

# Impact of a consortium-based student mobility programme: The case of AIMS (Asian International Mobility for students)

Impact of a  
student  
mobility  
programme

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper discusses the effectiveness of a consortium-based student mobility programme by investigating the impact of the Asian International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme. AIMS is a regional multilateral large-scale student mobility programme based on a consortium of 10 member countries and 87 member universities with the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO RIHED) as a facilitator. Over 6,000 students have participated in a semester-long intra-regional student exchange under AIMS since 2010.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study employed questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews to investigate the impact of AIMS and its advantages as a consortium-based student mobility programme.

**Findings** – It was found that AIMS significantly impacted member universities by accelerating their internationalisation processes through increasing the number of inbound and outbound students and courses offered in English and so on. AIMS has promoted harmonisation among the members by developing common procedures and guidelines, providing platforms for mutual sharing of experiences and good practices and capacity building of international relations offices. AIMS has also had a significant impact on students by enhancing their regional identity and knowledge about the region of Asia, contributing to their development as future regional and global citizens. As advantages of AIMS, member universities efficiently built a foundation for international collaboration with common procedures and guidelines and shared their experiences through such venues as Annual Review Meetings. Students also feel supported by having clear guidance and find programmes prepared by host universities and SEAMEO RIHED useful.

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**Originality/value** – This study is unique in that it empirically studies the impact of one of Asia's largest student mobility programmes for the first time by analysing large-scale qualitative and quantitative data.

**Keywords** Student mobility, Study abroad, Impact, Consortium, SEAMEO RIHED, Harmonisation of higher education, Internationalisation

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

The number of international students has steadily increased around the world: from 800,000 in 1975 to 2 million in 2000, and then to over 6 million in 2019, tripling in the two decades since 2000. Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary downward trend in the number of physically mobile international students, the number of international students is expected to continue to increase as the pandemic subsides ([Institute of International Education, 2018](#); [UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2022](#)). One of the main reasons behind the increase in the number of international students is that studying abroad is seen as an effective means of acquiring the skills and competencies needed by society and industry as globalisation and a global knowledge economy progress ([Marginson, 2007](#)).

While most student exchanges have been conducted individually or based on an agreement between two universities, student exchanges based on a consortium formed by multiple universities from different countries are becoming more active, particularly within a region. Europe is a pioneer region, having launched the Erasmus programme in the 1980s to promote student mobility within the region. In addition to improving the skills of young people, the programme was also actively promoted as a means of contributing to the harmonisation of higher education systems in the region and the creation of a European Higher Education Area as part of the Bologna Process ([European Union, 2014](#); [European Commission, 2019](#)).

Among other regions in the world, a large-scale intra-regional student mobility programme can also be found in Asia, known as the Asian International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme. AIMS is a consortium-based student mobility programme, in which over 6,000 students participated in a semester-long student exchange ([SEAMEO RIHED, 2020](#)). This is one of the largest-scale student mobility programmes involving many countries in the region of Asia ([Chi Hou \*et al.\*, 2017](#)).

The objective of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness of a consortium-based student mobility programme by investigating the impact of AIMS and proceeds as follows: the next section presents discussions by previous studies on consortia of universities and consortium-based student mobility programmes as well as the originality of this paper. [Section 3](#) presents an overview of the history and development of AIMS. [Section 4](#) then presents the objective and research method, which is followed by findings and discussions in [Section 5](#) and conclusions in [Section 6](#).

## 2. Literature review and originality

Recent years have seen unprecedented increases in international collaboration in education and research. Universities are increasingly working together across national borders to strengthen their competitiveness ([Deardorff, de Wit, Leask, & Charles, 2022](#)). While these international joint activities mainly take place based on bilateral international arrangements between two universities, international collaboration based on a formal consortium of multiple universities has become more active in recent years, particularly at a regional level, as a response to processes of globalisation and regional integration ([Beekens, 2004](#); [Casingena Harper, Curaj, Egron-Polak, & Georghiou, 2015](#); [Knight, 2016](#)).

International consortia of universities here refer to formal, multilateral, institutional arrangements of universities from multiple countries, with coordination by an additional administrative layer, aimed to promote a series of joint activities (Fastner, 2016; Leal, 2019). Membership in a consortium is limited to selected institutions that are allowed by the other partner institutions to enter the consortium (Beerckens, 2018). The size of consortia can vary as some are formed with only a few members and others with hundreds of members. While some international consortia are formed across different regions, they often take place regionally, along with the movement of regionalisation of higher education (Leal, 2019). Activities that universities conduct under consortia are diverse, ranging from faculty exchange and international joint degree programmes to joint research activities. Student mobility is also a popular activity undertaken by various consortia.

Several studies have investigated consortium-based student mobility programmes, particularly the Erasmus programme in Europe, the pioneer of such consortium-based student mobility. Among these studies, several investigate the impacts of the Erasmus programme. They primarily investigate the impact on individual students to find that students enhanced their skills and competencies relevant to the labour market and for a cohesive society, such as tolerance, confidence, and problem-solving skills (for example, Bryla & Domanski, 2014; Jacobone & Moro, 2015). The European Union (2014) and European Commission (2019) further discuss that the Erasmus programme contributed to creating a stronger European identity among students and that the programme promotes the internationalisation of participating member universities. Though our research project investigated the impact of AIMS in these three aspects, this paper focuses our discussion on the latter two aspects, namely the impact on students in terms of enhancing their regional identity and the impact on universities in terms of internationalisation, as AIMS explicitly promotes these aspects as unique objectives of a consortium-based student mobility programme. In addition, the paper discusses the impact of AIMS in terms of promoting the harmonisation among member universities and the advantages of a consortium-based student mobility programme.

