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A Roadmap on Harmonizing Education in the ASEAN Region: Challenges and Strategies

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Abstract

Aim: This research aimed to provide a comprehensive roadmap for harmonizing education in the ASEAN region by analyzing existing frameworks and initiatives, evaluating the effectiveness of harmonization strategies, identifying challenges, exploring contextual variations among member states, and proposing actionable recommendations.

Methodology: The study employed a conceptual analysis research design, examining and synthesizing relevant literature. The analysis focused on key themes such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS).

Results: The research found that existing frameworks like AQR, AQAN, MRAs, and ACTS have laid a strong foundation for educational harmonization in ASEAN, supporting qualification recognition, quality assurance, and student mobility. However, challenges such as diverse educational systems, political and legal hurdles, resource constraints, and the need for robust quality assurance mechanisms persist. Contextual variations among member states significantly influence the implementation and outcomes of harmonization initiatives.

Conclusion: Harmonizing education among ASEAN countries is a complex but achievable goal that requires coordinated efforts and strong commitment from all stakeholders. The study concludes that while existing frameworks are effective, addressing the identified challenges and leveraging contextual insights are crucial for successful harmonization.

Recommendation: The research proposes a roadmap that includes strengthening MRAs, enhancing AQR, expanding ACTS, promoting curriculum alignment, facilitating teacher and faculty exchange programs, supporting collaborative research, enhancing language and cultural integration, organizing regional educational conferences, and developing policy and regulatory frameworks. Addressing these areas will contribute to a more integrated, competitive, and cohesive regional education system.

Keywords: ASEAN, educational harmonization, AQR, MRAs, quality assurance, student mobility

INTRODUCTION

Education is a cornerstone of socio-economic development, and this holds particularly true for the ASEAN region, which is marked by its rich diversity in cultures, languages, and educational systems. In recent years, the goal of harmonizing education across ASEAN countries has gained significant momentum. This effort is driven by the need to enhance regional integration, boost economic competitiveness, and foster social cohesion. Harmonization in education involves aligning standards, curricula, and quality assurance mechanisms to enable the mutual recognition of qualifications, promote student and staff mobility, and ensure consistent educational quality across the region.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has made significant progress toward this objective through initiatives like the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR), the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), and Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs). These frameworks aim to foster a cohesive educational environment that supports lifelong learning and enhances graduate employability throughout ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019; Carvajal, et al, 2023). However, despite these strides, achieving educational harmonization



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remains a complex endeavor, complicated by divergent educational policies, varying levels of development, and numerous political and legal challenges.

A key element in this effort is the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR), which provides a common reference point for comparing qualifications across ASEAN member states. This framework plays a vital role in the recognition of qualifications, ensuring that they meet comparable standards and thereby facilitating the mobility of students and professionals within the region (Kuroda, et al, 2020; Carvajal & Vicente, 2024). Alongside this, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) seeks to enhance education quality through collaboration on quality assurance standards and practices, promoting regional cooperation and capacity-building among quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2019).

Another important strategy is the implementation of Credit Transfer Systems, such as the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS). These systems are designed to facilitate the recognition and transfer of academic credits earned by students in different ASEAN countries, thus promoting student mobility and fostering knowledge and skill exchange (Hirosato, 2022). In addition, efforts to align curricula across member states are crucial in standardizing core learning outcomes and ensuring that students receive a comparable quality of education, regardless of where they pursue their studies (Pham & Nguyen, 2023).

Despite these advancements, several challenges persist. The region's diverse educational systems, political and legal obstacles, resource limitations, and the need for consistent quality assurance frameworks are among the primary barriers that must be overcome to achieve true educational harmonization (Dhirathiti & Sonsri, 2019; Carvajal & Vicente, 2024). Consequently, this research outlines a comprehensive roadmap for harmonizing education in the ASEAN region, focusing on the strategies employed and the challenges encountered. The study aims to help create a more integrated and competitive regional education system that benefits all ASEAN member states by contributing to the ongoing dialogue and efforts in this field.

Background of the Study

The quest for harmonizing education in the ASEAN region is deeply intertwined with the broader goals of regional integration and economic development. Since its inception, ASEAN has pursued initiatives aimed at strengthening economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and political stability among its member states. As a cornerstone of socio-economic progress, education has been a key focus in these integration efforts. The ASEAN Vision 2025 emphasizes the creation of a cohesive, economically integrated, socially responsible, and truly people-oriented ASEAN (ASEAN Secretariat, 2018).

