

The Impact of the ASEAN Curriculum Framework on Regional Educational Integration: Opportunities, Challenges, and Implications

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Abstract

The integration of Southeast Asia through ASEAN extends beyond politics and economics into education. A central instrument in this process is the ASEAN Curriculum Framework (ACF), introduced in 2012 to harmonize curricula across member states. This article examines the impact of the ACF on regional educational integration, focusing on policy dimensions, curriculum practices, and academic mobility. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through a literature review of ASEAN official documents, UNESCO reports, and academic publications from 2012 to 2024. Findings indicate that the ACF contributes to curriculum harmonization, enhances 21st-century competencies, and strengthens ASEAN identity. Furthermore, the framework supports academic mobility via the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS). Nevertheless, significant challenges persist, including disparities in educational quality, financial constraints, and inconsistencies in evaluation systems. The study concludes that the ACF holds considerable potential for advancing regional educational integration, but its success depends on strong political commitment, financial support, and readiness of national education infrastructures.

Keywords: ASEAN Curriculum Framework; Regional Educational Integration; Academic Mobility; Curriculum; Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION

The integration of the Southeast Asian region through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) extends beyond political and economic dimensions into the realm of education. A significant instrument established for this purpose is the ASEAN Curriculum Framework (ACF), introduced in 2012 to guide member countries in formulating curricula that align with regional developmental visions. The primary objectives of the ACF include enhancing students' global competencies, strengthening ASEAN identity, and fostering educational mobility among member nations (Prateepornnarong, 2020; Chao, 2020). The successful implementation of this framework is envisioned to lay a foundation for a more interconnected and cohesive educational environment within Southeast Asia.

Nevertheless, the execution of the ACF encounters numerous challenges. National educational systems differ significantly across member states, and disparities in human resource quality and limitations in educational infrastructure present tangible obstacles (Stecyk, 2023). Despite these hurdles, the ACF is expected to contribute to the establishment of common educational standards, foster collaboration among educational institutions, and promote the creation of a more integrated ASEAN academic space (Munusamy & Hashim, 2021; Stecyk, 2023). Addressing these challenges requires strategic initiatives and collaborative efforts that unify the educational objectives of the member nations while respecting their unique contexts.

This article seeks to analyze the impact of the ACF on regional educational integration in Southeast Asia, focusing on policy dimensions, curriculum practices, and implications for student and teacher mobility across ASEAN countries. The ACF promotes equitable access to quality education, which is essential for fostering cooperation among member states and enhancing mutual recognition of qualifications and competencies (Munusamy & Hashim, 2021; Faragher et al., 2020). Importantly, it aims to address disparities in educational quality and

resource allocation, crucial for facilitating inclusive and sustainable educational development across the region (Kemathad & Tatiyaworawattanakul, 2023; Tiraphat et al., 2020).

Through a systematic examination of the implementation challenges and opportunities presented by the ACF, this discourse aims to illuminate pathways for effective collaboration and educational exchange. Regional educational integration holds the potential to enhance not only academic achievement but also social cohesion and economic development across ASEAN. Thus, understanding the intricate dynamics of educational integration through the ACF remains critical for realizing the broader aspiration of a unified ASEAN community (Lorenzo, 2021; Muslim et al., 2023).

METHODS

This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach utilising a literature review method. Data collection involves examining official ASEAN documents relevant to the ASEAN Curriculum Framework (ACF), UNESCO reports, and international academic articles that discuss educational integration in Southeast Asia from 2012 to 2024 (Rattanasevee, 2023). The analysis is conducted through content analysis techniques, which encompass several steps: first, identifying key themes associated with the ACF, including its objectives, implementation strategies, challenges, and impacts (Page et al., 2021). This foundational framework provides a comprehensive understanding of how the ACF is perceived and operationalized across different educational contexts.

Following the thematic identification, the information is categorized across three primary dimensions: policies, curriculum frameworks, and educational mobility (Munusamy & Hashim, 2020). This structured categorization not only facilitates a clearer understanding of the diverse educational landscapes but also aids in understanding the variety of challenges and opportunities faced by ASEAN member states. After categorization, a comparative analysis is performed, contrasting the outcomes of ACF implementation in various ASEAN countries, thus allowing for insights into the effectiveness and adaptability of the ACF across different national contexts (Rattanasevee, 2023). The synthesis concludes with an assessment of the ACF's contributions to regional educational integration, shedding light on its potential impacts on academic standards and cooperative frameworks among member states.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ASEAN Curriculum Framework (ACF) provides a cohesive blueprint that allows member countries to align their national curricula with regional standards, emphasising competencies required for the 21st century, such as critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (Tkachenko et al., 2022; Rattanasevee, 2023). These competencies have led to a notable convergence in the core subject structures among member states, particularly with respect to the incorporation of English as the region's lingua franca and bolstering the teaching of ASEAN citizenship education. This harmonization serves as a foundational step towards cultivating a shared regional identity, addressing educational disparities, and promoting mutual understanding among ASEAN nations (Bae, 2023)(Rattanasevee, 2023).

