

International students and international relations: Bridging the gap between education and foreign policies

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Abstract

New Zealand has educated international students since the 1930s, from the Pacific and then, from the 1950s, from Asia. Simultaneously, New Zealand's domestic population has changed remarkably. From being a largely ethnically homogenous population (although with distinct small ethnic communities) in the early to mid 20th century, New Zealand's current and projected population is ethnically diverse. In New Zealand's 'super-diverse' city of Auckland, one in four residents are born overseas and an increasing number of those overseas-born will be born in Asia. Auckland is also the home of the greatest number of Asian students in New Zealand, local-born, permanent resident and international student. New Zealand's domestic future is distinctly Asian.

But New Zealand's international future is Asian as well. New Zealand's trade with Asia is necessary for its ongoing economic development. New Zealand has moved a long way from its exclusive trading relationship with Britain to being the first developed country to sign a Free Trade Agreement with China. New Zealand's foreign policy interests are also in Asia: what happens with the rise of China and India, and the role of the US and Australia, in Asia will have a profound and significant effect on New Zealand. As New Zealand's economic interests goes, so goes its political and strategic interests. And with an increasing number of New Zealand's domestic population having ethnic ties into Asia, there are more ties that bind New Zealand's future to the Asian region.

This paper seeks to draw some of these threads together and suggests ways in which New Zealand's international education and foreign policies can and must achieve mutually agreeable goals so that there isn't a gap between them but, rather, a bridge over which Asian students who study in New Zealand can walk as they engage with New Zealand, wherever in the world they may be.

Keywords

Foreign policy; export education; New Zealand; Australia; Colombo Plan

Introduction

While there has been long-standing engagement between New Zealanders and Asia in a variety of ways, ranging from missionary activity to trading to migration (Didham in press), the primary policy engagement has been through foreign affairs. Asian countries have had official diplomatic representation in New Zealand since the beginning of the twentieth century (Friesen, 2009). New Zealand has been represented diplomatically in Asian countries since the 1950s, though New Zealand moved quickly to fill diplomatic posts in Southeast Asia in particular, so that by April 1968 there were full diplomatic missions in Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Saigon. Together, these accounted for a quarter of all full New Zealand overseas missions prior to 1970 (Kember 2009). The convergence of what amounted to (though was never called) 'export education' policy in the 1950s with foreign policy of the same period primarily centered on the Colombo Plan, which, while detailed further in this paper, was essentially the education of (South and Southeast) Asia's elite in Western countries, including New Zealand. It was not a matter of two parallel policies, but rather a policy within a policy: foreign affairs was the umbrella under which the Colombo Plan operated. But a number of shifts, ideological, strategic and pragmatic, saw these two policies diverge to the extent that by the twenty-first century, they held less common ground. Export education policy developed in its own right, into its own industry with its own institutions (see Lewis 2005) and ultimately under its own Minister (usually, though not always, the Minister of Education). Foreign policy also changed, though in priority rather than substance, reflecting the changes of the governments of the day and, more often, within and between New Zealand's allies and neighbours. It was not quite a matter of 'never the twain shall meet' – when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) took on the government's trade responsibilities, export education fell under their radar once more – but as policy areas they remained largely distinct. This paper argues, however, that there should be a re-convergence of these two policy areas, largely because the importance of Asia to New Zealand is even greater now, in 2009, than it was in 1950.

New Zealand foreign policy from 1950

New Zealand's foreign policy and international/export education policy were once not as far apart as we find them today. International students from Asia first came to New Zealand in 1951, under the auspices of the Colombo Plan ('the Plan') of 1950. The Plan played a strategic role in New Zealand's foreign affairs policy. A response to instability in the Asia-Pacific, it was a companion to other Cold War alliances and it also shared their cause of fighting communism (McIntyre 1988). The Member of Parliament (and later Prime Minister) Sid Holland expressed as much at the time: "if people will consult a map they will realize that the troubled area of the world – from Korea, to Japan, Formosa, Indo-China, Indonesia – is a succession of steps in the direction of New Zealand" (cited in McIntyre, 1988, p. 145). Absurd as it might seem that the whole world was pointing toward New Zealand, this fear-driven parochialism was motivated by the Domino Plan: the fear that communism would come, like falling dominoes, down through the Asia-Pacific to New Zealand.