One of the primary tools in this endeavor is the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR), which serves as a common reference point for comparing qualifications across member states, thus facilitating the mobility of learners and workers. The AQR promotes the recognition of qualifications, enhances graduate employability, and ensures that educational standards meet both regional and global benchmarks (Kuroda, et al, 2020). In parallel, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) has played a critical role in advancing quality assurance practices across higher education institutions, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and accountability (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2019).

Another key initiative is the implementation of Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), which allow professionals to have their qualifications recognized across ASEAN countries. This initiative has been pivotal in enhancing professional mobility and addressing regional skill shortages (Hirosato, 2022). Moreover, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) facilitates the transfer of academic credits earned by students across member countries, thereby promoting student mobility and encouraging the exchange of knowledge and skills (Pham & Nguyen, 2023).

Despite these substantial advances, the diversity in educational systems, policies, and developmental levels among ASEAN countries presents significant challenges to harmonization efforts. Differences in curriculum content, teaching methodologies, assessment practices, and quality assurance mechanisms make it difficult to establish uniform educational standards across the region. Additionally, political and legal hurdles—such as varying national regulations and accreditation requirements—further complicate the harmonization process (UNESCO, 2014).


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Identification of the Research Gap

While there is considerable literature on the initiatives and frameworks aimed at harmonizing education in ASEAN, there is a clear gap in comprehensive studies that systematically analyze the effectiveness of these initiatives and identify persistent challenges. Most existing research focuses on individual components of the harmonization process, such as the implementation of the AQRF, MRAs, and quality assurance frameworks, without offering an integrated perspective that encompasses all these elements (Kuroda, et al, 2020; Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2019).

Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the actual impact of these harmonization efforts on student and professional mobility, graduate employability, and the overall quality of education in the region. Studies that critically evaluate the outcomes of initiatives like the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) and their alignment with the broader goals of regional integration remain scarce (Hiroto, 2022; Pham & Nguyen, 2023).

A further critical gap lies in exploring contextual challenges individual ASEAN member states face in adopting and implementing these harmonization frameworks. Given the region's diverse socio-economic, political, and cultural contexts, the harmonization challenges are not uniform across all countries. Therefore, research that delves into these contextual nuances and provides country-specific insights is essential for effectively developing tailored strategies to address these challenges (UNESCO, 2014).

Addressing these research gaps is crucial for advancing discourse on educational harmonization in ASEAN and for informing policy decisions that can lead to a more effective and sustainable integration of educational systems across the region. This study aims to fill these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the strategies employed in harmonizing education in ASEAN, evaluating their effectiveness, and identifying the persistent challenges that must be addressed to achieve a fully harmonized and integrated educational environment.

Significance of the Research

This research holds significant importance for both policy-makers and educational stakeholders across the ASEAN region. As ASEAN continues to strive for deeper regional integration, education is a crucial pillar that supports economic development, social cohesion, and cultural exchange. By providing a comprehensive analysis of the strategies and frameworks involved in harmonizing education, this study contributes to the ongoing efforts to create a more integrated and cohesive educational system across the region.

1. Policy Development:

The findings of this research offer valuable insights for policy-makers aiming to improve and refine educational policies. By identifying the challenges faced in implementing harmonization frameworks, this study can help inform policy reforms that are better aligned with the diverse socio-political and economic contexts of individual ASEAN member states. It also emphasizes the need for more flexible, adaptable strategies that can cater to varying national circumstances while maintaining the broader goals of regional integration.

2. Enhancing Educational Quality and Mobility:

By assessing the effectiveness of initiatives like the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), this research provides critical evidence on how these frameworks contribute to improving educational quality, student mobility, and professional recognition across the region. The study highlights gaps in current practices, offering recommendations on how to enhance cross-border mobility, ensure consistent quality assurance, and improve the employability of graduates within ASEAN.

3. Addressing Institutional Challenges:

This research draws attention to the challenges that higher education institutions face in adapting to harmonization frameworks, particularly regarding resource constraints, administrative readiness, and political and legal obstacles. By focusing on these institutional barriers, the study offers practical solutions for universities and colleges seeking to



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align themselves with regional standards, thus supporting the overall goal of creating a more unified higher education ecosystem.

4. Contribution to Regional Integration Goals:

Ultimately, the research contributes to ASEAN's broader regional integration goals by addressing one of the core elements of socio-economic development—education. Through an examination of both successes and challenges, the study enhances the understanding of what is required to achieve a fully integrated, people-centered ASEAN. It provides a roadmap for future actions, helping to create educational pathways that will foster a competitive, skilled workforce ready to meet the challenges of the global economy.

