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Human Mobility and Dismantling Cultural Dominance: Creating Collaborative Conversations to Secure Talent in a Post-Covid world

Brian Fairman¹, Adam Voak², Hurriyet Babacan³

Abstract

The rapidly increasing effects of globalisation is currently challenging many countries in ASEAN to think more creatively around their approach to human capability development to ensure economic viability. The intensified crossing of national and cultural borders, the emergence of transcendent communication technologies, and the increasing ease of human mobility are reshaping our approaches to international engagement and collaboration. These cross-cultural interactions will become even more important in a post-Covid-19 world as markets and trade open and a renewed effort to aggressively compete for limited talent begins. The future of the workforce is facing significant disruptions, and the competition for talent takes place from a global pool in which many nations are competing. This paper argues that intercultural approaches in business and management are critical to operating in this global environment. In an attempt to more clearly understand the intercultural management approaches needed in this interconnected, interdependent and globalised trading environment, this paper has used an action research approach to examine what (Hollingsworth & Cody, 1995) describes as 'relational knowledge'. These structured collaborative conversations have their origins in practitioner interactions within human capability development interventions in Indonesia. It is intended that the cultural responses received from our Indonesian project partners and collaborators will form the basis for a meaningful approach to respectful engagement. By framing the action research cycle through an examination of the impacts on human mobility, we can reveal the layers of cultural dominance. The authors concur with (Nagle, 2009) and (Rattansi, 2011), who both view interculturalism as a valuable enabler to encourage cross-cultural dialogue and challenge self-segregation tendencies within cultures.

Keywords: ASEAN, TVET, Globalization, Human Mobility, Culture, Human Capability Development

¹ Corresponding author, Australian Institute of Business and Economics, The University of Queensland, Brisbane ORCID: 0000-0002-1255-6204, email: b.fairman@uq.edu.au

² The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, Cairns, email: adam.voak@jcu.edu.au

³ Australian Institute of Business and Economics, The University of Queensland, Brisbane. ORCID: 0000-0001-7816-7546, email: h.babacan@uq.edu.au

1. Introduction

At present, in ways never previously experienced, human lived experience is being subjected to unrelenting pressure for change. These effects are manifested in expanding demographic multiculturalism, increasing levels of urbanization, rapid technological advances in communication, cross-cultural interactions, growing challenges to personal health, unprecedented amounts of international trade and escalating consumption of energy. Of relevance to this discussion is that each of these elements of change is contributing to a significant alteration to traditional ways of doing business (Babacan & Gopalkrishnan, 2022). These rapid changes are particularly noticeable in the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region, which is currently reacting sharply to the recent disruption of global labour markets and are now beginning to reopen its pandemic borders. This situation is driving concomitant changes in expectations of consumer markets, which are spurring increased demand for new and diverse human skills. There are consequent strains thus being generated within the labour workforces across the ASEAN region, which need to be addressed in order to maintain market quality and position.

As a reaction to this unanticipated pressure on the local labour markets, one of the primary objectives of the ASEAN Economic Community has been to encourage skilled labour mobility and knowledge transfer in order to boost productivity outputs and to address personnel shortages (Koty, 2016). ASEAN aims to exploit the free movement of people, services, products, and financial investment within the region to promote growth and stability and encourage inter-country trade. It is in facilitating these goals wherein the challenge lies for ASEAN to improve intra-regional labour mobility. It is further clear that to achieve this critical regional economic aspiration, a skilled and flexible workforce will be essential. Therefore, it is not unexpected that demand from corporations to attract, recruit and retain skilled labour within the ASEAN bloc is growing, and, in response, there is an urgent need for many member states to focus greater attention on skilling local human resources.

