

The mutually beneficial role of Australian universities in the development of tertiary education in Asia and the South Pacific: past, present and future contributions to nation-building

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For those of us who have lived deeply in others' worlds, we never again live solely in our own. Cross-cultural education has many lessons to offer in understanding and appreciating one another's economic, political, and social realities, not the least of which is that culturally responsive teachers need not be of the same ethnic group as their students. (Crowl & Hall 2005:427)

Since the early 1950s, Australian universities have increasingly welcomed students from developing countries with the aim of preparing them for the return home. At the same time, Australian graduate volunteers and academic and administrative staff have assisted in the development of tertiary institutions and, often while undertaking their own research, have experienced the mutual benefits of working with local colleagues. As a staff member of the University of Papua New Guinea from 1972-1989, and a visiting lecturer at a number of other universities, I have had the opportunity to observe both the contributions which Australian universities and individuals have made, and the benefits which have been received, from this process of interaction.

The development of tertiary education cannot be considered in isolation from political and administrative changes and specific economic, social and community realities confronting an established or emerging nation. There is no reliable blueprint which governments or universities can rely upon when designing distance tertiary education programs, or which academics or students can follow when working or studying in another country. However, this paper considers the contributions which Australian graduate volunteers and university staff have made, and continue to make, to nation-building in the Asia/Pacific region.

Increasing numbers of independently funded students from the region are attending Australian universities with the implicit understanding that they will return home better able to contribute to nation-building in their home countries. This paper explores some of the positive and negative aspects of the development of what the Goldring Report (1984:9) referred to as "the notion of education as a tradable item".

Australian Volunteers Abroad

The Volunteer Graduate Scheme for Indonesia was initiated by Herb Feith and other colleagues in 1951. The aim was that young Australian graduates would

¹ Paper presented at the *Learning, Teaching and Social Justice in Higher Education* Symposium held at the Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, on Wednesday 18 November 2009. I greatly appreciated the comments and suggestions received at a 20 October "work in progress" presentation for the Department of Political and Social Change, RSPAS, Australian National University.

work in Indonesia on local salaries and local conditions so that they would not only contribute to, but benefit from, the experience. After they returned home, the knowledge and cultural understanding they gained would enable them to assist Indonesian students who were granted Australian scholarships to study at Australian universities and other tertiary institutions.

At the same time, the volunteer experience was personally and intellectually enriching and, as many volunteers noted, of great value in their later careers. For example, as Purdey (2007:185) points out, the experience Feith gained from working with the Indonesian Ministry for Information provided him with research data and fieldwork experience and understanding essential in the completion of his doctorate.

When the Overseas Service Bureau was established in 1961, it took over responsibility for the Volunteer Graduate Scheme and expanded its work to provide volunteers to countries, not only in the Asia/Pacific region but elsewhere, in a program called Australian Volunteers Abroad. In 1999, the program was renamed Australian Volunteers International with a special emphasis on education and training specialists. A major theme throughout the operation of this Scheme has been that the volunteer's contribution will be of mutual benefit - both to the individual volunteers and those with whom they work.

As one volunteer couple from Papua New Guinea stated: "If there's one thing we learned this year, it's how much we have to learn about life from people here. Both they and us must be teachers and learners. (Overseas Service Bureau 1989:29)

Australian Universities and the University of Papua New Guinea

The establishment of the University of Sydney in 1850 and the University of Melbourne in 1853 had reflected a desire to remain close to British tertiary education traditions and buildings, courses and teaching styles which reflected Oxford and Cambridge models of excellence. However, after World War II increasing links between Australian and other universities in the Region reflected a shift in emphasis from being off-shoots of British universities to a more international orientation.

Although there was some contact with other tertiary institutions in the Region it was not until the Australian National University was established in 1946, that the idea of a specifically Australian tertiary education ethos began to gain momentum. At the same time, Australia's role as a colonial administrator meant that the establishment of tertiary education in the territory of Papua and New Guinea, was a subject of much discussion and controversy.

In 1962, the Report of the United Nations Mission noted that the need for skilled personnel at all service levels had not been fully addressed. Otherwise, it would be 'impossible to develop the standards of professional, administrative and political leadership which are vital to any Territory in preparation for self-government'.² It was a matter of increasing concern that the Administration appeared to be

² United Nations Trusteeship Council Report, 1962, p. 64.

prepared to delay the provision of higher education facilities until there was a greater level of universal primary and improved secondary education. There also appeared to be a lack of support for many capable students which would encourage them to continue on to further studies, rather than be quickly absorbed into the work force.

