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## Actors and Actorhood in Higher Education Regionalisms

Meng-Hsuan Chou

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

[Hsuan@ntu.edu.sg](mailto:Hsuan@ntu.edu.sg)

**Abstract:** Around the world, ‘higher education regionalism’ has become one accepted way to organise policy cooperation and reform efforts in the higher education sector. Higher education regionalism can manifest in two forms: *intra*-regional (dominant) and *inter*-regional (less common). Using the case of ‘European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region’ (SHARE), I identify the actors and their roles in inter-regional higher education policy cooperation. My intention is to engage with Pavel Zgaga’s research on the external dimension of the Bologna Process, particularly how actorhood of the Bologna Process is organisationally constructed and received by the SHARE partners. I conclude with some personal reflections about Pavel Zgaga’s knowledge exchange in Southeast Asia.

### 1. Introduction

How higher education and its policy reforms are organised is a central topic for scholars interested in the transformation of state-society relations. In the context of contemporary globalisation, the emergence of a macro-regional governance layer, involving established regional organisational entities and an evolving network of transnational policy actors, has become one accepted way to organise cooperation and reform in this sector. Pauline Ravinet and I refer to this phenomenon as ‘higher education regionalism’ (Chou and Ravinet 2015, 2016). While many examples of higher education regionalisms exist around the world, Europe’s Bologna Process is one of the most prominent example. In this chapter, I situate Pavel Zgaga’s scholarship on the external dimension of the Bologna Process in my research on higher education regionalism. Specifically, I intend to explore how actorhood of the Bologna Process is organisationally structured and perceived outside of Europe. Here, I define actorhood broadly to refer to the actors involved in the works of higher education regionalism and their overall agency (as representatives of their countries, organisations/associations, or universities), and the external acknowledgement of Bologna Process as a recognised way to organise higher education regionalism.

To do so, I begin with Zgaga’s work on Bologna Process’s external dimension before proceeding with an overview of my higher education regionalism research agenda to identify how we conceptualise the external dimension in our respective research, as well as the research questions we have in common. Next, I turn to an instance of higher education *inter*-regionalism—‘European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN<sup>1</sup> Region’ (SHARE)—to explore

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<sup>1</sup> ASEAN refers to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which currently has ten member states: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

how the actorhood of Bologna Process's external dimension is constructed by identifying the actors (who are they?), their roles (what hats do they wear?), and observable effects of higher education inter-regionalism (what are the impacts?). I conclude this chapter with personal reflections about Zgaga's knowledge exchange in Southeast Asia.

## 2. Pavel Zgaga and the External Dimension of Bologna Process

Pavel Zgaga is a prolific scholar and my entry into his scholarship was via the *external dimension* of the Bologna Process, 'a term which began to be used in the early years of the BP [Bologna Process] and referred to issues about the articulation of possible relationships between the then emerging EHEA [European Higher Education Area] and the surrounding world' (Zgaga 2019: 450). In the main, whereas the 'internal dimension' referred to those activities concerning the completion of the European Higher Education Area, the 'external dimension' addressed those between Bologna and non-Bologna member states and institutions; but Zgaga (2011: 4) reminded us that 'The borderline between the "internal" and "external" dimensions was unclear'. As an insider involved in developing the Global Strategy of the Bologna Process, Zgaga was the rapporteur overseeing discussions concerning ways in which the European Higher Education Area would be 'open and attractive to other parts of the world' through sharing of 'experiences with non-European countries' (Zgaga 2006: i). As a scholar, he provided a more reflective perspective of these developments at multiple timepoints following the implementation of the Global Strategy. In this section, I review his key publications concerning the external dimension of the Bologna Process (Zgaga 2006, 2011, 2012, 2019), giving particular attention to key debates and how these debates evolved over time. To do so, I begin with a brief overview of the Global Strategy's key policy areas and guiding principles.

The 2006 report 'Looking out: The Bologna Process in a Global Setting' set out the first parameters within which discussions concerning the external dimension emerged (Zgaga 2006).<sup>2</sup> Tracing the 'history of the "external dimension" idea', the report identified four distinct 'horizons, agendas and approaches in which the "external dimension" appears in Bologna documents' (Zgaga 2006: 32-33): (1) 'an information (didactic) approach' (presenting and explaining the European Higher Education Area 'correctly' to 'other world regions'); (2) 'a competitiveness and attractiveness agenda' (attracting international students and faculty to Europe); (3) 'a partnership and cooperation agenda' (collaborating with non-European higher education partners in non-commercial activities that promote 'academic values'); and (4) 'a dialogic approach' (exchanging good practices, experience, and ideas with representatives of other world regions with the aim to develop 'concrete mechanisms to facilitate the implementation of "partnership and cooperation agenda"').

