

U.S. EDUCATIONAL CO-OPERATION WITH ASEAN FROM 2021 TO 2024

HỢP TÁC GIÁO DỤC HOA KỲ VỚI ASEAN GIAI ĐOẠN 2021 - 2024

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Abstract - Over the past 45 years since establishing the Dialogue Partnership, bilateral cooperation between the United States and ASEAN has been continuously strengthened and expanded across various fields, particularly in education. The importance of educational cooperation was further emphasized when both sides decided to elevate their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2022, leading to the introduction of several new collaborative initiatives. This article analyzes the implementation of U.S. educational cooperation activities with ASEAN from 2021 to 2024 period under the administration of President Joe Biden, assessing the achievements and the impact of these initiatives on bilateral relations. Additionally, the article examines key foundations for the future development of educational cooperation, as well as broader multi-sectoral collaboration between the two parties.

Key words - ASEAN; U.S. educational cooperation; Biden administration; soft power; bilateral relations

1. Rationale

The rapid economic growth of Asian countries has reshaped the global landscape, ushering in a potential Asian-centric world order that influences economics, commerce, and education. Within this context, ASEAN's international education has undergone significant transformations to align with the demands of economic competitiveness at both individual and national levels. This shift has also led to increased privatization in education and greater integration of global educational networks. Major powers, such as China, Japan, and EU countries, have utilized public diplomacy to strengthen their influence in ASEAN through educational grants, incentives, and the establishment of branch campuses. These efforts have contributed to fostering partnerships and advancing educational development within ASEAN.

In response to these dynamics, the U.S. launched the U.S. Mission to ASEAN in 2010, becoming the first non-ASEAN country to establish a dedicated Mission in the region. This initiative underscores the U.S.'s commitment to strengthening ties with ASEAN by facilitating educational cooperation programs and academic exchanges, thereby contributing to the internationalization of ASEAN education [1].

Educational cooperation programs, such as those promoted by the U.S., play a pivotal role in enhancing cultural and linguistic understanding among participants-primarily students, scholars, and young leaders-who are likely to influence future foreign policy decisions. These programs aim to promote mutual understanding by

Tóm tắt - Trong hơn 45 năm kể từ khi thiết lập quan hệ Đối tác Đối thoại, hợp tác song phương giữa Hoa Kỳ và ASEAN không ngừng được củng cố và mở rộng trên nhiều lĩnh vực, đặc biệt là giáo dục. Tầm quan trọng của hợp tác giáo dục càng được khẳng định khi hai bên quyết định nâng cấp quan hệ lên Đối tác Hợp tác Toàn diện vào năm 2022, kéo theo sự ra đời của nhiều sáng kiến hợp tác mới. Bài viết này phân tích thực tiễn triển khai các hoạt động hợp tác giáo dục của Hoa Kỳ với ASEAN trong giai đoạn 2021-2024 dưới thời chính quyền Tổng thống Joe Biden, đánh giá kết quả đạt được và tác động của những hoạt động này đối với quan hệ song phương. Đồng thời, bài viết cũng xem xét những tiền đề quan trọng cho sự phát triển hợp tác giáo dục nói riêng và hợp tác đa lĩnh vực giữa hai bên trong tương lai.

Từ khóa - ASEAN; hợp tác giáo dục Hoa Kỳ; chính quyền Tổng thống Biden; quan hệ song phương

exploring local communities' achievements and challenges, fostering academic growth through research and self-learning, and broadening participants' horizons by immersing them in diverse cultural and social contexts. Beyond knowledge acquisition, these programs nurture essential soft skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, independent thinking, and leadership, while also fostering international networks and a deeper awareness of global challenges.

Such educational exchanges reduce ideological conflicts and promote shared values among nations. Education, as a cornerstone of society, impacts cultural, social, and political dimensions. It lays a foundation for individual health, employability, and self-esteem while driving national economic growth and political stability. On a global scale, education addresses critical issues like climate change, food security, conflict resolution, and pandemics [2]. Against this backdrop, the research explores U.S. educational cooperation with ASEAN from 2021 to 2024, focusing on its impacts on the U.S. and ASEAN individually, and on U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relations as a whole under Biden's presidency.

