



Building a Shared ASEAN Identity: The ASEAN University Network (AUN) and its role in Advancing Regional Integration

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Article History:

Received: March 11, 2026

Revised: April 21, 2026

Accepted: May 14, 2026

Published: July 15, 2026

Keywords:

ASEAN Identity, ASEAN University Network (AUN), ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), Higher Education Networks, Regional Integration.

Abstract

ASEAN has achieved remarkable success in uniting one of the world's most diverse regions into a relatively stable, peaceful, and economically dynamic regional bloc. In 2015, ASEAN established the ASEAN Community based on three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Within this framework, ASEAN seeks to build a resilient, innovative, dynamic, and people-centered community founded on regional solidarity and cooperation. As part of the ASCC, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) represents one of ASEAN's most significant people-centered initiatives, promoting collaboration among universities, students, and academic staff across the region. This study argues that AUN contributes to ASEAN identity-building by creating spaces for social interaction and shared experiences through educational cooperation, quality assurance mechanisms, and short-term mobility initiatives such as AUN Summer Camps, youth forums, and thematic network activities. These initiatives facilitate people-to-people engagement, strengthen mutual understanding among ASEAN citizens, and contribute to regional integration in Southeast Asia. However, the effectiveness and inclusiveness of AUN remain constrained by structural funding limitations within ASEAN, which in turn undermine the network's institutional capacity. Without stronger political commitment and reforms to ASEAN's funding mechanism, the long-term goal of fostering a deeply rooted ASEAN identity will remain difficult to achieve..

INTRODUCTION

Since its establishment, ASEAN has sought to foster regional integration among its member states. To cultivate a shared identity, ASEAN must construct shared values that can unite its members. ASEAN has undergone three phases in the process of constructing such values to support regional integration. The first phase involved the development of shared political values among ASEAN leaders. This was primarily achieved through sustained interaction and engagement among political leaders during the Cold War, amid the major powers' struggle for influence in the region. After consolidating its political objectives, ASEAN moved into the second phase, characterized by shared trade and economic benefits aimed at improving the economic prosperity of its people. This process began with the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) in 1992 as a response to the need for greater economic integration in the region. ASEAN recognized that economic growth is essential to maintaining regional stability. ASEAN has now entered its third phase following the adoption of the Bali Concord II in 2003, which laid the foundation for the establishment of the ASEAN Community in 2015 (ASEAN, 2020). This community is built upon three pillars: the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). This vision was further strengthened in 2005 through ASEAN members' commitment to adopt the official motto, "One Vision, One Identity, One Community." The ongoing process of deepening regional integration has since been reinforced through ASEAN Community Vision 2025, followed by ASEAN Vision 2045: Our Shared Values, which was officially declared in Malaysia in May 2025.

To understand how the public perceives ASEAN, the Poll on ASEAN Awareness (PoAA) conducted by ASEAN in the fourth quarter of 2018 may provide useful insight. Although the survey was conducted several years ago, it remains relevant for understanding broader patterns of public awareness toward ASEAN. The survey divided respondents into three categories: business, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the general public. Notably, awareness of ASEAN reached 100 percent in both the business and CSO categories, and 96 percent among the general public. However, despite this high level of awareness, fewer than one-third of respondents had adequate knowledge of the ASEAN Community and its pillars (22 percent, 38 percent, and 23 percent, respectively) (ASEAN, 2019). Therefore, a significant gap remains between awareness of ASEAN and a substantive understanding of its institutions and objectives. This is precisely the gap that initiatives such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN) seek to address. Without the involvement of grassroots society, especially students and youth, the vision of a people-centered ASEAN Community will remain difficult to achieve.

This paper seeks to examine the ASEAN University Network (AUN) as one of ASEAN's prominent initiatives that promotes regional integration under the framework

of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). Since its establishment in 1995, AUN has contributed to regional integration by engaging students in higher education across member states, thereby advancing solidarity and cooperation among institutions. Such collaboration has the potential to strengthen ASEAN awareness, particularly among the youth. Guided by constructivist theory, this study examines how ASEAN identity has been socially constructed through ongoing interaction, collaboration, and cooperation among member states and their citizens.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing desk research as its primary method of data collection. The study draws upon both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include official ASEAN documents, such as the ASEAN Charter (2007), the Agreement on the Establishment of the ASEAN University Network (1995), the AUN Charter (2022), and the Narrative of ASEAN Identity (2020). Secondary sources consist of scholarly articles, survey reports, academic journals, and books authored by experts and researchers in the fields of ASEAN studies, regional integration, and identity formation.

For data analysis, this study adopts qualitative content analysis combined with an interpretative approach to identify key themes related to regional identity, social interaction, and institutional mechanisms within ASEAN. Drawing upon a constructivist perspective, the study examines how interactions and shared experiences facilitated by the ASEAN University Network (AUN) contribute to the construction of ASEAN identity. Through this analytical framework, the study seeks to explain the role of AUN in fostering ASEAN identity within the broader framework of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. ASEAN in Brief

ASEAN has been relatively successful in bringing together one of the world's most diverse regions, often perceived as vulnerable to fragmentation because of its differences, into a relatively stable, peaceful, and economically dynamic bloc. According to Jeffery Sng and Kishore Mahbubani (2017), at least five factors enabled ASEAN to sustain its peace ecosystem. The first factor was the fear of communism, which initially united the ASEAN founding fathers in agreeing to establish the association. Interestingly, fear was one of the early forces that brought them together. The second factor was the role of strong leaders. ASEAN was fortunate to have influential leaders during the 1980s, a pivotal period in its history. Key figures included President Soeharto of Indonesia, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore, and Prime Minister Siddhi Savetsila of Thailand. Notably, President Soeharto's behind-the-scenes approach allowed other members to manage their relations

more independently. Indonesia's maturity in refraining from dominating ASEAN played a crucial role in fostering a genuine and organic sense of community. The third factor was geopolitical luck. ASEAN benefited from being on the winning side of the Cold War. The Sino-Soviet split also played a significant role in ASEAN's favor.

