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AIC
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AIC COMMENTARY

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ASEAN-India Cooperation in Higher Education in the Post-Covid-19 Period

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This commentary captures the cooperation between ASEAN and India in higher education. Educational cooperation has emerged as a major area of cooperation bolstering ASEAN-India relations. This commentary reflects on the international movement of students seeking higher education in ASEAN-India region. It also envisions the need for greater cooperation and collaboration between ASEAN member countries and India to confront the post-Covid-19 challenges in higher education mobility.

1. Introduction

ASEAN-India relations have grown over the years. India became ASEAN's strategic partner in 2012 following the commemorative summit held in December 2012. Cooperation in higher education has been a major focus of the ASEAN-India relationship. The cooperation in higher education received the needed political direction at the ASEAN-India Summit, held in Delhi in 2018 to commemorate the 25 years of bilateral relations.¹ The increasing role of women and youth in boosting the ASEAN-India relations has given impetus to several annual initiatives like the ASEAN-India Youth Festival, ASEAN-India Hackathon, Study in India Virtual Expo, ASEAN PhD Fellowships, ASEAN-India University Network, etc. Several prestigious institutes in India have also ameliorated their student and faculty exchanges with universities of ASEAN countries. For instance, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Guwahati has collaborated with some ASEAN countries like Malaysia and the Philippines to propel research and development, enhance the exchange of faculty and students and carry out internships and other capacity-building programmes. A notable initiative in this direction is IIT Guwahati's 5-year long agreement with Mariano Marcos State University, the Philippines. Several scholarship schemes have been rolled for ASEAN students under the aegis of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Ministry of Ayush.

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Among the initiatives in higher education cooperation, the most noted is the latest “Doctoral Fellowship in India for ASEAN” announced by the Prime Minister of India, during the commemoration of 25 years of ASEAN-India relations in New Delhi., which later was unveiled by the External Affairs Minister of India in 2019. The fellowship scheme has roped in 23 Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) to award 1000 doctoral scholarships to students from ASEAN nations. ASEAN-India collaboration in education is also bolstered by initiatives in the BIMSTEC region. The Coronavirus pandemic has exposed the internationalisation of education to a number of vulnerabilities. To tide over the pandemic with minimal distortion in the education sector, ASEAN and India need to confront the challenges together.

2. ASEAN-India Cooperation in Higher Education at a Glance

The collective efforts of India and ASEAN in the direction of education have remained at the centre stage of the strategic partnership. In 2018, during the 25th year of the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit, the Prime Minister of India announced a slew of initiatives in this direction. Among the notable announcements was the introduction of scholarships for ASEAN students to pursue PhDs in 23 Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs). The government allocated a budgetary amount of INR 300 crore (around US\$ 40 million) for this programme.² In the first year of the implementation of the programme, 250 students will be selected, 300 students in the next year and 450 in the subsequent year.³ The budget allocation in the year 2021-22 for ASEAN fellowships was raised to INR 10 crores from INR 4 crores in the budget 2020-21.⁴ In the academic session 2019-20, 22 ASEAN students have been provisionally selected in the first round, while 20 students have been selected in the second round in various IITs.⁵ ASEAN fellowships offered by the IITs cover areas like space technology and biotechnology, which are more accessible to the ASEAN member states.⁶

Another initiative in the direction of cooperation in education has been the ITEC fellowships started in 1964. Over the years, the ITEC fellowship has matured to integrate regional arrangements such as the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), MGC (Mekong-Ganga Cooperation), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation), AU (African Union), Afro-Asian Rural Development Organization (AARDO), Caribbean Community (CARICOM), and Indian Association Rim-Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC). The ITEC fellowships are offered in a variety of courses in streams like Agriculture, Food and Fertilizer, Banking, Insurance, Finance, Accounts and Audit, Cyber Technologies, Artificial Intelligence and emerging technologies, Engineering, English, Environment and Climate change, Health and Yoga, IT and Telecommunication, SMEs and Entrepreneurship, and Textiles, etc. in as many as 84 research institutes across India.⁷ Scholarships for ASEAN students are also offered through the mechanism of the ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund (AISTDF), and five fellowships from each ASEAN member state totalling 50 slots are earmarked under the ASEAN-India Research Training Fellowship. Under the ITEC programme, India offers 1102 scholarships annually to the ASEAN countries for short-term training programmes in various sectors. Additionally, India also provides around 200 scholarships to ASEAN

