



6th ASEF Rectors' Conference & Students' Forum (ARC6)

Future-ready Universities and Graduates: Quality Education Beyond the Horizon

**Rectors' Conference
12-13 October 2017, Singapore**

ARC6 Rectors' Conference Policy Recommendations for the
6th ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting (ASEM ME6)
21-22 November 2017, Seoul, Korea

The 6th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC6) took place at Singapore Management University from 9 to 13 October 2017. ARC6 brought together about 110 university leaders, higher education experts, business representatives, government officials and student leaders from 51 Asian and European countries, to connect, exchange good practices, and explore opportunities of cooperation for both regions. Areas of focus were: (a) Interdisciplinary research and education, (b) Lifelong learning, and (c) Access to Education. The Students' Forum took place from 9-12 October 2017, followed by the Rectors' Conference from 12-13 October 2017.

The ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC) was established in 2008 to support the deliberations and preparations of the biennial ASEM Education Ministers' Meetings. It is now recognised as the Official Dialogue Partner of the ASEM Education Ministers' Meetings (ASEM MEs).

Future-ready universities and graduates – challenges for quality

Over the past decades, higher education systems in Asia and Europe have witnessed unprecedented growth and diversification of growing importance for individual learners, for governments and for society. As key drivers of national and regional economic and social development, as well as major contributors towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), national higher education systems are also subject to on-going discussions on continuous enhancement, related to today's and tomorrow's needs and challenges. Despite different environments and conditions, similar challenges and trends can be experienced by institutions in both Asia and Europe:

- Given the importance of higher education for society and the high investment, there is an on-going quest for **the quality of education and research**. Current measuring and benchmarking, through methods and indicators used in national and international rankings and classifications, are subject to controversial debates. Overall, there is a concern that such measurements may actually stifle creativity and innovation, hence depriving higher education of one of its key assets. The importance of all academic disciplines and interdisciplinary skills also needs to be emphasized, against criteria targeting immediate research impact.
- Discussions on quality go in hand with discussions on quantity. Increased levels of higher education participation have become a strategy for economic and social development, and higher education attendance can be seen as a means of fostering or reshaping economies and the life of local or global communities. As a consequence, over the past decades, the higher education sector worldwide has experienced **massification and a diversification of the student body**. This has resulted in diversified needs and demands towards the education offered.

- Higher education is under pressure to **respond to demographic developments and evolving societal demands**, in terms of relevant skills and competences *vis-à-vis* the labour markets, needs for innovative knowledge and know-how, and educating graduates to take up professions, including those that do not exist yet.
- Higher education needs to **educate students to become active citizens**, in an era of post-factualism characterised by distrust towards, and disengagement from, established institutions.
- Given the on-going, relatively unpredictable and the fast transformation of social and economic environments, **lifelong learning** is a key priority. Universities have to ensure that graduates possess the necessary skills to learn and adapt to new tasks and situations, and also provide a learning offer for lifelong learners with their specific learning demands and socio-economic and educational backgrounds. Digital developments open new models for delivering LLL.
- The digital age is not only changing the ways people communicate or work, but also how education is delivered and the education goals themselves, as well as how research is being undertaken. Higher education institutions have to consider both: **how to deploy digital technology in education and research, and how to prepare graduates for this changing environment**.
- **Methods and modes of knowledge production and dissemination** are also in transformation, with a strong emphasis on open access to research results, interdisciplinarity and lifelong learning.

Universities have to respond to these, at times seemingly contradictory, demands. Discussing these trends among university representatives and students from both Asia and Europe at the 6th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC6) undoubtedly facilitated mutual understanding and learning, and laid ground for strategic cooperation within, and between the two regions.

