

“Between Tradition and Reform: Universities in Asia and Europe at the Crossroads”

Freie Universität Berlin
Berlin, Germany - 27-29 October 2008

Conference Recommendations

I. Introduction

The First ASEM Rectors' Conference took place at the Freie Universität Berlin on 27-29 October 2008. It gathered some 100 university leaders and representatives of ASEM¹ higher education institutions, networks and organisations at the highest level.

Building on previous successful initiatives, notably the 1st and 2nd AUNP Rectors' Conferences and ASEF's ASEM Education Hub (AEH) Colloquy series, the conference was jointly organised by the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), the European University Association (EUA), the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF), supported by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and hosted by the Freie Universität Berlin.

Conference discussions focused on the development of European and Asian higher education systems and on strategic university cooperation in and between both regions. In this context, conference participants took note of the conclusions of the ASEM Conference of Ministers Responsible for Education, held in Berlin on 5-6 May 2008, acknowledged by the ASEM7 Summit of Heads of State and Government in Beijing on 24-25 October 2008.

As a result of the conference, ASEM University Rectors and Presidents convey the following considerations and recommendations to the ASEM Ministers Responsible for Education in order to step up the process of higher education dialogue and cooperation between Asia and Europe, and support the strategic partnership between the two regions. It should be understood as an initial contribution from higher education leaders in Asia and Europe to the emerging ASEM Education Process, and, hopefully, as the start of a concerted dialogue between governments and the higher education sectors.

II. Enhancing ASEM Higher Education dialogue and cooperation

Conference participants recognised the high potential for enhanced exchange and closer cooperation between the higher education sectors of the two regions. It was found that, though subject to different environments, universities in both regions are facing similar challenges, resulting notably from combined influences of increasing institutional autonomy, competition, diversification and globalisation, opportunities of regional integration processes, changing societal demands towards higher education, increased competition for academic talent and skilled labour, and an increasing diversity of student populations. These challenges, while daunting for the individual university, open up far-reaching prospects for intra- and inter-regional cooperation.

¹ Countries which participate in the Asia-Europe Ministerial Meetings – involving 27 European Union Member States and the European Commission and 16 Asian countries and the ASEAN Secretariat

First ASEM Rectors' Conference: Asia – Europe Higher Education Leadership Dialogue

1) ASEM University Leaders' Response to the ASEM Meeting of Minister Responsible for Education (EMM)

University leaders from Asia and Europe

- welcome the Ministers' decision to set up a Strategic Asia-Europe Education Partnership for the 21st Century, involving stakeholders at all levels in order to strengthen the ASEM dialogue and cooperation in the field of education
- welcome the commitment of ASEM Education Ministers to meet on a regular basis as a timely initiative, which can be expected to render tangible benefits for multilateral research and education cooperation between the institutions of both regions and for the internationalisation of their higher education sectors
- support the issues agreed by Ministers and look forward to exploring prospects to develop and implement them further. In particular they
 - support the EMM conclusions on the need to improve information and visibility of the higher education systems of both regions
 - confirm in particular the need for establishing a high-level working group aiming at "improving the framework conditions for bi-regional exchanges"²
 - support the suggestions of the EMM regarding the reciprocal mobility of students, academic staff and researchers, life-long learning and industry collaboration.

University leaders consider it of primary importance that

- stakeholders at national and regional level, including students, are consulted in the programming and monitoring of cooperation initiatives;
- universities are fully involved, with regard to their complex missions and manifold tasks, which extend far beyond higher education and research and have important implications for the social and economic development of countries and regions as well as for other areas of education; and that
- measures are realised in a medium- and long-term perspective, with a mechanism for adjustment and improvement of programmes.

2) Establishment of an ASEM University Platform

In order to take up the Ministers' offer to collaborate on these and other issues, ASEM University Rectors and Presidents decided to establish a joint platform in order to discuss and define stakeholder positions and to enable a constructive and concerted dialogue on the higher education policy and collaboration development between the two regions.

The first ASEM Rectors' Conference is perceived as a first important step in this direction, in laying the ground for a platform for exchanges and collaboration among higher education leaders in Asia and Europe, and for the formulation of policy goals for the ASEM Education Process. It should be continued on a regular basis (every two years), underpinned and followed up by workshops, roundtables and other initiatives serving the build-up and exchange of knowledge and good practices.

A permanent office for the ASEM Rectors' Conference, located within the existing ASEF's ASEM Education Hub Secretariat in Singapore³, with the support of the European University Association (EUA, Brussels) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN, Bangkok) as institutional partners, will take on the secretarial tasks and the representative duties of the education communities of both regions within the ASEM political dialogue process.

