



Concept Note

4th ASEAN-EU Policy Dialogue on Higher Education: Advancing Innovation and Skills for a Sustainable Blue Economy

27–28 October 2026

Seda Vertis North Hotel • Metro Manila • The Philippines

Introduction

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the European Union are strategic partners with a shared commitment to enhancing security, trade, and connectivity. Their emphasis on sustainable connectivity and joint commitments to the 2030 Agenda are reflected in key frameworks, including ASEAN Connectivity Strategic Plan (2026–2035), the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific with its Multiannual Indicative Programme for Asia and the Pacific (2021–2027), and the 2020 Joint Ministerial Statement on Connectivity.

Strengthening connectivity and cross-regional cooperation in education fosters the internationalisation of higher education institutions and enhances mobility for students, researchers, and educators. Greater collaboration and joint research drive innovation and create quality jobs – cornerstones of successful partnership and community-building between ASEAN and the EU.

ASEAN member states have recently renewed their commitments to education. The **ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on Higher Education: Toward an Inclusive, Sustainable, and Prosperous ASEAN** (adopted in Kuala Lumpur, 2025) and the forthcoming **ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2026–2030** envision stronger regional cooperation, knowledge sharing, and resource mobilisation in education, training, and research. These commitments highlight the equal importance of **Higher Education and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET)**, as diverse pathways for lifelong learning and a future-ready workforce.

The SCOPE-HE Policy Dialogue Series

The Sustainable Connectivity Package – Higher Education (SCOPE-HE) is organising a series of Policy Dialogues across ASEAN and in Brussels to strengthen student and academic mobility both within ASEAN and between ASEAN and the EU, in line with regional strategies and action plans. These dialogues support policy initiatives that drive regional and cross-regional integration and innovation, providing a platform for policymakers to collaborate on key higher education themes.

With talent and skills mobility becoming increasingly critical, both regions benefit from stronger collaboration. SCOPE-HE convenes stakeholders from education ministries (ASEAN SOM-ED and ASEAN TVET Council Focal Points), higher education and TVET institutions, regional and international organisations, and the private sector.

- **Dialogue I (Vientiane, 2024):** Mapped key issues and gaps in ASEAN higher education, highlighting lessons learned in promoting equality, diversity, and participation, and reviewed best practices for resilience.

- **Dialogue II (Brussels, 2025):** Showcased regional collaboration, aligning mobility schemes and qualification frameworks between the EU and ASEAN, and explored mechanisms for greater youth participation in policy processes.
- **Dialogue III (Kuala Lumpur, 2025):** Monitored progress in ASEAN and translated high-level political commitments into actionable agendas. Recommendations focused on talent and leadership development, workforce readiness through skills and lifelong learning, and stronger education–business collaboration.

The Policy Dialogue in Manila

The 4th ASEAN-EU Policy Dialogue on Higher Education: Advancing Innovation and Skills for a Sustainable Blue Economy will be held in Manila in collaboration with the **Commission on Higher Education (CHED)**. Building on earlier commitments, the dialogue will explore how higher education and TVET systems can equip the blue economy with the skills, research, and innovation needed to ensure sustainability, inclusivity, and planetary health.

The Philippines has a strong tradition of advancing higher education frameworks and mobility schemes. Alongside Indonesia, it played a pivotal role in developing the **ASEAN Blue Economy Framework (ABEF, 2023)**, which guides ASEAN’s blue economy initiatives, encourages regional integration, and strengthens member states’ capacity to maximise the sustainable use of aquatic resources.

Higher education and TVET institutions are central to this effort. **Universities** generate knowledge, foster innovation, and build partnerships across sectors such as fisheries, maritime transport, coastal tourism, and offshore renewable energy. **TVET systems** provide practical training and technical skills, ensuring a future-ready workforce. Together, they connect with **Blue Science, Technology, and Innovation**, leveraging marine and freshwater science, data, and digital innovations to enhance efficiency, traceability, resilience, and trade.

As ASEAN Chair in 2026, under the theme **“Navigating Our Future, Together”**, the Philippines will prioritise ASEAN’s transition into a digitally empowered community, unlocking opportunities for inclusive and sustainable growth, and using AI to enhance education and youth empowerment.

The resulting **Manila Policy Brief** will provide actionable recommendations to advance higher education harmonisation, strengthen links between education and the blue economy, and deepen regional integration.

ASEAN and EU: Shared Blue Economy Priorities and Higher Education Partnerships

In both Europe and Southeast Asia, the blue economy encompasses a wide spectrum of marine and coastal activities, from shipping, fisheries, aquaculture, and offshore renewable energy to coastal tourism, marine biotechnology, and seabed mining. These sectors are vital for economic growth, but face pressing challenges that demand innovative and sustainable solutions.

At the intersection of **education and the blue economy** lies the need to advance innovation and workforce development through research, skills training, and digitalisation in maritime industries. Equally important is to ensure inclusivity and sustainability, balancing economic benefits with

social equity and environmental stewardship. Another priority is strengthening resilience by preparing climate-ready coastal communities and industries capable of withstanding rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and biodiversity loss.

Europe's blue economy is a cornerstone of the *EU's Green Deal* and *Global Gateway* strategies, designed to balance economic growth with environmental protection. The EU views the blue economy as critical to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and has prioritised the integration of education, research, and workforce development into blue economy strategies.

Against this backdrop, SCOPE-HE will present insights from its Higher Education Institutions cluster on the blue economy, which brings together five universities from ASEAN and the EU. This initiative, *"Higher Education Partnership for a Sustainable Blue Economy"*, modernises marine science education by establishing a strategic alliance between leading ASEAN institutions and EU partners with expertise in marine ecology, management, and tropical coastal systems.

