



The Role of ASEAN Scholarships in Improving Access to Higher Education for Indonesian Students

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Abstract

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The role of ASEAN scholarship programs in improving access to higher education for Indonesian students. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach through document analysis, the research identifies how these scholarships alleviate financial and non-financial barriers, thereby enhancing educational opportunities for students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The findings reveal that ASEAN scholarships not only provide comprehensive financial support but also foster regional integration by cultivating cross-cultural competencies and expanding academic networks. Despite these benefits, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access due to uneven information distribution, rigid selection criteria, and administrative inefficiencies. The study underscores the crucial roles of governmental, institutional, and private sector collaboration in optimizing scholarship implementation. Empirical evidence affirms that recipients of ASEAN scholarships achieve significant academic success and contribute to Indonesia's human capital development, aligning with the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025. This research contributes valuable insights for policymakers to enhance the inclusivity and effectiveness of scholarship programs in the ASEAN context.

Keywords: ASEAN Scholarships, Higher Education Access, Regional Integration, Human Capital Development

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education plays a pivotal role in shaping high-quality and competitive human resources, particularly in the context of globalization and regional integration, such as within the ASEAN framework. In Indonesia, however, access to higher education continues to face a range of challenges, most notably in terms of financial constraints and limited opportunities for studying abroad. Scholarships emerge as a crucial mechanism to overcome these barriers by offering financial support and academic motivation to students, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Beyond serving as a form of economic assistance, scholarships also function as a strategic tool to enhance the quality of education and ensure the sustainability of students' academic journeys (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023).

Within the ASEAN context, scholarships provided by various institutions and the governments of member states, including Indonesia, play a strategic role in expanding access to higher education. Programs such as the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship and the CIMB ASEAN Scholarship create opportunities for Indonesian

students to pursue academic experiences in other ASEAN countries. These initiatives not only contribute to individual academic growth but also foster regional integration through cultural exchange and the development of human capital (ASEAN University Networks, 2015). This is closely aligned with the objectives of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), which positions education as a critical foundation for building an inclusive and competitive regional community.

Nevertheless, access to scholarship opportunities in Indonesia remains marked by significant inequality. Economic disparities, selection processes that tend to prioritize only academic excellence, and the uneven dissemination of information pose major barriers for students who are genuinely in need. Many students from low- to middle-income families, including those whose parents are civil servants, often struggle to obtain scholarships due to broad and standardized selection criteria that fail to account for nuanced socio-economic realities (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023). Such inequality risks impeding educational attainment and diminishing academic motivation among economically disadvantaged students.

In this regard, the Indonesian government and higher education institutions play a vital role in formulating inclusive education policies and expanding equitable access. Adequate education budgeting, transparent scholarship selection processes, and accessible information dissemination are key factors in reducing disparities in scholarship access (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023). Regional collaboration through initiatives such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN) also serves as an essential platform for strengthening inter-university cooperation, enhancing educational quality, and broadening cross-border scholarship opportunities within ASEAN (ASEAN University Networks, 2015).

Furthermore, in the face of regional economic integration through the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which was officially launched in 2015, improving the quality and accessibility of higher education has become a pressing necessity for Indonesia. Higher education institutions and government bodies must work in synergy to address the persistent barriers of cost and access while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of human resources to compete at both regional and global levels (Mulyadi & Sri Iriyanti, 2019). ASEAN scholarship programs therefore represent a strategic pathway that not only alleviates students' financial burdens but also equips them with international exposure and competencies needed in the ASEAN integration era.

This study aims to critically examine the role of ASEAN scholarships in improving access to higher education for Indonesian students, while identifying both the challenges and opportunities associated with these initiatives. The research seeks to contribute to the formulation of more effective and inclusive policies in optimizing ASEAN scholarship programs as a catalyst for developing high-quality, regionally competitive Indonesian human capital.

METHODS

A Research Type

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. Descriptive research aims to provide a detailed, systematic, and factual explanation of a particular phenomenon or event without manipulating variables (Silalahi, 2009; Nazir, 1988). Qualitative research, on the other hand, seeks to understand the

meanings, reasons, opinions, and motivations underlying specific behaviors or social phenomena (Bakry, 2016; Bogdan & Taylor as cited in Moleong, 2010). Accordingly, this research is intended to comprehensively describe the role of ASEAN scholarships in enhancing access to higher education for Indonesian students, including the challenges and opportunities encountered during their implementation.

