

## FEATURED RESEARCH CENTRE

### CENTRE FOR ASEAN REGIONALISM (CARUM): AN INTRODUCTION

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#### INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or ASEAN is increasingly emerging as a global leader in regionalism. Its internal development with three new communities forged in 2015 under Malaysia's chairmanship and its leadership of wider regional initiatives are attracting international academic interest. This inspired the University of Malaya to take the initiative to set up the Centre for ASEAN Regionalism University of Malaya (CARUM), a top-down centre under the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation)'s office, a signature initiative of the University of Malaya. This centre focuses on an area in which Malaysia has already achieved a competitive national edge and aims to be a national resource for Malaysia, assisting this country's regional leadership in policy formulation and implementation to meet the need for ASEAN effectiveness, including in wider regional leadership.

CARUM was formed in January 2015 and as a research centre has four primary functions, or foci:

1. Policy input - the centre aims to incorporate political advisory roles in a range of areas (not limited to economics and security or defense, but also education, language policy and other 'socio-cultural' areas)
2. Academic (research programmes) – the centre assumes multiple and multidisciplinary academic roles in promoting research and talks, thus synergizing with and more so mediating existing centres or institutes. It focuses not only on ASEAN but also on regionalism as a global phenomenon.

3. Centre for ASEAN Network and ASEAN-led Networks- the centre aspires to coordinate work undertaken in ASEAN studies elsewhere in the region. In addition, in the spirit of ASEAN, the centre interacts with outside entities (at both this university and other Malaysian and regional institutions) on areas of joint interest relating to the three ASEAN pillars. Research with or on the EU, for instance, is not only encouraged but also actively pursued and developed.
4. Development Programmes – the centre also aims to execute various programmes that are able to raise awareness not only among intellectuals, but focus on the wider community (community engagement) whilst promoting “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”. Various forms of seminars, symposiums, discourse, and conferences are organized with invited experts from within and outside the country. In addition, training programmes for academics, graduates, and government officials will be equally developed under this facility.

As a university research centre, it brings together members of staff, visiting scholars and academics across disciplinary boundaries. Broad-based research programmes characterize the development of CARUM. Associate members and visiting scholars at CARUM are distinguished by their inter-disciplinary and multi-national research interests and projects. These range from culture, society, economy, security and politics and other specialists from across a multifarious range of disciplines: health and medicine, dental, information technology, public policy, and more.

CARUM aims to function as a central node in a web of University of Malaya institutions, centres, programmes and initiatives. Like ASEAN itself, it reaches out to a range of disciplinary concerns and also geographical areas and highlights the outward looking ASEAN, which plays a pivotal role in the international fora, strengthening relations with its dialogue partners and other regional organisations.

The centre conducts research on the three communities of ASEAN and covers all aspects of ASEAN culture and society, economy,

security and politics as well as ASEAN's broader regional endeavours. It aspires to be a central meeting hub for scholars from Malaysia, the ASEAN region, the wider Asia and the world. CARUM also works closely with government agencies and the business community at high levels, and locks in partnerships with existing ASEAN-focused institutes and institutions in Malaysia and the ASEAN region, as well as centres for the study of regionalism elsewhere.

Some of the current research activities conducted by the centre include identity perspectives in building a regional community, transboundary haze in ASEAN, health behaviour among students in ASEAN countries, capacity building in education in Cambodia and Laos, non-traditional security challenges dimension in ASEAN, English as a lingua franca in ASEAN and ASEAN higher education harmonization.

As there has been more focus on economic and political-security research in general, what can be considered practical regionalism has been given a bigger focus than identity regionalism<sup>1</sup> by people researching on ASEAN and ASEAN regionalism. This centre aims to redress this imbalance and therefore highlights the cultural context and regional awareness that is important in any region building effort.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

As an entity that aspires to spearhead regional fields of research, this centre aims to assist with the formulation of governmental policies that involves the regional cooperation in ASEAN. The centre strives to produce high quality research and strengthen collaboration with external agencies including international institutions that encompass regional forms of research. In addition, it aims to expand the intra ASEAN mobility amongst ASEAN researchers whilst increasing the quality level of research output with the existence of an on-going cooperation network. The centre will also optimize the potential expert resources to establish a firm area of expertise within this region that focuses on interdisciplinary research. As its name suggests, the centre is interested in not only studies on ASEAN but also of ASEAN and other regions. Hence, comparative studies on ASEAN-EU, ASEAN-Africa, ASEAN-Latin America are also of interest.

