Status, Prospects, and Challenges of International Mobility of Students in ASEAN: The Philippine Experience

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Abstract

Propelled by the forces of globalisation and elements of regional integration, student mobility in ASEAN is expected to generate internationalised professionals for the regional economy. Cascaded to member-states through higher educational institutions, these mobility programmesare the major strategic components of cooperation for developing human resource capital within ASEAN countries. Platforms and arrangements established to enhance the regional mobility of students and facilitate the achievement of the aspired integration are a reality that the Philippines needs to fully embrace. This study examines the status of Philippine compliance with the ASEAN objective on student mobility using a qualitative approach with data sources that include document analysis and research instruments. Documents from government agencies and other sources were analysed. The survey was developed and a standardised interview was adopted.Results were then transcribed and coded for emerging themes. The results foundthat the most encountered difficulties in mobility programmes in state universities and collegesare accessibility regulations to the preferred host country (visa, residence permit, etc.), culture shock, and limited funding from the government. Most Filipino students are imbued with thelocal culture to aspire for higher education and self-development. The majority of state universities and colleges include internationalisation in institutional policies and plans to be compliant with state universities and colleges levelling, quality assurance assessments and responding to ASEAN regional integration. Other challenges that hinder mobility programmes persist, notwithstanding the long-term consequences of COVID-19. Adoption of open and distance learning as part of an alternative modality of internationalisation of higher education under Republic Act 11448 is timely and pragmatic.

Keywords: *Philippine student mobility, ASEAN student mobility, state universities and colleges, Internationalisation*

Introduction

Since the beginning of time, the human race has been on the move. Some people move to escape internal conflict, violence or human rights violations, hostile impacts of climate change, man-made or natural disasters,orother environmental causes. Others travel to avoid discrimination,pursue economic prospects, connect with family, or study. A migrant refers to "any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from one*'s* habitual place, irrespective of the person's legal status, whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary, what the causes for the movement are, and what is the length of stay" (McAuliffeetal., 2017).

In the last decades, great significance has been devoted worldwide to student mobility, involving initiativeslike Erasmus+ in Europe, International Student Exchange Program (ISEP) in the United States of America, University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) for the Asia-Pacific region, Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE), which is supported by the European Union, and the ASEAN International Mobility of Students (AIMS) Programme in Southeast Asia. Among many others, these are forms of internationalisation in higher education for which various institutional approaches have been adopted to inspire students to consider education in a foreign country, either on a short-term basis, study tour or educational exchange, or for a longer period in degree programmes. Internationalisation has emerged in higher education systems globally because the higher education sector needs to be receptive to the requirements of globalisation, which are increasing from underdeveloped to developed countries. Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) have essentially assimilated their international and inter-cultural dimensions and principles. International activities at these institutions have been designed to attain the aforementioned purposes of student mobility.

Similarly, as a regional cooperative body, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has envisioned the significance of student mobility in the region. However, structural differences remain one of the challenges in its implementation. Thus, this study seeks to determine the status and challenges of the international mobility of students to draw prospects for further development of these programmes and sustainable collaboration in Southeast Asia. This study gears to the foremost question of how existing programmes for international student mobility could be described so far as a regional programme of ASEAN for integration of HEIs and systems in the region are implemented by the Philippines through its state universities and colleges (SUCs). This research study will explore the situation and problems faced by the Philippines in complying with this approach in regional integration in the observance of Republic Act 11448 (RA 11448, 2019).

Literature Review

Parallel to the present study, some of the provided literature are very much relevant since they emphasise the role of international mobility of people, particularly students who contribute essentially to ASEAN's regionalism efforts. The internationalisation of higher education now gradually accumulates acknowledgement among leaders and planners, at both national and institutional levels. Higher education institutions are mere creations of states and it is only incumbent to governments to compel them to internationalise (Scott, 1999). This is a supra-nationalist approach as a response to the theory of "spill-over".

The driver for advancing "student mobility is improving international competitiveness in the knowledge economy" (Knight, 2008).There are "push and pull factors" of student mobility (Li & Bray, 2007; de Wit, 2008). "Push factors*"* denote those "educational features of the sending states that motivate students to proceed with their intent for education abroad"

(Cummings, 1984; Lee & Tan, 1984), while "pull factors" are educational features of the receiving states that entice students (Altbach, 1986; Agarwal et al., 2007). Countries usually fall short in generating adequate "pull forces" to draw international students from other countries partly due to lack of expanded higher education, institutional reputation, image and quality, as well as living milieu and limited career options.

