

ASIA-Link Symposium Kuala Lumpur, 07.09.2007, Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre

Opening Session

Address by Vincent Piket

**Dato' Prof. Dr. Hassan Said, Director General at the Ministry of Higher Education,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It gives me great pleasure to address today the official opening of the Asia Link Symposium.

The cooperation between the European Union and Malaysia in the field of higher education has been progressing well over the last few years. Activities undertaken by individual Member States of the European Union, through their education agencies, bilateral funding and national universities, were supplemented by activities funded by the European Commission. The specific focus has been on networking and capacity building to support human capital development.

Our meeting of today could not be more timely, as it coincides with the official launching of the National Higher Education Strategic Plan, which sets the medium-term roadmap for Malaysia's higher education system. The Plan builds on the acknowledged centrality of human capital development. The seven thrusts of the Plan are comprehensive and include: widening access and enhancing quality;

improving the quality of teaching and learning, and reinforcing the Ministry's delivery system.

We may safely say that the EU's higher education cooperation with Malaysia over the past years has already contributed to 5 out of the 7 thrusts. And many of the Malaysian universities represented today have been direct beneficiaries of activities funded by the Commission, especially Erasmus Mundus, as well as the Asia Link programme, which is also the funding source of this meeting, and Erasmus Mundus.

Two major trends have affected developments within the higher education sector in Europe over recent years: internationalisation and the move towards knowledge-based economies. These have brought with them new levels of internationalisation of higher education. They have also prompted the review of the role of the university as a key player in the development of the economy and society.

In this connection, I would like to quote to you a statement by the European Commissioner for External Relations, Mrs Benita Ferrero-Waldner. Recently she said the following: *"In today's global economy and an knowledge-based society, promoting international co-operation and mobility between higher education institutions in the European Union and other countries is a win-win situation: it contributes to the mutual enrichment of nations and to a better understanding among people. It supports economic and social development. And it builds bridges between societies, creates friendships and deepens links between people".*

The statement by Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner makes it clear that the EC recognises the role that higher education plays in international cooperation and in the development of the less advanced countries around the world. We are keen that universities should be taking the lead in developing those sectors of society and the economy that can bring the benefits of development to as wide a group as possible.

For that reason higher education has featured as a priority area in the EC's assistance to a number of regions and countries outside Europe, notably Asia. I'll give you some examples of what we have done to support higher education cooperation between Asia and Europe so far.

First, many of you will know the Asia Link programme, which since 2002 has provided funding for partnership projects between European and Asian universities. There have been a total of 175 projects selected, many of which are ongoing, for an impressive total budget of €70 million from the side of the EC. Typically, the Asia Link projects focus on curriculum development, teacher training, and exchange of teaching staff and students. For selecting projects we have targeted subject areas that were considered relevant for the development of the Asian countries, in economic and social terms.

A second important programme has been the Erasmus Mundus programme. Erasmus Mundus promotes Europe as a centre of excellence in higher education and gives grants to third-country students and academics to obtain masters degree in Europe. The focus is very much on the mobility of individuals, and the programme therefore nicely complements the Asia Link programme with its focus on institutional

cooperation. Specifically for Erasmus Mundus in Asia the EC has provided a total of €57 million over 2004-2006. With this budget we have provided grants to no fewer than 1,600 Asian students.

And thirdly, we have funded the Asean-EU University Network programme. With that project the EC has very much wanted to promote regional integration through university cooperation, in ways comparable to how we have supported university cooperation within Europe.

One piece of news I can bring you today from the side of the EC is that from 2007 on we will start with a sizeable new activity for promoting higher education cooperation with Asia and other parts of the worlds. It is called the Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window", and it combines elements from the three earlier programmes I have just mentioned.

It builds on the earlier Erasmus Mundus programme with its focus on promoting mobility. But, it adds an institutional cooperation component, in that we would like the mobility to happen within consortia of universities. These schemes can involve up to 20 universities from the EU and from the partner region. Another novelty is that, compared to the earlier Erasmus Mundus, we have broadened the range of eligible beneficiaries: the mobility can be for students at undergraduate, masters, postgraduate and doctorate level. The programme can also provide grants for post-doctoral research and for staff mobility.

At the same time the new Erasmus Mundus External Cooperation Window serves a very clear development purpose, as we have had it in Asia Link. We will do this by channelling the mobility funding into areas of study that are particularly important for the development needs of the partner countries, for combating poverty, and for helping them meet the development goals in the countries and regions involved. Particular attention will be paid to students in vulnerable situations.