students every year for bachelors, masters and doctoral programmes in premier Indian institutes under the ICCR's scholarship scheme. So far, 294 space scientists from ASEAN countries have benefited from the training programmes at the Center for Space Science and Technology Education in Asia and the Pacific (CSSTEAP) in Dehra Dun, India. ICCR has offered more than 3500 scholarships to 7000 students from 120 countries including ASEAN countries in the year 2021-22, increased from 2150 international students in the academic year 2018-19. Table 1 presents the number of fellowship slots offered under various schemes of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR). Besides, since 2006, the Sushma Swaraj Foreign Service Institute (SS-FSI) has been conducting a special training course for ASEAN diplomats every year.

Table 1: Number of Fellowship Slots in Various Schemes of ICCR in 2021-22

Sl. No.	Scheme	Slots	Countries covered
1	General Scholarship Programme	580	60 countries including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia
2	CEP/EEP Programme	152	29 countries including Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar and Vietnam
3	ICCR Scholarship Scheme for Indian Culture	100	All countries
4	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Scholarship Scheme	50	5 countries namely, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam
5	AYUSH scholarship scheme for BIMSTEC countries	30	6 countries including Myanmar and Thailand
6	AYUSH scholarship scheme for Malaysia	20	Malaysia
7	AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for Non-BIMSTEC countries	20	100 countries including Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam
8	AYUSH Scholarship Scheme for Southeast Asian Region (SEAR) countries	29	11 countries including Indonesia, Myanmar, and Thailand

Source: Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) Scholarship Manual for Academic Year 2021-22

ASEAN-India cooperation in education and research has soared high under the framework of the Science, Technology and Innovation Policy (STIP) partnership. The ASEAN-India Fund (AIF) was originally the agency behind science and technology cooperation activities between ASEAN member countries and India. The Government of India in 2008 earmarked US\$ 5 million for ASEAN-India Science and Technology Development Fund (AISTDF) for carrying out programmes and schemes in Science and Technology cooperation. The ASEAN-India Collaborative Research and Development (R&D) scheme under the AISTDF provides scholarship to two projects from each ASEAN member country for a period of up to 24 months. The selected ASEAN/Indian researchers can undertake a visit once every year for a

maximum of 14 days in the case of a senior researcher and a maximum of 30 days in the case of a junior researcher in either of the countries. As of July 2019, a total of 16 projects have been sanctioned under the ASEAN-India Collaborative Research & Development (R&D) Scheme⁸.

3. ASEAN-India Student Mobility

International mobility to seek quality education has increased over the decades. With the start of globalisation in the 1990s came stupendous growth in international mobility for education-related purposes. For example, there were enhanced instances of exchange programmes between countries, movement of students as well as teaching faculty and partnerships (MoUs) between overseas institutions and home institutions. As of now, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Delhi has 129 international active MoUs with Australia, South Korea, Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Israel, Japan, Taiwan, United Kingdom, etc⁹. Efforts in the direction of travel permits, mutual recognition of academic qualifications, visa arrangement, and post-study work visa, etc. have resulted in an outflux of students from India. As the Ministry of External Affairs notes, in the year 2018, a total of 7,53,000 Indian students enrolled in foreign universities. Out of this, an overwhelming 2,11,703 Indian students went to the United States alone, while 26,685 Indian students went to the United Kingdom for higher studies¹⁰. Table 2 presents India’s inbound and outbound students to and from major countries.

