

Report of the NACT Working Group on Education Cooperation

Hosted by NACT Singapore

Friday, 9 June 2017

Background

1 NACT Singapore, NACT China and NACT Laos hosted three separate working groups (WGs) on the theme of people-to-people exchange in 2017 as this is a key pillar of ASEAN-China cooperation in addition to the political-security and economic-trade pillars. While the WGs of NACT China and NACT Laos focused on cultural cooperation and tourism cooperation respectively, the WG of NACT Singapore, held in Singapore on 9 June 2017, examined education cooperation among ASEAN and China. The list of participants to this WG is at **Annex**.

Importance of Education and Education Cooperation

2 At the national level, the WG underscored the importance of education in underpinning economic growth and development in ASEAN and China. In many cases, it is the accumulation of human resources, more than capital or material resources that ultimately determines the nature and pace of economic development. Since a country's principal institutional mechanism for developing human resources is its formal educational system (whereby the necessary mindset, skills and knowledge is acquired), education therefore holds the key to growth and development for both developing countries (through industrialisation) and developed countries (by moving up the value chain).

3 With globalisation and rapid technological advances, the WG recognised the importance of having an educational system that continues to stay relevant to ever changing circumstances. Besides the formal education system, there is the proliferation of other complementary avenues such as various online educational platforms that allow individuals greater accessibility, flexibility and affordability to pursue a particular course of study. It is also important to have closer tie-ups between educational institutions and industries in order to raise the quality of human resources and employment prospects. In this regard, technical and vocational education and training are as important as conventional degree programmes.

4 Beyond the contribution of human resources to economic growth and development, the WG noted that education contributes to social unity and social harmony, and shapes national identity by inculcating shared values and beliefs, and a sense of belonging. In addition to producing students who excel academically, there is also a need to inculcate softer skills such as caring for the less fortunate and fostering a sense of community service. Such skills will help to promote a more inclusive and caring society. Towards this end, it is necessary to enlist the help of various stakeholders such as the civil society (including non-governmental organisations) and the private sector to complement the efforts of national governments.

5 Going beyond their respective national experiences, the WG observed that the countries in ASEAN and China were already engaged in education cooperation either at the ASEAN-China level or at the bilateral level involving ASEAN Member States as well as between China and individual ASEAN Member States. At the ASEAN-China level, the WG noted several steps taken to promote education cooperation at the regional level. The adoption of the ASEAN Vision 2025, including the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, at the 27th ASEAN Leaders' Summit held in Kuala Lumpur in November 2015, paved the way for ASEAN Member States to develop the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016-2020. At that same summit, the 18th ASEAN-China Summit Leaders' Meeting was held whereby the leaders unanimously agreed to designate 2016 as the "ASEAN-China Year of Educational Exchange". ASEAN and China have also agreed on the plan of Double 100,000 Goal of Student Mobility by 2020, i.e. for 100,000 ASEAN students to study in China and for 100,000 Chinese students to study in ASEAN countries by 2020.

6 During the Education Ministers' Roundtable Meeting in Guiyang in August 2016, ASEAN and China adopted the Joint Communiqué on the Development of Action Plan for ASEAN-China Education Cooperation in Support of the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016-2020. The communiqué listed the following guidelines in the future drafting of an ASEAN-China Plan of Action on Education: (a) To support the building of cooperation platforms; (b) To promote two-way student mobility and language & cultural exchanges; (c) To strengthen faculty exchanges; (d) To enhance cooperation on vocational education; (e) To encourage talent production through joint programmes and to promote mutual recognition of academic credits and degrees on a voluntary basis; (f) To enhance cooperation in other areas to be mutually agreed upon; and (g) To support the work on the establishment of quality assurance programmes between ASEAN and China. The ASEAN Secretariat is coordinating with China on the necessary steps to develop the ASEAN-China Plan of Action on Education.

7 At the bilateral level involving the ASEAN Member States as well as between China and individual ASEAN Member States, the WG noted that there were several programmes/initiatives in place to promote education cooperation. These included the provision of scholarships for students; community service and immersion trips for students; and, short term training for teachers and school administrators. In addition, the implementation of infrastructure projects in some ASEAN Member States under the Belt and Road Initiative has created opportunities for the recipient states to work closely with China in technical and vocational education so as to train the requisite human resource needed for the infrastructure sector. It was also observed that education cooperation between ASEAN Member States and China predated the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and some ASEAN Member States which began in the 1970s. An example cited was the founding of Xiamen University in Fujian by the prominent overseas Chinese businessmen and philanthropist Tan Kar Kee in 1921. In 2016, several decades later, Xiamen University embarked on its first overseas venture by officially opening a campus in Kuala Lumpur. This is a vivid case of a ground-up initiative in promoting education cooperation apart from the role of national governments. It further underscores the importance of an inclusive approach in enlisting various stakeholders in this joint effort.

8 There was a suggestion that ASEAN and China can actively explore areas where the research capabilities of China and the more developed countries within ASEAN, together with other relevant players, can help the less developed countries in ASEAN. It was pointed out that joint educational programmes such as research exchange or action learning projects among ASEAN and China based institutions can work towards poverty reduction in the developing countries.

Challenges

9 On the one hand, the WG recognised that the different levels of economic development and varied circumstances in each of the Ten Plus One countries have provided a basis for education cooperation to share experience, expertise and best practices. On the other hand, these same factors have led to a number of challenges in promoting education cooperation. One key challenge was the language barrier as students from ASEAN were generally more conversant in English while the language of instruction at educational institutions in China was largely in Mandarin. The additional year required for Mandarin study in China for these ASEAN students was a disincentive. As a result, ASEAN students generally preferred to study in the United States and Europe than in China. Nevertheless, it was pointed out that increasingly more English-language curriculums were provided for students from ASEAN Member States in China. It was highlighted that the Xiamen University campus in Kuala Lumpur conducted its courses in English.

10 Another challenge raised was the propensity for the national governments in some ASEAN countries to focus on the hard and tangible issues like transportation/infrastructure and agriculture development rather than softer issues like education and human resource development and training. Other challenges included the lack of information dissemination on available educational programmes/initiatives, the need to direct educational programmes/initiatives at the right audience in selected ASEAN Member States, and the importance of ensuring that educational programmes/initiatives were accessible to non-Chinese ethnic groups in some ASEAN countries.

Recommendations

11 The WG reiterated the importance of education and education cooperation in underpinning economic growth and development in ASEAN and China. With this focus in mind, the WG made the following recommendations to further promote education cooperation at the Ten Plus One level:

- (a) Create an ASEAN-China University Network (or ACUN) by building on the basis of the existing ASEAN University Network (or AUN).
- (b) Establish an online education information sharing centre to facilitate both academic research as well as vocational education and training among ASEAN and China.

- (c) Build stronger linkages between the Association of the China-ASEAN Education and Training Centres (an association comprising 30 Chinese educational institutions across China that was formed in 2015) with its counterparts in ASEAN.
- (d) Promote exchange of high-school students especially Chinese high-school students for short term attachment programmes in the less developed ASEAN countries as well as for ASEAN high-school students to spend some time in the less developed cities in China.
- (e) Consider putting education cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative as people-to-people connectivity is a key thrust of this initiative.
- (f) Ensure that educational programmes/initiatives provided by China are accessible to non-Chinese ethnic groups in ASEAN.

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Drafted by NACT Singapore in June 2017

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