These 'horizons, agendas and approaches' would later be translated into the five core policy areas and three guiding principles of the Bologna Process's Global Strategy. Zgaga (2011: 3) succinctly summarised the five core policy areas as 'improving information, enhancing the attractiveness and competitiveness of European higher education, strengthening cooperation,

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<sup>2</sup> The report is substantive (more than 200 pages) and should be considered a historical document in the development of the Bologna Process. In typical Zgaga-style, the report is presented as a history of ideas (in this case, the 'external dimension') from an insider who has been deeply involved in its telling and re-telling. Various quotes from speakers at organised events concerning the external dimension brings to life the highly provocative questions that participants in Europe asked when considering engaging non-Bologna stakeholders around the world.

intensifying policy dialogue and furthering the recognition of qualifications'. What set the Global Strategy apart from other approaches in regional policy cooperation in the higher education domain, and, indeed, made it *European*, were its three guiding principles. First, 'European heritage and values' were to steer the implementation of the Global Strategy, specifically the centrality of 'institutional autonomy', 'academic freedom', 'democracy, human rights and the rule of law' in all aspects concerning higher education (Zgaga 2011: 10). Second, the participation of all stakeholders was envisaged as integral to the implementation of the Global Strategy. Here, 'an atmosphere of trust' was highlighted as a key ingredient. Third, the Strategy was based on the principle of 'inclusive geographical scope' and welcomed diversity in engagement; partnership was thus *not* exclusive.

The adoption of the Global Strategy appears to suggest that the policy actors involved have largely addressed the question 'What is the purpose of the external dimension and how can it be best implemented?', but Zgaga informed us that this was far from settled. Early on, the preoccupation with identifying the purpose of the external dimension could be seen in several questions posed in the 2006 report: 'Should the Bologna reforms be extended to other parts of the world?', 'Is the Bologna Process overshadowed by Euro-centrism?', and 'the "external dimension"—does it matter and why does it matter?' (Zgaga 2006: 12, 14, 97). The extent to which Bologna policy actors gave weight to the features of *attractiveness*, *competitiveness*, and *openness*, along with the role that 'cooperation' would play in enhancing these features, in the design of activities for implementing the Global Strategy indicated their overall position concerning the purpose of the external dimension. The assessments Zgaga (2011, 2012, 2019) made in 2011 and 2019, however, revealed the overall tensions embedded in the implementation of the Global Strategy.

Reporting in 2011, Zgaga (2011, 2012: 219) identified two sets of activities from the Global Strategy's five policy areas that had the highest frequency (about 50% of all participating member states): 'first, publishing brochures and setting up special websites (policy area 1: improving information); second, bilateral and multilateral contacts and agreements between the EHEA and non-EHEA countries (policy area 4: policy dialogue)'. Contextualising these findings, Zgaga (2012: 220) pointed out that this was largely a ministerial view of the developments, rather than a comprehensive one that included other stakeholders such as the European Commission (i.e. macro-level developments), and higher education institutions (micro-level activities). What this early assessment tells us about the actorhood of the external dimension of the Bologna Process is that the official reporting reflected a state-centric view of these developments, with the ministries being the policy actors whose views were represented.

Assessing the impact of the Bologna Process in a global setting in 2019, Zgaga began by describing the embedded tensions that have come to differentiate two opposing implementation 'cultures' of the Global Strategy. Familiar to most scholars studying higher education regionalism in Europe, these 'cultures' have been expressed in several ways: the 'UNESCO approach vs. WTO approach' (Zgaga 2019: 454), 'cooperation vs. competition' (Zgaga 2019: 456), and the 'Europe of knowledge vs. Europe of the euro' (Zgaga 2009). What these opposing 'cultures' champion are distinct policy frames—i.e. problem definition, value judgement, and solution: a more utilitarian market-driven frame (e.g. 'Europe of the euro') that emphasises trade liberalisation, or a more culturally-grounded and non-market frame ('Europe of knowledge') that highlights the significance of academic values and institutional autonomy in the modernisation of European higher education. The extent to which these two opposing 'cultures' have played out or reconciled remains an ongoing development.