2. The Role of Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET)

In response to the growing need to become 'internationally competitive and to build economic advantage, ASEAN governments have increasingly relied on bolstering human resource development initiatives (Fairman, Voak, Abdullah, & Indarjo, 2020). A vital component of this government response has been a focus on revitalizing TVET. As a result of these policies, an array of international funding agencies (ADB, UNESCO and The World Bank), have paid particular attention to developing countries by supporting the establishment and practice of TVET systems (Volkoff & Perry, 2001). Whilst foreign assistance by these donor agencies has unarguably sustained improvements in ASEAN VET programs; further significant investments are urgently needed in physical and human resources for developing the sector. Assistance has mainly focused on improving the physical infrastructure to support TVET, but considerable effort has also centred around reforming human resource capacity within developing ASEAN nations (Maclean, Wilson, & Chinien,

2009). In parallel with these developments, the growing complexity of global supply chains, along with the interdependency of the actors involved at each transfer stage, means that considerable effort and investment should be made on a better understanding of the human actors within the system (Fairman, Voak, & Babacan, 2021).

Apart from the well-appreciated contributions in terms of financial assistance and program presentation, the process of accepting international support from international donors has seen these external agencies significantly influence the recipient government's policies and strategies (Easterly, 2007). In this respect, international donor agencies have transplanted foreign TVET policies that have been established in and are therefore applicable to the contexts of first world countries into the recipient developing country. This, arguably, may not be culturally appropriate. Consequently, in addition to the planned training outcomes for these activities, it has been suggested that these contributions may have unintended results (Allais, 2012). The concerns which have attended these funding arrangements is that, along with specified technical specialist support, this program has resulted in the form of 'colonization', which is inexorably shaped by (i) the overlaying of required international donor-led agendas as part of the 'conditionality' of support, (ii) the nature of the training conditions being applied being formulated to the meet the standards of international assistance (Powell, 2001), (iii) the conduct of international support requiring dependence upon imported technical assistance (Easterly & Pfitze, 2008), and (iv) the requirement of foreign aid to foreground concepts such as the incorporation of andragogy and increased social inclusiveness. The latter issue is especially pertinent in this regard, as it is focused on gender equality and governance as well as the implementation of VET systems that have become more customer-demand-driven (Kragelund, 2011). These characteristics are seen to have been currently implemented in Indonesia and are identifiable in many other national VET systems (Paryono, 2011). Nonetheless, even today, the unintended consequences of these interventions are being revealed in limitations and gaps emerging in various Nation's human capability development. One such constraint that has hindered the improvement of TVET systems is the limited amount of engagement with and understanding of local needs (H Babacan & Babacan, 2007).

Notwithstanding these concerns, TVET could prove to be the key to rebuilding and sustaining ASEAN's economic growth post-pandemic. TVET is a unique process in that it provides agile educational pathways which assist countries in adapting to changing and emerging markets and creating vital employment and self-employment opportunities. If implemented effectively, TVET interventions could potentially play a pivotal role in facilitating and revolutionizing the sorely needed development of skills and knowledge and ultimately fostering more entrepreneurial approaches to employment (Ra, Chin, & Liu, 2015). ASEAN governments should not underestimate the potential positive return on TVET investment, as these contributions to human development have direct links to GDP growth (Ra et al., 2015).

Indeed, we strongly suggest that TVET reform within ASEAN regions should focus on industry-led training interventions, cultural relevance, curriculum reform and close alignment to the stated needs of local industry. Where reforms are increasingly becoming more aligned with local industry requirements and driven by the demands of emerging markets, ASEAN economies are providing a growing share of basic industry and services sector production globally (Ra et al.,

2015). Such programs include a greater focus being placed on new technologies and the removal of outdated and inappropriate curricula. Furthermore, these reforms fundamentally require replacing outmoded equipment with teaching and learning materials with state-of-the-art resources (Maclean et al., 2009). Notably, many countries have seen TVET reform reap the benefits of stimulating and facilitating economic expansion (Maclean & Lai, 2011). Volkoff and Perry (2001) also contended that the desire to institute parallel globalization and technological reforms creates a need for urgent structural changes centred around skill development. These structural changes will be no less relevant in the post-pandemic world, where these actions need to be designed to act in concert with rapidly changing social, environmental and economic needs. Babacan (2022) posits that in the post-COVID-19 era, there is increasingly a need for a re-balancing of efficiency, inclusion and resilience in economic development.

