values and lifestyles. They are discernible everywhere. One key issue is the pluralisation of lifestyles, cultures, and values and the consequent effects of increasing individualization on social cohesion in society. At the same time, these processes have meant increasing levels of uncertainty and risk. Life courses are, put simply, much less predictable and more variable than in the past. They pose special challenges for education and training. They necessitate a diversity and flexibility of provision to suit those in different situations. They suggest a need for multiple pathways which are all valued and recognized. The increasing complexity and flexibility of these pathways, and proliferation of personal choices they engender, put a premium on the availability of counseling and guidance.

2. GLOBALISATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN ASIA-EUROPE RELATIONS: CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Common or similar economic and cultural changes in the contexts of education and training across Asia and Europe have led to some clear convergence at the level of policy discourse and general policy objectives. In terms of educational contents or objectives, there have been some common policy shifts. Higher education is becoming increasingly internationalized both in its reach and curricula. In the EU, this has been greatly supported by European Commission initiatives, whereas in Asian states such as Japan, Korea and Malaysia, it has been promoted through heavy government backing. There has also been widespread policy interest in enhancing foreign language skills, IT and so-called transversal skills, like problem solving and communications. Budgetary restraints in most countries have placed increasing emphasis on improving cost-efficiency in education provision. This has led to a widespread interest in new forms of quality control and performance evaluation at all levels of education. It has also led to measures in many countries to decentralize educational governance and control.

The structures of national systems are fundamentally determined by national differences in industrial structures and labor markets, in political traditions and institutions, and in cultures of citizenship and knowledge traditions. This point was acknowledged explicitly in the Chairman's Statement at the ASEM V Summit in Hanoi which noted: "cultural diversity is the common heritage of humanity" and called "on the need to promote unity in diversity and respect for the equal dignity of

all cultures and civilizations”. Leaders emphasized in particular “the need to preserve the national cultural identity, in face of the ongoing rapid advances of information and communication technology and globalization”. So long as there are continuing national differences in these areas of cultural and institutional diversity then it is likely that there will also continue to be major differences in national systems. This has major implications for the future of Asia-Europe educational collaboration.

3. MANAGING ASIA-EUROPE EDUCATIONAL COLLABORATION: POLICY TRANSFER AND SHARING

From what we have said, there is clear evidence of policy convergence within Asia and Europe around some broad policy themes and this bodes well for the future of collaboration between the two regions. The key areas include: internationalization of higher education, some decentralization in regulation and governance, increasing use of evaluation and quality control measures, and the need to bring education and the needs of employability together.

However, this does not yet appear to have led to any marked convergence in structures and processes. Indeed, even in an age of globalization, differences in national structures and processes of higher education policy would appear as distinctive as they were eight years ago when ASEM was launched. What is apparent is that different countries – or groups of countries – have responded in practice to common problems in different ways in line with particular traditions and models. This fact raises a major challenge for managing the future of Asia-Europe educational collaboration as well as assuring quality of education.

Within the next context of globalization, it seems fair to suggest that more multilateral and region-to-region initiatives are likely to frame future of engagement. This will require greater coherence and consistency within regions – within the burgeoning ASEAN plus three partnerships, for example – if genuine multilateral collaboration is to become a reality. Further, if ASEM is to be truly a “partnership of equals” then there has to be greater sensitivity to the needs and contribution of the Asian side.

4. NEW DIRECTIONS IN ASIA-EUROPE HIGHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION

It is our strong belief that in order to ensure quality in the goals, content and instruments of all policies and programs, AEI should possess a carefully-crafted balance between two complementary domains. The first is the need for a highly developed research culture, advanced through internationally-recognized research pillars, seminars/conferences, publications and affiliations. The second is the development of sustainable international postgraduate programs, working in partnership with lead Asian and European universities to assure the highest levels of quality and flexibility.

Drawing from AEI experiences, the organization of research should encompass six objectives that may act as a flexible template for other similar initiatives.

