Informal Political Discussion

The framework of Fifth ASEM Education Ministers’ Meeting (ASEMME5) plans to approve the Conclusions by the Chair and agree on the main activities to be implemented within the next two years before the Sixth ASEM Education Ministers’ Meeting in the Republic of Korea. However, the 10th anniversary of the ASEM Education Process is approaching. This will provide an opportunity to reflect, assess progress made and set the course for future joint cooperation in a more targeted way. Against this background, the political leaders of ASEM partners in the field of education are now invited to express their initial views and discuss the future of the ASEM Education Process in an informal setting at the Working Breakfast, which will be held on 28 April 2015 from 9.30 to 10.45.

Consequently, it would be helpful to identify the challenges faced at this moment, the main areas of cooperation, as well as working methods, which could contribute to the development of skills, increase the quality of education, the exchange of knowledge and ideas, greater institutional links and person-to-person contacts. This information would form a basis for the policy agenda for the ASEMME6 held in 2017.

The participants of Working Breakfast are invited to give their vision on the future of the ASEM Education Process on the basis of the achievements made by the ASEM Education Process to date, the main areas of interest and the main challenges faced in cooperation between both regions.

The following guiding questions are prepared to facilitate discussion:

1. How would you envisage ASEM education cooperation in the next 5 years and beyond; and what major challenges to be tackled through the ASEM Education Process do you see in these 5 years?

2. How would you foresee the potential of ASEM education cooperation and its contribution to meeting the challenges of the 21st century and influencing Asian and European education policies? In what areas do you see the potential of your country/institution to contribute to the strengthening of collaboration between both regions? What benefits can be gained from the ASEM Education Process for your country and stakeholders?

Participants: Education Ministers, Vice Ministers, State Secretaries and Deputy State Secretaries (incl. comparable level to State Secretaries and Deputy State Secretaries), the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport, the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat. Observers: the Director of the ASEM Education Secretariat and the Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation.

To give all participants an opportunity to contribute as well as to foster a more interactive discussion, the first interventions must not exceed two minutes and need to be used to express
initial views and opinions. Consequently, participants will have the option to intervene more than once.

Introduction – The Wider Context

The ASEM education cooperation forms part of the joint regional cooperation between Asia and Europe and consists of three pillars:

1) the Political Pillar;

2) the Economical and Financial Pillar and

3) the Social, Cultural and Educational Pillar.

Informal dialogue underpins ASEM cooperation; however, cooperation across all areas has become more and more action-oriented in questions of mutual interest. ASEM will be celebrating its 20th anniversary in 2016. The summit in 2016 in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia is expected not only to take stock of past achievements but also to set a renewed and reinvigorated set of ideas for its third decade.

At the 10th ASEM Summit in 2014 in Milan, Italy the leaders reiterated that education was a key enabling factor in promoting sustainable and inclusive development, innovation and poverty reduction [...] Ministers responsible for education were invited to reaffirm their commitment to strengthen and further develop ASEM education cooperation (Paragraph 31).

A Symposium on the Direction of ASEM was held in Bangkok, Thailand on 30 March 2015. The outcome of the Symposium was printed under the title The Bangkok Initiatives on the Future Direction of ASEM and contained a variety of ideas for consideration by members. It suggested maintaining the informal structure of ASEM while refocusing its objectives and promoting more tangible initiatives. It suggested that ASEM partners should not perceive themselves as members of two separate continents but as a single, increasingly interconnected whole. It also commented that connectivity in its broad sense should be promoted, including people-to-people links, not only transport infrastructure. The document mentioned that the four areas of education cooperation should be further strengthened. The need to enhance the institutional memory of ASEM implicitly referred to the rotating ASEM Education Secretariat as a possible model to follow in other sectors. The Bangkok Initiatives provided an input into wider policy discussion on the future of ASEM which will culminate at the ASEM Meeting of Foreign Ministers in Luxembourg in November 2015. However, the most significant meeting will be the 20th anniversary ASEM Summit in Mongolia in July 2016.

Achievements

It should be noted that currently, the ASEM Education Process is based on cooperation in four priority areas approved by Education Ministers in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2011, namely:

A. Quality assurance and recognition;

B. Engaging business and industry in education;

C. Balanced mobility;

D. Lifelong learning including technical and vocational education and training.

When the seven years since the 1st ASEM Conference of Ministers Responsible for Education held in 2008 in Berlin, Germany are considered, it is clear that a significant evolution of the ASEM Education Process has taken place. The overarching benefits have been networking, mutual understanding and the exchange of experience at all levels, including ministerial. The ASEM Education Process has provided benefits for ministries, the higher education community, quality assurance agencies and the various other parties involved. In addition, the multi-stakeholder approach has ensured a direct link between policymakers and the education community. A wide array of proposals for cooperation, best practice and the exchange of information have also provided stimulus and inspiration for local and national education strategies.
ASEM education cooperation has also contributed to the promotion of the recognition of qualifications, the transparency of education systems, trust and belief in the quality education and increasing mobility, enhancing academic cooperation, the formation of new partnerships and the acquisition of values, skills and competences for sustainable development. ASEM education has also supported the idea of adapting skills to meet the needs of the labour market and the continued reinforcement of sustainable development.

Since its inception there has been a steady development in result-oriented ASEM events. ASEM members have had excellent opportunities to participate in different types of ASEM education initiatives: programmes, seminars, conferences, forums, working groups, peer learning activities etc.