Table 2: India’s Inbound and Outbound Students to Various Countries in 2018

Country	Outbound	Inbound
US	2,11,703	1,414
Canada	1,24,000	305
UK	26,685	150
Indonesia	17	126
Malaysia	1,900	1,235
Philippines	11,000	22
Singapore	2,000	124
Thailand	297	420
Brunei	24	1

Source: Ministry of External Affairs and UIS statistics

With the initiation of the Doctoral Fellowship for ASEAN students in IITs and other initiatives, the number of inbound students has increased from CLMV countries. This is reflected in the number of students from Lao PDR increasing from 19 in 2018 to 62 in the year 2019. Similarly, students from Myanmar have increased from 324 in 2018 to 479 in the year 2019. Despite the efforts, however, inbound students from several ASEAN member states like Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam have shown a dip in the year 2019¹¹. India attracts most of the foreign students from neighbouring countries such as Nepal,

Bhutan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, etc. The Covid-19 pandemic has also brought a screeching halt in international students. The lockdown and border restrictions have added to the woes of international students. Visa arrangements are keeping behind due to strict lockdowns and consular offices running with minimal personnel. Though the Covid-19 pandemic has had a toll on the physical movement of students, it has also amplified the efforts in remote learning harnessing digital infrastructure. ASEAN and India hosted a virtual Youth dialogue in June 2020 to harness the youth energy of the member countries. Also, Hackathon 2021 organized between ASEAN and India signalled renewed commitment for education cooperation in the face of the raging second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Opportunities

On the one hand, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted activities across various sectors of economies, while, on the other hand, the same disruption has sprung open a cohort of opportunities for developing countries. There is a scope for further amelioration in the number of students coming from ASEAN countries to India. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of staying close to home. Since many countries in ASEAN are bounded with India through land and maritime borders, it gives them a feeling of home away from home while receiving quality education and research training from a reputed institute in India. The pandemic has given impetus to online and remote learning. The role of digital infrastructure could not be emphasised more. Successful events like Hackathon 2021 organised in virtual mode received huge participation from all ASEAN member states. However, many of the ASEAN member states lack heavily in digital infrastructure. For instance, countries like the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, etc. do not have consistent access to internet services and face a digital divide. ASEAN and India could converge their efforts in closing the digital divide, which is affecting the education sector considerably.

Notwithstanding, certain ASEAN countries such as Malaysia have a robust ICT sector and is gaining on smart education platforms. India has an edge in ICT services and could harness it to provide smart education solutions and materials to ASEAN countries. Significant attempts could be made in addressing issues like vaccine hesitancy by harnessing the power of youth. India and ASEAN countries appear similar in their demographic dividend. In the present scenario when the second wave of Covid-19 is gaining momentum in ASEAN countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Vietnam, etc., there are also increased instances of vaccine hesitancy. India and ASEAN could collaborate in this area by involving their youth in creating awareness about vaccines and at the same time delve into the causes behind people's reluctance towards Covid-19 vaccines.

The influx of ASEAN students into India has already dimmed in recent years. Add to that the current Covid-19 pandemic which has created new hurdles for fostering greater collaboration. Vaccine passports are going to be new gateways for increasing student influx from foreign countries. India and ASEAN could amplify efforts in this direction. Greater cooperation is needed for both the regions to recognize each other's vaccines for unimpeded movement of students as well as researchers between ASEAN and India. As of now, India's

indigenously grown vaccine ‘Covaxin’, developed by Bharat Biotech, has not received approval in a majority of countries. Only nine countries including the Philippines have approved Covaxin. It is important to get an emergency use listing from the WHO for Covaxin if student movement to other ASEAN countries has to be made hassle-free. With the majority of students looking for a foreign education experience but in the neighbouring countries following the Covid-19 pandemic, ASEAN and India must be on the same page in terms of accreditation of degrees.

As of now, very few courses of study are recognized between ASEAN member states and India. Accreditation of academic degrees and diplomas has emerged as a prominent factor in increasing educational cooperation between ASEAN and India¹². To attract more students from India to ASEAN and vice versa, both parties need to work on Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs). The MRAs between India and ASEAN are limited and highly restrictive for professionals.¹³ Some recently inked MRAs between India and ASEAN member states have been between ICAI (Institute of Chartered Accountants of India) and MICPA (Malaysian Institute of Certified Public Accountants), and between Association of Indian Universities (AIU), India and Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), Malaysia. The MRAs between ASEAN member states and India have been in air services, sports education, nursing, etc. MRAs need to be inked in other services as well such as Telecommunications, Information Technology and IT-enabled services, financial services, and Healthcare services.

