More Than Just EFTSUs: Malaysian and Overseas Students in Australia

Richard Gehrmann
University of Southern Queensland

A REVIEW OF


Paralleling rapid economic growth and the rise of the middle classes in several East and Southeast Asian countries, in recent years a new phenomenon has appeared on Australian University campuses that has subtly yet significantly altered the work of many teaching academics. The arrival of increasing numbers of overseas full fee paying students has the potential to alter teaching styles in Australia and to impact upon Australia's relations with countries in the region. While the 22,000 or more overseas students enrolled at Universities in a year come from a variety of English speaking and non-English speaking countries, the largest single group come from Malaysia, which appropriately is the focus of Andressen's recently published Educational Refugees: Malaysian Students in Australia. While Andressen addresses himself specifically to the issue of Malaysians, many of his findings could be pertinent to those Australian academics teaching students from a wide range of other national backgrounds. But the issues involved in the education of overseas students in Australia go much further than this book's compass indicates and demand careful consideration. While there is great potential for positive cultural developments to flow from the presence of non-Australian students in Australian Universities, the human costs could also be significant.

Ironically, the academic staff who tend to be entrusted with teaching Malaysian and other Asian overseas students in Australian Universities are those who are least well equipped to do so. This does not necessarily imply any lack of standard teaching skills on the part of specific academics, but refers to the types of degree courses favoured by overseas students, and to the discipline background and training of the staff in these disciplines. Full fee paying students tend to be understandably utilitarian about degree choices that they make, and enrol in what might be called the vocational rather than the liberal arts faculties (pp.121-122). The unfortunate junior lecturer in Accounting or Engineering with no academic training or background knowledge in the history, society or culture of Malaysia is working in a vacuum when s/he attempts to instruct Malaysian students, using identical methods of instruction to those already utilised for the education of Australian students. By contrast, those staff who are educated in Asian Studies and aware of the cultural and historical disposition of
Malaysian and overseas Asian students rarely if ever teach such students, as full fee paying overseas students tend to avoid the liberal arts courses offered in Asian Studies. Andressen’s book thus makes valuable and strongly recommended reading for lecturers of degree courses that enrol substantial numbers of overseas students.

Andressen does not of course specifically write with the intention of providing remedial education for academics teaching overseas students in areas other than Asian Studies, a task that has been admirably accomplished by others (Ballard 1987, Ballard & Clanchy 1991). Andressen’s topical study provides important insights into the choices considered by West Malaysian students in influencing their decision to study in Australia, an issue he has previously raised in Policy Organisation and Society (1990). A variety of factors such as lack of opportunities within Malaysia, cost of study in other countries, access to specific degree courses, the benefits of an English language environment, the adventure of studying overseas, quality of education offered, the experiences of relatives and friends, as well as physical proximity to Malaysia are all considered and evaluated.

Of overriding importance is the lack of opportunities at home in Malaysia due to restrictive government policies that discriminate against non-Malay students, giving highly qualified Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians no choice but to undertake study overseas. The subsequent preponderance in Australian Universities of Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent complicates their recognition as specifically Malaysian Chinese or more rarely, Malaysian Indians. In general terms, to both the Australian academic and to the Australian student, the Malaysian Chinese student is physically and linguistically indistinguishable from the Taiwanese or Hong Kong student, and perhaps even the South Korean student. This homogenising effect neutralises student ethnicity, and essentially places these students in a generalised category of (presumably wealthy) ‘Asian’ students of indeterminate national or ethnic origin, who can be relied upon to conform to stereotypes by studying hard, transcribing lecture notes in detail, and avoiding verbal participation in class discussion, thus requiring little interest from Australian fellow students and demanding little attention from the overworked lecturer. Therefore, these ‘Asian’ students can pass through the Australian University system without disturbance and without altering their host society, having no more impact than to add to the Universities’ coffers. The Orientalist assumptions that Asians are a homogenised group might be convenient for an overworked junior academic teaching large first year classes, but it dehumanises students, and does not present them as individuals from clearly defined countries or ethnic groups with specific study and learning problems. Such problems are ignored, and both staff members and Australian fellow students can blithely progress without interacting culturally with the fee paying job creators. A close study of monographs such as Educational Refugees could do much to alter this perspective.

