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## Cambodia-Philippines Relations: Education as One Way Forward

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President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s September state visit to Cambodia, [the first by a Filipino leader in nearly a decade](#), resulted in [three agreements in policing, aviation, and higher education](#). Among them, the education Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) may not look as significant as defense cooperation or market access, but its timing and focus deserve attention. It reflects how Cambodia and the Philippines are strategically thinking to place education on the diplomatic agenda to solidify future ties.

The [education MoU](#) between the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and Cambodia's Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport lays out a framework for faculty and

student exchanges, joint training, and collaborative research. In essence, it opens opportunities for Cambodian universities, still grappling with capacity gaps, to link with Philippine institutions that have deeper regional networks.

Why does this fresh take on diplomacy matter for both nations? Firstly, it provides Cambodia with tangible sources to support education reforms and a broader human capital strategy. Secondly, it gives the Philippines a platform to project academic and cultural influence in mainland Southeast Asia, an area where Manila has historically been less active. Even though modest steps, they indicate a form of “education diplomacy” that complements more visible forms of statecraft.

The visibility was when the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) and the University of the Philippines (UP) [announced formal cooperation](#). This pairing of leading universities of both countries is significant. RUPP has been central to Cambodia’s higher education transformative efforts, while UP remains the Philippines’ flagship university, known for its research capacity and regional networks. A collaboration between the two leading institutions creates a platform for academic mobility, research partnerships, and cultural exchanges that could potentially spill over to other institutions. Engagement with the Philippines opens a new pathway that diversifies Cambodian academic links and reduces reliance on immediate neighbours.

Beyond bilateral relations rhetoric, why does this matter more for the ASEAN context? Viewed through an ASEAN perspective, intra-regional academic cooperation directly addresses the [ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community \(ASCC\)](#) pillar. Frequently viewed as the neglected pillar of the ASEAN integration, the ASCC is meant to build regional identity and solidarity through people-to-people connectivity. The [ASCC Blueprint 2025](#) emphasizes cooperation in education and human resources development, which includes enhancing access, quality, and regional cooperation. Building on this framework, ASEAN has introduced other initiatives such as the [Roadmap on the ASEAN Education Space 2025](#), ASEAN University Network (AUN), and the [ASEAN International Mobility for Students \(AIMS\)](#), which were devised to further institutionalize student mobility and academic exchange. Yet, participation has often been uneven. Larger ASEAN members

dominate regional education initiatives, while countries like Cambodia and the Philippines remain less visible. If implemented well, Cambodia-Philippines educational exchanges could advance these objectives more effectively than many of the joint communiqués that ASEAN has issued. This instance illustrates how bilateral initiative can be achieved without the need for a grand new framework.

Additionally, education is often overlooked as a tool in Southeast Asian diplomacy, albeit being one of the lowest-cost investments with the highest long-term returns. Education can be regarded as a form of [soft power](#) that provides durable, low-cost avenues to build trust and identity across borders. Student exchanges and joint research may not produce worthy headlines, but they can shape how future leaders perceive each other's countries. Habits of cooperation can be created through academic exchanges as well, which can outlast political cycles.

Furthermore, this cooperation allows the Philippines to expand its regional visibility and further promote Filipino culture and values in the mainland setting. Unlike trade negotiations that can stall over tariffs or defense cooperation that is clouded by geopolitics, education allows a rare win-win environment where both governments can claim mutual gains.

At the same time, challenges persist. ASEAN's education cooperation has often suffered from uneven implementation. Cambodia, for instance, continues to suffer from a lack of [institutional capacity](#). Adding to this issue, there are also issues of funding shortfalls, bureaucratic inertia, and concentration in elite universities. There is a concern that the Cambodia–Philippines MoU may remain symbolic if it is not backed by resources and sustained engagement. To avoid this, exchange programs should extend beyond capital-city universities, enabling wider access for students and academics from provinces and less privileged backgrounds. Only then can education diplomacy contribute meaningfully to inclusive development and ASEAN community-building.

What makes the Cambodia–Philippines case noteworthy is not that it will transform ASEAN diplomacy overnight, but that it demonstrates how mid-sized states can advance regional goals through practical bilateral cooperation. It illustrates how the ASCC can be

operationalized from the ground up, not only through ASEAN Secretariat and blueprints. By highlighting education during a state visit, Phnom Penh and Manila proved that diplomacy could extend beyond ministries and summits, reaching the academic environment, as well.

Ultimately, if sustained and expanded, this education cooperation could serve as a model for how ASEAN states can reinvigorate the ASCC. It is a reminder that regional integration is not built only on markets and security alignments, but also on the less noticed work of improving people-to-people connectivity. By investing in education, both countries are investing in the next generation of ASEAN leaders—an outcome that may matter more than the immediate deliverables of any MoU.

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