

Philippine Higher Education and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS): nexus of issues and challenges in implementation

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Introduction

The Philippine higher education system takes pride being recognized as one of the oldest in the Asian region. With its history dating back to the founding of the royal and pontifical University of Santo Tomas (est. 1611) and the establishment of University of the Philippines by the American colonial government in 1908, the country's university system is Asia's first European model of higher learning. At the turn of the 20th century up until the 1960s, Philippine universities have enjoyed a reputation of academic excellence attended by scholars from all over the region. Southeast Asian neighbors used to send their bureaucrats and technocrats to premiere institutions in the country (i.e. Asian Institute of Management, International Rice Research Institute, the University of the Philippines) for advanced studies and training. However by early 2000s, Philippine higher education institutions (PHEIs) though still highly regarded are already on a steady decline and overtaken by universities in Singapore, Thailand and Malaysia in the league tables. Good reputation is now just part of the over-all measure of quality in higher education. Accreditation, local or international, has taken center stage as the veritable arbiter of quality. Transnational education credits are the new currency for students with the emergence of mobility programs offering varied opportunities for knowledge accumulation and credit recognition.

To a certain extent, Philippine higher education stakeholders were caught of guard with the speed of change sweeping the region's educational landscape. The name of the game is region-wide, inter-university cooperation and harmonization of national and regional qualification frameworks. But the main problem that this paper aims to address is the readiness of Philippine higher education structures, policies, and stakeholders' commitment to engage with this transnational education reform initiatives like the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS). As a country that has a long storied history of accreditation systems at institutional level (Arcelo, 2003), how well is it responding to the requirements of a credit transfer system which is individualized and learner-centered? With a national qualification framework still to be operationalized and no national credit transfer system in the foreseeable future, the Philippines ongoing

participation in the ACTS implementation is entangled in a nexus of issues and challenges as explored in this paper.

To further contextualize the focus of this paper, it is instructive to highlight the state of the Southeast Asian higher education region-building project as discussed in the next section. It is part of the bigger political project on ‘regionalism’ -- a state-led agenda to build up ‘regional coherence’ via the trading of goods and services, and the facilitation of human and non-human mobility (e.g. technologies, information, capital, the factors of production) – a centuries old phenomenon (Olds and Robinson, 2014). This was fully actualized in the immediate post WWII years with the quest for a common or ‘integrated’ market economy as *raison d’être*. This regional cooperation and joint efforts will then trigger the creation of a “common educational space” especially in Europe (and later in Latin America). However, it was not until the Bologna Process (formally launched in 1999), which helped construct the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), that the first substantial incorporation of higher education into regionalism agendas. The Bologna process in Europe is now being recognized as the best example of this regional level of educational system reform as it not only increased student mobility but also strengthened economic integration within the region. The discussion as to whether Asia, or perhaps ASEAN, should fully adopt a similar approach has been ongoing for the past decade but has largely been hampered by the pronounced disparity between systems and expectations, particularly in terms of income demographics, accreditation, and linguistics. For good and for bad it is also the Bologna Process that has helped stir up a series of subsequent ‘echoes’ in other parts of the world regions’ higher education landscape like the ASEAN in this context.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)

Historical accounts trace the beginnings of the vision and initiative of ASEAN regional cooperation to the Philippines, from among Filipino intellectuals and political leaders. The earliest attribution is to the country’s martyr and national hero, Dr Jose Rizal, who dreamt of bringing together the Malay peoples, seen as artificially divided by colonial frontiers. In July 1963, Philippines President Diosdado Macapagal convened a summit meeting in Manila. MAPHILINDO (for Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia) was proposed as a realization of this dream. It was described as a regional association that would approach issues of common concern in the spirit of consensus. However, due to some political issues in the region at that time this organization was not fully realized. Four years after the Manila summit, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN was established on 8 August 1967 in Bangkok by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand -- its five original member countries. Additional five member-states joined in the succeeding decades: Brunei Darussalam joined on 8 January 1984, Vietnam on 28 July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23 July 1997, and Cambodia on 30 April 1999. Timor Leste is currently an observer-member. ASEAN covers a land area of 4.46 million km², and has a population of approximately 600 million people, which is 8.8 percent of the world’s population. Its objective is to

develop an integrated ASEAN Economic Community, which focuses on a single market with free flow of commodities, services, investment, and skilled workforce (ASEAN, 2017).