Other examples of consortium-based student mobility programmes in Asia include Campus Asia or the Collective Action for Mobility Programme of University Students in Asia, which was established in 2016 and formed by universities from three countries including China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (hereinafter referred to as “Korea”). Campus Asia has put efforts into creating a network among universities, to improve the competitiveness of the universities in the international academic market and to develop future leaders who can succeed in the globalised world. So far, some 6,625 students have participated in exchanges through Campus Asia (Campus Asia Joint Monitoring Agencies, 2019; Yojana Sharma, 2022).

Another large-scale consortium-based student mobility programme active in Asia is the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific (UMAP), which brought together various regions across the world. Over 25 member countries representing Southeast Asia, East Asia, Central Asia, Australia, and North and South America have provided opportunities towards diverse mobility. The consortium was established based on a multilateral agreement that allows institutions to engage in activities without having to sign further agreements (OHEC, 2014; UMAP, 2023). While studies on these consortium-based student mobility programmes have discussed their objectives, activities undertaken and mechanisms as well as their effectiveness descriptively, this paper discusses the impact of AIMS as well as its advantages as a consortium-based programme, using empirical data collected from both quantitative and qualitative surveys and interviews.

### 3. Overview of AIMS

AIMS is a regional, collaborative, multilateral and consortium-based student mobility programme, initiated and supported by member governments to enhance intra-regional

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community building in Asia through the process of higher education harmonisation. Undergraduate students are provided with government-supported scholarships to do their semester-long exchange with credit transfer at another university in a different country in one of the disciplines being offered in the programme. To ensure that student mobility happens at the regional level, the programme unites governments, universities, and students together with the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development or SEAMEO RIHED, as the regional facilitator.

The seeds of the AIMS Programme were sown during the 43rd SEAMEO Council Meeting in 2008 when SEAMEO RIHED's proposal on "A Framework for Regional Integration in Higher Education in Southeast Asia: The Road towards a Common Space" was endorsed. Key to the common space was the launch of regional student mobility with three goals to harmonise the regional higher education system, enhance the internationalisation processes of universities in Southeast Asia and equip students with intercultural competencies and a sense of regional identity and citizenship (SEAMEO RIHED, 2008). Through subsequent policy dialogues of the Southeast Asian Higher Education Senior Officials Meeting (SEA-HiEd SOM), the Malaysia-Indonesia-Thailand (M-I-T) Student Mobility Programme was initiated as a pilot project in 2009 with the vision to expand mobility region-wide. In later years, and with rapidly growing regional and international interest, M-I-T expanded into the AIMS Programme to include additional member countries: Vietnam in 2012, Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines and Japan in 2013, Korea in 2016, Singapore in 2019, and Cambodia in 2023.

To harmonise Southeast Asian higher education, the AIMS Programme began targeting undergraduate student exchanges based on 5 initial disciplines that were identified as strengths of the region, including Agriculture, Food Science and Technology, Hospitality and Tourism, International Business, and Language and Culture. In addition, participating member universities, which are nominated by their respective governments, must meet the following minimum requirements: (1) to use English as a medium of instruction regularly, (2) to be able to facilitate credit transfer for students, and (3) to have an international relations office or system in place to support student mobility. The institutions are also obliged to provide a tuition fee waiver for all incoming students (SEAMEO RIHED, 2019).

Two underlying principles in the AIMS Programme were established to support the programme and the harmonisation process. First, regarding sustainability and self-sufficiency, each member country supports its participation in the AIMS Programme by providing the required financial arrangements and implementation procedures for student mobility as well as participating in and hosting annual AIMS Meetings. Secondly, on reciprocity and balanced mobility, the Programme seeks to encourage a balanced flow of inbound and outbound students to support equal exchange and development in the region of Asia.

To ensure continual dialogue at the regional level for the effectiveness and efficiency of mobility, the mechanism of the Annual Review Meeting was put in place. Coordinated by SEAMEO RIHED, the Annual Review Meeting provides an opportunity for all stakeholders of AIMS, including government representatives, university executives, faculty members, international relations officers, students, and alumni to meet and review the Programme's process, share updates, discuss challenges and obstacles, and reflect on future developments. Government representatives focus more on student mobility policies and funding issues. For member universities, faculty members are grouped by discipline to discuss academic exchange, including credit transfer and course mapping, and the international relations officers meet to network and discuss the internationalisation process and procedures for exchange. The Meeting was initially organised twice annually and later reorganised annually from 2012 onwards.

The AIMS Programme has expanded over the years with more member countries, students and member universities and disciplines. The first batch of students commenced their exchange in 2010 with 117 students across 23 participating universities. When Vietnam joined in 2012, the number of member universities increased to 32 and the programme was renamed the ASEAN International Mobility for Students (AIMS) Programme in the same year. Brunei Darussalam, the Philippines, and Japan joined in 2013 and increased the number of member universities to 61 with over 1,200 alumni in total by 2014. The disciplines have also been expanded to provide for a broader choice of academic specialisations, including Biodiversity, Economics, Engineering, Environmental Science and Management, and Marine Science. The AIMS Programme then expanded to nine member countries when Korea and Singapore joined in 2016 and 2019, respectively, bringing the number of member universities to 78 and over 4,000 alumni in total. The AIMS Programme was renamed the Asian International Mobility for Students Programme (retaining its acronym) towards the end of 2018 to acknowledge the expansion and growth of AIMS and foresee future expansion in the region and beyond. In 2023, Cambodia officially joined the AIMS Programme, expanding the Programme to 10 member countries with 87 participating universities and more than 6,000 students and alumni towards the second decade of the AIMS journey.

