

Regionalizing Higher Education in East Asia: the Asia Education Leader Course as a specific but distinctive case

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Following worldwide tendencies, higher education in East Asia has experienced internationalization and, more recently, regionalization. Against the backdrop of the internationalization overviewed in the first part of this paper, the second part reviews the main patterns of regionalization initiatives in East Asia, which seem to be either top-down with political rationale or bottom-up with economic motivation. Viewing the Asia Education Leader Course (AELC) as a specific case of the regionalizing higher education in East Asia but distinctive in its design, the third part connects the programme to the theoretical discussion of higher education regionalization and highlights its design features. The fourth part draws on the data of interviews with AELC students to discuss the programme design from students' viewpoint. The paper at last suggests that we need a more diverse understanding of approaches to regionalizing higher education in East Asia. Keywords: higher education, internationalization, regionalization, East Asia, Asia Education Leader Course

I. Higher education internationalization in East Asia

Riding on the tide of globalization, universities around the world have been observed to devote tremendous efforts to becoming international universities. Yet higher education internationalization is not a uniform process. While policies and strategies are introduced for the internationalization of universities, they are often different and diverse in intention, design and practice. Nevertheless it is possible to identify one basic feature in the process. Wächter et al. (1999) define in the European context that 'internationalization of higher education is understood as the process of *integrating an international dimension* into the teaching and research function of a higher education institution' (p.12, emphasis added). Among European countries, the well-known Erasmus Programme was launched in 1987; and several kinds of educational and vocational programmes have also been collaboratively conducted by higher education institutions across national borders.

The background and approach of higher education internationalization in East Asia are quite different from those in the EU. While it may be true to say that Asian countries have yet established any shared, strong and stable platform for the internationalization in this region, there has been increased support by individual governments for the endeavour. For instance, there have emerged several international programmes led by the Ministry of Education and Science in Japan. One of them is the ‘Global 30’ Project, which is seen as an effort to make Japan an international education hub. The programme provides a range of English-conducted courses to attract international students and develop international human resources. There are currently thirteen universities involved in the programme since 2010. Another main programme is the ‘Top Global University’ Project, whose aim is to drive more Japanese universities up onto the list of top 100 universities in the world. It involves 37 universities since 2014, including the above thirteen ‘Global 30’ universities. Similar government-initiated programmes can be found in other East Asian countries. In Korea, ‘Brain Korea’ was launched in 2011 and is now on its second phase under the name of ‘BK21 PLUS’ (Brain Korea 21 Program for Leading Universities & Students). It can be discussed that East Asian governments generally take a positive and even active role in facilitating the internationalization of the higher education sector, the process of which is often interpreted as producing more top-ranked universities in the world.

II. Higher education regionalization in East Asia

As a ‘notable evolution’ of the internationalization overviewed in the last section, regionalization is observed in higher education development worldwide, including in East Asia, in recent years (Knight 2013: 105). According to Knight (2013), higher education regionalization is the ‘process of building closer collaboration and alignment among higher education actors and systems within a defined area or framework called a region’ (p. 113-4). The East Asian region referred to in this paper covers, following Pempel (2005: 25), both Southeast Asia represented by the ten member states of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Northeast Asia including Japan, China, Taiwan and Korea. There is no East Asian counterpart to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) featuring highly institutionalized regional collaborations from student mobility and quality assurance to credit transfer and mutual recognition; and Chao (2014: 560) observes that the establishment of such counterpart ‘cannot be seen in the near future’. Nonetheless, there have been increased initiatives developed for collaboration

among higher education systems in East Asia, with Southeast Asia putting in ‘most efforts’ (Knight 2013: 107), against the background of Southeast Asian regionalism originally for political but increasingly for economic purposes (Chao 2014). Among the efforts are, notably, the initiatives of ASEAN Higher Education Area (AHEA) and ASEAN International Mobility for Students Programme (AIMS).

Compared with Southeast Asia, the regionalization of higher education in Northeast Asia is less vigorous, with less initiatives and mechanisms to facilitate the process. The most institutionalized higher education programme in place at this sub-regional level so far is the Collective Action for the Mobility Programme of University Students in Asia (CAMPUS ASIA), initiated and involved by the trilateral parties of Japan, China and Korea. Currently focusing on student exchange at the undergraduate level and joint/dual degree programme at the graduate level, CAMPUS ASIA, as Chun (2016) examines, is government-driven, in the sense that it is derived from the political will of the leaders of the three governments to increase mutual understanding and encourage stability in the region, led by the governments from planning to implementation and management, and funded by respective governments. Chun (2016) discusses that this top-down nature is one of the two ways that CAMPUS ASIA differentiates itself from other student exchange programmes autonomously managed at the university level. The other characteristic is discussed to be its trilateral rather than originally bilateral exchange and collaboration between the three higher education systems.