There are four major areas of cooperation under ASEAN framework: 1. political and security cooperation; 2. economic cooperation; 3. functional cooperation; and 4. development cooperation. In its fifty years, ASEAN initiatives are more focused on the first two (2) areas of cooperation. Education and training are subsumed under the *development cooperation* work under the third pillar, the ASEAN socio-cultural community. It can be said that regional cooperation on this area is still in infancy, particularly in higher education. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, in consonance with the goal set by ASEAN Vision 2020, envisages a Southeast Asia bonded together in partnership as a community of caring societies and founded on a common regional identity (ASEAN, 2009). To wit;

ASEAN shall ensure that its work force shall be prepared for, and benefit from, economic integration by investing more resources for basic and higher education, training, science and technology development, job creation, and social protection.

Among the on-going ASEAN activities of in this area are the following:

- ASEAN Work Programme on Preparing ASEAN Youth for Sustainable Employment and Other Challenges of Globalisation;
- **ASEAN University Network (AUN) promoting collaboration among member universities;**
- ASEAN Students Exchange Programme, Youth Cultural Forum, and the ASEAN Young Speakers Forum;
- The Annual ASEAN Culture Week, ASEAN Youth Camp and ASEAN Quiz;
- ASEAN Media Exchange Programme

Although the AUN was the pioneer platform for regional higher education cooperation, as of this writing, there are three (3) to five (5) similar ongoing initiatives. To date, most efforts toward enhancing higher education regionalization in Asia have been linked to three international organizations, Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization-Regional Institution of Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED) supported by ASEAN, University Mobility in Asia and Pacific (UMAP), and Collective Action for Mobility Program of University Student in Asia (CAMPUS Asia). Their collective aim is the intensification of the integration of higher education systems across the region through student mobility programs. But this all started in 2003 when ASEAN decided to launch several mobility programs in order to strengthen relations and activities among higher education institutions through the establishment of the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the SEAMEO-RIHED (ASEAN University Network (AUN), 2017). SEAMEO-RIHED aims at fostering “the efficiency, effectiveness and harmonisation of

higher education in Southeast Asia through system research, empowerment and the development of mechanisms to facilitate sharing and collaboration in higher education” (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2016, p. 8).

In 2015, ASEAN and the European Union launched the EU Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region (SHARE) programme, which aims to support ASEAN in harmonising regional higher education by sharing European experiences. The EU has entrusted the implementation of SHARE to a consortium composed of British Council, Campus France, EP-Nuffic, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the European University Association (EUA), and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). This is the latest initiative supported by the donor community but this paper is more focused on the forerunner of them all, the AUN, as discussed in the next section.

The ASEAN University Network (AUN)

Composed of twenty six (26) member-universities as of 2018, the AUN was established in November 1995 in response to the 4th ASEAN Summit’s call to deepen regional identity and build human resources through strengthening of the existing network of universities and institutions of higher learning. The Charter and the Memorandum of Agreement on the Establishment of the AUN spells out its role and responsibilities which include the promotion of cooperation among ASEAN scholars, academicians, and scientists in the region; development of academic and professional human resources in the region; and information dissemination among the ASEAN academic community.

Through collaborative activities addressing the aforementioned priorities, the AUN continues to contribute to the deepening awareness of regional identity among the young people of the region. Additionally, AUN works along the ASEAN’s strategic thrusts in the area of human resources development focusing on equipping and re-tooling people with skills to prepare them for the opportunities and challenges of closer economic integration within the region and beyond, as well as in ensuring meaningful participation in the integrated ASEAN Community envisioned by the region’s leaders (AUN, 2008). To wit;

“ASEAN shall ensure that its work force shall be prepared for, and benefit from, economic integration by investing more resources for basic and higher education, training, science and technology development, job creation, and social protection. The development and enhancement of human resources is a key strategy for employment generation, alleviating poverty and socioeconomic disparities, and ensuring economic growth with equity. ASEAN shall continue existing efforts to promote regional mobility and mutual recognition of professional credentials, talents, and skills development.”

Obviously, efforts to “harmonize” the region’s higher education structures and mechanisms are patterned after the European Union’s Bologna process. ASEAN literature (ANU, 2008; SEAMEO-RIHED, 2008) is littered with references to this education reform process. It is now immaterial to debate on the form or modality this has reached the ASEAN shores, the change process has begun and an increasing number of ASEAN member-states’ institutions of higher learning are embracing this new cross-border university partnerships.

Aside from actively engaging the AUN in ASEAN regional collaborative activities, other institutional developments contributing to this process of harmonization was the creation of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) back in 2008. This ASEAN think tank was envisioned to provide intellectual and capacity building support to the realization of the ASEAN Economic Community and East Asia community of the future. Further, it is dubbed as the Asian counterpart of OECD in Paris (which is focused on developed economies) and working on the three pillars of deepening integration, narrowing the development gap and sustainable development in East Asia. The center has its own directorate on education or learning and training that engages AUN and other parallel organizations in education research and development in the region.

