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The CALOHEA's Insights on Key Utilities for Driving Recognition of Qualifications in ASEAN Medical Education

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In this editorial note, I specifically highlight my personal insights gained from the Measuring and Comparing Achievements of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education in Asia (CALOHEA) project, which concluded on 4 July 2024, in Bangkok, Thailand. The CALOHEA project united 31 institutions across seven ASEAN countries and five European countries (1). The CALOHEA project is coordinated by the Tuning Academy of the University of Groningen (the Netherlands) and the ASEAN University Network and is funded by the European Commission (Erasmus+). Within the ASEAN region, institutional teams were created to form three subject area groups in civil engineering, medicine, and teacher education. For the medicine group, the participating institutions included Universiti Sains Malaysia (Malaysia), Universitas Padjadjaran (Indonesia), Universiti Malaya (Malaysia), Universitas Hasanuddin (Indonesia), West Visayas State University (the Philippines), and the University of Medicine and Pharmacy at Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) (2).

Through three recognition mechanisms (3) i.e., establishing comparable competencies, measuring student workload, and implementing authentic assessments, CALOHEA ensures that qualifications are recognised and valued both locally and internationally. This recognition enhances the comparability of medical degrees, facilitating graduates' mobility and career opportunities in a global context. These outcomes were validated through multiple stakeholder engagements and 14 national dissemination meetings held since 2021 until 2024 in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. The aim was to contribute to the internationalisation of higher education institutions by developing a series of interrelated measures necessary for improving the recognition of medical education degrees (4).

KEY UTILITIES OF QUALIFICATIONS RECOGNITION IN MEDICAL EDUCATION

CALOHEA's approach aligns with United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) eight universal principles for the recognition of qualifications, shedding light on the opportunities and challenges in adopting qualifications recognition in the ASEAN context (5, 6). The UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education outlined eight principles for the recognition of qualifications (5): (1) Everyone has the right to have their qualifications evaluated for further education or job opportunities; (2) The process of recognising qualifications should be clear, fair, quick, non-discriminatory, and affordable for all; (3) Recognition should be based on trust and clear, fair, and transparent criteria and procedures; (4) Decisions should be made using reliable and up-to-date information about education systems and institutions; (5) Recognition should respect the variety of education systems around the world; (6) Authorities should make decisions in good faith, provide clear reasons, and have appeal processes in place; (7) Applicants must provide accurate information and have the right to appeal recognition decisions; and (8) Measures should be taken to prevent and eliminate fraudulent practices in higher education qualifications.

To CALOHEA, the recognition of medical qualifications serves four key utilities: comparability, compatibility, transferability, and verifiability (6, 7). Comparability refers to the degree to which medical qualifications from different educational systems can be assessed as equivalent in terms of level, learning outcomes, and quality. Compatibility is the extent to which medical qualifications from different educational systems can fit into each other's frameworks, allowing for seamless integration and recognition. Transferability involves the ability of medical qualifications and credits to be moved and accepted across different educational institutions or employment sectors. Verifiability assures that medical qualifications are authentic, credible, and can be confirmed through reliable and transparent processes. These utilities embody the eight principles of UNESCO. Comparability is grounded in transparency and trust, compatibility in the respect for diversity and good faith in decision-making, transferability in the ability of qualifications to be accepted for further education or job opportunities, and verifiability in the reliability of information and the responsibilities and rights of individuals being assessed.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE RECOGNITION OF MEDICAL QUALIFICATIONS

The recognition process faces several key challenges (6). Diverse educational systems complicate the recognition process and the alignment of differing systems and standards. Implementation barriers, such as bureaucratic inertia, lack of resources, and varying levels of commitment from different countries, hinder progress. Technological disparities could hinder equitable access to the benefits of qualification recognition, as technology plays a bigger role in the recognition process. Cultural and linguistic differences complicate the understanding and interpretation of qualifications.

However, there are also significant opportunities. A harmonised and transparent framework of qualifications recognition allows medical students and academic staff to move more easily between different systems, enhancing mobility. International collaboration among medical education institutions is enhanced, fostering joint research projects, dual degree programmes, and cultural exchange. Easier recognition processes attract international

students, academic talents, and professionals, enlarging talent pools and workforces and driving innovation, leading to economic and social benefits. Robust quality assurance mechanisms are promoted, ensuring that recognised qualifications meet international standards.

STRATEGIC ACTIONS

To overcome the challenges and seize the opportunities, several strategic actions are proposed (6). Capacity building includes training for credential evaluators, developing clear guidelines, and sharing best practices. Technological solutions can streamline the recognition process, such as utilising blockchain for secure and verifiable academic records. Policy harmonisation and mutual agreements among countries are advocated to facilitate a smoother recognition process. Engaging all relevant stakeholders, including educational institutions, governments, employers, and students, is crucial in the recognition process.

While the CALOHEA Project has concluded, the results and practices from its engagement and dissemination meetings remain highly relevant to universities across ASEAN and beyond. These efforts have propelled internationalisation through the development of competence frameworks and a comprehensive understanding of student workload, enabling comparisons of medical education programmes' profiles and learning outcomes. Through these insights and actions, CALOHEA will continue to champion the recognition of medical qualifications, thereby enhancing mobility, fostering collaboration, and elevating the quality of medical education within and beyond ASEAN.

Looking forward, the implications of CALOHEA's findings and practices are important for the future of medical education in ASEAN and globally. The insights gained from the project lay a solid foundation for ongoing advancements in qualifications recognition, fostering greater harmonisation and transparency across educational systems (8). By continuing to implement the developed competence frameworks and assessment methodologies, universities can ensure that graduates' qualifications are universally recognised and valued (6, 8). This not only enhances graduates' career mobility and opportunities but also strengthens international collaboration in medical research and education. As technological innovations continue to reshape higher education (9), CALOHEA's emphasis on robust quality assurance mechanisms and stakeholder engagement will remain essential for navigating future challenges and seizing new opportunities in the evolving landscape of global medical education. Through sustained commitment and collaboration, the legacy of CALOHEA will continue to drive excellence and innovation in medical education across ASEAN and beyond.

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