

Understanding Regionalisation in Philippine Higher Education Against the Backdrop of the ASEAN Integration

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1. Introduction

Globalisation has far-reaching effects on nations and regions of the world. The phenomenon, which has been associated with the “breaking down of barriers” has heightened competition among nation-states as neighbouring countries enter into arrangements directed at creating a common market and allowing the free movement of goods, capital and labour (Gray, 2017). One of the emerging responses to globalisation is the notion of regionalisation, which began with the regional policy harmonisation in Europe (Woldergiorgis, 2013, p. 13). Various conceptions of regionalisation in education have been forwarded. It builds from Hurrell’s (1995 as cited in Kacowicz, 1998) idea of regionalism as the growth of social integration. Similar to how globalisation and internationalisation are often loosely interchanged, regionalisation has also been closely associated with internationalisation. Knight (2012) suggests that regionalisation and internationalisation are symbiotic and complementary approaches in higher education, but also emphasised that while both terms may be used interchangeably, both suggest distinct differences if examined closely.

In Southeast Asia, this phenomenon of regionalisation in education is further given impetus by the ASEAN Community Vision 2020, an initiative that seeks to promote regional cooperation and foster a sense of community among the member-states (Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN], 2012). The movement has far-reaching impacts not just on the economic front, but also on the education of the countries in particular and the region in general. The third pillar of the ASEAN Integration, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, specifically recognises the critical role of education. According to the ASCC Blueprint (ASEAN, 2009), the ASCC envisions several goals including promoting human development and building the ASEAN Identity. In the achievement of these goals, there is high premium put on the advancement and prioritisation of education, underscoring as a strategic objective the “integration of education priorities into ASEAN’s development agenda and creating a knowledge based society” (p.2). Particular actions in support of these include the promotion of education networking; collaborating with other regional education institutions; and the development and offering of courses on ASEAN studies (ASEAN, 2009).

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The Integration has significant repercussions for the Philippines and its higher education system. As one of the major exporters of human talent in both the region and the world, the country is faced with the challenge of meeting its increasing demand for education on one hand, and delivering quality education and producing competitive individuals on the other (Killingley and Ilieva, 2015). The country has been criticised for lagging behind in its efforts in education in light of the Integration's expectations, compared to its Southeast Asian neighbours (Geronimo, 2013; Domingo, 2013).

Given these, it is noteworthy to explore how higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Philippines understand the concept of regionalisation in higher education. The term is not uncommon, but it poses various interpretations when discussed alongside related concepts such as internationalisation. Even more important is identifying how Philippine HEIs are pursuing regionalisation in light of the ASEAN Community Vision. It pays to ask how the ASEAN Integration is shaping the definitions and constructions of regionalisation and the HEIs' regionalisation approaches and initiatives.

2. Regionalisation in higher education

Like internationalisation, the strongest push behind regionalisation is globalisation. Woldegiorgis (2013) explains the relationship between the two, noting how globalisation has allowed nations to come together. The breaking down of barriers has increased competition among nations, resulting into neighbouring-states creating a common market and allowing for improved mobility of goods, capital and labour. This mobility of human resources has also been reinforced by the pursuit of a knowledge economy, leading to an increased impetus to improve the quality of educational services and boost the employability of workers. Mittelman (1996, as cited in Kacowicz, 1998) further suggested three lenses by which one can view the interrelationship between globalisation and regionalisation: (1) regionalisation as a sub-set or component of globalisation; (2) regionalisation as a response to globalisation; and (3) regionalisation and globalisation as parallel or overlapping processes. As a sub-set of globalisation, regionalisation promotes integration activities aimed at multi-lateral cooperation. As a response to globalisation, it is a counter alternative, an opposing response of nation-states to the idea of a "single universal culture" that is associated with the goals of globalisation. The third notion views the two as more than an economic process: the integration and creation of "mega-regions" (Wyatt-Walter, 1995, as cited in Kacowicz, 1995).

Furthermore, the conceptual and theoretical discourse on the distinction between "regionalisation" and "internationalisation" also continue. Yang (2002) pointed out that both terms are closely intertwined, while Knight (2012) asserts that *higher education regionalisation* involves a multitude of related times, which are at times interchangeable, but also pose "subtle and important differences" (Knight, 2012, p. 24). The author explains that regionalisation is often "in concert with internationalisation," both symbiotic and complementary, yet also sometimes competitive (pp. 28 – 29).

