

**Keynote Address by**  
**H.E. Le Luong Minh, Secretary-General of ASEAN**  
**at the British Council Conference on**  
**“Educating the Next Generation of Workforce: ASEAN Perspectives**  
**on Innovation, Integration and English”**

**24 June 2013**

**Bangkok, Thailand**

Distinguished Participants,  
Ladies and Gentlemen

1. First, allow me to thank the British Council and the Ministry of Education of Thailand for inviting me to address this important Conference. The theme of this Conference is very relevant to ASEAN since it tackles the very same issues we are dealing with, in our Community.
2. The ASEAN Charter, while envisioning an ASEAN with “One Vision, One Identity, One Community”, mandates us to “promote our common ASEAN Identity and a sense of belonging among its peoples in order to achieve its shared destiny, goals and values.<sup>1</sup>”
3. With the diversity in ASEAN reflected in our diverse histories, races, cultures and belief systems, English is an important and indispensable tool to bring our Community closer together.
4. Used as the working language of ASEAN, English enables us to interact with other ASEAN colleagues in our formal meetings as well as day-to-day communications. From these interactions, we are able to get to know better our regional neighbors, their interests, their concerns, as well as their dreams and aspirations. Through English, we are raising our awareness of the ASEAN region and, with the many characteristics we share and hold dear, further strengthening our sense of an ASEAN Community.
5. Over the past decade, we have witnessed an increasing prosperity in ASEAN. According to 2011 ASEAN statistics, the average GDP per capita has grown by 75% from the year 2000. The proportion of the ASEAN population living under PPP \$ 1.25 a day had been halved since 2000, down to 15% in 2010.
6. However, in spite of this growing prosperity, we remain confronted with the challenge of unequal distribution of economic gains. Development gaps still remain between the newer four Member States (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Viet Nam or CLMV) and ASEAN-6. A recent ASEAN study shows that ASEAN-6 children stay in school longer and are more likely to finish their basic education than their CLMV peers. While the mean years of schooling in ASEAN-6 countries is 8, they only range from only 4 to 6 in CLMV countries.

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<sup>1</sup> Art. 35, ASEAN Identity, ASEAN Charter.

7. Since education plays a significant role in narrowing the development gap in ASEAN, this clearly shows the need to invest more in our education sector.

8. With the coming of the ASEAN Community in 2015, we need to prepare our students not only to reap the benefits integration will bring about, but also to face the challenges that it will create. We must prepare them to be working professionals.

9. As part of these integration efforts, last November 2012, ASEAN Member States signed the Agreement on Movement of Natural Persons. This agreement aims to provide the mechanisms to facilitate the mobility of persons engaged in trade in goods, trade in services, and investment. The availability of a skilled and educated labor force has become one of our strengths and has been one of the driving factors that draw investors into the region.

10. Through Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRA) frameworks, we have forged instruments through which one Member State agrees to recognize the education or experience or license granted in another Member State. We have MRAs for persons involved in business services, health services and tourism services.

11. ASEAN has also been liberalizing the restrictions on the provision of educational services across the region. By 2015, we hope to do more by ensuring the free flow of education services and free flow of professionals in the region. With all these integration efforts, we have become an important player in the global supply chain. We are virtually creating an ASEAN labour market.

12. In order to prepare our students and professionals in response to all these ASEAN integration efforts, among other measures, it is imperative that we provide them with opportunities to improve their mastery of the English language, the language of our competitive global job market, the *lingua franca* of ASEAN.

13. With English competency, the employment and promotion possibilities for an ASEAN professional, with comparable knowledge and skills, will no longer be limited to his own country but will also expand to the nine other ASEAN Member States.

14. With this, I am happy to note that the British Council, based in ASEAN Member States, has made available various capacity building programs and other learning platforms to increase opportunities for and employability of our peoples.

15. For our part in ASEAN, I am pleased to share that through various measures in our education sector, we are making significant investments on our people by providing platforms for our students to learn, practice, and improve their English competency while fostering the ASEAN identity. Let me highlight a few:

- In higher education and technical education, we are already working on a balanced approach to cover all levels of regional cooperation, e.g. at the school level, through the Southeast Asia School Principals Forum (SEASPF).
- Through mechanisms such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN), we are able to enhance cooperation among 26 member-universities in the region. Using English as a medium of communication, AUN implements programs designed to increase the mobility of faculty members and students, either through scholarships and student-faculty exchanges. Its ASEAN Credit Transfer System (ACTS) allows students to choose from almost 10,000 courses and apply for a student exchange programme and/or scholarship through an online application system.
- Through the ASEAN Curriculum Sourcebook, we are also incorporating and teaching ASEAN studies in our schools. This way, we are teaching the next generations to appreciate our region's cultural diversity; promoting tolerance, mutual understanding and acceptance; and preparing our students to become better and more responsive ASEAN citizens.
- We are also continuously encouraging volunteerism and exchange programs, which promote the use of English as the primary medium of communication. Some of these initiatives include the Malaysian-led ASEAN Youth Volunteer Program (AYVP) as well the Brunei-U.S. English Language Enrichment Programme for ASEAN. The SEAMEO Regional English Language Centre (RELC) in Singapore should also be commended for its work in promoting the use of the English language in the region.

Distinguished participants,

Ladies and gentlemen,

16. Through education, through the use of English language and, more importantly, with a heightened sense of ASEAN Identity and ASEAN Community, we hope that ASEAN integration and cooperation will bring both benefits and opportunities to the region.

17. When our ASEAN students and professionals go out to join the regional and global workforce, they will be confronted with more competing interests and demands. This Conference is a valuable opportunity for you to discuss how we can prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of the ASEAN Community in 2015. I wish you all a successful and productive conference.

Thank you!

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