

# **Universal News- for ASEAN Report on Education Foreign Policy**

**Interview with Professor Ansary Ahmed  
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**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** I would like to start by talking about Southeast Asia as a whole, 70% of global demand will come from this region by 2025. How do you think that within the region, the governments and the private sectors are gearing up to meet this demand?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** Firstly, I would contest the figure of 70% of demand coming from Southeast Asia. I think 70% of global demand could come from Asia as a whole, but I do not think this 70% will come from Southeast Asia alone because we only have a population of 550 million, compared with between 3.8 and 4 billion in the whole of Asia. The figures I have from UNESCO and other organisations suggest that by 2025, there will be about 125 million students throughout the world, of which 70% will come from this region. In terms of meeting the demand, if you look at Southeast Asia generally, Indonesia has 300 universities ranging from the very small to the very large, The Philippines has about 70 or 80 universities, Thailand has a similar number, and here in Malaysia we have about 70. Countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, of course are currently lagging far behind the other Southeast Asian countries. In terms of the general development of human capital, I think countries that are well-advanced such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and to a certain extent The Philippines, have a sufficient number of universities, colleges, training stations etc. that are going to take care of the needs of the population. Singapore has in fact positioned itself as a regional provider of high-end capital development and has linked up with leading universities throughout the world to either offer joint programmes or to have the partner universities establish branch-campuses in Singapore. In the case of Malaysia, we have taken another approach as we want to become an education hub in this part of the region so we have encouraged the establishment of branch-campuses, and whilst they may not be from the eight Ivy League university campuses, they are nevertheless popular and high quality institutions from the United Kingdom, Australia etc. We are also now opening up to universities from other parts of the world, such as India, Egypt and China, and will be seeing the education space in Malaysia opening up further to allow institutions of repute to enter the region and start operations here to help achieve the goal of positioning the country as an education hub.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** As you mentioned, there is a huge range of diversity and what we are expanding to is truly global. If we take Southeast Asia as an example, within this region alone there are apparently over 1,500 languages, along with many different cultures and religions etc. and aside from the obvious benefits of knowledge and the benefits to the people, what do you think this will do for the image of the region?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** I think if we look at Asia as a whole, the primary attraction for most of the investors from the West has so far been China, closely followed by India and I think Vietnam is slowly becoming the third most attractive

investment option. If we sub-divide Asia into East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East then Southeast Asia has always been an attractive destination for investment. This is because people in this part of the world are prepared to work hard, they adapt quite easily, and generally Southeast Asians have a very open outlook as we have been colonised by different European countries and have been exposed to the Western world. Much of our education system has developed from the legacies left behind by these countries so we have strong links with Britain, America, France and the Netherlands etc. because they have all been here. As the trend moves towards having higher knowledge intensity within a society itself, there will be a shift in the way we think of Southeast Asia. We will no longer see the region as a factory because it can no longer play this role, the only countries that can play the role of a factory here would be Vietnam to a certain extent although it is becoming less attractive, and countries such as Laos will become increasingly attractive destinations because cheap labour is moving from China. We as a nation in Southeast Asia have no choice but to move up the value chain and in order to do this we need to develop competitive knowledge-intensive industries and make sure that our people are as highly educated as possible, as highly skilled as possible, possessing the required competencies that can make them highly competitive.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** Since the creation of Asia eUniversity under the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD), there are 31 member states and it goes above and beyond actual education, and there is cooperation in other sectors such as agriculture etc. What example would you give of ACD and what has been its greatest accomplishment so far as a group of member states?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** As a group of member states under the ACD, we currently have 20 projects underway. The ACD is very much an Asian-wide umbrella network bringing together Asia in a regional context and the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian nations) regions. We are implementing projects and project-based activities, each of which is championed by a specific country, for example we are running an agricultural project championed by China, biotechnology is being championed by India, IT (information technology) championed by South Korea and education is championed by Malaysia. Each project is implemented with the purpose of bringing Asia closer together so that we have more regional integration. Here in Malaysia, we look at education as a whole and incorporate training as part of education for lifelong learning and professional development, and we are looking at how we can integrate what is being developed in each respective country because we each have strengths that can be developed, whilst reducing the weaknesses that run across Asia. For example, if the more developed ACD countries possess greater knowledge in ICT and tools for education, this is then shared with those countries that are less developed in those areas, resulting in the mutual benefit we are hoping to create and share with each other.