Data Collection Techniques

Data for this study were gathered through document analysis (library research). Document analysis involves collecting and examining written materials, official reports, journal articles, books, and relevant electronic sources related to the research topic. These documents are subsequently analyzed, compared, and synthesized to construct a systematic and integrated review (Moleong, 2018; Sugiyono, 2014). This method ensures that the research is grounded in credible and diverse secondary sources, enabling a thorough understanding of the subject matter.

Data Analysis Techniques

The data analysis was conducted using a qualitative descriptive approach, which involves an in-depth and comprehensive description and interpretation of the collected data. The analytical process encompasses data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and inductive conclusion drawing. This approach allows the researcher to explore relationships between phenomena and interpret the underlying meanings without resorting to statistical analysis (Sugiyono, 2014; Creswell, 2014). The qualitative descriptive analysis facilitates a rich and nuanced understanding of the dynamics surrounding ASEAN scholarships and their impact on educational access.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

Profile and Diversity of ASEAN Scholarship Programs for Indonesian Students

ASEAN scholarships encompass a broad and multifaceted range of initiatives aimed at enhancing educational opportunities for Indonesian students across the Southeast Asian region. Notable scholarship programs include the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship, CIMB ASEAN Scholarship, ASEAN-China Young Leaders Scholarship (ACYLS), alongside offerings from prestigious universities such as Chulalongkorn University, the National University of Singapore (NUS), and Universiti Malaya (Maybank Foundation, 2022; CIMB, 2025; ASEAN-China Secretariat, 2020). These scholarships typically provide comprehensive financial packages that cover tuition fees, living allowances, travel expenses, health insurance, and educational resources (CIMB, 2025; Maybank Foundation, 2022). For example, the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship offers full tuition, accommodation, round-trip airfare, laptop allowances, and comprehensive medical insurance, empowering recipients to pursue academic fields critical for the future economic and technological advancement of the region, including data science, finance, and entrepreneurship (Maybank Foundation, 2022). Additionally, the ASEAN University Network (AUN), which integrates 30 leading universities across ASEAN, including Indonesia's top-tier institutions such as ITB, UGM, and UI, plays a pivotal role in facilitating student mobility and expanding accessible

quality education within the ASEAN community (ASEAN University Network, 2020). This institutional network not only increases scholarship availability but also enriches cross-national academic collaboration and exchange.

Overcoming Financial and Non-Financial Barriers to Higher Education Access

Financial constraints remain one of the most significant impediments for Indonesian students aspiring to pursue higher education abroad, particularly within the ASEAN region. ASEAN scholarships alleviate these economic barriers by providing full or near-full financial support, effectively removing tuition and living costs as obstacles to access (World Bank, 2021). This support is especially critical for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who would otherwise lack the means to study overseas. Beyond monetary aid, ASEAN scholarships address informational and procedural challenges through streamlined application processes and preparatory support programs that enhance applicant readiness and competitiveness (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023). Despite these efforts, challenges persist in ensuring equitable access. Students from rural or marginalized communities frequently encounter difficulties in accessing timely information and meeting rigorous academic requirements that often advantage candidates from urban, well-resourced schools (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023). Therefore, while ASEAN scholarships contribute to educational inclusivity, there is an ongoing necessity to broaden outreach efforts and consider more flexible eligibility criteria to further democratize access across diverse socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds.

Contributions to Human Resource Development and Regional Integration

ASEAN scholarships extend their impact beyond individual academic achievement to significantly contribute to broader human capital development and regional integration within ASEAN. By facilitating Indonesian students' academic experiences in various member states, these scholarships cultivate vital cross-cultural competencies, foster extensive regional networks, and nurture a shared ASEAN identity and sense of belonging (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020). Graduates return equipped with enhanced skills, perspectives, and intercultural understanding that are indispensable for Indonesia's active engagement in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the increasingly interconnected global economy (Mulyadi & Sri Iriyanti, 2019). Moreover, scholarship recipients often emerge as informal ambassadors of ASEAN solidarity, strengthening diplomatic, economic, and socio-cultural ties through ongoing academic collaborations and professional exchanges. These outcomes align closely with the strategic goals outlined in the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025, which underscores education as a cornerstone for sustainable development and cohesive regional integration (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

