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INTERNATIONALIZATION INITIATIVE OF SELECTED UNIVERSITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA: BASIS FOR INTERNATIONALIZATION STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

Gloria M. Capanang

Assistant Prof. 4/ Department Chair, Professional Education, BEEd Department,
Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus, Bayambang, Pangasinan, Philippines
gcapanang.bayambang@psu.edu.ph

Gemma D. Escano

Assistant Prof. 4, Professional Education Department,
Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus, Bayambang, Pangasinan, Philippines

Dr. Sally Jarin

Director, International Affairs and External Linkages Office
University of Northern Philippines, Vigan City, Ilocos Sur, Philippines

Corresponding Author

Gloria M. Capanang

Pangasinan State University Bayambang Campus, Pangasinan, Philippines,
gcapanang.bayambang@psu.edu.ph

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ABSTRACT

Internationalization has become a cornerstone of higher education in Southeast Asia, enabling universities to enhance global competitiveness, foster cross-cultural competencies, and align with the Sustainable Development Goals. This study examines the internationalization initiatives of selected universities in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam, analyzing strategies such as student and faculty mobility programs, international partnerships, curriculum internationalization, and virtual exchange initiatives. Employing a qualitative multiple-case study design, data were gathered through document analysis, key informant interviews, and comparative benchmarking against global standards, such as those of the International Association of Universities (IAU). Findings reveal common enablers, including government policies and digital infrastructure, alongside challenges such as funding constraints and geopolitical tensions. These insights form the basis for a proposed Internationalization Strategy Framework that emphasizes adaptive, context-specific models integrating regional ASEAN priorities with universal best practices. The framework offers actionable guidelines for Southeast Asian universities to strengthen their global engagement.

Keywords: *internationalization strategies, Southeast Asian universities, higher education mobility, comparative benchmarking, strategy framework*

INTRODUCTION

In an era where borders blur and knowledge flows freely across continents, Southeast Asian universities stand at a pivotal crossroads. Internationalization—once a buzzword for elite Western institutions—has emerged as an essential strategy for regional higher education, fueling innovation, cultural exchange, and economic vitality. From the Philippines' vibrant student exchange programs to Vietnam's ambitious partnerships with European consortia, universities across the region are boldly stepping onto the global stage. Yet, as ASEAN nations pursue shared goals such as the ASEAN Economic Community and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a pressing need arises: How can these diverse initiatives coalesce into a cohesive framework that amplifies their impact?

This study addresses that imperative by investigating the internationalization efforts of selected universities in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. Drawing on a qualitative lens, we analyze key dimensions including academic mobility, joint research ventures, curriculum globalization, and digital collaborations. Through in-depth case analyses, interviews with university leaders, and policy document reviews, the research identifies enablers, such as supportive government incentives, and challenges, such as infrastructure gaps and geopolitical sensitivities.

Ultimately, these insights culminate in a proposed Internationalization Strategy Framework—a practical, adaptable blueprint designed to guide Southeast Asian institutions toward sustainable global engagement. By bridging regional realities with international best practices, this framework not only equips universities to compete worldwide but also fosters inclusive growth that resonates with local communities. As we delve deeper, this study illuminates a path forward for higher education in one of the world's most dynamic regions.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multiple-case study approach, ideal for exploring complex phenomena in real-world settings (Yin, 2018). By examining internationalization initiatives across five Southeast Asian universities—one from each of the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam—we capture contextual nuances and cross-case patterns. This design facilitates in-depth analysis while enabling comparative insights to inform the proposed Internationalization Strategy Framework.

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling selected universities based on criteria including institutional size (>10,000 students), established internationalization programs (e.g., >5% international student ratio), and regional representation. Key informants included 20-25 participants per case: university administrators (e.g., international office directors), faculty leads in global programs, and recent outbound/inbound students. A total of approximately 100-125 participants ensured data saturation.

Data Collection

Triangulation enhanced the credibility of the study through three methods. First, document analysis was conducted by reviewing 10–15 artifacts per university, including strategic plans, annual reports, memoranda of understanding (MoUs), and program evaluation reports covering the period from 2018 to 2025. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted through 45–60-minute virtual or face-to-face sessions, with participants' consent for recording, using an interview guide that explored the enablers, challenges, and outcomes of internationalization initiatives. Third, comparative benchmarking was performed by assessing the universities' initiatives against the four internationalization strategies proposed by Knight (2004) using a customized rubric that evaluated mobility, partnerships, curriculum, and research.

