

## EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN SAARC: A CASE FOR DEEPER INTEGRATION

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*In the last few years, especially after the establishment of World Trade Organisation, the world has seen an upsurge in Regional Trade agreements. While many RTA's are flourishing worldwide, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is already considered to be dead by some scholars. On one hand we have the global Regional Trade Agreements which are devising strategies to strengthen intra-regional trade relations, the South Asian countries on the other hand are entering into more and more bilateral treaties with the countries within and outside the region, shifting the focus from SAARC. The thorny relationship between the two big countries of the region, India and Pakistan and the lack of complementarities in trade in goods are also considered to be major road blocks. However, great potential of reviving intra-regional trade and cooperation in this region lies in the service sector. All the countries in the*

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*region have seen a shift in the structure of their economies moving away from agriculture and towards services.<sup>1</sup> There is a considerable variation across countries in this region in terms of size of their service economies, the output and export growth performances of services, the relative shares of individual economies in regional services trade and their revealed comparative advantage indices.<sup>2</sup> Through this paper the author is trying to make a case for deeper integration in South Asian region through intra-regional cooperation in the services sector. The focus is on the most important yet most neglected sector of educational services. In recent years there has been a growing trend towards internationalisation of education globally with many regions coming up with concrete strategies in this regard. The paper will study the potentialities and complementarities in cooperation with the education sector and the lessons from other regional initiatives to chalk out an action plan for SAARC.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Seven South Asian countries Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka launched the economic and political organization, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) on 8 December 1985<sup>3</sup>. The SAARC countries share certain common social and economic problems, including those related to low literacy rates, poor infrastructure, substandard quality of education, heavy dropout rates, and inadequate funding.<sup>4</sup> In this backdrop, SAARC as a regional organization for socio-economic development of the South Asian Region serves as a platform for these countries to work together in a spirit of friendship, trust, and understanding to accelerate economic and social development in this region. For achieving their development objective SAARC countries have identified fifteen areas of cooperation; human resource development and education being some of them.

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<sup>1</sup> The average annual growth of service sector output has consistently moved upward, from little under 4.5% in 1970's to a little over 6% in 1860's, over 6.5 % in 1990's and further 8.3% in 200-07. See UNCTAD Hand Book of Statistics, 2008 (online version) accessed on 26 June 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Rupa Chanda, Integrating Services in South Asia-Trade, Investment and Mobility. 41-45 Oxford University Press.(2011).

<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan joined SAARC in April 2007.

<sup>4</sup> P.V.Rao, "Globalisation and Regional Cooperation: Perspectives on India's Role", in, Rama S. Melkote,ed., MEANINGS OF GLOBALISATION: INDIAN AND FRENCH PERSPECTIVES, Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, (2001).

One fourth of the world's population resides in South Asia, making it both the most populous and most densely populated geographical region in the world.<sup>5</sup> Despite being rich in human resources and sophisticated technical skills, yet the number of people unemployed is climbing new heights in the South Asian Region.<sup>6</sup> This is because the region has not paid much attention on enhancing its ability to nurture its human capital. The important role education plays in the development of a nation can never be overemphasised. Education is an essential foundation for the social and economic success of a global economy. It expands choices and opportunities for the individuals and reduces poverty and social injustice by providing the underprivileged resources and opportunities for upward social mobility and social inclusion. The focus on the 'knowledge economy' in the present globalised world has also made this sector more significant in the development of human capital.

When we talk about education, higher education deserves a special attention as it affects almost every area of national as well as regional development. An educated labour force is much more likely to be able to work productively and to be able to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of an ever changing global economy. All SAARC countries have more or less similar higher education structure including entry qualifications, age, duration of courses, and instructional management system.<sup>7</sup> The pressing demand for higher education and a strong desire for foreign qualification by youth are common issues.<sup>8</sup> Opportunities are limited in this area with gross enrolment ratios varying among SAARC countries being less than 5% to 10%.<sup>9</sup> The participation of women is not more than 40 % in any SAARC country<sup>10</sup>, and

<sup>5</sup> Refer to Table V.

<sup>6</sup> Youth Unemployment in South Asia as high as 9.6%; Times of India, January 22, 2013, available at <[articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com)> Collections > South Asia>.

<sup>7</sup> All the SAARC countries share the same colonial past. These countries were formerly British colonies hence, they all follow the same British education system.

<sup>8</sup> India accounts for 70% of the outward mobility of students in the region. Around 140000 students went abroad to study in 2005 and the country imported higher education to the tune of US\$3.5 billion in 2004. More than 20,000 Pakistani students went abroad for studies in 2005 and this number has been rising by 13%-15% per year. Likewise, in 2005, around 14,500 Bangladeshi students and 9000 Nepalese Students and 1000-1500 Maldivian Students were studying abroad. The market for South Asian Countries is the English speaking countries like the US, UK, Australia, Canada, and others such as Singapore Malaysia and several other developing countries like India. See Rupa Chanda, INTEGRATING SERVICES IN SOUTH ASIA-TRADE, INVESTMENT AND MOBILITY. Oxford University Press.2011, p 228.

the quality of education is second-rate. Spending on education ranges from 2% to 4% of the gross national product (GNP)<sup>9</sup>, which is less than the UNESCO standard of 6% for developing nations. Private enterprise, a recent phenomenon, limits its role to market-oriented, professional, and technical education.

Education in South Asia suffers from twin problems of lack of excellence and of access. The idea of cooperation in education sector was floated in the very first SAARC summit but little development in this regard has taken place in last 25 years. The piecemeal strategies and division of education objective into different committees and sub-committees has only further slowed down the pace of development. SAARC countries have formed convergence on major issues concerning education, such as standardizing education, granting equivalence and harnessing the potential of open distance education, but the major issue that is affecting educational sector is the lack of implementation. It is high time for SAARC countries to evolve common educational forums and collaborative strategies to deal with the situation. It is no secret that education cooperation amongst SAARC countries would help raise the overall human capital of the people and will hence contribute to the economic development of the region. The object of this paper is to assess current status of higher education in SAARC countries and examine emerging trends. The discussion concentrates on structure, access, quality, funding patterns, and future prospects of cooperation in higher education within the region. Such an assessment might help in promoting interstate cooperation and planning better strategies. Today all countries across the globe report an increased emphasis on ensuring that young people can meet the challenges and needs of rapid transformation, and can participate effectively in the globalized environment. Hence, one can find a growing number of cooperation agreements between governments of various

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mr. Sambhav Srivastava, Section Officer, Association of Indian Universities new Delhi, December 9, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> S. K. Sahni and R. N. Srivastava, *Millennium Development Goals and SAARC*, SAARC- THE ROAD AHEAD, Foundation for Peace and Sustainable Development, 2007, 333, Iqbal Ahmed Saradgi [Et al] (ed).