Meanwhile, from amongst the academics and university administrators sector, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) pilot project was formally launched by AUN in December 2008 in Jakarta Indonesia. The AUN-ACTS pilot project gave cognizance to the importance of an effective credit transfer system and its quality assurance to facilitate mobility and raise a number of exchange activities at in-country level, between ASEAN universities or beyond the region (Gajaseni, 2008). On top of bilateral agreements between member-state’s higher education institutions, the ACTS initiative was expected to further widen and deepen the ASEAN dynamics of regional cooperation towards a common higher education area, akin to the European model (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2008).

ASEAN CTS (ACTS) and Quality Assurance in ASEAN Higher Education

Credit transfer systems are not alien to ASEAN countries and ANU member-universities. In fact, many ASEAN universities have their own learning credit systems, but generally at the undergraduate level to display students’ workload within universities. But ANU members share a vision towards a regional credit system that will facilitate and promote mobility of students and academic exchange among ASEAN institutions and countries. The ASEAN CTS project is a concrete step towards the realization of this vision. However, AUN’s ACTS pilot project also recognizes the different perceptions and steps taken in the credit systems of ASEAN countries. When AUN-ACTS was launched, Brunei, Thailand and the Philippines, already have their own credit systems (but in varying levels and scope); Malaysia was harmonizing its

credit transfer systems at the national level; while Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were still in the process of setting up their own credit systems. Officially, the ASEAN Credit Transfer System aims to: encourage student and academic mobility at in-country level and within ASEAN; enhance mutual recognition of qualification and stimulate QA among ASEAN universities; and realize the important and the impact of globalization/ internationalization on higher education. To achieve the aforementioned goals, AUN's ACTS was piloted with the following features:

- ACTS will be a student centered system based on student workload in terms of learning outcomes.
- The pilot project will start out with fewer institutions involved.
- Student mobility in the pilot project is within a period of 1-2 semesters.
- The project will be based on notional ACTS Credit Units (ACU) for expression and conversion of national credits, study periods and learning achievement.
- It will not require the modification of existing institutional or national credit system.

But early on, AUN has already identified and anticipated challenges with ACTS implementation which include but not limited to the following; 1.) differences in higher education systems and stages of development in ASEAN countries; 2.) incompatible curricula, subject content, academic programmes in the region; 3. difference in the credit accumulation system; 4.) academic year varies from country to country; 5.) status of quality assurance implementation and system establishment in each university; 6. linguistic issues ; 7. other factors such as; a.) study visa requirements, resident and work permit, social security, health insurance etc., b) lack of interest/ motivation/support for student and staff mobility, c) funding support; and 8. the need for a partnership approach between government and institutions.

The last one is most crucial especially when the actual ACTS is implemented at the national and regional levels. Interestingly, some of these are lingering issues and challenges in the context of the Philippine higher education system. And the core argument of this paper is hinged on the aforementioned, that a Philippine credit transfer and accumulation system must be put in place first before the country's higher learning institutions can fully and successfully participate in the implementation of the ASEAN credit transfer system. Although in Europe, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was implemented at the transnational level before the national credit transfer system was reorganized and ECTS was adopted (especially in the case of Spain). The succeeding sections outline the array of deep-rooted problems, issues and "peculiarities" of the current Philippine higher education system with direct implication to its participation in the ACTS.

It is worth mentioning that the current ACTS initiative is inspired and driven by the project, EU-ASEAN Credit Transfer System (EACTS) in engineering education. The objective of the EACTS project was to

facilitate and promote student mobility across ASEAN and EU in the field of engineering. EACTS distinguished itself from other Credit Transfer Systems by its two-fold specialization: firstly, it focused on the facilitation of student mobility between two specific regions, EU and ASEAN. Secondly, it was piloted specializing on student mobility within engineering education. EACTS was developed by a network of four universities from Germany, Indonesia, Italy and Malaysia and funded under the Asia-Link programme of the European Commission (Ramli, 2008).

Philippine Higher Education System

Governance mechanisms

The trifocalization in 1994 was the institutional expression of the decentralization of management of education subsystems, particularly for Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education. This resulted into the creation of independent governing bodies, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (or TESDA for TVET) and the Commission on Higher Education (or CHED for higher education). Today, the administration and supervision of the Philippine higher education rests on the Commission on Higher Education or CHED as mandated by the Higher Education Act of 1994, while basic education is with the Department of Education or DepED as stipulated in the Basic Education Act of 2001. CHED's predecessor is the Bureau of Higher Education, one of the bureaus under the Department of Education, Culture and Sports (now the Department of Education).