**Education is the only field of ASEM cooperation with a Secretariat.** It was established in 2009 to ensure the effective coordination and sustainable progress of the ASEM process. Since its creation, the ASEM Education Secretariat has coordinated ASEM educational activities, helped with the preparation of ASEM ministerial meetings and facilitated the implementation of output-oriented initiatives that have contributed to educational policy development and practice.

At the level of stakeholders in the ASEM Education Process, a dialogue has been established and developed with policy makers and experts within different cooperation platforms and events. Partner organizations with their initiatives have given valuable input to developing the ASEM Education Process.

It also needs to be mentioned that the ASEM family is still growing. It began with 26 partners in 1996 and now numbers 53 with several other countries seeking entry. This constant enlargement has proved to be both challenging and rewarding.

**Challenges**

The dynamic nature of co-operation has meant that different opinions have been and still are being considered regarding the need to introduce new priorities or cancel/change some of the current ones in respect of social and economic requirements. In addition, there is also the question of whether the ASEM process should include various educational levels and science issues.

Another essential question which has emerged is how to ensure both the effectiveness of the process and still achieve common targets without losing the informal nature of ASEM Education Process – its core value.

The results of several surveys and studies suggest that missing recognition of qualifications and study periods, comparability of qualifications and learning outcomes hinder mobility of both students and staff.

Furthermore, in accordance with the Conclusions reached by the Chair of the Fourth Asia-Europe Meeting of Ministers for Education (ASEMME4) in 2013, Education Ministers repeated the need for comparable and reliable mobility data to enable evidence-based policy-making. The Conclusions also encouraged the collection of data on inbound and outbound mobility in cooperation with experienced data collectors in both regions. During the last two years, ASEM education cooperation has not focused on this issue. However, in spite of the financial obstacles and the complexity of the process data availability would enable better planning and implementation of existing and future ASEM education initiatives.

It has been noted that with an increasing number of ASEM education events, there is also a growing concern among ASEM members that some of the launched initiatives overlap. Consequently, there is growing interest in strengthening the coherence of those activities which ensure tangible outcomes. It is also recommended that the ASEM Education Process and other regional processes are linked more systematically and effectively.

On a different topic, new ideas and solutions have emerged as a result of various projects and activities. Similarly, the sharing of best practice has taken place. All these results need to be made accessible to the ASEM community. The promotion of visibility and the exchange of information are issues where much remains to be done and any ideas for solutions would be much appreciated.
Role of employers and their engagement in education processes is growing in significance in many ASEM countries some of which have faced economic challenges, including financial crisis. It is not surprising that a lack of financial resources is often mentioned as one of the main obstacles that hinder more effective ASEM education cooperation and the increased commitment of participating countries. However, this challenge calls for new ideas and solutions and non-traditional approaches to cooperation.

Consultations with ASEM members and stakeholders

Latvia proposed three guiding principles when setting up priorities and targets for the post-ASEMME5 period. They are:

1) **continuity**: the continuity of ASEM Education Process should be based on the progress made in the 4 key policy areas, ministerial vision and consultations with stakeholders;

2) **consultation and collaboration**: preconditions for achieving common goals are (1) early consultation with ASEM member states and stakeholders; (2) collaboration to produce results;

3) **commitment**: ministerial commitment for cooperation ensures sustainability of the ASEM Education Process.

ASEM members have agreed to follow these principles when setting future priorities and launching new initiatives.

**Latvia, as the host of the ASEMME5, carried out written consultation with ASEM members and stakeholders in 2014 to identify their initial views on the future of the ASEM Education Process. Discussions were continued at the First Senior Officials’ Meeting (SOM1) held in Riga, Latvia in November 2014.**

Most of the ASEM members and stakeholders believed that the four main priority areas are necessary to be maintained during ASEMME5 to ensure the continuity and further development of the ASEM Education Process. A majority of countries pointed out the importance of collaboration on Quality Assurance and Recognition. Most participants consulted wanted to maintain the existing priorities, while realising at the same time, the need for a stronger focus and/or evaluation. A number of countries supported efforts to promote the development of basic, transferable and professional skills of individuals to facilitate their integration into the labour market and acquire the competences necessary for providing sustainable development, including creativity, communication skills, critical literacy, relational thinking, environmental responsibility, digital skills, entrepreneurial skills etc. A number of countries would welcome further exploration of joint activities that could support this objective. In addition, the need for improved and quicker information exchange was pointed out. It was thought that this could help to share the activities or programmes regarding the four priority areas between ASEM members.

The views expressed during the SOM1 discussions suggested that the ASEM process needed to include various educational levels not only higher education. It was suggested not to put out topics by the level of education but instead to look at cross-cutting themes, for instance, technological developments, balanced mobility and students’ employability and skills. However, this remains an open question which needs to be discussed at ministerial level.

During the SOM1 discussions broad support was expressed regarding the suggestion of a Two-Pillar system, where Pillar 1 was dialogue-oriented to provide a platform for mutual learning and Pillar 2 was result-oriented covering pilot projects with commitments. The recommendations were to focus on clear, realistic objectives and result-oriented activities, while maintaining a multifaceted and multipurpose process. The need for a vision document and the more active involvement of stakeholders, especially students, rectors and teachers was supported. Additionally, the importance of the visibility and coordination of the ASEM Education Process was stressed. Close cooperation and exchanges between the relevant ministries of Foreign Affairs, Education, Culture, Labour, etc. was also emphasized for improved synergy.