Scholars like Woldegiorgis (2013), Yavaprabhas (2014) and Sirat, Azman and Bakar (2014) use "harmonisation" to describe regionalisation in higher education. Harmonisation implies the process of "creating frameworks" that govern the relationship of actors in international

relations, and is focused on establishing commonalities than creating whole new identical standards (Woldegiorgis, 2013). For Yavaprabhas, harmonisation in education suggests that universities are able to retain their own identity, while ensuring that their quality of education is comparable and compatible with others. Sirat, Azman, and Bakar (2014) also define “harmonisation” as emphasising the creation of an “area of knowledge” where the interaction of higher education, mobility and employment may be facilitated.

Both Sirat, Azman and Bakar (2014) and Woldegiorgis (2013) also recognise the key role of the higher education institution in forwarding harmonisation or regionalisation in education. Harmonisation, according to the authors, is determined by nations and the individual HEIs even when it is driven by supranational organisations and goals. Ratanawijitrasin (2015) also furthered that in a lot of instances, universities from the member-countries take it unto themselves to introduce policies and initiatives in support of the move to harmonise.

Knight (2012, 2013) suggests a framework of interrelated approaches – functional, organisational and political – to explain regionalisation activities. The functional approach looks at the practical initiatives of the HEIs concerning the alignment of higher education systems (e.g., academic calendar synchronisation, etc.) and collaborative academic programs (e.g., joint and double degree programs, quality assurance and accreditation schemes, etc.). The organisational approach is concerned with the development of structures, frameworks and agencies that will provide a systematic organisation to the pursuit of regionalisation. The third approach, political, refers to more formal and top-down strategies undertaken by key decision-making agencies to facilitate the implementation and adoption of regionalisation initiatives, such as treaties and declarations of intent (Knight, 2012, pp. 29 – 31; 2013; pp. 118 – 120).

These constructions and definitions attached to regionalisation in higher education as a concept and its process pose significant implications on the way the term is understood by actors both at the national and institutional levels, and more so how the notion is given life and manifested in institutional initiatives and activities.

3. Study Scope

This paper is an exploration of the understanding of regionalisation of selected higher education institutions in the Philippines, focusing on the following key areas: (a) the definitions of regionalisation in higher education; and (b) the regionalisation initiatives of the HEIs and how the ASEAN Integration play a role in these initiatives.

Using a multiple case study design, the paper looked at the definitions and practices of three higher education institutions in the country, representative of the three general types of HEIs in the Philippines: public/state (HEI A), private-sectarian (established and run by religious orders) (HEI B); and private non-sectarian (established and run by private individuals and corporations) (HEI C). Data was gathered through interviews with administrators and research extension personnel²; a semi-structured questionnaire; and review of secondary sources, online documents and articles on the HEIs.

² Research and extension personnel are unique only to HEI A

4. Results and Findings

4.1 Definitions of Regionalisation

Data gathered suggest a very close association between regionalisation and internationalisation as understood and constructed by university constituents. There exists the prevailing notion of regionalisation as leading to or directed towards internationalisation, which is often viewed as broader or larger in scope compared to the former. For most constituents of the HEIs, regionalisation is a “precursor to internationalisation.” This supports the idea of Mittelman (1996 as cited in Kacowicz, 1998) of regionalisation as a subset of globalisation where it serves to promote and forward the building of multi-lateral agreements.

The close association between these two terms also leads to a great degree of overlap. HEI constituents, for example, cite mobility activities as activities of regionalisation, but also forms of internationalisation. The notion of competitiveness that is attached to regionalisation, brought on by the idea of needing to be “at par” and “comparable” to other foreign universities are not just limited within Southeast Asia or Asia, but also with other universities in other parts of the world. The logic of a university’s regional competitiveness is also equated with international competitiveness because the region is seen as part of the international.

Yet, the distinction between the two terms is evident when referring to geo-political structure and orientation. HEI constituents automatically associate the “region” as those comprising of countries (universities) that are near or neighbouring, and therefore the immediate frame of reference is Southeast Asia, and to a certain extent, Asia (East Asia in particular). This emphasis on the geo-political unit that is Southeast Asia is also associated with the promotion of a Southeast Asia/Asia-centric orientation where there is greater bias given to this geo-political unit. Regionalisation, for the constituents it appeared, is equated with the promotion of a regional culture that is protective of the region. In education, this is exemplified in university partnerships that are directed at not just boosting the respective institutional capacities, but also becoming a mechanism to pool together and harness resources to deliver a much stronger educational system that can adequately compete with the West and other developed countries/regions much more effectively compared to individual country efforts. The respondents also cite as example the use of Southeast Asia as the comparative lens or the operating context, or using Asia/Southeast Asian examples or best practices rather than those from the West.