Definition of Key Terms

1. **ASEAN Region:** The ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) region comprises ten member states in Southeast Asia, including Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. These countries collaborate on various initiatives aimed at promoting economic cooperation, political stability, and socio-cultural integration.
2. **ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF):** The AQRF is a regional framework that enables the comparison and recognition of qualifications across ASEAN member states. It serves as a common reference point to support the mobility of students, professionals, and workers by ensuring that educational qualifications meet comparable regional and global standards.
3. **Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs):** MRAs are agreements between ASEAN member states that facilitate the recognition of professional qualifications across borders. These arrangements allow qualified professionals in one ASEAN country to have their credentials recognized and accepted in other ASEAN countries, promoting cross-border mobility and addressing regional skill shortages.
4. **ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS):** The ACTS is a system that enables the transfer of academic credits earned by students across ASEAN member states. This framework facilitates student mobility within the region by allowing credits from one country's higher education institution to be recognized in another, thus promoting greater regional integration in education.
5. **ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN):** The AQAN is a network that promotes the development and implementation of quality assurance practices and standards across higher education institutions in ASEAN. Its goal is to enhance the quality of education in the region through collaboration and capacity-building among national quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions.

Literature Review

1. Existing Frameworks and Initiatives for Educational Harmonization

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) is a crucial tool designed to enable the comparison of qualifications across ASEAN member states, thereby facilitating the recognition of educational and professional credentials. As Kuroda, et al (2020) highlight, the AQRF supports the mobility of learners and workers by ensuring that qualifications meet comparable standards throughout the region, making it a cornerstone of ASEAN's educational harmonization efforts.

Similarly, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) plays a pivotal role in promoting quality assurance in higher education across ASEAN countries. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) discussed how AQAN's initiatives have fostered collaboration among quality assurance agencies, facilitating regional cooperation and capacity building. AQAN's focus on developing common quality assurance standards and practices is essential for ensuring educational harmonization across the diverse ASEAN region.



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Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) are another critical initiative that facilitates the recognition of professional qualifications among ASEAN member states. According to Hirosato (2022) and Carvajal, et al. (2023), MRAs have been instrumental in promoting professional mobility and addressing skills shortages within the region. By enabling professionals to work across borders without requalification, these arrangements are vital to creating a more integrated ASEAN workforce.

Furthermore, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) is an initiative designed to support student mobility by enabling the transfer of academic credits earned in different ASEAN countries. Pham & Nguyen (2023) underscores the importance of ACTS in encouraging the exchange of knowledge and skills, thereby promoting a more cohesive and integrated educational environment. This system is essential for students seeking to pursue part of their studies in another ASEAN country, as it ensures their credits are recognized regionally.

2. Effectiveness of Harmonization Strategies

Efforts to align curricula across ASEAN member states are crucial to ensuring students receive a comparable quality of education. Pham & Nguyen (2023) highlight the challenges and successes in standardizing core curricula and learning outcomes, emphasizing that alignment is key to educational harmonization but requires extensive collaboration and consensus among ASEAN countries. Another critical component of this harmonization process is the development of quality assurance mechanisms. According to Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019), AQAN has been instrumental in promoting practices that ensure consistent educational quality across the region, fostering mutual trust among member states and improving the overall effectiveness of higher education.

Challenges and Barriers to Harmonization

Despite these efforts, several challenges persist. The diversity of educational systems, policies, and developmental stages across ASEAN countries makes harmonization complex. UNESCO (2014) notes that variations in curriculum content, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices pose significant obstacles to establishing uniform standards. Political and legal hurdles further complicate the process, with Kuroda, et al (2020) pointing out that differing national regulations and accreditation requirements create barriers to the mutual recognition of qualifications. Overcoming these obstacles requires concerted diplomatic efforts and greater policy alignment. Additionally, some ASEAN countries face resource constraints that limit their ability to fully engage in harmonization initiatives. As Hirosato (2022) notes, financial and infrastructural limitations hinder the capacity of educational institutions to participate in regional frameworks like AQRF and AQAN.

Contextual Variations Among ASEAN Member States

The socio-economic and cultural diversity within ASEAN also plays a crucial role in shaping the implementation of harmonization initiatives. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) argued that understanding these contextual nuances is vital to developing strategies that address each member state's specific needs and challenges. UNESCO (2014) highlighted how political, economic, and cultural factors influence individual countries' abilities to adopt harmonization frameworks. These insights underscore the importance of tailored approaches that respect the unique contexts of each ASEAN nation.