*In the Mission's view the kind of programme for secondary higher education needed in New Guinea must be approached with greater imagination and boldness. The need for qualified personnel in all fields is so great and so urgent that a new approach is essential. ... Inevitably, until a university is functioning within the Territory, the co-operation of Australian and even other overseas universities will have to be sought, but the Mission feels confident that this assistance will be readily granted.*³

Following this report, the Australian Minister for Territories Paul Hasluck appointed a Commission for Higher Education, under the chairmanship of Vice-Chancellor Sir George Currie, to consider proposals for the establishment of tertiary education institutions. The Commission presented its final report in March 1964 and strongly supported the immediate establishment of a university which would provide tertiary education of a high academic standard. The strong and enthusiastic support for a Port Moresby based university reflected the views of all three commission members George Currie, John Gunther and Oscar Spate, and their conviction that this would be the best way to prepare graduates to take over administrative, professional, and community service roles.

It is important to note that there were many differing opinions as to the wisdom and timing of the establishment of a Territory university, and its location in Port Moresby. However, external pressures from the United Nations Committee on Decolonization, and international and Australian pressures to hasten self-government and eventual independence, forced the Australian Government to accept that there was an immediate and urgent need to provide qualified local graduates.

Given the sense of urgency, it was not surprising that the University of Papua New Guinea Ordinance was approved by both Commonwealth and Territory governments on 24 May 1965. The next step was to recruit academic and administrative staff be able and willing to work in somewhat difficult and chaotic circumstances. However, this proved much easier than might have been anticipated. There was a clear feeling among many of the newly appointed staff that the University was an instrument for change and that it had a special nation-building mission in providing an opportunity for discussion and debate, in marked contrast to the negative colonial attitudes and expectations which existed at the time.⁴

³ Ibid. p. 65.

⁴ For reflections on these early years see Jim Griffin "The Instant University" 1976, and Ken Inglis "Education on the Frontier: The first ten years of the University of Papua New Guinea" 1980.

Over the next few years, the development of tertiary education in Papua New Guinea continued and competition to attract academic staff from Australia, New Zealand and other regional tertiary institutions increased. After Papua New Guinea became an independent nation in 1975, direct Australian aid to the University of Papua New Guinea also diminished, partly because it was now spread across a growing number of other universities, often as a result of applications by individual academics or disciplines. A review of “Australian Assistance to the Universities of the South Pacific Region” conducted on behalf of the Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB) noted that, with regard to the Universities of Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific:

Hitherto Australian assistance, while generous, has been developed in an essentially ad hoc manner. It has been determined by ADAB officials mostly without recourse to the experience of Australian universities. (ADAB 1981:7).

A wide range of possible assistance was then considered – short and long term scholarships, staff assistance, staff development, and exchange visits. The possibility of an expanded role for the Australian Universities International Development Program was also considered, noting that “to date AUIDP has had only limited contact with Papua New Guinea universities and virtually none with the University of the South Pacific” (p. 49). In 1986, Reid and Drysdale’s survey of AUIDP’s development assistance program (funded by a grant from the Australian Development Assistance Bureau) outlined the progress that had been made towards providing greater assistance to tertiary education in the Asia/Pacific Region and beyond. They concluded (pp. 27-28), that its successor, the International Development Program of Australian Universities and Colleges (IDP) should have an even more productive future.

Like every human institution, the new-born IDP is a product of its past. The gradual expansion into different countries, disciplines, universities and activities described above has given it contacts, reputation and experience in certain areas. There are many other aspects of university overseas cooperation which continue to lie outside its scope, Nevertheless, it has become the most professional instrument the Australian universities possess in seeking to respond collectively and creatively to the enormous challenges of our region.

Since then, the program (renamed *IDP Education Australia* in 1994) has developed a variety of linkages between Australian Universities and Colleges and other tertiary institutions in the region.⁵ Secondments, distance education, and the use of video conferencing have enabled more effective and mutually beneficial teaching and research. The establishment of the *Virtual Colombo Plan* in 2001 was “intended to provide developing countries with distance education programs and access to Australian research via the internet”. (Oakman 2004:282) This has developed into a broad learning network which has been of benefit to a number of universities in the region. For example, the University of the South Pacific has

⁵ It is important to note that, although the Australian Catholic University was established in 1991, several of its component colleges had for many years provided tertiary education opportunities for students from the Asia/Pacific region.

been able to benefit from the expansion of the World Bank's Global Development Learning Network (GDLN).