<sup>11</sup> Higher education in Developing Countries: Peril and Promise, World Bank-UNESCO, Washington D C, 2000 available at [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/.../Resources/Peril\\_and\\_Promise.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/.../Resources/Peril_and_Promise.pdf), accessed on (March 18, 2011). Also see *Students Demand Hike in Funds for Education*, The Hindu, Feb 3, 2010.

countries as well as amongst educational institutions across nations. Against this backdrop a thorough study on cooperation between the SAARC member countries in partaking and sharing their educational services becomes imperative.

**Table I: Literacy Rate in SAARC Countries**

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Adult literacy rate MF	-	57.7	52.8 <sup>c</sup>	62.8 <sup>d</sup>	98.4 <sup>d</sup>	57.4	54.9 <sup>f</sup>	90.6 <sup>e</sup>
Adult literacy rate M	...	62.0	65.0 <sup>c</sup>	75.2 <sup>d</sup>	98.4 <sup>d</sup>	71.1	68.6 <sup>f</sup>	92.2 <sup>e</sup>
Adult literacy rate F	...	53.4	38.7 <sup>c</sup>	50.8 <sup>d</sup>	98.4 <sup>d</sup>	46.8	40.3 <sup>f</sup>	89.1 <sup>e</sup>
Youth literacy rate MF	...	78.7	70.4 <sup>c</sup>	81.1 <sup>d</sup>	99.3 <sup>d</sup>	82.4	70.7 <sup>f</sup>	80.7 <sup>e</sup>
Youth literacy rate M	...	77.1	80.0 <sup>c</sup>	88.4 <sup>d</sup>	99.2 <sup>d</sup>	89.2	79.1 <sup>f</sup>	86.8 <sup>e</sup>
Youth literacy rate F	...	80.4	68.0 <sup>c</sup>	74.4 <sup>d</sup>	99.4 <sup>d</sup>	77.5	61.5 <sup>f</sup>	74.9 <sup>e</sup>

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Note: The literacy data, refer to the year 2011 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>a</sup>1982, <sup>b</sup>2002, <sup>c</sup>2005, <sup>d</sup>2006, <sup>e</sup>2008, <sup>f</sup>2009, <sup>g</sup>2010. (...) data not available

**Table II: Gross enrolment Ratio**

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Gross Enrollment ratio Tertiary Education MF	-	14	9	10 <sup>b</sup>	...	5 <sup>b</sup>	8	14
Gross Enrollment ratio Tertiary Education ratio M	...	16	10	12 <sup>b</sup>	...	8 <sup>b</sup>	9	10
Gross Enrolment ratio Tertiary Education ratio MF	...	11	7	8 <sup>b</sup>	...	2 <sup>b</sup>	8	19
Gross Enrolment ratio Secondary Education MF	49	52	70	47 <sup>b</sup>	64	42 <sup>b</sup>	35	102
Gross Enrolment ratio Secondary Education M	62	48	69	54 <sup>b</sup>	59	48 <sup>b</sup>	40	100
Gross Enrolment ratio Secondary Education F	34	46	71	40 <sup>b</sup>	68	35 <sup>b</sup>	30	104
Gross Enrolment ratio Primary Education MF	98	...	111	94 <sup>b</sup>	104	115 <sup>b</sup>	92	97
Gross Enrolment ratio Primary Education M	114	...	111	101 <sup>b</sup>	105	123 <sup>b</sup>	101	98
Gross Enrolment ratio Primary Education F	81	...	112	87 <sup>b</sup>	103	106 <sup>b</sup>	83	97

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Note: The literacy data, refer to the year 2011 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>a</sup>1982, <sup>b</sup>2002, <sup>c</sup>2005, <sup>d</sup>2006, <sup>e</sup>2008, <sup>f</sup>2009, <sup>g</sup>2010. (...) data not available

**Table III: Public expenditure on education (SAARC Countries)**

	Afghanistan	Bangladesh	Bhutan	India	Maldives	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri Lanka
Gross public expenditure on education as a% of GDP	1.7 <sup>a</sup>	2.2 <sup>f</sup>	4.7	3.3 <sup>g</sup>	7.2 <sup>g</sup>	4.7	2.4	2.0
Public expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure		14.1	11.5	10.5	16.6	20.2	9.9	12.9

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Note: The literacy data, refer to the year 2011 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>a</sup>1982, <sup>b</sup>2002, <sup>c</sup>2005, <sup>d</sup>2006, <sup>e</sup>2008, <sup>f</sup>2009, <sup>g</sup>2010. (...) data not available

**Table IV: Table III: Public expenditure on education (Other Countries)**

	Burundi	China	Ghana	Republic of Moldova	Timor Leste	Swaziland	United Kingdom	United States of America
Gross public expenditure on education as a% of GDP	6.1	...	8.2	8.6	10.1	7.8	5.9	5.6
Public expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure	24.1	20.1	...	...	8.1	21.0	11.3	13.1

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Note: The literacy data, refer to the year 2011 unless otherwise noted.

<sup>a</sup>1982, <sup>b</sup>2002, <sup>c</sup>2005, <sup>d</sup>2006, <sup>e</sup>2008, <sup>f</sup>2009, <sup>g</sup>2010. (...) data not available

### ***Regional profile of South Asia with respect to education sector***

South Asia is an important contributor to the growing global demand for education given its sizeable young population and growing middle class. The region accounts to a large number of internationally mobile students.<sup>12</sup> The low educational status indicators<sup>13</sup> in part reflect inadequate funding of educational sector, in particular the inability of the governments to provide adequate financial resources to augment capacity and quality. The share of education expenditure in GDP as well as the share of education in total government expenditure is lower than that in comparable developing

countries in other regions.<sup>14</sup> The region spends less than 4.2% of GDP on education.<sup>15</sup> The trend in educational indicators over time further indicates that although there has been improvement in some areas, such as literacy rate and gross enrolment ratio at some levels, by and large the extent of these improvements is rather limited.<sup>16</sup> If one carefully studies the education related statistics of South Asian countries, the picture that emerges is of a region which is unable to meet the demand for education due to its growing population, as observed in rising student-faculty ratios, a region which is unable to devote sufficient resources to education as reflected in declining or stagnant public expenditure allocation in overall GDP, and growing reliance on private providers and overseas institutions and a region which is unable to address issues of quality and governance as reflected in high dropout rates in most of the countries.<sup>17</sup>

Such limitations notwithstanding, the South Asian countries have witnessed considerable growth in their education system in terms of enrolment numbers and the number of educational institutions and universities. Several common features emerge as a result of this growth. The most important of these is the privatization of education and the growing contribution of private education providers in past decade in almost all the South Asian countries, particularly in higher education segment.<sup>18</sup> There are many educational institutions that are operating in South Asia, through partnership arrangements, local campuses, franchises, certificate, diploma granting programmes and online education.<sup>19</sup> There is also some outward

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<sup>12</sup> Today a large number of students study abroad and as per the UNESCO Statistic's institute, the international student mobility has increased over 2 million since 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Refer to Table V.

