

FIRST EAHEP ROUNDTABLE – 25/26 November 2008, Hanoi, Vietnam

“Autonomy, Governance and Management in Higher Education in Asia and Europe”

Executive Summary

The Roundtable demonstrated a similar broad approach to autonomy, governance, and management in both the European and Asian countries which were represented. This broad approach can be summarised as follows.

Institutional autonomy demands limited state intervention. It can assist in securing academic freedom, both for institutions and individuals. Such autonomy requires competent and sensitive management. In order to provide for maximum effectiveness in terms of creativeness within universities, autonomy needs to be all-embracing – covering the selection and admission of students, the employment and remuneration of academic and non-academic staff, the appointment and remuneration of the Rector, all matters concerning the curriculum and the development of new academic programmes or avenues of research, the ownership, sale and purchase of all property, including land and buildings, and measures to maximise income (including the ability to borrow).

The State, for its part, can expect accountability for public funds (where provided) and a responsiveness to the needs of society and the economy. This accountability and responsiveness can be promoted by the establishment of governing bodies for institutions with a majority of representatives appointed from outside the institution. Responsiveness can also be promoted by developing an entrepreneurial culture – and ethical values - within the institution.

All the institutions represented at the Roundtable had developed or were in the process of developing the establishment of governing bodies. Their main role is to set the strategy for institutions while leaving the Rector to lead and manage the institution. The composition of governing bodies varied. Some universities had small Councils of 10 members, while the pattern elsewhere was for larger Councils. But the functions were similar.

Most institutions were also developing a similar approach to management within institutions. A co-operative approach involving all academic staff was no longer considered to be appropriate – in part because institutions needed to take quick decisions on new developments. There is now usually a corporate approach with the Rector and his senior colleagues (sometimes called the Rectorate) acting as an executive Board of Directors.

Despite an accord over the broad approach to autonomy, governance, and management, there are detailed differences according to circumstances. These differences apply both within Europe and within Asia. In Asia particularly, Governments continue to exercise control over universities. In Japan, the State has to approve 6 year strategic plans. In Vietnam, only two out of over 100 universities had high levels of autonomy. In Thailand, there has been insufficient focus on university management and the first delegation of authority to universities in 1992 had been unsuccessful (although there was now confidence that autonomy could be extended). In Europe, there have been developments giving substantial autonomy to universities in many States in Germany. Elsewhere in continental Europe, Governments have sought to retain some controls.

Three other themes were highlighted during the Roundtable: (1) the need for some flexibility for universities to raise their own resources, (2) the importance of diversity in what universities offered, and (3) the value, as well as problems created by international students.

(1) Resources alongside autonomy are seen as the major factors influencing the success of universities. In Asia, the development of private universities - often offering courses in limited subject areas – has provided for more students without releasing more resources for higher education generally. The scope for increasing fees in the

State funded sector is limited. In Europe, there are fewer private universities and State funded universities in some countries are not allowed to charge for tuition. This position is however changing as Governments recognise the benefits to individuals and priority for other claims on public funding.

(2) Diversity in higher education is said to be necessary to meet all the needs of society and the economy. It tends to be more prevalent in countries where there is strong competition between universities. The Bologna Agreement in Europe has recognised the need for diversity, particularly at postgraduate level. Arguably the binary system of separate higher education institutions for some vocational subjects - prevalent in Europe - limits diversity in universities. Borderless and transnational higher education serve to promote diversity.

(3) While internationalisation was generally seen as an essential element of institutional development, there were claims that international students travelling from Asia to universities in Europe and elsewhere were damaging the interests of higher education in Asia. Some of these students settled as academic staff in the countries where they studied and contributed to the success of universities there. While this was recognised to be a problem, it was also the case that many international students returned to their home countries at some stage and made an important contribution there.

The construction of the Roundtable was effective. It led to much debate both within and outside the main sessions. There had been general agreement about the approach to autonomy, governance and management. Within both Europe and Asia, national policies were at different stages but moving in the same direction for institutions – more if not complete autonomy, accountability provided through effective governing bodies with external representatives, and more corporate management. These developments sometimes led to unease amongst staff and students because of a perceived loss of power. This unease could be offset by appropriate consultation, sensitive management, and a realisation that a thriving university meeting the needs of society had new benefits for staff and students. Several speakers spoke about the need for more diversity within the university sector in meeting society's changing needs.