The Rectors' Conference resulted in the following ARC6 Policy Recommendations, which will be conveyed to the Ministers at their 6th ASEM Education Ministers' Meeting (ASEM ME6) on 21-22 November 2017 in Seoul, Korea, for consideration and further action. The policy recommendations are complemented by conference reports that captured working group discussions,

ARC6 conclusions and recommendations to ASEM ME6

1. Forward-looking institutional missions

ASEM Ministers are called upon to:

- Renew their commitment towards the missions of universities, which should be envisaged in a holistic way, that would allow education, research, and service to society to be interconnected, to the benefit of students, staff and societies, and would be in line with the principle of academic freedom;
- Acknowledge and support the diversity of institutional missions and profiles, by granting institutional autonomy, and by acknowledging the role that all types of institutions are called upon to fulfil in national societies and economies;
- Ensure sufficient and sustainable funding for institutions to fulfil their missions;
- Set up appropriate national and regional external quality assurance frameworks and implement qualification frameworks with an appropriate balance between accountability and autonomy of institutions;
- Support higher education institutions in developing their own internal quality assurance – according to the institutional missions, in their specific local, national, and regional contexts, and in line with the principle that the primary responsibility for quality and quality assurance lies with the institutions themselves.

2. Connecting learning and teaching, research and service to society in response to local and global challenges

ASEM Ministers are called upon to:

- Support and promote the role of higher education in educating future graduates as active and responsible citizens and creative and technically proficient graduates, critical thinkers, problem solvers, and lifelong learners;
- Set up or further develop national frameworks that enable development and implementation of a diversity of learning and teaching approaches;
- Set up or further develop national frameworks that valorise all aspects of academic work (research, teaching, and community service), and incentivise academic staff to invest time in teaching enhancement and building up relations with the wider community;
- Enable higher education institutions to develop knowledge creation and curriculum in a way that takes into account interdisciplinary approaches, the indispensable connection between research, education, and society demand;
- Support frameworks that encourage universities to involve students as co-creators of knowledge, actors in their own learning, and full members of the university community;
- Promote and stimulate collaboration and networking between universities and the wider society, as a way to foster connections between learning and teaching, research and community service;
- Support higher education institutions in their endeavours towards the implementation of the SDGs.

3. Lifelong learning as a key mission of future-ready universities

ASEM Ministers are called upon to:

- Develop and valorise inclusive national strategies and policies of lifelong learning, that emphasise the value of lifelong learning in all stages of life, and provide possibilities for both first-time and returning learners, and for a diversified student body;
- Recognise the contribution of higher education to lifelong learning, through mechanisms that are appropriate to the institutions' contexts;
- Promote and support national and transnational measures and initiatives that enable an appropriate recognition of prior learning, which is indispensable to develop lifelong learning provision. This could be done through embedding lifelong learning into national qualifications frameworks; addressing flexibility in education pathways (including barriers in accessing to, and progressing in learning paths); and recognising formal, non-formal and informal learning altogether as complementary and integral parts of lifelong learning. Such measures would also contribute to foster intra- and inter-regional mobility, and collaboration between institutions and national authorities, in a mutual trust perspective;
- Support the university staff's continued professional development;
- Include lifelong learning objectives in the missions and work of national quality assurance and funding agencies and authorities;

4. Towards a quality education for all

ASEM Ministers are called upon to:

- Acknowledge the contribution that higher education makes towards a more inclusive society, and incentivise institutions to develop strategic approaches to fulfil this role. This could be done, for instance, through financial incentives, valorising inclusiveness-related initiatives in the national external quality assurance framework, or developing national supportive schemes for fostering the participation of specific student populations;
- Encourage, facilitate, and support the implementation of an inclusive learning environment at institutions, so that the heterogeneity in students' prior attainments or condition does not transform into factors of disengagement.

Conclusive words

The participants of the 6th ASEF Rectors' Conference convey their recommendations for consideration to the ASEM Education Ministers and for their deliberations at the 6th ASEM Education Ministers Meeting on 21-22 November in Seoul, Korea.

The university leaders from Asia and Europe will continue to develop partnerships at inter-institutional, local, national and international levels, in order to provide attractive and relevant curricula, which provide active learning outcomes, cross-cultural experiences in a mutual understanding perspective and through mobility, and opportunities to cross-fertilize good practices in teaching and research. Asian and European higher education institutions reaffirm their willingness to continue an active and sustainable dialogue process with the ASEM Ministers responsible for Education. They call upon ASEM Ministers to continue supporting and encouraging higher education cooperation initiatives within the ASEM Education Process, through the Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) and key education stakeholders like the European University Association (EUA), the ASEAN University Network (AUN), the European Students' Union (ESU) and the Erasmus Student Network (ESN).

Singapore, 13 October 2017.

Co-organised by



In Partnership with



Supported by



ASEF's contribution is with the financial support of the European Union.