We are now moving towards sharing different programs and offering joint certifications. Basically the bottom line is that it aims to bring the countries closer together and encourage integration because we believe that there are so many things we have in common. Asia is very diverse in terms of culture, values, languages etc. but at the same time, we know that we can find common ground and goals, so we are at first focusing on this common ground before we build bridges in terms of those things that are not as common and see whether we can collectively become stronger and achieve growth. This is the whole idea behind the creation of the ACD and I think it is slowly

proving that it works because the founding members are considering the possibility of making it a much more cohesive organisation than it is at present. They are slowly trying to institutionalise the ACD because it came together as a project-driven organisation.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS: I would like to touch on the main reason behind the creation of Asia eUniversity. Electronic education and the idea of distance learning have been accepted and have gained credibility within the United States and Europe. Malaysia as a country, backed by you, has been instrumental in spearheading distance learning as a viable educational channel. Do you feel the region accepts the credibility of electronic learning or do you think it still needs a few more years for people to come on board?**

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** I think in Asia in general, the idea dates back many years because in countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka etc. so-called open universities have been in existence for up to 40 years already. However the concept of online education is something new for the majority of people and whilst open universities have been in existence for some time, online education is slowly becoming accepted and recognised. We need to look at each case slightly differently, and we see ourselves as champions of e-education so in that context we are leveraging our technology. Firstly, the technology exists and is so powerful that it is possible to change teaching and learning itself. Secondly, we are looking at opening access because across much of Asia and Southeast Asia, the participation rates are still fairly low in comparison with developed nations, with an average of about 20% entering higher education compared with about 80% in Europe and the US, so there is a huge gap and the cost of establishing physical universities is becoming more expensive by the day.

One viable alternative, without compromising on the quality, is to look at business education and at online education, and this is becoming more acceptable in much of the developing world as a real alternative to the conventional methods of teaching and learning, which is why it is now becoming more mainstream than it was previously. Statistics show that this is the faster growing sector in the higher education market because there is a need for an alternative learning system. People in the workplace continually need to upgrade their knowledge, competencies and skills, but someone who is working cannot go to university full-time, so the only way they can do this is on a part-time or online basis and this is where current technology allows us to offer many more flexible learning options than were previously available, as it is not so strict and stringent and learning can be fitted in around a busy schedule.

Corporations are now looking at this as an alternative way of training because taking their staff out of the organisation to an on-site training facility located elsewhere involves significant costs, so technology-based teaching and learning is becoming a much more attractive option and is increasing in popularity. I think over the next ten years, we will see this really take off.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS: One of the differentiating factors between an Ivy League university, and universities in this country is the credibility of the actual qualifications. With Asia eUniversity operating across such a broad range of countries, how does the Office of International Affairs manage to standardise the educational offering?**

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** We work together with the respective regulatory body in each country as we recognise that higher education is a highly regulated industry and each country protects its citizens from being exposed to counterfeit degrees or institutions. Therefore, although we have been created by the ACD, we still ensure we abide by the rules and regulations of the regulatory bodies in each respective country we are partnered with.

Fortunately, there is a global network of qualifications agencies and many of these agencies now have mutual agreements in place, meaning that if a programme is recognised in one country, it will be recognised in another country because the standards are aligned. That is how benchmarks are created for program standards. Certain countries are willing to accept and recognise a programme once it has been accepted by the Malaysian government. Nevertheless, there are certain countries which require you to register the programme there and have it audited by the local authority so we have to check the requirements in each country. For example, we are registered in India but we are now in the process of doing the same thing in New Zealand.

At the same time, we have taken the initiative to design a framework to achieve transnational recognition of the degrees and programs offered and a similar project has been running in Europe for a long time in the form of the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System). We have proposed this to the ACD countries and they have recognised this as an initiative worth pursuing. At the moment exploring the possibilities and each country is looking at how we can establish the framework, and we are organising a conference later this year to bring all ACD countries together try and agree on the framework of this mutual recognition. If we can achieve this I think this problem will be solved right across Asia.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** Last October, you conducted a workshop on the globalisation of education. As an institute that is looking to create relationships with international institutes, for example the IBSS (International Business School of Scandinavia) with which you launched your MBA (Masters in Business Administration) program, how much energy and effort is being dedicated to trying to create unions with more prestigious institutes, particularly in the US and Europe?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** To be honest with you, I think they are too proud to work with us, because they are already world leaders in education and do not see the need to engage in activities with an institution like ours. Our partnership with IBSS materialised through a third party who told them that we were a university worth working with, so we came together to discuss the possibilities and were able to get that program up and running within three months., so obviously when there is the desire to work together, things can be achieved fairly quickly. Currently, we are in discussions to explore the possibility of working with some New Zealand universities that are interested in working with us. We are already offering joint certification with various Cambodian and Vietnamese universities, so we are currently engaged in more of these partnerships in Asia than in the West because we have found that Western institutions tend to have their own norms which are difficult to adapt to work with us. In the case of IBSS, we are now extending the programme to Vietnam, Egypt and will soon run the programme