While the CAMPUS ASIA case illustrates the kind of regionalization driven by top-down political rationale, ‘the majority’ of bottom-up cross-border collaborations by individual universities are observed by Chun (2016: 282) to be motivated by economic rationale, which is seen as a result of higher education marketization and the attendant growth of private sector and financial diversification in the domain in East Asia in the 1990s. The differences suggest that there are at least two approaches in sub-regional and regional higher education collaboration in East Asia: the top-down approach with political rationale and the bottom-up approach with economic rationale. This study focuses on the Asia Education Leader Course (AELC), a specific case distinct from the two approaches above in the higher education regionalization in Northeast Asia.

III. Asia Education Leader Course: a regionalization case with distinctive design

Knight (2013) provides two useful analytical tools for understanding regional higher education initiatives: the conceptual mapping of regionalization terms, and the model of

functional, organizational and political approaches (FOPA). First, the mapping produces on a continuum four groups of terms often used in the analysis of higher education regionalization, from the first group of terms including cooperation and collaboration that represents a loose and open relationship at one end to the fourth group of terms such as integration that represents a formalized, institutionalized and comprehensive relationship at the other end. In between there are the second group of terms like coordination and alignment that suggests an organizational relationship and the third group of terms including harmonization and convergence that entails some systemic changes at the institutional and national levels. While Knight (2013) importantly cautions that placing the terms on a continuum does not mean that regionalization would progress along it in reality because different regions might have different goals in regionalization, it is still helpful to consider the continuum as a four-level indicator of the intensity of regionalization in higher education. The second analytical tool is the FOPA model, which clarifies the different focuses of regional initiatives into three – the focus on the functions, the focus on the organizational architecture, and the focus on the decision-making and formalizing process.

The AELC is a cross-border joint education programme launched in 2014. Proposed and coordinated by the Graduate School of Education at Tohoku University, the programme is co-run by six partner institutes in five universities across Japan, Taiwan, China and Korea, which host in rotation AELC summer/winter courses open to graduate students of all partner institutes, with a student quota of five to each partner each time.¹ The AELC has established its education goal (for future education researcher, teacher leader, and education administrator), curriculum framework (known as ‘the rainbow curriculum’, each summer/winter course in 2016-2018 opening three subjects to match the three clusters of knowledge, attitude and skill on the basis of practice), and qualification standard (a joint certificate of completion awarded provided that at least six subjects, no less than two from each cluster, are participated and passed). Also it has built up an administrative procedure to connect partner institutes and cover from student recruitment to student feedback collection (Tanaka et al. 2015). But the contents of the three subjects in each summer/winter course are currently at the discretion of the host institute; and while constructing a common regional identity is often posited as an important part in regionalization initiatives, the AELC remains short of overt expression of promoting Asian citizenship, despite that it does provide important learning resources and opportunities for the development of the regional identity (Chen 2017). It can be discussed that the AELC, if measured by the four-level indicator of regionalization

intensity based on the discussion of Knight (2013), is a joint education programme reaching the second level describable by terms like coordination and alignment, given that it is beyond a loose partnership, yet short of institutional adaptation of it in individual partner institutes. Also, as the AELC is designed with the focus on education practice, it can be seen as an initiative taking the functional other than the organizational or the political approach to higher education regionalization.

The birth of the AELC is different from the aforementioned two approaches to higher education collaboration in East Asia. Unlike the top-down approach of which CAMPUS ASIA is the epitome, the AELC is a programme initiated autonomously by institutes within universities in the region at the bottom; and its tuition exemption policy suggests that it is not motivated by economic purposes, which are observed to be the driving force of many bottom-up cross-border collaborations.

So far we have identified the nature of the AELC with reference to some theoretical measures of higher education regionalization, and highlighted its distinctive bottom-up and non-economic-motivated feature. A further specification of the design (and limits) of the AELC below will show in more detail its distinctions from, as well as similarities with, other cross-border education programmes.

Multilateral partnership. The partnership of six institutes across four education systems in Northeast Asia qualifies the programme as not only a concrete regionalization case, but a programme with perhaps the widest coverage of education systems among existing bottom-up joint education programmes in the region, not to mention in the academic field of education.

Summer/winter courses in rotating venues. The qualification design of the AELC requires students to participate in more than one summer/winter course and, accordingly, to stay, normally two weeks, in more than one university and city. Unlike other short-term programmes which are often one-off, this design gives students chance to reunite and maintain network with peers from different universities by keeping attending the summer/winter courses of the programme.