Through this collaboration, higher education becomes the **engine of sustainability, inclusivity, and climate resilience**, training the workforce, generating knowledge, and creating conditions for responsible growth in sectors such as fisheries, maritime transport, coastal tourism, and offshore renewable energy.

Key Objectives

In line with this rationale, the Fourth Policy Dialogue aims to **advance regional and cross-regional mobility and cooperation in higher education, TVET, and research**. Drawing on both ASEAN and EU experiences, the dialogue is designed to inspire new partnerships, expand existing ones, promote mutual understanding, and provide recommendations for deepening people-to-people connectivity.

The sessions of the policy dialogue will follow a three-sequence structure with the following key objectives:

1. Presenting the Current State of Play – Europe and Southeast Asia: Shared Blue Economy Priorities and Higher Education Linkages

The opening session will present the current state of play in Southeast Asia and Europe, highlighting shared priorities in the blue economy and the ways in which higher education and skills development can support them. It will introduce the work of the *ASEAN Coordinating Task Force on Blue Economy (ACTF-BE)*, outline the aims of the *ASEAN Blue Economy Framework*, its Implementation Plan (2026–2030) and forthcoming Roadmap, as well as examine how *Europe's Green Deal* and *Global Gateway* strategies integrate education, research, and workforce development into blue economy strategies. This session will underscore the power of human capital, emphasising the importance of workforce development to ensure that skills and innovation drive sustainable sectoral growth.

2. Insights and Trends – Enhancing Higher Education Partnerships Advancing the Development of Blue and Green Talent

The second session will explore insights and trends in enhancing higher education partnerships to advance blue and green talent. It will revisit the *ASEAN Leaders'*

Declaration on Higher Education and the actionable recommendations of the *Kuala Lumpur Policy Brief*, while reviewing progress in mobility and collaboration in higher education and TVET, particularly in relation to the blue economy. ASEAN and the EU experiences, including SCOPE-HE initiatives, will be presented to demonstrate how joint research, mobility schemes, and qualification harmonisation can support sectors such as marine biotechnology, offshore energy, and sustainable resource management. Perspectives from academia, government, and the private sector will highlight the importance of aligning education and research with workforce needs to develop talent for sustainable growth.

3. Collaboration and Aligning Action – Enhancing Cooperation and Mobility through Higher Education and Innovation

The final session will focus on collaboration and aligning action, examining how ASEAN and the EU policy frameworks can be successfully implemented to support the blue economy. Recognising that the sector depends on skilled professionals in areas such as marine engineering, aquaculture, biotechnology, and renewable energy, the discussion will consider how higher education and TVET institutions can design curricula and training pathways to meet these needs.

Key themes will include the expansion of university–industry linkages, the integration of green and digital skills into workforce development, and the promotion of youth participation, gender equality, and inclusivity. Particular attention will be given to the role of women in the marine industry, noting that they comprise nearly half of the workforce, and to the importance of inclusive approaches that ensure equitable opportunities.

Participants will also discuss effective formats for ASEAN-EU policy dialogue in higher education cooperation to sustain ongoing cross-regional cooperation. They will be invited to co-create actionable recommendations, culminating in the *Manila Policy Brief*. This brief will outline strategies to expand higher education–industry linkages for blue innovation, harness green and digital skills to strengthen the blue economy workforce, promote inclusive participation across regions, and propose effective policy dialogue formats that ensure continued engagement of ASEAN and the EU stakeholders in higher education cooperation.

Output and Expected Outcomes

This policy dialogue represents a critical step toward realising the aspirations of ASEAN framework documents on education and the ***Regional Initiative for a Common Space in Southeast Asian Higher Education (RISE)***. By engaging diverse stakeholders, the organisers aim to create a collaborative environment that fosters innovation and inclusivity in higher education across the ASEAN region.

Expected outcomes include:

1. A **Manila Policy Brief** summarising policy discussions and recommendations on strengthening linkages between education and the blue economy.

2. A set of co-created **actionable recommendations** for policy makers and stakeholders (ASEAN SOM-ED and ASEAN TVET Council Focal Points) to enhance mobility, collaboration, and resource allocation.
3. **Strengthened networks** among higher education and TVET departments, higher education institutions, TVET institutions, and the private sector, laying the foundation for deeper cooperation and shared progress.

Participants

The policy dialogue will convene a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss collaborative education strategies for advancing innovation and skills in support of an inclusive and sustainable blue economy.

Participants will include:

1. Representatives from the departments of higher education and TVET of all ASEAN member states (ASEAN SOM-ED and ASEAN TVET Council Focal Points).
2. Representatives of the European Commission, EU Delegations and EU member states.
3. Representatives of Higher Education Institutions.
4. Representatives of TVET institutions and polytechnics.
5. Private sector stakeholders engaged in education and workforce development.
6. Youth representatives.

Format and Activities

The dialogue will feature a dynamic mix of formats and activities designed to foster exchange and co-creation:

- **Panel Discussions** will bring together policy makers, experts, and higher education practitioners from ASEAN and EU member states to share insights and perspectives.
- **Parallel Sessions** will address specific topics related to higher education mobility and the co-design of policy recommendations, culminating in the drafting of the *Manila Policy Brief*.
- **Poster Exhibition and Institutional Pitching Session** will provide a platform for higher education and TVET institutions to showcase their programmes, partnerships, and initiatives – including upcoming cross-regional collaborations and MoUs – through poster displays and short institutional presentations.
- **Side Meetings** with ASEAN target groups will provide opportunities to discuss specific education and blue economy linkages in greater depth.
- **Networking Opportunities** will encourage cross-sector and cross-regional partnerships, reinforcing collaboration and mutual understanding.