Therefore, reforms should be harmonised with the "push" and "pull" factor framework (Chan, 2012). This is why ASEAN plays an important role in these activities. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) as a new conduit of advancing student international mobility in the region are executed to motivate student mobility, partnerships and exchanges (Chan, 2012).These agreements, declarations, conventions and treaties are considered important strategies for harmonisation and eventually regional integration (Knight, 2014).The domestic approach centres on the reform of local regulations and policies of admitting foreign students, provision of related services, learning atmosphere and support to alleviate the perceived challenges faced by inbound students (Rivers, 2010). The domestic approach targets to fortify the institutions and systems to accommodate incoming students.

Student mobility attracts talents and skills required to propel economic development, and students may potentially reside and employ themselves in the receiving country once they have completed their education (Rosenzweig, 2008). This, however,contributes to the brain drain phenomenon, which is disadvantageous to the sending countries.

The Republic Act 11448 (RA 11448, 2019) brought the means for foreign HEIs to offer educational services and engagements with HEIs in the Philippines. Transnational education are all types and modes of delivery of study programmes, educational services, or sets of courses of study involving the participation of foreign educational institutions with their counterparts. The Act lists several arrangements used in other countries that can be emulated, such as academic franchising, academic programme offerings, articulation, specification of auxiliary services, awarding of services, branch campuses, distance education, double degree offerings, and joint degree offerings (RA 11448, 2019). This initiative of the present Philippine government is in response to the pressing demands of globalisation that compels borderless education and democratised access to tertiary education.

The Republic Act 11448 complements another law, i.e. Republic Act 10650 (RA 11448, 2019), which aims to increase and improve access to quality higher education through the advancement and exploration of open and distance learning (ODL) as another modality of education (RA 10650, 2014). The new measure also intends to implement distance education as an appropriate, efficient and effective system of delivering "quality higher and technical educational services" in the country. This statute enjoins media and telecommunication networks to encourage ODL, and exempts from tax those entities that provide support services to higher education institutions offering these programmes.

The assessment of how the Philippine student mobility policy and programme contribute to the goals/objectives of ASEAN student mobility intentions will result in promoting studentmobility, creating more vibrant programmes for citizens of ASEAN Member States (AMS), and improving common higher education for the region.

In addition, this study sought to answer the following questions:
   i.   What is the situation of Philippine compliance with ASEAN student mobility policy?
  ii.   What factors affect Philippine compliance with ASEAN student mobility policy?
 iii.   How can Philippine student mobility be improved, if needed?

Research Objectives

The study aims to contribute to ASEANOLOGY by assessing how the Philippine student mobility policy and programme complement the goals of ASEAN student mobility intentions. The results of this study serve as basis to label prospects for further development of international student mobility and sustainable collaboration in the ASEAN region. Hence, this study has the following specific objectives:
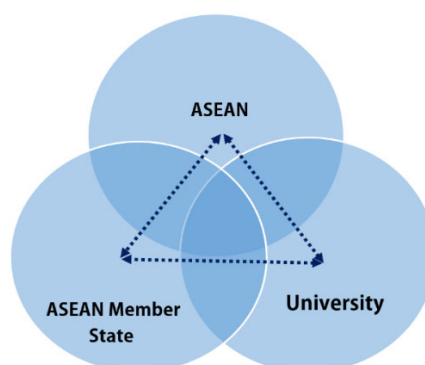
i.   To describe the status of Philippine compliance with ASEAN student mobility policy;
ii. To determine the factors that affect Philippine compliance with ASEAN student mobility policy; and
iii. To recommend measures that may be adopted in order to improve Philippine student mobility.

Research Method

The theoretical model of this study was anchored to the triple-helix model developed by Dooley and Kirk (2007, as cited in Bektas & Tayauova, 2014) that describesuniversity–industry cooperation. Modelled from this structure, cooperation between ASEAN, governments, and universities can thus be predicted. In this triple-helix model, ASEAN provides motivation for encouraging ASEAN Member States to cooperate with each other through student mobility to ensure participation of their respective HEIs by providing benefits to the development of collaboration.