2. U.S. educational cooperation policy with ASEAN from 2021 to 2024

2.1. Overview of U.S. educational cooperation policy with ASEAN from 2021 to 2024

The longstanding U.S. - ASEAN partnership has consistently reaffirmed a shared commitment to strengthening people-to-people ties by investing in

education. As highlighted in the 2022 ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit Joint Vision Statement, both parties pledged to support human capital and youth development through educational initiatives and exchange opportunities, with particular attention to diverse populations, including vulnerable and marginalized groups [3].

In October 2021 at a virtual summit between the U.S. and ASEAN leaders, President Joe Biden announced \$100 million to support programs to strengthen U.S. -ASEAN cooperation. This amount was leveled up to another \$150 million of initiatives in the budget to expand the U.S. - ASEAN strategic partnership, which will go toward economic, climate, health, and education programs, as reiterated in President Joe Biden's remark [4]. Having said that, education is always prioritized in bilateral cooperation between two sides.

2.2. The practical implementation of U.S. educational cooperation activities towards ASEAN from 2021 to 2024

U.S. - ASEAN relations have steadily strengthened over the years, with education playing a crucial role in deepening these ties. Each year, the U.S. allocates over \$70 million to support educational and cultural exchanges, aiming to foster mutual understanding, cooperation, and lasting friendships between the two sides. Notably, over the past four years under the Biden administration, the U.S. and ASEAN have made significant efforts to enhance educational collaboration through a variety of programs and initiatives, following the commitments made at the 2022 ASEAN-U.S. Special Summit. Some initiatives build upon the foundations laid by previous administrations, while others have been newly introduced. Key educational programs implemented between 2021 and 2024 to strengthen U.S. - ASEAN relations through expanded engagement include doubling the size of the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) within three years, extending the Billion Futures Scholarship program, doubling the Fulbright U.S. - ASEAN Visiting Scholars program, launching a new program called "U.S. - ASEAN University Connections Initiative" (UCI), expanding English language training programs in Southeast Asia, and establishing the U.S. - ASEAN Institute for Rising Leaders [5] [6] as in the figure below.

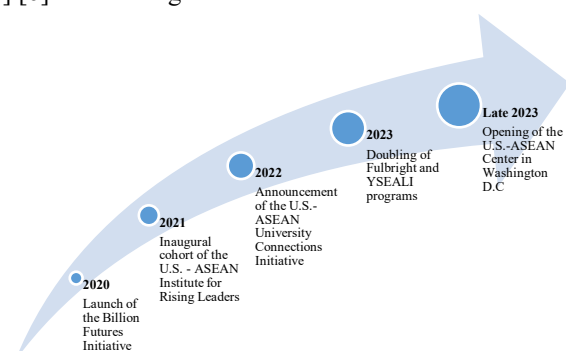


Figure 1. Strengthening U.S. - ASEAN educational ties from 2021-2024: A Timeline

First, Billion Futures Initiative is named with the aim of embodying the connections between a combined one billion citizens of the U.S. and ASEAN on both sides of the

Pacific Ocean through education launched in the second half of 2020. This Initiative embarked on its journey with the first cohort in 2021. For FY2023, the initiative provided 90 additional grants for students from ASEAN countries and Timor-Leste to study at U.S. universities through the Fulbright and the Global UGRAD programs. Additionally, the initiative also provides another 5-year \$19 million Lincoln Scholarship Program in Myanmar via the U.S. International Development Agency to support 135 young leaders from ethnic and religious backgrounds to pursue master's degrees in the U.S [6].

Second, the U.S. - ASEAN Institute for Rising Leaders innovative program at the School of Advanced International Studies: The Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) was launched. This program was created for mid-career public service professionals to sharpen their academic and policymaking skills. In 2023, 31 fellows from 10 ASEAN countries marked the very first and inaugural cohort of the program. This event reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to ASEAN centrality and support for the ASEAN outlook on an Indo-Pacific region that remains free and open, connected, prosperous, secure, and resilient. One of the best ways to support and emphasize this vision as said by Finer, the National Security Council official at the program reception is by fostering connections with the next generation of ASEAN leaders through people-to-people initiatives like the Institute for Rising Leaders [8].