The Commission of Higher Education is directly under the Office of the Philippine President and oversees the 1,943 higher education institutions (as of academic year 2016-2017) in the country. Of these, 233 are categorized as State Universities and Colleges (SUCs), Local Colleges Universities (LCUs); and other government-run school (OGSSs), 1710 are private HEIs. As of AY 2016-2017, there are 3, 589,484 higher education students in these colleges and universities (CHED, 2018). Majority are enrolled in the following top three courses: 1) Business Administration and related courses; 2) Education (teacher training); and 3) Engineering and Technology.

State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) are funded by the national government and are governed by their own charters. There are increasingly rising number of LCUs funded by local government units and oftentimes their policies and programs are heavily influenced by local political families. SUCs charters ensure their autonomy and academic freedom. They are empowered to develop their own curricula, introduce competitive institutional programs, and award their own degrees. CHED ensures that SUCs adhere to the Higher Education Modernization Act (Republic Act 8292), which provides among others, the uniform composition of Governing Boards of SUCs with CHED as the Chairman. However, lately the

unprecedented proliferation of LCUs, cast a shadow on the regulatory functions of CHED and clashes with claims of autonomy by LGUs.

Higher education in the Philippines is strongly under the control of the private sector. Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs) are usually owned and administered by private individuals, groups or organizations. They are classified as sectarian and non-sectarian. Sectarian schools are non-stock, non-profit educational institutions owned and operated by religious orders (Catholic and Christian schools), while non-sectarian refers to those operated by private corporations, which are not affiliated to any religious organizations. Majority of the non-sectarian schools are stock corporations and only a few are non-stock, non-profit corporations, while a number of them are registered as foundations. Private higher education institutions experience some degree of freedom, only when their programs are given CHED recognition and when they have attained accreditation by FAAP. Recognition of academic programs is awarded to PHEIs who complied with the minimum requirements prescribed by CHED.

Quality assurance through accreditation

Quality assurance is yet to gain a strong foothold in the Philippine higher education sector. As of this writing, the Philippine Qualification Framework is more or less still on paper and effective implementation may take a while. Back in 2006, the acceptance of accreditation as an instrument for quality control and enhancement, and its growing and widespread use was hailed as a promising development in higher education. This in spite of the fact that accreditation in the Philippines is in effect since the 1950s. Accreditation has been considered as a way of enhancing the quality of higher education through a system of standards, continuous monitoring and self-assessment. It has taken more time for the public sector to embrace institutional accreditation because state institutions did not readily accept the notion of accreditation as a means of quality control (UNESCO, 2006 p. 146). There are national accreditation schemes which rank local colleges and universities such as the Accrediting Agency for Chartered Colleges and Universities in the Philippines, Inc. (AACUP), National Network of Quality Assurance Agencies, Inc. (NNQAA), and the Association of Local Colleges and Universities Commission on Accreditation, Inc. (ALCUCOA). These are associated with the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APON) and the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education which is based in Dublin, Ireland.

Private schools, on the other hand, are accredited by various bodies which form the Federation of Accrediting Agencies in the Philippines (FAAP). They are the Philippine Association of Schools, Colleges and Universities (PAASCU), The Philippine Association of Colleges and Universities in Accreditation (PACU-COA), Association of Christian Schools, Colleges and Universities- Accrediting Agency (ACSCU). There are four levels of accreditation in the Philippines;

- Level 1- Applicant status. This level is for programs which have undergone a preliminary survey visit and certified by the FAAP as being capable of acquiring an accredited status within two years.
- Level 2- This level is awarded to programs, which have been granted, accredited status by any of the member agencies of the FAAP and whose status the latter certifies.
- Level 3- This level is awarded to programs, which have been granted accredited status and have met additional requirements based on criteria and guidelines set by FAAP.
- Level 4- The highest level of institutional accreditation for those who have distinguished themselves in a broad area of academic disciplines and whose programs are comparable with international standards.

The country's quality assurance (QA) system is classified as non-governmental (SEAMEO RIHED, 2008) based on the Asian classification of QA systems. Most of Philippine universities and colleges are now subscribing to the accreditation process, except for the University of the Philippines, that considers itself self-sufficient and has not submitted to any form of outside accreditation (Gonzalez, 2006).

Credit transfer and accumulation

Technically, the Philippines foray in the transnational credit transfer system started at the turn of the millennium. Through the initiative of the Commission on Higher Education, the Philippines has been a member of the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP) since 2001. The Philippines is one of the 31 member-countries, along with Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, People's Republic of China, Ecuador, Fiji, Guam, Hongkong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Laos, Macau, Malaysia, Mexico, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Russia, Samoa, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, USA, and Vietnam. The UMAP is a voluntary association of government and non-government representatives of the higher education sector in the Asia Pacific region that promotes enhanced cooperation between universities and increased mobility of staff and students (UMAP, 2009). Under the UMAP Exchanges, student-participants enroll in academic courses in their chosen host university for a minimum of one semester and a maximum of two semesters. The host university waived tuition fees for the duration of their study while they earn credits for the courses that they have completed under the program. The UMAP Exchange program was open to both undergraduate and graduate students.

