

Young Dietitians Across Asia: Navigating Challenges and Unlocking Opportunities

Special Report: AYDN Activities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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Introduction

The Asian Young Dietitians Network (AYDN) organized a forum during the 32nd Malaysian Dietitians' Association National Conference (MDA 2026), held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 4-5 July 2026. The session, titled Young Dietitians Across Asia: Navigating Challenges and Unlocking Opportunities, brought together young dietitians from the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam and Bangladesh to share their experiences and perspectives on the dietetics profession in their respective countries and discuss future directions for workforce development across the region.



Figure 1. Discussion among five AYDN members from four countries

The origins of AYDN can be traced to a regional dialogue held during the 8th Asian Congress of Dietetics (ACD) in Yokohama, Japan, in 2022, where young dietitians from across Asia shared perspectives on the status and development of the profession in their respective countries. These discussions led to the establishment of the network under the mentorship of Prof. Shigeru Yamamoto, with support from Ajinomoto Co., Inc., Japan. AYDN was officially established on 1 December 2023 with participation from 12 countries and regions. Since its inception, the network has provided a platform for professional exchange, networking and collaborative learning among young dietitians in Asia. Its activities have included regional meetings, networking events and research initiatives. One ongoing project is a comparative review of undergraduate nutrition and dietetics programs across AYDN member countries, aimed at identifying similarities and differences in educational pathways throughout the region.



Figure 2.

Against this background, the forum provided an opportunity for young dietitians from different countries to exchange experiences and reflect on both shared and country-specific challenges facing the profession. Despite the diversity of healthcare systems represented, several common themes emerged from the discussion. Participants reflected on professional recognition and regulation, education and career development, the growing influence of artificial intelligence (AI) in practice, and the value of regional learning and collaboration.

Recognition, regulation and professional identity

Differences in the level of professional development among the participating countries were immediately apparent. The Philippines represented one of the most established systems discussed during the forum, with nearly 80 years of history in nutrition and dietetics education and a longstanding licensure system for Registered Nutritionist-Dietitians (RNDs). In contrast, Vietnam has only recently introduced professional licensing, while Bangladesh is still pursuing broader legal recognition of the profession.

Despite these differences, similar concerns emerged across countries. Participants repeatedly described professional recognition not as an endpoint, but as an ongoing process requiring legal protection, public awareness and advocacy.

The Philippine experience illustrated both the benefits and limitations of regulation. While licensure provides a national competency standard and protects the professional title, challenges remain in ensuring that dietitians are fully recognized as clinical healthcare professionals rather than primarily as food service personnel. Similar concerns were raised regarding professional encroachment by other practitioners offering nutrition-related services without formal dietetics qualifications.

Malaysia provided another perspective on the impact of regulation. Since achieving formal recognition, dietitians have gained greater visibility and access to a broader range of employment opportunities. Nevertheless, participants noted that regulation alone does not automatically translate into public understanding of the profession. Competition from unqualified online nutrition coaches and misinformation circulating through social media

continues to challenge the visibility of evidence-based nutrition practice.

For Vietnam and Bangladesh, discussions focused on professional identity formation. Vietnamese representatives described ongoing efforts to establish clearer licensure systems, harmonize educational standards and better define the role of dietitians within healthcare teams. In Bangladesh, recent government recognition of educational requirements for nutrition professionals was viewed as an encouraging step, although registration and licensing remain priorities for the profession.

Across all four countries, participants highlighted the importance of defining professional scope, strengthening public understanding and ensuring that dietitians are recognized as integral members of healthcare teams.

Education, training and career development

The discussion on education extended beyond university curricula and focused on how young dietitians develop practical skills required in professional practice.

Although educational systems differ considerably across countries, speakers shared the view that technical knowledge alone is insufficient. Clinical competence requires supervised practice, mentorship and opportunities to apply theoretical learning in real-world settings.

Representatives from Vietnam and Bangladesh particularly emphasized the need for stronger practical training opportunities. In Bangladesh, structured internships and supervised clinical placements were identified as a major priority for workforce development. Participants noted that classroom learning provides foundational knowledge, but professional judgement, communication skills and confidence are largely developed through direct patient interaction.