<sup>14</sup> Refer to Table III.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* The 4.2 average is much less than the UNESCO prescribed standard of 6% for developing countries. A comparative analysis with data in Table IV will show that the public expenditure of South Asian countries on education is lesser than other equally developed and least developed countries.

<sup>16</sup> Refer Table II.

<sup>17</sup> Refer The Global Education Digest 2012 by UNESCO available at [www.uis.unesco.org > Home > Education > Global Education Digest](http://www.uis.unesco.org/Home/Education/Global_Education_Digest).

<sup>18</sup> *Supra* note 2, p. 230.

<sup>19</sup> In online education Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) like *courser* are gaining huge popularity. MOOCs are online portals where various universities offer certificate/ introductory courses to the global student market through internet (falls under cross border exchange mode of rendering services under GATS).

presence by the educational institutions in this region mainly from India which have set up their operations abroad like Dubai, Malaysia and Singapore in order to serve the local student population and also students from the region, who are studying abroad in these markets. In India, according to a 2005 study, there were 131 foreign education providers mostly operating through twinning and collaborative programmes with local partner institutions.<sup>20</sup> Foreign providers in India have also been engaged in recruiting students from the home region for study in their home campuses abroad. However there are only university franchises operating with no foreign campuses in India. The latter could change once the Foreign Higher Education Providers Bill that is pending in the parliament is passed.<sup>21</sup> In Pakistan, both public and private foreign Institutions are allowed to operate and collaboration between foreign and local education providers is encouraged by the Higher education Commission.<sup>22</sup> In Bangladesh, internationalization of higher education sector has resulted in proliferation of private institutions that have partnership arrangements and joint ventures with foreign providers.<sup>23</sup> In Sri Lanka, there are several higher education degree programmes that are offered by foreign universities in partnership with Sri Lankan institutions, as well as foreign institutes which offer higher education qualifications.<sup>24</sup> Similar kind of arrangements also exist in Maldives to address the growing need of skilled man power in tourism and hospitality sector. The degree of internationalization in Nepal and Bhutan, in comparison to other South Asian countries, remains comparatively limited. It has been mainly in the form of foreign assistance for setting up local educational institutions or for developing capacity in local universities.

Privatisation and internationalization of education services in South Asia has in turn given rise to several regulatory concerns and challenges akin to those

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<sup>20</sup> P. Agarwal, *Privatisation and Internationalization of Higher Education Services In the Countries of South Asia- An Empirical Analysis*; ICRIER, New Delhi. 2006. P 21.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p 22. There are eight collaborative degree programmes in Pakistan as well as programmes run by reputed foreign institutions with local partners with only minimal regulation.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Refer *Sri Lanka as an Education Hub For International Students*, World Bank.(2010),available at, [worldbank.org/INTSOUTHASIA/Resources/50\\_Sri\\_Lanka\\_as\\_an\\_Education\\_Hub\\_for\\_International\\_Students.pdf](http://worldbank.org/INTSOUTHASIA/Resources/50_Sri_Lanka_as_an_Education_Hub_for_International_Students.pdf).



seen globally. For instance, in Pakistan, the main challenge is that public sector institutions, though equitable, lack quality while the private institutions that are of higher quality are often unaffordable for most people. The same holds true in the case of India and Bangladesh. There is a considerable debate in some of the countries regarding public versus private educational institutions and the implications of private and international education providers on cost, quality and equity. Meanwhile, the public sectors contribution has declined and capacity constraints in this segment have grown. The private education system tends to be relatively expensive while the public education system is characterised by very low tuition fees and is highly subsidised by the government. This financing structure has resulted in problems of cost recovery and difficulties in funding capacity have increased in public education system giving rise to an inequitable education system and a marked disparity between public and private segments (with private education system which mainly catering to the higher income groups).

**Table V: Tertiary education sector- Country profile**

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
<b>Afghanistan</b>					
Total population	29839994	30577756	31411743	32358260	33397058
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	...	323.69131	...	...	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	...	54.18406	...	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	3485.93333	4126.16667	5967.5	...	...

Outbound mobility ratio (%)	...	4.33489	...	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	-	-	-	...	...
<b>Bangladesh</b>					
Total population	145478300	147030145	148692131	150493658	152408774
Out-of-school children of lower secondary school age. Total	...	2676916	1980548	2644537	...
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	14626	19727	...	31733	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	...	...	...	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	16317.33333	19009.41667	21221.5	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio (%)	1.26048	1.20147	...	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	-	-	-	...	...
<b>Bhutan</b>					
Total population	701363	713665	725940	738267	750443
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	...	...	1571	1506	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants.	735.42045	...	772.12325	947.23868	...

Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	735.42045	...	772.12325	947.23868	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	60.23504	...	65.55197	67.60322	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	938.6	1106	1227.5	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio (%)	18.58246	...	22.32224	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	1.21089	1.41775	1.5735	...	...
<b>India</b>					
Total population	1190863679	1207740408	1.225E+09	1.241E+09	1.258E+09
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	1477.56238	1578.26437	1730.6242	...	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	63.57788	63.21893	65.07499	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	179437.9333	198886.9167	203480.5	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio (%)	1.04256	1.06648	0.98107	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	-	-	-	...	...
<b>Maldives</b>					

Total population	307632	311739	315885	320081	324313
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	1710.60336	...	...	...	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	...	...	...	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	1912.33333	1792.16667	1996	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio	36.98189	...	...	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	4.81114	4.48602	5.02012	...	...
<b>Nepal</b>					
Total population	...	...	...	...	...
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	96023	98987	152695	150814	...
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	...	...	...	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	17953	22296	24202	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio (%)	6.2999	7.70789	6.42186	...	...

Gross outbound enrolment ratio	...	...	...	...	...
<b>Pakistan</b>					
Total population	167442258	170494367	173593383	176745364	179951140
Number of students in tertiary education per 100,000 inhabitants. Total	597.2356	739.04544	...	914.33089	...
Gross enrolment ratio. All levels combined (except pre-primary). Total	42.87393	43.70843	...	44.25647	...
Enrolment in education. Tertiary. Total	...	...	...	...	...
Outbound mobile students (students from a given country studying abroad)	29458.83333	33442.51667	36386.3	...	...
Outbound mobility ratio (%)	3.02517	2.72777	...	...	...
Gross outbound enrolment ratio	-	-	-	...	...

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics.

Note: The literacy data refer to the year 2011 unless otherwise noted.