Recommendations for Enhancing Harmonization

To advance the harmonization of education in ASEAN, several recommendations are critical. First, policy harmonization is essential. Kuroda, et al (2020) and Carvajal and Vicente (2024) suggest that aligning national education policies and regulations with regional frameworks will streamline accreditation, quality assurance, and qualification recognition, helping to overcome many of the current barriers. Second, capacity building and resource allocation are necessary to support under-resourced countries. Hirosato (2022) emphasizes that targeted funding and technical assistance can empower educational institutions to participate fully in regional initiatives like AQRF and AQAN. Finally, enhanced collaboration and dialogue among member states are key to fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. Pham and Nguyen (2023) and Carvajal, et al. (2023) stressed the importance of regional



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educational conferences and workshops as platforms for sharing best practices and developing joint strategies for harmonization.

Synthesis

The harmonization of education in the ASEAN region is a complex yet vital undertaking aimed at promoting regional integration, improving educational quality, and facilitating the mobility of students and professionals. A synthesis of the literature reveals several key themes and insights that are crucial to understanding and advancing this goal.

Existing Frameworks and Initiatives

Several frameworks and initiatives have been established to support the harmonization of education in ASEAN. Central to these efforts is the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQR), which provides a common reference point for comparing qualifications across member states and facilitating their mutual recognition. Kuroda et al. (2020) highlighted that AQR enables regional mobility by ensuring comparable standards of education and qualifications. Similarly, the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) plays a pivotal role in promoting quality assurance standards and practices across the region. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) emphasizes AQAN's role in fostering regional cooperation and capacity building among quality assurance agencies, which is essential for maintaining consistent educational standards. Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) further enhance professional mobility by recognizing qualifications across ASEAN countries, addressing skills shortages, and boosting employability (Hirosato, 2022; Carvajal, 2023a, 2023b). The ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) also facilitates student mobility by enabling the transfer of academic credits earned in different ASEAN countries, promoting knowledge exchange and contributing to a more integrated educational environment (Pham & Nguyen, 2023).

Effectiveness of Harmonization Strategies

The effectiveness of harmonization strategies such as curriculum alignment and quality assurance mechanisms is well-documented. Curriculum alignment ensures that students receive a comparable quality of education across ASEAN member states. Pham & Nguyen (2023) discussed both the challenges and successes in standardizing core curricula and learning outcomes, highlighting the importance of collaboration in this effort. Similarly, quality assurance mechanisms are essential for maintaining educational standards and fostering mutual trust. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) underscores AQAN's role in developing common quality assurance practices, which are critical to the harmonization process.

Challenges and Barriers to Harmonization

Despite progress, several challenges and barriers continue to hinder the harmonization of education in ASEAN. The diversity in educational systems, policies, and levels of development among member states presents a significant obstacle. Chao (2024) explains how variations in curriculum content, teaching methodologies, and assessment practices complicate the establishment of uniform standards. Political and legal differences further exacerbate these challenges. Kuroda, et al. (2020) and Carvajal et al. (2023) noted that differing national regulations and accreditation requirements create barriers to the mutual recognition of qualifications, requiring diplomatic efforts and policy alignment to overcome. Resource constraints also pose a considerable challenge, particularly for countries with limited financial and infrastructural capacities. Hirosato (2022) observes that these limitations can restrict the participation of educational institutions in regional frameworks such as AQR and AQAN.

Contextual Variations Among ASEAN Member States

Understanding the contextual variations among ASEAN member states is vital for the successful implementation of harmonization initiatives. Socio-economic and cultural differences significantly influence the outcomes of these efforts. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) argue that recognizing these nuances is essential for developing strategies that effectively address each country's needs and challenges. Country-specific challenges further highlight the need for tailored approaches. UNESCO (2014) presented case studies demonstrating how



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political, economic, and cultural factors shape individual countries' abilities to engage in harmonization efforts, stressing the importance of context-sensitive strategies.

Recommendations for Enhancing Harmonization

To overcome challenges and enhance harmonization, several recommendations emerge from the literature. Policy harmonization is critical for aligning national education policies and regulations with regional frameworks. Kuroda, et al (2020) suggests the development of common standards for accreditation, quality assurance, and qualification recognition as a pathway to greater cohesion. Additionally, investing in capacity building and providing adequate resources to educational institutions are essential. Hirosato (2022) advocates for targeted funding and technical assistance to support countries facing resource constraints, enabling them to participate more fully in regional initiatives. Enhanced collaboration and dialogue among ASEAN member states are also crucial. Pham & Nguyen (2023) emphasize the importance of regional educational conferences and workshops as platforms for sharing best practices and developing joint strategies for advancing harmonization.

Harmonizing education in ASEAN is an ongoing and multifaceted process that demands concerted efforts from all stakeholders. By critically analyzing existing frameworks, evaluating the effectiveness of harmonization strategies, identifying and addressing challenges, and proposing actionable recommendations, this research seeks to contribute to the creation of a more cohesive, integrated, and competitive regional education system. The synthesis of the literature underscores the complexity of this endeavor but also highlights the potential benefits of a harmonized educational environment for the socio-economic development of the ASEAN region.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to provide a roadmap for harmonizing education in the ASEAN region.

