ASEAN University Network in the Philippines: Implications to the Member Universities and Involvement with CHED

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Abstract: **The study focused on the implications of the ASEAN University Network to its member universities in the Philippines, and its involvement with the Commission on Higher Education to provide an understanding of higher education internationalization in the framework of networked learning that develops and maintains connections which structuralize a platform and venue of collaboration. This study identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the regional university network, and the involvement of CHED to its operations. The interviews with the heads of departments concerned, complemented the discovered respective areas of implications from the related literature, as well as expounded the engagements done by, and with, the member universities and AUN. Despite the gaps, impartial information was acquired in the respective areas of the network. The findings of this research encapsulate the convergence of the implications of the ASEAN University Network to the member universities, and the key function of the involvement of the Commission on Higher Education for the expansion of the said regional network. The researchers thus recommend the identified areas of improvement to be considered for the network to formulate plans of action towards a robust and enduring AUN in achieving ASEAN integration.**

Keywords: **AUN, CHED, higher education institutions, internationalization.**

I. INTRODUCTION

ASEAN cooperation on education is one of the initiatives of the ASEAN in achieving an integrated region. In line with this, ASEAN has been prioritizing the strengthening of the ASEAN University Networking.

The ASEAN University Network (AUN) was established on November 1995 with the objectives of encouraging and promoting higher education cooperation and development to enhance regional integration in achieving global standards. AUN in the Philippines has become a way to gauge the quality of the country's higher education and it is perceived that the best universities in the region are members of the network. Philippine universities are thus encouraged by CHED to become part of the network.

Commission on Higher Education (CHED) is the body responsible for the higher education institutions in the country whether be private or public. It is aiming to have an educational system that is global and in line with the standards of the developed countries. With this, CHED prioritizes a policy framework on the internationalization of HEIs which includes student mobility through AUN and other institutions.

The scarcity of researches regarding AUN, specifically within the Philippines, has been a cause of concern as the network has already been in existence since 1995. The researchers found the necessity to study this topic to fill the aforesaid gap and as it supports a global outlook, which are both vital to the AUN criteria for membership.

Moreover, the purpose of this study is to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats encountered by the three-member universities in the Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University Manila and University of the Philippines Diliman; entailing the AUN membership and also to determine the expansion of opportunities and membership through AUN with CHED.

Statement of the Problem

AUN is committed to carry out the initiative of the ASEAN in achieving cooperation on education for an integrated region, as well as focusing on the strengthening the existing network of leading HEIs in the region. It has been operating since 1995, and in the country there are already three (3) member universities. However, the implications of the network has not yet been as prominent and known, most especially to the non-member universities. Since there are little to no studies about the AUN's implications, the researchers came up with the following problems:

1. What are the implications of ASEAN University Network membership to the member universities in the Philippines?

2. How does the Commission on Higher Education expand the involvement of universities in the ASEAN University Network?

Theoretical Framework

ASEAN University Network establishes interrelationship between ministries of higher education and institutions. The "Networked Learning Theory" substantiates the significance of the stated problems exist and expresses the purpose of the study. Whereas, this theory "is a process of developing and maintaining connections with people, and information, and communicating, therefore supporting, each other's learning". The study framed the implications of the established connection with AUN to the member universities as well as capturing the involvement of the Commission on Higher Education fulfills its purpose of learning from each other's learnings.

Conceptual Framework
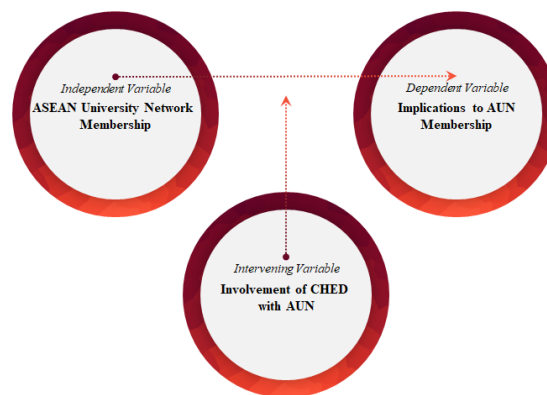
In the framework provided, the ASEAN University Network membership is the independent variable that establishes connection and expands the possibilities that can be obtained by the member universities in the Philippines (Ateneo De Manila University, De La Salle University, and University of the Philippines). To further guide through the study, the researchers follow the procedures of gathering data, conducting interviews, and analyzation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The dependent variable is the implications to the AUN member universities, included are the results of the study or the gathered internal strengths and weaknesses, and the gathered external opportunities and threats. In the process, the involvement of Commission on Higher Education comes into the narrative, making it an intervening variable for its role on supervising the universities and HEIs in the Philippines, and also for the cooperation of CHED and AUN. Part of the outcome will be understanding the involvement of CHED and their cooperative activities, if any, with the AUN through the member universities. The concept is further supported by the theoretical framework of Networked Learning Theor that maintains established connection and learning from each other's learnings. Overall, the framework expresses the implications of the ASEAN University Network in the Philippines, specifically with the Member universities, and the involvement of CHED for the expansion of AUN.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used the Qualitative type of research following the Basic Qualitative Research Design. This research design is the most appropriate method for the study where it allowed the researchers to dive deeper into the problem.