Had that split not occurred, ASEAN might have been influenced by communist regimes if the Soviet Union had prevailed. The replacement of a doctrinaire Mao Zedong with the more pragmatic Deng Xiaoping shifted China's approach toward ASEAN, initiating large-scale cooperation and fostering a positive relationship between China and ASEAN over the following decades. The fourth factor was market-oriented economic policies. ASEAN's founding members integrated themselves into the rapidly expanding East Asian economic system, benefiting from and contributing to the growth of global trade. As a result, ASEAN member states experienced significant economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s. The fifth factor was the development of ASEAN-based regional networks. ASEAN has made a significant contribution to fostering collaborative efforts across the Asia-Pacific region. The tradition of inviting dialogue partners to the Annual Ministerial Meeting (AMM), followed by the Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC), has strengthened the sense of community among ASEAN member states. This practice not only enhanced intra-ASEAN cohesion but also facilitated the emergence of various regional processes and institutions grounded in a shared ethos of cooperation.

On the other hand, constant interaction and socialization have fostered trust among ASEAN member states, which in turn has shaped shared norms governing member behavior toward one another. These norms gradually contributed to a common understanding of "appropriate behavior" within ASEAN, commonly referred to as the ASEAN Way. This approach emphasizes deliberation (*musyawarah*), consensus (*mufakat*), non-interference, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. Much of this trust was built during ASEAN's formative years, particularly when the organization successfully managed regional challenges, including the Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Myanmar conflicts (Acharya, 2001). Although the ASEAN Way has been criticized by some as a weakness that hampers ASEAN's development (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025), its proponents, such as Kishore Mahbubani and Amitav Acharya, regard it as a suitable framework for the region, given its historical and cultural roots.

The process of ASEAN Community formation began more than two decades ago with the adoption of ASEAN Vision 2020 in 1997, followed by the Bali Concord II in 2003, which formally articulated ASEAN's commitment to establishing the ASEAN Community for the first time. Subsequently, at the 27th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, ASEAN officially declared the establishment of the ASEAN Community on 31 December 2015, founded upon three pillars: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) (ASEAN, 2015). As discussed earlier, ASEAN has undergone three phases in constructing the values that underpin the

formation of the ASEAN Community. Interaction and socialization among member states, particularly during ASEAN's formative years, played a crucial role in fostering trust and a sense of community within the region (Acharya, 2001). This period represented the first phase, characterized by the development of shared political values among ASEAN's founding members.

After consolidating its political objectives, ASEAN entered a second phase centered on shared economic and trade benefits. Economic cooperation became increasingly important for sustaining regional growth and stability. Following the adoption of the Bali Concord II, ASEAN embarked upon a third phase aimed at creating a more people oriented community through the promotion of shared social and cultural values. Together, these three phases laid the normative foundation for the three pillars of the ASEAN Community (ASEAN, 2020). One of the factors that encouraged the formation of the ASEAN Community was ASEAN's limited effectiveness in addressing several major regional challenges, including the South China Sea dispute, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, and transboundary haze pollution caused by forest fires. In response to these challenges, member states increasingly sought regional solutions within the framework of the ASEAN Community. Through this approach, ASEAN aimed to strengthen the coherence, resilience, and dynamism of regional cooperation in pursuit of its community-building objectives. Furthermore, member states expected ASEAN to develop more effective mechanisms for addressing both traditional and non-traditional security challenges in line with its vision of a more integrated regional community (Durmaz, 2023).

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is one of the three pillars of the ASEAN Community and places particular emphasis on the people-oriented and people-centered dimensions of regional integration. The ASCC seeks to foster a shared sense of community and a common ASEAN identity through cooperation in the social, cultural, educational, youth, health, and social protection sectors. Consequently, it is the pillar most directly associated with the construction of ASEAN identity, as it promotes social interaction, people-to-people engagement, and cross-cultural learning at the societal level (ASEAN, 2018).