As part of his assessment, Zgaga (2019: 457-459) ‘looked out’ to developments outside of Europe and identified the ‘echoes’ of the Bologna Process around the world. What he found would be of interest to researchers examining global diffusion: differences abound between the Bologna philosophy and regional higher education policy cooperation elsewhere. Indeed, while some regional policy actors expressed interests in the Bologna Process and its approaches, they also pointed to the significance of local institutions and practices that provided very little traction to implementing the Bologna ‘model’. This led him to ask, ‘Is it possible at all to talk about the “BP global model” as a model that could be enforced across the globe?’ (Zgaga 2019: 460). Concluding that ‘a more complex approach is needed to clarify these issues. It is not just about “looking out”, Zgaga (2019: 46) argued for the European Higher Education Area to be included in these assessments. As I shall discuss next, Zgaga and I shared the same outlook; for me, it was the starting point for developing and carrying out my higher education regionalism research agenda.

### 3. Higher Education Regionalism and the External Dimension of the Bologna Process

Scanning the globe, one quickly realises that Europe’s Bologna Process is one regional initiative among many in the higher education sector. For instance, there has been consistent efforts in building common higher education areas in Africa through the African Union’s (AU) harmonisation strategy, sub-regional initiatives of the Southern African Development Community, and activities of the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education. Looking towards Latin America, we find the mechanisms of Mercado Común del Sur (Mercosur) for programme accreditation (MEXA) and mobility scheme (MARCA). Similarly, in Asia, there is the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) programme, as well as the many initiatives from the ASEAN University Network (AUN). In recent years, China has also taken the lead in establishing higher education alliances through multiple initiatives such as the Asian University Association (AUA) and the University Alliance of the Silk Road (UASR). What these initiatives have in common are emphases on mobility (student, faculty), some form of credit transfer, and participating institutions and countries’ ambition to be dominant/prominent in the global higher education landscape. Pauline Ravinet and I identified these initiatives as manifestations of higher education regionalism (specifically, *intra-regionalism*), which we defined as referring to:

[A] political project of region creation involving at least some state authority (national, supranational, international), who in turn designates and delineates the world’s geographical region to which such activities extend, in the higher education policy sector (Chou and Ravinet 2015: 368).

We derived this definition after reviewing what has been written on higher education regionalism in the political science literature and in higher education studies—two distinct sets of literature that have much to say about this phenomenon, but rarely engage each other in a fruitful conversation on the subject. From political science, we learned from scholars who examined regions, ‘new regionalism’, and European integration (Caporaso and Choi 2002; Fawcett and Gandois 2010; Hettne 2005; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Mattli 2012; Warleigh-Lack 2014; Warleigh-Lack and Van Langenhove 2010). From higher education studies, we obtained insights from scholars who are serious about the impact that the re-composition of space, scales, and power have on past, current, and the future state of higher education (Gomes, Robertson and Dale 2012; Jayasuriya and Robertson 2010; Knight 2012, 2013).

The lessons from our review led us to these three positions concerning the study of higher education regionalism:

- *It must be comparative.* Studying higher education regionalism means comparing varieties of higher education regionalisms to consider the sector's apparent isomorphism. This corresponds directly to Zgaga's reference of 'echoes' of the Bologna Process around the world.
- *It must be sector-based.* Studying higher education regionalism is to be serious about the particular dynamics of higher education and how they interact with the wider multi-purpose regional organisation (EU, ASEAN, AU, etc.) and national needs. For us, integrating the multi-layered local context and developments are crucial in examining the evolution of initiatives and policy cooperation, and we saw the policy sector as an entry point to this investigation.
- *It must be differentiated.* Studying higher education regionalism means to distinguish between intra-regional initiatives (within one geographical region) and inter-regional initiatives (between at least two geographical regions). The latter is where my higher education regionalism research agenda overlaps with Zgaga's research on the 'external dimension' of the Bologna Process.

With these points of departure, we proposed a heuristic framework to study higher education regionalism along these three dimensions:

1. *Constellation of actors* central and active in these processes: this means identifying the individual and collective actors involved and mapping their interaction patterns. Focusing on the actors allow us to see whether they wear multiple institutional hats, and represent different interests and positions depending on the audience setting. It would be particularly interesting to delineate how they navigate between different geographical higher education arena over time.
2. *Institutional arrangements* adopted, abandoned, and debated: this refers to identifying the institutional form and rules and the instruments considered, accepted, or rejected. We anticipate that institutional forms would vary across the world's geographical regions, particularly if these institutional arrangements are embedded within the regional multipurpose organisation (e.g. EU, ASEAN, AU).
3. *Ideas and principles* embedded and operationalised: this points to identifying the paradigms, policy ideas, and programmatic ideas guiding the instances of higher education regionalisms (see Chou and Ravinet 2017).

