



White Paper

Strategies to strengthen collaboration in Higher Education between Europe and South East Asia

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1. INTRODUCTION

The ACCESS White Paper aims at stimulating consultation and reflection among relevant stakeholders and, in particular political and academic decision makers from Europe and South East Asia on strategies to enhance cooperation between the two regions in the field of Higher Education.

The White Paper is articulated in three main sections: Vision, Diagnosis and Proposal. The ACCESS vision on cooperation is provided first, followed by the diagnosis on the current situation as emerging from activities of desk research and consultation with stakeholders. Finally, a number of proposals are made to enhance cooperation between the two regions in the field of Higher Education.

The content of the White Paper is the result of a two-years process of consultation with a number of key stakeholders and practitioners from Europe and South East Asia. In particular, the White Paper reflects the results of:

-  A survey that has been run among almost 1800 South East Asian students and researchers with the aim of understanding their attitudes and perception towards European higher education
-  Three interregional Dialogue Events that have been organised in SEA: on "Students Involvement in University Management" (Bangkok, Thailand, 1-3 February 2010), on "Mobility as An Instrument for Integration" (Manila, Philippines, 4-5 June 2010) and on "Challenges for South East Asia-Europe University Cooperation in the 21st Century" (Yogyakarta, Indonesia, 27-28 July 2010).
-  A consultation with the members of the ACCESS Advisory Board, namely the Commission of Higher Education of Thailand, the Asia Europe Institute of the University Malaya, the Asia Pacific Students and Youth Association, the ASEM Education Hub of the Asia-Europe Foundation, the UNESCO Asia Pacific Regional Bureau for Education, the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific and the SEA-EU-NET project.

2. THE VISION¹

2.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITIES OF EUROPE AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Many European and South East Asian past and ongoing initiatives of regional integration (with their strengths and weaknesses) have acknowledged the internationalisation challenge posed by the XXI century as well as the impact of this global process on local systems, in educational terms as much as political and economical; the latter, moreover, dramatised by the recent financial crisis.

From this perspective, all major stakeholders involved in regional integration processes have generally pointed out the importance of enhancing further cooperation mechanisms in Higher Education in order to meet the challenges of globalisation. In this context, student and teacher mobility, mutual accreditation systems and recognition of qualifications, quality assurance and the exploration of new forms of mobility and knowledge exchange supported by new technologies are key elements when re-thinking and re-designing the education policy in the context of the bi-regional relations.

The transformation process that nowadays takes place in European universities, running under and beyond the Bologna Process², is a useful experience for reflection. We observe how higher education institutions work towards adapting their programmes and curricula to the social needs.

This growing diversification is working with the progressive integration of the different forms of education, based on a higher flexibility of the programmes and on increasing students mobility. Thus, it aims towards convergence, taking into account the diversity of contexts, learners' groups and the views of the stakeholders involved in the process.

Analysing what is working well and what is not working so well in the Bologna Process can favour regional integration processes in South East Asia and, at the same time, it can enhance a systemic approach to the existing cooperation relationships between European and South East Asian universities.

The significant differences among SEA countries, also in terms of Higher Education systems, should not be underestimated and the difficulties encountered in the Regional and sub-Regional integration processes are a clear indicator of the complexity of the task; but waiting for "regional integration" to be accomplished before accelerating the international integration process might reveal to be a losing strategy: **the two processes should progress in parallel and learn from each other "what works where and why"**.

¹ Adapted from C. Dondi, G. Alberti at al., 2008 "Contribución A Una Estrategia Innovadora Para Implementar El Espacio Común De Educación Superior – Alcúe", VALUE White Paper http://www.value-project.eu/value/images/GreenPaperVALUE_ES.pdf.

² The Bologna Process was launched in June 1999 with the Bologna Declaration (http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/990719BOLOGNA_DECLARATION.PDF). It is an intergovernmental initiative subscribed by 46 Ministries of Education and based on cooperation with higher education institutions, students, staff and international organisations. The Process aims at creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to allow harmonisation among education systems, transparency, mutual recognition of titles, mobility of academics and, more in general, to improve the European Higher Education performance in the globalised world. More information at http://ec.europa.eu/education/higher-education/doc1290_en.htm.