Now that the USP's campus has an optical-fibre link to Australia via the Southern Cross cable and is connected to the Australian Universities Internet2 facility, the Suva campus is able to receive high-quality video conference broadcasts from Australian universities. Through this medium, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) has over the past two years funded videoconference discussions on important development topics, which have also been broadcast through the GDLN to groups in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, and in Dili, East Timor. (Duncan & McMaster 2008:203)

It was estimated that in the 2008-2009 budget that 34% of official development assistance (ODA) to education would be spent on higher education.

This sounds very encouraging but the question arises as to who will really benefit in a lasting and meaningful way from this assistance. One local critic of an AusAID funding tertiary education project noted with some bitterness that the major beneficiaries were the Australian tertiary consultants. She was also clearly very angry that local teachers had been ignored and that the funds available during the project supported it artificially but were not sustained afterwards. She stated (Puamau 2008:125,126) that local expertise was not valued.

Instead of bringing in 18 advisers, the ATL [Australian Team Leader] should have used the expertise available at the University of the South Pacific.

..

With 95% of AusAID funding going back to Australia, the donor country obviously benefited significantly from FATEP. Therefore the need is urgent for donor agencies in all spheres of assistance, including education, to review and rethink their aid philosophy, processes, and operations.

More and more questions are now being asked as to the relevance of much that was previously accepted as appropriate educational aid to developing countries.

At the same time, the importance being given to the development and maintaining of a wide variety of more direct and personal linkages between Australian universities and other tertiary institutions has been acknowledged in a new program aimed at providing assistance to academics at the University of Papua New Guinea. This pilot program will provide travel, accommodation and living expenses to current or recently retired Australian academics willing to spend between 4-20 weeks in a collaborative teaching and mentoring role. With funding support from AusAid, it reflects a continuing commitment to face-to-face contact which will be of mutual benefit to all those involved. The call has gone out for expressions of interest to take part in the "Academic Volunteers at the University of Papua New Guinea" program.

It will be interesting to see whether there is a similar and equally enthusiastic response as that to the call in the 1960s and 70s for Australian academics to help in UPNG's initial establishment and development. It will also be important to ensure that these initial contacts are followed up and that those involved in the mentoring relationship are able to build on this experience.

International Students at Australian universities

In the post World War II period, as volunteer graduates became more interested and involved in the development of tertiary education in the Asia/Pacific Region, Australia also moved to provide scholarships for tertiary students from neighbouring countries. As a result of a January 1950 international agreement, later termed the Colombo Plan, thousands of Asian students were provided with scholarships to attend Australian tertiary institutions. In 2001, the Australia Malaysia Cultural Foundation published a series of articles by former Colombo Plan scholars and others who had observed the changes in Australian government policies towards the education of international students. In his Foreword, The Australian Federal Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs (Kemp 2001:3) noted that:

The Colombo Plan Scholars were pioneers in the internationalisation of Australian education. From an Australian point of view, international students are now an integral part of Australian education, and our institutions have benefited enormously from this experience.

Over the years there has been an increase in cultural awareness and sensitivity to the changing nature of local and national tertiary education needs. Other changes in the way in which the Plan operated reflected the increased awareness among universities of the potential financial and staffing benefits which resulted from larger numbers of fully funded international students.⁶ This means that historians may find it easy to downplay or dismiss the Colombo Plan as having had little or no lasting value.

But, Australia's commitment to the provision of modern infrastructure, the promotion of sustainable development, and the emphasis on technical training, distance education and institutional strengthening, all have strong links to the Colombo Plan's basic vision of regional development (Oakman 2004:283).

The idea that the teaching of international students should be of mutual advantage to all involved was emphasized in the report of a committee set up to review private overseas student policy. It recommended (Goldring Report 1984:9) that the objectives of Australia's future policy on overseas students should be:

- . *to contribute to the social and economic development of people and institutions in developing countries, and especially those in the Asia and Pacific region, by granting them access to Australia's educational and training resources;*
- . *to increase cultural exchange and to improve the quality of Australia's educational and training resources; and*

⁶ For example, Alex Auletta noted that "Increasing numbers of private students in the 1970s meant that international students, both sponsored and private, were becoming increasingly linked to mainstream higher education policy" (2001:8).

- . *to serve Australia's interests by improving communication with and understanding of Australia.*

Questions arose as to whether more attention should be paid to increasing the numbers of overseas students, and the balance which should be maintained between those on scholarships and full-fee paying students. In 1990 (Harris and Jarrett), a report on educating overseas students at Australian universities noted that:

Australian institutions of higher education, with some exceptions, have been relative latecomers in accepting the notion of educational services as a tradable item (p.102).

They concluded that:

The efficiency with which Australian higher education institutions achieve their objectives in pursuing the recruitment of overseas students will determine both the educational and financial success, or otherwise, of the move to full-fee paying overseas students (p.112).