For ASEAN to remain relevant and sustainable in the long term, it is essential to gradually shift the sense of ownership of the organization from governments to the people. When ASEAN citizens develop a stronger sense of ownership and belonging toward the regional organization, they are more likely to encourage their governments to pay greater attention to ASEAN-related issues, thereby contributing to deeper regional integration (Sng & Mahbubani, 2017). In this regard, the development of the ASCC has increasingly focused on cultivating a shared ASEAN identity as a foundation for strengthening regional solidarity and community-building. Former President Fidel Ramos of the Philippines stated: *"The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is at once the easiest and the most difficult for the ASEAN leaders to organize. The lesson of the European Union teaches us that elite arrangements – made over the heads of ordinary*

people – have limited effectiveness. There is no way an “ASEAN Community” can be built without engaging the interests of ordinary ASEAN peoples” (Ramos, 2017, as cited in Cuyvers et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, many scholars (Benny et.al, 2015; Sng & Mahbubani, 2017; Kliem, 2018; Lee, 2018; Lin, 2023) argue that ASEAN remains largely elite-driven, and this elite-based structure limits its overall effectiveness. Therefore, ASEAN needs to shift its approach toward a more people-oriented model of regionalism. Although public perceptions of whether “ASEAN is elitist and disconnected from ordinary people?” show some improvement in the *State of Southeast Asia 2025 Survey* (ISEAS, 2025), fundamental structural problems remain unresolved. ASEAN must pay greater attention on public needs by continuously incorporating feedback from its citizens into its policymaking processes. For instance, the most recent public poll conducted by ASEAN officials was in 2018, indicating a lack of systematic engagement in public opinion. In contrast, the European Union conducts surveys on a biannual basis, enabling it to respond more effectively to citizens’ concerns. ASEAN also needs to invest more seriously in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which serves as the foundation for fostering the sense of ASEAN Identity.

Interactions among people in shared activities, as well as the specific characteristics of those interactions, play an important role in strengthening a sense of community. Within the principle of shared emotional connection, “the contact hypothesis” suggests that increased interaction among individuals enhances the likelihood of social closeness. Similarly, the principle of “the quality of interaction” emphasizes that more positive experiences and relationships result in stronger communal bonds (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In this context, ASEAN, through the ASCC framework, may facilitate interactions among its citizens through cultural and educational exchanges, which in turn can strengthen a shared sense of community among the peoples of ASEAN.

An illustrative example of educational initiatives that foster a sense of community is the “Teaching ASEAN” program developed by Dian Azmawati from Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and Linda Quayle from the University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus. Through this initiative, students from both institutions were encouraged to interact and communicate with one another via Skype. Such cross-border interactions motivated students to learn more about ASEAN, including its cultural diversity and political background (Azmawati & Quaylee, 2017). These educational exchanges demonstrate how direct people-to-people interaction can cultivate a sense of community by introducing and reinforcing ASEAN identity among students.

When initiatives like these demonstrate positive results in fostering interaction and mutual understanding among students, they illustrate the broader potential of regional educational cooperation. Within this framework, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) serves as an important institutional platform for expanding,

coordinating, and sustaining such initiatives at the regional level, thereby strengthening their impact on cultivating a sense of the ASEAN Community.

2. ASEAN Identity: Concept, Construction, and Awareness

To understand how a region as prone to fragmentation as Southeast Asia has been able to build a shared collective identity and avoid major wars among its member states -perhaps with the Cambodia-Thailand border dispute as the most notable exception-, Alexander Wendt's concept of collective identity provides a crucial analytical lens. Wendt argues that collective identity emerges when states begin to view the interests of others as part of their own, a process shaped through continuous interactions and cooperative practices that gradually transform mutual perceptions (Wendt, 1994). While conflict can undermine collective identity, Wendt also emphasizes that the presence of a common threat can actually facilitate its formation. In the context of ASEAN, the organization was, in a sense, "unified" by a shared fear of communism during the Cold War, which served as a common external threat (Sng & Mahbubani, 2017). Regular interaction and cooperation during ASEAN's formative years contributed to the development of mutual trust and solidarity among member states (Acharya, 2001). Notably, this dynamic was further strengthened by ASEAN's willingness to accommodate Vietnam following post-Vietnam War tensions, signalling a commitment to regional solidarity rather than isolation. As Wendt notes, institutions and processes are codetermined: *"It is through reciprocal interaction, in other words, that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests"* (Wendt, 1992).

In *"The Evolution and Limitations of ASEAN Identity"* (2017), Acharya argues that continual interactions between governments and societies in the region socially and politically shape Southeast Asian identity, which serves as the foundation for ASEAN identity as a regional organization. He highlights the distinction between Southeast Asian and ASEAN identities. While ASEAN identity is largely artificial, political, and elite-driven, Southeast Asian identity is more historical and social. Thus, ASEAN identity reflects, but doesn't completely coincide with, Southeast Asian identity. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities, Acharya similarly conceptualizes the region as that of the nation, as a collectively imagined entity. In this sense, Southeast Asia as a region has been shaped by colonial experiences, the work of historians and academics, and the role of ASEAN's political elites.

In fact, ASEAN is not based on a culturally or historically homogenous identity, in contrast to the European Union. Given the significant ethnic, linguistic, and cultural variety among its member states, Southeast Asia's regional identity is a relatively new concept. In this regard, ASEAN has been instrumental in creating and preserving a common regional identity that aims to represent modern Southeast Asia rather than a pre-existing cultural identity. This understanding also explains why ASEAN has historically been reluctant to accept proposals for membership from nations that are thought to be "inadequately representative of Southeast Asia," including Australia,

India, and Sri Lanka (Rattanasevce, 2023). From this angle, ASEAN aims to include every nation in Southeast Asia, both physically and culturally. With the admission of Timor-Leste in 2025, this objective has been completed institutionally.