The HEIs’ frequent use of the terms “collaboration” and “partnership” in referring to regionalisation also underscore the notion of harmonisation, but not necessarily standardisation (Sirat, Azman and Bakar, 2014). Universities in a region collaborate or partner with each other in order to harmonise their efforts or synchronise their systems, but

do not necessarily create similar efforts or systems. Instead, the harmonisation process of regionalisation serves as a process of consensus-building where the points of reference (standards) are mutually-acceptable. The bias for these words, if juxtaposed with the regionalisation activities of the HEIs, suggests voluntary and mostly informal relationships between the HEIs in the Philippines and their foreign partners, rather than a rigidly structured one. Following Knight (2012)'s conceptual mapping of regionalisation terms, these suggest a degree of togetherness or regionalness that are largely inter-institutional (than country-level), and activities that are "softer" forms of interaction such as academic exchange and research collaborations.

4.2 Regionalisation Activities and the Role of the ASEAN Integration

As mentioned earlier, the interchangeability of regionalisation and internationalisation means that regionalisation approaches also significantly overlap with internationalisation initiatives. Overall, following Knight's (2012, 2013) suggested framework of regionalisation approaches, the HEIs' initiatives are largely functional, that is, consisting of initiatives, programs and policies that are directed at strengthening collaborations and partnerships. The strongest initiative in terms of systems alignment is HEI A's shift of its academic calendar from June to August. A major programmatic and curricular initiative for the HEIs is the revision of the curricula of their degree programmes to fit outcome-based education standards, which is hoped to provide relevant competencies and skills for Philippine graduates to be more competitive in the region.

Likewise, while all three HEIs put a premium on accreditation as a form of quality assurance and subscription to standards, only HEI A has gained ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance standard accreditation of its degree programmes. HEI B has focused on securing accreditation from the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (international), while HEI C has emphasised its accreditation from the Philippine Accrediting Association of Schools, College and Universities (national/local). Accreditation then, as far as being a regionalisation approach, is still highly variable at the institutional level. This variability in forms and types of accreditation can be attributed to resource factors. Evidently, accreditation is both funding and time-intensive for the institutions, and HEIs choose the kind of accreditation that is not only cost-efficient but lends the best weight and serves the most purpose. Despite the differing focus on accreditation though, these can be viewed as the institutions' initial step to ensuring quality assurance while higher level frameworks and mechanisms are still being devised.

Linkages and the creation of inter-institution partnerships are also a strong initiative of the HEIs. For HEIs A and C especially, while inter-university partnership agreements contain the common activity of student mobility (both inbound and outbound), as well as mobility of faculty and research staff (in large part, outbound), the partnership also includes provisions for creating joint and double degree programs and collaborative research projects. For HEI C also, the partnership includes resource-sharing through inter-library access and use of research and laboratory facilities of partner universities. Industry linkaging and collaborations with companies and businesses in the more advanced economies of Southeast Asia (i.e., Singapore) and East Asia (i.e., China, Japan, South Korea) are also used to create

value-added to degree program offerings. An example would be the international internship and on-the-job training programmes for students of HEIs B and C.

Worth noting as well are some of what might be considered least explored or pursued initiatives yet are instrumental to the creation of a regional identity and culture, which the ASCC Blueprint has underscored as one of the key objectives of the Integration. At the individual constituent level, particularly among the faculty groups, there appears a conscious effort to integrate ASEAN concepts and issues in course syllabi and classroom discussions. However, in all three HEIs, there are no specific courses, whether general education or specialised, on ASEAN studies. All three HEIs also do not offer a degree program on ASEAN studies, nor do they have specially designed centres of research/extension/service focused on Asia or more specifically, Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, while Knight's organisational and political approaches are more applicable at the national and regional levels, some form or iteration of these approaches were identified at the level of the institutions. Most significant would be the creation of and increased role given to facilitative or coordinating units tasked to undertake regionalisation initiatives, such as the creation of the Office for Institutional Linkages for Research and Development for HEI B. Such form of targeted initiative is depicted as a way to improve the organisational architecture and legitimise the institution's regionalisation and internationalisation goals. The membership of the institutions in regional networks, such the SEARCA University Consortium for HEI A, the Association of Jesuit Schools in Asia and the Pacific for HEI B, and the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific for HEI C are not only forms of networking and linkaging, but also serve as a way to strengthen the institution's position in the region and secure organisational recognition and acceptance.