Other dilemmas that University teachers and administrators should seriously consider emerge from Andressen’s work. He alludes to some of the non-economic disadvantages inherent in an educational system that is disposed towards a commercially based decision to attract and educate students who are not the products of an Australian high school education (p. 12). The case can be taken further. With the increased economic benefits flowing to Universities from full fee paying students, the possibility exists for the growth of tacit or even direct pressure from University administration and faculty administration to ensure that fee paying overseas students are content and satisfied. One implication of this might be that not too many overseas fee paying students should fail too many subjects. Similarly,
Higher Education Research and Development, Vol 14, No 1, 1995

admissions sections infected with 'target fever' might be tempted to allow less well qualified students to enter the University, thus placing the pressure of failing poor students on individual staff members. Serious allegations have recently been raised of the growing acceptance of an existence of two classes of degree, one for English speaking Australian students, and another for fee paying non-English speaking students. There have also been allegations of direct pressure being placed on staff who choose not to comply with and condone this practice (Aubert, 1993). Were such situations to exist, many staff might be tempted both to ignore poor English in written work and to ignore what would elsewhere be regarded as excessive student collaboration on the presumption that the students involved will eventually return home, and will not practise their profession in Australia. For academics working in Australia to adopt this attitude would be extremely dangerous, as possible loss of accreditation by the Public Service Board of countries such as Malaysia would not only reduce the attractiveness of Australia as a study destination, but could possibly damage the hard won academic reputations of Australian Universities on a world wide basis. Presumably no-one would wish for the emergence of a situation that paralleled the abuse of the University system by some institutions in the United States, where University entry, scholarships and remedial tuition have been provided for academically less qualified students based on the sole criterion of athletic ability, thereby devaluing the University degree. If students with poor English who are less qualified are admitted solely because they have money, institutional and national reputations will suffer and eventually the numbers of overseas students seeking to enter Australian Universities will decline (p. 209). Andressen observed that India has become less popular as a study destination for Malaysians for such reasons (pp. 105-6), and fears were also noted that some institutions in the United Kingdom "were concerned more with garnering fees rather than ensuring that a high quality education was maintained", thus contributing to a reduced demand for higher education places in the United Kingdom (p.98). Since the publication of Andressen's book, the Australian high commissioner to Malaysia has warned that there is a perception in Malaysia that the image of Australian education has declined in relation to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States because the profit driven "focus on developing the market ... has done nothing to present a picture of a good education system" (Powell, 1994). Are the short term economic gains of export education as a national industry, and the direct aggrandisement by self-seeking individual institutions worth the incalculable cost of nation wide loss of accreditation and reputation?