In this then, the barrier against communism was going to be one of ideas, not simply military intervention. These ideas were a means to an end: to raise the standard of living in these countries; to preserve (or, in some cases, create) democratic institutions; and to impart Western values (McKinnon 1977; cf. Oakman 2000). South and Southeast Asia were also valuable trade routes for both New Zealand and Australia and important enough that they could not lose them to a wave of communism (Department of External Affairs 1962; cf. Auletta 2000). In short, the Colombo Plan was not only altruistic, but was also a significant and strategic part of New Zealand's foreign policy (McIntosh 1977; McKinnon 1977).

By the end of the first year of the Plan, sixteen students were in New Zealand; eleven years later, in 1962, there were 450 students. Between the beginning of the Plan and 1962, New Zealand spent over £2,321,500 on technical assistance and 1,113 students from South and Southeast Asia had received training in New Zealand (Department of External Affairs 1962). The first issue of *The Colombo Plan News* (1956, p.1) writes of the Plan in these terms:

The Colombo Plan, apart from being a vast co-operative enterprise designed to bolster the economic and technological development of various countries of South and South-East Asia, holds a significant place in the history of human relationships. The visits of Asian trainees to member countries of the Plan and the despatch [sic] of experts to different Asian nations have stimulated cultural interchanges and closer understandings of other ways of life which have previously been clouded by distance and other difficulties such as language. New Zealand was a foundation member of

the Colombo Plan and has been playing an increasingly active part in providing assistance under the Technical Co-operation Scheme. There are, as a result, a growing number of people from both outside and within New Zealand who have been or are associated in some way with the Colombo Plan. Approximately 100 Asian trainees are at present taking courses within New Zealand while there are over 200 others who have received awards and since returned to their own countries.

While the benevolence of the Colombo Plan was more ideologically motivated than substance-driven, there were nevertheless important developmental projects that took place under its auspices, and education given to students under the Plan was of benefit to them and to New Zealand long-term (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade [MFAT] 2001).

New Zealand's changing foreign policy priorities

Over time, New Zealand's foreign policy shifted. In the 1970s and early 1980s, New Zealand moved toward a 'foreign policy of trade', a contrast from its earlier foreign policy alliances (McKinnon 1993). In time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry for Overseas Trade were amalgamated into MFAT, cementing this shift. The astonishing economic growth of countries on the Western rim of the Pacific fuelled discussions about 'new economic relations' with these countries and discussion of these 'economic relations' was one of the standard ways of expressing a commitment to the liberalisation of the New Zealand economy and a greater openness to foreign investment and migration (McKinnon 1993). As Mike Moore, the then Minister for Overseas Trade, expressed it: "We have gone...from seeing Asia as a source of threat to seeing Asia as a source of opportunity for New Zealand" (cited in McKinnon 1993, p.277). Gone was the communist threat and gone (for all intents and purposes) was education-as-aid. The liberalisation of New Zealand's economy, and an increased openness to foreign migration saw trade become a significant factor in foreign affairs; the role of international education in that framework was also influenced by the recognition of the costs of educating overseas students.

There were other underlying changes. In both Australia and New Zealand, there was concern from policy-makers, politicians, and educationalists that international students were displacing sponsored and domestic students; concerns about the effectiveness and equity of educating Asia's elite were also raised (Tarling, 2004). Alongside this, New Zealand's foreign policy direction was changing: its commitment to the Commonwealth was weakening, its alignment with the United States during the Vietnam War indicated a shift in its bilateral ties, and communism appeared less of a significant threat. In the face of these, education seemed a less effective weapon than once thought.

Progressively, the gap between foreign affairs policy and international education policy widened to the extent that the only significant involvement that MFAT would have in international education policy would be primarily through its trade work or, occasionally, through repairing damaged reputations abroad, such as during the 1990s (and other times) when private language schools collapsed in New Zealand leaving many Asian students out of money and the classroom.

Tarling (2004) has detailed the policy shifts from 'aid to trade' and those need not be repeated here, suffice to note that international education policy is as far away from where it began (in policy terms, from the foreign affairs ministry) as it could possibly be. The argument of this paper, however, is that this chasm is ultimately detrimental to New Zealand's interests, both domestically and internationally.