Participants of the Study

The chosen participants are people from respective organizations that are working closely with AUN. The participants are the Director of Office of International Linkages in UP, Dr. Gil S. Jacinto, the Director of Office of International Relations in ADMU, Mr. John Luis D. Lagdameo, and the Director of International Affairs Staff of CHED, Atty. Lily Freida M. Milla.

Sampling Technique

The researchers made use of Purposive Sampling for choosing the research participants. The selection of participants were based on the objective of the study requiring participants to be rich in knowledge about the research topic. With this, only those who are working closely with AUN qualified as participants for the interviews.

Research Instrument

Primary and secondary sources of data are both present in the research. The research instruments that were used in the study include literatures that contain necessary information about AUN and CHED, articles published by AUN, works regarding AUN activities, and interview proper. The study relied on first hand data from the participants of the interview with related literatures as supporting data.

Data Gathering Procedures

The researchers went on two (2) phases in data gathering. The first phase of the research involved an in-depth research on ASEAN University Network and its involvement with the Commission on Higher Education. The second phase of the research refer to the conducted interviews with participants from AUN Member Universities in the Philippines and CHED.

Data Analysis

The researchers conducted a SWOT Analysis for the data in this study. Strength and weaknesses are associated with the internal factors of the organization and shows their abilities and/or competencies under the external dynamics that have significant influence on their goals and objectives. The data of the study were thoroughly interpreted and summarized to come up with the main findings of the study.

III. DISCUSSION

The implications of the ASEAN University Network membership to the member universities in the Philippines

Strengths

Membership in the network signifies prestige as a regional quality university as the 'branding' is one of the strengths of the network. The connections and collaborations with other universities accelerates the transfer of knowledge and is in line with the framework of supporting each other's learning. Quality Assurance as the instrument of mutual recognition; as the key feature in having compatible and comparable degrees and as the door for non-members' inclusivity, is another strength of the network as with the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) which helps the students in expanding their network of learning and the university in internationalizing. There is also CHED's active support among others, but the networks' capability to provide a wide array of opportunities is one of the most prominent strength of the network.

Weaknesses

Despite the fact that AUN has been committed with bringing in and contributing to the strengths of the member universities, there are still persisting important weaknesses. One is the unreadiness for the faculty exchange and research collaboration which is one of the key areas. Heavily brought by the diversity of the region, there have been inconsistencies with the course credits, language barriers, and facility with the language. Another is the issue with the

inflexibility of some faculty members, whereas some are not as open when it comes to their ways of teaching. Financial limitation also impedes the operation and development since the Network is not capable of sustaining itself financially, and accordingly it works with donation and funding. Lastly, the perceived exclusivity of the network due to the inadequate resources for managing big networks. Aforementioned, the network has been working with donations and funding, hence, the bigger the network, the more difficult it is to manage. Therefore, some important progress has to be attained in order to maximize the Network's functions and achieve its objective as an existing body.

Opportunities

The opportunities are almost immeasurable in the network. Its main opportunity of having connections enables to open more possibilities for more opportunities. Connection with other universities respectively supports the Networked Learning Theory. And because of that, cooperation, relativity, benchmarking, partnership, participation, accessibility, venue for inter-institutional recognition, commitment, are all present and developed. The different thematic networks brought different universities together to envision themselves as leading universities in the ASEAN region by adapting best practices and learning from each other's learnings altogether. The network encompasses inclusivity for non-member universities, promoting collaborations, networking, and people-to-people linkages. All of these to achieve the aim of maintaining regional identity and leading to regional integration.