## II. EDUCATIONAL SERVICES IN SAARC: TRADE OR COOPERATION?

Before going into any further details of educational services in SAARC, it is important to have a shared understanding of the key terms and ideas that define what is meant by international educational cooperation. Educational services are one of the twelve categories of services recognized by the United Nations Central Product Classification (UN CPC) and World Trade Organization (WTO)<sup>25</sup>. But the way SAARC countries look at education is

<sup>25</sup> THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION: LAW PRACTICE AND POLICY, Oxford University Press, 2006. 611 -616, Mitsuo Matsushita [Et al].

broader than the WTO's definition of services.<sup>26</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit in the year 2007, proposed integration of services into SAFTA and called for a collective vision of free flow of trade in services<sup>27</sup>. Though some convergence of trade interests are seen in transport, telecommunication and energy services but education is still seen as means of co-operation rather than a sector of developing trade relations. This is because both the extent and quality of educational services matter for the overall socio-economic empowerment of the people of South Asia where large sections still lack literacy and restricting this sector in the four corners of trade will be detrimental for the overall development of the region.

The WTO's approach towards education is driven by its market philosophy. WTO rules do not differentiate between a commercial service like telecommunication, insurance, banking etc. and a public utility service like educational services. WTO envisages opening up of a country's educational sector and liberalizing the rules governing educational institutions, making it conducive for the foreign universities to invest and set up branches in that country purely for commercial purposes. On the other hand, Educational cooperation occurs whenever two or more states work together to share their educational capabilities, resources and expertise. Cooperation between countries is always done in a spirit of friendship and not with the motive of capturing market. Knowledge is meant for the benefit and welfare of the society. The aim of cooperation in education is to open the contours of education so that knowledge is not restricted within boundaries of a country. Free flow of knowledge and expertise across the borders, unrestricted exchange of ideas and intellect amongst people is the basic underlying philosophy of cooperation in educational sector.

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<sup>26</sup> Under Article 3(b) of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) the term service has been defined as; "services" includes any service in any sector except services supplied in the exercise of governmental authority." Further "a service supplied in the exercise of governmental authority" is defined under Article 3(c) of GATS as "any service which is supplied neither on a commercial basis, nor in competition with one or more service suppliers. *Also see*" Higher education in Developing Countries: Peril and promise", World Bank-UNESCO, Washington D C, 2000. (available at [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/.../Resources/Peril\\_and\\_Promise.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/.../Resources/Peril_and_Promise.pdf) , accessed on March 18,2011).

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat\\_id=53](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=53), accessed on March 3, 2011.

### ***Modes of cooperation***

The modes of educational cooperation can be divided into four levels. These are i) between governments; ii) between institutions; iii) between staff; and iv) between students of two countries.<sup>28</sup> International partners working together towards an educational objective may be playing similar roles e.g. two countries cooperating on an exchange program; in a purchaser-provider relationship (i.e. trade in educational services); or in a donor-recipient relationship (i.e. development assistance).<sup>29</sup> At the government to government level, educational co-operation can be classified into five categories:

1. People Exchange (e.g. students and teacher exchange programme),
2. Information Exchange (e.g. conducting international workshop, setting up distance education centres and e-library networks);
3. Facilitation of Trade in Educational Services (e.g. liberalizing the rules relating to establishment of educational institutions);
4. Regulatory Reform (e.g. relaxing visa rules, simplifying equivalence procedure);
5. Development Partnerships (e.g. scholarship programmes for students and research scholars from the region or giving financial assistance in setting up university in another member country).

This paper focuses on regional cooperation amongst government and the role they can play in stimulating, supporting and where necessary, regulating educational cooperation to maximize its contribution to economic and social development.

### ***MULTILATERAL COMMITMENTS UNDERTAKEN BY SAARC COUNTRIES OUTSIDE THE REGION***

Trade in education sector under GATS is covered under five categories – Primary education, secondary education, higher education, adult education

<sup>28</sup> *Supra* note 9.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Mr. Manish Mohan, Additional Director and Head, SAAC Division, FICCI, New Delhi on (December 10, 2010). These different forms of cooperation should not be viewed as alternatives to each other, but as complements and mutually reinforcing.

and other education services. During the Uruguay round only 29 member countries made commitment in education services. Thus the sector was not a thrust area for negotiations in WTO. In south Asia barring Nepal, none of the other member countries from this region has scheduled education services in Uruguay rounds of GATS negotiations. This implies that the South Asian countries, notwithstanding their autonomous liberalisation of this sector, would like to preserve their policy flexibility by excluding this sector from scheduling commitments. India and Pakistan have however tabled education services in the subsequent request offer negotiation, reflecting the fact that these countries have received request in this sector for other WTO member countries and have also become more willing to negotiate this sector given their autonomous liberalisation of education services since the Uruguay round. Rest of the South Asian countries have however not changed their stance in education services.

Though the sector is open for negotiation the commitments and offer vary in nature. India has been the most restrictive offering only higher education, with various regulatory conditions imposed on foreign education providers. Nepal, on the other hand has made commitments in three segments of education services, but has placed foreign equity participation limits and also phased in liberalization by gradually relaxing the limit. The negotiating stance of both these countries suggest that even where education services have tabled by the South Asian Countries, there has been an attempt to preserve regulatory autonomy in the interest of consumer protection and quality assurance. Education is not an important sector in the trade and cooperation agreements signed by South Asian Countries with the countries outside the region. Some of these agreements have a bearing on education services when they talk about mutual recognition of professionals and IT development. India- Singapore Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA) and Pakistan- China Free Trade Agreement (FTA) are most significant agreements in this regard. But as a whole, SAARC countries reflect a reluctance to multilaterally commit to full-fledged liberalization in education so as to safeguard their concerns in this sector. And this sector does not form a significant part of their bilateral and multilateral trade treaties.



### ***Intra-regional collaborations and inter-governmental Initiatives (within SAARC)***

Since its inception in 1985, the significance of human resource development at the regional level has been well recognized by SAARC. Commitments were made and even a SAARC literacy year was declared as far back as 1996. At the ninth SAARC summit held at Male in 1997, illiteracy was identified as one of the major cause of hindrance to the social and economic development of the region and a major factor contributing to the region's backwardness and social imbalance. Further, since reorganization of SAARC Integrated Programme of Action (SIPA) in 1999, education was included as an area of cooperation under the purview of Technical Committee on human Resources development.<sup>30</sup> In this context, SAARC Chair, SAARC fellowship and scholarship schemes are in operation in the region<sup>31</sup>. A SAARC Consortium of Open and Distance Learning (SACODIL) have been created with a view to standardise curricula and mutual recognition of various educational and vocational courses. Besides, various regional centres have been established from time to time in the member countries of SAARC to promote regional cooperation in practical implementation of the SIPA.<sup>32</sup> The SAARC Human Resource Development Centre was established in Islamabad in 2002 with an objective to undertake research, training and dissemination of information on human resource development issues such as health, education, gender, poverty, children and environment.<sup>33</sup> The importance of development of education also assumes a special place in the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the 12<sup>th</sup> summit at Islamabad in 2004. The SIPA has identified certain priority themes for cooperation in the field of education. These are Women and Education; Universal Primary Education; Literacy, Post Literacy and Continuing Education; Educational Research; Science and Technical Education, Education for the Underserved Areas and Distance

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<sup>30</sup> [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat\\_id=53](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/cat-detail.php?cat_id=53), accessed on April 20, 2011.