Third, the U.S. - ASEAN Connections Initiative (UCI) was implemented under the U.S. Department of State's IDEAS Program, announced in 2022. The UCI, in partnership with the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA), provides an array of virtual and in-person training for leaders from various higher education institutions in the U.S. and ASEAN. Key insights of activities in this Initiative are professional development and networking opportunities to foster sustainable international academic partnerships and the two-way exchange of students, scholars, and researchers from ASEAN and U.S. institutions. In late 2022 and early 2023, there were 3 virtual trainings taking place. These trainings included (i) introducing U.S. Higher Education to an ASEAN audience whose intention was building partnerships with U.S.-based institutions, (ii) exploring university partnership models with ASEAN institutions, and (iii) providing leaders with key insights about international strategic partnerships with an emphasis on U.S. - and ASEAN-based institutions. Besides online webinars, UCI fellows and the Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs met in person in Washington D.C. in early 2023 in a professional networking event in which professionals had opportunities to share and exchange ideas on better educational solutions for the U.S. and ASEAN [9]. The latest Higher Education Partnership Toolkit which was developed by AIEA and the IDEAS program to promote research development, dual or joint degrees in a variety of fields between the U.S. and ASEAN was just published in March last year [9].

Fourth, doubling sizes of Fulbright and YSEALI programs is a focus during Joe Biden's presidency. Even though Fulbright and YSEALI are initiatives launched under previous presidencies, they were expected to be implemented more fully and comprehensively under President Joe Biden's administration. The meaning of doubling the size of the YSEALI program means doubling the number of YSEALI professional and academic fellowship exchange opportunities from 450 in 2023 to 900 young leaders by 2025. Alongside the YSEALI network members, on the margins of the U.S. - ASEAN Summit, the U.S. has also decided to double the number of Fulbright U.S. - ASEAN Visiting Scholars, with 20 fellows selected from ASEAN countries to come to the U.S. during the AY 2023-2024, making a total number of more than 500 scholars joining the program till 2024. While the YSEALI emphasizes youth leadership and development who are future regional leaders, the Fulbright is designed to increase collaboration through research projects among ASEAN and U.S. scholars, with a shared focus on U.S. - ASEAN cooperation and ASEAN priorities [6].

Additionally, in late 2023, the U.S. - ASEAN Center opened in Washington, D.C., through a public-private partnership with Arizona State University. This initiative follows the commitments made during the 2022 U.S. - ASEAN Summit, where the Biden administration pledged to enhance U.S. relations with ASEAN. The center serves as a key hub for deepening engagement between the U.S. and ASEAN partners. Among its five core activities, as outlined by the White House, strengthening collaboration in the cultural and educational sectors is a primary focus.

As mentioned above, there are a variety of activities implemented through education, leadership development, and academic collaboration. By expanding flagship programs such as YSEALI and Fulbright, launching new initiatives like the UCI, and establishing the U.S. - ASEAN Institute for Rising Leaders, these efforts have fostered deeper connections between students, scholars, and professionals across ASEAN and the U.S.

3. The impacts of educational cooperation activities on U.S. - ASEAN relations from 2021 to 2024

3.1. To the U.S.

The signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia in 2010 marked a new phase in U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relations, demonstrating that the U.S. recognized its future prosperity and security as closely tied to the Asia-Pacific region. At the U.S. - ASEAN Summit in November 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden stated that ASEAN is at the heart of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy, and the U.S. - ASEAN Comprehensive Strategic Partnership represents the beginning of a new era between the two sides. The U.S. has identified its interests in the diverse region, including security, political, and economic interests, alongside competition for influence with China and the expansion of its soft power. Thus, close cooperation with ASEAN across various fields, including education, will bring significant benefits to the U.S. on

multiple fronts [2], particularly in cultural and social cooperation.