3. ASEAN Responses

There is an increasing degree of ‘mobilization’ in, and among ASEAN member states, which is manifested through the opening of regional borders across the area (Boehrer & Linsky, 1990). Also, there is the concurrent problem of how to better understand issues around human connectivity and mobility which will be needed to maintain and enhance a social milieu which is relentlessly increasing in size and complexity. Partnerships between countries also provide opportunities for ASEAN nation-state governments to more confidently influence the mobility and skills development programs required to respond to these mobilization requirements. Indeed, Marginson (1999) observed that, although the flow of global capital and more significant financial interconnectedness can consume markets, it is nevertheless true that training and education systems remain areas where governments can still exercise sovereign power. Babacan and Gopalkrishnan (2022) identify the economic processes of the market, consumption, and production are socially constructed processes that “demonstrate the ‘embeddedness’ of economics in the social domain” (Swedberg, 1997), the social construction of economic institutions (Aspers & Dodd, 2015), and that economic activity is located within a “concrete, ongoing systems of social relations” (Granovetter, 2018). This is particularly applicable to ASEAN relationships, where interactions occur through a multi-relational and multi-cultural milieu.

The ASEAN Mutual Recognition Agreement (MRA) has already taken an essential first step to facilitate regional skill mobility. The MRA has effectively established a framework for the recognition of qualifications and skills across the region. Currently, some seven qualification arrangements exist across several sectors, ranging from engineering and medicine to accounting services. ASEAN has also enacted further initiatives to support human mobility across the region (Secretariat, 2013). These initiatives aim to support regional trade through the provision of short stays for business people in order to facilitate cross-border economic interactions. There are also other mechanisms currently under development to enhance human mobility, including efforts around regional quality assurance for qualifications and skills

recognition and the increased sharing of information to facilitate smoother migration.

However, with this increased responsiveness and flexibility come embedded challenges, particularly around skilling the next generation of the workforce. These challenges will be acutely evident within the ASEAN region as it strives to be ready for increasing levels of globalization. At the current time, international donors are pivotal in the development of human resources in the ASEAN sphere. Rightly or wrongly, these interventions or technical assistance programs are being developed to assist in the creation of environments for learning. Notwithstanding this admirable intention, it has been observed that, more often than not, they have an unwitting impeding effect, as appropriate cultural nuances are seen to be deficient during their deployment (A. Babacan & Babacan, 2018). As indicated earlier, foreign donors often externalize and reinforce their dominant cultural values by engaging in-country vocational educators in their programs (Cooper & Walters, 2009). Nevertheless, with the drive to increase responsiveness and flexibility, there are inherent challenges, particularly around skilling the next generation of the workforce, and these challenges will be acutely evident within the ASEAN region as the bloc strives to ready itself for the complexities of globalization.

4. Human Mobility and the Future of Work

Promoting productive employment and decent work for all is Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals, and yet many people in the world continue to be in precarious employment and insecure economic positions (Gopalkrishnan and Babacan, 2022a). Substantial inequalities prevail in the areas of access to work and work quality. Some of the key areas are identified as the “segmentation among workers, according to geographical location (between countries and between workers in urban and rural areas), sex and age” (Gomis, Kapsos, & Kuhn, 2020). Work and occupations are structured, evolve over time and replicate and reinforce existing inequalities. The International Labour Organisation estimates that people of working age who are employed are 57% of the global population, with 39% out of the labour force. However, there is significant underutilization of workers such as those who would like to work more paid hours (time-related underemployment) and people out of employment who would like to work but whose personal situation or other factors prevent them from actively searching for a job. Gomis et al. (2020) estimate that 473 million, or 14% of the extended labour force, are underutilised.