Our higher education regionalism research agenda embraces an inductive method of enquiry, and requires intensive fieldwork with key actors involved in their regional, national, and institutional homes. In the next section, I will turn to a case of higher education inter-regionalism, involving the EU and ASEAN, to look at how the 'external dimension' of the Bologna Process has been viewed in Southeast Asia.

#### **4. Higher Education Inter-Regionalism: the case of SHARE**

The SHARE initiative is an instance of higher education inter-regionalism, involving policy cooperation between two distinct regional entities: EU and ASEAN. Designed and promoted as ‘European Union Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region’, we may approach SHARE as a case of Bologna Process’s external dimension, as the ASEAN partners did when it was launched in 2015. The European Commission funds the SHARE initiative, originally for the period 2015-2019 with €10 million; the contract officially concluded on 30 June 2020, but was extended for a further period (February 2021 to the end of 2022) with €5.175 million from the EU and €175,000 co-financing from the British Council (SHARE 2021a). SHARE’s primary objective is to ‘strengthen regional cooperation [within ASEAN, and between ASEAN and the EU], enhance the quality, competitiveness and internationalisation of ASEAN higher education institutions and students’ (SHARE 2021b). To do so, the SHARE initiative is organised to implement three Result Areas (see Table 1). The 2020-2022 work programme is divided into two sets of activities. First, those continuing and building on existing Result Areas (e.g. quality assurance, qualifications framework, credentials recognition and portability). Second, initiatives reflecting universities’ mission to train graduates ready for the labour market (e.g. outcome based pedagogy, graduate employability) and response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. virtual exchange, collaborative online international learning) (Table 1).

**Table 1: SHARE Result Areas and work programme (2015-2022) (SHARE 2021a, 2021b)**

<b>Main Result Areas (2015-2019)</b>	
Result 1	Policy dialogues (British Council lead)
Result 2a	ASEAN Qualifications Reference Frameworks (DAAD lead, ENQA and EUA)
Result 2b	ASEAN Quality Assurance (DAAD lead, ENQA and EUA)
Result 3a	ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) (Campus France lead)
Result 3b	ASEAN-EU Credit Transfer Systems (AECTS) (Campus France lead)
Result 3c	ACTS and AECTS Student Mobility with Scholarships (Nuffic lead)
<b>Technical assistance and capacity building (2020-2022)</b>	
‘Developing ASEAN Communities of Practice for greater coordination, knowledge management, and Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL)’	
‘Strengthening of regional initiatives on quality assurance and accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes’	
‘Supporting the implementation of national qualifications frameworks and the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRf)’	
‘Contributing to the ongoing work of the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN)’	
‘Supporting the move to Outcome Based Education (OBE) pedagogy’	
‘Producing a Study on “Graduate Employability in ASEAN” as part of a series of studies to support the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) 2025’	
‘Implementing digital modalities of internationalisation including Virtual Exchange and Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL)’	
‘Piloting digital credentials recognition and portability to enhance the ASEAN-Europe Credit Transfer System (AECTS) mechanism’	

A consortium of six European organisations operating transnationally leads SHARE’s day-to-day implementation: British Council (operational lead), German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), Nuffic (the Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education), Campus France (the French agency for the promotion of higher education, international student services, and international mobility), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and the European University Association (EUA). SHARE’s target groups and beneficiaries are all ASEAN-based entities. At the regional-level, these agencies are identified:

ASEAN University Network (AUN), Task Forces for the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework for Higher Education (AQAFHE), ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN), ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF), and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation Regional Centre for Higher Education (SEAMEO RIHED). At the national-level, SHARE targets government departments active in the higher education sector, university managers and faculty, quality assurance agencies, student associations, and students (SHARE 2021a).