<sup>31</sup> [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity\\_id=16](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=16), accessed on April 20, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity\\_id=15](http://www.saarc-sec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=15), accessed on April 20, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with P.K.Prabhakaran, Programme Director, South Asian Foundation, New Delhi on (April 18, 2011).

Education. The nominations of nodal agencies for each of the priority themes have been completed and appropriate Action Plans are being prepared<sup>34</sup>.

In the Eleventh Summit<sup>35</sup>, the leaders of SAARC member countries underlined the need to devise appropriate strategies for raising the quality of education through exchange of information among universities in the region. This was followed by the first meeting of the Committee of Heads of University Grants Commission/Equivalent Bodies, held in Dhaka in October 2003 to propose modalities for implementation of the recommendations of the Eleventh Summit. The meeting of UGCs work closely with UNESCO; and SAARC also has a memorandum of understanding with UNESCO to that effect. Till date there had been 6 such meetings in which many landmark decisions have been given; like the minimum period to acquire a Bachelor's Degree (excluding Professional Degrees) is agreed to be made as 12 +3 years of Education in all member States, chapter on introduction to SAARC is resolved to be included in the curricula at secondary level Social Science courses, certain degree of understanding has also been converged regarding chartered university. It is decided that the degrees awarded by chartered universities in the region should be recognized by all member states on the basis of number of years' studies, grades and credits obtained. Considerable progress is also seen in preparation of SAARC Regional Handbook on Chartered Universities/Degree Awarding Institutions in the Member States and standardization of education curriculum of South Asia.

However, only some limited engagement in educational services, mainly in the form of student mobility within the region and through cross-border establishment of franchises and subsidiaries in other countries within the region. India is one of the main destinations for Nepali students pursuing higher studies. Bhutan also sends considerable number of students for higher education in India compared to other English speaking countries. India is also a main destination for higher education for Maldivian students studying abroad through scholarship or self-financing. India received 320

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with Sambhav Srivastava, Section Officer, Association of Indian Universities (AIU), (December 19, 2010). Also see < [http://www.saarcsec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity\\_id=12](http://www.saarcsec.org/areaofcooperation/detail.php?activity_id=12)>, accessed on April 20, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Kathmandu, 4-6 January 2002.

Bangladeshi students in 2003, down from 736 in 1993-94, though it is likely seen that more number of Bangladeshi students are studying in India.

Intra-Regional investment is another means of engagement in regional educational services. As in case of students mobility it is primarily from other countries to India, in investments also the flow is mostly in one direction that is from India to other South Asian countries. Till date, however, these investments are rather limited in terms of sectorial orientation as well as the range of institutions. They are mostly confined to Medical Education and Information Technology and a few Indian institutions such as Manipal, NIIT and Aptech. At school level, there have been few such ventures like the Delhi Public School franchise in Kathmandu. One of the most prominent examples of regional investment and collaboration in education is the Manipal College Of Medical Science (MCOMS), Pokhara established in Nepal in collaboration with Government of Nepal in 1994, and is affiliated to Kathmandu University.<sup>36</sup> In information technology, National Institute of Information Technology NIIT, the Indian software and computer training company has opened their branches in Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. These institutes are either managed directly by NIIT or are in partnership with the local institutions. The institute does not just have presence in cities but have catered to the rural population of these countries as well.<sup>37</sup>

Another Indian IT education institute Aptech had also opened its branch in Bangladesh and in 2006-07 was catering to 40% of Bangladesh's IT training market.<sup>38</sup> Also noteworthy is the 2.5 million Ngultrum "total solution" project funded by India in Bhutan.<sup>39</sup> The aim of this project is to help create knowledge based Bhutanese society by providing access to IT and IT

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<sup>3</sup> This is a well-recognised institute and is listed in WHO directory of medical schools and the international Medical Education Directory of Education Commission for Foreign Medical Graduates (ECFMG).

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.niit.com/aboutniit/Pages/GlobalPresence.aspx>, accessed on on January 7, 2013. Also see, NIIT LAUNCHES SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAMS TO DEVELOP HUMAN CAPITAL IN SRI LANKA. available at: <<http://www.niit.com/newsandevents/Lists/NIIT%20News/disformCustomv3.aspx?List=a325a1cf%2Da064%2D4573%2Db17a%2D3ce893a0d178&ID=208#sthash.BZj5NKDP.dpuf..> Accessed on January 7, 2013.

<sup>38</sup> *Supra Note*, p 212.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Amb. A.N Ram, former ambassador of India to Bhutan, on (March 22, 2011).

solutions to a large proportion of Bhutan's population including government officials, teachers, entrepreneurs and rural children. The Bhutanese government has also held discussions with IT majors, such as Infosys, seeking their support for developing IT infrastructure in the country.<sup>40</sup>

Apart from this, the establishment of South Asian University in the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus in New Delhi is a major milestone in the history of educational cooperation in SAARC region. South Asian University is the brain child of the Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, who floated the idea at the 13<sup>th</sup> summit at Dhaka; an inter-governmental agreement was signed at the 14<sup>th</sup> summit at New Delhi in the year 2008 to set up the South Asian University. The university is jointly funded by the members of SAARC<sup>41</sup> and its objective is to harness the potential of the talented brains of this region and to promote cutting edge scientific and technological research by providing a forum where academicians, scholars, researchers and gifted students can work together in the service of human advancement. The First Academic Session of South Asian University commenced on 26 August 2010 with an intake of 50 students.<sup>42</sup>

### ***Role of India in deepening intra-regional ties***

The major challenge that SAARC Countries are facing today is with respect to providing tertiary education. As discussed above, the average adult literacy rate in south Asia was 60.9% in the year 2004 with Maldives and Sri Lanka having the highest adult literacy rate of 96.3% and 90.7% respectively, India stood third with 67% and the literacy rate of rest of the SAARC countries was

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<sup>40</sup> *IT Giants Look at Bhutan for Investment*, <articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com> Collections › Development Centre>, December 24, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> The South Asian University is the first international university to be set up in India, with link campuses in other SAARC member countries. The real estate cost of Rs. 750 million has been borne by the Indian External Affairs Ministry and contributions for other expenses are to be determined on a participatory basis. The role of SAARC countries will be to provide annual subsidies while full autonomy is granted to the University. It is a *sui generis* system where in the University is a government funded private University.

<sup>42</sup> The University has special quotas of reservation for students from different SAARC countries. Maximum of 50% seat is allocated to students from the host country i.e. Indian students, 10% reservation is for the students from Pakistan and Bangladesh and at least 4% for students from Nepal, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka.

less than 50%.<sup>43</sup> Though the literacy rate in India is fairly average compared to the illustrious record set by Maldives and Sri Lanka, still one should not undermine India's role in catering to the needs of higher education in South Asia.