In terms of student and teacher mobility, the ACF has facilitated more efficient implementation of student exchange programs under the ASEAN University Network (AUN) due to the discussions surrounding curricular convergence (Tkachenko et al., 2022)(Rattanasevee, 2023). The recognition of academic credits, as specified in the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS), further enhances this mobility, allowing for smoother transitions for students as they engage in academic endeavors across member countries.

Although the long-term effects indicate a rise in academic mobility, it largely remains concentrated within prestigious institutions, showcasing a critical pathway while also revealing inequalities based on institutional prestige and geographical disparities within the region (Putra et al., 2023)(Tiraphat et al., 2020)(Rattanasevee, 2023).

The ACF's emphasis on promoting education that fosters an ASEAN identity involves incorporating historical, cultural, and communal values into curricula across secondary education, as evidenced by initiatives in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand that have included "ASEAN Studies" (Bae, 2023)(Rattanasevee, 2023). Although the implementation at this level remains somewhat limited, these efforts represent crucial steps in nurturing a sense of unity and shared destiny among the ASEAN youth, reinforcing the idea of ASEAN citizenship. Cultivating a robust identity can significantly enhance regional solidarity, ultimately benefiting the socio-political fabric of the ASEAN community Anafinova (2022)(Rattanasevee, 2023).

However, the implementation of the ACF is not devoid of challenges. The disparities in educational capacities, notably between countries such as Singapore and Laos, present significant hurdles in aligning national systems with ACF standards (Rattanasevee, 2023)(Gunawan, 2024)Imam et al., 2022). Additionally, financial constraints in several member states hinder their ability to synchronize their curricula with the ACF requirements fully, and inconsistencies in educational evaluation impede equitable credit transfer between nations. Thus, while the ACF presents a framework for regional integration, its success is contingent upon member countries' commitment, financial backing, and the readiness of educational infrastructures to adapt to these regional aspirations (Rattanasevee, 2023)(Gunawan, 2024).

Discussion

The ASEAN Curriculum Framework (ACF) has emerged as a pivotal instrument in aligning education across Southeast Asia. By emphasising 21st-century competencies—critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity—the framework fosters curriculum harmonisation among ASEAN member states. This convergence is reflected in the adoption of English as the region's lingua franca and the promotion of ASEAN citizenship education, both of which enhance common academic standards and regional identity.

In terms of academic mobility, the ACF facilitates the implementation of student and faculty exchange programs under the ASEAN University Network (AUN). The ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) has streamlined the recognition of academic credits, enabling smoother cross-border transitions for students. While this has boosted mobility, it remains concentrated in elite universities, highlighting inequalities in access based on institutional prestige and geographical location.

The framework also plays a critical role in fostering a shared ASEAN identity through education. Several countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, have integrated "ASEAN Studies" into their national curricula. Although still limited in scope, these initiatives lay the foundation for nurturing a sense of belonging and solidarity among ASEAN youth. A strengthened regional identity, in turn, enhances social cohesion and contributes to the broader ASEAN community-building agenda.

Despite these positive outcomes, challenges in implementation remain profound. Educational disparities between member states—such as the advanced system in Singapore compared to the resource-constrained system in Laos—pose significant barriers to alignment. Additionally, financial limitations in several member states hinder the full adoption of ACF standards, while variations in evaluation systems impede the equitable transfer and recognition of qualifications. These issues underscore the reality that successful educational integration

requires not only curriculum harmonisation but also alignment in policy, infrastructure, and resources.

Thus, while the ACF represents a significant step toward regional educational integration, its long-term success relies on collective commitment, equitable investment in education, and the development of a common evaluation framework.

CONCLUSION

The ASEAN Curriculum Framework has demonstrated significant potential in advancing **regional educational integration in Southeast Asia**. It has contributed to curriculum harmonization, enhanced 21st-century competencies, facilitated academic mobility, and strengthened ASEAN identity. However, its implementation is hampered by disparities in educational quality, limited financial resources, and inconsistent evaluation mechanisms across member states.

For the ACF to serve as an effective driver of integration, ASEAN must:

1. Strengthen political commitment and policy alignment.
2. Ensure equitable investment in teacher training, infrastructure, and educational funding.
3. Develop a standardized regional evaluation system to support recognition of qualifications and academic mobility.

By addressing these challenges, the ACF can become a catalyst for building a more integrated, inclusive, and sustainable educational system in Southeast Asia—supporting ASEAN's vision of a cohesive and globally competitive community.

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