in London, and we are currently in discussions with some Chinese and Indian universities to extend our joint certifications.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** As we briefly mentioned previously, economic power is shifting further east. You stated ‘developing human capital begins with children’ in a seminar a few years ago. Obviously you have demonstrated very public support for the government’s initiatives to increase education and dedicate 25% of the national budget to doing this. What are your intentions in terms of entering and expanding education at the entry-level for five year olds upwards in elementary schools?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** We are basically a higher education institute at present, running mainly master’s degree programs, but we are now looking at running many more bachelors’ programmes and we have also started to look into the possibility of offering pre-university programs. I have also been approached to get involved with high school programs but these are slightly different in the context that they are international high school programs. We are in discussions with a party from China, another from the Middle East and another from Australia to explore the implementation of high school programs across Asia, so we are looking at various options in terms of making sure that the breadth is there and that we can sell the concept, but whether we will do all of this is a different question and we may establish sister universities for this type of program.

What we are trying to do through all of this is to introduce a certain level of technology within teaching and learning because we believe that human resources and capital of tomorrow is going to be very much technology dependent, so the teaching and learning of today has got to take that into consideration. Additionally the profile of the learner who is coming into the systems is that of a digital native, and the old-fashioned, conventional way of teaching with over-emphasis on the ‘chop and talk’ is no longer going to work. Today’s high school students are very technology-driven through social environments and interfaces etc. so if we use these methods and tools which are very attractive to them in our teaching, we will create an attractive environment for our students to learn in.

We are therefore trying to keep up with this new wave of using technology for teaching and learning when perhaps not all institutions are because I am strong believer and a strong advocate that that the future will be that way, whether we like it or not. I think our cellular phones will become more and more powerful and some people say that even our watches are going to be capable of doing much more than they do today, so devices are going to continue to become more powerful and will become more mobile in nature, which will allow people to engage in more ways to learn on the move.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:** There was an article on the beginning of the end of this transition to the new mobile world and the strength of e-commerce in shops such as Borders and Amazon online where you can download books onto your computer. This partly answers my next question, as we have discussed that demand is going to be growing at an exponential rate, but what other qualities does Asia eUniversity have that are going to keep you competitive in the region?

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** Our greatest strength is basically the fact that we are a trans-border institution so we leverage on the diversity because we are involved in many

different countries and can see what is going on in each country, so therefore we are very much present, as opposed to being something people just look up on the internet. We can actually participate in the development of the economies and be an active player at a local level which is a great advantage. Secondly, we have the goodwill of 31 countries and that number is growing and this goodwill is not something that can be created overnight, it builds up over a long period of time. Thirdly, we are currently using ICT and we would like to consider ourselves an early mover in the ICT sector in the kind of education and learning that is required for the future, which we consider to be a small advantage that our competitors do not yet have, and we have enough experience and competence to believe that we can get there.

Going back to the idea of certification, I have gone one step further and introduced triple certification. For example we have a partner in Bahrain and another in the UK and we have developed a program certified by all three partners, where I certify the academic component, our partner in Bahrain certifies the industrial component and the partner in the UK certifies the professional component, so students receive academic, industrial and professional certification. I think the future is moving closer towards this because if you wish to prove that you are a professional, in order to have an advantage it helps to have industrial exposure, and of course you always need to demonstrate academic strength, so all three components need to come together and we are able to do this because we have trans-border presence which allows and encourages people to work with us.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS: Speaking in terms of the local benefits of organisations, there tends to be a lot of red tape involved where this does give you greater transparency, greater resources and greater flexibility. Of course education is the responsibility of governments and the private sector. Moving onto some of your personal achievements, it was great to see that you were personally recognised last July by the Asia Pacific Entrepreneurial Awards, and received the award for Best Entrepreneur. What does this award mean to you, particularly given the category of nominees you were up against?**

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** To me personally, it does not mean that much because it is an award for the organisation above anything else. We have brought this university from concept to reality and it has taken about six years to create, and to see something transform from an idea into reality and to prove that it is a workable model is the really rewarding part. To have it recognised as a promising enterprise is therefore very rewarding for the organisation as a whole. I think more importantly than that is the fact that this success cannot be achieved unless there is support from various organisations and state departments etc. I simply happen to be the face of the organisation visible to the outside, but there are a lot of others behind me and without these people and organisations, it would not have been possible to achieve this. It does not stop there however, because at the end of the day, we have to ensure that we are relevant to the future needs of the people of Asia, and how we achieve this is the key to our whole success.