Unlike other SAARC countries, India has the second largest higher education sector in the world. The number of Indian universities increased from eighteen at the time of independence to 493 today (Including 42 central universities, 60 state private universities, 316 state universities, 130 deemed universities and 33 institutes of national importance<sup>44</sup>. India is also the highest educational scholarship providing developing country in the world. Hence it is no surprise that India remains the most preferred destination for students from other member countries. India's comparative advantage in educational sector lies in the strong technical base of higher education in the form of world class Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and regional engineering colleges. These technical institutes are offering a wide range of courses in the fields of engineering and manufacturing including the information technology sector (IT) and IT Enabled Services (ITES).<sup>45</sup> The other specialized programmes in demand are Computer Science, Medicine, Marine Science, Biotechnology, Agriculture Technology, Buddhist Studies, and Economics and Management Studies. Indian human resource and educational companies such as Institute of Chartered Accountants and Financial Analyst of India (ICFAI) have already entered the Sri Lankan market.

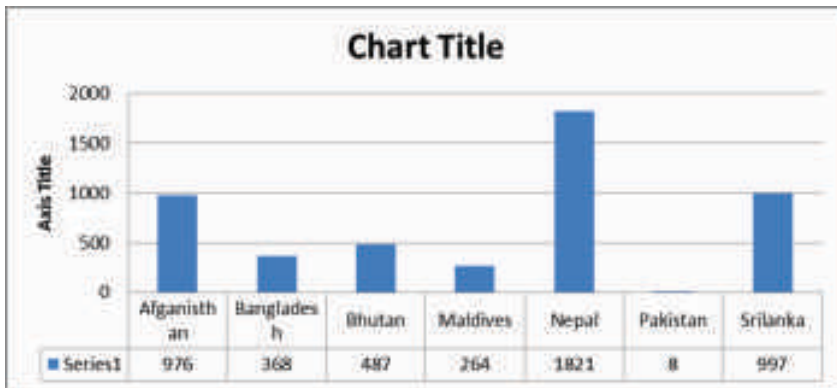
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<sup>43</sup> *Supra* note 10 .

<sup>44</sup> University Grant Commission Annual Report 2009-2010, University Grant Commission, New Delhi. 2011.

<sup>45</sup> South Asian Development and Cooperation Report, Research and information system for developing countries, Oxford University Press. P 138.

### ***Students' mobility in South Asia:***



Statistically speaking, during the academic year 2007-08 Nepal had sent the highest number of 1821 students to India to seek admission in higher education, followed by Sri Lanka (997), Afghanistan (976), Bhutan (487), Bangladesh (368), Maldives (264), Myanmar (44) and Pakistan (8). The total number of students from SAARC region to India was 4965 during the above period.<sup>46</sup> Nepali Candidates are permitted to approach Indian educational institutions directly for general courses. As a result, every year hundreds of Nepali students obtain admission directly for general undergraduate courses in India. Sri Lankan students seek admission in Indian universities majorly because of the comparatively shorter duration of course. Many specialized honours courses in Sri Lanka are of 4 years compared to 3 years in India.<sup>47</sup> The students can save one year by studying the same course in India than in their homeland, hence there is a surge in number of students from Sri Lanka.<sup>48</sup> At the same time we can see the least number of students from Pakistan, the reason being the political mistrust between these states ensuing stringent visa rules. The Governments have signed visa agreement to ease travel in a bid to normalise their relationship. This new visa policy

<sup>46</sup> Report on International Students in Indian University 2007-08, Association of Indian University, New Delhi. In 2003-04 over 12,000 international students including 7,380 South Asian students (including Afghanistan), were enrolled in Indian universities and institutions although this number has declined from 13,707 in 1993-94.

<sup>47</sup> *Supra* note 9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

mandates a time frame of 45 days for deciding on an application as opposed to the earlier indefinite time taken to process an application.<sup>49</sup>

India realizing its responsibility, as the most technically and educationally developed country in the region has been active in promoting quality education in South Asia. As discussed above, India took a historic step in the history of educational cooperation in SAARC region by setting up of South Asian University in the JNU campus, New Delhi. Besides, the University Grants Commission (UGC) of India has also taken a historic step last year by approving the proposal for reducing fee for the students of SAARC countries. This proposal was originally mooted by Nepal which wanted slight reduction in the fee for its students studying in India. The UGC not only accepted the proposal but also extended it to all the SAARC countries. According to this proposal students from these countries would now be paying the same amount as fees as their Indian counterparts. This positive decision by the UGC will immensely benefit the deserving students from the SAARC region.

<sup>50</sup> Apart from the actions taken by the Government of India, there are other organizations like South Asian Foundation which with the aid of UNESCO is persistently working on strengthening the ties between SAARC nations by way of education. South Asian Foundation's core objective is to promote regional cooperation through a number of UNESCO Madanjeet Singh Institutions of Excellence in the eight SAARC countries, offering courses in Preservation of Cultural Heritage (Kabul), Human Rights and Common Law (Dhaka), Forestry Studies (Bumthang, Bhutan), Journalism (Chennai), Kashmir Studies (Srinagar), Regional Cooperation (Pondicherry), Green Energy Technology (Pondicherry), Climate Research (Maldives), Public Health (Kathmandu), Visual Arts (Lahore), South Asian Studies (Lahore), Water Management (Moratuwa, Sri Lanka). The South Asian Foundation provides scholarships to 2 students from each SAARC member country every year to pursue their higher education in any of the UNESCO Madanjeet Institutions of excellence.<sup>51</sup> Another such Scholarship is given by SAARCLAW Centre at National Academy of Legal Studies And Research (NALSAR),

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<sup>49</sup> *India Pakistan Ink Visa Agreement*, The Hindu, September 8, 2012.

<sup>50</sup> *Students from SAARC countries to pay less fees in universities*, Deccan Herald, April 22, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> *Supra* note 33.

University of Law, Hyderabad. Since its inception, the University has awarded scholarships to 43 Students.<sup>52</sup> Bhutan is the most active participant by sending 33 students, followed 8 students from Nepal and 2 students from Sri Lanka.<sup>53</sup>

### III. EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION IN OTHER REGIONS

Throughout the world there are different groups of countries active in educational cooperation often linked to economic integration. These developments reflect a common concern to strengthen educational systems in order to compete in global markets. This section of the paper examines the role that cooperation in education has played in deepening integration in other regional economic arrangements for the lessons to be learnt.