- i. To advance multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research that has special significance globally and for the countries of Asia and Europe specifically, and for intra – and inter – regional relations.

ii. To balance the demands of basic theoretical and conceptual research strategic and applied research that is relevant to policy formulation and problem-solving.

iii. To organize research in key thematic areas or research pillars. This will be achieved through concentrated, multinational groupings of researchers who will explore interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary insight across the range of fields of inquiry.

iv. To provide high quality research on issues of importance to business, the public sector and government, and the wider community.

v. To establish research hubs as the foundation stones upon which our researchers can undertake work of the highest quality and relevance. These foundation stones will include unique collections of data and expertise in research methods to utilize these data. Researchers will have electronic access, as well, to other world class information resources.

vi. To support interregional and inter-institutional research collaboration in a number of ways:

- by performing research teams with high – level collaboration between Asian and European scholars, research institutions, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders.
- by coordinating and supporting individual research projects centrally through research pillar conveners and advisory committees;
- by funding individual research grants;
- by supporting research students;
- by establishing durable research infrastructure resources and facilities;
- by bringing together a large number academic researchers and policy users through linkages with other complementary centers, group and networks of advanced research;
- by organizing research seminar series to strengthen scholarly dialogue between key stakeholders.

In order to meet these aims, research at AEI is currently organized in four complementary research pillars:

- Globalisation, Regional Integration and Development
- Interculturalism and Community Development
- Sustainability, Governance and Social Change
- Business Networks, Knowledge Management and Competitiveness

In order to illustrate the kinds of synergies between first order research and direct policy application, the AEI has already convened several research groups. Of course, initial proposals are already being debated at the highest intergovernmental levels. What is needed is the expertise and analysis that only dedicated research hubs can provide. Further, joint collaboration with European experts will be invaluable.

Following this, it is clear that postgraduate teaching and learning in the Asia-Europe process must be driven by its advanced research culture. Thus, the organization of any portfolio of postgraduate courses is intended to create synergies between research and teaching/learning. The existing programs offered by the AEI, for example, reflect a number of unique characteristics that further the aims and objectives of enhancing quality higher education cooperation and exchange.

- *Partnership*: Each of the International Master programs has been established in joint partnership with leading institutions in Europe.
- *International Teaching*: Each of the International Master programs is taught jointly by AEI's academic staff and Visiting Professors, all of whom have global reputations. This ensures that AEI's students have the benefit of learning from leading scholars who bring with them outstanding pedagogical practice and research insight. In addition to their teaching duties, Visiting Professors add considerable value through frequent dialogue with the University's local faculty, the promotion of collaborative research, and other public outreach activities.
- *International Students*: Since their inception in September 2002, the International Masters programs have enrolled a total of 135 students and nearly one-third of these students have been from Europe.
- *Financial Support*: As part of its commitment to developing a truly global learning experience, AEI offers both full and partial financial support to deserving applicants on the basis of both outstanding academic achievement and appropriate personal and leadership qualities.

In order to build on and extend AEI's existing portfolio of the International Masters programs, special mention should be made of one of the new courses. The ASEAN Studies program is the first dedicated postgraduate course of its kind anywhere in the world - quite a thought given the general acknowledgement of the success of ASEAN as a regional association and the proliferation of equivalent EU Studies courses over the last ASEAN University Network announced the launching of Thailand and the University of Malaya, to support this initiative. AEI also hopes that EU countries will see the advantages in sponsoring European students to study the processes of regional integration and policy formulation in this dynamic and important region.

All the areas of teaching/learning have been chosen to meet student-led demand and to complement the AEI's research pillars - with direct linkages between the two.

In addition, plans are also well advanced to develop a comprehensive PhD program for students drawn from both Asia and Europe, and to be supervised by leading scholars from both regions.