According to Acharya (2017), there are five major sources of ASEAN identity: nationalism, religion, cultural norms and modes of interaction, development state orientation, and regionalism. Nationalism in Southeast Asia emerged mainly from anti-colonial struggles and independence movements, which created a strong sense of sovereignty among ASEAN states. Nationalism in Southeast Asia is not destructive, but rather complementary to ASEAN regionalism. Religious diversity in ASEAN is high, yet it rarely leads to interstate conflict and more often affects domestic politics. Cultural norms such as communitarian values and respect for authority have shaped governance and development paths in the region, often resulting in a tendency towards state-led capitalism, dominant party-political systems, military rule, and other forms of ‘illiberal democracy’. Although the idea of “Asian values” emphasizes society over the individual, it is not uniformly shared across ASEAN due to the region’s diversity. Another key source of ASEAN identity is its developmental-state orientation, whereby regional cooperation prioritizes stability and economic growth, enabling ASEAN to bridge ideological and political differences among its members. Finally, Southeast Asia regionalism, shaped by ASEAN, plays a crucial role in regional integration, primarily by establishing the ASEAN Community with its three pillars. This is what makes ASEAN, despite its myriad differences, have a greater sense of regionalism than its neighboring regions such as South Asia and Northeast Asia.

The Narrative of ASEAN Identity, adopted at the 37th ASEAN Summit on 12 November 2020, constitutes one of ASEAN’s most important official documents for understanding the meaning and direction of ASEAN identity. The document defines ASEAN identity as “*a process of social construction shaped by a balanced combination of constructed values and inherited values, which together strengthen the ASEAN Community*”. Through this narrative, ASEAN commits to building a community that is united, inclusive, sustainable, highly integrated and cohesive, competitive, innovative, and dynamic. Guided by the motto “One Vision, One Identity, One Community,” ASEAN seeks to realize a rules-based, people-centered, and people-oriented regional community (ASEAN, 2020).

As Sng and Mahbubani (2017) argue, governments may change, but the people remain. Therefore, ownership of ASEAN must gradually shift from political elites to its citizens. This perspective is reflected in ASEAN’s identity narrative, which adopts a bottom-up and inclusive approach that seeks to engage ASEAN peoples, particularly at the grassroots level. ASEAN identity is presented as a journey toward a common regional goal, built on shared values, ambition, and vision among ASEAN members. In order to make it meaningful, ASEAN stresses the importance of making its people feel a sense of belonging to the association. This means that ASEAN citizens should be able to see and feel the benefits of ASEAN in their daily lives. To evaluate the development

of ASEAN identity, ASEAN uses three indicators. *ASEAN Awareness* refers to how far people recognize themselves as part of ASEAN. *ASEAN Relevance* looks at whether people understand how ASEAN matters to them and benefits their lives. Meanwhile, *ASEAN Appreciation* reflects how much people value being part of ASEAN, as well as how ASEAN is recognized by external actors as a united and central regional community (ASEAN, 2020).

A poll on ASEAN Awareness conducted by ASEAN in 2018 -the most recent publicly accessible survey on the topic- provides an important snapshot of how far ASEAN citizens feel a sense of belonging to ASEAN, as well as their level of knowledge and perceived benefits from the organization. The survey covered three groups of respondents, consisting of businesses, NGOs, and the general public. While almost all respondents reported being aware of ASEAN (100%, 100%, and 96% respectively), their general knowledge about ASEAN remains relatively low. More notably, when asked about their understanding of the ASEAN Community, less than one-third of respondents on average reported having adequate information about it, while the majority admitted having little to no knowledge. This finding is concerning, especially considering that *The Narrative of ASEAN Identity* emphasizes that a strong sense of ASEAN identity is essential for strengthening the ASEAN Community. In this regard, ASEAN identity among its citizens remains far from fully realized. Although the survey was conducted in 2018, and some changes may have occurred since then, its findings remain relevant. At the same time, this also highlights the importance of ASEAN to conduct such surveys more regularly in order to identify existing gaps and address them effectively.

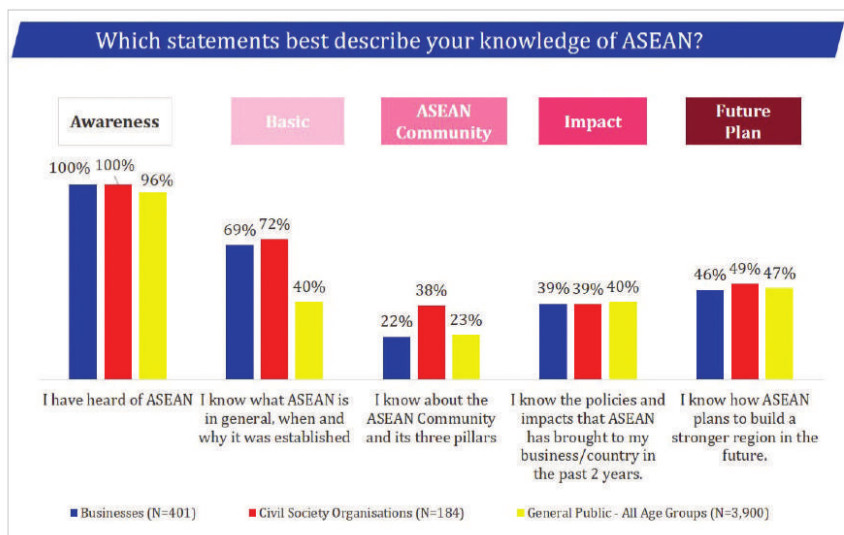


Figure 1. Level of awareness and knowledge of ASEAN PoAA 2018)