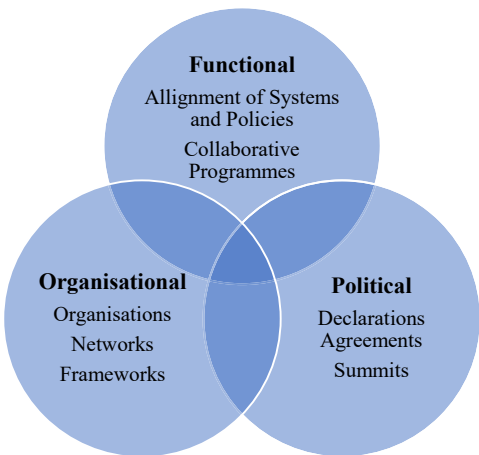
With the expansion of the AIMS Programme, the AIMS Steering Committee, comprising two representatives from each country including a government representative and university representative, was established in 2016 to serve as a think tank and decision-making body that handles technical challenges and provides programme direction as well as policy recommendations. The AIMS Steering Committee meets annually before the AIMS Annual Review Meeting to screen and resolve policy issues (SEAMEO RIHED, 2020). Over the years, these developments in the AIMS Programme have established a system for intra-regional student mobility based on a consortium of 87 member universities from 10 member countries, with SEAMEO RIHED as the regional facilitator.

#### 4. Objective and research method

The objective of this paper is to discuss the effectiveness of a consortium-based student mobility programme by investigating the impact of AIMS as well as its advantages as a consortium-based student mobility programme. To achieve this objective, the following three research questions are proposed:

- RQ1.* What impacts has AIMS brought about on participating universities and participating students, in terms of promoting the internationalisation of universities, harmonising higher education in the region of Asia, and enhancing Asian identity among students?
- RQ2.* What advantages does AIMS have, which are unique to a consortium-based student mobility programme, as opposed to regular student mobility programmes?
- RQ3.* What kind of activities can consortium-based student mobility programmes carry out to maximise these advantages?

[Knight \(2016\)](#) applies the Functional, Organisational, Political Approaches (FOPA) model to the situation of higher education regionalisation in Asia. The first approach to regionalisation in higher education emphasises a functional perspective, categorising initiatives into strategic alignment and practical programmes like student mobility and collaborative education. The second approach focuses on organisational architecture, fostering systematic development through diverse networks and organisations. The third approach involves political will and strategies that prioritise higher education regionalisation on decision-making agendas with instruments such as declarations, conventions, and treaties. [Figure 1](#) is the illustration of the relationship and interaction of the three approaches.



**Figure 1.**  
FOPA model

**Source(s):** Knight (2016)

In this model, AIMS is included as an example of a functional approach to higher education regionalisation. At the same time, Knight points out that it is necessary to carefully analyse outcomes of different regionalisation initiatives to ensure all implications are understood, as an issue for future reflection and research (Knight, 2016, p. 123). The objective of this paper is thus in line with these suggestions by Knight, aiming to analyse and discuss the impact of AIMS with empirical data.

A mixed-method approach was taken to achieve the above research objective. Both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained through two means, namely questionnaire surveys and semi-interviews. The questionnaire survey was conducted from February to April 2023. Three kinds of questionnaire surveys were developed employing a 5-point Likert scale to measure opinions (1) being “not at all” and 5 being “significant”) as well as collecting qualitative responses. The first two surveys were distributed to all member universities, which were 82 universities at the time of the survey. The first survey was directed at top management levels of universities such as vice presidents for internationalisation, asking about the extent to which AIMS has had an impact on the following 6 items related to the internationalisation of member universities: (1) enhancing profile and visibility of your university, (2) concluding new Memoranda of Understanding or Agreement (MOUs/MOAs) with AIMS member universities, (3) increasing the number of inbound students from AIMS member universities, (4) increasing the number of outbound students sent to AIMS member universities, (5) launching new course offered in English, and (6) increasing invitations to engage in international activities, e.g. invitation to be a speaker, editor of a journal, or being featured in news. Of the 82 universities participating in AIMS, 47 universities responded (response rate: 57%).

A second survey was directed at the International Relations Offices (IROs) of member universities (hereafter referred to as “IROs”), which asked about the impact of AIMS on the following 11 items related to enhancing their procedures and building capacity to support further harmonisation among member universities: (1) launching of new International Relations Office, (2) expansion and increase in the number of staff for IRO, (3) strengthening position and authority of IRO in promoting international activities, (4) development/revision of regulations and procedures for inbound students, (5) development/revision of regulations and procedures for outbound students, (6) development/revision of information platform (e.g. website) for inbound students, (7) development/revision of information platform (e.g. website) for outbound students, (8) strengthening the monitoring, benchmarking and evaluation



system on international activities, (9) capacity building of IRO staff to support inbound students, (10) capacity building of IRO staff to support outbound students, (11) capacity building of IRO staff to negotiate and coordinate with other universities. Of the 82 universities, 45 universities responded (response rate: 55%).

Finally, a third survey was distributed to all students who participated in the programme (hereinafter referred to as “students”) asking about the extent to which participation in AIMS had an impact in terms of enhancing their Asian identity and knowledge about the region of Asia through the following 4 items: (1) awareness as a citizen of your own country, (2) awareness as an Asian citizen, (3) knowledge about society, customs and practices of the destination (host) country, and (4) knowledge about society, customs and practices of the region of Asia. Of the 6,000 AIMS students and alumni, 324 responded (response rate: 5.4%). [Table 1](#) shows the number of students who responded by home and host country.

