FACING CHALLENGES AND PROPOSING SOLUTIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION STUDIES IN ASIA

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Abstract. In order to succeed, European Studies in Asia must demonstrate to the students their direct relevance for a future professional career. This is not an easy task in general within the humanities and social studies, of which EU studies are a part. In my experience Asian students tend to be more practically oriented and less oriented toward social sciences and towards speculative thinking in general (especially when is communicated in a foreign language). The issue of adaptation applies also for the European academics teaching in Asia. The adaptation to a new study environment is not always easy (and to a certain extent not always needed since being a visiting European professor is a part of their exotic charm), however certain patterns of teaching must be adopted. In order to demonstrate the usefulness of Europe or EU related majors in various Asian universities, the way teaching about Europe supports the teaching of other disciplines, especially International Relations, International Economics, Trade, history, philosophy, political sciences or language studies must be demonstrated. European studies must be approach both as a transversal and as a niche specialization. Again the interest in such courses is related to the perspective of overseas travel, and overseas work or internship opportunities. The future of Europe Studies in Asia relies on other conditions such as mobility, adaptation to regional perceptions and teaching methodologies, a good level of awareness about the utility of such studies for a future career, and above everything the institutionalised periodical and systematic involvement of potential employers in curricula design and teaching methodology, because they know best what kind of expertise they want.

Keywords: European studies, Asian studies, international relations, cultural diplomacy, academic exchanges.

Introduction

Academic mobility (both for professors and students) increasingly became a mass phenomenon facilitated partly by the waves of globalization (access to information and affordable intercontinental air travel) and partly by bilateral or

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international agreements and programs. This article expresses some thoughts coming from various EU related teaching experiences as visiting professor in China (Jinan University), Singapore (National Singapore University), Korea (Pusan National University). To an increased extent the planet is no longer fragmented, economics, politics, international relations and university education are extensively converging towards a global stage. Anyone would expect that the need for internationally minded expertise is greater than ever and the IR, Global Studies, European Studies program would be booming as never before driven by the job market demand. Because of its broad nature, an EU studies or international relations programs affords graduates options, and a high flexibility in terms of how students apply the skills they have developed through the curriculum (if the skills are existent and if the program is post-graduate). International trade and investments are carrying new requirements for the increasing number of students in Asia, mastering English and other foreign languages being a must and for this must, international experience is highly valued in countries like Singapore, Korea, and Japan (whose investments in Europe are increasing). The influx of Asian students has also become a financial life line for many universities in particular in the UK. Countries like New Zealand even opened universities and programs with a special purpose to provide British style education for Asian students at lower costs compared with the UK.

According to the destinations and the purposes of Korean or Singaporean students, most Korean students would earn the doctoral degree abroad, particularly in the U.S., after completing their B.A and master’s degree in their home country. Another increasing trend in that is that many students want to study English abroad in native speaking countries namely UK and alternatively Australia or New Zealand. However this popular trend does not necessarily favour Europe or European studies but rather the UK as a study destination.

EU as a normative power in the Asian academic world?

EU is still, for many comparative regional integration strategies, regarded as a reference point or the only testing laboratory for regional integration in other parts of the world1. The study of ‘Europe’ ranged from the Faculties and Departments of political and social sciences through law and commerce to culture and languages. CAMPUS Asia as an Asian University Student Exchange Program is modeled upon the European Erasmus program with a more practical oriented perspective as it based not on simple university agreements but rather on dual degrees programs. It make campus Asia programs although not as extensive and massive but more meaningful for the enrolled students who will have a joint dual degree. Also a dual degree obliges the participating universities for a higher level of integration and coordination mirrored on higher impact in terms of regional integration.