2.2 THE ACCESS PERSPECTIVE

As a starting point, ACCESS considers universities as natural stakeholders of a “non traditional integration among different countries and regions of the world”, in other words, an integration that goes beyond mere economic and trade relationships and that implies knowledge creation and sharing in a perspective of mutual recognition as well as contribution to the development of society in an international perspective. That is to say that the metaphor of Universities as “Ivory Towers” should evolve towards an “Ivory Bridge” concept. Based on this shared vision, the ACCESS Project believes that the enhancement of the cooperation among the HE systems of the two regions should be aiming at the constitution of a bi-regional community founded on common values, reciprocity principles and mutual recognition.

ACCESS considers students, researchers and professors’ **mobility** to impact positively in terms of institutions’ reciprocal **knowledge**, and to contribute to the establishment of praxes of mutual recognition of titles and qualifications. Further, mutual recognition increases **trust** among the parts and constitutes a step forward in the search for the best modalities to foster synergies and increase cooperation. Mobility itself should be framed into a broader strategy for scientific cooperation among the institutions involved in exchange and mobility programmes, and turn into a starting point to increase the **intercultural development of new curricula**.

To achieve this goal, ACCESS considers the following four elements as essential:

- 1) A systemic and permanent/long term approach in order to integrate and articulate the many – and not always collaborating – ongoing initiatives in both regions, so to maximise the impact of Higher Education cooperation within South East Asia and between Europe and this region;
- 2) Encouraging collaboration and long-term partnerships among all levels of society, starting from academics and universities and including companies, cultural associations and other civil society bodies: however ambitious it may sound, it traces a direction, given that the promotion of European universities alone is not enough, neither is the right approach, to build an inclusive Higher Education area across EU and SEA.
- 3) Physical mobility of students and researchers towards the European Union, although an important source of learning and innovation, is not the only way through which cooperation can be increased. Other dimensions of collaboration should be considered and investigated, notably: *Distance education and e-learning, Internationalisation of curricula through joint development and delivery of academic programmes leading to joint titles, Partnerships in research and teaching, including mutual use of infrastructure and grassroots partnerships among the stakeholder representatives in the respective countries/regions.*
- 4) Observing and understanding the attitudes, the opinions and the expectations of South East Asian Higher Education stakeholders towards the European Union is relevant³. However, it is necessary to also take into consideration the opposite perspective, the European towards the Asian⁴. Hence, a systematic monitoring process on the perceptions of the respective systems involving the actors of both regions should be ensured.

³ See for instance ACA, 2005 “Perceptions of European Higher Education in Third Countries”.

⁴ See for instance the work of the ESIA – European Studies in Asia, European Studies in Asia (ESIA), an action launched in 2005 by ASEF to stimulate European studies in the Asian region not only by strengthening interaction between existing networks in Asia, but also by creating synergies between European study centres in both Asia and Europe.

The ACCESS Project also aims at highlighting how horizontal international cooperation can work as an instrument to strengthen and promote the capacities of the organizations involved: intellectual, cultural, technological, scientific or humanistic as well as social ones. Cooperation is a learning process in itself provided that all participating parts get to know one another and can complement each other.

The use of the term *cooperation* combines elements of help and solidarity with those of marketing promotion and political and economic interests; it can be understood as well as the set of actions that allows the coordination of policies and joining forces to achieve common goals in the international arena. Thus, **cooperation** must be understood **as a two-way process** in which the countries involved agree to cooperate to solve a specific problem but also to achieve new common objectives and seize opportunities raised by the same interaction among institutions from both regions.

3. THE DIAGNOSIS

3.1 STATE OF THE ART EU-SEA RELATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The broad policy dialogue between Europe and South East Asia stands on some major pillars such as economic cooperation and regional integration/cooperation. However, education and training have been increasingly given attention as both strategic to achieving social and economic development and to competing in a globalised world.

The main cooperation forum of EU-Asia dialogue in HE is the annual ASEM Ministerial Conference on higher education. The Asia-Europe Meetings were initially established in 1996 as an informal, multi-dimensional dialogue process between the 15 EU Member States, the European Commission and the 10 ASEAN states. Later they were enlarged as to include the nowadays 45 members⁵. The ASEM Ministerial Conferences on Higher Education started only in 2008 but upheld since the beginning a clear agenda of shaping a political framework for cooperation based on linking university with business/industry and pulling down obstacles to mobility. Strengthening cooperation in education and training was seen as central to promoting economic and social development in a globalised world as well as it is considered crucial to do so by involving stakeholders at all levels.

Already in 1997, though, ASEM had given life to ASEF, the Asia Europe Foundation, which aims at ensuring that cultural and educational issues are included in the wider framework of cooperation and dialogue between the two regions and that mutual understanding between the peoples of Asia and Europe is promoted through intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges. In 1998, ASEF established the ASEM Education Hub, a multi-dimensional platform for cooperation and exchanges among higher education stakeholders, which produced and runs a number of support tools such as the DEEP (Databases of Education Exchange Programmes) database, targeting students and focused on study opportunities in the two regions.

