

Global Thinking Indonesia's UPH explores partnership with Singapore's SMU

Indonesian Universities Look Abroad to Gain Edge

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In the most recent QS World University Rankings, the highest-ranked university in Indonesia sits at 273, far below top institutions in Singapore and China, which sit well within the top 100.

Even among Asian universities, Indonesia's best still fails to break into the top 50, despite the nation being the world's fourth most populous and the largest economy in Southeast Asia.

"Rankings are not everything, but they do say something," Nathanael Santoso, assistant director of the faculties of business, law and social and political sciences at Universitas Pelita Harapan, told the Jakarta Globe.

Nathanael said that Indonesian universities are less successful because they "are not doing enough in terms of research, making strong alumni groups [and] increasing academic standards."

He added that the extent to which Indonesian students are prepared to study or work abroad raises the question, How internationalized are our students?

One major reason students do not study abroad is economic circumstances. But even when finances are not an issue, most Indonesian students are still at a disadvantage because they lack the necessary skills to thrive overseas.

While many universities in the region are integrating English-language courses and international programs into their curriculums, Indonesia's universities have remained localized, placing them at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunities to study or work abroad.

"Feedback from major companies around the region say they want to hire someone who's adaptable and able to learn fast, someone eloquent who can write well [in English]," Nathanael said.

Jimmy Paat, an activist at lobby group the Education Coalition, said that some Indonesian students are able to compete in the global workforce.

"The problem is that the universities haven't done much to optimize their students' potential," Jimmy said.

With the development of Indonesia's



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Singapore Management University president

university system a growing concern, UPH is exploring possible partnerships with international universities.

Today, representatives of UPH will meet with those of Singapore Management University.

SMU president Arnoud De Meyer said the institution is keen to work with other Southeast Asian universities in an effort to learn from and sharing knowledge with regional counterparts.

De Meyer said the demand for education is increasing exponentially.

"We need to find different ways to collaborate and find ways to learn and share knowledge to increase opportunities for education," he said.

UPH hopes to use a partnership to increase the currently limited international opportunities for Indonesian students.

"Access to universities like SMU here in Indonesia would bridge that gap," Nathanael said.

De Meyer and Nathanael said an emphasis on a liberal arts education, which teaches students how to think analytically and "learn how to learn," is imperative for greater graduate success.

De Meyer said the 2015 Association of Southeast Asian Nations Free Trade Agreement will play an important role in shaping the region's education systems. Therefore, he said, universities will have to adjust to the changes made by globalization.

Nathanael said that Indonesian universities have not incorporated liberal arts elements in part because the Ministry of Education and Culture is yet to comprehensively understand the concept.

University programs have not been updated by the ministry, impacting on the administration of universities.

Although the national government has allocated Rp 287 trillion (\$30.4 billion) for education this year, 20 percent of the state budget, Jimmy said it was not enough to advance the standard of education.

UPH and SMU's cooperation could pave the way for greater associations between universities in the region.

"We want to create a network of centers of excellence in the Asean region whereby these network universities will become the reference points of knowledge if the region starts talking about Asean integration, business or policies," Nathanael added.

Jimmy said the level of research in Indonesian universities was still low and said it was regrettable that the government had overlooked the importance of research.

According to the QS Asian university rankings for 2013, Indonesia's best university is the University of Indonesia, ranked at equal 64 for the continent, followed by the Bandung Institute of Technology at equal 129th position. UPH ranked between 250 and 300, while SMU was not included in the assessment.

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Professor Arnoud De Meyer. Photo courtesy Arnoud De Meyer