Campus Asia participating universities must learn and therefore avoid the less mediatised and less reported realities of Erasmus programs. Erasmus program is famous and highly popular among students however most participating students remember their Erasmus in another EU country rather as a nice socializing experience and less in terms of what they achieved in term of academic knowledge. The class attendance of Erasmus students in their host universities in many cases is rather low, and the requirements for passing an exam are more relaxed than for ordinary students. At my course on International Relations which I was teaching in English at the University of Oradea (Romania) I saw my Erasmus students coming from Poland only once in an entire semester. Also I have not noticed any real research or program integration among participating universities apart from student’s exchanges, some conferences and workshops. There is indubitable some outcome from these events but difficult to measure or to demonstrate unless it can show some concrete results such as dual degrees and joint research programs and projects whose outcome is noticed by various industries and the business community. Also at this moment, to my knowledge, there is not a functional and effectively implemented Quality Assurance System for the student exchange programs. In the case of Erasmus the massive number of available places meant the selection process is often relaxed, the students often don’t have the minimal language abilities to follow classes in the host universities and also in the host universities the academic staff often is unable to speak effective English. Well aware or not about this issue in the case of Campus Asia the first concern of the Japanese delegation was to propose a Quality Assurance System whose result in the following year were basic agreements regarding details on common subjects, granting of credits, academic assessment and credit transfer performance.

Also it would be rather realistic to consider that if anyone copies or adapts something from the EU it is in their perceived self interest and not necessarily because they share or admire EU norms and ideas, and would not hesitate to follow another example if it would prove more efficient, lucrative and adaptable to its culture. The teacher – student relationship often promoted by the very idea of European as a normative power is highly disliked in Asia and above all in China. Also not without some reasons many are arguing the implementation of EU modeled systems and norms came from EU founded academics and researches. The same applies for the European general self perceived power of ideas and ideation. Most Asians academics mirroring the politicians and public opinion tend to think in terms of immediate results and achievements than in terms of distant goals such as cultural innovation or other abstract goals which in the EU discourses seems to be abundant. Also post modern norms and ideas may just not work in societies whose citizens are not living in a post-modern world (it may be the case of most mainland China, Myanmar, India, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia). Finally United States pragmatic and practice oriented academic

system seems to offer a more attractive normative power in academic terms. The entire Bologna process which adapts the EU tertiary education to the US system seems to be the hardest evidence regarding who is the real global normative power. And in this case it may be more advisable for the Asian academics to go directly to the source.

In search for more functional teaching methodologies for European Studies in Korea

The issue of adaptation applies also for the European academics teaching in Asia. The adaptation to a new study environment is not always easy (and to a certain extent not always needed, being a European visiting professor can be a part of its exotic charm), however certain patterns of teaching must be adopted.

In order to succeed European Studies in Asia must demonstrate to the students their direct relevance for a future professional career. This is not an easy task in general within the humanities and social studies that EU studies are a part of. Asian students tend to be more practically oriented and less oriented toward social sciences and in general towards speculative thinking (especially when is communicated in a foreign language).

The study results of some students can be disappointing despite hard work. Most students use more reproductive, stepwise, sequential, detailed and analytic study strategies, while a smaller part use more deep, structuring, and relating strategies aimed at identifying main points and constructing an overall, coherent picture of the study materials. The way the Chinese and Korean students are used to learning is in many respects similar to what I used to encounter as a student in the first post-communist years Romania, a system which often will not fit the demands of the educational system of a good university in Western Europe. However often this is compensated by hard work, ambition and dedication. Also those few of those blaming this system of learning are unaware of the dividing line between mechanical memorization and memorization to assist development in meaning. I make this remark in order to underline the importance of knowing more about the views, motives, study habits and cultural norms students in the host country have. Knowing more about these differences can be highly informative about how a visiting professor might support students with their eventual adaptation to European learning environments and perhaps a future internship or job.

From my own teaching experience so far the well spread myth about the Asian student’s custom to respect, listen to, often not to criticize or challenge one’s teacher is only partially truth in the second decade of the 21 century. Although the students are respectful they won’t hesitate to question any amount of homework.