Source : <https://asean.org>

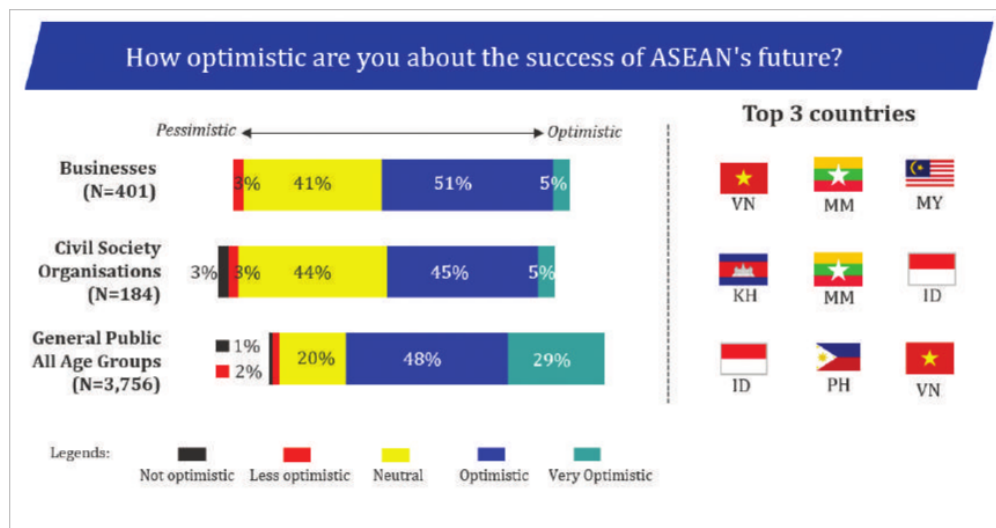


Figure 2. Level of optimism about the success of ASEAN's future (PoAA 2018)

Source : <https://asean.org>

Despite these limitations, public perception of ASEAN appeared generally positive. Most respondents expressed optimism about ASEAN's future (60%, 50%, and 77% respectively). This number is even higher than public perceptions of the European Union conducted in the same year, where 58% of respondents were optimistic, while 37% expressed pessimism about the EU's future (EU, 2018). Moreover, a similar survey conducted in 2024 shows a less favorable result with only 55% of respondents expressing optimism, while 42% were pessimistic (EU, 2024).

At the same time, respondents raised several critical points. Many argued that ASEAN should reduce hierarchical communication patterns and establish more direct engagement with its stakeholders. ASEAN should also increase the frequency of promoting its agenda, especially through social media such as Facebook and Instagram, rather than relying primarily on its official website. In line with this, ASEAN should consider creating more engaging content and collaborating with social media influencers to broaden its reach. Above all, the lack of consistent follow-up from ASEAN was viewed as a key weakness, contributing to the relatively low levels of awareness and public interest in ASEAN initiatives (ASEAN, 2019).

All in all, such dynamics suggest that ASEAN identity remains an ongoing process. Though ASEAN has successfully articulated a formal and normative vision for a shared identity, its social foundations remain quite uneven throughout the societies of Southeast Asia. Against this background, Acharya (2017) insisted that a critical challenge for policymakers and civil society is to achieve congruence between Southeast Asia Identity and ASEAN Identity. This would be necessary through policies not only

aimed at sustaining unity and neutrality in ASEAN's great power rivalry but also positive efforts toward the expansion of the ASEAN social base through interest participation by its people and civil society. Without such congruence, ASEAN identity risks remaining an elite-driven construct rather than a lived regional consciousness.

3. The ASEAN University Network (AUN)

ASEAN's commitment to higher education cooperation can be traced back to the Fourth ASEAN Summit in 1992, which emphasized the need to "hasten the development of a regional identity and solidarity, and promote human resource development by considering ways to strengthen the existing network of leading universities and institutions of higher learning in the ASEAN region." In response to this commitment, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) was established through the signing of the Agreement on the Establishment of the ASEAN University Network in 1995. Since then, AUN has served as ASEAN's principal platform for promoting cooperation among higher education institutions across the region.

The legal foundation for the operation of AUN is provided by the AUN Charter, which was first adopted and entered into force before being replaced by an updated version in 2022. The Charter outlines the organization's institutional framework, governance structure, funding arrangements, and membership composition. It also defines the objectives and functions of AUN in supporting regional cooperation in higher education and contributing to the broader goals of ASEAN community-building (ASEAN University Network [AUN], 2022).

The foundation of AUN is aligned with the aims and purposes of ASEAN stated in the Bangkok Declaration of 1967, namely "*To promote active collaboration and mutual assistance on matters of common interest in the economic, social, cultural, technical, scientific and administrative fields*" (3); "*To provide assistance to each other in the form of training and research facilities in the educational, professional, technical and administrative spheres*" (4); "*To promote South-East Asian studies*" (6); and "*To maintain close and beneficial cooperation with existing international and regional organizations with similar aims and purposes, and explore all avenues for even closer cooperation among themselves*" (7) (ASEAN, 1967). The ASEAN Charter also emphasized that ASEAN aims "*To develop human resources through closer cooperation in education and life-long learning, and in science and technology, for the empowerment of the peoples of ASEAN and for the strengthening of the ASEAN Community*" (10); "*To promote a people-oriented ASEAN in which all sectors of society are encouraged to participate in, and benefit from, the process of ASEAN integration and community building*" (13); and "*To promote an ASEAN identity through the fostering of greater awareness of the diverse culture and heritage of the region*" (14) (ASEAN, 2008).