By design, SHARE embodies similar tensions and ambiguities of implementing transnational initiatives such as Europe's Bologna Process, particularly issues concerning ownership (who owns it?) and promoted values (whose values?). These tensions are visible in the presentation of SHARE: it is 'an EU Grant funded project' and 'SHARE is a project of ASEAN' (SHARE 2021a). At the same time, the consortium claims to be working on 'behalf of ASEAN and EU' (SHARE 2021a). The SHARE steering committee (referred to as stakeholders) consists of the ASEAN Secretariat (Education, Youth and Sports Division under the Socio-Cultural Community Department), the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Education (SOM-ED), and the EU Delegation in Jakarta. Setting aside the steering committee, the organisational set up of SHARE divides the policy actors geographically and by roles: the European consortium implements a range of activities (e.g. policy dialogues, quality assurance, qualifications framework) for ASEAN actors. The 'giver-receiver' dynamics could be interpreted in at least two ways. First, as equal partners (a horizontal exchange) 'sharing' their good practices. Second, hierarchically, as instructors offering lessons to participants. During our fieldwork, we found that ASEAN actors had the latter perspective when SHARE was launched. It was explained to us that there was contention because the ASEAN partners felt that there was a 'general lack of acknowledgement or awareness of existing efforts already made in South-East Asia on higher education coordination' (Chou and Ravinet 2017: 156). In their view, they saw the dismissal of what has been achieved in the region as the overall approach the Bologna Process applied to its external dimension. The significance of this perspective should be emphasised and, I argue, it may be useful to offer another 'history of the "external dimension" idea' than the one Zgaga provided to account for this viewpoint.

Since the late 1990s, inside and outside of the European Union (EU) institutional framework, European policy actors became increasingly interested in the external dimension of European cooperation. This interest emerged out of the dual recognition that there needed to be greater coherence between diverse EU measures across policy sectors ('horizontal management', see Peters 2015, 2018), and that partnership with non-EU member states, particularly concerning implementation, was essential for policy success. While the Bologna Process is not a EU process, it is still a *European* process, and thus must be situated in the overall policy thinking at the time. Certainly, sectoral policy logic is likely to have its own dynamics, but political scientists have challenged the observation that a policy sector could be entirely insulated (see Gornitzka 2010; Capano and Piattoni 2011); for instance, the extent to which a sectoral policy objective could be achieved may rely on its overall synergy with prominent policy logics in other sectors (Chou 2012). It was in the area of justice and home affairs, notably in the fields of asylum and migration, that the policy focus on the external dimension was most prominent for the EU. These developments have a long history in European integration (Chou 2009). For EU member states, the removal of internal borders to ensure free movement also meant that the external borders needed to be strengthened to prevent the entry of unauthorised third country nationals. While the member states of the European Communities, as the EU was then known, attempted to strengthen their common external borders since the mid-1980s through the Schengen arrangement, it was only in 1999 when they explicitly did so: the Tampere

European Council officially acknowledged the significance of the external dimension in these efforts (Boswell 2003; Wolff, Wichmann, and Mounier 2009).

What is relevant for our current discussion was the prevalent policy logic driving how the EU, consisting of the European Commission working closely with interested member states during earlier efforts, engaged external partners concerning border management. In the first wave, the European Commission, representing the EU, actively sought to interest source and transit countries in mobility partnerships whereby the latter would assist, *inter alia*, in the readmission of unauthorised migrants and failed asylum seekers. The prevailing policy understanding at the time was that the EU sought to ‘outsource’ its border management work to others through aid incentives and technical assistance. The latter was described as a sharing of experiences and practices from the EU to partner countries and was commonly invoked as a driving motivation. It is necessary to highlight how the Bologna Process used the same language when promoting its external dimension activities, suggesting that policy discourse is transferrable even though the intentions may be quite different. While the EU has successfully concluded mobility partnerships with several countries (Reslow and Vink 2015), it has also failed when the invited partner state approached negotiations with caution and exploited the internal division among the participating member states (Chou and Gibert 2012). It is therefore not surprising that the external dimension of EU policy work has come to be associated with the question ‘What is in it for the EU?’—a question participating European institutions and states, as well as invited partners, asked in light of their own desired outcomes. For the SHARE initiative, ASEAN participants responded with general caution, waiting to see what is on offer and could benefit their respective countries and institutions.