Moreover, human mobility in the ASEAN region will be significantly challenged by technological change, referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution (or Industry 4.0)⁴. The key aspects of this change will be *digital economies* which are digital platforms penetrating all aspects of society and economy with digital connectivity and significant exchange of goods and services around the world; *sharing economy* where there is less ownership of material goods and more focus on access (e.g. platforms for music, films); *platform economy* where changing nature of companies are fragmented across the ecosystem with brokerage roles (Schwartz, Hatfield, Jones, & Anderson, 2019). The flow of disruptions to the nature of work includes

⁴ <https://alpha.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/The-Automation-Advantage.pdf>

increasing automation and machine learning impacting the nature of work and a decline of jobs that can be automated. The workforce is increasingly divorced from companies and places, and there is less need for permanent employees. All of these result in an increasingly flexible and growing casualised workforce with little income and job security and increased use of contract labour or freelance as against permanent jobs (Schwartz et al., 2019). The ability to capitalise on new employment opportunities is multi-factorial and will be impacted by existing structural inequalities within the ASEAN region.

Nonetheless, many of the emerging ASEAN nations are being tested by the need for growth of employee mobility; currently, their educational institutions are struggling to provide the human resource development frameworks to build a sustainable, modern, skilled and efficient workforce. This increased connectivity and freedom of movement between and among ASEAN countries have seen a significant increase in human mobility. Whilst increased human mobility brings with it many cross-border benefits, including valuable labour and new trading connections, it can, conversely, also introduce new challenges. These include overcrowding, strains around social cohesion and the potential for human exploitation through human trafficking.

Although the intra-ASEAN movement has increased over the past decades, the patterns of mobility have stayed relatively consistent. Cross-border wage differentials within the region have been a significant factor in driving specific flows of human resources, with ASEAN remaining as a net exporter of labour across Asia and the Middle East. These demands for labour create challenges for ASEAN, particularly around retaining talent within the region. The bloc will need to consider new approaches and more formal measures to develop employment opportunities to encourage nationals to return home.

5. Globalization and ASEAN

In parallel with the rise of the Information Age, the effects of increasing globalisation are currently challenging the workforce *status quo* and seriously questioning the appropriateness of existing models which guide different countries' approaches to human capability development. [Brynjolfsson](#) and [McAfee](#) (2014) argue that the 'bounty' of technological change will not be 'spread'. The new technological era brings major risks of widening inequality, as automation substitutes for labor across the entire economy, the net displacement of workers by machines might exacerbate the gap between returns to capital and returns to labor. The future of work, access to work, and income opportunities will be one of the main challenges of the fourth industrial revolution. New capitalism is linked with labour market transformation, with more tenuous connections between employers and workers, which has given "rise to new employment relations characterised by a much greater sense of precariousness and insecurity" (Doogan, 2009).

Recognizing this urgent need to skill a modern workforce will mean greater collaboration between governments, educators and the industries they serve. Greater efforts across the region need to be placed on strengthening community and industry engagement to ensure the ongoing relevance of TVET programs. Additionally, much greater investment needs to occur in upskilling local educational workforces to ensure the ongoing sustainability of TVET systems, particularly in emerging economies within ASEAN.

In this situation, it is essential to (i) examine the appropriateness of importing 'external knowhow' into these emerging economy's vocational education and training sectors, (ii) assess the desirability of placing particular focus on culturally appropriate training models, (iii) understand the possible disadvantages of placing growing reliance on 'external' models of engagement which may not be culturally appropriate, and (iv) realise the implications of such training for proper and sustainable TVET models. Central to this re-skilling of the ASEAN TVET sector are (i) programs that address the human resource development of the educator workforce, (ii) the need to build viable and sustainable links to industry to provide seamless workforce needs, (iii) an exploration and examination of models for successful industry development and (iv) an investigation of how to nurture mutually beneficial 'strategic partnerships' both locally, regionally and internationally.