A recent and very important development is the establishment in 2009, following an agreement by all ASEM Ministers responsible for Education, of a rotating ASEM Education Secretariat, a structure aiming at coordinating ASEM educational activities, at helping with preparations for the ASEM ministerial meetings, and at facilitating the implementation of output-oriented initiatives that contribute to educational policy development and practices⁶. Other attempts towards regional integration in the field of Higher Education are the Brisbane Initiative from Australia (<http://www.brisbanecommunique.deewr.gov.au>), the ASEAN+3 Summit (<http://www.aseansec.org/4918.htm>) and a number of discussions in the frame of SEAMEO - Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (<http://www.seameo.org>).

All mentioned initiatives are aligned with regarding issues such as **credits recognition and transferability, qualifications and quality assurance as key elements for reaching integration and promoting cooperation**. The ASEM meeting of Higher Education Ministers, held in May 2009 in Hanoi, has agreed on the need to forge "*strategic partnerships for quality assurance, credit recognition and transfer in ASEM countries*"⁷ in order to strengthen cooperation in HE.

⁵ These include 43 countries, the European Commission and the ASEAN secretariat. Australia, New Zealand and Russia will officially join ASEM in the ASEM 8 Summit in October 2010, so that the number of the ASEM members will increase to 48.

⁶ Conclusions by the Chair, ASEM Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Hanoi, May 2009.

⁷ See *Conclusions by the Chair of the 2nd ASEM Education Meeting*, held in Hanoi, Vietnam on May 14-15 2009 <http://www.aseminfoboard.org/Calendar/MinisterialMeetings/?id=249>

3.2 KEY CHALLENGES TO BE ADDRESSED

In the frame of the current context of cooperation between the two regions, consultation with experts, policy and decisions makers in the field highlighted the following challenges, which shall be taken into consideration when designing strategies to enhance cooperation:

At the **policy** level:

-  the fragmentation of the region in terms of Higher Education systems, infrastructural development, culture and language;
-  the openness and mobility constraints given – in some countries – by national governments.

At the **practice** level:

-  the presence of mainly “bilateral initiatives” (offshore campuses, education fairs, liaison offices) among some Anglophone countries (USA, UK and Australia), and SEA partners;
-  the presence of few European “stable initiatives” other than British, in the area (except INSEAD Campus, a recently German established campus in Vietnam and few others);
-  the fact that some countries of the South East Asian region are more open towards Higher Education international collaboration .

4. PROPOSAL

4.1 ONE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE

As a first strategic step, ACCESS proposes to **investigate on the interest and feasibility for the creation of a common Higher Education Area between EU and SEA (to be further expanded to Asia)** implying systematic cooperation in terms of mobility, curricula development and research.

Agreeing on this objective would require adding to the current *Government to Government* approach a *Government to People* and a *People to People* perspective and would call for a stakeholders-based reflections on the feasibility and value added that a Common Higher Education Area between Europe and South East Asia could bring in terms of regional and interregional integration, also in view of the ASEAN objectives for 2015. This would also progressively encourage bilateral cooperation in the direction of concrete bi-regional cooperation, with the effect of increasing equity and inclusion of all involved countries in EU as well as in SEA.

This higher level of cooperation should be accompanied by measures able to **reduce the fragmentation and overlapping** of existing cooperation mechanisms between the two regions, **reinforce existing cooperation platforms** for securing (almost) exhaustive flow and exchange of information on HE initiatives between the two regions, including the DEEP database for students which is already working and proved useful, and by **awareness raising campaigns within EU and SEA Higher Education institutions, including academic as well as non academic staff and students** so to motivate them to identify their stake and their objectives in the process, making them more collaborative and participative.

4.2 FIVE COOPERATION PILLARS

In parallel, and in order for the EU-SEA cooperation process to reach a higher level of coherence, effectiveness and impact, it should be organised around five pillars:

1. 21st century HE internationalisation must be based not on chasing students in the short term, but in long-term collaboration and mutual benefit and reciprocity. The level of official recognition and institutionalisation must be kept high both to make the process more credible, effective and continuing and to help pull down barriers that hamper mobility and cooperation such as visas, mutual recognition of studies etc. In this perspective, for instance, the involvement and activation of Rectors' conferences or associations is encouraged provided that the information flow reaches the grassroots levels too and all stakeholders are involved.
2. Pillar 2: Academic cooperation must be based on recognition of respective strengths rather than on the export of one existing model. The European Higher Education system, especially in terms of lifelong learning and quality framework, can be a point of reference and a model to look at while striving for SEA regional integration. However, the process must guarantee a certain equilibrium among the participating countries and a clear context-based development grounded on the identification of local leadership.