Data collection spanned six months (January-June 2025) and adhered to ethical protocols approved by the researcher's institutional review board.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) proceeded iteratively: (1) familiarization with transcripts and documents; (2) initial coding using NVivo software; (3) theme generation across cases; (4) cross-case synthesis to identify patterns. Member checking and peer debriefing ensured trustworthiness. Quantitative elements, such as initiative participation rates, were supplemented descriptively.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Informed consent, anonymity, and data security were prioritized, with cultural sensitivity in translations for non-English materials. Limitations include potential self-report bias and a focus on public universities; future studies could incorporate quantitative metrics and include private institutions

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emerging internationalization patterns (2021–2026)

Over the past five years, selected universities in Southeast Asia shifted from isolated overseas student recruitment toward integrated, multidimensional internationalization. Key trends included: (1) expansion of virtual and blended mobility (online exchange, joint webinars, and dual mode courses), (2) growth in regional networks (ASEAN based consortia, bilateral partnerships with European and Belt and Road institutions), and (3) deliberate curriculum changes such as “internationalization at home” modules, global issue based learning, and English medium subject offerings. These patterns were especially visible in larger public universities with established international offices and research intensive profiles, which used the post pandemic recovery period to restructure and formalize their international strategies.

Policy and institutional enablers

Institutions that made the most visible progress tended to combine national policy support (e.g., government-backed scholarship mobility schemes and regional ASEAN initiatives) with clear internal governance: dedicated internationalization committees, cross-faculty working groups,

and performance-based incentives for faculty engagement abroad. Case universities from the Philippines and Thailand, for example, reported stronger participation in internationalization once they embedded mobility targets and collaborative research indicators into tenure and promotion criteria. At the same time, universities with weaker infrastructure (limited IT systems, small international offices, or fragmented leadership) often struggled to move beyond “project driven” or ad hoc partnerships, leading to uneven outcomes.

Challenges across mobility, curriculum, and partnerships

Despite progress, several recurring challenges emerged over the five years. In terms of mobility, students and staff frequently cited financial constraints, visa and insurance complexities, and uneven language proficiency as major barriers, especially in lower income Southeast Asian contexts. On the curriculum front, while many institutions introduced “internationalized” courses, instructors reported difficulties aligning these with local learning outcomes and overcrowded programs, leading to “token” international content rather than deep integration. In partnerships, dependence on short-term funding (e.g., donor-driven projects) made it difficult to sustain collaborations beyond the initial grant period, and some universities experienced “partnership fatigue” due to weak institutional memory and leadership turnover.

Towards an Internationalization Strategy Framework

Taken together, the results point to several key building blocks for an Internationalization Strategy Framework oriented toward Southeast Asia. First, universities need an adaptive governance model that links national policies, institutional leadership, and academic units under a shared internationalization vision. Second, they require inclusive mobility and capacity-building mechanisms that address financial, linguistic, and digital divides, ensuring that internationalization does not benefit only a small elite. Third, a curriculum integration strategy should go beyond adding “global” labels and instead restructure learning outcomes, assessment, and classroom practices to reflect both global and local contexts. Finally, partnerships should be guided by long term co creation principles, with clear indicators for knowledge transfer, mutual benefit, and impact on teaching and research. This framework, grounded in the past five years of practice, can help universities in Southeast Asia move from fragmented initiatives toward coherent, sustainable internationalization that enhances both quality and equity in higher education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The internationalization initiatives of selected universities in Southeast Asia over the past five years reflect a growing commitment to moving beyond isolated student-exchange programs toward more comprehensive, institution-wide strategies. These efforts have led to expanded partnerships, increased virtual and blended mobility, and deliberate attempts to internationalize curricula and research. At the same time, persistent structural and contextual challenges—such as limited funding, uneven language and digital readiness, and short-term project logic—reveal that true internationalization cannot be sustained without strong governance, clear policies, and long-term institutional will. Overall, the findings suggest that Southeast Asian universities are gradually evolving from “being internationalized” to “becoming internationalized.” However, the journey remains uneven and highly dependent on local conditions and leadership support.

Future internationalization efforts should be guided by a clear, context-sensitive Internationalization Strategy Framework that aligns national and regional goals with institutional priorities. Universities are encouraged to strengthen central internationalization units, establish transparent criteria for mobility and partnership agreements, and mainstream internationalization into academic planning, budgeting, and faculty incentives. To level the playing field, leaders should prioritize inclusive programs that support underrepresented students and faculty, integrate language and digital literacy support, and diversify funding sources beyond donor-driven projects. At the policy level, regional bodies and governments should promote benchmarking, knowledge sharing, and cooperative platforms that enable Southeast Asian universities to learn from one another and build a more coherent, sustainable, and equitable internationalization agenda.

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