

Welcome and Opening Remarks

By Assoc. Prof. Dr. Piniti Ratananukul

Deputy Secretary-General, Office of the Higher Education Commission, Thailand

At the International Asia-Europe Conference on Enhancing Balanced Mobility

March 5, 2012

Pullman Bangkok King Power Hotel, Bangkok

Advisor to the Minister of Education, Thailand, Dr. Sumate Yamnoon,

Director ASEM Education Secretariat, Dr. Siegbert Wuttig,

Distinguished speakers, participants and guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure and an honor to deliver this welcome and opening speech at the International Asia-Europe Conference on Enhancing Balanced Mobility. On behalf of the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC), I would like to express my gratitude and extend a cordial welcome to all of our distinguished speakers and participants, in particular to our overseas guests and speakers who have travelled from far distance to attend this international conference. I wish you a big welcome and a pleasant stay in our beautiful city of Bangkok.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me talk briefly about the background of this conference, which Thailand committed to stage during the third Asia-Europe Meeting of Ministers for Education (ASEMME 3) held in Copenhagen, Denmark during 9-10 May 2011. The inspiration of Thailand's commitment is due to the need to strengthen academic cooperation with and learn from institutions in Europe. In a smaller scale, ASEAN is entering the fully-fledged ASEAN Community in 2015. The key component to achieve this integration is to promote a people-to-people exchange. A good start is the mobility of students and academics across the region. The success stories of the Bologna process, ECTS and other models of academic mobility in Europe can be a lesson learned for ASEAN to promote the free flow of people exchange.

In a wider scope, we can see internal changes in higher education of countries across Asia. These changes are in the areas of higher education reform, access to higher education, diversity of higher education, university governance and management, and quality assurance. These changes have reflected universities' endeavors to cope with streams of external forces brought about by the process of globalization.

Among the global trends, mobility of students and scholars seems to be the proactive phase of changes among universities in Asia and across the world. It can yield an immense impact on higher education especially in terms of enhancing "internationalization" of higher education. Mobility in higher education has been reflected in the process of internationalization of higher education, liberalization of education, transnational education, distance learning and virtual education. According to OECD, more than three million students worldwide are studying at higher education institutions outside their home countries. This is a 65 percent increasing since the year 2000.

Mobility offers open opportunities for direct exposure to other higher education environments, which enables not only academic exchanges but also upholding of quality and standards. Adding to this essence, mobility should also be used to enlarge the scope of "internationalism" among universities and their people for a better understanding of socio-economic and cultural aspects of the region as well as producing high quality manpower for the global community.

Europe is one of the world's most advanced areas in science and technology and fields of modern state of the art. Thus, it comes as no surprise to see remarkably expanded systematic inter-university cooperation between Asia and Europe in the forms of academic consortiums, networking, bilateral and multilateral activities, and partnerships as well as academic exchange of students and scholars. Asia and Europe have much to offer each other through this instrument of academic mobility.

Since its inception, the Asia-Europe Meeting (or ASEM) has continuously contributed to mutual benefits of the two regions. As we all know, the origins of the ASEM process lay in mutual recognition, in both Asia and Europe, that the relationship between the two regions needed to be strengthened, reflecting the new global context of the modern society, and the perspectives of the new century.

Nevertheless, we are also aware that the overall picture of mobility between Asia and Europe shows great imbalances. The number of mobile students and scholars from Asia to Europe is significantly higher than the number of European students and scholars coming to Asia. European countries count more incomings than outgoings, while countries in Asia do the reverse.

These imbalances can come from diversity in the higher education system, in any program structure, in curriculum content, in mode of delivery and even in unequal standard of quality of higher education. These elements, sometimes, pose as obstacles that may prevent balanced mobility though there have been many attempts and proposals on implementing tools to overcome these challenges.

Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I expect this conference to be a productive platform to exchange particular knowledge and experiences on how we can put our attempts into practice to enhance student and academic mobility for mutual development.

Before moving to the next session, I would like to express my appreciation to Director of the ASEM Education Secretariat, *Dr. Siegbert Wuttig*, for his generous support to make the conference possible. My thanks also go to all the speakers and participants for their contribution and spirit of cooperation to share their valuable experiences in the conference.

At this time, may I declare open the International Asia Europe Conference on Enhancing Balanced Mobility. I look forward to your fruitful deliberations.

Thank you.