## ACTIVITIES

In 2015, CARUM hosted a number of activities that ranged from a symposium, forum, international conference, regional workshop, roundtable discussion and dialogue session. These events covered a wide range of issues such as the role of higher education from the Malaysian and ASEAN perspective, arbitration discourse and practices in Asia, promoting human rights among the youth in ASEAN, discussions on transboundary environmental pollution and women in leadership in ASEAN.

A number of the events were in collaboration with local and international higher education institutions, governmental units, governmental ministries and regional and international bodies. To date, the centre has established connections with the Asia-Europe Institute (AEI), University of Malaya; Asialink and University of Melbourne, Australia; the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy (LKYSPP), National University of Singapore, Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM), Malaysian Association of Applied Linguistics (MAAL), Kuala Lumpur Regional Centre for Arbitration (KLRCA), Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia (MoHE), Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia (MoFA), International Association of Universities (IAU), ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR), among others.

The centre's list of activities include the following:

1. Symposium on Hybridity in Higher Education, 6 April 2015
2. The ASEAN Higher Education Forum, 9-10 June 2015
3. International Conference on Arbitration Discourse and Practices in Asia, 20-21 August 2015
4. ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR): Regional Workshop on the Role of Youth in Promoting Human Rights in ASEAN: Making Rights a Reality, 30-31 October 2015
5. AEI-JPAS-CARUM Roundtable Discussion on Transboundary Haze Pollution, 5 November 2015
6. The 2015 Asialink Conversations: Women in Leadership, 9-10 December 2015

In organizing these activities, the centre has promoted itself as an ideal partner for international collaboration efforts with the diverse range of themes and topics. Future cooperation efforts appear to be set with the Australian-ASEAN Council and Asialink, a follow-up to the Women in Leadership event held in December 2015; a two week ASEAN Young Scholars Workshop (AYSC) in the month of July 2016 followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Conference on ASEAN Studies 2016 (ICONAS 2016) in collaboration with the Korean Institute for ASEAN Studies (KISEAS). A symposium to reflect on Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship is in the planning stages as well. In addition, CARUM has been involved in the implementation of mobility under the ASEAN Declaration on Higher Education with the MoHE.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

In the little more than a year since CARUM was set up, the centre has played an active role in research, seminars and collaborative activities. The centre plans to organize events such as a seminar on the achievements and challenges in Malaysia's 2015 ASEAN year. It intends to recruit more scholars who will carry out research on areas such as ASEAN approaches to regionalism, how ASEAN engagement is changing national education systems, what challenges remain from a business perspective in creating a single market and workforce for ASEAN and the institutional progress of each of the three ASEAN communities. Topics such as ASEAN states and the South China Seas issue, the role played by Malaysia in ensuring peace in the region, the Rohingya issue in Myanmar as well as refugees and asylum seekers across Asian countries, extremism in the region will also be given due attention. In summary, how are strategic challenges threatening the unity of ASEAN-South China Sea contests, United States-China-Japan-India relations, mass refugee movements, intra-ASEAN territorial and other disputes?

In the sociocultural sphere, unifying tools such as sports and its role in ASEAN community building and how it contributes to ASEAN integration is an important area to pursue. In the domain of education, it is necessary to look into how to create a harmonized platform for coordinated and collaborative actions and operations among the institutions of higher learning. Challenges due to the diverse higher education systems and the lack of compatibility between curricula and

practices warrant long-term educational goals for the ASEAN states. A common bond though is English, accepted as the common working language of ASEAN and often considered as a language of pragmatism. An area worth studying is whether English can contribute towards a sense of regional community with communicative and emotive bonds among its users.

In the longer term, CARUM hopes to be a centre that helps with the formulation of government policies involving ASEAN cooperation. It aims to facilitate the strengthening of collaboration with other agencies including international institutions covering research in the region. That at the same time would enhance intra-ASEAN mobility among researchers around the world and lead to contributions towards increasing the level of production of ASEAN and ASEAN related publications with the creation of research networks. It would also optimize the use of expert resources and expertise for research areas deemed important for ASEAN, establish a national and international referral centre for data collection on ASEAN and contribute towards achieving the vision and mission of ASEAN in accordance with national priorities.

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### **NOTE**

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Milner, “Regionalism in Asia,” in J. Love (ed.), *The Far East and Australasia 2015* (46<sup>th</sup> Ed.), Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, pp. 68-76.

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