In addition to collecting quantitative data, the questionnaires requested respondents to write specific examples of the impact of AIMS to collect qualitative data. 22 respondents in the questionnaire for top management, 18 respondents in the questionnaire for IROs, and 153 respondents in the questionnaire for students wrote specific examples of the impact of AIMS.

Following the questionnaire survey, individual one-hour semi-structured interviews with member universities and students were conducted between July and September 2023 to collect qualitative data. The team interviewed a total of five members of top management of member universities, nine members of IROs of member universities, and eight students, to learn specific examples of the impact and advantage of consortium-based student exchange programmes, based on their responses to the questionnaire survey.

Both the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire surveys and the interviews were analysed to answer the [first research question](#) while the qualitative data obtained from the questionnaire surveys and the interviews were analysed to answer the [second](#) and [third research questions](#).

## 5. Findings and discussions

### 5.1 Impact of AIMS

#### (1) Impact in terms of promoting the internationalisation of universities

In the questionnaire survey for top management of member universities, they were asked to what degree AIMS has had an impact on the following six items related to the internationalisation of universities:

- (1) Enhancing the profile and visibility of your university
- (2) Concluding new MOUs/MOAs with AIMS member universities
- (3) Increasing the number of inbound students from AIMS member universities
- (4) Increasing the number of outbound students sent to AIMS member universities
- (5) Launching a new course offered in English
- (6) Increasing invitations to engage in international activities.

The proportion of their responses and the mean for each item are shown in [Figure 2](#).

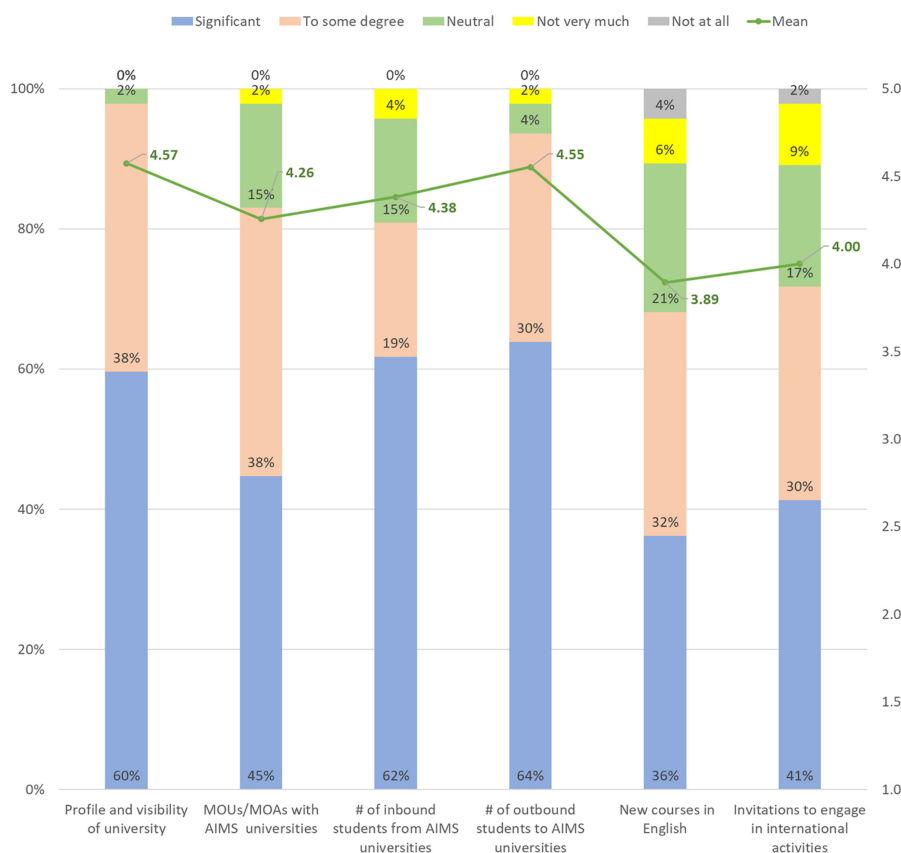
[Figure 2](#) shows that the mean for all items was above 3.5. The mean was above 4 for all items, which was higher than the average of 3.0, except for one item, namely “Launching new courses offered in English”. The largest proportion of respondents (from 36 to 64%) reported the degree of impact of AIMS on all items as significant, indicating that, on average, respondents reported that their participation in AIMS had a significant impact on these items.

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Home country	Host country						Total
	Brunei	Indonesia	Japan	Malaysia	Philippines	Korea	
Brunei	2		2			5	9
Indonesia			17	20	3	16	80
Japan		4		2	9		35
Malaysia		14	16		2	44	90
Philippines		4	2	14		7	46
Korea		3		11	2		20
Thailand		4	12	5	1	10	29
Vietnam				2			13
n.a.				1			2
Total	2	29	49	55	17	82	324

**Source(s):** Authors





## Impact of a student mobility programme

**Figure 2.**  
Responses to  
questions on  
internationalisation  
(*n* = 47)

**Source(s):** Authors

Furthermore, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyse specific examples of the impact of AIMS on these items reported by 22 respondents to the questionnaire and the five interviewees. The results are summarised as follows. By participating in AIMS, each university has established a network with new partner universities in the Asian region. Students used to be more interested in studying in Europe and the U.S. but AIMS offers students more options for study abroad destinations. For example, the Vice President for Internationalisation of a Thai university mentioned, “We could initiate student mobility to partner universities in Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines that we would not have been able to initiate without AIMS” as a specific example of the impact of AIMS. The Associate Dean for International Affairs of a Thai university commented “Students are interested in Europe and the U.S. but they are far and costly. Asia is now one of the first choices”.

