

## Asia-EU study link still not binding

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THE European Union (EU) is Asean's earliest dialogue partner but this relationship has not been adequately leveraged in higher education co-operation.

Participants at the Asean-EU Rectors' Workshop in Bangkok last week bemoaned the state of co-operation in higher education.

It is sad to note that co-operation among universities, exchange of students and lecturers and networking in education have never been carried out in an organised and sustained manner.

Emphasis seems to be on trade and commercial links as well as in security and political dialogue.

Enhancing educational, cultural and people-to-people ties to generate greater awareness and better understanding is the foundation for the political and economic aspects of co-operation.

While trade, investment and economic co-operation are necessary for promoting growth and development, they are hollow if opportunities to learn from one another are not nurtured.

Short of the cultural pillar, no other activities are adequate to promote a more comprehensive relationship between the regions and their peoples.

There had been attempts to address this deficiency by introducing two important programmes: the Asean University Network Programme and the Asia-Link Programme. There is also the lesser known Asian-European Engineering Exchange Programme.

Generally, these programmes give universities in Europe and Asia a platform to build a long-term partnership.

The future of the Asia-Link programme seems to hang in the balance. This is testimony that education figures lowly in the Asian-EU political-economic-cultural nexus.

While Asean welcomes the Erasmus Mundus, the EU's recent initiative to foster co-operation among European academic institutions and with the rest of the world, it cannot be a substitute for the Asia-Link programme.

As a way forward, the subject of higher education co-operation must be placed high on the agenda for next year's Asean-EU Ministerial Meeting.

Asean governments and leaders cannot be excused for their complacency. The regional grouping, which was established in 1967, only spoke of promoting co-operation in the field of higher education and human resource development at the 1992 Asean Summit in Singapore.

It took a long time before the Asean University Network, for example, was established. This has proven to be the logical vehicle for co-operation with EU universities.

It would be a shame to let it flounder because of lack of support.

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