To achieve this, the study focused on the following specific objectives:

1. To analyze existing frameworks and initiatives such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) to understand their roles, implementation, and impact on educational harmonization in ASEAN.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of various strategies in harmonizing education across ASEAN countries, including curriculum alignment, credit transfer systems, and quality assurance mechanisms.
3. To identify and assess the challenges and barriers faced by ASEAN member states in harmonizing education, including divergent educational systems, political and legal hurdles, and resource constraints.
4. To examine the contextual variations among ASEAN member states that affect the implementation and outcomes of educational harmonization initiatives, providing country-specific insights.
5. To propose actionable recommendations and strategies for overcoming identified challenges and enhancing the harmonization of education in the ASEAN region, contributing to regional integration and socio-economic development.

The harmonization of education in the ASEAN region is crucial for promoting regional integration, enhancing education quality, and facilitating student and professional mobility. However, despite various initiatives and frameworks aimed at achieving this goal, significant challenges persist that hinder the realization of a fully harmonized and integrated educational system. These challenges include divergent educational policies, varying levels of development, political and legal hurdles, and inconsistent quality assurance mechanisms. Additionally, there is a lack of comprehensive research that systematically analyzes the effectiveness of these initiatives, identifies the persistent challenges, and provides context-specific insights.

Despite implementing frameworks such as the AQRF, AQAN, MRAs, and ACTS, the ASEAN region continues to face significant challenges in harmonizing its educational systems. There is a need for a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of these initiatives, an assessment of the contextual challenges faced by individual member states, and the development of actionable recommendations to address these challenges and enhance educational harmonization in the region.



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This research aims to fill the existing literature gaps by providing a roadmap for harmonizing education in ASEAN, evaluating current strategies and initiatives, and proposing solutions to overcome the identified challenges. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to the ongoing efforts to create a more cohesive, integrated, and competitive regional education system that benefits all ASEAN member states.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative research design, specifically employing a conceptual analysis approach to examine the harmonization of education within the ASEAN region. Qualitative research is well-suited for exploring complex and context-dependent issues, such as educational harmonization, which involves multiple frameworks, diverse socio-political contexts, and varying levels of development across ASEAN member states. The conceptual analysis method allows for a systematic and detailed examination of key concepts, theories, and strategies related to education harmonization.

Through qualitative analysis, this research sought to understand how different frameworks and initiatives function within the region, identifying patterns, themes, and variations that influence their effectiveness. The study draws from existing literature, policy documents, and theoretical frameworks to comprehensively synthesize the current state of educational harmonization efforts in ASEAN.

The objectives of this qualitative conceptual analysis are multifaceted. First, it aimed to analyze and synthesize existing frameworks and initiatives focused on educational harmonization in ASEAN, emphasizing key concepts and their application across various member states. Second, it sought to evaluate the effectiveness of current strategies by exploring the qualitative impact of these initiatives on educational outcomes, student mobility, and professional recognition. Third, the analysis identified challenges and barriers to harmonization, examining the differing socio-political, legal, and institutional factors in ASEAN countries. Fourth, the study explored the contextual variations among member states, investigating how cultural, economic, and educational contexts influence the implementation and results of harmonization efforts. Finally, this analysis proposed actionable recommendations for enhancing educational harmonization based on a qualitative synthesis of successful practices and common challenges identified across the region.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Harmonizing education in ASEAN is a multifaceted endeavor that requires the alignment of educational systems, standards, and practices. The aim of this alignment is to ensure the mutual recognition of qualifications, facilitate the mobility of students and professionals, and guarantee high-quality education across the region. This section outlines the key strategies and initiatives that have been implemented to achieve these goals, supported by relevant literature.

Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs)

Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) play a critical role in enabling the recognition of qualifications and certifications across ASEAN member states. These agreements allow professionals to have their qualifications recognized in other ASEAN countries, facilitating regional mobility and addressing skills shortages. Hirosato (2022) highlights that MRAs have been crucial in fostering a more integrated labor market, which is vital for the region's economic development. By standardizing the recognition of qualifications, MRAs also help streamline cross-border employment opportunities, making it easier for professionals to move and work throughout ASEAN.

However, while MRAs offer significant advantages, their implementation faces challenges. UNESCO (2014) and Chao (2024) pointed out that harmonizing national standards with regional agreements requires greater collaboration and policy alignment among member states. The process of aligning qualifications across countries with varying legal frameworks and educational standards remains a complex task. Ensuring that these qualifications are recognized uniformly across borders requires sustained diplomatic and political efforts and a commitment from all member states to participate fully in the harmonization process (Carvajal, 2023a, 2023b).