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3 In this article, the term ‘Asian’ will merely be used in a geographical sense to refer to people from the East and South East Asian continent.


bibliography over 20 pages per week and in some cases the meaning and use of a particular course for their career path. If at a first view students will rather obey and follow their teachers soon the professor confused by this attitude will find himself with an empty class or with the students leaving the course (in Korea the students can abandon an optional course, for another course, twice within the semester). Because students will hardly raise questions on their own they have to be invited all the time to question ideas and concepts within the course, and periodically to be asked and checked if they understood what they were told. The interrogation and interactivity is essential as a teaching method. Also the use of visual material has paramount importance in an environment in which there is always a language barrier. Students of Confucian heritage cultures rarely dare to openly question professors and even if they disagree, avoid arguing with them. For instance the open invitation to ask questions or even questioning all the time the own assumptions can produce valuable results and opportunities to enhance critical thinking and analytical skills.

Apart from a certain degree of shyness Chinese, Singaporean or Korean students have more or less the same profile to their European counterparts. Most of them are unable to identify a specific career path or job they are specifically seeking after graduation and for instance even the less specific technical skills expected from a certain academic course. The first thing I ask every student in a new class is about their expectations from the class and what are their career plans (in order to adjust the course content). With few very few exceptions (both in Europe and Asia) the answer, (if there is any answer) tend to be...something about... It denotes a very serious mismanagement at the university level unable to provide clear career paths and truly professional content for the courses. Most EU related courses regardless their exotic names would be examination of European integration History, theories of European integration, or a surface description of EU institution (rarely a real investigations into the functional aspects of various EU administrative ingredients). Potential employers are requesting technical skills but technicality comes only from effective practice, and few academics have been truly civil practitioners as civil servants or direct negotiators with various EU institutions or departments. Some of the most prestigious (and the most expensive) EU related academic institutions like College of Europe from Bruges employees almost exclusively as academic staff current or former EU functionaries, peoples who can provide the students with the needed technicalities required from an employable future expert.

These patterns of learning, including approaches to learning, regulation strategies, conceptions of learning, and learning orientations, may coincide or conflict with the way of learning that is expected in universities abroad.

A well-functioning exercise is to give the Asian students a sense of diversity and complexity of EU (a structure comprising 23 official languages, small and medium sized member states each with their own political EU related issue)
to form a tutorial group and to assign to each member of the group the mission to find information about a particular EU member state and then to represent his interests within the EU Institutions and negotiating process. The representatives from each group may give presentations about their allocated EU member state. They must be also aware about what and how much of their own contemporary culture and society is in fact European based. Another problem is to inoculate the necessary distinction between European civilization and History and Western civilization and history as in virtually all cases European related courses are designed at the moment in most Asian Universities. The Cold War teaching legacy (US inspired) of depicting the European Studies as a continuous struggle between the Western civilization and Eastern Communism still affects in terms of academic accuracy and effectiveness the EU studies in Asia. It is also unfair to link the European Studies entirely to the European project, and transform it into a new kind of legitimizing ideology. In fact neither the Classical Greece legacy, Hellenism nor the Roman Empire are just European, even less just Western.

A further aspect of this issue is to advance the EU as a functional model not just of economic integration but also as a Social model and as the manager of globalization and prototypical example of good governance, including both global governance and EU governance norms and values. In this case the transition from a state centralized economy toward a market economy and the privatization process occurring in the former Communist bloc within the process of transition and European integration can be a valuable case study for the transition economies in East and South East Asia. Privatization and decentralization, the effects of compensations toward the large number of workers made redundant, the effects of early pensioning systems are all valuable lessons for any transition country.

Students must be explained the role and meaning of EU culture, history and philosophy for an academic profile, and for future experts which need to be not only an efficient civil servant in charge with administrative duties but also an intellectual elite prepared to provide an added value and in-depth analyses of various documents, procedures and evolutions. EU studies in Asia apart from the business, trade and administrative content related courses must provide information about the role of visionary and enterprising personalities in Asia – Europe relationships, and there are so many other personalities apart from Marco – Polo. Figures like Constantine Phaulkon and many other Jesuits in Asia are virtually unknown, unrecognized and a valuable cross cultural experience unknown and unused. There were visionaries pushing the limits of cultural adaptations and capable of finding the right adaptable teaching solutions for a legacy which proved to be both powerful and influential with minimal resources. Without vision, passion and enthusiasm most EU studies chairs do not survive after the end of EU financing.