In the cultural and social domain, the U.S. carried out numerous cultural diplomacy activities with ASEAN during the second decade of the 21st century, which have continued under the Biden administration. These activities have been concretized in various areas, including education. U.S. Embassies, Consulates General in ASEAN member states, and the U.S. Mission to ASEAN serve as coordinating bodies for educational exchanges and cooperation with ASEAN and its member countries. Projects, grants, and capacity-building initiatives for students, scholars, and researchers during the 2021-2024 period, such as UCI, the Billion Futures Initiative, and the Rising Leaders program, are notable efforts funded by the U.S. government. These initiatives and programs aim to provide intellectual and material resources to support these knowledge groups in accessing education while also fostering a greater understanding of the U.S. among ASEAN citizens. Through these efforts, American culture, values, and identity are widely promoted, shaping perspectives in ways that align with U.S. interests.

A fruitful cooperation in the education sector lays a solid foundation and functions as a symbiotic factor for successful collaboration in other areas. This foundation helps strengthen the U.S. presence in Southeast Asia in particular and in the broader Asia-Pacific region, aligning with the U.S. strategy outlined in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and reiterated at the 2022 U.S. - ASEAN Summit.

3.2. To ASEAN

The U.S. has always been regarded as a nation with a remarkable combination of power compared to any other nation, contributing to the position of the number one great power globally in decades. For ASEAN, U.S. support in education and development during the 2021-2024 period has brought numerous practical benefits, contributing to improving the quality of education, creating equal opportunities, and promoting comprehensive development for member states. The initiatives and cooperative programs between the U.S. and ASEAN have not only enhanced the education system but also contributed to the development of a high-quality workforce in the region.

One of the most significant impacts has been the improvement of education quality through exchange programs, training, and research support. The U.S. has funded various scholarship programs for students, lecturers, and researchers from ASEAN countries, such as The Rising Leaders Program, providing them with access to advanced education, fostering creative thinking, and equipping them with essential skills to contribute to their nations' development. Programs like the Fulbright Scholarship and the YSEALI continue to receive strong support and increased participation, benefiting thousands of students, scholars, and young leaders across the region. A recent report by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs under the Department of States indicates that 64% of YSEALI alumni agreed that the YSEALI program contributed positively to their professional and academic goals by enhancing their knowledge and skills and

expanding their ability to collaborate with others in their field, while 65% of alumni reported that their academic, professional, and personal outcomes are positively influenced by relationships formed through YSEALI [7]. These initiatives have helped ASEAN cultivate a generation of potential leaders with innovative mindsets and the ability to address regional challenges. Additionally, the cooperation on education has enabled young leaders to connect, exchange ideas, and learn from top U.S. experts. The huge technical and intellectual support for education helps ASEAN keep pace with global technological development trends, contribute to building a knowledge-based economy, and promote innovation in the region, ultimately contributing to ASEAN's sustainable development.

Additionally, regarding ASEAN's perspective on educational cooperation with external partners, education in general and higher education in particular, which has seen rapid growth and internationalization over the past decade, has been seen as one of the crucial areas facilitating ASEAN integration. The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025 advocates the promotion of "greater people - to - people interaction and mobility within and outside ASEAN" through an innovative ASEAN approach to [higher] education [10]. Besides, also in this Blueprint, in the E.2 section which is Towards a creative, Innovative and Responsive ASEAN, many strategic measures are mentioned, some of which focus on enhancing the competitiveness of ASEAN human resources through the promotion of life-long learning, strengthening regional and global cooperation in enhancing the quality and competitiveness of higher education institutions, and promoting ASEAN as a center for human resource development and training [10]. As can be seen the U.S. cooperation with ASEAN in the education sector helps ASEAN achieve bigger goals regarding educational development as stated in the Blueprint.