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ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)

The ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) is another essential initiative for educational harmonization. It provides a common reference point that allows comparisons of qualifications across member states, facilitating the mobility of learners and workers. Kuroda, et al. (2020) notes that AQRF is a key component of ASEAN's strategy to ensure that qualifications are mutually understood and accepted across borders. This framework supports the development of consistent educational standards, contributing to regional integration by enabling a smooth transfer of qualifications between countries.

Despite its importance, the AQRF's effectiveness depends on how well it is implemented across ASEAN. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) argued that while the framework provides a solid foundation for the mutual recognition of qualifications, there are significant disparities in how member states apply quality assurance mechanisms. Countries with fewer resources may struggle to meet AQRF's standards, leading to inconsistencies in its application. To address this, Hirosato (2022) recommends increased technical support and capacity-building initiatives for resource-constrained countries to ensure that all member states can fully benefit from the framework.

ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN)

The ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) is integral to maintaining educational standards across the region. AQAN promotes regional collaboration on quality assurance practices, facilitating the development of consistent standards across higher education institutions. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) emphasized that AQAN has successfully fostered capacity-building efforts among ASEAN member states, encouraging greater cooperation between national quality assurance agencies. Through AQAN, the region has seen improvements in maintaining high educational standards, which is essential for harmonizing qualifications and ensuring that learners and professionals receive comparable education across borders.

However, the uniform application of quality assurance standards remains a challenge. Disparities in the level of development between member states affect how these standards are implemented. As Hirosato (2022) highlights, some countries may lack the financial and infrastructural capacity to adopt AQAN's practices fully. This limits their ability to participate in the harmonization process. Therefore, targeted funding and technical assistance are crucial to ensure that all ASEAN member states can engage effectively in regional quality assurance initiatives.

Credit Transfer Systems and Curriculum Alignment

Credit transfer systems, such as the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), are vital for facilitating student mobility across ASEAN. These systems allow students to transfer academic credits earned in one country to another, thereby promoting the exchange of knowledge and skills. Pham & Nguyen (2023) notes that ACTS has been instrumental in supporting student mobility, which is a key element of educational harmonization. By enabling students to move between institutions and have their credits recognized, ACTS contributes to a more integrated educational environment.

Curriculum alignment complements credit transfer systems by ensuring that core curricula and learning outcomes are standardized across member states. This standardization ensures that students receive a comparable quality of education regardless of where they study within ASEAN. According to Pham & Nguyen (2023), curriculum alignment is crucial for promoting the mutual recognition of qualifications. However, achieving this alignment requires significant collaboration between educational institutions, policy-makers, and regulatory bodies, particularly in harmonizing diverse educational traditions and practices.

Teacher and Faculty Exchange Programs

Teacher and faculty exchange programs are critical in promoting the harmonization of education standards across ASEAN. These programs enable educators to share best practices, teaching methodologies, and cultural knowledge, thereby fostering professional development and a deeper understanding of different educational systems. Holzhaacker, Pham & Nguyen (2021) asserts that such exchanges are vital for aligning teaching standards across the



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region, as they provide opportunities for educators to gain insights into different pedagogical approaches, enhancing the overall quality of education.

In addition to fostering professional development, these exchange programs also contribute to regional cohesion by building networks among educators. These networks promote long-term collaboration between institutions, which is essential for sustaining the momentum of educational harmonization efforts. However, as with many other initiatives, the success of exchange programs is dependent on adequate funding and institutional support, which may be lacking in less-resourced countries (Niedermeier & Pohlenz, 2019).

Collaborative Research and Language Integration

Collaborative research initiatives are another key aspect of educational harmonization in ASEAN. Joint research projects between universities and research institutions in different countries help to address regional challenges and promote innovation. Kuroda, et al (2020) highlights that collaborative research fosters a culture of cooperation, which is essential for tackling common educational issues and advancing the quality of education in the region. Such collaborations also contribute to the development of knowledge-sharing platforms, which can be used to enhance educational standards.

Language and cultural integration are also critical components of harmonization efforts. Programs that focus on language training and cultural exchange help to break down barriers between ASEAN countries, fostering a sense of regional identity. Niedermeier and Pohlenz (2019) stressed these programs' importance in promoting mutual understanding among students and educators from different cultural backgrounds. Language and cultural integration efforts are essential for building a cohesive ASEAN community, which supports broader goals of educational and socio-economic integration.

Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

The alignment of national education policies and regulations is essential for supporting regional integration in ASEAN. Kuroda, et al (2020) argues that developing common standards for accreditation, quality assurance, and qualification recognition is crucial for creating a cohesive educational framework that facilitates mobility and integration. The harmonization of policies is particularly important in ensuring that students and professionals can transition smoothly between different ASEAN countries without facing regulatory barriers.

Nevertheless, achieving policy alignment is challenging due to member states' political and legal differences (Carvajal, 2023a, 2023b). Holzhacker, Pham & Nguyen (2021) noted that overcoming these challenges requires sustained diplomatic efforts, as well as strong leadership at both the national and regional levels. Ensuring that policies are aligned with regional frameworks like the AQRF and AQAN will be critical for the long-term success of ASEAN's educational harmonization goals.

Implementation Challenges and Considerations

Despite the promising strategies outlined, several challenges remain in achieving effective educational harmonization in ASEAN. The diversity of educational systems, political and legal hurdles, and resource constraints are significant barriers (Carvajal & Vicente, 2024; Carvajal, et al 2023). Holzhacker & Pham & Nguyen (2021) explain that the varied educational structures, policies, and standards complicate harmonization efforts, requiring significant collaboration and consensus-building among member states. Kuroda, et al (2020) adds that political and legal frameworks, including national regulations and accreditation systems, present obstacles to the seamless recognition of qualifications.

Resource constraints also hinder some countries from fully participating in regional initiatives. Hiroto (2022) emphasizes the need for targeted funding and technical assistance to support these countries in implementing harmonization frameworks like AQRF and AQAN. Without adequate resources, countries with limited financial or infrastructural capacity may struggle to meet the standards required for effective educational harmonization, thereby limiting their participation in ASEAN's broader integration goals.



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Harmonizing education among ASEAN countries is a complex but achievable goal that requires coordinated efforts and a strong commitment from all stakeholders. By leveraging frameworks like the AQRF, fostering collaboration through MRAs, and promoting student and faculty exchanges, ASEAN can create a more integrated and competitive regional education system that benefits all member states. Addressing the identified challenges—such as diverse educational systems, political and legal hurdles, and resource limitations—will be essential for achieving effective and sustainable educational harmonization in the region.

Conclusion

1. Analyzing Existing Frameworks and Initiatives

The study found that existing frameworks such as the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs), and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) have laid a strong foundation for educational harmonization in ASEAN. These initiatives support the recognition of qualifications, enhance the quality of education, and promote student and professional mobility across member states. The AQRF and AQAN, in particular, have been effective in establishing common reference points and quality assurance standards that are critical for mutual recognition and comparability of qualifications.

2. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Harmonization Strategies

The effectiveness of various harmonization strategies was evaluated, revealing that credit transfer systems, curriculum alignment, and teacher/faculty exchange programs are instrumental in promoting mobility and knowledge exchange. The ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) facilitates the seamless transfer of academic credits, encouraging students to study across borders. Curriculum alignment efforts help learning outcomes and ensure a comparable quality of education across member states. Teacher and faculty exchange programs enhance professional development and cultural understanding, contributing to the harmonization of teaching standards and practices.

3. Identifying and Assessing Challenges

The research identified several challenges that hinder the harmonization of education in ASEAN. These include diverse educational systems, political and legal hurdles, resource constraints, and the need for robust quality assurance mechanisms. The diversity in educational structures and policies among member states complicates efforts to establish uniform standards. Political and legal differences further challenge the negotiation and implementation of harmonization agreements. Additionally, resource limitations in some countries restrict their capacity to fully participate in regional initiatives. Ensuring consistent quality across educational institutions requires continuous improvement and capacity building in quality assurance practices.

4. Examining Contextual Variations

Contextual variations among ASEAN member states significantly influence the implementation and outcomes of harmonization initiatives. Socio-economic, political, and cultural differences affect how each country adopts and benefits from regional frameworks. The study highlights the importance of understanding these contextual nuances to develop tailored strategies that address specific needs and challenges. Some countries may require more capacity building and resource allocation support to effectively participate in harmonization efforts.

Recommendations

Based on the comprehensive analysis of existing frameworks, the effectiveness of harmonization strategies, challenges, and contextual variations, the following recommendations outline a **strategic roadmap for advancing the harmonization of education in the ASEAN region**.

1. Strengthening Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs)

To facilitate the recognition of qualifications and certifications across ASEAN member states and promote professional mobility, MRAs need to be strengthened. First, existing MRAs should be updated regularly to reflect current educational standards and evolving industry requirements. Furthermore, new MRAs must be developed in


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emerging fields to address skills shortages and meet the demands of the evolving labor market. Efforts should also be made to promote MRAs among educational institutions, employers, and professionals through targeted outreach programs and informational campaigns to increase awareness and understanding.