5. PRACTICES OF ENHANCING QUALITY ASSURANCE IN MEETING EMERGING CHALLENGES IN CROSS-BORDER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT AT AEI: PERSPECTIVES FROM CURRENT POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

In ensuring quality, it is crucial to address the issue of AEI's commitment in providing basic necessities (i.e. housing and sanitary facilities, eating facilities, and visa/administration) and creating stimulating academic environment (i.e. seminars/lectures and study environment) that encourages learning.

5.1 Basic Necessities

It is essential that the basic necessities of postgraduate students be suitably met. It must therefore be a focal point of postgraduate institutions seeking to competitively attract international participants to provide appropriate facilities. Institutions must seek to assure the quality of services provided and to facilitate the transition into the host-country and culture. The heart of the institution is the lectures/seminars and professional intellectual dialogue; however, these cannot effectively take place if the basic needs of students remain unmet.

Coming from a diverse variety of countries, the expectations concerning "basic necessities" will certainly vary. While the expectations of other Southeast Asian may be quite similar to Malaysia, the expectations of top-notch students from developed countries will be quite high. Living accommodations must be conveniently located, facilitate extra-curricula interaction between students, and provide for adjustment to the Southeast Asian climate. Students from Northern Europe and temperate regions will have difficulties with the heat. This must not be forgotten or marginalized.

Quality assurance management must be implemented in the area of providing basic necessities and effectively impose improvements and best practices of administration if anything is found to be wanting.

If international students from developed countries do not enjoy living in the host-country, they will simply go home. As such, dormitory facilities should provide a comfortable living environment. Eating facilities must also be conveniently located, have sufficient hours of operation, and offer students, particularly international students, a variety of affordable options. AEI, in particular, offers very good facilities being located across from one of the university canteens. There is of course always room for improvement and quality assurance management must play an actively facilitating role.

It is also the task of the administration to provide a health and constructive (in the ideal case, inspiring) environment for learning, researching, and exchanging information. Once the basic necessities of students have been met, it is the focal point of the institution to facilitate knowledge transfer and growth.

In the context of administration, it is essential that quality assessment is taken of the quality assurance management processes themselves – especially when an institution is in the embryonic stages of development.

5.2 Academic Environment and Cross Border Education Management

The medium of transfer of information in internationally diverse forum is generally accepted to be the English language. With so many non-native speakers speaking English, it is not surprising that many individual dialects of English are to be found. While international scholars and internationally educated local scholars generally converse and conduct research fluently, this is not always the case. Quality assurance management must be sensitively implemented to ensure high standards and clear communication.

An educational institution as internationally oriented as AEI seeking to enhance its international reputation must attract renowned international experts and local lecturers of the highest caliber. AEI has been quite successful in this respect. Methods of conducting international networking and evaluation of potential international partners are well established. For continued quality, quality assurance management ought to consistently monitor the situation.

The classroom and lecture hall facilities of AEI are on par with the highest of standards. The library resources are well-stocked and further enhanced with computing facilities. Its operating hours has been extended to allow postgraduate students to use the facilities. The physical environment of an institution provides the basic framework of the academic environment. As good as this physical environment may be if it is inaccessible to students, it is useless. Quality assurance measures must be drafted to access the components contributing to the creation of a healthy academic environment. These must be monitored with the goal being to deliver the highest quality education and academic experience with the fewest hiccups as possible.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the varied experience and challenges, AEI provides a platform for students to enhance their knowledge and academic competence. By highlighting the existing quality of AEI and the ways to improve, it is already quality. The practice of Kaizen will further enhance quality in terms of intra-, inter-, multi-, and cross-disciplinary knowledge and inevitably produce quality graduates.

Further, it is clear that the core policies of the ASEM have reached a critical turning point. To date, much has been done and it is good to concentrate upon success. But there is also a need to acknowledge that the potential beneficial results of high quality policy collaboration and knowledge transfer in the field of higher education are very considerable. The ASEM process could be at the centre of a real knowledge infrastructure, linking higher education in Asia and Europe through precise programs with identifiable student markets, and problem-solving applications. Moreover, the overall knowledge synergies will benefit all the ASEM member states and more than two billion people.