The visibility of member universities in Asia has improved as student exchanges and various collaborations have taken place. For example, the Vice President for International Affairs of a university in Brunei Darussalam commented, “We send many students to countries in Asia. Each student is a student Ambassador, and they study abroad wearing the hat of our university. This has greatly enhanced the profile and visibility of our university within Asia”. The Deputy Director of the International Centre of a Malaysian university also commented on this point, saying “Through AIMS, the inbound and outbound programme are

then developed and become a module to some other mobility programme with partner universities. This indirectly enhanced the profile and visibility of my university. Through the AIMS Programme, my university started to have a connection with a Korean university and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to further engagement in mobility and others”.

The internationalisation of member universities has also progressed through the establishment of new English-taught courses and programmes and the acceptance of international students. The Vice Dean of an Indonesian university commented, “We used to offer none of our courses in English, but now we offer six courses in English since joining AIMS”. The Associate Dean for International Affairs at a Thai university commented on increasing invitations to engage in international activities, saying, “We received more collaboration after joining AIMS such as co-research, invitations as speaker, an increase of MoUs and the number of outbound and inbound students” indicating that participation in AIMS led to diverse international activities. The Director of External Affairs of a Filipino university also mentioned, “The membership with the AIMS programme strengthened our university’s goal in internationalisation. Through this, the university aims to be a globally recognised university that accelerates a comprehensive, innovative, and inclusive internationalised learning experience enhanced by meaningful cross-cultural collaborations in many parts of the world”. The Head of the Global Mobility Division of a Malaysian university further mentioned “International students bring with them unique cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. This diversity can enrich the classroom and campus environment, leading to a more inclusive and dynamic learning experience”.

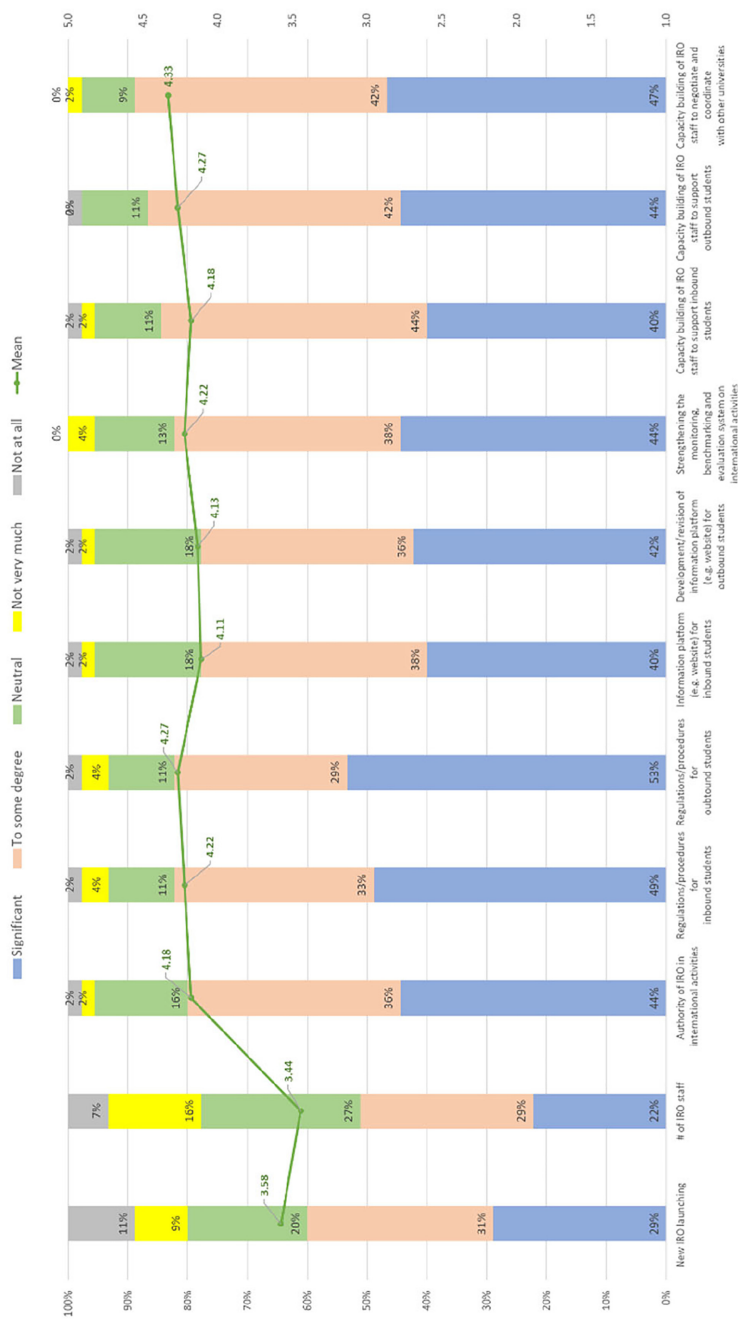
## (2) Impact in terms of harmonising higher education in the region

In the questionnaire survey for the IROs of member universities, IRO representatives were asked to what degree participation in AIMS has had an impact on the following 11 items related to the enhancement of their procedures and capacity building of IROs to support further internationalisation and harmonisation among member universities:

- (1) Launching of new International Relations Office
- (2) Expansion and increase in the number of IRO staff
- (3) Strengthening position and authority of IRO in promoting international activities
- (4) Development/revision of regulations and procedures for inbound students
- (5) Development/revision of regulations and procedures for outbound students
- (6) Development/revision of information platform (e.g. website) for inbound students
- (7) Development/revision of information platform (e.g. website) for outbound students
- (8) Strengthening the monitoring, benchmarking, and evaluation system on international activities
- (9) Capacity building of IRO staff to support inbound students
- (10) Capacity building of IRO staff to support outbound students
- (11) Capacity building of IRO staff to negotiate and coordinate with other universities.