Threats

Besides the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities, the AUN and the member universities can be negatively affected by a number of external issues that impede the attainment of the goal it was established for. First is the diversity of the ASEAN region. Although aforementioned that it brings weaknesses to the AUN and member universities, it can also be a threat in various ways. This threat may be associated to the perceptible cultural differences in the region. It makes it more challenging for the members to engage with each other. Second, internationalization is becoming a money making venture. This threat may be associated with the competition among higher education institutions in the country. Other higher education institutions implement internationalization without having much experience for the reason of competing with the others. Afterwards, it becomes a money making venture. This competition causes Philippine colleges to be left behind when compared to other ASEAN countries. The third threat is the overlapping of thematic networks. Being a member of many networks, excluding AUN, becomes a challenge because of the differing systems they have. With the different systems of these networks, technical challenges may arise and following the different systems of the networks they are members of can get quite daunting. Fourth, the competition between AUN and Western countries' programs. Some citizens of Southeast Asia are more attracted to programs in Western countries. This is the biggest challenge to the network causing success rates of AUN programs to have slow progress. Lastly, opening the network for membership can also be a threat. This may result AUN to lose its prestige.

Commission on Higher Education expand the involvement of member universities in the ASEAN University Network

In general, CHED enjoys an active and fruitful participation with AUN especially in discussing policies and developments of existing and future mechanisms for cooperation. CHED attends the annual SOM-ED meetings hosted by the AUN Secretariat. AUN representatives also participate in the meetings and conferences of the SEAMEO-RIHED as resource persons.

Moreover, CHED exercises its role with AUN through the nomination of competent HEIs. Elaborately, every membership expansion of AUN, CHED is tasked to make nominations based on the criteria given by the Operation Guidelines of the Network.

CHED acknowledges the perceived exclusivity of the AUN, in lieu with this, they are championing a concept whereas the member universities will mentor the next batch of nominees and bring them up to the standards. CHED also provides support on the member universities housing thematic networks such as to DLSU's Cultural and Arts and to ADMU's Ecological Education and Culture. Financially, how CHED works is through reimbursement. For non-member universities, CHED provides support by assisting them in the implementation of the AUN-QA system which is a requirement for having the title of associate member.

To date, CHED has been most active with its engineering subnetwork, the ASEAN/SEED-Net with the three member institutions namely DLSU, UP, and MSU-IIT. This subnetwork is focused on promoting human resource development in engineering.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The research analyzed the implications of the ASEAN University Network to the member universities or specifically the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that gave better understanding on the study. The researchers encapsulate the convergence of the complex and overlapping implications of AUN as well as acknowledging the involvement of CHED. The benefit of the membership enhances its desirability to external factors and it has the capability to widen opportunities as its prominent strength. The diversity in the region becomes the root cause of many weaknesses and threats. However, there are challenges that can be ameliorated by the accessibility provided by the network. CHED has always been a part and still plays the vital role of supporting HEIs in the country in collaboration with AUN. All in all, the contribution of AUN to the member universities is already present, yet there are still areas that calls for improvement and development to fulfill gaps and formulate actions in enriching the network.

Recommendations

This study recommends the member universities to seek the actualization of bringing the other universities up to the standards through making the information about the network more accessible and through further involvement of non - members to various activities and programs. This study also urges the non-member universities to start internationalizing their curricula as endeavor in raising its standards as a way for coping up with the demands of the shifting society. Additionally, they are recommended to aspire in becoming a part of the thematic areas of the AUN for further improvement of the quality education, for enjoyment of a number of opportunities. On the other hand, CHED is recommended to exert more effort in promoting internationalization through utilizing new forms of media. This could be a platform for the AUN to further increase their influence.

Any further research about internationalization of HEIs in the Philippines and ASEAN University Network may continue this study to contextualize the implications of the aforementioned topics for a strategic preparation and management of the ASEAN Integration. Future researches may focus on the third pillar of ASEAN— the sociocultural pillar; utilizing the help of education as a driving force for the achievement of the regional integration, as well as improving the ASEAN University Network for a more accessible platform in developing closer connections in the ASEAN Community. Furthermore, this study suggests to further the information gathered by conducting an in depth research regarding the active participation of De La Salle University as an AUN member and the implications entailing this membership.

The scope of this study did not include the extensive relationship of member universities with AUN, thus this study recommends researches regarding the internal processes of the network itself, how their policies are formulated and how their programs are implemented throughout the ASEAN region. For CHED, it's highly recommended to make the universities more familiarized to the implications of the AUN membership, from its benefits up to the limitation it entails. Internationalizing the higher education institutions in the region establishes a strategic cooperation for a strategic preparation for the solid foundation in achieving the future ASEAN Integration. AUN, in partnership with other involved bodies, implement new programs for cross-cultural literacy of the region, and also on how can the diversity of the region be a strength to the AUN.

Lastly, to solidify the foundation of the AUN as an organization, it would be ideally beneficial to set up branches of headquarters to member states in the ASEAN Region. The organization would more materialize and more accessible to a point easier flow of transactions. Hence, the regional network is not only felt by its membership but also felt embodied through the tangible form.

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