

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AND ASIA
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If you were to do what I did about eight years ago and head down to the National Library and leaf through pages of old newspapers and foreign affairs' journals, you'd come across reference to Malaysian students being in New Zealand under what was known as the Colombo Plan. The various articles would not only say how much these Malaysian students enjoyed coming to study in New Zealand, but how terribly generous and benevolent it was of the New Zealand government to sponsor them here. There would be pictures of a student and beside him another picture of the type of work he would be doing when he returned to Malaysia.

Fifty years ago, this was what most New Zealanders, indeed anybody in Canada, Australia, even America, would have thought of when you mentioned the phrase "international education and Asia". The world, of course, was a remarkably different place and had either just completed or was still in the midst of major international conflicts. New Zealand also was a very different place and fifty years ago no-one would have thought that there could have ever been the need for an organisation like the Asia New Zealand Foundation.

Fast-forward some fifty years, and let's have a scan of some of the items making news in Asian and Australian newspapers. From the Malaysian *Star* on Sunday March 9, 2008:

"The number of foreign students in peninsular Malaysia has risen more than 30%, which augurs well for the country's aim of becoming a regional hub of educational excellence..... Quoting figures released by the Immigration Department, Higher Education Ministry Marketing and International Education Division director Dr Mohamed Nasser Mohamed Noor said the increase could be attributed to ministry's new identity abroad - "Malaysia Education".... Dr Mohamed Nasser said Indonesia

and China were the biggest markets, followed by the Middle East and African countries. He added that the total number of students from China and Indonesia was 15,000, with another 9,000 from the Middle East.... As Malaysia is a cosmopolitan country, foreign students from China and Indonesia would feel home here', Dr Mohamed Nasser said.... "One can secure the best Asian education here." Dr Mohamed Nasser also said foreign universities had set up their branch campuses in the country. "Malaysian students need not travel to the United States, United Kingdom, Australia or New Zealand to study as they can enrol in the branch campuses of foreign universities such as Nottingham, Monash and Curtin here" he added.¹

Anybody who has been to Kuala Lumpur, or indeed any other major Asian city, can attest to the presence of foreign universities. That, in itself, is not a particularly new thing. Western universities have had a presence in Asia for the past several years. But as *The Australian* newspaper points out, Australian universities face serious competition for overseas students as India and China expand and upgrade their education systems. This has forced Australian universities to distinguish themselves from their competitors. So Melbourne University, for example, focuses on its postgraduate model, while Australian National University places a strong focus on its international standing, the University of Wollongong with its Middle East focus and Deakin University with its focus in India.²

But such ventures into Asia are not without their perils. In 2004 the University of New South Wales set up campus in Singapore, with much fanfare and expectation. Less than two months after its grand opening, it closed its doors. It faced a financial short-fall of \$15 million a year and only enrolled 148 of an expected 300 students in its first semester. This followed an investment of 22 million Singaporean dollars by the Australian university.³ The episode left red faces and a bad taste in mouths of the students who had enrolled in the university. Newspapers in China and other significant markets for Australia's international education criticised the Australian government. The blogosphere reflected dissatisfaction with the Australians and the Singaporeans and in

¹ The Star, retrieved from <http://thestar.com.my/education/story.asp?file=/2008/3/9/education/2052828326> 26 March 2008

² 'Foreign students a local necessity', *The Australian*, retrieved from <http://www.pieronline.org/default.aspx?page=newsarticle&NewsID=1008> 26 March 2008

³ 'University of New South Wales Singapore campus to shut in June' <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/277897/1/.html> 30 March 2008

Canberra there was undoubtedly some explaining to do to Ministers, while other universities were probably breathing a sigh of relief as they said 'there but for the grace of God...'

International education and Asia is changing. Despite setbacks with Australian universities, Singapore is establishing itself as an Asian hub for international education while the National University of Singapore is positioning itself as a global university. Other Asian cities and universities are positioning themselves likewise.