The proportion of their responses and their average for each item are shown in [Figure 3](#).

[Figure 3](#) shows that the mean values for all items were above 3, higher than the average of 3.0. The mean values for all but two items were above 4, and the largest proportion of respondents (from 40% to 53%) reported the degree of impact of AIMS on all items as



Source(s): Authors

Figure 3. Responses to questions on procedures to support further harmonisation (n = 45)

significant except for one item (Launching of new IRO). This indicated that, on average, respondents reported that their participation in AIMS had a significant impact on these items.

Furthermore, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyse specific examples of the impact of AIMS on these items reported by 18 respondents to the questionnaire and nine interviewees. The results are summarised as follows. Member universities have been revising their regulations, procedures, and information platforms to facilitate student exchange, referring to the common guidelines developed for AIMS and those of partner universities. This has promoted mobility and harmonisation among member universities. The Deputy Director of the IRO of a university in Brunei Darussalam stated, "We used to have draft regulations, but the content was not relevant anymore. We revised and updated them on the acceptance of international students from AIMS. In doing so, we considered the items and contents to be included by referring to those of other universities in Korea and Japan". The Director of Internationalisation at a university in the Philippines stated, "There became an enhanced procedure for student mobility participants, both outbound and inbound, including cultural debriefing and post mobility integration for outbound students". The coordinator of a Thai university commented, "Because we had our own Thai academic calendar, which is different from others, we made our regulations flexible. For example, when our students go to Malaysia, we allow students to take exams earlier". The Vice Dean of a university in Indonesia gave another example of harmonisation, saying, "Universities in different countries have different academic calendars. It is not easy to unify these calendars, but we are taking measures such as allowing students to take lectures online if they are unable to take some courses because they arrive late in Indonesia due to a calendar discrepancy".

The IRO staff is also being strengthened through participation in AIMS, by having training opportunities and interactions with other universities and learning from their best practices. The Director of the IRO at a university in Vietnam stated, "Participation in workshops and training courses organised by SEAMEO RIHED has had a great impact on the capacity building of IRO staff. The manager of the IRO at an Indonesian university commented, "Until now, we used to collaborate only with a Korean university, but through AIMS, we are now able to exchange students with many countries. We have learnt how to work with diverse partners who have different work cultures and styles". An IRO staff member from a university in Indonesia said, "We learn a lot from the emails to students that the universities concerned share with us in the cc. For example, Japanese universities communicate with students about details, and we learn about steps for student intakes and how to treat students".

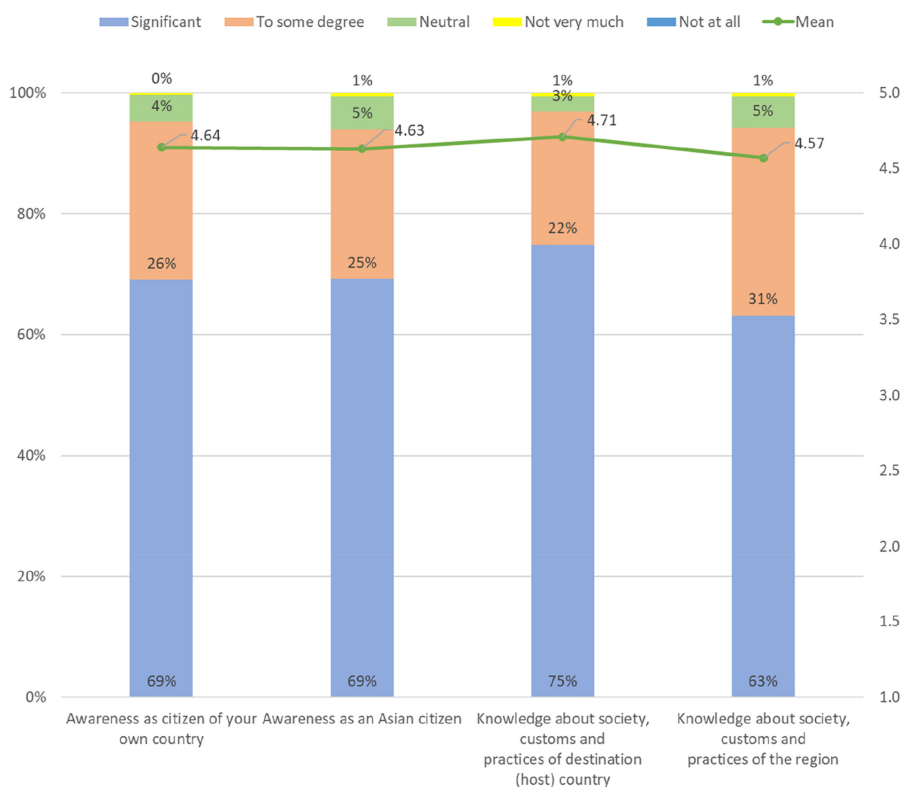
### (3) Impact in terms of community building in the Asian region

In the questionnaire for students, they were asked to what degree participation in AIMS has had an impact on the following four items related to their Asian identity and knowledge about Asia:

- (1) Awareness as a citizen of your own country
- (2) Awareness as an Asian citizen
- (3) Knowledge about society, customs and practices of destination (host) country
- (4) Knowledge about society, customs and practices of the region of Asia

The proportion of their responses and their average for each item are shown in [Figure 4](#).

