

Strengthening the ties that bind us together: the role of the ASEM Education Process for ASEM Dialogue and Cooperation - from a European perspective

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Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour and a pleasure to be here with you today.

Since Germany hosted the first ASEM Ministerial Meeting on Education in 2008, progress has been impressive. For example, at the second Ministerial Meeting it was agreed to establish the Education Secretariat to coordinate activities – the only ASEM structure of its kind. And that is how we come to have such a comprehensive stocktaking report before us today.

The third Ministerial set the four priorities that guide our work in this forum. These were introduced by different ASEM partners: *quality assurance and recognition* by the European Commission and the Republic of Korea; *engaging business and industry in education* by Malaysia (I am delighted to be sharing this platform with Minister Dato' Seri Idris Jusoh today); *balanced*

mobility by China; *lifelong learning including vocational education and training* by Vietnam. This shows our readiness to focus on areas where each partner can offer added value.

At this ASEM Meeting on Education, organised by the Latvian Ministry of Education and Science, with the ASEM Education Secretariat and other Latvian institutions, we are focusing on 'ASEM Education Collaboration for Results'. Plenary Sessions will explore how we can ensure that young people develop the skills they need to be more employable and how we can use new technologies in education.

Results, concrete results, this is what citizens are asking for, and rightly so. In Europe, unemployment, especially among young people, continues to be unacceptably high. Europe is running a serious risk of losing an entire generation, people who are neither working nor studying, who are facing poverty and social exclusion. A youth without perspective seems to me the most dramatic and absurd waste for a society.

We all know that education is much more than a means of supplying the labour market with human capital. Education goes far beyond helping people find a proper job. But when youth unemployment affects half of a generation, concrete results matter. We must deliver.

Allow me to give a snapshot of the situation we are facing in Europe.

More than six million young people are unemployed in the EU with peaks of more than 50% in some Member States. Even more alarmingly, 7.5 million young Europeans between 15 and 24 are neither in employment, nor in education or training.

And yet, the private sector is struggling to find employees with adequate skills. There are more than two million vacancies in the EU. Labour shortages, especially in the digital sector, are becoming a pressing issue for businesses.

Moreover, Europe's labour force has started shrinking and will continue to do so for at least four decades.

We also face the challenge of modernising our education systems. The internet generation is not as well educated as might be expected, notably when it comes to science, maths, engineering and technologies.

And finally, the recent tragic terrorist attacks in Paris and Copenhagen remind us that we need to do much more to help young people find their place in society. Across Member States,

far too many youngsters are marginalised and lack a sense of belonging.

How do we tackle these challenges? There is a common denominator: education, in the widest sense of the word. Education has to be the starting point of our efforts to increase employability, raise productivity, address the skills mismatch and prevent social exclusion. And the international dimension of education has a crucial role to play in this.

Why? Because it brings huge benefits. An analysis of the 80,000 replies we received to our survey on the impact of the European Union's Erasmus student exchange programme shows this very clearly.

We see that those who take part in the programme are only half as likely to experience long-term unemployment as those who have not studied or trained abroad. They not only get new insights in their specific disciplines, but also develop vital cross-cutting skills and attitudes such as tolerance, confidence, problem-solving ability and curiosity which 92% of employers are looking for.

This has inspired the design of our Erasmus+ programme which will provide mobility for at least 20% of students by the end of

the decade, compared to the current 10%. Moreover, the programme will help develop international partnerships to build capacity and drive reforms in higher education. And it will encourage new types of cooperation to strengthen the knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation. I hope many of you are sending delegates to our Erasmus+ Information Day on Wednesday to see what the EU has to offer.

Ministers, ladies and gentlemen,

The EU's Member States have around 4000 higher education institutions in total. Despite a wide variety of languages, cultures and specific structures in the different countries, Europe's higher education systems are comparable and compatible. Why shouldn't we be able to replicate a similar system across Europe and Asia, in particular with the support of Erasmus+ and our expertise?

Internationalisation is an opportunity. Partnerships can bring real benefits for higher education systems, institutions and individual students, researchers and staff. And even beyond, as I believe that our Education dialogue is crucial to ensure sound exchanges and cooperation in other policy areas.

In an ever more complex world, in which giving a sense to diversity and understanding and accepting pluralism is becoming a pressing need, we need to strengthen the ties between our two continents. People-to-people exchanges are both the ultimate goal and the precondition to a meaningful partnership.

I would like to end by quoting Marie Curie who said: "*You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end, each of us must work for our own improvement.*"

This is the basis of our cooperation programmes, Erasmus+ and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions supporting training and mobility for researchers. I sincerely hope Europeans and Asians will be able to take advantage of the opportunities on offer. We are here to support the development of education systems in the ASEM countries in a spirit of mutual respect and equal partnership. I wish you an excellent meeting. Thank you.