We haven't even considered Vietnam, whose economy is growing at a remarkable rate; or Indonesia, which holds great importance to our Australian neighbours if it doesn't to us.

The movement of international students is one of the most ubiquitous forms of globalisation. The total number of mobile tertiary education students was estimated to have reached more than 2.7 million in 2005, a nearly 61% increase since 1999.⁴ The growth of international students globally can be attributed to a number of factors:

- The post 9/11 international climate
- Higher costs associated with overseas study
- Increased competition in the market
- Enhanced opportunities in the home countries
- Chronic skill shortages
- The need for education institutions to diversify their generated income
- The need for host countries to retain international students for skill shortages in the labour market, brought about by emigration, sub-replacement birth rates and ageing populations.⁵

The landscape on which we consider and reflect upon international education is therefore changing. There is as much likelihood of a student from China studying in Singapore as there is a student from India studying in Malaysia. The intra-Asia movement of students has the real potential of leaving New Zealand behind. As I noted earlier on, even Australia is recognising that the competition for Asian international students is coming from within Asia and it is finding it necessary to re-position itself.

⁴ L. Verbik, *International Student Mobility: Patterns and Trends*, London: The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, p.1

⁵ Ibid., p.2

International education is big business. Along with the movement of students is a significant movement of money, both in the form of direct costs, i.e. educational fees, but also in indirect ways in terms of the living costs as well as the remittances that students may send back to their home country (although this is more particular of permanent than temporary migrants) and the students' earning potential after they graduate. The business possibilities are immediate and obvious.

But there are other possibilities which may be more significant that are worth noting. How many of these students will remain in the country in which they are studying instead of returning to their countries of origin, therefore using their student visa as a backdoor entry to longer-term migration? There may be a deliberate strategy by governments to encourage this and this may well be at a cost to their sending countries who are losing human capital. What are the subjects these students are studying and what might this mean for their future employment prospects or skill shortages in their sending countries? What, if any, are the connections between international education policies and foreign affairs policies? Are discussions taking place as to the longer-term consequences of having the best and the brightest students of one country studying in another country? What are the factors that are prompting Asian students to study in Asia ahead of Western countries like Australia or New Zealand?

International business is necessarily entwined with foreign affairs. Watch the attention being given to the recent signing of the FTA between China and New Zealand and you'll see what I mean. Look at the statistics of the type of international students entering the United States and you'll see there was a decline in students from the Middle East after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Consider the sanctions placed on Cuba by the United States and any number of other examples and you'll see that international business is more than the movement of money and goods.

This is as true of international education as anything else and perhaps more so. While New Zealand's immigration and education agencies measure the number and type of students entering and leaving New Zealand to and from Asia, they don't measure what happens to those students once they return to Asia. We have no way of knowing empirically whether an Asian business graduate from Victoria University went and worked for a large multi-national in Singapore, returned to the family fish farm in Malaysia or migrated to Australia. These students are, in all likelihood, the type of people with whom New Zealand will

do business in the future: they will be the owners of the large manufacturing firms or the IT companies with which New Zealand would hope to trade. They will also be the diplomats with whom New Zealand will have to negotiate to sign trade deals or broker international crises with, or the government ministers or officials who will formulate policy which may or may not be favourable to New Zealand's interests.

This is not to say that New Zealand needs to market more heavily in Asia for its international students. There isn't a direct link between quantity and quality. Nor is this to say that we should return to the heady days of the Colombo Plan, which would be difficult to do without recreating the Domino Theory in any case. What we do need to do, however, is place our conversations, policies and debates about international education in a much bigger tent and in a way that it isn't dominated by who would come and how much money they would bring. New Zealand, perhaps more so than any other country in the world, needs to recognise its Asian international students as being extremely important links and conduits for New Zealand's linkages and relationships with the Asian region in the future. Without doing this, New Zealand may find that international education and Asia is something the rest of the world is doing while we look on with regret.