A hint of a concern that should interest Vice-Chancellors and university administrators relates to the reliability of the supply of overseas students. Andressen repeatedly makes the point that students from Malaysia make rational choices to come to Australia, and are capable of making equally rational choices to go elsewhere should several key factors change. One of these factors is the unavailability of places in Malaysia due to positive discrimination in favour of the Malay ethnic group, and laws prohibiting the establishment of private degree granting institutions. This point is also supported by Vatikiotis (1993) who indicates that the Malaysian government is intending to take action to stem the flow of students overseas, a flow that currently consists of nearly half the post secondary student body. There are further intentions of reversing this flow by attracting fee paying foreign students to study in Malaysia, a policy which could eventually undercut the Australian market. The current Malaysian education policies cause the estimated loss of US$1 billion each year which is clearly a significant cost for the economy of a developing country, and it
appears that this consideration may be capable of overriding the political considerations that initially created this student exodus. Were changes to be made in the law to allow private Universities to offer degrees within Malaysia, Andressen's figures imply that the flow of students to Australia might possibly dry up by as much as 60% (pp.150-3). If this were to occur, problems would emerge for departments where staff have been specifically recruited as a result of the projected high enrolments of overseas students, comparable to the staffing problems that have emerged in some Australian Education faculties following the recent decline in enrolments. Considering that the number of overseas students undertaking degree courses in Commerce, Economics and Business Administration and Engineering far outnumber those in other faculties (pp. 122-3), departmentally specific staffing problems and funding problems could emerge, particularly in those universities which actively seek to recruit overseas students. Even in a stable academic market there are always difficulties in planning staffing levels and recruitment, difficulties which would be exacerbated following a significant and unexpected decline in student enrolments. This problem would be compounded in many institutions by the way in which funding is allocated by the University administration, making long term and medium term planning difficult. The possibility exists that the presence of large numbers of overseas students of specific nationality in Universities is only a short term or medium term trend, parallelling the rise and fall of mature aged students in the 1970s and mid 1980s. It certainly appears that Malaysia as a student reservoir falls into this bracket, while Hong Kong could be expected to decline as a source of overseas students after 1997. It is therefore essential that educational planners consider the issue of the source of students, evaluating the reasons why specific ethnic and social groups from specific countries select an Australian University education, rather than concentrating on students in the post-arrival stage as mere student numbers with occasional learning problems, problems that can apparently be solved by remedial English classes for which fees are charged. The vulnerability of the higher education trade can be assessed in the light of the 'recalcitrant' incident, which while being only a minor political dispute has done little to endear Australia to Malaysia’s Prime Minister Mahathir.

The education of large numbers of Chinese Malaysians and Indian Malaysians in Australia raises a moral question that does not fall within the ambit of Andressen's work. Shamsul (1993) has referred to the possible existence of an exploitative attitude towards Malaysian students, with Australian universities using them as a 'milking cow', an attitude he finds comparable to the past attitudes of British colonialists towards Malaysia (p. 44). Is the reliance on overseas fee paying students a new form of neo-colonialism and exploitation of our less developed neighbours? The image of venerable Australian institutions of higher learning as the vultures that prey on the misfortune of other 'neighbouring' countries is not one that we should welcome, but some pertinent facts should be considered. Significant numbers of overseas fee paying students tend to come from countries where for political or economic reasons they are disadvantaged. For example those students who are Indians from Fiji seek the security that higher education offers in the face of blatant racial discrimination by a dominant ethnic minority. Students from Hong Kong, fearing the ramifications of the resumption of power by China, view overseas qualifications as a passport to freedom. In Malaysia, the political effects of the New Economic Policy have caused extensive hardship for middle class and lower middle class Chinese and Indian Malaysians seeking University education for their children, with 88% of those surveyed by Andressen feeling that the education costs of gaining a degree in Australia represented "a significant financial burden
in their families" (p.202). There is something faintly obscene about Australian universities, places of 'light, liberty and learning', scouring the globe to find prospective students who are unable to gain admittance to their own universities they support with taxes. Having located such students, we then entice them to Australia where we can gain our share of their hard earned family income. Andersen estimates the cost of educating a Malaysian student in Australia as A$20,000 per annum per student (p. 127). Based on personal contact with middle class Malaysian couples in Malaysia who choose to take two jobs to pay for children's education overseas, I feel that something of a taint does cover our stampede towards the selling of degree education, a process that we are encouraged to proudly view as the achievement of some form of positive and successful incorporation into the Asia-Pacific region. To extend Shamsul's historical metaphor, was last century's extension of Australian control throughout Papua New Guinea, and the related offering to Melanesians of the chance to take employment in the Queensland sugar cane fields, nothing more than an earlier form of today's frequently repeated call that 'Australia must become part of the Asia-Pacific region'? The noted Sinologist, Professor Stephen FitzGerald, recently commented on the greed of Australian universities in their push into Asia, a greed which caused them to gain the reputation as "the carpetbaggers, the gold diggers, the mercenaries of education". This was a market-directed and money-driven move "led by people who had no knowledge of or intellectual interest in the societies they visited" (Chong, 1994). However ignorant and ill-informed they might or might not be, one assumes that the officials in charge of university marketing and international recruitment sections would have some sense of moral responsibility for the long term reputation of the University that employs them, and would not prefer to see themselves as latter day mercenaries or carpetbaggers.