[Figure 4](#) shows that the mean for all items was above 4, higher than the average of 3.0., and the largest proportion of respondents reported the degree of impact of AIMS on all items as significant, indicating that, on average, respondents (from 63 to 75%) reported that their participation in AIMS had a significant impact on these items.



Impact of a student mobility programme

Source(s): Authors

**Figure 4.** Responses to questions on impacts on Asian community engagement ( $n = 324$ )

Furthermore, a thematic analysis was conducted to analyse specific examples of the impact of AIMS on these items reported by 153 respondents to the questionnaire and the eight interviewees. The results are summarised as follows. Contact with people from different cultures and backgrounds in a foreign country helps students learn not only about their country but also about their own country and enhance their identity as citizens of their own country and as citizens of Asia. While studying abroad, students are often asked many questions and have many opportunities to give presentations about their own country and culture. They realised that they did not know their own country properly, and they learnt much about its culture and history.

An Indonesian student who studied in Korea said, “Meeting many international students gave me an opportunity to know myself and to think deeply about how to present myself and my country well. When other people asked me about Indonesia, I realised that I had taken it for granted and started to think about Indonesian history, batik, and social issues”. A Bruneian student who studied in Korea commented, “As most of my classes had a lot of international students, it made me very aware of my identity as a Bruneian and Asian, considering most of my peers were European. As the classes I took had lots of discussions, I was able to share my experience as a Bruneian (awareness as a citizen of my own country), Asian (awareness as an Asian Citizen) and youth in general (awareness as a global citizen). Similarly, I too learn about the situation in other regions and countries, such as Europe and Korea”. A Malaysian student who studied in Korea commented, “Though separated by

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distance, country borders and language barriers, most of the AIMS students also share almost identical life values and principles taught in their families and also the vision and hope for their countries and ASEAN”.

Several students say that they are ambassadors of their university and their country, indicating their self-awareness is improved by representing their country with a high level of awareness. A student from Indonesia who studied abroad in Thailand commented, “I somehow represent not only myself but also Indonesia, like an ambassador. I was asked many questions by students from other countries, such as why I wear a hijab and what halal is, and I managed to answer them. But I was not satisfied with my answers and decided to learn the history and culture of Indonesia after coming back”. Most cited activities that enhanced the regional identity include presentations about their own culture, engagement with other international students both in the arranged classroom environment and extra-curricular activities as well as representing their country as an “ambassador”.

### *5.2 Advantages of a consortium-based student mobility programme and activities that maximise advantages*

In the questionnaires and interviews, many respondents emphasised the advantages that AIMS has as a consortium-based student mobility programme. A thematic analysis was conducted to analyse statements by five interviewees of university top management, nine interviewees of IROs and eight interviewees among students. The results are summarised as follows. The consortium of member countries and member universities has established a system and platform for student exchange with SEAMEO RIHED as the facilitator, which ensures quality and continuity. Under this system, the consortium has established guidelines as a group, so individual universities do not need to negotiate and agree with each other individually. The Vice President for International Affairs of a university in Brunei Darussalam said, “The advantage of the consortium-based student exchange programme is that all member countries and universities as a whole can discuss and decide on rules for credit transfer and other matters, and all member universities can conduct activities based on these agreements. Normally, we would have to negotiate with each university individually, but we do not have to waste time for that under a consortium”. The Vice Dean of a university in Indonesia also commented on this point, saying, “There is no need to make new rules individually; we just need to follow the guidelines set by AIMS as a whole”. The Deputy Director of the IRO of a university in Brunei Darussalam also stated in this regard, “Platform is there. Procedure is there. SEAMEO RIHED is managing the programme, thus if we have a question, we always have someone to ask”.

Many respondents emphasised the Annual Review Meeting as an activity that promotes the above-mentioned advantage as a consortium-based student mobility programme, serving as a forum for meeting other partner universities face-to-face, deepening relationships, consulting and negotiating with many member universities at once, and learning from each other. The manager of the IRO at a university in Indonesia said, “The annual meeting is useful. At the last year’s meeting, we learnt a lot of success stories from Malaysian universities. We can share what kind of international activities each university is doing both formally and informally”. The International Administrator at a Japanese university commented “The annual international conference, which lasts several days, provides an opportunity for the IROs of AIMS participating universities in each country to meet and exchange ideas with each other. This has had a positive impact not only on staff relations but also on student flow, as it has deepened the relationship with IROs of each partner university and facilitated exchanges in student flow”. The Global Relations Division’s AIMS coordinator of a Thai university commented “The very special and unique feature of the AIMS programme is the AIMS Review Meeting. This meeting allows the IROs to have a chance to go

abroad and meet other IROs from different universities. These opportunities improve not only professional skills but also a connection or networking among IROs.”