English as the instruction language. Similar with many cross-border education programmes existing in the region, the AELC is an English-medium programme, although English is not the first language of the instructors or students. There has been internal discussion that the programme should serve as a unique platform, given its designed diverse student composition, for students to learn more about the languages in the region.

Non-degree programme. In its current form the AELC does not lead up to a degree, though it was initially designed as a stepping stone towards a joint degree programme.

Instead, the AELC awards a joint certificate of completion containing the signatures of the leaders of all six partner institutes. Without the restraints of degree qualification, there is currently little quality assurance mechanism in place for the AELC.

This section has specified the key features of the AELC, which is born out of the higher education regionalization in East Asia. How is the AELC with such design reflected in students' perceptions of and experiences in the programme? In the next section we shall address the question.

IV. The AELC in students' perspective

To rule out possible institutional and social factors that might influence student's perception and experience, we focused on AELC students from Graduate School of Education in Tohoku University to examine the programme in the eyes of students. An interview was designed to explore AELC student's motivation behind and experience in the programme in general. We interviewed, in the semi-structured and one-to-one manner in September and October 2016, five Tohoku AELC students who had participated in at least one summer/winter course and were selected because of availability (Table 1).

	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Student year</i>	<i>Academic field</i>	<i>Previous short-term studying abroad experience</i>
A	Female	Master's Year 2	Cultural Anthropology	No
B	Female	Master's Year 1	Clinical Psychology	Yes
C	Female	Master's Year 1	Psychology	No
D	Female	Master's Year 2	Curriculum Studies	No
E	Male	Master's Year 2	Curriculum Studies	Yes

Table 1: Information about the five AELC student interviewees from Tohoku University

There are at least three aspects mentioned and favoured by the students in their narratives of the AELC experience that are relevant to the programme design. The first is the orientation of the programme in the academic field of education. This was pointed out particularly by students who had previous short-term studying abroad experience.

[Those short-term programmes I participated before] were like general education, very shallow [in terms of contents], and lectures on broad subjects taking a big proportion...AELC had more in the field of education and contents that I am personally interested in. (Interviewee B)

The knowledge learnt in it was important. What was more was the network [of peers in the field of education across the region built in the programme]...Also it was good to have the opportunities to visit local education-related institutions which would not be accessible if I was not a participant of the programme. (Interviewee E)

The second aspect is the presence of, and the attendant opportunities to exchange and corporate with, students from across the region in virtually every class. Interestingly, it was the students without previous short-term studying abroad experience who explicitly referred to this feature. This might be because the international or regional learning environment of this programme was fresh for them but less for those already having relevant experience. The third aspect mentioned by the students, regardless of having previous studying broad experience or not, is the use of English as the instruction language. Some students mentioned and embraced the language aspect because there was little chance before to develop their individual academic learning in the English-medium setting. For one student, however, it was the attitude towards using English in the class by person whose first language was not English that inspired and gave her a positive experience.

What impressed me in the class was not the subject content but the instructor, whose English was not very good and required listener great effort to catch his words...He, however, spoke loudly and confidently to try to send out his message...And it was amazing that I could catch what he wanted to say! That's the most important thing I learnt in that class...If you have something to say, isn't it just fine to speak in a loud and confident way [despite of language barrier]? (Interviewee C)

The interview data suggest that the students' positive perceptions of and

experiences in the programme were related to, specifically but not exclusively, its regional class setting with the orientation in the field of education and the use of English as the instruction language. This finding helps identify the strengths of the particular programme, and, furthermore, implies ways to improve students' experience for bottom-up and function-driven cross-border programmes alike in the region and beyond.

V. Implications

This paper outlined the higher education internationalization and regionalization in East Asia and showcased the AELC as a specific but distinctive case of the regionalizing East Asian higher education. It also drew on the data of interviews with AELC students to highlight the relevance of the programme design to student perception of and experience in the programme. As a bottom-up, non-economic-motivated and function-driven programme with multilateral-partnership, the AELC serves as an alternative case to the main patterns of cross-border higher education initiatives in the region. By presenting the distinctive case, the paper suggests that there needs to be a more diverse understanding of approaches to regionalizing higher education in East Asia.

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Note

¹ The six partner institutes are (1) Graduate School of Education, Tohoku University, Japan; (2) College of Education, National Chengchi University, Taiwan; (3) School of Education Science and (4) School of Psychology, Nanjing Normal University, China; (5) Department of Education, Korea University, Korea; and (6) College of Education, National Taiwan Normal University, Taiwan. More information about the AELC is available on its website: <http://www.sed.tohoku.ac.jp/~aelc/>.

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