To assure credit transfer, UMAP members and the participating universities have agreed to use the University Credit Transfer Scheme (UCTS). The UCTS has three components:

- UMAP Study Plan – host and home universities agree on subjects/courses that may be taken by the students and their corresponding credits
- UCTS Credit Points Scale – used for conversion of number of credit from host to home

university. This scale is the same as the one used in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS)

- UCTS Grading Scale – used as reference for conversion of grades

To promote the UMAP and facilitate the increase in student and staff exchange, the UMAP Council Inc. Philippines was established. Higher education institutions present during the 2002 orientation were automatically inducted as UMAP Council members. As of 2008, however, only De La Salle University was implementing the UMAP Credit Transfer Scheme in its student exchange program (Adriano, 2008; Santiago, 2008).

1. Within university systems (intra-institutional)

At the moment, there is no credit transfer and accumulation system within the country's university systems, both public (e.g. University of the Philippines (UP) System) and private (e.g. De La Salle University (DLSU) System). Even transferring from one campus to another is "not encouraged." This was an honest admission by DLSU's registrar back in the 2008 conference on the proposed ASEAN credit transfer system (Santiago, 2008). On the same gathering, UP's representative also reported to the body that the Philippines' national university system has no credit transfer and accumulation system among its 7 autonomous universities and UP's Open University. She only referred briefly to UP's conversion scale being implemented by the Office of the University Registrar in its flagship campus in Diliman which serves as guide for exchange students, cross-registrants, transfer students from universities whose grading system is different from that of UP. Inbound exchange students, on their own initiative, apply for accreditation using either the UCTS of the UMAP or the ECTS (European system).

2. Between university systems (inter-institutional)

Since there is no credit transfer system happening within institutions, it is to be expected that this is nil between institutions. Generally, there is no common or comparable guidelines/measures and benchmarks between higher education institutions for their programs and respective credit systems that will ease mobility of students between Philippine universities and colleges. Most of the time, the outcome of the process is based on "good" or "bad" will of the university registrars.

Again, in the 2008 Jakarta conference, the Philippine context (in the DLSU presentation) was correctly portrayed, that in general, *cross enrollment is discouraged*. However, for valid reasons, a student may be permitted to cross-enroll in another school for up to the normal subject load for that particular term (Santiago, 2008). As expected, due to the demography of private higher education institutions, there is a

high degree of institutional autonomy on crediting of courses, sometimes to a fault. Most of the time, the burden of ensuring recognition of credits earned is passed on to the hapless student.

Philippine Higher Education Policies Complementary to the ACTS

Medium-term higher education development and investment plan

The reform in the higher education sector started in 1994 with the creation of an independent Commission of Higher Education (CHED) by virtue of Republic Act 7722. One of the policy instrument borne out of this reform is the formulation of the Medium-Term Higher Education Development and Investment Plan which provides the policy framework and defines the programs that will enable the higher education subsector to fulfill its role in the development of the country's human resource in the context of globalization and the emerging knowledge-based economy. According to the plan, the major initiatives of the higher education sub sector shall be geared towards the attainment of four goals, namely:

1. Quality and Excellence - the provision of undergraduate and graduate education that meets international standards of quality and excellence;
2. Relevance and Responsiveness - generation and diffusion of knowledge in the broad range of disciplines relevant and responsive to the dynamically changing domestic and international environment;
3. **Access and Equity - broadening the access of deserving and qualified Filipinos to higher education opportunities; and**
4. Efficiency and Effectiveness - the optimization of social, institutional, and individual returns from the utilization of higher education resources.

Furthermore, in response to global challenges posed by rapid development in information and communications technology, globalization, and the emerging knowledge-based economy, the higher education system must address the following : a)improving the quality of students entering the higher education system; b) improving the responsiveness of higher education programs to labour market demands and national development needs, particularly for agricultural modernization; **c) improving the access and success in higher education for the deserving poor; d) rationalizing the higher education system; e) improving the policy and regulatory framework for higher education; f) enhancing institutional capability of the HEIs and the Commission on Higher Education**

Executive Order 358 - to institutionalize a ladderized interface between Technical-Vocational Education And Training (TVET) and Higher Education (HE)

This Presidential Executive Order issued in September 15, 2004 highlights the compartmentalization of Technical-Vocational Education and Training (TVET) And Higher Education (HE) as hindrance to the recognition and accreditation of competence in technical-vocational skills higher education and vice-versa. In view of the aforementioned, the President has mandated the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) and the commission on Higher Education (CHED) and to wit:

... in consultation with the concerned sectors and stakeholders shall develop and implement a unified national qualifications framework that establishes equivalency pathways and access ramps for a ladderized system allowing for easier transitions and progressions between TVET and HE.

The Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF) and the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF)

The preceding two macro level reforms are further distilled by the formulation of the Philippines Qualification Framework (PQF). The PQF was developed to establish a coherent national and internationally benchmarked structure for all qualifications awarded in the Philippines. The PQF covers all levels of formal education from the pre-school levels to doctoral degrees and aims to fulfill the following;

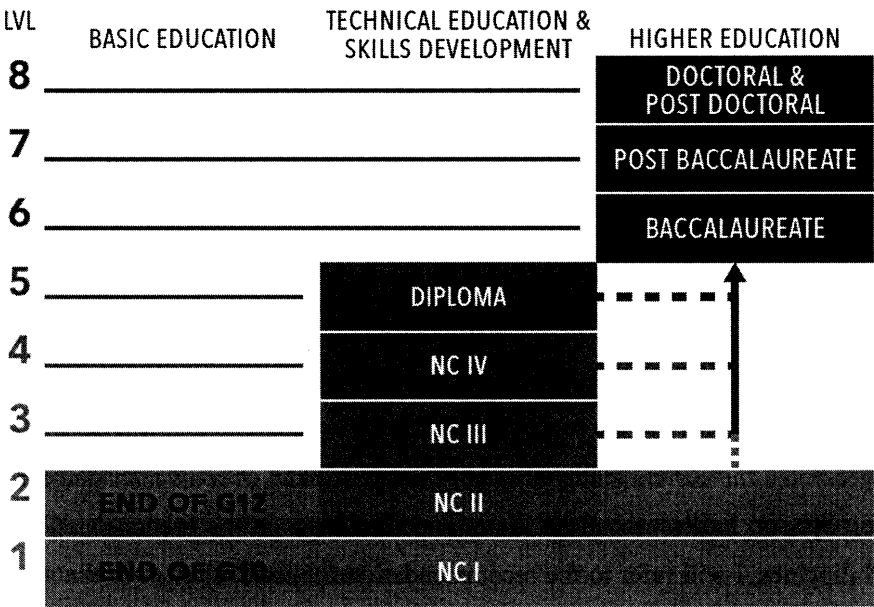
- Unify the three sectors of Philippine education
- Ensure that all qualifications have a purpose and relation to one another that the students and the public will understand
- Improved access to lifelong learning
- Improved quality standards
- More innovation, improved relevance and responsiveness
- Comparability with international benchmarks and international recognition

The PQF has provision for credit transfer and articulates bridging mechanisms for recognition of qualifications earned in basic education, technical vocational education and training and higher education. The diagram below illustrates how the PQF provides flexible pathways, exit and entry points responsive to a person's career and working life. Through the PQF there will be multi-point channels linking school, work-based, vocational and academic qualifications.

In a nutshell, the Philippine Qualifications Framework (PQF) is a national policy that describes the levels of educational qualifications and sets the standards for qualification outcomes. Established through Executive Order No. 83, series of 2012, the PQF has the following objectives: 1) to adopt national standards and levels for outcomes of education; 2) to support the development and maintenance of pathways and equivalencies which provide access to qualifications and assist people to move easily and readily between the different education and training sectors and between these sectors and the labor market;

and 3) to align the PQF with international qualifications framework to support the national and international mobility of workers through increased recognition of the value and comparability of Philippine qualifications. Figure 1 illustrates the eight-level qualifications progression of the PQF.

Figure 1. Philippine Qualifications Framework Progression Chart



Under the PQF, students and learners are expected to gain Level I qualifications at the end of Grade 10 (Junior High School) and Level II qualifications at the end of Grade 12 (Senior High School). The PQF has eight level descriptors, and these level descriptors define each qualification in terms of: knowledge, skills, and values; application; and degree of independence.

Meanwhile, the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (QRF), a common reference framework, functions as a device to enable comparisons of qualifications across participating ASEAN countries while at the same time, support and enhance each country’s national qualifications framework or qualifications systems that are currently at varying levels of development, scope and implementation. The ASEAN QRF addresses education and training sectors and the wider objective of promoting lifelong learning. The framework is based on agreed understandings between member countries and invites voluntary engagement from countries. Therefore it is not regulatory and binding on countries.