Figure 1

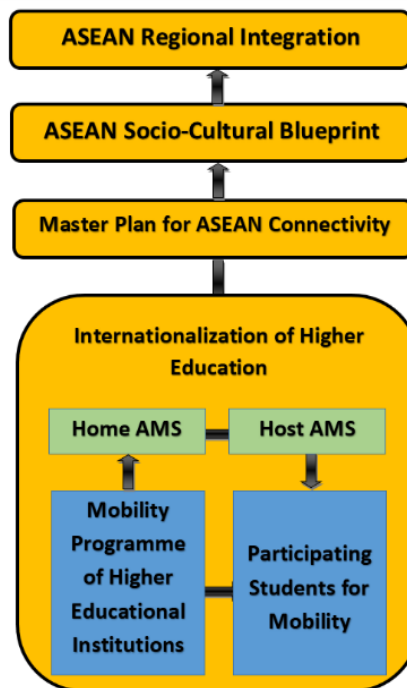*Triple Helix Model* (Dooley & Kirk, 2007, as cited in Bektas & Tayauova, 2014)

ASEAN Member Stateservesas the policy maker or regulator that enables student exchange and mobility between universities in the region. In case of the Philippine, the government as a participant in international student mobility regulatesthe SUC programmes in the implementation process that in turn will affect compliance tothe ASEAN objectives for regional integration. SUCs in the Philippines implement partnerships with other HEIs in the ASEAN region on the basis of their capabilities by employing preferential frameworks of participating HEIs from other AMS. If AMS, through their higher education institutions, effectively continuewith student mobility cooperation involving mutual trust and address some gaps in student mobility, further collaborative opportunities will become successful. In addition, as the ability of a host AMS through its HEIs to accommodate international students is a major factor in steering the global flow of mobile students (Choudaha& Chang, 2012, February 1), the impact to the ASEAN goal of regional integration will also substantively increase.

This model can be related to the cooperation theory thatworks as the "yardstick" of ASEAN cooperation in several concerns, particularly security. This theory suggests an explanation forcertain cooperation of ASEAN member states in maximising their respective national interests, regardless of the absence of an international institution to enforce or guarantee adherence to their engagements of cooperation (Axelrod, 1984). In furthering national interests such as higher education for human resource development, countries depend on "the means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves" (Waltz, 1979).

Figure 2

Conceptual Model

"Education is one of four parts included in the Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity" (MPAC) 2025 (ASEAN, 2016), in whichASEAN will be the vanguard of transformation. Being the critical *"soft connectivity"* (Schwab, 2014), education can best attend as an underpinning for a more profound and extensive integration in the region. Participating students need to apply for international mobility programmes that both host and home HEIs agreeto (in terms of qualifications, criteria, procedure and funding schemes) in conformity with the conditions set by the host and home AMS. The Philippines' Commission on Higher Education (CHED) plays the part of the state's agent and overseer to ensure the compliance of SUCs to the provisions of relevantpolicies and statutes concerning transnational higher education.

Research Methodology

Based on the conceptual framework of this study, the methodology was developed to identify the necessary data to answer the research questions, data collection method, respondents, and procedure of data analysis. The questions of this study were answered by the collected data from different sources using documentary analysis and the perceptions of the respondents using a set of instruments validated by experts from the University of the Philippines and CHED, such as the survey-questionnaire and interview guide questions, respectively.

There were two (2) groups of respondents, i.e. the Filipino students (outbound) under international mobility programmes who are presently enrolled or recently completed their education in other participating ASEAN countries, and the key officials/implementers from SUCs. There were 77 students (representing 92.77%)surveyed and siximplementers (representing the remaining 7.23%)interviewed. The respondents were specifically selected because of their participation, involvement, and knowledge on areas concerning international mobility of students in theASEAN region. Since this study is not inferential or meant to represent a given population, the purposive sampling method was used tocollect views from the said groups of respondents.

The framework analysis method was employed as a variation of content analysis, which is often termed thematic or qualitative content analysis. This approach identifies commonalities and differences in qualitative data before focusing on relationships between different parts of the data, thereby seeking to draw descriptive and/or explanatory conclusions clustered around themes. This method also offers case- and theme-based approaches wherein data are categorised through the hierarchy of themes and sub-themes (Gale etal.,September, 2013). This method reduces data by summarising and synthesisingpreliminary interpretations, similarities, differences, and gaps and connecting the relationships to each other. The method also makes use of data mapping and interpretation through case-based typologies and creates a matrix to link cases and themes together. From this matrix, the framework analysis develops interpretations and explanations (Gale et al., September, 2013;Moerman, n.d.).

