

European Union's Public Diplomacy to ASEAN through the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE) in 2024

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE) in 2024 in supporting European Union public diplomacy towards ASEAN. The main focus in this research is to analyze how the SCOPE-HE programme can contribute in improving the quality of higher education level in ASEAN communities and provide pathways for accessibility and inclusiveness of education, and facilitate the development of graduate skills for the labor market through student exchanges between EU and ASEAN universities. This research adopts Joseph S. Nye. Jr's soft power theory with a focus on the dimensions of public diplomacy. The research method uses the descriptive qualitative method with data collection technique in the form of literature studies and analysis of official documents from European Union and ASEAN and other related sources. Findings of this research show that the SCOPE-HE programme is implemented through enhanced student and academic mobility, strengthening networks between universities in the European Union and ASEAN, and building a connected and skilled workforce. This cooperation also involves various parties such as NUFFIC and DAAD as international organizations although the main funding comes from the European Union itself.

Keywords: SCOPE-HE, Soft Power, Public Diplomacy, European Union, ASEAN.

INTRODUCTION

Within the sustainable development framework, quality education is one of the goals to achieve social and economic advanced globally (SDGs 4) and supported by involvement of international actors as the partnerships for the goals (SDGs 17). In this context, European Union and ASEAN have engaged in collaboration across various sectors. Strategically, European Union utilize the soft power through public diplomacy as the instrument to strengthen image and position in Southeast Asia. Joseph S. Nye. Jr., in his book "*Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*" (2004), describe that soft power is the country's ability to affecting other countries to achieve the same goals with collaboration or partnership instead of the military involvement. Josep Nye also explain that soft power can be exercised through several ways, one of which is public diplomacy. That can be achieved through three dimensions: daily communication, strategic communication, and development of long-term relationships by collaboration, scholarship, exchange, workshop, conference, and access to the media channels. In those context, European Union seeks to build a long-term partnership with ASEAN which education become the primary pillars through the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE). The SCOPE-HE programme

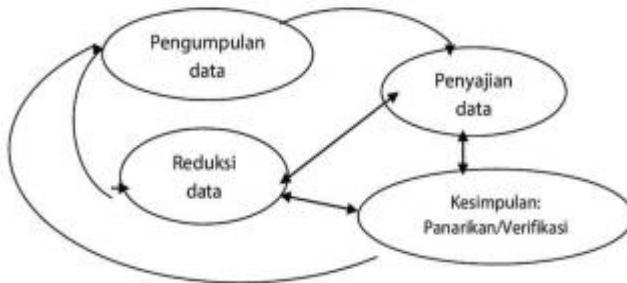
launched in February 2024 and planned to be end in January 2028, represent EU initiative with EU itself as the main funding and involve several partners such as NUFFIC and DAAD (ASEAN, 2024). Significant challenges to access and quality of higher education in ASEAN, subsequently led to the development of EU-ASEAN partnership in the education field. This highlights the crucial role of education in diplomacy particularly for the global-power country like European Union. Based on this statement, the led research question is "How the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE) serve as the tool of European Union's public diplomacy to ASEAN in 2024?".

The previous literature shows that prior to the SCOPE-HE, EU SHARE Programme was already serving as the foundation for the new initiative of strategic partnership. The EU-SHARE Programme was designed to support the harmonization of higher education in the ASEAN region by leveraging relevant experience and expertise from Europe's Bologna Process, the ERASMUS mobility scheme, and the establishment of the European Higher Education Area. This program also aimed to foster mutual recognition and student mobility among higher education institutions in ASEAN to strengthen people-to-people connectivity. ASEAN and EU jointly prepared a 2.5-year extension of the programme until 2021. During this extension period, SHARE focused on strengthening ASEAN ownership, institutionalization, and the sustainability program outcomes (European Union External Action, 2019). Based on the previous publication and literature, the research of SCOPE-HE is a new phenomenon to be studied, especially because this programme is the expansion of the EU-SHARE Programme which was newly launched in 2024 (ASEAN, 2024).

The SCOPE-HE serves as an affective public diplomacy instrument of European Union especially on reinforcing EU soft power in ASEAN, by focusing on enhancing the quality, inclusiveness, and graduate skill through the student exchange, and strengthening university network. This mutually benefits for ASEAN's higher education and workforce skills, while EU's strengthening its global image in international stage. This study aims to examine the role of SCOPE-HE in the context of EU's public diplomacy as an effective measure to enhance the image of the EU and its contribution to the achievement of SDGs 4 and 17.