² As stated in the ASEM Education Ministers Meeting "Chairs conclusions"

³ Without prejudice to the other task and mission of the ASEM Education Hub

First ASEM Rectors' Conference: Asia – Europe Higher Education Leadership Dialogue

Individual institutions and national university organisations would volunteer as hosts and provide the venue, practical organisation and co-funding of events and activities.

The annual AEH Advisory Committee Meeting will provide the opportunity to set the agenda, and finalise policy recommendations.

As a result of the First ASEM Rectors' Conference, ASEM University Leaders would like to convey to ASEM Ministers Responsible for Education the following recommendations, for consideration and endorsement at their next meeting in Hanoi, in 2009.

III) Recommendations

1) Towards an Enhanced Framework for ASEM Higher Education Policy Dialogue and Cooperation

Conference participants recommend the establishment of a strong and sustainable framework for Asia-Europe Higher Education Dialogue and Cooperation, which would

- provide an interface for discussion between decision-makers in ministries and Asian and European higher education associations and institutions (ASEM University Platform)
- contribute to the enhancement of information exchange and knowledge on higher education and research policies, among others by commissioning surveys and studies, such as the launch of a regular report on higher education in Asia, modelled after the European Trends report of EUA
- contribute to identifying strategic and operational priorities, and to the development of stakeholder-driven programmes and the means to achieve them.

In proposing a structured dialogue between the ASEM University Platform and the ASEM Education Ministers, university rectors and presidents of Asia and Europe wish to recall the European Bologna Process as an example of a successful dialogue process, which, in less than a decade, has developed into a major higher education modernisation initiative, involving 46 countries, with a considerable positive impact on European higher education institutions, while respecting national sovereignty of the participating countries and strengthening the autonomy of the higher education institutions. One of the key features of the Bologna process is the close and structured involvement of higher education stakeholders. While the scope of Asia-Europe is, of course, different from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), some of the lessons from European and Asian integration processes could be considered when designing and implementing the mechanism of an ASEM government - stakeholder process. In this regard, the emergence of a widely representative stakeholder organisation on the Asian side should be fostered.

2) Mobility within ASEM countries

University Leaders support the idea of involving stakeholders in the high-level working group on ASEM mobility, proposed by the EEM, in order to develop concrete strategies, goals and means for the enhancement of inter-institutional mobility between the two regions.

This should comprise, in particular, actions for ensuring funding and other incentives for institutions and movers, for enhancing quality assurance and recognition as important prerequisites for successful exchange and cooperation, and also aiming to improve regulations regarding visas, resident and working permits, and pension rights.

As immediate priorities it is suggested to devise means for enhancing:

- university partnerships as key drivers for improving quality mobility, particularly with regards to tailored exchange programmes for doctoral and post-doctoral candidates,

First ASEM Rectors' Conference: Asia – Europe Higher Education Leadership Dialogue

to strengthen institutional links in research and teaching, and for administrative staff, to ensure the sustainability and effectiveness of institutional links

- transparency of national systems and higher education institutions, through concrete progress in recognition of qualifications, cooperation in the areas of qualification frameworks, learning outcomes and quality assurance;

3) Research collaboration

University Rectors and Presidents agreed that an Asia-Europe partnership in higher education can only be successful, if it includes research as one of the universities' core tasks since it is an important driver for economic and social development.

Ministers are therefore invited to

- give full attention to fostering university-based reciprocal research collaboration
- foster the development of joint research clusters, especially in priority areas identified by the ASEM7 Summit
- especially support research clusters as a means to enhanced research cooperation
- encourage joint research in area studies, notably in EU or Asia research centres, focussing, amongst other topics, on the role of higher education institutions in Asian and European societies and to
- explore further the opportunities to set up a larger framework for research cooperation and research funding on the basis of inter-governmental agreements, and in particular to consider the recent communication of the European Commission "A strategic Framework for International Science and Technology Cooperation". (http://ec.europa.eu/research/iscp/pdf/com_2008_588_en.pdf).

4) Incentives and Support for ASEM Higher Education Cooperation

University Rectors and Presidents are convinced that the realisation of the Asia-Europe Education Partnership for the 21st Century and its concrete elements, as proposed by the EMM, require incentives, and in particular funding.

They therefore recommend

- setting up an institutional partnership programme, similar to past programmes, such as Asia-Link and AUNP, as complements to other current schemes
- providing financial support for networking activities of higher education institutions and organisations to underpin partnerships and to enhance the sustainability and dissemination of their outcomes.

IV. Outlook: Next ASEM Ministerial Meeting

The Conference forwards its recommendations to the 2nd ASEM Education Ministers Meeting, to be held in May 2009 in Hanoi, Vietnam, for their consideration, and re-affirms its willingness to enter into an interactive and sustained dialogue process with the ASEM Ministers Responsible for Education.