I tell my staff and contacts that knowledge used to be monopolised by universities, so you would go to university to obtain knowledge at the highest level but this is no longer the case as knowledge is everywhere. The internet has given the ability to gain knowledge to every single individual with internet access and the issue of how to

remain relevant in such a wide environment where knowledge is everywhere is therefore extremely important and presents a great challenge. Textbooks are there, materials and case studies are on the internet etc. so perhaps this free availability of knowledge means that we will no longer need traditional universities in the future. When a student enrolls in a university, they are looking for more than knowledge, because knowledge is freely available; they want a certificate as a testimonial that they have gone through the rigorous process and are qualified for the job in question. They want a qualification with prestige and image within society and this is now the most important element.

If there are two people who share an identical body of knowledge, but one obtained this knowledge through self-study and did not go to university whilst the other went to a prestigious university, obviously the one with the prestigious degree will stand out in the crowd. As a university, we have to position ourselves to be that kind of organisation and building prestige is an essential component for our future plans. The issue is how this can be achieved and quality equates to prestige and one of the fastest ways to build prestige in the short-run is to partner, link and network with other prestigious organisations, which is what we and a number of other universities are already doing. We are expanding our network as quickly as possible to build this network of like-minded, prestigious institutions that can create an advantage for the students.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS: As you mentioned, you have worked tirelessly to implement this and create this network of universities. What would you say has been your proudest achievement in relation to Asia eUniversity?**

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** I think the greatest achievement that we have would be the acceptance of the concept by the Asian countries, be they developed, developing, less developed and least developed. The 31-country ACD network is made up of countries including Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka which would be classified as least developed, and at the other end of the spectrum, we have South Korea, Singapore and Japan which are the most developed countries, and then we have a number of developing nations at different levels in between. When you take an idea to a platform to present it, and someone can see the relevance of the idea to their country and their people, I think that is extremely satisfying and means that you have come up with an idea, a concept, an institution, a platform, a vehicle etc. which others feel are of relevance to them as well. More often than not, universities have been established due to endowment, national aspirations, industrial needs etc. the fact that we have established ourselves on a trans-border basis as opposed to a national basis is something that we think will be good for us.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS: Do you have a final message you would like to communicate to the readers of *Foreign Policy*?**

**PROF. ANSARY AHMED:** It would be to seek to understand because I think the world is becoming rapidly more globalised, however I am also seeing more polarisation. On the one hand, we are becoming a global community, we are becoming more individual within that community and we are seeing the world as West and East, North and South. I think we should be looking beyond these divisions and see the world as one. Seeking to understand is therefore critical and this is how we educate ourselves. There are so many things we have in common, whether you are from north, south, east

or west, and seeking to understand the other the world will be a much better place compared with how it is today. Education play a very important role from a very young age right up to the highest level, which is why I think there needs to be more mobility between north and south, and east and west, more global networks and more linkages between countries and regions. This is the only way I think we can all be successful on earth, as there is much we need to learn about our environment, climate etc. As far as the environment is concerned, certain countries are trying to address the problems we face whereas others are not and we really need to work together in order to achieve results, but unfortunately this is not happening.

I read an article yesterday that discussed the interesting topic of religion in the public space, jointly organised by Europe and Asia, and it addressed how the Europeans perceived religion in the public space in comparison with how we in Asia perceive religion in a public space. There were some interesting debates because there is a division between public space and private space, and the norms in Europe are not the same as the norms in Asia. Seeking to understand those norms is critical for us to work as partners and move forward. We say that the pendulum is moving towards the East, and this is definitely true to an extent. I had some Dutch business students come here for three months to undertake their internships and they were able to learn about this part of the world, and they were stunned having never been here before and not realising how diverse and advanced the country is, and that some practices are more advanced than their European equivalents etc.

I explained to them that my grandfather, my father and I have lived through the last 200-250 years when the West was dominant, but our grandchildren and great-grandchildren etc. are going to experience a period that will be dominated by the East. We have to prepare ourselves for this as it will have a huge psychological impact on the Western society and psyche, and likewise it will have a huge impact on the Eastern psyche in terms of how we are supposed to lead, and whether we are prepared for this after having followed for so long. China for example is rapidly becoming an economic giant, and it is predicted that they will overtake the US economy.

**UNIVERSAL NEWS:**

**Thank you very much for your time and comments.**