

30 MAR, 2026

## Talent without borders

The Edge, Malaysia



Page 1 of 5

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**A**cross Southeast Asia, universities are redesigning degrees around employability, industry partnerships and cross-border exposure to meet the demands of a more integrated economy.

“Institutions are becoming more strategic, [with] fewer ceremonial memorandums of understanding [and] more focus on employability, joint programmes, industry-linked projects and selective research collaboration,” says Mandy Mok, CEO of AppliedHE, a Singapore-based higher education company offering tools and hands-on support to universities across Asia.

She adds that this is evident among private universities in Malaysia, especially those with industry-linked programmes.

“Degrees are increasingly co-designed with employers, with industry certifications, internships and applied projects built in, so students graduate with skills and credentials that employers recognise immediately,” she says, adding that programmes are being shaped by job roles rather than academic disciplines in areas like technology, hospitality and applied business.

At the Asia School of Business (ASB), regional exposure is embedded directly into programme design. ASB, established in 2015 by Bank Negara Malaysia in collaboration with MIT Sloan, is a graduate business school in Kuala Lumpur.

According to ASB CEO and president Prof Joseph Cherian, ASB’s global leaders’ executive training programmes are built across Malaysia and at least one other Asean market.

“Global leadership cannot be taught in a single-country context nor classroom. We practice what we preach... Our MBA and EMBA (executive MBA) students are required to do learning excursions into neighbouring countries, because one cannot understand the frictions and the flow of regional business until you are physically standing in the markets you aim to lead,” Cherian says.

Building on that philosophy, he argues that business education in the region should

adopt a “Southeast Asia out” approach.

He observes that for decades, the developed world has produced an abundance of business leaders trained in Western values and managerial frameworks to operate across borders.

“But the centre of gravity in growth, enterprise and capital allocation is shifting decisively towards Asia. As Asian firms, and Asean firms in particular, increasingly expand internationally, we must flip the paradigm ... We need global leaders grounded in Asian leadership principles, best practices and values, not merely as an add-on to Western norms,” he says.

According to Cherian, this means equipping leaders to navigate markets, geopolitics, institutions, networks and policy environments by starting from the realities of Asian systems.

“This is not a rejection of Western thinking, but a correction of imbalance. The world does not need more leaders trained to interpret Asia through Western templates. It needs leaders trained to interpret global complexity through an Asian or Asean lens, confidently, competently and globally,” he says.

### CONNECTING CAMPUSES ACROSS ASEAN

To enable regional movement of talent, however, there must be mutual recognition of qualifications between Asean member states, says Professor Abhimanyu Veerakumarasivam, deputy vice-chancellor and provost of Sunway University.

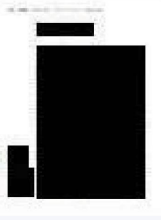
“Without it, regional movement remains limited to short-term encounters. With recognition, mobility becomes structural, enabling graduates to pursue careers, postgraduate studies and professional practice across Asean with confidence,” he explains, further noting that Asean higher education is shifting from parallel national systems towards an emerging regional architecture of collaboration, mobility and shared standards.

Abhimanyu adds that while national systems will and should remain sovereign, impor-



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**Cherian, Asia School of Business**



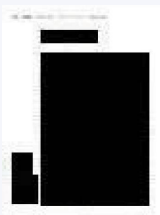
30 MAR, 2026

## Talent without borders

The Edge, Malaysia



Students studying machinery at United Tractors' vocational institution in Jakarta



30 MAR, 2026

## Talent without borders

The Edge, Malaysia



Page 3 of 5



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**Abhimanyu, Sunway University**

tant common building blocks are now in place. These include the Asean Qualifications Reference Framework, the Asean Credit Transfer System, and quality assurance platforms facilitated through the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organisation (SEAMEO) and broader Asean mechanisms.

He says these initiatives are making academic credentials more interoperable across borders while upholding aspirational academic standards.

“The Asean-SEAMEO Joint Declaration on the Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education signals strong political will to move beyond ad hoc bilateral arrangements towards structured regional cooperation,” he says.

According to Abhimanyu, joint and dual degree programmes, student mobility schemes, collaborative research projects and emerging credit recognition arrangements that allow students to study across Asean are producing tangible results for learners and researchers.

“For example, Sunway University and Universitas Indonesia have established 10 joint research projects spanning material sciences, business management and healthcare, fostering meaningful knowledge exchange as well as staff and student mobility,” he says.

Research collaboration is also deepening. For instance, Sunway hosts the Asean Young Scientists Network secretariat and is expanding faculty mobility through joint appointments and co-supervision of post-graduate research.

Abhimanyu adds that sustained regional collaboration in higher education also serves as a soft diplomacy mechanism, reinforcing mutual understanding, dialogue and resilience across borders.

“In this sense, academic networks contribute directly to a more stable and integrated Asean, creating a foundation for talent mobility, innovation and shared problem-solving even in a complex geopolitical environment,” he says.

UCSI University president and vice-chancellor Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir adds that Asean has made notable progress in harmonisation over the years, adding that the Asean Quality Assurance Network, for which UCSI serves as secretariat, has been instrumental in that effort.

She adds that while Asean member states

began with fragmented education systems shaped by British, Dutch, French and US colonial legacies, harmonisation is increasingly being driven by inter-university initiatives, research collaboration and common interests.