New Zealand's future in Asia

As MFAT explicitly expressed it in 2007, New Zealand's future is in Asia (MFAT 2007). Asia is home to ten of New Zealand's twenty top markets for goods exports and is becoming increasingly important for tourism and education (MFAT 2007). New Zealand's population in 2006 was ten percent Asian and is projected to be 16 percent by 2026 (Bedford and Ho 2008). Arguably, Asia is more important to New Zealand foreign policy in 2009 (at the time of writing) than it was in 1950 when New Zealand signed the Colombo Plan. While there isn't unrest in Southeast Asia, there is significant economic growth in China, currently the third largest economy in the world (and set to surpass Japan and become the second largest, behind the US). With China's economic rise, alongside the loss of US soft-power in the Asian region (largely as a result of the Bush Presidency and US interventions in the Middle East (Singh 2004; East West Centre 2007; cf. Nye 2009)) there are concomitant changes in Asian regional architecture. The strategic regional and political shifts in Asia will invariably impact New Zealand because of both

its geographical and economic proximity to the region (cf. White 2009). The foreign affairs priorities might have changed but Asia remains forefront of New Zealand's foreign policy focus (McCully et al. 2007; MFAT 2008). One of New Zealand's largest export industries is education and the role that Asia-born alumni of New Zealand universities can play in promoting New Zealand's interests in Asia is potentially very significant.

As one would expect, international students and New Zealand's export education industry generally are the focus of domestically-oriented policy documents and government-commissioned research in the fields of export education (Deloitte 2007; Education NZ and Ministry of Education 2008), immigration (Merwood 2007) and even mental health (Ho et al. 2002; Abbott et al. 2006). However, within foreign policy-oriented/international relations literature in New Zealand, international students feature less prominently. No articles on international students, Asian students or the connections between export education and foreign policy feature in the *New Zealand International Review*, the journal of the New Zealand Institute for International Affairs, from 1998 to 2009. Of the vast New Zealand academic literature on Asian migrants and students in New Zealand, relatively little deals explicitly with the link between Asian students and New Zealand foreign policy (with some notable exceptions: Bennett 1998; Tarling 2005; Rolls 2005; Beal 2006; McGrath, Stock and Butcher 2007). However, general literature on New Zealand foreign policy toward Asia invariably mentions the Colombo Plan (e.g. McKinnon 1993).

Nevertheless, MFAT's (2007) so-called White Paper, *Our Future with Asia* draws some connections. It refers to international students in New Zealand in four places, noting variously that:

- the Colombo Plan "laid the foundation for some enduring relationships between New Zealand and the region"(p.28);
- the internationalisation of the education sector has an Asia focus and this "has the potential to have a positive impact on our engagement with the region" (p.37);
- there is a greater challenge because of increased international competition for New Zealand to attract the "best and brightest" Asian students (p.35); and
- education providers are building links with Asia through scholarships, research collaboration, joint degrees and the "good use" of alumni networks and adds that "Asian students returning to their home countries with positive firsthand experiences of New Zealand play an important role in promoting New Zealand, as well as forming a valuable pool of potential employees for New Zealand companies" (p.48).

In contrast, in MFAT's (2008) briefing to the incoming Minister in 2008, Asian students were only mentioned in terms of their numbers and contribution to New Zealand's economy; the Colombo Plan was mentioned only in reference to historical links with particular Asian countries, such as Malaysia; and education was only referenced in the context of "services" and aid.

The Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Discussion paper released by the National Party before it successfully won the 2008 election (McCully et al. 2007) notes that "[d]eveloping the 'Asia literacy' of New Zealanders is a major task and extends well beyond 'foreign policy' into education, immigration, and other policy frameworks (p.9)". While this is a brief mention, this discussion paper nonetheless highlights that 'Asia literacy' extends across a number of policy frameworks and perhaps implies that export education policy needs to be seen within the two broad agendas of improving Asia literacy domestically (i.e. amongst New Zealanders) and extending New Zealanders reach and influence into the Asian region. This point shall be amplified momentarily.

The Australian experience

Bridging the gap between foreign and export education policies is not unique to New Zealand. Australia is facing similar issues. Recent problems in Australia with its Indian student populations have caused foreign policy headaches for the Australian government (Wesley 2009) with one university vice-chancellor calling for a return to the Colombo Plan, noting that it would support Prime Minister Rudd's aspirations for a new security and trading bloc in Asia (Healy 2009).

