Asian University Leaders, Meeting in Australia, Seek to Improve International Ties

By Janaki Kremmer

Gold Coast, Australia

At a conference here on Australia's east coast that drew hundreds of higher-education leaders from the Asia-Pacific region this week, educators called for equal partnerships with Western institutions and agreed that they needed to become more flexible to adapt to a rapidly changing economic environment.

Although the mood at the Asia Pacific Association of International Education’s annual meeting was generally positive, with many feeling that Asian higher education is coming into its own, university representatives from China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, and elsewhere agreed they need to step up their international activities.

"Asian universities tend to be very domestically oriented, and their self-esteem is very high within the nation. But they are very limited and their standards are not global," said Doo-Hee Lee, a business professor at Korea University and the association’s founder and president. "Western universities still set the standards, and Asian universities are always falling behind."

To tackle those problems, Mr. Lee announced the creation of the Asia Pacific Leaders program, in which top university students will study, volunteer, and learn the local culture in a neighboring country’s university. Mr. Lee said 15 Asian countries and 22 universities are participating.

Such a program is necessary, Mr. Lee said, because Asian universities tend to produce graduates who "don’t know anything about their neighbors, and this does not bode well for this Asian century that we talk about."

The association, which is only five years old, has grown each year—a sign that Asian universities are increasingly interested in developing a regional identity. This year’s annual
The conference drew 900 attendees—300 more than expected—and more than double the sponsorship of the previous year, organizers said.

Arun Sharma, deputy vice-chancellor for research and commercialization at the Queensland University of Technology, in Australia, gave the opening address. He called for an end to what he described as a mercantile approach to higher education, in which Western countries export their programs to Asia and then repatriate the profits.

"If the profits stay in the country, then you can broaden your network, enhance your brand everywhere, do your research at the cost price, even get some government funding and provide education in that country," he said.

He noted that the government of India is considering a bill that would welcome foreign universities but require profits to remain in India, which he supported.

"Seeing higher education merely as an export for profit is a route down the food chain," Mr. Sharma said.

For the Australian universities in attendance here, much of the talk was about restoring the country’s international reputation, particularly in India, following several highly publicized attacks against Indian students last year.

Christopher Madden, who directs the international office at Griffith University, which is hosting the conference, said that the entire team of Indian delegates pulled out of the conference about four months ago.

"I don’t think it was a coincidence. I think they were genuinely concerned for their safety," he said.

Building partnerships at home and abroad was a popular topic with attendees, with many saying that remains the best way to leverage limited resources and expose the faculty and students to a broad array of ideas.

Sarah Todd, pro-vice chancellor for international activities at the University of Otago, in New Zealand, said the country’s eight universities try to cooperate with one another rather than compete.
"We even say stuff like 'our university does teach this subject, but you are better off studying it at such and such university.' Such relationships and much larger networks are needed in the Asian Pacific region as a whole, she said.

Many university representatives here said they were also eager to draw in students from outside their home country. Some universities are doing so by creating Western style institutions or programs within existing universities.

Singapore, one of the most internationally focused countries in Asia, plans to attract more foreign students through a new university of technology and design, as well as a new American-style liberal-arts college affiliated with the National University of Singapore. And in 2001, Peking University introduced the Yuanpei honors college, a pilot program that immerses a select group of students into a liberal-arts project similar to the those in the United States.

Mr. Lee noted that while American universities have time-tested academic programs, Asian universities are in an age of experimentation.

But there was one area in which American universities could improve, he added: outreach. Only about 30 Americans attended the conference. Some Asian educators, he said, feel that American higher education could risk insularity if it "does not also start to innovate and get involved with Asia."