“UCSI University partners with Indonesian, Thai, Singaporean, Filipino and Vietnamese universities in the areas of sustainable aviation fuel, biochar carbon capture, microbial fuel cell technology, engineering, computer science, business and medicine, among others,” she says.

Partners include National University of Singapore, Nanyang Technological University, Universitas Indonesia, Universitas Airlangga, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Mahidol University and Chulalongkorn University.

International accreditation further supports labour market mobility, Siti says, adding that Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines are signatories to the Washington Accord that recognises engineering degrees, while Malaysia and Indonesia are signatories to the Seoul Accord for computing and information technology degrees.

“Asean students are asking for regional exposure. They want to experience how international business is done in Malaysia. They want to step up as global citizens,” she says.

### FROM RECOGNITION TO REPUTATION

Despite the momentum, deeper interoperability across Asean remains uneven.

“We’re seeing real progress, but it’s uneven. Integration is happening in specific hubs and corridors rather than across the whole system, so it still feels more concentrated than collective,” says AppliedHE’s Mok.

She identifies Malaysia, Thailand and increasingly Vietnam as moving the fastest. “The common factors are clear government internationalisation policies, stronger quality assurance, and institutions willing to benchmark themselves openly.”

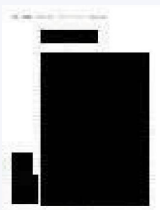
The biggest constraints, Mok notes, are inconsistent quality standards, regulatory complexity and lack of institutional transparency. “Many universities simply don’t have reliable data on outcomes, which makes trust and recognition difficult ... Without solid evidence of how graduates actually perform, recognition still relies more on reputation than policy.”

In practice, Mok says, mutual recognition



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**Siti, UCSI University**



30 MAR, 2026

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of qualifications remains largely aspirational outside select well-established pathways and professional fields.

“The frameworks are there, but implementation is slow and uneven, so recognition still tends to depend more on reputation than policy,” Mok says.

Professional bodies add another layer of friction, particularly where academic recognition does not automatically translate into the right to practice, she adds.

Sunway’s Abhimanyu also notes that professional pathways remain regulated nationally and that credit recognition processes outside formal networks can be slow and uneven.

Administrative requirements such as visas and compliance also differ across countries, limiting scalability and predictability for institutions and students.

“While some express concern that Asean mobility might displace national jobs, evidence shows the opposite. Mobility strengthens rather than replaces local talent pools,” says Abhimanyu.

“Mutual recognition, credit frameworks and professional pathways are designed to complement, not compete with, national talent development,” he says, adding that structured regional movement encourages knowledge transfer, skills enhancement and collaborative innovation.

ASB’s Cherian contends that turning regional ambition into measurable outcomes requires discipline, follow-through, well-trained leaders and the institutional capacity to deliver.

He adds that while Asean-trained leaders must be deeply conversant with the region, their true strength lies in combining world-class management discipline with on-the-ground understanding of local and regional realities.

“Too often, after the Asean rhetoric and customary handshakes conclude, implementation becomes the harder act to follow. Our challenge at ASB is to ensure our graduates are the ones who bridge that gap between the handshake and the result,” Cherian says.

UCSI, meanwhile, sees a strong case for universities across Asean to come together and offer a shared university platform.

“This will pave the way for game-changing initiatives like 2+1+1 Asean professional

degrees, where the third year is spent at a partner Asean university and the fourth is an industry-integrated year at an Asean regional employer,” says Siti.

“It’s important to provide cross-border opportunities across Asean and Malaysia has stepped up with the provision of the EMGS (Education Malaysia Global Services) graduate pass that allows students to work for up to a year.”

### MAKING THE WORK PLAN COUNT

For the Asean Work Plan on Education — a regional education cooperation road map — to bring about real change, commitments must be specific and measurable at the country level.

“Broad regional goals sound good, but they don’t move behaviour. Once countries attach numbers and timelines to their ambitions, accountability becomes real,” Mok says.

She adds that while Asean’s consensus culture makes public scrutiny uncomfortable, the absence of regular, visible reporting on progress makes commitments easy to ignore.

“Universities engage when there’s a payoff, for example through funding, recognition and access to partnerships, not when participation feels like extra compliance work. The work plan needs carrots, not just rules ...The plan needs early wins. Long timelines sap momentum,” she says, adding that pilots such as credit transfer schemes, shared internships and joint credentials that deliver visible results within a year or two can help build confidence and political support for deeper integration.

For Sunway, three areas of consistency are essential as Asean develops its next regional work plan: shared quality assurance principles, interoperable credit and qualification frameworks, and regulatory predictability.

According to Abhimanyu, the focus areas established in Asean Work Plan 2021-2025, that include quality assurance, credit transfer, mobility and lifelong learning remain relevant.

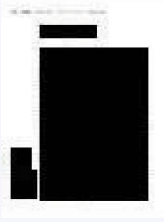
“Consistency does not require uniformity. Asean’s strength lies in diversity, but coherence enables meaningful collaboration,” he says.

Abhimanyu adds that Malaysia exemplifies how national systems can remain sovereign while being regionally interoperable, allowing universities like Sunway to operate effectively at Asean scale. ● *By Jennifer Gomez*



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30 MAR, 2026

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The Edge, Malaysia



Page 5 of 5

### SUMMARIES

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