2. Enhancing the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)

The AQRF plays a pivotal role in ensuring comparability of qualifications across ASEAN member states, thus supporting regional mobility for both learners and workers. To ensure the AQRF remains relevant and aligned with global standards, it should be regularly reviewed and updated. Additionally, member states should be provided with technical assistance and capacity-building programs to facilitate the effective implementation of the AQRF. Establishing a centralized AQRF database would streamline the qualification comparison process and improve transparency, thereby simplifying mobility for professionals and students alike.

3. Strengthening the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN)

To enhance the quality of education through collaboration on quality assurance standards, AQAN should continue its efforts to develop common quality assurance guidelines that can be adopted across ASEAN member states. Regular peer reviews and audits should be conducted to ensure adherence to these standards, and best practices in quality assurance should be promoted through workshops, training programs, and collaborative projects. This approach will ensure the continuous improvement of educational institutions across the region, fostering greater regional cooperation.

4. Expanding the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS)

To further support student mobility, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) must be expanded to include more institutions and programs across ASEAN member states. An online portal for managing and tracking credit transfers should be developed to ensure transparency and efficiency in the process. Additionally, bilateral and multilateral agreements between universities should be encouraged to support seamless credit transfer across borders, allowing students to maximize their educational opportunities throughout ASEAN.

5. Promoting Curriculum Alignment and Development

Standardizing core curricula and learning outcomes is critical for ensuring a comparable quality of education across ASEAN member states. Collaborative efforts among educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and policy-makers should lead to the development of regional curriculum frameworks for key disciplines. Establishing a consortium of universities to work on curriculum alignment projects and share best practices will encourage the adoption of regional curricula. Incentives should also be provided to educational institutions to support this alignment and ensure widespread participation.

6. Facilitating Teacher and Faculty Exchange Programs

Teacher and faculty exchanges are vital for promoting the sharing of best practices, teaching methodologies, and cultural understanding. A regional framework should be developed to govern these exchange programs, including guidelines and funding mechanisms. Institutions should be encouraged to participate by highlighting the professional development benefits of such exchanges. Additionally, an online platform could be created to connect educators and facilitate the planning and execution of these programs.

7. Supporting Collaborative Research and Development

Encouraging joint research projects and the sharing of resources among ASEAN universities and research institutions will help address regional challenges. Establishing regional research funding programs to support these initiatives and creating research hubs in strategic areas will foster innovation and knowledge-sharing. Interdisciplinary collaborations that tackle issues of regional significance, such as sustainable development, should also be prioritized.

8. Enhancing Language and Cultural Integration Programs

Fostering mutual understanding and respect among students and educators from different ASEAN countries is crucial for building a cohesive regional identity. Language training programs should be developed to improve proficiency in both ASEAN languages and English, facilitating communication across borders. Cultural exchange programs, including student and faculty exchanges, can also promote regional identity. Moreover, incorporating



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ASEAN studies into school and university curricula will deepen knowledge of regional history, culture, and current affairs.

9. Organizing Regional Educational Conferences and Workshops

Conferences and workshops provide essential platforms for stakeholders to discuss challenges, share best practices, and develop strategies for educational harmonization. ASEAN should host annual regional conferences focused on these themes, encouraging diverse participation from policy-makers, educators, researchers, and students. Proceedings and reports from these events should be published to disseminate knowledge and guide future policy decisions.

10. Developing Policy and Regulatory Frameworks

Policy harmonization is key to aligning national education systems with ASEAN's regional integration goals. A regional policy framework that outlines common standards for accreditation, quality assurance, and qualification recognition should be developed. Additionally, regular policy dialogues among ASEAN member states will be necessary to address legal barriers and facilitate regulatory alignment. Technical assistance should be provided to member states to ensure that their national policies are in line with regional frameworks.

Implementation Challenges and Considerations

Despite the comprehensive roadmap outlined above, several challenges remain. The diverse educational systems, policies, and standards across ASEAN countries complicate harmonization efforts. Collaborative efforts and consensus-building are essential to address these disparities. Political and legal hurdles also pose significant challenges, as negotiating agreements that satisfy all member states can be difficult due to differing frameworks. Diplomatic efforts and policy alignment are required to overcome these challenges. Furthermore, resource constraints hinder some countries from fully participating in harmonization initiatives. Targeted funding and technical assistance are necessary to support these countries. Finally, maintaining consistent quality across educational institutions will require robust quality assurance mechanisms, along with continuous improvement and capacity-building efforts.

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