Students also pointed out the advantages of AIMS as a consortium-based student mobility programme. One advantage that students commonly pointed out as an advantage is that, as a consortium, there is an agreed-upon process and guidance among member universities, thus procedures proceed relatively smoothly under close coordination between the home and host universities, which provides a sense of security. In addition, they also found programmes prepared by host universities for AIMS students as well as communities and events for AIMS students before, during and after the exchange, including an orientation programme organised by SEAMEO RIHED, as activities to maximise the advantages of AIMS, which would not be available when studying abroad on one’s own. For example, a student from Thailand who studied in Japan said, “The advantage of AIMS is that it has clear guidance and procedures, and close coordination between the home university in Thailand and the host university in Japan, so we can feel safe and assured”. A student from Indonesia who studied in Thailand also commented “AIMS is managed on a consortium basis, and the administration process is smooth because it is tracked and monitored by my department”. A student from Brunei Darussalam who studied in Korea commented, “The programmes for AIMS students, such as a visit to a museum, a cooking class to make traditional sweets and a two-day and one-night trip to Busan, were all provided by the host university, which was a valuable opportunity for me. In addition, there is a faculty member who is the coordinator in charge of AIMS”.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1 *Summary of findings*

The above findings can be summarised as follows: AIMS has had a significant impact on the number of MoUs and MoAs reached, the number of inbound and outbound students and the number of courses offered in English, as well as the number of international activities and opportunities, contributing to the internationalisation of member universities and the enhancement of their profile and visibility in Asia and the world. Although, traditionally, students in the region have preferred to study abroad in Europe and the U.S., the AIMS Programme has provided students with more diverse options within the region.

The impact of AIMS on the internationalisation of member universities has been significant, especially for those universities that had not yet made significant progress in internationalisation and had little international activity before joining AIMS. One university respondent stated, “Through AIMS, the inbound and outbound programme is then developed and becomes a module to some other mobility programme with the partner universities”. From this, we can see that a foundation for international student mobility has been laid through participation in AIMS.

It was also revealed that at the practical level, participation in AIMS had a significant impact on the development and revision of regulations and procedures and information platforms to facilitate student exchange, referring to the common guidelines developed for AIMS and those of partner universities, which promoted harmonisation among member universities. IROs are also being strengthened through participation in training opportunities and interactions with other universities to learn best practices.

AIMS has also had a significant impact on students in terms of enhancing their Asian identity and knowledge about Asia. Through studying in another Asian country, students gain opportunities to know more not only about their destination country but also their own country and the region of Asia.

The advantages of AIMS as a consortium-based student mobility programme were also confirmed. The consortium has established guidelines, and each member university follows



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them to promote student exchange, thereby eliminating the need for each university to negotiate with each other. Mutual sharing of experiences has also been promoted through such venues as Annual Review Meetings. This is especially beneficial for universities that have not had many international student exchanges in the past. It is a difficult task to create rules and regulations from scratch by oneself. Joining the consortium-based AIMS and working with a common set of guidelines with other member universities made it possible to efficiently build a foundation for international collaboration.

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Students also found advantages of AIMS as a consortium-based student mobility programme. With clear guidance and procedures monitored by member universities as well as close coordination between host and home universities, students feel supported. They also found programmes prepared by host universities for AIMS students as well as communities and events for AIMS students before, during and after the exchange, including an orientation programme organised by SEAMEO RIHED, as advantages of AIMS. The findings show that they contributed to enhancing regional identity. AIMS is playing an important role in developing future global citizens.

These advantages would particularly benefit short-term exchange opportunities such as one semester. With support from home and host universities, students are not confronted with unclear procedures. The existing communities and events would help students prepare for the start of their semester at the host university.

AIMS, which was presented as an example of a functional approach to regionalisation in the Functional, Organisational, Political Approaches (FOPA) model, has been contributing to the advancement of the regionalisation in higher education through promoting internationalisation and harmonisation among the member universities and enhancing Asian identity among the students.

### *6.2 Future directions of AIMS and suggestions*

The findings suggest that mutual sharing of experiences and training programmes have been effectively building the capacity of IROs as activities to maximise the advantages of AIMS. It is suggested that SEAMEO RIHED, AIMS member countries and universities continue organising more sharing sessions, capacity-building training activities as well as webinars to promote grounds for discussion and to learn from best practices, which will further promote harmonisation of higher education systems.

More activities could help students further enhance their Asian identity and knowledge about the region of Asia and AIMS recently launched the following three new thrusts: (1) AIMS University Social Responsibility, (2) AIMS Regional Orientation, and (3) AIMS Alumni Network. Each of these thrusts is mandated to (1) engage AIMS students for enhanced understanding of the regional challenges and co-create sustainable solutions, (2) raise awareness of AIMS as a regional and multilateral exchange programme and prepare learners going on the exchange with a sense of regional identity and global citizenship, and (3) remain engaged in AIMS regional community building for sustainable living and learning. All these activities could lead to students' strengthening their Asian identity and knowledge about the region, taking advantage of AIMS being a consortium-based student exchange programme. These AIMS initiatives should continue to be strengthened as AIMS Meetings resumed physically in 2022 and physical student mobility also steadily returned. The new approach and direction of AIMS also support the shared vision for an inclusive space for collective intelligence in higher education for sustainable living and learning in Southeast Asia of a redefined Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education.

Recent challenges have also helped to share the future directions and evolution of AIMS. While the COVID-19 pandemic suspended the physical mobility of students under AIMS in

2020–2022, it also offered the opportunity to innovate the regional mobility programme. The AIMS Steering Committee Meetings held during the pandemic agreed that AIMS should be more resilient, and flexible and continue to enhance learning through various modes of mobility, including hybrid, blended and virtual exchange. The transit had been smoother than expected because the communication platform among member universities was already there under AIMS. Even though now we see the pandemic subside, AIMS may consider various approaches to ensure that more students can get access to internationalisation and to ensure courses and activities offered are also in line with future workforce demands. Consideration should be given to incorporating technology into courses whether through hybrid models, elements of Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) or through the introduction of virtual mobility.

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