The very meaning of European Studies is also a matter of debate and it needs to be clarified and somehow codified as today a potential candidate for an M.A in European Studies may find the real content of the curricula often different from what he would normally expect. Today it can mean anything from the study of the EU, the study of non-EU Europe, the study of European integration, or the
study of EU languages, politics, history, geography, culture and civilization. Often EU or European Studies in an Asian context would not simply mean the exclusive study of Western Europe, of East and Central Europe, or of one country in Europe or comparative studies of several European countries.

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of Europe or EU related majors to various Asian universities the way teaching about Europe supports the teaching of other disciplines, especially International Relations, International Economics, Trade, history, philosophy, political sciences or language studies must be demonstrated. European studies must be approach both as a transversal and as a niche specialization. Again the interests for such courses are related to the perspective of overseas travel, and overseas work or internship opportunities.

To sum up the future of Europe Studies in Asia relies on other conditions such as mobility, adaptation to regional perceptions and teaching methodologies, a good level of awareness about the utility of such studies for a future career, and above everything the institutionalised periodical and systematic implication of potential employers into the curricula design and teaching methodology, because they know best what kind of expertise they want. Or perhaps an M.A or a B.A program is too long for the pragmatic business community for instance around a small M.A budgeted program a constellation of EU intensive, specifically and technically focused short term courses may gravitate.

Also in order to improve the attractive quality of EU studies the EU centers located in various Asian countries may be seconded by counseling centers providing both career information, project design skills and support to obtain internships or jobs in Europe. For example, within the Korean Embassies and Overseas Trade Centers of Korea Trade-Investment Promotion Agency (KOTRA) various internship opportunities all over Europe are provided but surprisingly the students, even those enrolled today in various EU studies schemes are unaware of them. Also in Korea and not only the European Studies curriculum is more oriented towards an academic content and career rather than for practitioners professional purposes, therefore a gap between theory and practice can be easily noticed and difficult to fill.

What about mutuality?

Asian studies especially in some EU counties are disproportionately low when compared with the amount of trade, investment and the growing importance of Asia on the global stage, especially in economic terms, as a source and destination of investments. While the Chinese and Japanese studies chairs are quite well represented, there are scarcely any Korean, Vietnamese, Indonesian or Malay studies offered even if in the case of Korean language abilities work opportunities would be easy available taking into account the numerous and growing Korea investments in particular in Central and Eastern Europe. Perhaps the same rationale also appears for the situation in Europe. First the lack of qualified personnel (easy solvable if there were the necessary funds) but necessary funds today came hand in hand with the number of interested students and the
number of interested potential tax paying candidates is somehow directly proportional to their direct employment perspectives. Here the business community would potentially have a hard word to say even by direct involvement in designing curricula, even by sponsoring the needed number of experts with contract based scholarships covering their tuition fees and living allowances (which in the Central Eastern European countries would not represent an unaffordable amount of money).

*European Union studies – as a discipline in search for identity*

Within the entire academic community actively in charge in various ways with the spread of EU studies in Asia there is a continuous concern regarding the ambiguous status of this discipline derived directly from its ambiguous status within European Universities.

The main issues rely in the practicality and real use of such a discipline and program at B.A and/or M.A level. Various solutions were offered with various occasions perhaps the most functional one been to concentrate rather on short term intensive professional training programs in EU affairs for government officials, NGO personnel and business executives who have to deal with the EU legislation, procedures and methodologies.

The link between EU Studies and the students’ professional career prospective must be highlighted, and this is possible only by changing the curricula structure toward practical, technical case studies and examples of good practice. The fact that too often teaching EU Studies is done by respectable academic staff but not truly experts in European Studies unless they were in charge with some specific EU either negotiation and also various deficiencies in terms of mastering English or the local language complicate the diagnosis. Nevertheless, considering the reinforced interest in comparative models of regional cooperation, and the need for EU legal and procedural expertise for an export oriented economy there are further perspectives for the proliferation of European Studies in particular in Korea but also in China, Malaysia and Singapore. In Korea in particular the growing interest in issues like public policy approaches dealing with the population ageing, social inclusion and in particular the social economy prove that the applicability of European experiences to Asia is among the most sought after EU related subject which may motivate and attract students. Further incentives like the opportunity to study a semester in Europe, an internship in one of the many Korean enterprises located in Europe etc may be the necessary ingredients to make the EU Studies curricula truly attractive and functional in Korea and in general in an Asian context.