METHODS

This research uses the qualitative descriptive methods, emphasizing in depth-understanding on a specific phenomenon by examining each case studied in a greater detail (Sahir, 2021). Data resources include primary and secondary through the literature review, document analysis, and official data from ASEAN, EU, and every related entity. The data analysis technique used in this research is following the Miles, Huberman & Saldana interactive model (2014), that is separate by three steps; data reduction, presentation, and drawing conclusion.



Picture 1. Data Interactive Model by Miles, Huberman & Saldana

Source: (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

The following below is the explanation about the data interactive model:

1. Data Collection

Data collection is the process of acquiring information that allows a researcher to build an analysis, draw conclusions, and formulate actions. This stage includes presenting data in a narrative form, structured logically and systematically according to the research findings. Thus, the information obtained becomes easier to understand and can be used as a basis for further analysis.

2. Data Reduction

Data reduction is the stage of selecting and simplifying various pieces of information that relevant to the research. This process serves as a part of qualitative analysis to sharpen, categorize, and focus the data, while also eliminating unessential information. Data reduction allows researchers to gain a clearer, more directed, and more in-depth overview of the research subject.

3. Data Presentation

Data presentation refers to the process of compiling research in a format that makes it easy for researcher and reader to understand the patterns and meanings contained. On qualitative research, presentation can be done through brief description, charts, table, or other forms of presentation that support to drawing conclusion.

4. Penarikan Kesimpulan dan Verifikasi

Conclusion drawing is the final stage of the data analysis process. Conclusions are obtained through the processing of data that has been reduced and displayed, and are then verified based on the empirical evidence found in the field. At this stage, the researcher formulates the final interpretation concerning the research focus on the European Union's Public Diplomacy to ASEAN through the EU-ASEAN Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education Programme (SCOPE-HE) in 2024.

Public Diplomacy Theory

Public diplomacy is a conceptual theory from Joseph S. Nye Jr., which is derived from the soft power theory. Soft power theory was introduced by Joseph Nye in the latest 1980's, he explains that approach from other country nowadays is involve various aspects and other international actors, not only depends on hard power. Based on Joseph Nye's book, soft power is an ability to change other's preference indirect way. In the country's context, other countries perceive that a country has a good values and good access, can be a motivating for the other countries to follows. Through the soft power, a country can influence another country to want a similar outcome without a military threat, instead, they promote collaboration and partnership (Nye, 2004). Joseph S. Nye Jr., explains that public diplomacy is a part of soft power framework that has three dimensions. First dimension contains daily communication which explain the context of foreign and domestic policy decision in the international sphere and make sure that the policy can be delivered and understood abroad. Second dimension explains the strategic communication that can be built through symbolic events or messages from time to time, similar to politic campaign or ads with the aim to promote the government ideas or policies. Last dimension is developing long-term bilateral relations through the cooperation, scholarship, exchange, workshop, conference, and access to media channels (Nye, 2004). Referring to those three dimensions, SCOPE-HE can be categorized as one of the ways to achieve EU's public diplomacy goals to ASEAN through the education-based collaboration. This collaboration aimed to enhance the access and inclusiveness of higher education in Southeast Asia through enhancing student and academic mobility, strengthening EU-ASEAN university network, and building a connected and skilled workforce (ASEAN, 2024).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Enhancing Student and Academic Mobility

One of the SCOPE-HE goals is to enhance student and academic mobility by facilitating movement between European Union and ASEAN's university with aims to achieve mutual recognition of qualifications. This will create more opportunities and international experiences and will contribute to more dynamic regional knowledge exchange. The mobility is carried out through efforts to mutually recognize qualifications/academic credit both within ASEAN and between EU and ASEAN that complete the Erasmus+ programme, in line with relevant strategy and action plan ASEAN in this field. Seeking for international mobility opportunities and understanding the capacity building in ASEAN is crucial not only for implementing new and innovative solution in higher education, but will also lead to higher quality and competitiveness in higher education system and VET ASEAN community (ASEAN, 2024).

SCOPE-HE Programme is an expanded of EU-SHARE and also serves as a supporter of the previous strategic collaboration between EU and ASEAN like Erasmus+. Based on the publication report from European Commission, student mobility between university in Europe has been widely facilitated by long-term mobility named "International Credit Mobility", and accompanied by capacity building for undergraduate student and academic by Participatory and Integrative Support for Agricultural Initiative, Improving internationalisation practices in south Asian higher education, workshop and project-based global (European Commission, 2020). SCOPE-HE itself has a framework that almost similar to collaboration between EU-ASEAN in strategic partnership. The increase of student and academic mobility also carried out in a similar way to Erasmus+, but the expected output requires this programme to focus more on capacity building through the participation and partnership between university in ASEAN and EU.