The general assessment of the SHARE initiative at the end of its first phase is that it has been successful. For instance, more than ten policy dialogues were initiated on diverse higher education topics (see SHARE 2021c). Similarly, more than 500 scholarships were awarded to ASEAN<sup>3</sup> undergraduate students enrolled in the 32 universities that make up the SHARE network (SHARE 2019). Of these, 400 scholarships were allocated for intra-ASEAN mobility, and 100 for studying in the EU. These scholarships offered a fully-funded semester exchange and recipient testimonials point to its transformative capacity (see SHARE 2019). Writing a few years after the Bologna Process’s Global Strategy was implemented, Zgaga (2012: 225) indicated that ‘One of the key dilemmas from the outset has been the potential collision between “the national” and “the European” dimensions of higher education’, especially because ‘European higher education remains organised and financed at a national level’. The same could be said for higher education inter-regionalism in the case of SHARE: as long as activities and efforts to foster inter-regionalism are organised and financed by European partners, the emergence of the ASEAN dimension in this policy cooperation is going to be shaped by the European dimension.

## **5. Some Reflections: Pavel Zgaga in Southeast Asia**

It may be fitting to conclude this tribute to the scholarship of Pavel Zgaga with some personal reflections. During 2016-2019, we were collaborators in the Jean Monnet Network ‘Nexus of European Centres Abroad for Research on the European Higher Education Area’ and had the opportunity to host each other in Ljubljana (October 2017) and Singapore (July 2019). Two

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<sup>3</sup> EU funding regulations excluded students from Brunei and Singapore from receiving scholarships (SHARE 2019: 9).



exchanges stood out in my mind. First, in Ljubljana, Pavel was delighted to tell me about the presentation by a doctoral candidate he supervised on academic freedom in Singapore and Italy (Westa 2017). Second, in Singapore, as he faced a local audience less familiar with European developments, but highly aware of higher education activities in Southeast Asia, Pavel lucidly elaborated ‘European Higher Education Area and the world: 20 years after the signing of the Bologna Declaration’. His presentation described the emergence and evolution of the idea of higher education regionalism in Europe, and how the policy actors ‘muddled through’ both the contentious and ambiguous aspects of these developments. What impressed me was the genuine enthusiasm and sensitivity Pavel expressed in both instances. A lifelong curiosity is the hallmark of a scholar, but awareness of and understanding for different practices and beliefs are the foundations for convincing scholarship. At the end of his visit to Singapore, Pavel told me about his travel plans for the future, Asia included. Several months later, the COVID-19 pandemic would transform the world.

As I write, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a seemingly contradicting transformation of higher education around the world: one characterised by limited physical mobility and frenzied pedagogical and research activities. The awareness of the new coronavirus since Winter 2019 saw governments channelling health security concerns into all policy sectors in attempts to prioritise human lives and safeguard national economies. In the higher education sector, we see governments buffering the long-recognised internationalisation pressures by closing national borders (and keeping them closed for months), suspending cross-border flights, and regulating crowd sizes and movement. For many universities, most traditional internationalisation activities came to a standstill as institutions sought to adhere to new health guidelines (masks, social distancing, classroom bubbles). At the same time, universities scrambled to offer courses online to all students, particularly international students in their home countries or those who were stranded en route to study destinations. The full extent of the pandemic’s impact on higher education activities, particularly higher education regionalism, remains to be seen. The pandemic has, however, generated conversations in Southeast Asia about a longstanding issue in the world of higher education: the value of higher education.

Asia (South, East, Southeast) has long been the home of many international students studying abroad. As students normalise remote learning, questions concerning paying high tuition fees to study abroad are being asked, particularly when its known benefits such as networking and potential access to foreign labour markets are being curtailed or becoming increasingly unclear. For Asian countries that generally send their nationals to study abroad, and universities in Asia seeking to attract foreign faculty to their institutions, the pandemic offers opportunities to re-configure the global higher education landscape through internationalisation. These states may work closely with universities to bring in young foreign academic talents facing hiring freezes elsewhere, or their own citizens working in foreign universities, to join their ranks. In so doing, these countries and universities internationalise their curriculum offerings for domestic students, convincing them to stay at home. Intra- and inter-regional alliances such as SHARE and the many higher education initiatives supported through China’s Belt-and-Road (BRI) provide alternative pathways for these initiatives and internationalisation efforts (Cabanda, Tan, and Chou 2019; van der Wende, Kirby, Liu, and Marginson 2020). As the digital divide grows and becomes more visible, another perspective concerning the value of higher education has also emerged, specifically whether higher education is more valuable for those who have less or no access. These debates point to a set of shared concerns about the purpose of higher education today—topics that would certainly be of interest to a lifelong scholar such as Pavel.



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