3. Students participation must be a key and emblematic element of multistakeholder governance of university modernisation process. Students are at the same time a resource for higher education, the main beneficiaries of higher education and the future leaders of society. Their involvement in the decision-making processes conditions the evolution of higher education. In this context, cooperation between students' associations of Europe and South East Asia should be fostered to share experiences and best practices in the field of students' contribution to governance.
4. The full potential of ICT should be exploited as a tool for internationalisation, both as a complement to physical mobility of students and researchers and for joint curricula development and research collaboration.
5. Better integration between research cooperation and academic exchange is required to strengthen long-term institutional partnership among HE institutions. This should be promoted by bringing forward new inter-regional initiatives and partnerships as well as by strengthening and extending existing activities.

4.3 FIVE IMPLEMENTATION MECHANISMS

The following implementation mechanisms are proposed:

- 1) ASEAN–EU inter-regional Networks of Excellence and Thematic Networks should be established and supported, to drive forward both research collaboration and academic exchange programmes. These should be the vertebral elements on which to install concrete and collaborative initiatives.
- 2) User-friendly Information and Knowledge Sharing Facilities between the two regions should be established on themes such as innovative university governance, regional integration of higher education systems, virtual mobility, university-industry cooperation.
- 3) An Inter-regional Credit Transfer System based on ACTS and ECTS, should be put in place to ensure compatibility and comparability of relevant academic programmes, and to enhance student mobility.
- 4) Quality Assurance System in higher education institutions in ASEAN and EU should be strengthened based on experience and expertise of participating institutions. Mutual recognition agreements of Quality Assurance Systems should be promoted to facilitate inter-regional student/faculty exchanges and joint degree programme development.
- 5) Sufficient funding from governments, the private sector and other funding bodies should be sought in order to enable and ensure effective implementation. In particular, a funding scheme able to support institutional higher education cooperation, beyond student mobility, is needed (such as AUNP or Asia-Links). This should be done with attention to the socioeconomic and HE development differences of SEA countries.

5. NEXT STEPS

With the present White Paper, the ACCESS project wants to contribute, in full cooperation with the initiatives described above, to a convergence process that should involve institutional actors and the most consolidated networks active in this field, and advocate that synergy can be created and a “federative” effort may bring academic cooperation much beyond the limited horizon of a closed coordination process among a few government representatives. Since the young generation researchers and students will most probably push EU-SEA Higher Education systems in this direction anyhow, in a spontaneous process of mutual discovery, ACCESS proposes to structure the whole process in an open way.

The present paper is **proposed for discussion and consensus building** to all those interested in the achievement of the EU-SEA Common Space of Higher Education.

The ACCESS consortium remains available to further discuss the content of the present paper. If you wish to contact ACCESS please email Ms Cristina Brecciaroli at cbrecciaroli@scienter.org.

ANNEX: THE ACCESS PROJECT

The ACCESS project (Academic Cooperation Europe-South-East Asia Support) aims at strengthening cooperation between higher education institutions from Europe and South East Asia (SEA) in a long-term and sustainable perspective. The project, supported by the Erasmus Mundus Programme of the European Commission, explores the perceptions and expectations of SEA higher education stakeholders towards European higher education system, promotes meaningful higher education partnership schemes and supports dialogue around the possible construction of a common EU-SEA HE area.

The project consists of four components:

-  the SURVEY component, aiming to understand opinions, attitudes and expectations of SEA HE stakeholders towards European HE;
-  the POLICY DIALOGUE component, aiming to contribute to the policy debate on the improvement of EU-SEA Higher Education cooperation;
-  the PROMOTION component, aiming to promote the attractiveness of European HE through the development of new partnership value proposition to SEA HE institutions (in line with the Erasmus Mundus approach);
-  SERVICES component, aiming to set-up and validate a network-based service model to support EU-SEA HE cooperation and mobility.

The founding idea of the project is to reach its objectives by “promoting, through partnership and mutual benefit, value proposition” which implies facilitating and supporting mutual knowledge and information sharing in a collaboration perspective, through partnership building.

For more information on the ACCESS project visit our web site <http://www.access-project.eu>.