For Central Asia we have already started up operation of this new programme. Today, I can inform you that from the academic year 2008/2009 onwards this initiative will also be expanded to Asia, besides Latin America, Africa, the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe. The call for proposals for the new programme will be published in October. Applications can be submitted by European institutions which have been awarded an Erasmus Charter, but they are to involve institutions from Malaysia and other Asian countries. Students, researchers and academic staff can then apply to the selected partnerships.

As to the available budget, the EC has set aside a total amount of €90 million for the coming three academic years, i.e. 2008-2010. I should add that the very large share of the mobility funds will be destined for Asian beneficiaries.

This new higher education programme will not stand on its own. It will be placed in the context of other EC programmes aimed at the higher education sector. I will mention two.

First, the Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, which is open to third countries and in which Asian participation has been rising steadily. Many of you will know in particular the Madame Curie programme for the mobility of researchers from third countries.

Secondly, we will continue funding the TransEurasian Information Network (TEIN). This is a particularly exciting programme that, over the past few years, has allowed 30 million Asian researchers to communicate with each other through a new high-volume and fast data link. And the same 30 million Asian researchers have also been able to communicate with the same data link with the European colleagues: for data exchange, for collaborative research, and for applications, for instance telemedicine and e-learning. Here in Malaysia, thanks to very active collaboration between the Government and the research sector, the TEIN programme has catalysed the Malaysian Research and Education Network (MYREN). This network now includes 15 universities, and that number will go up soon.

Ladies and gentlemen, the internationalisation of higher education is a response to globalisation, but is also a factor in increased exchange across borders. When we look at this exchange, we can easily see the need for a better understanding of for and agreements on systems that make it easier for students, teachers and courses to move and be recognised in other countries.

At a policy level, Europe's Bologna Process has been the catalyst for a reform of higher education that focuses on quality, compatibility and common approaches across all the countries involved. And it is fascinating to see how Bologna has

prompted debate and integration not just as to university curricula and qualifications, but also on improving the management of higher education and on questions concerning the funding of higher education sector.

Many universities outside Europe are looking towards Europe's experiences as sources of good practice on how to manage the processes of change and the need for reform that these developments bring with them. Therefore the EC supports the extension of the Bologna Process to countries outside Europe.

Within Europe, mobility for students and academics has been a very popular and very effective way of improving knowledge and understanding between countries. This has been an important factor in the European Union project. Europe is keen to build on this, by making this international dimension available to students and academics from outside Europe. Europe is keen to establish itself as the natural choice for students from Asia, or for academics seeking wider cooperation. Likewise, European students and academics have so much to learn about Asia.

But this can only happen if students and academics are aware of the nature and structure of higher education in Europe and if their European counterparts know about Asian higher education. This is one of the reasons why the European Higher Education Fairs are being organised in seven Asian countries. The first two took place in November 2006 in Bangkok and New Delhi. Each of them drew thousands of students, and they were attended by 120 European universities and 20 Member States participated.

The next one will be held this weekend in Kuala Lumpur at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. Over 80 HE institutions are registered from EU 18 countries. We have 180 participants at today's Symposium.

I will conclude my presentation by looking to the plenary session and I suggest to discuss the following challenges:

Challenges

- **A major first challenge is to harness higher education to provide the skills to drive forward economic and social development, in a way that raises people out of poverty in a sustainable and equitable way.**

Are the universities in Asia ready to take on this task, and to actively support the achievement by their countries of the Millennium Development Goals? Do the universities and the governments pay sufficient attention to ensuring that disadvantaged groups get the opportunities they need to overcome their predicament? How can the European universities support this?

- **Second challenge: is to help create a level playing field for higher education among the countries in Asia by raising standards in countries or regions with Asia that are lagging behind.**

Of course, programmes such as Asia Link and Erasmus Mundus can help this. But a connected question is which role can be played by bilateral cooperation between Asian countries and by regional cooperation, including in the context of ASEAN and SAARC.

- **Third challenge: To develop the individual scholarship-winners into a cadre of well-qualified practitioners and policy-makers, with an international outlook, who can play a key role in your country's development**

Do universities, government, and business cooperate sufficiently to ensure that highly qualified, internationally trained graduates find their way to interesting jobs that meet their skills? And, how to deal with the sensitive question of braindrain, within Asia and from Asia to other regions? What lessons can Europe offer?

I hope that these three points will be helpful for a fruitful discussion. Thank you for your attention.