Brunei	Universiti Brunei Darussalam
Cambodia	Royal University of Law and Economics Royal University of Phnom Penh
Indonesia	Institut Teknologi Bandung Universitas Airlangga Universitas Gadjah Mada Universitas Indonesia
Laos	National University of Laos
Malaysia	Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia Universiti Malaya Universiti Putra Malaysia Universiti Sains Malaysia Universiti Utara Malaysia
Myanmar	University of Mandalay University of Yangon Yangon University of Economics
Philippines	Ateneo De Manila University De La Salle University University of the Philippines
Singapore	Nanyang Technological University National University of Singapore Singapore Management University
Thailand	Burapha University Chiang Mai University Chulalongkorn University Mahidol University Prince of Songkla University
Vietnam	Can Tho University Vietnam National University, Hanoi Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City

Figure 3. AUN Core Member Universities (as of April 2026)

Source : <https://www.aunsec.org/discover-aun/membership>

Within the framework of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), AUN serves as a platform for policy dialogue in ASEAN higher education by strengthening cooperation among universities in the region and promoting collaboration and solidarity among scholars, academicians, and researchers across member states. For its administrative and operational functions, AUN is supported by an organizational structure consisting of the Board of Trustees, Member Universities, Thematic Network, and a Secretariat. The AUN Board of Trustees plays a central role in reviewing and

approving the AUN strategic plan and budget, ensuring alignment with ASEAN priorities, overseeing AUN Thematic Networks, reviewing and accepting new members, supervising financial accountability, and appointing the Executive Director and approving the Terms of Reference (ToR) of the Deputy Executive Directors and their appointments.

Initially, AUN Member Universities consisted of 11 founding members from six ASEAN Member States. Over the years, this number increased through the admission of 19 new members from 10 ASEAN Member States. AUN Members' Presidents/Rectors/Vice Chancellors play a central role in setting policies for the operation of the network, formulating the strategic plan of the AUN Secretariat, approving programs and budgets, and evaluating the AUN's activities and performance. These responsibilities are exercised through the AUN Rectors' Meeting, which is convened at least once annually (AUN, 2022). Alongside the 30 core member universities of the AUN, there is also the ASEAN+3 University Network (ASEAN+3 UNet), established in November 2012, which serves as a sister network to the AUN. The ASEAN+3 UNet comprises 21 "Plus Three" universities, aiming to foster collaboration and solidarity among higher education institutions in ASEAN, China, Japan, and Korea. Inter-university cooperation facilitated by AUN extends beyond its core member institutions and the ASEAN+3 University Network through the operation of 19 AUN Thematic Networks. These networks allow universities outside these core groups to participate as associate or affiliate universities. Currently, 237 associate members are participating in various AUN Thematic Networks as reported in the AUN Annual Report 2024-2025 (AUN, 2025).

According to the AUN Charter, funding of AUN activities is based on a cost-sharing basis from AUN member universities and financial support from external funds, which usually come from its dialogue partners, such as China, Japan, and the EU. Funding limitations have constrained the inclusiveness of the AUN membership universities, as not all universities can bear the financial responsibilities of being a host university of AUN activities. This constraint was acknowledged by the then Deputy Executive Director of AUN, Dr. Choltis Dirathiti (as cited in Ratih, 2016). As a result, resource mobilization has become a crucial component in the implementation of AUN programmes, carried out through cooperation with member universities, ASEAN bodies, member state governments, and external donors such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Union (EU).

The dependence on external fundings for one of its people-to-people flagship programme reflects a deeper structural problem in ASEAN institutionalization. The root of this problem lies in the ASEAN's funding mechanism which states that its Secretariat operational budgets is derived from equal annual contributions from all member states (ASEAN, 2008). It is difficult to imagine the country with a large GDP as Indonesia (USD 1,4 Trillion) and Singapore (USD 574 Billion), contribute the same amount as Laos (USD 16 Billion) and Timor Leste (USD 2 Billion). This "equal pay" principle

actually originated when ASEAN was first established, based on the idea that all member states were equal. However, with the expansion of membership and the widening economic disparities among member states, it is difficult to say that this system remains relevant (Sng & Mahbubani, 2017). It can therefore be argued that this structural finding problem within ASEAN institutionalization, negatively effects on AUN's finding mechanism, forcing it to rely more heavily on external partners.

In Figure 4. below, it can be seen that the current AUN member universities only represent a small percentage of the whole higher education institutions (HEI) across ASEAN member states. This disparity highlights the limited representativeness of AUN membership in relation to the broader higher education landscape in ASEAN. To address these structural and financial constraints, AUN institutionalizes inter-university cooperation through the AUN Thematic Networks. This scheme focuses on academic collaboration based on specific thematic and disciplinary areas, thereby enabling regional cooperation to be conducted more efficiently and effectively.

