

Building Interregional Networks Among Young Researchers: IFAIR's 2nd EU-ASEAN Perspectives Dialogue

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Comparative regionalism is a budding research field which generates a demand for interregional forms of knowledge production as a way to overcome regional intellectual parochialism. However, this demand is yet to be matched by appropriate academic networks. Valuable regional research networks exist in the form of punctual interaction at international conferences, but dialogue *between* regions that goes beyond these is still rare. There may be a number of reasons for this. Apart from potentially differing research cultures, the simple fact that institutionalizing intellectual exchange across geographical distances is usually cost-intensive is certainly one of the most important barriers. This is especially true for countries and regions where the financial equipment of research institutions is poor and funding for travel is sparse. Those who suffer the most under such conditions are students and young researchers with generally fewer personal resources and limited access to funding for academic purposes.

Against this background, the 2nd Interregional EU-ASEAN Perspectives Dialogue (EUAP II), which was held from March to June 2015, shows how a mix of on- and offline formats can help in building bridges for young academia despite unfavorable conditions.

The EUAP II was organized by the *Young Initiative on Foreign Affairs and International Relations e.V.* (IFAIR), a student-led, Germany-based initiative that promotes youth exchange and projects related to international affairs.¹ Following the inaugural project in late 2013 and early 2014, the second edition of the Dialogue ran under the heading 'Building Global Partnerships – Which Role for the EU and ASEAN?'. In keeping with this question, 20 graduate and post-graduate students, as well as young professionals from Europe and Southeast Asia, discussed the potential for the two regional organizations to cooperate on current challenges in global governance.

Concluded in late March 2015, the first phase of EUAP II was an online conference which included a two-week working phase of break-out groups focusing on specific issue areas. Using video conference technology, the participants jointly developed research questions and prepared presentations that were then discussed in a plenary session. With high selection standards, the project connected a low financial threshold and a 50:50 quota for participants from each region, thus ensuring excellence in academic performance without sacrificing equal representation of voices from both regions.

1 More information on the organization can be found on <http://www.ifair.eu>.

Expert advisors from academia, think tanks, and civil society organizations assisted the break-out groups in their research during the working phase. The findings of the online conference form the basis for a policy paper, which identifies the potential for an EU-ASEAN partnership. In addition, the paper makes recommendations to decision-makers on how to improve interregional cooperation in the issue areas of development, trade, finance, and climate change. It was drafted by a group of Dialogue participants under the guidance of IFAIR's editorial team. In the recently concluded second phase, a project delegation discussed the policy recommendations with political stakeholders in Brussels. The visit was concluded by a 'citizens café' informing the public about the findings of EUAP II. There was also a panel discussion with experts and project representatives at the *European Institute for Asian Studies* on 18 June 2015.²

The support by established research institutions, such as the *EU Center in Singapore* or the Brussels-based *European Institute for Asian Studies*, indicates that the potential of hybrid on- and offline research formats for exchange among young academia is gaining increasing acknowledgement by the regionalism community. The discussions of the online conference attest the undeniable viability of web tools as a means to create sustainable interregional formats of knowledge production as well as the productivity of such formats in producing policy-relevant analyses (see also the paper resulting from the first EU-ASEAN Perspectives workshop, Meissner et al., 2014).

The EUAP II discussions showed that, while the potential for joint action by the EU and ASEAN on global issues differs across policy fields, there are generally clear limits for a partnership. In addition to differences between the two regions, divergences within the regions in terms of political and economic structures obstruct the development of common policies. Any strategy for developing the global dimension of EU-ASEAN interregionalism will therefore have to work towards relations on more equal terms between but also within the two regions. A recurrent point raised at the conference was that greater involvement of civil society and private sector actors can help to level the playing field.

This being said, the obstacles towards a more fully developed interregionalism somewhat reflected back on the EU-ASEAN Perspectives Dialogue itself: Even though the participants came from geographically diverse backgrounds, including nationals from five European and six Southeast Asian countries, the inclusion of representatives from each region's peripheries has proven hard to achieve. Increasing inclusiveness will therefore form one of the key challenges of future editions of the project. In this respect, the main hurdles are weakly developed academic networks which make it hard to advertise calls for applications, limited internet bandwidth capacity which impedes participation in the online meetings, and a lack of language skills. An improvement of the academic and digital infrastructure together with an enhancement of English language training in higher education systems would go a long way in maximizing the potential of interregional knowledge production.

² The paper and a report on the discussion can be accessed on <http://ifair.eu/en/eu-asean-perspectives-dialogues/>.



REFERENCES

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