The debate has continued as to the acceptable balance between individual and institutional economic benefits which may accrue from the promotion of tertiary education as an exportable commodity. Some critics consider that there has been a lowering of standards on the one hand, but also a lack of proper preparation and support for the increased numbers of international students accepted at Australian universities. For example, in an article entitled "Don't do what Australia has done", Nilsen (2004:28) argued that:

Once intellectual values have been reduced to market values, there is no reason to have a distinctive institution, namely The University, to reflect intellectual values and the notions of objectivity and truth and then, from the point of view of general public awareness, those values may cease to exist.

At the same time, the official Australian Government position is that the development of tertiary education as an exportable commodity has been a mutually beneficial process.

Australia gains significant benefits from its export of education and training services. The social and economic benefits flow to individuals, institutions and the wider community, both in Australia and in other countries. International engagement in education and training can transform individuals, widen their intellectual horizon, opening them to new ideas and experiences, and extending their friendships. Overseas students also contribute intellectually to Australian education and society, and provide diverse social and cultural perspectives that enrich the educational experience for many Australian students (Australian Government: Department of Education, Science and Training 2007:3).

Nevertheless, there has been increasing concern that security, housing, social inclusion and other needs of overseas students have been ignored or downplayed. The commercialisation of recruitment processes may also mean that universities rely upon "agents" to ensure that prospective students have the necessary language

skills, are appropriately briefed and assisted with their accommodation and other needs.

Problems also arise when earlier educational experiences reflected a greater emphasis on rote-learning rather than critical and analytical approaches. Students may take for granted that the very fact that a text is included as a reference means that the lecturer agrees with everything that is written. It may take time and the experience of being present during debates and discussions for a student to feel comfortable presenting an alternative point of view. At a conference in 1980 on the educational difficulties of overseas students it was noted that:

The foreign student is often reluctant at first to enter into debate with his fellows or with staff members but I like to think that the experience of hearing a lowly Masters' degree student disagree with the professor at a seminar will help loosen intellectual bonds and encourage freedom of thought and expression (Campbell 1980:106)

It is also important to keep in mind that while the clash of educational cultures always needs to be considered, problems may be related to different social expectations and reactions. Overseas students may find it difficult to adjust to what they perceive as the general lack of formality and respect; for example, "calling a lecturer by his, or even worse her, first name" (Ballard and Clancy 1991:19).

It is often only after these initial misunderstandings and communication problems, that academics also learn to communicate more effectively and to question their own cultural preconceptions, reflecting the comments made by Crowl and Hall (2005:427) that "culturally responsive teachers need not be of the same ethnic group as their students". However, the lasting impact of being a foreign student must also be taken into account when graduates return home "for those of us who have lived deeply in other's worlds we never live again live solely in our own".

On 8 July 2009, an article by Guy Healy in the Higher Education section of *The Australian* (p.29) reported the call by the Vice-Chancellor of James Cook University for a revived Colombo Plan.

Scholarships worth scores of millions of dollars should be rolled into a Colombo plan mark 11 to recalibrate Australia's relations with overseas students and address critical regional, environmental and security issues, a vice-chancellor says.

He also reported that:

Flinders University deputy vice-chancellor international Dean Forbes said concerns over sustainability of rapid growth rates in overseas student numbers had been brewing for some time.

Professor Forbes said the flashpoints were student housing, employment, social inclusion and safety. He called for widespread introduction of sophisticated engagement programs to make overseas students feel safer and more welcome.

Similar calls for greater assistance and support for overseas students reflect concerns felt by many university administrators, academics and student associations that security and other issues confronting overseas students have not been fully appreciated and that too much emphasis has been placed on the economic benefits gained by universities and Australia from increased numbers of fee-paying students.

Final thoughts

This paper has reflected on the contributions which Australian universities have made and continue to make to nation-building in the Asia/Pacific region. As the late Dr Gabriel Gris, former Vice-Chancellor of the University of Papua New Guinea pointed out:

The university system is vitally important to develop Papua New Guinea as a nation. Every country today, and particularly one which is changing rapidly, needs institutions where the potential of some of its people for creativity, elucidation and problem solving can be developed to a high order. Report of the Committee of Enquiry into University Development 1974:3.

However, it is also important to keep in mind that there is no single model which academics or students can follow when teaching or studying in another country or with overseas students and teachers in their own country. My own experience resembles that of the author of *A Bias for Hope* (Hirschman 1971) who cautioned against suggesting that one can provide a universal blueprint for others to use. At the same time we are also part of the assessment process so cannot remain detached and aloof from the wider international society where we live and work.

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