

**First ASEM Rectors' Conference: Asia – Europe
Higher Education Leadership Dialogue
“Between Tradition and Reform: Universities
in Asia and Europe at the Crossroads”**

Welcome and Opening Statement

Professor Dr Dieter Lenzen

President, Freie Universität Berlin

Vice-President International, German Rectors'

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Dear Dr Rathchavy,
Dear Ambassador Khanh,
Dear Professor Wintermantel,
Dear Professor de Maret,
Dear Mr Ehrenberg,
Esteemed Colleagues and distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure and a privilege to welcome you to Freie Universität Berlin on the occasion of this inaugural meeting of Asian and European leaders in higher education. It is no coincidence that Freie Universität is hosting the First ASEM Rectors' Conference. As some of you might know, Freie Universität Berlin was founded by students and scholars on 4 December 1948 – almost exactly 60 years ago – with the support of the American Allies and Berlin politicians. This was a response to the persecution of students critical of the system at Universität Unter den Linden in the Soviet sector of the divided city of Berlin.

The foundation of Freie Universität Berlin was facilitated through international support. International impulses have shaped its research and teaching ever since. In order to survive, both at an academic and intellectual level, Freie Universität early on established connections from its geographically isolated position in West Berlin to Western Germany, Europe, and the entire world.

What began as a necessity, rapidly evolved into a successful strategy: currently, Freie Universität has over 130 partnerships with scholarly institutions worldwide. The university is a drawing card for international researchers: Freie Universität and Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München are the two locations most often selected for visiting scholars of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. About 600 foreign scholars currently contribute to the diversity of our research and teaching. Of our approximately 34,000 students in over 100 subject areas, 16 percent come from abroad.

In the German Excellence Initiative, Freie Universität was one of nine universities that met with success in all three funding lines, thereby receiving additional funding for its institutional future development strategy as an "international network university". Freie Universität can thus take its place in the global competition among universities.

The recent worldwide financial crisis underscores, once again, the obvious fact that we live in a truly globalised world: Actions and decisions taken at a local or national level affect not only neighbouring countries, but the whole region and even the whole world. Given this situation, I am convinced that the university in the 21st century has to be a transnational university. Only as a truly transnational university will it fulfil its mission, to educate global citizens and to research for the good of society.

Education for global citizenship and research for the good of society are at the core of a university's mission. As a natural consequence of the emerging challenges of globalisation, universities of the future are universities in the world and for the world. Only in this way, the chances of globalisation can be seized and its risks can be anticipated and overcome.

As the chances of globalisation predominantly open up to well-qualified and skilled individuals, national education systems, especially at the tertiary level, have a particular responsibility to enhance the positive consequences of globalisation and, at the same time, to anticipate and avert the negative ones. Education is the key for the individual, but also for society, to effectively balance the chances and risks of globalisation.

Nonetheless, higher education systems and universities are themselves not only agents of change, but are also affected by change themselves.

Globalisation leads to

- increasing national and international competition in the tertiary sector;
- increasing cultural diversity of higher education systems through the influx of educational migrants;
- increasing tensions between the older and the younger generation about access to higher education;
- decreasing public funds for higher education despite widening access; and
- changing demands on higher education by students and other stakeholders.

It will depend on the competitiveness and flexibility of national higher education systems whether they will be able to cope with these challenges, while at the same time maintaining and enhancing the quality of education and research.

Higher education institutions have always had “open doors” to the world. Since their beginnings, universities have been acting in an international context. Nowadays, just as in the past, international collaboration enriches research, teaching and study. Therefore, the mobility of students, teachers and researchers is a prerequisite for the successful operation of universities and the competitiveness of national science and research systems.

However, in the long run, it will not be sufficient to stick to the traditional concept of internationalisation as being the exchange of students and the participation in international research projects. It will depend more and more on the ability of the entire university to design and implement a broad strategy for internationalising, based on the university’s profile and mission and encompassing all areas of a higher education institution – from studies to teaching, research, services and administration.

Successful, effective and sustainable internationalisation will depend, first and foremost, on a self-concept of the university as a global institution. What is required is not the internationalisation of teaching, studies and research, but transnationality of the university as a whole.

A university that ignores the challenges of globalisation will in the long run, or even in the medium run, not stand a chance in national, much less in global competition. The same is true for higher education systems as a whole, especially with the industrialised nations facing dramatic demographic challenges and decreasing funds for higher education.

It is now up to national higher education systems as well as for individual universities to find their specific place in a developing world higher education system and to actively participate in defining this emerging system. Yet, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for internationalising a higher education institution. It is important to establish a common vision of internationalisation and internationality, while at the same time taking into account the specificities of a university as well as the regional and national context in which it is embedded.

The German Rectors’ Conference, as the voice of German universities, supports its member institutions in this process of internationalisation and aims at actively participating in the development of international standards and benchmarks that will enable German universities to be part of an emerging world higher education system.

Therefore, the German Rectors' Conference and the Freie Universität Berlin are proud of their partnership with the Asia-Europe Foundation, the ASEAN University Network and the European University Association in launching the First ASEM Rectors' Conference here today.

"Between Tradition and Reform: Universities in Asia and Europe at the Crossroads" is the thematic heading under which we have come together. Truly, higher education institutions in Europe stand at the crossroads, aiming to maintain their valuable heritage and tradition while at the same time adapting to the changes of today and rising to the challenges of the future.

As I understand from discussions with Asian colleagues, the same is true for universities in Asia. This conference provides us with an excellent opportunity to discuss higher education policy issues which are relevant to both regions, such as the development of new mechanisms for the governance and management of universities, the dichotomy of competition and cooperation in the higher education sector and quality assurance in higher education.

At the same time, this First ASEM Rectors' Conference is an important step towards establishing a sustainable dialogue platform between Asia and Europe on higher education issues, in view of enhancing cooperation among ASEM universities. In response to the conclusions adopted by ASEM education ministers, who met on invitation of the German minister of education and research in May of this year – also in Berlin, by the way – it is our common aim to set the agenda for an enhanced cooperation between universities in Asia and Europe and to develop recommendations, to be submitted to the competent ASEM national governments and regional bodies.

I would like to thank the Federal Ministry of Education and Research for whole-heartedly supporting this conference. I would also like to particularly thank and welcome our Asian colleagues who travelled a long way to join us here today. Furthermore I would like to thank all speakers for providing us with some stimulating input for our discussion.

Let me wish for a most productive and pleasant two days of discussion and exchange, which will hopefully stimulate new impulses for the future development of higher education cooperation between our two regions. Once again, welcome to Germany, welcome to Berlin. Thank you.