AUN Thematic Networks operate based on two main indicators: the membership model and the management model. The membership model consists of inclusive, semi-exclusive, and exclusive arrangements, which determine the level of access granted to AUN member and non-member universities within each network. On the other hand, the management model indicates the degree of centralization in programme administrations, including funding, implementation, and evaluation, between the AUN Secretariat and the host university (Ratih, 2016).

The ASEAN University Network-Quality Assurance (AUN-QA) Thematic Network was the first and remains the core thematic network established by AUN. It was launched in 1998 to promote quality assurance in higher education institutions (HEIs) across ASEAN. AUN-QA has generated notable impacts on the higher education ecosystem in the region.

Name of Country	Total of HEI	Public HEI	Non-Public HEI	AUN Core Member Universities	Affiliate Universities	Total of AUN Core Member and Affiliate Universities	Sources
Brunei	6 to 19 (no official data found)	4	2 to 9 (no official data found)	1	3	4	Ministry of Education of Brunei, ASEM, AUN Website
Cambodia	195	79	115	2	9	11	Ministry of Education of Cambodia, AUN Website
Indonesia	4416	125	4291 (consisting of vocational, religious and private colleges)	4	55	59	Higher Education Database of Indonesia (PD Dikti), AUN Website
Lao DR	117 (no official data found)	57 (with 5 universities) (no official data found)	60 (no official data found)	1	0	1	Head Foundation, AUN Website
Malaysia	394	20	374	5	26	31	Ministry of Education of Malaysia, AUN Website
Myanmar	210 (no official data found)	no data	no data	3	11	14	Myanmareducation.info, AUN Website
Singapore	34 to 84 (no official data found)	6	28 to 78 (no official data found)	3	1	4	TopUniversities.com, UniPage.com, Ministry of Education of Singapore, AUN Website
Thailand	154	84 (consisting of Autonomous, Public, Rajabhat, and Rajamangala Universities)	70	5	20	25	Ministry of Higher Education of Thailand, AUN Website
.The Philippines	1977 (as per 2024)	263 (consisting of 113 state and 137 local universities and colleges, and 13 Other Government Schools (OGS))	1714	3	85	88	Presidential Communication Office of the Philippines, AUN Website
Vietnam	243 (as per 2023)	176 (as per 2023)	67 (as per 2023)	3	71	74	National Statistics Office of Vietnam, AUN Website

Figure 1. The Estimated Number of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) in 10 ASEAN Countries (cited from various sources, accessed on 16 December 2025)

Pham and Nguyen (2024), in their study on the impact of AUN-QA on Vietnamese higher education institutions, find that external quality assurance agencies, particularly AUN-QA, to some extent, have contributed to a shift in institutional design toward more outcomes-based education (OBE). This shift places greater emphasis on the student learning process and graduate outcomes, rather than on input-based approaches that focus primarily on student and staff inputs. Notably, the AUN-QA assessment is voluntary rather than compulsory, which, in turn, supports the development of internal quality assurance systems and encourages continuous improvement within participating institutions.

Beyond quality assurance, AUN has also contributed to enhancing student mobility within ASEAN. Soejatminah (2018), in the Indonesian context, highlights AUN's role in facilitating student mobility through the ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) mechanism, which operates under the AUN-ACTS Thematic Network. ACTS enables academic credits earned in one ASEAN country to be recognized by higher education institutions in another, thereby supporting cross-border academic exchange within the region. In addition, AUN-QA serves as a source of legitimacy for universities seeking to upgrade their quality assurance systems to meet regional standards. However, the high costs of obtaining and maintaining AUN-QA certification may pose challenges, particularly for smaller or less-resourced universities, which can limit broader participation in AUN-led collaboration schemes.

The AUN-ACTS system is administered by the AUN-ACTS Secretariat, which has been hosted by Universitas Indonesia since 2010. Through this thematic network, AUN facilitates student mobility and exchange programmes for periods ranging from one to a maximum of two academic semesters, as well as shorter study periods, such as a summer semester (Universitas Indonesia, n.d.). Despite its potential, the inclusiveness of the AUN-ACTS programme remains limited, as participation is restricted mainly to AUN core member universities and members of the ASEAN+3 University Network (AUN, 2025).

AUN also contributes to regional collaboration across various fields, including sustainable agriculture and food security. Regional academic networks can facilitate the exchange of knowledge, best practices, and innovative solutions, thereby broadening understanding of agroecology (AE) and sustainable agri-food systems (SA), as well as increasing young people's interest in these fields (Nelles, 2023). This is particularly important, considering that many ASEAN economies continue to rely heavily on the agricultural sector. In early 2025, AUN officially launched a new thematic network, the ASEAN University Network-Agriculture and Food Security (AUN-AFS), which aims to address food security challenges sustainably amidst the climate crisis. Universiti Putra Malaya serves as the host university for this thematic network (AUN, n.d.).

To date, thousands of students have benefited from AUN initiatives, and this number is expected to continue increasing in the coming years. Participation mainly takes place through short-term and flexible programmes such as AUN Summer Camps. Youth camps, AUN Internships, Academic Symposia, and workshops, which bring together students and academic staff from different ASEAN countries (AUN, 2025). These short-term engagements reflect the institutional and financial constraints faced by AUN, particularly the limited political commitment and funding available at the ASEAN level. Despite these limitations, AUN's initiatives play a meaningful role in strengthening ASEAN Awareness and fostering a stronger sense of the ASEAN Community through people-to-people interaction.

