



Bundesministerium
für Bildung
und Forschung

ASEM Rectors' Conference

Speech

by the Director-General for
European and International Cooperation
of the
Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Christoph Ehrenberg

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Mr. Lenzen, Dr. Pitsuwan, Ambassador Khanh, Distinguished Rectors, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to welcome you here today on behalf of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. I hope that you enjoyed an exciting and productive exchange of ideas at your meeting yesterday.

State Secretary Meyer-Krahmer had originally planned to speak to you this morning. Unfortunately, he is unable to be here due to other commitments.

Ladies and Gentlemen, we are experiencing extraordinary times with extraordinary challenges for politics and the financial sector, as well as for all societal forces in our countries. In view of the global dimension of the financial crisis and its global implications, it is all the more important to conduct an even closer international dialogue in all fields of policy. In addition to short-term instruments, we are also being called upon to provide long-term solutions to today's great challenges — not only challenges of financial and economic policy, but also of climate change and demographic developments, for example. Science and research play a very important role in solving these problems, and international cooperation is absolutely essential.

The first ASEM Conference of Education Ministers, which was chaired by Federal Minister Dr. Schavan in May this year, was a first step at senior political level towards intensifying cooperation between Asian and European countries on questions of higher education and other education issues. It is encouraging that you as representatives of the universities have taken the initiative for this present conference. I would like to thank all those responsible

for preparing and organizing this first ASEM Rectors' Conference. It is a valuable component of the new ASEM education agenda.

Ladies and Gentlemen, international cooperation in the field of higher education enjoys a long tradition — and this is also true of cooperation between Europe and Asia. The political dialogue within the ASEM process is also nothing new. It has existed since 1996. What is new is the idea of incorporating the topic of education in the dialogue at minister level. We are proud to say that this was Germany's idea, which was taken up by the Heads of State and Government. As I have just mentioned, the ASEM Education Ministers met in Berlin in May for a conference aimed at exchanging experiences and discussing how to encourage processes of development and strengthen cooperation.

But what inspired us to include education in the ASEM process alongside the classical areas of industry, trade and foreign policy? We did so in the full awareness that this area holds the greatest potential for development in all our countries. The world's workshops of the future are schools, training facilities and universities. Education and knowledge should no longer be the privilege of just a few, but should be available in all countries throughout the world to ensure progress and development.

To achieve this goal, we must focus on cooperation as well as competition. Of course, every university would like to do well in the annual Shanghai Ranking. Those who don't succeed will criticize the method employed. Competition is part and parcel of science. Competition for the best researchers and students. Competition for the best research ideas and results, for the best academic training. If we succeed in establishing a good balance between both — cooperation and competition — we will be able to

achieve the best possible results in the field of science, with positive consequences reaching far beyond.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the 43 ASEM states have huge potential. They dispose of half of the world's income, they represent 58% of the world's population and they control 60% of the world's trade. This means that the ASEM partnership has a global responsibility. When we talk about education and training, about science and research, this is not just a dialogue about internal questions of education and science systems, but about the potential of these systems to tackle the great global problems.

All these arguments show that we were wise to put the topic of education high up on the agenda of the ASEM process. We are convinced that the ASEM partners will take up and maintain the dynamism of the first events here in Germany. Vietnam will host the next dialogue of ministers in Hanoi at the end of May 2009. It will then be a matter of consolidating the strategic ASEM Education Partnership for the 21st Century and making headway with the measures required.

The Ministers' discussions in May concentrated, on the one hand, on how we can improve mobility and exchanges between our universities in Europe and Asia. There is still a lot of room for improvement in this field. We must seek to end the disparity in the flow of mobility between Europe and Asia — for example by drawing more attention to courses of study and providing better language preparation. Visa issues, the transparency of course contents and degrees — the list of topics is long.

On the other hand, the Ministers discussed how to improve the networking of universities with industry with a view to enhancing

graduate employability. All the Ministers agreed that this discussion should be continued and intensified. The disparity between qualification pathways and labour market demand is a significant obstacle to development in many countries.

The Ministers called for follow-up activities at working level in both these areas.

I would like to briefly quote:

(1) To invite ASEM members to join an EU-Asia working group including Senior Officials and stakeholders from the education sector to identify the challenges connected with strengthening the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, and to make suggestions for improving the framework conditions for bi-regional exchanges with special regard to recognition of qualifications and degrees.

(2) To propose the establishment of a bi-regional forum involving stakeholders from the education and economic sector to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between education and industry at local, national and international level. A regular exchange of experience on how to promote knowledge, skills, and competences relevant to the labour market could thus be established.

The Ministers will provide their contribution by convening a working group on obstacles to mobility at the beginning of December 2008. Once again, the kick-off meeting will take place in Germany. The forum on higher education and industry is to take place shortly, following consultations with the ASEM partners.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ASEM dialogue on issues of higher education has set itself ambitious goals. The many good examples of successful bilateral and multilateral cooperation between European and Asian universities certainly provide a sound basis for the strategic partnership which we all envisage. However, we also want to establish a new overarching platform for exchanging information and developing and implementing joint projects, above and beyond these existing partnerships. And we want to do this at all levels. You, as university rectors, will play an important role in this scheme.

I am confident that this conference will produce important results which will influence our work in future.

I wish you all a further two days of interesting discussions and hope that this forum will become a regular feature of the ASEM dialogue.

Finally, I would like to wish you all a pleasant and interesting stay in this fascinating city of Berlin.

Thank you for your attention.