Strengthening EU-ASEAN University Networks

SCOPE-HE will encourage universities to collaborate on addressing global issues by promoting technologies and scientific cooperation. ASEAN member states have invested in research facilities, enhance the research capacity, and promote creativity. In order to create the opportunities for joint research projects, knowledge sharing, and expertise exchanges, SCOPE-HE will build upon previous joint research projects already initiated in the fields of health, agriculture, renewable energy, and environmental conservation. This programme will also encourage the new or ongoing collaboration and partnership between universities. EU Ambassador of ASEAN, Sujiro Seam stated that research and innovation are one of the crucial aspects of the SCOPE-HE program's implementation. There are three university clusters selected from 120 program proposals submitted. The EU-ASEAN cross-regional relations, especially in research universities where university networks are an effective and sustainable step in tackling global challenges. Seam also highlighted the EU's research and innovation programme, Horizon Europe, with a

budget of €95.5 billion, and encouraged researchers from ASEAN to take advantage of the opportunity to participate in this programme.

The strengthening of inter-university networks under SCOPE-HE has already yielded several results. There have been official meetings of the three newly selected research clusters under the SCOPE-HE Academic Connectivity Grant to enhance research collaboration. First, a program with six institutions from France, Germany, Indonesia, and the Philippines are collaborating on the GreenTrans-EDU initiative, led by Ilmenau University of Technology in Germany, which aims to promote sustainability through research and teaching. In Indonesia, specifically on May 16, 2025, Universitas Pancasila received a visit from partner institutions from Technische Universität Ilmenau (Germany), Université de Technologie de Compiègne (France), University of Applied Science Erfurt (Germany), and Mindanao State University (Philippines) to conduct an International Research Collaboration on the theme GreenTrans-Edu: Towards Green Transformation in Higher Education. As part of a series of tridharma activities within the GreenTrans-Edu and EU-ASEAN program, the GreenTrans-Edu team visited the Edu-Techno Park of the Faculty of Engineering at Universitas Pancasila to directly review the sustainable program managed by the SDGs Center of the Faculty of Engineering at Universitas Pancasila (SDGs Centre Engineering Faculty of Universitas Pancasila, 2025).

Another successfully implemented program is DIGIHAZ. To address the increasing danger of natural disasters, the DIGIHAZ project, led by the University of Alicante in Spain, aims to improve research capabilities among six higher education institutions in Spain, Greece, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In Malaysia and the Philippines, natural disasters have caused significant losses in the past, and their impact is expected to increase in the future due to climate change. The DIGIHAZ project seeks to address these challenges by encouraging enhanced research in Filipino and Malaysian universities so mitigation efforts. This will be realized through the development of high-quality doctoral programs focused on digital transformation for natural disaster management, as well as by providing specialized training to researchers in this field. As a result, they can leverage the latest advances in big data analysis, machine learning, the Internet of Things, data analytics, and computational modeling, as well as acquire skills in applying these methodologies for natural disaster modeling and disaster risk reduction (University of Alicante, 2025).

Finally, the STABLE program involves five institutions from Germany, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Netherlands working together to modernize marine science education and promote the Blue Economy, under the leadership of IPB University in Bogor, Indonesia. The Faculty of Fisheries and Marine Science (FPIK) at IPB University is the only higher education institution from the Southeast Asian/ASEAN region to have successfully won the Highly Competitive EU-ASEAN SCOPE Grant on the theme Higher Education Connectivity – Blue Economy. Meanwhile, the Digital Transformation theme was won by a university in Spain, and the Blue Economy theme was won by a university in Germany. These three universities were then appointed as cluster leads. Recently, the FPIK IPB University also sent a team consisting of Prof. Hefni Effendi, Prof. Mala Nurilmala, and Firsta Kusuma Yudha, M.Sc. to participate in a series of workshops and discussions with university representatives from the European Union and ASEAN.

Located at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Jakarta, Prof. Hefni presented the STABLE Project (Sustainable Blue Economy) (IPB University, 2025). This project represents a higher education partnership aimed at strengthening inter-country collaboration in building a sustainable, inclusive, and knowledge-based blue economy. By bringing together universities from the European Union and ASEAN, this cluster positions them to contribute significantly to the 2030 Agenda for the Sustainable Development Goals Plan (ASEAN, 2025).