#### ***Bologna Process***

International provision of higher education services in both European and East Asian countries increasingly have a regional dimension. The European Union has since 1987 promoted the mobility of students, faculty, and content through its Erasmus Programmes. The Bologna Process aims to establish a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in order to enhance quality and to promote mobility between the higher education systems of its 45 member countries.<sup>54</sup> Among the EHEA's features would be a common system of credits for study, a common qualifications framework in three cycles – undergraduate, masters and doctoral, a diploma supplement to serve as a common format for certifying qualifications, and common criteria and methods of quality assurance. Diversity of standards and distance are larger issues for the SAARC than for the Bologna Process countries, which bears upon the methods and the time-scale for achieving a common higher education area. However, discussions on some Bologna elements such as mutual recognition arrangements and credit transfer have already started in

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<sup>52</sup> 37 students for LL.B , 5 Students for LL.M and 1 student for Ph.D programme.

<sup>53</sup> *Students form SAARC Countries in NALSAR*, (M.K.Nambiar SAARCLAW) Newsletter, July-December 2009, Hyderabad. at 18.

<sup>54</sup> *Understanding Bologna Process*, Outline prepared by the Delegation of the Commission of the European Union to Russia, Moscow, December 16, 2005. Also see, <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/> and [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info).



South Asia. The methods by which European countries work together to achieve long term objectives are also of interest to the SAARC countries. Key features of the Bologna Process include biennial conferences of Education Ministers of the participating countries, supported by representatives of the universities and their students. These meetings take stock of progress over the last two years and set directions for the next two, including the identification of targets, common data requirements and indicators of progress. The European Union is constituted very differently from SAARC. The idea here is not to import European models as they stand but SAARC Countries should aim to understand the European experience, and to use it as one ingredient in its own shaping policies. SAARC should develop forums for dialogue with Europe which will enable it to draw on the European experience, and share its own. For example common higher education area proposed by the Bologna Process may be of interest to SAARC. The European Higher Education Area offers a number of benefits to a group of countries aiming at economic integration. It facilitates the flow of highly qualified manpower across national borders, and hence economic integration; it promotes efficiency through widening choice for staff and students; and it enhances educational effectiveness and cultural awareness by promoting staff and student mobility

### ***Educational Cooperation in ASEAN***

ASEAN is one of the fast paced economies of the world. The need of educational cooperation in improving the quality of human resources for competition both at regional and global level was felt by ASEAN in the early 1990s. The establishment of ASEAN University Network was a huge step in this regard. AUN is an arrangement between 26 universities in the ten ASEAN countries for harnessing its educational potential. The ASEAN University Network emerged from a highly ambitious idea of the ASEAN leaders and the ASEAN sub-committee on Education (ASCOE) to establish an ASEAN University. A year after this idea was launched, it became clear that this would present too many problems concerning funding, location and leadership. Therefore, in 1994, it was decided that the founding of a network of existing institutions would be more feasible. In its early years

(1995–1999), the AUN focused mainly on the sharing of knowledge and experiences and on small-scale student and staff exchange. Since 1999, the collaborative activities became more complex with programmes like Joint Curriculum Development, cooperation in Information Communication technologies (ICT) and the establishment of sub-networks.<sup>55</sup> This is not only the case for intra-ASEAN cooperation but also for the activities with the dialogue partners. The main objective of the AUN is to strengthen the existing network of cooperation among universities in ASEAN by promoting collaborative studies and research programmes. Furthermore, the AUN attempts to promote cooperation and solidarity among scientists and scholars in the region, and to develop academic and professional human resources as well as to produce and disseminate scientific knowledge and information among the universities in the region.<sup>56</sup> If we analyse the ASEAN experiences in implementing education cooperation in the last few years, we will find some successful measures to be taken into account in order to have successful education cooperation in our region. These are: understanding common problems, exploring common interests and identifying mutual gains of cooperating on a regional basis. Prioritizing the programs/projects that are urgent; in this case, SAARC should be at the driving force to identify priorities that are of interest to SAARC (and the dialogue partners). The willingness among SAARC countries to harmonise regional educational regulations and to that extent, making the domestic laws and national policies governing education is the biggest reason for success of ASEAN, which SAARC member countries should learn. Sharing resources in order to implement special assistance, which focuses on capacity building to bridge development gaps across SAARC nations is also an important agenda. Further, implementing joint efforts, which are about creating and developing regional institutions and implementing the programs through win-win approach, is indispensable.

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<sup>55</sup> See, <[www.aun-sec.org](http://www.aun-sec.org)> accessed on April 10, 2011.

<sup>56</sup> See Soekartawi [Et al, "Strengthening education cooperation through ASEAN partnership and networking: Lessons from Indonesia," Country paper presented in "The First Regional Seminar and Workshop on Strengthening Cooperation on Education to Achieve ASEAN Caring and Sharing" organized by Ministry of Education, Thailand and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand at Amari Watergate Hotel, Bangkok, Thailand on 23-25 February 2009. source at <<http://www.bic.moe.go.th/th/images/stories/ASEAN/presentation/Indonesia.pdf>> accessed on April 10, 2011.

### ***East Asian Cooperation in Education***

East Asian countries (10 in ASEAN, plus P.R. China, Japan and South Korea) are also in a process of internationalising their higher education sector with an increasing regional component. Led by Japan, the ASEAN +3 study group on facilitation and promotion of exchange of people and human resource development advanced a comprehensive report which was welcomed by the East Asian leaders meeting in October 2003. The EAS group strives for regional promotion of lifelong learning programs; credit transfer systems; scholarships and exchange programs for students, faculty, staff; research and development cooperation; ‘centres of excellence’ including e-learning; and curricular development as bases for common regional qualification Standards among interested institutions.<sup>57</sup>

### ***The Way Forward***

Today in the knowledge era, we have technologies such as, Oceanography, Biotechnology, Air and Space Technology etc. knocking at our doors. Globalization has many unprecedented opportunities to offer to SAARC but how we are going to utilise it is up to us. For making optimum use of the opportunities, we need trained human resource, which could only be produced by a good education system. The onslaught of globalization is merciless, if we do not act, we won’t be able to survive the competition from other countries. Though the need for prioritising the development of educational resources of the region is much debated, stronger commitments to that end are lacking. Mutual cooperation is a key factor in dealing with these problems, especially in higher education. SAARC aims to accelerate economic and social development in member states, which requires optimal utilization of human resources. It has, therefore, emphasized the importance of promoting education.

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<sup>57</sup> Philip McKenzie, Robert Horne, Andrew Dowling,; and Adrian Beavis, , *Harnessing Educational Cooperation in the East Asia Summit (EAS) for Regional Competitiveness and Community Building* (2008). *Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation*. source at [http://research.acer.edu.au/policy\\_analysis\\_misc/5](http://research.acer.edu.au/policy_analysis_misc/5) accessed on April10, 2011 .