Analysis and Findings

Status of Philippine Compliance with ASEAN Student Mobility Policy

Table 1

Status of International Mobility of Students

Areas	$\bar{x}$	r	VI
A. Discipline Offered	4.52	1	Strongly Agree
B. Scholarship Support	3.98	4	Agree
C. Admission Standards	4.19	3	Agree
D. Structural Arrangements	4.22	2	Agree
Average Mean	**4.23**		**Agree**

Note. $\bar{x}$= mean   r = ranking   VI = Verbal Interpretation

It can be inferred from the table that the respondents strongly agreed that discipline is the bestmanaged component of mobility programmes. On the other hand, scholarship support seemed to be lacking. The results infer to the operationalisation of the *"Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity"*, which serves as key in attaining seamless movement of people, goods and services that support different international mobility programmes in the region by providing numerous platforms to improve higher education systems, specifically the tools in increasing the disciplines (Loades, 2005) being recognised, along with other initiatives such as ODL.

The findings validate the views of implementers that "*varying disciplines are offered"*. At the same time, they confirmthe views of student-respondents that scholarship support is lacking.

Factors Affecting Philippine Compliance with ASEAN Student MobilityPolicy

Table 2

Motives of Students in Studying Abroad

Motives	f	%	r
1. Imbued by personal reasons.	30	48.39	1
2. The degree/education obtained will improve portfolio/curriculum vitae.	15	24.19	2
3. Acquire social and cultural experiences from the host country.	2	3.23	6.5
4. Better international career opportunities abroad.	12	19.35	3
5. Increase job prospects (home country).	10	16.13	4
6. Learn a new language, or improve language skills.	1	1.61	8
7. Expand connections/networks by meeting more people of different nationalities.	2	3.23	6.5
8. Take advantage of the offered scholarship or grant.	5	8.06	5

Note. f = frequency   % = percentage   r = ranking

This result reveals that the primary motive of student-respondents in pursuing studies in other countries is personal reasons, which ranked first. This is followed by improving portfolio; better career opportunities abroad; and in the Philippines,taking advantage of scholarship opportunities; and establishing connections to other nationalities, which are in the same rank. Learning a new language is the least mentioned reason in engaging in international mobility.This confirmed that importance of ASEAN and AMS through higher education institutionsin fulfilling these expectations and attracting participants within the region for student mobility (Chan, 2012).

Table 3

Problems Encountered in Philippine Student Mobility

Problems	x	r	VI
1. Insufficient skills of the student in a foreign language.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
2. Discomfort with accommodation (including food) in the host country.	3.75	15.5	Frequently Encountered
3. Separation anxiety/ from partner, child(ren), and friends.	3.63	17	Frequently Encountered
4. Loss of social benefits (insurance, financial or non-financial)	4.25	9.5	Always Encountered
5. Loss of opportunities to earn wages due to the programme.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
6. Unexpected additional expenses in pursuit of the study.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
7. Low benefit scholarship coverage of the programme.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
8. Loneliness, discomfort or nervousness with other people.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
9. Problems with recognition of credits achieved from home country.	4.00	13.5	Frequently Encountered
10. Problems with access regulations to the preferred host country (visa, residence permit, etc.).	4.63	1.5	Always Encountered

Problems	$\bar{x}$	r	VI
11. Limited admittance to the preferred institution and/or study programme in the foreign country.	4.00	13.5	Frequently Encountered
12. Incompatibility of the programme structure to the student's field of study/interest.	4.25	9.5	Always Encountered
13. Emotional problem or stressful experience in the programme.	4.13	11.5	Frequently Encountered
14. Health problems (e.g. allergy) or existing disability served as obstacle in the study.	4.13	11.5	Frequently Encountered
15. Disconnected with religious support or spiritual needs.	4.38	5.5	Always Encountered
16. Academic delinquencies or low grades.	3.75	15.5	Frequently Encountered
17. Disorientation or slow to adjust to the local culture (culture shock).	4.63	1.5	Always Encountered
18. Incompatibility with the academic norms or practices.	2.88	18	Moderately Encountered
Average Mean	**4.13**		**Frequently Encountered**

Note. $\bar{x}$= mean   r = ranking   VI = Verbal Interpretation

It can be gleaned from the table that respondents always encountered problems in access regulations in the host country (visa, residence permit, etc.), and often become disorientated or slow to adjust with the local culture (culture shock).Butthe implementers draw other problems that might greatly affect compliance of the Philippines to ASEAN policies on student mobility. Accordingly, programmes were perceived to be"*not popular, only a limited number is engaged", "leniency in structural arrangement", "language (diversity)", "digital divide and social divide in the region",* and *"conflict of laws".* This supports Rivers'suggestion (2010) that reform initiatives must be focused in addressing these challenges usually met by inbound students.

