Trading, peace and knowledge in ASEAN: Tips from the EU

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While ASEAN takes baby steps towards greater cooperation, the success of the European Union (EU) in regional integration makes it a natural case study to consider. Let us take a look at the EU experience in trade, peace and knowledge, and see the inspirations ASEAN and Singapore can take.

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Economic integration

One of the most visible EU successes is the internal market, with free movement of people, goods, services and capital[2] within the community. The internal market imperative has been a stepping stone in opening a vast hinterland at the EU's doorstep.

ASEAN knows the economic benefits of economic partnership, with the current push for the ASEAN Economic Community by 2015. How should ASEAN get there? The EU method was to abolish trade barriers internally. ASEAN should do this, but should also not forget that its most important export markets lie outside the region[3]. An inward-looking policy, regionally, would be disastrous. The Singapore experience, with its virtual lack of barriers to trade, is such a prime example of openness that the ASEAN Economic Community should be no protectionist 'Fortress ASEAN'.

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Peace

The EU was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012. While peace should never be taken for granted, the award is an important symbolic validation of EU efforts in the "advancement of peace and reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe"[4].

Europe is wary of wars and conflicts, having had two world wars fought on its continent. ASEAN, on the other hand, is still youthful. Its nations, said to be "made from the mould of decolonisation"[5], may value nationalism and sovereignty more. Perhaps ASEAN should put that exuberance to peaceful dispute resolution. In the bigger scheme of things, why should territorial claims in the South China Sea divide a united ASEAN? Nations should learn to be good neighbours and treat one another with respect and dignity. After all, as the tumultuous domestic history of the region shows, the peace is hard-earned. Its honest, hardworking citizens therefore have no need for greater conflict and the governments of ASEAN owe it to them to see that through.

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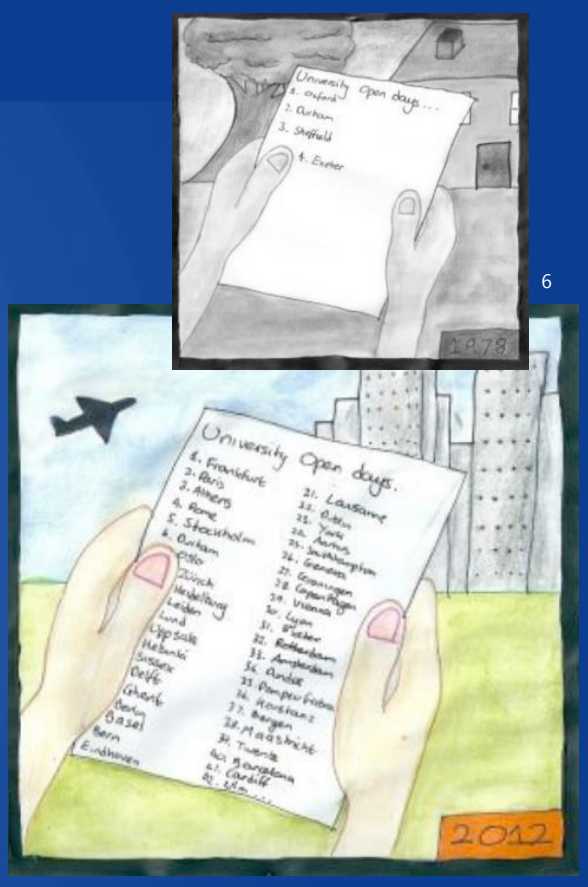
Knowledge-based society

The EU sees a knowledge-based society as the way to remain competitive and improve the lives of the people. In its effort to cut down barriers to education, various EU initiatives allow European citizens to study across borders with no extra cost or administrative hurdles.

Education has to be the bedrock of a peaceful and enlightened society. As the saying goes, knowledge is power. Reciprocal educational arrangements within ASEAN will promote valuable research, academic exchange and cultural understanding. It is not merely about exchange programmes but must include academic cooperation, learning and practical application. Take a look at Singapore. It is mindful that its people are its only resource, and has built up strong universities with international links. This is the way to go. Singapore could spearhead such linkages for ASEAN. Enhancing the way the citizens of ASEAN learn, by also having an outward-oriented perspective, will ensure that the youth today are keenly aware global citizens and are equipped with the skills to find the solutions to tomorrow's problems.



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Footnotes: [1] A final year LLB student at the National University of Singapore who dreams of a better future while creating this infographic-style article for the 2013 EUC-FASS Office of Programmes Short Essay Competition. The moral rights of the author are asserted. This extracurricular piece of work is dedicated to Regana Mydin and Irene Calboli, without whom I would not have broadened my horizons from Singapore to Asia, the EU and the world.
[2] Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, Kingdom of Belgium, "Overview of the European Union at work and its major achievements"
[3] Michael G Plummer, "East Asian Economic Integration and Europe: Can ASEAN Learn from the EU?"
[4] Nobel Prize, "Nobel Peace Prize 2012"
[5] CIMB ASEAN Research Institute, Phar Kim Beng, "Can ASEAN Still Learn from the European Union?"
[6] Checklists modified from Sarah Freidstedt, cited in James Elles, "European Union: Achievements worth celebrating"
[7] Map modified from Addicted04, cited in Wikipedia
[8] Stick figures modified from Joseph Luis, cited in Openclipart
[9] Dove modified from SeriousTux, cited in Openclipart
[10] Vectorised ASEAN flag cited in Wikipedia