The ASEAN QRF aims to be a neutral influence on national qualifications frameworks of participating ASEAN countries. The process for endorsing the ASEAN QRF is by mutual agreement by the participating countries. Countries will be able to determine when they will undertake the processes of referencing their qualification framework, system or qualification types and quality assurance systems against the

framework. The purpose of the ASEAN QRF is to enable comparisons of qualifications across countries that will:

- Support recognition of qualifications
- Facilitate lifelong learning
- Promote and encourage credit transfer and learner mobility
- Promote worker mobility
- Lead to better understood and higher quality qualifications systems.

Currently chaired by the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), the ASEAN QRF will also provide a mechanism to facilitate comparison and transparency of and harmonise regulatory agreements. It will link the participating ASEAN NQFs or qualification systems and become the ASEAN's mechanism for recognition of its qualifications against other regional and international qualifications systems.

Issues and Challenges of ACTS Development and Implementation

The preceding sections have presented the current status of quality assurance and over-all management of the Philippine higher education system. In discussing the issues and challenges in the implementation of ACTS in the context of the Philippines, I will refer to the recommendation for establishment of the ACTS Pilot for a more a grounded discussion.

1. *Respective ASEAN governments should provide a political framework with a clear vision and financial support to the pilot project.*

A well articulated framework is already in place to support ACTS implementation. The aforementioned national policies currently compliments the aims and purpose of ACTS. But perennial problem in the Philippine setting is in implementation (of well-articulated frameworks, policies and or plans). Take for example EO 358 mandating the cooperation of higher and vocational-technical education sectors. Observers may be tempted to conclude that Filipino politicians and education policy-makers have finally found a common ground. However, it is still vulnerable to political interference (and legitimatization) evidenced by the issuance of a presidential edict. EO 358 provisions would have been more legitimate if issued as a joint memorandum between CHED and TESDA and not via executive fiat.

The two (2) government agencies are mandated by law to perform coordinative functions at all levels, from policies to programs and projects. Likewise, academics and education technocrats sit in various committees of CHED and TESDA who would have been most credible to initiate such policy. But as has been the practice in the Philippines, all policy-related matters are subjected to the culture of obeisance - in "deference" towards political power vis-à-vis e.g., academic or scientific rationale. The same is true with the PQF, years after the promulgation of EO 83, it is still on paper and being presented and discussed

conference after conference without concrete operational outcomes. Unfortunately, the PQF mechanism for credit transfer and accumulation as described in paper would have demonstrated by now initial outcomes of ACTS pilot implementation in the Philippines.

2. *Higher Education Ministries and concerned institutions should provide leadership for the establishment of ACTS. Encouragement should be given to the establishment of in-house or in-country workshops to share experiences, perceptions and best practices in respect of credit transfer schemes.*

Going by the documents of Philippine activities in relation to ACTS, this paper concludes that the Commission on Higher Education's participation is yet again at the periphery, just like what happened after bringing Philippine universities to joining UMAP's CTS program (*It literally disappeared after facilitating their "entry" to the organization, hence UCTS implementation in PHEIs went nowhere*). At present, only the two (2) member universities from the Philippines are active in the exploratory activities/conferences for the implementation of AUN's Quality Assurance Framework. This is symptomatic of the nature of CHED's dynamics as discussed earlier. It probably needs another executive order on AUN-QA and ACTS implementation in the Philippines.

Most literature do not directly address the lack of national or central authority exercising regulatory and administrative power over the Philippine higher education subsystem. This is now becoming a serious problem highlighted by the unwarranted proliferation of local colleges and universities, set up by provinces and cities exercising their much vaunted autonomy. In an editorial, the Philippine Daily Inquirer called this the "politicization of education." The editorial decried... *in the guise of widening access to education in both basic and tertiary levels, Congress and local government units have set up SCUs and LCUs all over the country.these institutions have been exploited by public officials as an excuse to raid public coffers; use public works and school-building funds; put their wards, supporters and relatives in the faculty, administration and overall payroll; "advertise" themselves by affixing their names or their kin's on "their" school's name; and perpetuate political dynasties.* This is a scathing public commentary on the lack of command responsibility of the country's higher education ministry over state colleges and universities. The Philippines' seems to be the incarnation of the "soft state" that Gunnar Myrdal (Lankester, 2004) prophesized in 1964 as the likely cause of underdevelopment of Asian countries. The Philippine government obviously has been unable to enforce effectively its policies and laws.

3. *High priority should be given to addressing Quality Assurance issues*

At this juncture, it can be said that quality assurance concerns are just being paid lip service by many Philippine higher education stakeholders. Everything is good on paper, on manuals, but the process or even whole quality assurance systems fail in actual implementation. The attitude most of the time is *procedural compliance*. About the accreditation system in the country, the whole process is very expensive for most organizations (Arcelo, 2003). Moreover, the system has no guarantee of normative standards. Why? Among the ASEAN countries, the Philippines has the most number of accrediting bodies, with four groups, that are highly deregulated and being managed as private organizations. Other ASEAN countries have a central accrediting agency, usually under the tutelage of the ministry of higher education. In 2000, the Presidential Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) recognizing numerous issues haunting the accreditation system in the country proposed the following reforms;

- a) There should be a cooperative re-structuring such that a common set of accreditation standards, criteria and procedures will be adopted for each particular program for all schools. The focus of the accreditation will be programs, not whole schools.
- b) Industry and business professionals, especially in Information Technology and Engineering shall be included in the development and implementation of accreditation standards and programs.
- c) Government, through CHED, shall officially recognize the accreditation process, giving it due subsidy. CHED shall have a more active oversight of the accrediting system and should be the official certifying agency of the programs accredited by the different accrediting agencies.

There are no formal studies yet looking into the actual implementation of the proposed reforms to the country's accreditation system.

4. Attention should be given to the development of national credit, credit transfer and credit accumulation systems in the context of local needs.

As highlighted in the introduction, the University of the Philippines (UP) has been accorded the distinction as the national university. In addition, it is also one of the pioneers in the implementation of UMAP credit and transfer system but did not pursue it to the end. In the newly launched ASEAN University Network Quality Assurance System, UP's representative is elected as one of the Chief Quality Officers (CQOs). The irony is, UP still refuses to submit to any form of local accreditation, for whatever other reasons the university administrators have aside from being "self-sufficient" (Gonzalez, 2006). This line of reasoning is further reinforced in UP's new charter with wide-ranging provisions on financial and administrative autonomy from the state. However, still, as the country's national university, it must lead by example. It is now imperative for UP to develop its own credit transfer and accumulation system, a real one, not just an equivalency table for numerical and alphabetical ratings. Stories still abound of UP students difficulty in transferring from one UP campus to another taking exactly the same academic program. The worst scenario is the same subject not being credited in another UP campus because they are not comparable in

scope and number of hours, etc. Incredulous, yes, but it is still happening in the premiere university of the Philippines as of this writing.

Finally, it would not be meaningful for the Philippines to spend resources on the ACTS initiative if in the end it fails to institute the Philippine credit transfer and accumulation system. The Philippines has an illustrious history of participating (and even leading) international projects and programs on education management, but sadly it can barely manage its own system. It is high time is for higher education stakeholders to be more circumspect in addressing lingering problems ailing the system. The sector cannot afford to cast all the blame to the Commission on Higher Education because it weakens the whole system. This is especially true for local universities and colleges with their self-proclaimed autonomy. Likewise, the vibrant and dynamic private sector must be tapped by CHED to harness its long tradition of self-regulation. But these PHEIs must also fully recognize CHED's authority over them.

Ways Forward

The ASEAN credit transfer and accumulation system, holds great promise in facilitating the creation of common higher education space in the region. This is in line with the strategy of promoting regional integration via small but feasible mechanisms such as the ACTS (SEAMEO-RIHED, 2008). The region's leaders with partners like AUN have already taken great strides in establishing a common framework for higher education cooperation (Yavaprabhas, 2008). Nonetheless, this can be pushed further up the ASEAN agenda, by elevating the dialogue at the ministerial level. If the ASEAN looking up to the European Union as a model, then regional education issues must be discussed at the same level as trade and security issues.

Meanwhile, the Philippine higher education system has been at a crossroad for the longest time, since the early 1990's during the so-called "East Asian" miracle. When its neighbors experienced unprecedented levels of development the country languished at the bottom. The country's educational institutions were scrutinized and tasked to account for its role in the nation's phenomenon of 'underdevelopment.' Institutional studies were conducted, program reviews were implemented, self- assessments were administered, and in the end some tentative answers were found. However to this day the education sector is still searching for answers. Nevertheless, it must continue engaging its ASEAN neighbors to find answers to the development puzzle the Philippines had become.

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Philippine Higher Education and the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS): nexus of issues and challenges in implementation

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The paper analyzes issues and challenges related to the operationalization of the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) in the Philippines in the last decade. Employing policy and documentary analysis, evidence highlight several factors hindering the ACTS to gain a foothold in the Philippine higher education sector. Foremost is the absence of strong state control of the country's education system. The dominance of the private sector and the prevalent *laissez faire* model of education regulation (particularly institutional accreditation) further conflate the weakness of the state. This in turn hinders the formulation of a permeable framework of higher education to facilitate inter-university mobility and recognition of learning credits. The Philippine higher education sector currently lacks readable, comparable and compatible information (hallmark of permeability) on education among different institutions (both public and private). Thus, this paper argues that a national credit transfer and accumulation system must be installed first, before the Philippines can fully participate in the implementation of the ACTS.