7th ASEF Rectors' Conference and Students' Forum (ARC7)
Students' Forum: 11–14 May 2019 | Rectors' Conference: 12–14 May 2019
Bucharest, Romania

**Higher Education Taking Action Towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe**

Interview | Conducted by Rose Gosteli
Theme 1 - Taking Action at Home: SDGs as Core Pillars of University Governance

This interview was conducted by Rose Gosteli, a student from Mahidol University International College. A half-Swiss, half-Filipino doing a BA in Intercultural Studies and Languages degree in Thailand, Rose is highly interested in the differences and similarities between Asian and European cultures and systems, and particularly in how such diverse perspectives can be combined to better provide quality education.

To that end, this interview was conducted with Professor Jeremy Dela Cruz from the ZHAW School of Management and Law in Switzerland and Professor Michael Naglis from the Mahidol University International College in Thailand. Professor Naglis is a lecturer in the Tourism and Hospitality Management Department, and the Associate Dean of Student Affairs in Mahidol University International College. He thus serves as one of the main points of contact and communication between students and those in university administration and governance and thereby has a thorough awareness of the issues present on both sides.

Professor Dela Cruz is a lecturer in the International Business Department, and the Deputy Programme Director of ZHAW's BSc in International Management and MSc in International Business. His expertise and research interests are in Higher Education, International Business and Globalization, and Southeast Asia. He has also taught in Southeast Asia and so has extensive experience with both Asian and European higher education systems.

Michael Naglis
Lecturer in the Tourism and Hospitality Management Department, Associate Dean of Student Affairs, Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Jeremy Dela Cruz
Lecturer in the International Business Department, Deputy Programme Director of MSc International Business and BSc International Management, the ZHAW School of Management and Law, Switzerland

What does quality education mean for you?

JDC:

John Dewey said "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." The purpose of education is preparation for life in the context of a given society. The purpose of higher education is preparation, not only for gainful and effective integration into a given society but further, for leadership, within a discipline for the betterment and progress of that society. How well we achieve the adequate preparation for life and leadership in a given society, the systems and processes that are employed, and the degree to which, on average, these are successful in this goal is how I measure the quality of education.

MN:

Quality education is when the curriculum design and extracurricular activities have the ability to produce a graduate who's able to make an honest living and become a responsible citizen and a lifelong learner. It should introduce a wide array of issues and disciplines to challenge critical thinking and value the differences, include high quality faculty and staff, and the presence of a quality assurance system that works.

What policy issues do you feel are present and pressing in Higher Education?

JDC:

- » Increased pathways for VET to technical-colleges at the tertiary level
- » Increased digitization of higher education towards a autodidactic/student-led, learner-specific model, including more non-STEM (i.e. Liberal Arts) topics alongside STEM topics
- » Increased internationalization and democratization of Swiss-led higher education
- » Increased focus on the professional demands of the future as will be brought by the 4th Industrial Revolution.

MN:

There are important questions regarding what we consider valid 'systems' and 'major areas' in terms of who develops them, how do they get into the position to have the authority to do so, and are they the right person? Often the people in power are not the most qualified and suitable for the job, and yet they are the ones who develop the vision and systems so on and so forth. For example, some administrators here at Mahidol are doctors, and may have a lack of vision or experience regarding higher education and management skills. There's a joke that says we lose a good doctor to get a bad administrator. I think we need to start with the leader of the university, really putting capable people in the position (with a good and transparent system of recruitment and selection).

Are there policies, methods, or systems of higher education from Asia or Europe that you feel are highly successful and which you'd like to see implemented more in your region or that you feel would contribute to higher education abroad?

JDC:

I feel strongly that Swiss VET programs have been able to claim the degree of success that that have due to their counterparts in the commercial realm; employers who not only allow, but encourage a strong balance and connection between work and study, and provide OTJ training, state-of-the-art facilities, mentoring, etc..Along with policy changes that support this shift, this model could work well in nations such as Singapore and India, and eventually, in Korea, and Japan.

I think there should be greater professionalization of the teaching vocation. That is something Switzerland does quite well, but in many countries being a teacher isn't seen as a high-level or high-status career. Incentivize the best and brightest to pursue a career in education/teaching/academia. Provide adequate resources, status, funding, programs, etc. This is too important a job to be done by "those who can't…"

I also feel there is room for improvement in motivating more Swiss nationals, and especially women, to pursue (technical) higher education.

MN:

There should be less emphasis on grading and GPAs and more on mindset and knowledge. Grading creates a lot of limitations to learning because students focus on what to learn for the exam and not what to learn for the betterment of themselves.

The system in Finland is interesting system; it puts value on individual differences and moves away from standardized testing. However, implementing something like that will require a major revamping from all levels.

How can universities further work toward the SDG of Quality Education?

JDC:

Here in Switzerland, it's more about consciously getting out of it what you put into it. Unlike Asia, education isn't a golden ticket to a better life; life is already good. Still…

Educational policies can be re-crafted to make them more relevant and applicable to the demands of the future, specifically the 4th Industrial Revolution, (including automation, digitization and AI).

Universities can implement more flexible learning (digital) platforms and in this way have greater female participation.

Marketing of Swiss Education (specifically Higher Education) on the global stage

could be improved; increase internationalization policy at the governmental and inter-governmental level.

MN:

We must rethink the definition and value of higher education. I think it might start with one visionary leader who's not afraid to challenge the status quo. They can communicate for a buy in, build a coalition team, and keep moving forward. We need those pioneers to break free from the bureaucracy and gain momentum from all stakeholders. A short-term fix could be at the individual level of each lecturer, with them building their course with an open mindset about the true definition of learning and less worry about "How do I grade my students?"

What would you personally suggest if you were handling policy recommendations for higher education?

JDC:

I would push for more future-proofing of higher education, especially in the VET (phenomena-based learning) and STEM fields (Student-led pedagogy), as well as an increased focus on what machines cannot do: soft skills (critical thinking, collaboration, creativity and learning skills), higher-thinking skills (goals-setting, choosing methods to study, evaluation, and reflection), etc. We could also use a reform/revolution in how assessments are done (e.g. multi-methods vs. exam score).

MN:

Shorten the duration of an undergraduate program (4 years is way too long and costly). Universities must also focus on their real strengths and not offer too many programs just for revenue-seeking purposes. A mentorship program also might be a better than internships, and it can start in the early years of a degree.