3.3. To U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relations

As of 2023, beyond YSEALI, the U.S. engages with ASEAN member countries through various initiatives, including high school, university, and professional and cultural exchange programs, as well as grants. The Department of State has awarded 269 grants to alumni of U.S. exchange programs from ASEAN member states, conducted 7,500 programs across 51 American Spaces in the region, and nominated over 48,000 students, researchers, and professionals for U.S. government-funded academic and professional opportunities. These efforts highlight the U.S.' ongoing commitment to empowering young leaders and supporting the future prosperity and security of Southeast Asia [6]. Educational cooperation activities have had a significant impact on the comprehensive U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relationship. As a form of soft power, educational collaboration with ASEAN has brought positive effects not only for ASEAN and the U.S. individually but also for the broader U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relations.

Firstly, educational cooperation is considered an important component in the comprehensive strategic

partnership between the two sides. Strengthening cooperation and implementing initiatives in the field of education also builds trust and mutual understanding between ASEAN and the U.S., enabling the continuation of initiatives in other areas, such as economics, politics-security, and non-traditional security issues.

Secondly, cooperation in the field of education helps reinforce the U.S.' commitment to ASEAN's central role in regional architecture, especially in the context of increasing volatility in Southeast Asia and, more broadly, the Indo-Pacific region. The rising influence of China, along with the deepening engagement of major powers in the region, further underscores the necessity of U.S. - ASEAN cooperation. For the U.S., close collaboration with ASEAN in education demonstrates its commitment to ASEAN and its member states.

Each program and initiative implemented has its own goals either directly or indirectly contributing to the better U.S. - ASEAN bilateral relations. For instance, as Arizona State University President Michael Crow stated in a press release the U.S. - ASEAN Center is "the next step, and the [U.S. - ASEAN] Center we will extend our collective programs and partnership across ASEAN region" [11]. The Center not only does the creation of a new chapter for the University's engagement with ASEAN, but also reflects the U.S.'s commitment to supporting ASEAN centrality in its Indo - Pacific foreign policy through comprehensive engagement with ASEAN, and education is part of it.

3.4. Challenges of U.S. educational cooperation towards ASEAN from 2021 to 2024 and beyond

While U.S. educational cooperation towards ASEAN offers numerous benefits, it also presents challenges and potential unintended consequences. The most concerned issue is the sustainability of funding as many partnerships rely heavily on short-term grants from the U.S. government, or even programs that may not support long-term or are vulnerable to policy changes executed by the U.S. president. Recipients or beneficiaries may be affected by abrupt shifts in funding priorities, leading to discontinued programs, resource shortages, and disruptions in ongoing educational initiatives. This instability can hinder the long-term impact of collaboration and create uncertainty for institutions and students who depend on these programs.

Another challenge is the dependency on U.S. educational frameworks, approaches, and principles, which may not always align with ASEAN's unique but diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts. Over-reliance on American learning models and values, however, can lead to a lack of locally driven innovations and policies that better reflect national and regional needs upon their return to home communities.

Additionally, the home country context in the post-program phase may also be a concern for program alumni. Those who are beneficiaries of the U.S.-backed educational programs are undoubtedly critical thinkers and exceptional in their fields, and they are willing to apply

lessons learned from the programs they benefit. Nevertheless, their home context may present challenges in this regard, due to an unsupportive political climate and lack of funding for post-program projects, hindering the fellows from creating long-lasting benefits for their communities.

These challenges impose concerns on stakeholders who should work toward more balanced and sustainable educational collaborations that genuinely benefit ASEAN sustainably.

4. Policy implications for Viet Nam

4.1. Viet Nam's position in relations with the U.S. in the region

Vietnam has increasingly affirmed its position and voice on the international stage and is one of the countries with a stable and strong relationship with the U.S. in the Indo-Pacific region. The elevation of bilateral ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership further underscores the strength of this relationship, built on mutual benefits. Among the 10 ASEAN Member States, Vietnam ranks as the top sender of international students to the U.S. and was the 5th largest globally in 2023, with 21,900 students studying abroad. Speaking at the Brookings Institution in March 2024, Vietnam's Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son reaffirmed that academia serves as a driving force in the normalization and advancement of bilateral relations [6]. Additionally, in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), President Joe Biden highlighted Vietnam as a key regional partner alongside India, Indonesia, and others, emphasizing the need to strengthen ties with Vietnam to help achieve the objective of "building connections within and beyond the region" [4].

