

THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE ASEM PROCESS

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I. Introduction

- Friends, ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 1st Rectors' Conference which is a pioneering initiative of the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) to bring together leaders of higher education institutions such as yourselves to exchange and share valuable experiences in the field of higher education co-operation.

II. ASEM and the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) – Catalysts for Higher Education Co-operation in Asia and Europe

- Since 1996 that it was established, the **ASIA-EUROPE MEETING (ASEM)** has been the main multilateral channel for communication between Asia and Europe, strengthening interaction and mutual understanding between the two regions through dialogue. The establishment of the **ASIA-EUROPE FOUNDATION (ASEF)** in 1997 is a concrete outcome of the ASEM process. It remains the only permanent physical institution of ASEM.

- ASEF promotes greater mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges and serves as the interface between civil society groups and governments. In past 12 years, ASEF has implemented **452 projects** (under which 891 events) which have brought together more than **13, 927 participants** and an even wider audience (185,000) in Asia and Europe. ASEF prides itself in being a catalyst for bi-regional relations, in processes that may not have otherwise emerged from purely governmental nor purely civil society initiatives.
- Needless to say, one of the main areas of concern of ASEM countries take a crucial role when it comes to human security, economic and social development – that is higher education. Indeed, it is seen not only as a high priority by universities but more so by national governments in its policies and programmes. Convinced to this end, **ASEF has developed the ASEM Education Hub (AEH), its multi-dimensional platform for bi-regional cooperation in higher education, which was established in 1997 at the Second ASEM Summit in London.** I am sure you had a glimpse of the work of ASEF, the ASEM Education Hub and its partners through our multi-media showcase in the exhibition area.
- **The renewed AEH has various pillars:** Its (1) **Advisory Committee** is a forum for discussion between the regional and international networks and organisations acting as both an observatory and a think-tank for ASEM higher education cooperation. The Hub organises an (2) **Annual Colloquium** on transversal issues (including quality assurance, joint curriculum development and university governance). The Hub also fosters institutional linkages among universities through (3) **Thematic Networks** in fields as Lifelong Learning, Peace and Conflict Studies, Intellectual Property Management, Regionalism and Human Security. Finally, as mobility is a fundamental aspect of

internationalisation, ASEF launched in 2007 the (4) **Database on Education Exchange Programmes (DEEP)**,¹ a comprehensive online portal that provides students with information on education opportunities in ASEM countries.

- The ASEM Education Hub plays a strategic role in putting forward the concerns of the higher education sector in important Meetings, debates and other fora - building on the combined expertise and resources of its partner universities and higher education institutions. At the 1st Education Ministers' Meeting held in Berlin in May, AEH has put together a policy paper which can contribute to deepening understanding and broadening partnerships among universities and can also serve to elevate education issues to governments.

III. University Colloquy and the Rectors' Conference as Engines of Higher Education Growth and Co-operation in ASEM countries

- Asia and Europe are two regional groupings diverse in history, societal and cultural context. However, today they share a global reality that brings both opportunities and challenges. Indeed, the words "globalisation" and "interdependence" has become more and more real as we try to tackle issues that affect our universities, us - as education planners and practitioners, our clients – researchers and students and the global public. The programme, carefully crafted with the help of our partners - the German Rectors' Conference, the European University Association (EUA), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), and the Free University of Berlin, reflects the concerns that are of significance to all of us:

¹ DEEP lists over 4,000 universities in Asia and Europe and hundreds of official institutions, national agencies and support organisations for students.

- (1) *How do we balance co-operation and competition among higher education institutions?*
- (2) *How do we become sustainable and autonomous when it comes to governance and management?*
- (3) *Which is the growing trend in research co-operation and how do these researches matter for national and regional development agenda?*
- (4) *How do we ensure quality assurance or deal with credit transfer for students and researchers in Asia and Europe?*

- These are the big questions that would be quite intimidating but I am sure will be enriching and rewarding for all of us to discuss. Today, in this inaugural Rectors' Conference, as ASEF strives to provide a space for dialogue between Asian and European heads of higher education institutions, we are responding to these opportunities and challenges hoping that our discussions could bring two positive outcomes: (1) a comprehensive perspective of trends, issues and concerns in higher education and (2) a resolve to bring the outcome of these discussions to the attention of policy and development planners. Both of which will result to our pro-active contribution to the larger goals of the ASEM process.

IV. Conclusion

- ***'Between Tradition and Reform: Universities in Asia and Europe at the Crossroads'*** is indeed an apt theme for the Conference. Changing times requires a careful reflection of next steps carefully considering the lessons of the past as well as the uniqueness of the

present. We also have to note that the ASEM 7 Summit just recently concluded in Beijing has a theme that nicely juxtaposes itself in our own agenda: ***Vision and Action: Towards a Win-Win Solution*** which tackled global challenges directly affecting the citizens of both regions such as education, climate change, security issues (food, energy and human security), sustainable development, human rights, global economy and trade, inter-cultural dialogue and global governance.²

- I therefore invite all of you to take advantage of this rare opportunity to discuss, interact, debate and openly express your views and opinions on the topics laid out in the programme. Although the discussions in this inaugural Conference will be mainly focused on the trends of higher education in Asia and Europe, the repercussions and impact would have contributed to the larger discourse among higher education experts and practitioners worldwide precisely because of the dynamic positions these two regions play in the global issues of human, social and economic development. After all, with the ASEM membership increased to 45 partners, we embrace virtually the whole of Asia and Europe, and represent half of the world's GDP, almost 60% of humanity and 60% of global trade. These ASEM countries are our main clients and the world is our audience.
- Thank you very much.

² Notes on the ASEM 7 Event.