

Education and the Sharing of Knowledge

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Paper presented to The Third Asia-Pacific Round Table Meeting: East Asia and the Pacific: Securing the Future, The Global Foundation in Partnership with The World Bank, Sydney, 15-16 March 2004

Let us discuss education and the sharing of knowledge in five parts.

1. Education, skills and knowledge in East Asia and the Pacific face a massive challenge.

East Asia-Pacific has the largest share of population in the world and the largest call on future education and training, with fast-growing needs and faster-growing market demand. The Asia-Pacific region contains about 60 per cent of global population but only a third of higher education enrolments, 20 per cent of the world's wealth, and a tiny share of scientific knowledge production. Need and demand for education and training are driven by demography and prosperity, with a great cultural reverence for learning throughout the region. However there is on the whole a large and growing gap between supply and demand, capacity and need. Of course it varies by country, by industry sector and by level of education (primary, secondary, vocational education and training, higher education, lifelong learning).

The region is a growing generator of technological innovation, with Japan, Korea, China, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore contributing significantly, though that can be difficult to measure. Its civilisations are a wellspring of cultural knowledge, spiritual and artistic creation. One is drawn to the hope expressed by Mamphela Ramphele that for poor countries the sciences might learn from the arts, that trade in education and innovation might move to more equitable terms for the South the way world music has done¹.

2. Addressing basic human needs must be at the heart of policy and practice.

The region harbours too many areas of extreme poverty: the millennium goals should continue to drive development and there are hopeful signs for universal basic education and the elimination of

¹ Mamphela Ramphele, *A New Concept of Service for Graduate Education*, Speech to LaPidus Luncheon, Council of Graduate Schools Annual Meeting, Washington DC, December 6, 2002.

gender disparities. As UNESCO points out, these education goals could be met with fewer resources than are spent on cosmetics in USA, or ice cream in Europe².

There are massive efforts to modernise education and training systems throughout the region, and not only in developing economies, with a focus on policy reform, teacher training, finance and investment, quality assurance and skill development. But we have to face the reality that, of all components of post-war official development aid, capacity-building has been the least successful³. Despite this there are many successes at the local level – schools, colleges, libraries, workplaces for example – and we need more effective ways of sharing these experiences and growing some hope. It is good to see a rising respect for local and indigenous knowledge in development and education.

The international financial institutions have come to a renewed understanding that social rates of return on investment in tertiary education can be just as high as in basic education and that a strong university sector is necessary for sustainable professions and for access to a knowledge-based economy and society⁴. This has been evident to us at RMIT, as both a client of the IFC and ADB for RMIT International University Vietnam, and as a program provider through World Bank support to the African Virtual University in a growing number of sub-Saharan countries⁵.

3. Private provision can, with safeguards, effectively bridge gaps in market demand.

In most countries of this region there are efforts to reform the education, training and research sectors to expand the role of the private sector through investment, services, financing and other means. In some countries private provision dominates – eg Korea 84 percent of tertiary education, Philippines 76 percent – while other countries – eg China, Vietnam – have only recently encouraged private provision. Without adequate accreditation and quality assurance, some

² UNESCO, *Facts and Figures 2000*, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Paris, 2000.

³ Fukuda-Parr S, Lopes C and Malik K, eds, *Capacity for Development: New Solutions to Old Problems*, Earthscan Publications, London, 2002.

⁴ See for example The World Bank, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*, World Bank, Washington DC, 2002.

⁵ See David Wilmoth, 'RMIT Vietnam and Vietnam's development: risk and responsibility', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7, 2004, 1-20, forthcoming.

countries are having second thoughts about the rapid opening up of education markets and there are thousands of sub-standard or failed colleges.

For some aspiring students, trainees or researchers, international options are desirable or even necessary, and not only for élites. Asia is the dominant originating region (led by China and India at similar scale) for international education movements, holding 70 percent of a remarkable and fast-growing industry. Governments everywhere cannot meet the demand for education and training, and it is vital to press for reduced barriers to trade in educational services through the current GATS negotiations for example.

There is a special task to address dispersed demand in remote and island communities through linked learning resource centres and distributed learning, through effective schemes for student or trainee credit transfer and mobility, and through resource sharing among local and distant institutions. Despite some good online programs, the most effective means of providing education and training among small remote economies seems to be through hybrid provision, part face-to-face experiential and part distance or online.

4. Build vocational capacity through work-integrated learning

Workplace skills are at the heart of economic and social development, but in too many countries there is a social disdain for vocational education that needs to be overcome. School and college access to workplace experience can help remove this stigma, and to gear the aspirations of the young and not-so-young to the excitement and daily realities of the workplace. There are some good experimental results in vocational education and training which could be readily transferred through better communication of best practice.

The training and capacity strengthening components of development assistance projects are too often lost through being confined to a particular project – say in the transport or health sector. They could be more sustainably channelled through local institutions for the long term.

5. Knowledge for development is better shared than kept to single projects

Information and communications technology has a major contribution to make to cost-effective education and training and to providing the infrastructure for tertiary services and the professions so necessary for development. But huge knowledge gaps remain. The 'digital divide', so passionately debated at the recent World Summit on the Information Society, is very real in the

East Asia Pacific, but there are some examples of 'leapfrogging' by some developing societies in the use of knowledge, innovation and technology in globalising markets to get ahead of some developed countries.

Migration of people in search of work or a better life – including large refugee flows – are an essential part of the global labour market. At the low-wage end, international remittances can be the main means of financing education, for example among Chinese, Indian and Vietnamese diasporas across the region. At the high-wage end, there is concern about a persistent 'brain drain' in certain skill areas, but such movements are linked to trade, investment and return migration as well. I am reminded of the old New Zealand claim that the movement of Kiwis to Australia has been responsible for a rise in the IQ of both countries...

Recently security considerations highlight the role that knowledge and intelligence play in security and economic growth. It is important to make access to knowledge resources as cost-effective as possible, including through networks of low cost information resource centres that can be powerful if sometimes unpredictable agents of social development and access to education for women. Intellectual property rights and the sale of knowledge-intensive products and services for urgent needs in health, education and the environment call for cheaper and more flexible approaches among intellectual property holding companies and regulating governments alike.

Beyond universal literacy, where the region has done well in global terms, the promise and the tyranny of English language learning make up an issue that need to be confronted. But whatever the language, whatever the medium, we have to find effective ways of distributing learning opportunities to all, including best practice in how this might be done.