4.2. Policy suggestions for Viet Nam's contribution to a broader ASEAN dynamic

To leverage its regional influence and strengthen bilateral relations with the U.S., contributing to the U.S.'s educational cooperation with a broader ASEAN, Vietnam must make necessary adjustments to sustain its cooperation with the U.S. not only in education but also across various sectors during the new U.S. presidential term, amid significant foreign policy shifts and uncertainties surrounding President Donald Trump's leadership. Accordingly, actions should be taken by the Vietnamese government and the Party as follows:

Firstly, Viet Nam is advised to continue to cooperate with ASEAN countries to realize the priorities and major directions of Vietnam's education system in particular, and ASEAN's education system in general, as outlined in the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2021-2025, aiming towards the development of a sustainable national and regional education system. Some regional high-level conferences, such as the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting and the East Asia Summit Education Ministers Meeting, with the participation of education ministers from Southeast Asia and East Asia, have actively and diligently coordinated to seek collaboration in implementing projects focused on comprehensive education at all levels. Therefore, Vietnam needs to proactively cooperate closely

with both regional and non-regional countries to learn from and seek suitable initiatives to enhance the quality of education in Vietnam, keeping pace with the rapid development trends today.

Secondly, Viet Nam should continue to strengthen cooperation with the U.S. to promote educational collaboration. This is in line with the trend of increasing international cooperation in education and with the development direction of Vietnam-U.S. relations. Vietnam has identified education as a national priority with the policy of promoting lifelong learning and training high-quality human resources as one of the three strategic breakthroughs. Therefore, continuing to enhance educational cooperation with the U.S. is one of the key focuses of bilateral relations, especially in training high-quality human resources to help Vietnam achieve its development goals.

Thirdly, it is necessary to strengthen efforts to enhance the human resources that meet the requirements for skills, knowledge, and the ability to quickly adapt to the labor environment. The industrial revolution, along with the rapid explosion of AI, has posed a significant challenge to education as both educators and learners must quickly adapt from a traditional knowledge-heavy teaching method to an innovative and creative education system that helps develop comprehensive capabilities for learners, avoiding a sharp disparity in skill levels among labor groups.

5. Conclusion

The U.S.' educational cooperation with ASEAN during the 2021-2024 period under President Joe Biden's leadership has been implemented through a variety of initiatives and activities. Many new initiatives have been launched alongside the continuation of programs established by previous administrations. These efforts primarily focus on youth development, strengthening people-to-people connections, enhancing research capacity for scholars and intellectuals, and expanding the range of beneficiaries of exchange and support programs.

The U.S. contributions to improving the quality of education in ASEAN have been systematically implemented, aiming to build the capacity of ASEAN citizens - those who will shape the region's future - while also strengthening bilateral ties between the U.S. and ASEAN. These initiatives not only enhance educational opportunities but also support ASEAN's broader development goals, ensuring a future of shared prosperity, innovation, and collaboration. As these programs continue to expand, they will play a crucial role in shaping the next generation of leaders and deepening U.S. - ASEAN relations in an increasingly interconnected world.

The efforts in educational cooperation not only further reinforce long-term academic partnerships and cultural exchanges with ASEAN but also help solidify the image of the U.S. as a proactive global leader in enhancing the capabilities of ASEAN citizens, reaffirming its strong presence in the region.

Sustaining U.S. - ASEAN educational collaboration post-2024 requires a multifaceted approach that embraces emerging technologies and global challenges. By fostering AI-driven education through joint research, faculty exchanges, and curriculum development, both sides can prepare students for the digital future. Expanding research collaborations will enhance sustainability education and policy impact. Strengthening long-term academic partnerships, and securing sustainable funding will ensure lasting cooperation. Through these strategic actions, U.S. and ASEAN institutions can drive innovation, enhance global competitiveness, and create a more resilient and interconnected education ecosystem.

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