As far as political approaches, the strong focus of HEIs A and C on internationalisation, as evidenced in the inclusion of an internationalisation goal in their vision-mission statement has been translated into the institutions' strategical plan. HEI A's Graduate School, for example, has purposely included internationalisation as one of its four pillars. HEI B has internationalisation as a core component of its institutional roadmap. Such forms of declarations and their integration into the fibre of the institution to become a core thrust of institutional leadership then become a mechanism to legitimise, rationalise and institutionalise structural reforms and policies relating to regionalisation or more broadly, internationalisation.

In examining these regionalisation initiatives and approaches, it would appear that the ASEAN Integration serves both as a form of consciousness and an opportunity. In all HEIs, the ASEAN Community Vision seems to foster a positive consciousness, particularly of enhanced multi-cultural awareness, as well as positional awareness. The ASEAN Integration brings Asia and more specifically, Southeast Asia into closer and sharper focus, and the ASEAN-centered mindset that results is seen as a way to elevate the region and to veer away from the traditional impositions of Western perspectives. For the faculty constituents, such orientation has contributed to a broadening of context and frames of reference. Academic discourses, institutional discussions and pedagogical approaches are not just national or local-specific anymore, but are often positioned, approached from, and looked at now from a

broader context that is Southeast Asia or Asia. At the same time, positional awareness is also evident wherein the institutions are challenged to position themselves in the much bigger context of Southeast Asia/Asia. Questions such as *“Where we are?”*, *“What are we doing?”* or *“What can we do?”* are incorporated into institutional discourses on the ASEAN Integration. To a large extent then, the Integration has encouraged an increased awareness in the HEIs of the need to look at the quality and comparability of their education, their position as an educational institution, and what they should be doing to respond to the challenges of the Integration. Yet, there is also negative consciousness where some constituents see the Integration as “top-down” or “difficult to grasp” and their institution’s initiatives as “fragmented” and “sporadic”.

At the same time, the Integration is used as an opportunity by the institutions to legitimise their regionalisation and by extension, internationalisation goals. It is used as an opportunity to create institutional mechanisms relating to organisational design such as the creation of and increased role accorded to facilitative and coordinating units with dedicated regionalisation and internationalisation functions. However, the most evident area in which the Integration serves as an “opportunity” is in terms of programmatic initiatives, especially when it comes to curricular and degree program innovations; the establishment and beefing up of educational niches; knowledge-sharing through networking and increased partnerships.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The discussion of regionalisation cannot be separated from the discourse on internationalisation. They are closely associated particularly in taking about purpose or objectives, expected outcomes and activities and approaches. Their key difference lies in dimensions of geo-political structure and orientation, with regionalisation suggesting a specific focus on a particular geo-political scope and consequently, a stronger bias for this unit (in this case, Southeast Asia). At the institutional level, regionalisation and by extension, internationalisation approaches still focus largely on functional activities, particularly on academic programmes. Programmatic initiatives relating to curriculum and academic linkaging, such as the focus on curriculum redesign to emphasise outcome-based education; accreditation of degree programs; and the exploration of inter-institution partnerships for student and faculty exchange, research collaborations, materials and resource-sharing; and the development of degree programs that capitalise and build on the HEIs’ respective niches, are among the most common forms of regionalisation activities.

These initiatives are driven by the ASEAN Integration, first as a form of consciousness and secondly as a venue for opportunities. The Integration promotes a consciousness of competitiveness as HEIs find themselves asking how their institutions are positioned vis-à-vis other universities in the region in terms of performance and quality of education. At the same time, the Integration is an opportunity for the HEIs to legitimise their regionalisation goals and activities, serving as the frame of reference and operating context.

The definitions of regionalisation and the institutions’ related approaches and initiatives reflect how Philippine higher education stakeholders understand bigger educational goals such as internationalisation. These also reiterate the value of a clear, articulated

regionalisation/internationalisation policy that can guide and direct institutional policies and activities. At the same time, it also underscores the need for more targeted awareness-raising efforts on the Integration. In addition to communicating its broader goals, the Integration's implications on sectors such as education and even more particular, its expectations from the constituent groups of educational institutions must be highlighted, tasks that concern both national and institutional actors.

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