In order to achieve these stronger ties with European universities, mutual recognition of credits and the participation of the business community in the entire approach is an essential ingredient of functionality and credibility. From the job market perspective the potential of several Asian and European cities is
particularly good, considering the EU companies located in Asia (in particular in places like Singapore and Hong Kong) and the many Korean investments in many Central and East European Cities. However for the moment this is just theory. In reality business representatives rarely if any ever participate at the workshops, seminars, conferences and usually any EU related event organized by the EU Studies departments across de regions and the organizers should ask why, because there is always a reason. The fact that in India a country with more than one billion people and 400 universities there is only one program offering an M.A in European Studies located at Nehru University should send both a warning signal but also a green light for those who can smell an unexplored and a potentially high in demand academic niche.

Marketability must be based on hard facts not unrealistic promises. In Romania in the mid 90’s the marketing strategy for the booming number of EU and International studies was the opportunity to go abroad for a semester with a scholarship (a bridge too far for a public in need for visa in a country whose average salary rarely exceeded 100 $) and the perspective to be interdisciplinary specialized (to know something from everything). The promised interdisciplinary quality was in fact more often a mask for the composite and non-integrated composition of the B.A and M.A programs (professors from various departments such as History, Sociology, Philosophy, Economics, Law have just added the label European to their ordinary courses. Also too often interdisciplinary is a substitute for a general view over a certain domain and at the end a lack of specialization (virtually the repetition of the high school). The hard technical, legal and business related content is most often missing because the academic staff simply does not have it. The employability of graduates is the ultimate test of any academic program, and the rather low job market absorption of the several thousands of EU Studies and IR graduates (just for a country like Romania) shows that there many things are mismanaged. For instance all those programs are in a free fall in terms of enrolling candidates. Go to any internet site advertising a B.A or M.A program in EU Studies or IR. The first striking thing is the rosy career perspective promised to the potential candidates (Foreign Office, European Commission etc). Then a simple research on the profile of the candidates wanted or recruited by the European Commission or the Ministries of Foreign Affairs are likely to provide a more realistic perspective. Mastering foreign languages, law, secretarial skills, economics, econometrics and numerical reasoning seems to be the priorities on the list and in this field graduates in Economics, Law, Administrative studies and often even engineering are preferred. Experts in EU Studies or IR are in a real high demand, what is lacking at this moment is a true practical and technically oriented program capable of offering the graduates the skills desired by potential employers. Also in my view this kind of program is advisable at M.A level only as a way to give a focused specialization to somebody who already has a professional status (a B.A in Economics, Law, History, Languages etc).

The good practice cases seem to confirm the above mentioned assertions. For example the most long vive self sustaining EU Studies program in Asia, namely the Master of Arts in European Studies offered by the Chulalongkorn
University in Thailand, grants a big part of its success not only to its multi end interdisciplinary feature (and perhaps also to the fact that it lasts only one year) but rather to its international networking approach, most of the teaching staff being imported from abroad. While few departments can afford the exorbitant price of Western European academic staff, there are hordes of good quality potentially available EU technically experienced teaching staff from Central and Eastern Europe who will happily come to teach at very competitive prices. The EU Center at Pusan University in Korea seems to have discovered this trick, and in the last year all the visiting EU staff came from Eastern Europe (Poland, Estonia, and Romania).

A rise in the “demand” for European studies in Asia is directly related to the identification of some clear professional perspectives for the graduates. It may come from a direct infusion of more substantial educational standards and participation into a common effort to re-master the curricula. Practitioners from the civil service, foreign office and the business community know the best the kind of EU related expertise they want, however their involvement in universities affairs is scarce if any. Academic staffs are unwelcoming towards any intruders and the desire to change, adapt, re-adapt or retrain, although this is rather the exception than the norm for academic staff both in Europe and Asia especially after a certain age. When performance happens the results are rewarding.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY
