



H.E. Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN

**Keynote Address at the
2026 Aus4ASEAN Alumni Dialogue**

23 June 2026, ASEAN Headquarters/ASEAN Secretariat

Your Excellency Tiffany McDonald, Ambassador of Australia to ASEAN,

Dr. Piti Srisangnam, Executive Director of ASEAN Foundation,

All the members of the Board of Trustees of the ASEAN Foundation,

Excellencies, Distinguished alumni, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I can associate myself with the remarks of Ambassador Tiffany and Ambassador Sarah.

It is my great pleasure to welcome all of you to The ASEAN Headquarters/The ASEAN Secretariat. Take a look around this room. What you see is not simply a gathering of accomplished individuals. You are, collectively, a living record of one of the most important investments ASEAN and Australia have made in each other; a common belief that education can bridge nations and strengthen regions, and that the human connections formed in lecture halls and university corridors and campuses would eventually shape something larger. But your presence here reflects something deeper than academic achievement. It reflects enduring friendships, professional networks, and shared values built across the years. And today is the real evidence of that.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Australia was ASEAN's very first Dialogue Partner in 1974. It was a relationship built, from the very beginning, on a particular kind of confidence — that two very different societies, separated by geography but connected by proximity and shared interest, could find common ground and build on it. Over five decades now, that confidence has proven justified.

Our partnership has expanded across trade and investment, digital transformation, renewable energy, education, climate resilience, public health, connectivity, and regional security. We have strengthened people-to-people ties and reinforced our shared commitment to an open, stable, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

In 2021, Australia became one of ASEAN's first Comprehensive Strategic Partners — a reflection of how far we had come together, and how seriously both sides regarded what lay ahead. And this year, we mark the fifth anniversary of that Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. It is a milestone worth pausing at; not to be self-congratulatory, but to take an honest measure of what we are, where we are and where we need to go. Because the world in which this partnership must now operate is considerably more demanding than the one in which it was conceived.

Strategic competition is intensifying. Economic volatility continues to disrupt livelihoods and supply chains. Climate change is no longer a future threat but a present reality of communities across our region. Emerging technologies are transforming economies and societies faster than most institutions can adapt.

In other words, the international environment is becoming more complex, more fragmented and more challenging. This is the context in which the fifth anniversary of our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership falls. And it is also the context in which the people in this room matter more than they might realise.

You — ASEAN graduates of Australian universities — are not peripheral to this partnership. You are among its most durable assets. Across the region, alumni of Australian universities have gone on to serve as ministers, diplomats, entrepreneurs, academics, scientists, civil servants, journalists, and certainly community leaders.

Whether or not that describes your path today, you share something with all of them: you have lived in both worlds. You understand ASEAN and Australia not through policy papers but through personal experience — through friendships formed across cultural difference, through the gradual discovery that international cooperation is not an abstract concept but a practical, human necessity.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our region, for all the pressures upon it, remains one of the most dynamic in the world today. ASEAN represents a market of nearly 700 million people, projected to become the fourth-largest economy in the world by 2030. Southeast Asia's digital economy continues to expand rapidly.

Our youthful population, growing middle class, and entrepreneurial energy represent enormous opportunity; an opportunity that will be realised only if the people shaping our institutions and economies can think and work together across borders.

This is where alumni communities matter greatly. You are uniquely positioned to help shape the next chapter of ASEAN-Australia relations. You can help build stronger educational partnerships and research collaboration. You can facilitate business innovation and cross-border investment. You can contribute to more resilient healthcare systems, more sustainable urban development, and more inclusive digital economies.

This is precisely what ASEAN's vision for the future demands. The ASEAN Community is not merely an institutional project. It is about ensuring that our region remains resilient, innovative, dynamic, and genuinely people-centred. *ASEAN 2045: Our Shared Future*, adopted by our Leaders last year, clearly articulates this. And Australia's longstanding support for ASEAN community-building, most recently through initiatives such as the Australia for ASEAN Futures Initiative, reflects a partnership focused not only on dialogue, but on delivering practical outcomes for our peoples, and particularly for youth.

The youth of ASEAN and Australia will inherit a world shaped by artificial intelligence, green transformation, demographic shifts, and geopolitical uncertainty. They will need not only technical skills but intercultural competence, adaptability, and ethical leadership. These are not qualities that can be taught in a classroom alone. They are qualities formed through the kind of experience that everyone in this room has had.

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The scholarship programmes, university collaborations, research initiatives, and institutional partnerships that have sent generations of ASEAN students to Australia and Australians to engage more deeply with Southeast Asia have yielded returns far beyond the classroom. They have produced leaders who think regionally. Innovators who work across cultures. Citizens who understand that our futures are bound together in many different ways. In an era where misinformation spreads rapidly and trust erodes easily, that shared understanding is not a soft dividend. It is a strategic one.

Alumni networks like this one are uniquely positioned to extend that dividend forward. The most valuable contribution you can make to the next chapter of ASEAN-Australia relations is not institutional; it is personal. Mentor a young professional. Support a student exchange. Facilitate an internship. Create platforms for collaboration between ASEAN and Australian institutions. Open a door for someone who reminds you of yourself at the start of this journey.

These are the acts through which the next generation will encounter this partnership not as a diplomatic construct, but as a lived reality that expands their horizons and improves their lives. This is why educational cooperation must remain a cornerstone of the ASEAN-Australia partnership.

I would like to underline this point. This is why educational cooperation must remain a cornerstone of the ASEAN-Australia partnership. Deepening collaboration in education and skills development, accelerating cooperation in the digital and green economies, and strengthening connectivity between our businesses, institutions, and peoples will be central to meeting the challenges ahead.

To all alumni gathered here today: your achievements reflect the success of educational cooperation between ASEAN and Australia. Your experiences embody the spirit of regional connectivity. And your future contributions will help shape the character of our partnership in the decades ahead.

What we celebrate today has deep roots. Long before the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, long before 1974, the Colombo Plan was already weaving the first threads of this connection — bringing tens of thousands of Southeast Asian students to Australian universities from 1951 onwards.

Few could have predicted what those investments would yield what we have today: presidents, ministers, heads of civil service, and community leaders across the region, their careers and convictions shaped in part by what they learned and who they met in Australia. What you represent is the continuation of that tradition.

Perhaps one of you will find yourself in this very position someday — Secretary-General of ASEAN, speaking to the next generation of alumni.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Five years into our Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the human relationships built through decades of educational exchange remain the most enduring foundation of what ASEAN and Australia have created together.

It is as sound and as vital today as when Australia first took a chance on a young regional grouping with an ambitious idea and an uncertain future. ASEAN has since proven itself. So has the partnership. And so, I would submit, have the people in this room as well.

The next five years, ten years; will challenge us differently. The challenges are larger, the stakes higher, and the margin for drift narrower. But the foundation is strong and you are part of it. Thank you very much for your commitment, your leadership, and your continuing engagement with ASEAN.

May the friendships and networks represented here continue to grow stronger. And may ASEAN and Australia continue working together for a peaceful, resilient, and prosperous region.

Thank you very much and a good morning to all of you.