4. The Contribution of AUN to Strengthening ASEAN Identity

McMillan defines Sense of Community as follows: *"Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together"*. According to this definition, McMillan and Chavis identify four core elements of a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership refers to the sense of belonging and identification with a group; Influence reflects the perception that individuals matter to the group and the group matters to them; Integration and fulfillment of needs act as reinforcement. It is the belief that members' wants will be satisfied by being a part of the group; Shared emotional connection refers to the dedication and conviction that members share and will continue to share common experiences, time, history, and locations. McMillan and Chavis further argue that strong communities are those that provide members with meaningful opportunities to participate in shared activities, engage in positive interactions, resolve problems constructively, recognize individual contributions, and invest emotionally and socially in the community. A sense of community, they suggest, can develop more effectively when appropriate support and organizational mechanisms are in place, creating conditions in which members' needs are met through their involvement in the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In the context of ASEAN, these four elements of community have largely been built at the intergovernmental level. However, a key challenge lies in shifting this sense of community from governments to the people. ASEAN citizens need to directly experience this sense of belonging through concrete interactions and shared activities facilitated by the organization. Education, particularly through the ASEAN University Network (AUN), plays a crucial role in this process by engaging students and academic staff in collaborative and meaningful experiences. Through such initiatives, AUN contributes to strengthening people-to-people connections and fostering a greater sense of belonging to the ASEAN Community.

Conception (2025) argues that ASEAN identity is constructed through strong national identities and shared regional cultural ties. Referring to the *Narrative of ASEAN Identity*, he understands identity as a reflection of who ASEAN member states are, where

they came from, and where they are heading. In this sense, ASEAN identity is not static, but a social construct shaped by a balanced combination of constructed values and inherited values. Importantly, Concepcion emphasizes that the fostering of ASEAN identity can not rely merely on natural processes. Instead, deliberate policies and structured initiatives must complement natural social development. To promote regional understanding and mutual respect, the ASEAN people need to be exposed to varied cultures, traditions, and regional issues through education and interaction. In this regard, conscious initiatives such as the ASEAN University Network and other ASCC programmes play a vital role in strengthening awareness of ASEAN identity and, ultimately, in fostering the sense of ASEAN community.

Despite the structural and historical differences between the European Union and ASEAN, examining Erasmus remains useful for understanding how student mobility programmes may contribute to regional identity formation. As discussed previously, identity is fluid and not fixed, and is formed through social interaction. In the context of the European Union, European identity has proven not to replace national or local identities, but rather coexists with them. Erasmus is often understood as a bottom-up, rather than a top-down form of European integration, as it provides a social space for cross-cultural interaction among students. Although the initial Erasmus document did not mention explicitly “European identity” as its primary goal, concepts such as People’s Europe, youth exchanges, and shared values point to policy directions that support the formation of such an identity. Most of the literature suggests that mobile students are more likely to feel more European and connected to Europe, rather than non-mobile students, who show the opposite results. Ultimately, Erasmus does contribute to strengthening European identity through cultural exchange and interaction with other European counterparts. (Cojocaru, 2019).

In its ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) blueprint, ASEAN commits to engaging and benefiting its people and to building an organization that is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic (ASEAN, 2016). Within this framework, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) emerges as one of the most prominent initiatives in advancing a people-centered ASEAN Community, particularly through higher education cooperation and people-to-people interaction.

CONCLUSION

In 2015, ASEAN established the ASEAN Community under three pillars: ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). This framework reflects ASEAN’s aspiration to build a rules-based, people-oriented, and people-centered community in which ASEAN citizens actively participate in and benefit from regional integration and the community-building process (ASEAN, 2015). In the realization of this objective, ASCC plays a crucial role as it emphasizes people-to-people interaction and seeks to gradually shift the ownership of ASEAN from governments to its people.

Within the ASCC, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) stands out as one of the most prominent initiatives that enhances collaboration and positive interactions among higher education institutions, students, and academic staff across the region. Through educational exchanges, quality assurance mechanisms, and thematic networks, AUN provides social spaces where ASEAN citizens can interact, share experiences, and recognize one another. By bringing students and academics together, AUN makes ASEAN more tangible and meaningful in everyday experiences, thereby strengthening ASEAN identity and fostering a stronger sense of community.

Despite its contribution, AUN has notable limitations, particularly in terms of funding and exclusiveness. Limited funding is, in fact, a main structural problem within ASEAN itself, as Sng and Mahbubani (2017) argue that the stagnation of the ASEAN Secretariat stems from the policy of “equal payments” to the organization’s budget. According to them, ASEAN needs to move from this system to the principle of “capacity to pay” in order to address the problem that hinders budget growth and increases dependence on external donors. This limited political commitment is also visible in AUN’s funding structure. AUN relies heavily on cost-sharing contributions from its member universities and financial support from external partners, such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Union (EU). As a result, many AUN activities remain exclusive and short-term in nature, which in turn, limits the inclusiveness of AUN and, ultimately, its efforts to foster the ASEAN identity among its citizens.

Overall, AUN has strong potential as a people-centered platform to support the building of ASEAN identity within the ASCC framework. However, its long-term impact depends on how far ASEAN can overcome funding constraints and expand participation. Strengthening AUN and similar initiatives is therefore important for ASEAN’s effort to build a more people-centered community and a shared regional identity.

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