Vietnamese speakers highlighted another challenge: variability between university programs. While nutrition and dietetics education are expanding, the absence of a nationally standardized curriculum creates difficulties in ensuring consistent competencies among graduates. Participants also noted that training remains heavily oriented toward hospitals, with fewer opportunities to gain experience in schools, industry and community settings.

By contrast, speakers from the Philippines and Malaysia described more established educational pathways but emphasized the need for continued professional growth beyond graduation. Particular attention was given to communication skills. Malaysian representatives argued that effective nutrition care depends not only on scientific evidence but also on the ability to translate that evidence into practical recommendations that patients can understand and implement.

The discussion also explored emerging career pathways. Opportunities in digital health, food technology, consultancy and industry were identified as increasingly attractive options for younger professionals. Experiences shared by participants working internationally further highlighted the importance of research skills, data analysis, scientific writing and cross-cultural communication in an increasingly global profession.

Artificial intelligence and digital tools in dietetics practice

The role of artificial intelligence attracted considerable interest and generated one of the most dynamic discussions during the forum.

Participants generally agreed that AI has become part of everyday professional practice. Examples included

developing educational materials, summarizing scientific information, supporting regulatory reviews, improving written communication and enhancing patient education resources.

At the same time, all speakers stressed that AI should be regarded as a support tool rather than a replacement for professional judgement.

Several concerns were raised regarding the reliability of AI-generated health information. Malaysian representatives discussed the phenomenon commonly referred to as "AI hallucination," in which systems generate plausible but inaccurate information. Caution was advised when using AI for medical nutrition therapy, where inappropriate recommendations may overlook important clinical nuances that influence patient care.

The need to verify references and consult original sources was repeatedly emphasized. Participants shared examples in which AI-generated summaries contained inaccuracies or cited references that did not exist, highlighting the continuing responsibility of nutrition professionals to critically evaluate information before applying it in practice.

The discussion also extended beyond the use of AI as an end-user tool. Participants suggested that dietitians should be involved in the development and validation of nutrition-related AI systems. Ensuring that algorithms reflect sound nutrition science and local dietary practices was viewed as an important future role for the profession.

Despite the opportunities offered by digital technologies, speakers consistently emphasized that empathy, ethical judgement, critical thinking and human interaction remain irreplaceable components of dietetics practice.

Learning across Asia

The final part of the forum focused on lessons that countries could learn from one another.

Rather than presenting a single model for professional development, the discussion highlighted how countries at different stages of maturity can contribute valuable perspectives. The Philippines demonstrated the long-term benefits of sustained professional development and regulation, while Malaysia shared lessons from successful policy advocacy and stakeholder engagement. Vietnam provided insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with building a young profession, and Bangladesh illustrated the importance of resilience and collective action when pursuing recognition and reform.

Participants stressed that professional progress should not be taken for granted. Many of the structures that currently support dietetics practice, including regulation, licensure, educational standards and professional associations, have been built over decades through advocacy and collaboration. Hearing experiences from countries at different stages of development reminded participants that professional growth is an ongoing process rather than a final destination.

In this context, AYDN was recognized as a valuable platform for regional exchange. Through dialogue and collaboration, young dietitians can learn from diverse experiences while identifying shared challenges and opportunities.

Concluding remarks

Although the countries represented at the forum differed considerably in their levels of professional development, common themes emerged throughout the discussion. Professional recognition, high-quality education, practical

training, effective communication and responsible use of digital technologies were identified as priorities across the region.

The discussion also demonstrated that the future of dietetics will depend not only on scientific expertise, but also on the profession's ability to adapt to changing healthcare environments, engage with the public, contribute to emerging technologies and collaborate across sectors and national boundaries.

The AYDN forum provided an opportunity for young professionals to exchange experiences, reflect on shared challenges and learn from different national contexts. Such regional dialogue may play an important role in supporting the next generation of dietitians and strengthening the profession throughout Asia.