The Reforms in the Philippine Student Mobility International Programmes

Table 4

Suggested Improvements in Philippine Student Mobility

Suggestions	f	%	r
1. Include language lesson	6	10.53	4
2. Increase financial support	23	40.35	1
3. Make cultural fellowship part of the programme	9	15.79	3
4. Longer period of the programme	4	7.02	5
5. Improve government assistance/facilitation	15	26.32	2

Note. f = frequency   % = percentage   r = ranking

This table showsthat the respondents' most recommended improvements in international mobility programmes inthe Philippines areincreasing financial support, followed by improving government assistance/facilitation, introducing cultural fellowship and language lessons, and extending theperiod of the programme. Conversely, based onthe validation interviews with SUC implementers, the recommendations given were: *"there is a need to invest in internationalisation", "more government support", "more publicity",* include *"cultural sensitivity", "report the undertakings", "sharing of experiences and learned skills and competencies", "(re)echo to others what they have earned",* or render services (as "make them tutors or research assistant") upon return to home country/SUC. These are compelling

reasons for governments to create a more enticing climate and improve pull forces to attract foreign students, hence improving the reputation of having the capability to accommodate them (Altbach, 1986; Agarwal et al., 2007).

Discussions

The data demonstrated that a number of SUCs include mobility of students in their institutional mandates, vision/mission, objectives, policies, and plansin order to comply with the requirements of mandatory SUC levelling, quality assurance assessments and consequently, responding to ASEAN regional integration. Respondents revealed that availability of various disciplines is the most managed component of mobility programmes. However,this is contrary to the findings of Le et al. (2017, July), who in a parallel study found that lack of mutual recognition in various disciplines remains a challenge in its implementation.

A majority of participants in outbound mobility programmes are of a university-going age, and it is a common Filipino culture to aspire to attain tertiary education and self-improvement, which are the main driversforstudying abroad. This is supported by Baruch et al. (2007, March) who found that the competitiveness of one's portfolio is the strongest motive that influencesmobility.

Despite different harmonisation efforts and improvement of mobility programmes, access regulations and culture shock remain the primaryproblems for students.This is contrary to a similar study conducted in Thailand, which revealed that international students believed that politics and security are their major concerns(Mangmeechai & Jirapornvaree, 2019).It is further evident that insufficient financial support is still the utmost limitation of the Philippine government and its public HEIsin implementing mobility programmes. Coincidentally, international studentsupport in the region(in terms of scholarships) is also very limited due to lack of "appropriate funding" (Wright, 2016). This could be due to shortcomings in proactive planning in "internationalisation of higher education"that makes it reactionary to the development of mobility programmes in the region (Chou& Ravinet, 2017;Knight, 2012). For this reason, commitment from the government and HEIscan be assessed as beingeither "deep" or "shallow" (Nair, 2009).Other problems such as unpopular programmes, leniency in structural arrangement, absence of centralised mobility database, multiple mobility platforms with overlapping mandates and varying credit transfer schemes, sustainability of resources, language diversity, digital and social divide in the region, as well asconflict of immigration laws,curtail the effectivenessof these mobility programmes. Given the present situationthat is influencedby the COVID-19 pandemic, sustaining academic arrangements in other remote modalities of learning is also suggested.

Conclusions

One of the main objectives of Philippine international studentmobility is supportingnational development goals and ASEAN regional integration. It is a developmental strategy to advance the quality of higher education, develop the competitiveness of human resource capital, and stimulate innovation and transformation toward sustainable economic development. SUCs are responsible forcontributing towards compliance withASEAN commitments. The research objectives of this study were directly addressed by the collected data from different sources using documentary analysis and the perceptions of outbound Filipino students and implementers from SUCsgathered through surveys and interviews. To surmise, the Philippines complies withthe goals of ASEAN regional connectivity commitments via student mobility. It has been shown in this study that the paramount

challenge in the implementation of international student mobility is of afinancial nature. Lack of sufficient resources and infrastructure, as well as accessibility and capability must be seriously addressed by the national government as they have been identified as barriers for student mobility for most HEIs, particularly the SUCs. Other challenges like the consequences of "social divide" or the socio-economic status of the people hinder the full-scale implementation of mobility programmes.The Philippine government, through CHED and SUCs, needs to revisit policies and make necessary adjustments in itsown respective contexts before advancing towards a regional harmonisation of higher education; to effectively bring the stance of the sector during consensus-building in the ASEAN level. With the academic landscape transitioning to a New Normal due to the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery through alternative modalities such as ODL in internationalising further higher education under the RA 11448 Transnational Higher Education) is deemed practical and realistic.

Acknowledgement

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