Higher education is of utmost significance for modernization of an economy and creation of a knowledge-based society. The member countries, therefore, must assess the progress of higher education, both in quantity and quality, and take corrective measures. The foregoing review reveals that in the entire SAARC region, enrolment in higher education in proportion to other countries, the eligible age group is low. The first and foremost task is to increase opportunities for access to higher education to meet the educational needs of various sections of groups, including women. The gross enrolment ratio between age group of 17 to 23 years varies in SAARC countries from less than 1% in Afghanistan to about 10% in India, while it is very high from 50% to more than 90% for some developed countries.<sup>58</sup> Thus, large-scale expansion of higher education facilities has to be undertaken in the entire region. Perhaps, the Open Distance Learning System is the best option to cover the maximal number of learners with minimal financial and physical costs. India has already taken a lead by diverting 25% of the enrolment in post-secondary education to the ODL model and is planning to raise the figure to 50% within a decade<sup>59</sup>. Other SAARC nations should also strengthen this efficient mode of learning.

Improvement in the quality of education is another aspect requiring urgent attention. Establishing world-class schools of higher education will prevent youth from being lured away by foreign institutions. Unconditional cooperation in curriculum development, preparation of instructional material, implementation of innovative practices, use of new technologies, exchange of experts, and promotion of collaborative research are the needs of the hour. SAARC should promote and finance regional conferences on various issues on higher education, including those related to quality improvement. So far, almost all SAARC countries have been financing their education systems out of public funds. But allocation of public funds for education is very low. Keeping in view the degree of underdevelopment, all governments must consider devoting more funds to education. For example, in India public funding of education, in the form of subsidies, has been to the

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<sup>58</sup> C.P.S.Chauhan, Higher Education, Current Status and Future Possibilities in South Asia, Analytical Reports on International education, Vol 2 No.1, March 2008, p 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

extent of 90 to 95% of total expenditure.<sup>60</sup> And still universities are short on funds. The government has proposed to increase public funding on education from the present 3.9% to 6% of GNP in due course.<sup>61</sup> Other countries of the region should also work on similar strategies.

Since large-scale expansion of higher education accompanied by increased financial burden on the public exchequer, the Government of India has encouraged the private sector to establish and manage higher education institutions. Similarly, other countries of the region have also welcomed private for-profit investment in the higher education sector. It has been observed that the impact of private higher education in the region has been positive, because private universities generally pay higher salaries to teachers, offer a good curriculum, and provide high-quality libraries and research facilities. Thus, privatization tends to respond to the popular demand for modern, job-oriented, and practical training in technology and business. But most private universities and colleges are providing professional education and are functioning on commercial lines. Opening private universities and colleges is a lucrative business in India these days. Privatization and commercialization of higher education are two faces of the same coin, and hence, commercialization must be accepted; but at the same time governments must monitor institutions so that such commercialization does not lower the quality of education.

There are several broad segments or issues in the education services sector which can be addressed regionally. These include cross-border mobility within the region, cross border investment, franchise, collaborations, joint ventures, distance education and ICT based programmes (IGNOU can play a major role in this). Also harmonising regulations and recognition of selected degrees and programme and institutions within the region needs to be prioritised. As discussed earlier, there are areas of complementarity in this sector within the region but the ability of the key host countries like India would in large depend on their domestic capacity and quality, several issues need to be addressed to ease mobility of the students within the region. One

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<sup>60</sup> Report of Steering Committee, Secondary Higher and Technical Education for Eleventh Year Plan, Government of India Planning commission. p17-29.

<sup>61</sup> *Spending Boost for Health Education in 12th Plan*, Time of India, April 22, 2011.

major issue in this regard is the often stringent visa regime.<sup>62</sup> Today, foreign students coming on scholarship or self-financed basis have to undergo cumbersome visa regulations and documentation requirements when coming to India for studies same is true for mobility of researchers and teachers on exchange programmes. Another area for regional cooperation is facilitating cross border investments by easing the regulation for setting up education institution and harmonising investment regulations pan South Asia. More and more regional scholarship schemes can be introduced for SAARC students. Except the handful of scholarships given by the SAARC secretariat, UNESCO- Madanjeet Institute of excellence, South Asian university and National Academy for Legal studies and Research, Hyderabad etc. the SAARC countries have general scholarship for developing and least developed countries students.

All the member countries must work together, setting aside all bilateral economic, political, and territorial disputes. Sometimes bilateral territorial issues dominate discussions in SAARC meetings and socio-economic matters of common interest take a back seat. SAARC should be a platform for discussing common socio-economic problems and devising collaborative strategies to deal with them. One can see an active growing interest of SAARC countries in developing strong cooperation in the education sector after the 12<sup>th</sup> SAARC summit in Islamabad. Apart from the strategies being planned at the regional level, countries have also entered into bilateral agreements for cooperation. The recent example in this regard is Pakistani Prime Minister Syed Yousuf Raza Gilani's proposal to Bhutan for cooperation in the fields of education and human development by offering increased number of scholarships for the Bhutanese students particularly in medicine and engineering fields. He also offered training facilities to Bhutanese diplomats in Pakistan's Foreign Service Academy.<sup>63</sup> Expanding cooperation in education will build strong partnerships and support greater mobility for the students and academicians of South Asia. It increases awareness and intercultural appreciation of the other region by working together to build a common future and building networks for education and

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<sup>62</sup> *Supra note* , 46.

<sup>63</sup> *Pakistan, Bhutan Vow to Boost Ties in Trade, Tourism*, The Financial Express, March 20, 2011.

youth co-operation that are sustainable and dynamic. The cooperation in educational sector provides an inexhaustible driving force for deepening the relationship amongst SAARC countries. The benefits of international education initiatives go beyond the personal growth and skills obtained by individual participants. These initiatives also have positive cultural, political, academic and economic impacts on our society. The 'people to people' exchange gives an opportunity to the people of one country to explore, appreciate and understand culture, conditions and aspirations of citizens in other countries. It helps in forging good relations between two nations. When a country gives scholarship to the students of other country for achieving their higher education aspiration, it is actually creating its constituency in that other country. The 'people to people' exchange exposes students to social and cultural differences, new educational methods and systems, and unique global perspectives. The cross-border relationships that are formed during the cooperation programmes, for instance, are sometimes lifelong relationships that may become the foundation of future economic transactions or business collaborations.

Though there are many benefits of cooperation in educational sector but these benefits cannot be taken for granted. A number of factors are important for the success of cooperative activities and to ensure that they achieve their objectives. At regional level key success factors include cooperation. It must be seen by all parties as meeting genuine needs. Cooperation needs to be viewed as a two-way process whereby each country shares its strengths to help others as well as receives assistance in meeting its needs. It is imperative to provide a high level political support and strong links into national ministries and networks of education providers needs to be developed. A program framework in which the various components are mutually reinforcing: 'piecemeal programs don't work'. A cooperation policy with realistic timelines should be formulated together with the constitution of well-resourced coordinating group or secretariat which is able to maintain momentum, support national personnel, disseminate good practice, and develop future plans. Building social infrastructure on the solid foundation of education to enhance national capacity should be seen as a core task. Promotion of pioneering tertiary education should be realized as the foremost priority of the SAARC countries.