Post-Study work visa is another area where ASEAN and India could step up their partnership. The Post-Study Work visa policy has appeared as a major consideration by students for studying abroad. For instance, countries such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand have witnessed a massive increase in foreign students since their post-study work visa policies were re-introduced. India and ASEAN member states should chalk out a plan in this direction as well to increase student mobility among them. Selected universities in Singapore like the National University of Singapore (NUS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore Management University (SMU), Singapore Institute of Technology (SIT), etc. provide a non-renewable Long Term Visit Pass (LTVP) on application by Indian students for one year to seek job opportunities following the completion of the education in Singapore. However, the similar is not provided to ASEAN students coming to India and Indian students going to ASEAN countries. India and ASEAN can thus increase their exchange of students by working on a feasible post-study work permit.

In this context, it is suggested that ASEAN and India may consider establishing the ASEAN-India Open Universities Network (AIOUN) and ASEAN-India Business School Network (AIBSN). Universities in Singapore and Malaysia have consistently improved their ranks in the QS rankings of institutions as well as the Times Higher Education ranking. Similarly, many Indian universities have shown uninterrupted improvement in the university rankings. The strides shown are attracting more and more Indian students to universities in Singapore. The locations of several multinational corporations in Singapore also appear as a driving factor for Indian students to study there and seek employment there. The recognition

of degrees and qualifications would thus be the most crucial step in ameliorating educational cooperation between India and ASEAN.

5. Way Forward

The member states in ASEAN are at different rung of the economic ladder and the Covid-19 pandemic has further heightened development gaps in a whole array of sectors. While ASEAN-India cooperation in education was gaining speed following initiatives such as Doctoral Fellowship for ASEAN students in IITs, ITEC fellowships, ICCR scholarships, the pandemic has thrown a barrage of obstacles in the path of increased partnership. Digital divide, visa delays, vaccine hesitancy, vaccine recognition, accreditation of qualifications and degrees etc. must receive renewed undivided attention from both India and ASEAN to achieve the goals set out in the ASEAN-India Plan of Action (POA) for Peace, Progress and Shared Prosperity (2021-25).

End Notes:

1. Refer, for example, MEA (2018)
2. Refer, for example, <https://asean-iit.in/> to know more about Doctoral Fellowship in India for ASEAN.
3. Financial Express. (2019).
4. Refer, for example, <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/eb/dg25.pdf> budget allocation for higher education
5. Refer, for example, ASEAN India Doctoral Fellowship, <https://asean.iitd.ac.in/>
6. Refer, for example, Bolia (2020)
7. Refer, Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation Programme. Ministry of External Affairs. Government of India. Refer, www.mea.gov.in
8. Refer, Department of Science and Technology. List of ASEAN-India Collaborative R&D projects sanctioned under the ASEAN-India S&T cooperation programme. Ministry of Science and Technology, India. Details are available at www.mea.gov.in
9. Author's own based on IIT Delhi
10. Refer, MEA dashboard, available at www.mea.gov.in
11. Refer, for example, AIC-RIS (2020)
12. Ibid
13. Refer, for example, Chao (2017)

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About AIC

Considering the work of the ASEAN-India Eminent Persons Group (AIEPG), and its Report with recommendations for forging a closer partnership for peace, progress and shared prosperity, the Heads of the State/Government of ASEAN and India at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit 2012, held at New Delhi on 19-20 December 2012, recommended the establishment of ASEAN-India Centre (AIC), which was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble External Affairs Minister of the Government of India on 21 June 2013 at RIS. AIC serves as a resource centre for ASEAN Member States and India to fill the knowledge gaps that currently limit the opportunities for cooperation. AIC is closely working with the Indo-Pacific Division of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India to undertake and disseminate evidence-based policy research and provide policy recommendations.

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