A final concern relates to cultural relativism, and the nature of learning in the Australian university, and the nature of learning in non-western educative systems. Is the education that we are selling appropriate for developing countries such as Malaysia, or is it Australia specific? Certainly the buyer of education as a commodity is ultimately responsible for choosing his or her purchase, but we as promoters, advertisers and manufacturers of this 'product' clearly have some responsibility. Andersen briefly considers this question, when he notes that the parameters of the British style colonial educational system in Malaysia have created a pattern of education that strongly influences choices made to study in an overseas university (p.62). Leaving aside the rhetoric of the 'universality' of university education, in Australia we feel that the cultural influence of Oxbridge as a model of educational excellence in the past has not necessarily been conducive for the development of Australian nationalism, or for the development of the perception of Australia as an independent nation in the Asia Pacific region. The reliance on extra-cultural models may pay dividends for the future for Australia in terms of enhanced foreign policy outcomes and improved intercultural relations, but is this a morally acceptable position to hold? Furthermore, is our espousal of western style of learning, and our rejection of Confucian style rote learning anything more than cultural relativism at its very worst?

In the early 1970s, a documentary drama called The Gentle Strangers was filmed at the University of New South Wales to illustrate the cultural, social and educational problems faced by Asian students in Australia. This film still seems to be depressingly accurate in its depiction of a gulf in understanding between Australian hosts and Asian sojourners. If this is so, should we still be promoting the enrolment of large numbers of Malaysian and other Asian students into what might be an uneducated, racist and culturally unresponsive student
body? Should they be taught by those who are sometimes an uneducated, racist and culturally unceptive faculty, themselves the products of the educational systems of an earlier generation? Such hypothetical questions are perhaps unfair, but should be offered as observations, rather than criticisms. The intercultural understanding that develops as a result of contact between students from difficult cultures is often presented as an indirect benefit that comes from overseas students in Australia. Does this actually happen, or is it that bigotries and prejudices are merely reinforced? If this is the case, we are providing a travesty of a university education for our own Australian students.

*Educational Refugees* is an excellent book that achieves all that it intends to accomplish. Unfortunately the issues facing universities in Australia that relate to Malaysian and overseas students are greater than this alone. As Andressen indicates, there is a clear need for more work on this area (pp. 223-224), but such research must go beyond that which he suggests. The research by Harris and Jarrett (1990) on overseas students in Australia needs to be developed further with reference to specific national groups, as Smart and Ang have done for Singapore (1992) and Hong Kong (1993). There is a need for analysis on the choice made by other national groups to study in Australia, and research on the specific problems faced, and on the medium and long-term impact of an Australian education on the lives of individuals in the home country, and on the impact this has on the culture and society of the home country itself. Until then, every academic who purports to teach Malaysian University students in Australia should make time to read Andressen’s book. The issues involved are far too important to leave obscured and hidden in Departments of Asian Studies or Departments of Higher Education Studies.

**NOTE**

The views expressed are those of the author and are not to be construed as representing policies or practices at The University of Queensland or the University of Southern Queensland.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

I would like to express thanks to John Clanchy (ANU) and Maurice French (USQ) for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

**Address for Correspondence:** Mr Richard Gehrman, Faculty of Arts, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba QLD 4350, Australia.

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