Implementation Challenges and Obstacles

Despite their substantial benefits, ASEAN scholarship programs face a series of persistent implementation challenges that constrain their full potential. A notable issue is the unequal distribution of scholarships, which tends to favor students from urban areas with superior access to information, resources, and preparatory support, thereby exacerbating educational inequalities between urban and rural regions (Dalla & Kewuel, 2023). Furthermore, the predominant emphasis on high academic performance as a selection criterion risks excluding capable

students from underprivileged backgrounds who may lack access to quality preparatory education and facilities. In addition, administrative complexities and bureaucratic inefficiencies—such as cumbersome application procedures and insufficient coordination among ASEAN member states—can impede the timely and effective disbursement of scholarships (Sugiyono, 2014). Addressing these obstacles requires scholarship administrators and policymakers to adopt more inclusive, transparent, and equitable selection frameworks, enhance intergovernmental cooperation, and strengthen partnerships among governments, universities, and the private sector to optimize resource allocation and outreach.

Institutional and Governmental Support Mechanisms

The Indonesian government, in collaboration with higher education institutions, plays an instrumental role in amplifying the accessibility and impact of ASEAN scholarship programs. Government-led initiatives, including extensive information dissemination campaigns, preparatory workshops, and academic readiness programs, contribute significantly to leveling the playing field for prospective applicants from diverse backgrounds (Kemdikbudristek, 2022). Universities affiliated with the ASEAN University Network (AUN) further support scholarship recipients through academic mentoring, cultural orientation, and integration programs that enhance student retention and success (ASEAN University Network, 2020). Additionally, partnerships with private sector stakeholders such as Maybank and CIMB enrich scholarship offerings by integrating career development, internship placements, and leadership training, thereby bridging academic knowledge with real-world professional experience (Maybank Foundation, 2022; CIMB, 2025). These multi-stakeholder collaborations are essential for maximizing the scholarships' contributions to individual career trajectories and national human capital advancement.

Empirical Evidence: Outcomes and Impact

Empirical evidence substantiates the positive outcomes of ASEAN scholarships for Indonesian students, demonstrating their efficacy in enhancing educational attainment and employability. For instance, recipients of the ASEAN-Maybank Scholarship have consistently achieved high academic performance and retention rates, with a significant proportion securing employment in regional institutions and multinational corporations following graduation (Maybank Foundation, 2022). Similarly, data from the CIMB ASEAN Scholarship program highlight strong outcomes in graduate employability, leadership development, and entrepreneurial engagement (CIMB, 2025). Moreover, longitudinal studies and statistical analyses from institutions such as the World Bank (2021) affirm that scholarship beneficiaries experience upward social mobility and make substantive contributions to Indonesia's economic growth, innovation capacity, and regional competitiveness. Collectively, these findings underscore ASEAN scholarships' dual role in empowering individuals and fostering national development objectives, reinforcing their strategic importance within Indonesia's educational and socio-economic landscape.

CONCLUSION

ASEAN scholarships play a vital role in expanding access to higher education for Indonesian students by providing comprehensive financial support

that covers tuition, accommodation, and living expenses, effectively removing economic barriers to studying abroad. Beyond financial aid, these scholarships offer non-financial benefits such as preparatory programs, simplified selection processes, and opportunities to build cross-cultural and regional networks, which collectively enhance students' academic readiness and experiences. The impact extends beyond individual development, as scholarship recipients contribute to strengthening ASEAN identity and fostering regional cooperation. However, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access due to uneven information distribution, rigid academic criteria, and complex bureaucratic procedures. The involvement of the government and educational institutions is crucial in offering mentorship, broadening outreach efforts, and partnering with the private sector to increase the scholarships' reach and effectiveness. Empirical evidence demonstrates that ASEAN scholarship recipients achieve high academic success and strong employment prospects, positively influencing human resource development and national competitiveness at the regional level. Overall, this study underscores that ASEAN scholarships serve as a strategic instrument for promoting inclusive and quality higher education for Indonesian students while advancing ASEAN's social and economic integration goals toward 2025.

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