Building a Connected and Skilled Workforce

SCOPE-HE has a vision of building connectivity between vocational education institutions and the private sector to enhance the employability of young graduates. This is also done to align Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs with the needs of the labor market. The connectivity built is expected to be a solution for reducing unemployment and bridging skill gaps, which can lead to increased productivity and sustainable development. In this regard, SCOPE-HE facilitates relationships to improve workforce quality, conducts further studies on graduate employability, and provides capacity development tools to strengthen existing regional sectors. SCOPE-HE also collaborates with the private sector to develop VET programs, particularly in enhancing graduate skills in the fields of the environment, promoting inclusivity, and developing digital learning methods. This collaboration aims to build a closer relationship between vocational education and industry, especially in the digitalization and green transition sectors. In this era of globalization, vocational education is the right choice because the practical portion is greater than the theoretical content, which allows graduates to be ready to enter the workforce directly. According to Sujiro Seam, the EU Ambassador to ASEAN, ASEAN is a crucial region that must be developed, and through this program, both parties can increase opportunities in the context of the EU Global Gateway Strategy and sustainable connectivity, which is a key goal of EU-ASEAN cooperation. The focus of this pillar is the improvement and management of vocational education and private sector workforce (Polmasari, 2024). The SCOPE-HE program allocates funding for the development of educational institutions to foster academic connectivity. This funding is targeted at coordinating several institutions that will later design and implement academic connectivity activities in both the EU and ASEAN regions. The funding will be provided during the period of January 2025 – December 2027 with a total of €545,000, which will be focused on three academic areas: Green Transition, Digital Transformation, and Blue Economy. The funding proposals will be directly assessed by a selection committee comprising academics and experts from ASEAN and the EU (EU-ASEAN Strategic Partnerships, 2023). From the total funds provided by the EU, it can be seen that this collaboration is fully supported by many parties, both financially and in the implementation stages, which are backed by NUFFIC and DAAD, institutions that focus on international educational development.

Role of NUFFIC and DAAD on Programme's Implementation

The implementation of this program involves various parties, and the EU and ASEAN are not the only ones responsible. SCOPE-HE is commissioned by the European Union in partnership with ASEAN. Meanwhile, the responsibility for implementing this program falls to NUFFIC (The Dutch organization for internationalization in education), an organization dedicated to the expansion of education internationally. NUFFIC facilitates educational programs from primary and secondary education to higher and vocational education, research, and adult education. Through cooperation with domestic and foreign partners such as the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the European Commission, NUFFIC helps build peaceful and prosperous societies through education (NUFFIC, n.d.). In its implementation, NUFFIC is also accompanied by DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), a German organization that organizes higher education institutions and student bodies that promote international academic exchange and cooperation as a key partner of the SCOPE-HE program (ASEAN, 2024). DAAD is the world's largest funding organization for international student and researcher exchange, with its budget primarily coming from federal funds for various ministries, especially the German Federal Foreign Office, as well as from the European Union and a number of companies, organizations, and foreign governments. In this case, DAAD provides domestic scholarships for students in the Southeast Asian region, especially for Master's or Doctoral studies related to development for individuals who plan to pursue a career in teaching and/or research at higher education institutions funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) (DAAD, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The SCOPE-HE program acts as a bridge for cooperation between the EU and ASEAN, aiming to improve educational quality and with an added focus on vocational and other institutions to develop skilled and well-trained graduates. The program has three main pillars as its key outcomes: student and academic mobility, strengthening inter-university networks, and enhancing vocational education and training. This program is an effective step for EU-ASEAN bilateral relations within a diplomatic framework, especially since SCOPE-HE is an expansion of the previous EU-SHARE cooperation program, which was known to successfully increase student mobility. The cooperation between the EU and ASEAN can therefore be considered an effective public diplomacy effort by the EU, framed within educational collaboration. This is supported by key findings such as increased student mobility, the successful implementation of collaborative programs like the GreenTrans-Edu and DIGIHAZ International Research Collaborations—which serve as examples of strengthened inter-university networks—and the existence of scholarships for Master's and Doctoral studies provided by DAAD. The theories of soft power and public diplomacy are sufficient to explain the effectiveness of the European Union's diplomatic efforts using multi-track diplomacy within a soft power framework. This study does not discuss the long-term impact of the SCOPE-HE program due to data limitations. Therefore, it is hoped that future studies can investigate the long-term impact of this program, for instance, by focusing on statistical

data analysis regarding graduate employment rates, post-graduation income, or specific inter-university mobility data.

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