Globalization, in conjunction with escalating levels of internationalization of education, is placing emerging and unfamiliar pressures on the ASEAN Training and Further Education systems. According to [Sevrani and Gorica](#) (2012), globalization is 'an inevitable and irreversible process' and, as such, they recommend that in dealing with globalization, the development of training and further education within emerging jurisdictions needs to acknowledge the inevitable positive aspects of the change and diminish the negative ones. [Marques et al.](#) (2011) also provide a clear and definite analysis of globalization, suggesting it brings more significant trade benefits on the back of efficiencies, cost reductions and economic integration. Additionally, [Anderson](#) (2006) states that globalization can, if treated with due attention, assist in the creation of borderless marketplaces and subsequently increase the diversification of services and products through the manifestation of export opportunities. Globalization has, in essence, accelerated the reformation of industry and expanded its pervasiveness. In this respect, many ASEAN nations are being seriously challenged by commitments toward greater employee mobility. Nevertheless, their current educational institutions cannot provide the human resource development frameworks to provide an appropriately skilled and efficient workforce.

It must be recognised that the dominant parochial perspectives which venerate 'international' expertise within technical assistance programs are likely to perpetuate a cycle of reliance on foreign interventions. [Ruder and Sanniti](#) (2019) argue that one of the main drivers of our current predicament is a hierarchical, dualistic Western worldview in which reality is divided into distinct parts with one superior to and dominant over the other: humans over nature, mind over body, men over women, rationality over emotion, and of the powerful over the weak. This ontology is predatory, and we need to rethink our approaches to human development. We suggest that future international TVET interventions should be encouraged to increase local indigenous participation to develop local capacity. This practice would also serve as a valuable enabler in facilitating more culturally appropriate interventions. At the same time, foreign intervention may be warranted and indeed could have many benefits for developing and emerging countries, especially in the areas of highly competitive and globalized industries.

Subsequently, the interventions and technical assistance must also focus, at their core, on the premise that human capability development must be sustainable, and it must be framed to have a life beyond the intervention of foreign input. In a new TVET future for emerging countries within ASEAN, there must be involvement and development of localized and respected expertise. These local experts will then

be available to play a valuable and continuing role long after the donor funding has expired. They will act to ensure that the next generation of local practitioners will have access to assistance that is not only competent and capable but also intimately understands the cultural nuances of the home country.

6. Hidden Problems in Imported TVET Development Assistance

Notwithstanding the positive effects of globalization, it is of concern that there are some relatively hidden issues that we feel need to be acknowledged and considered carefully. Anderson (2006) believes globalization can potentially erode traditional controls within countries, especially when they accept international development assistance. Therefore, greater awareness is needed around these hidden issues, and this consequently cautions us against unquestioned and wholesale acceptance of imported models, as they may result in unexpected and unhelpful long-term outcomes. In the majority of recent TVET initiatives, external aid donors deploy western expertise as they search for western solutions, often using Western technologies and means to achieve western perceptions as to the improvement in practices. These foreign approaches invariably serve as a self-perpetuating cycle of western-centric development. Recipient countries, however, are becoming more perceptive in recognizing this cycle, and it has been suggested that this lack of apparent relevance and input to indigenous systems and personnel needs reforming. Therefore, empowering local communities to develop culturally relevant training and education outcomes and building local human capability may provide the most advantageous ongoing benefits for the recipient community and give the most return from the international aid response (Powell, 2001).

Further, ASEAN nations have a rich tapestry of cultures, which seemingly co-exist in a harmonious group. It is these cultures and traditions that could bring fresh eyes to much larger complex globalized problems. In addition, these communities, villages and kampongs could potentially lay the foundations for new and creative responses to significant national human capability development challenges. It must be appreciated that many ethnically diverse nations bring with them centuries of culture, knowledge and an array of insights, all of which have real value and currency and should be treasured in an increasingly homogeneous world. Interculturalism should be something that is cherished and nurtured as it may prove to be the hidden competitive advantage to transform ASEAN's economies and serve as a valuable enabler to launch the bloc onto the international stage.

7. Final Thoughts

The benefits of the digital age are promoted as a transformative force in the livelihoods of people around the world. This discussion is taking place in the absence of critical inquiry about how societal outcomes can be envisioned and critical inquiry about its distributive and inclusion impacts (H Babacan, 2020; Graham, 2019) on access to education, poverty and labour market participation. Achieving just and sustainable economic systems requires a rethink of our approach.

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