In the same issue of *The Australian*, Slattery (2009) makes similar remarks:

Many of the students of the Colombo Plan returned to become doctors, lawyers and politicians, power elites in the world's most vibrant economies. Australians talk a lot about engagement with the region and this was a form of regional interaction with enormous potential to shape our relationship with the nations to our north. It was replaced by an industry focused on quantity rather than quality, a little like our wine exports. It is an industry, moreover, on which our higher education sector is frighteningly dependent.... The overseas student program needs to be reinvented around an appreciation of these kinds of relationships and an equally keen appreciation of what kind of future we may face in their absence.

One similarly-oriented scholarship scheme to the Colombo Plan in Australia is The Prime Minister's Australia Asia Endeavour Awards, emerging from the PM's 2020 Summit (held in 2008), where the priority host and home countries for these various awards are all in Asia. The aims of these awards are to:

- “consolidate Australia’s position as the most Asia-literate country outside of Asia
- develop internationally-aware, skilled future leaders in Australia
- build human capital within Australian businesses and contribute to productivity gains and innovations
- establish enduring education and professional linkages between Australia and Asia
- develop a network of people across Asia who have a strong affinity to Australia
- ensure that young people have the skills and knowledge to be able to compete and collaborate in a globalised market, particularly with our key trading partners in Asia; and
- enhance Australia’s reputation as a quality education destination” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2009).

There is some suggestion in diplomatic circles that government leaders within Asia want to reintroduce the Colombo Plan to achieve similar but broader objectives.¹ While this will probably be warmly welcomed and will build upon historical goodwill, it will remain important that export education policy generally is closer aligned with foreign policy priorities in Asia. Much literature concerned with export education policy and the experiences of international students generally adopts too narrow a focus and rarely adopts a long-term perspective.

The motivation for Australia and New Zealand foreign policy to re-engage actively with export education policy is not just to respond to reputational difficulties abroad, but also because these two countries’ futures will be profoundly affected by what happens in the Asian region. With major alliances being redrawn and, in Australia’s case particularly, a significant difference emerging political allegiances (with the USA) and economic partnerships (with China) (White 2009), forging worthwhile and beneficial relationships in the Asian region becomes strategically important.

How New Zealand and Australia might go about achieving links between foreign policy and international students will differ according to the context of each country. But two broad suggestions can nonetheless be made.

First, while off-shore agencies are often co-located at embassies and high commissions, there are nonetheless distinct reporting lines (on paper at least). For efficiencies in both reporting and in personnel, it may be appropriate to have the foreign ministry responsible entirely for the off-shore interests of its government. Foreign students, educated in either Australia or New Zealand and now living back in Asia (for example), may constitute part of these countries’ diaspora populations (see Fullilove and Flutter, 2004; Didham, in press) and certainly would be in positions to advance (or otherwise) the foreign policy interests of these countries. A country’s diaspora population cannot be easily categorised into ‘graduate’, ‘tourist’ or ‘business’ and embassies and high commissions may be called upon to engage with these diaspora populations in both their diplomatic and consular work (see White, 2007; Fullilove and Flutter, 2004; cf. Blue Ribbon Panel Report, 2008).

The corollary of converging off-shore operations is that there must be similar convergences ‘on-shore’, which leads to the second suggestion. In both Australia and New Zealand, various government agencies (across cities, states and nationally) are involved in the writing and delivery of export education policy in one form or another. Beyond these

¹ This is based on confidential conversations with senior diplomats throughout Asia and cannot be further attributed.

official organisations there are a number of non-profit, educational, religious and other groups involved in the welfare or education of international students. The variety of interested parties can be seen, by way of example, in the number and range of submissions to the Australian Senate for their 2009 inquiry into the welfare of international students in Australia (Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). The various (and sometimes conflicting) agendas of these official and unofficial organisations can lead to bureaucratic deadlocks, intense lobbying to Ministers and others, and mixed messages to national and international media, not to mention current and prospective international students and their parents. There is, of course, a place for both official and non-official organisations and there are often distinct roles between those who write policy and those who have to administer and deliver it, but nevertheless there needs to be greater cohesion and cooperation between these various agencies. One of the potential consequences of greater cooperation may be an incorporated approach to advancing the foreign policy interests of governments through their export education policies. This is especially important in ensuring that foreign students to these countries do not become “poisoned alumni” (Wesley, 2009) upon their return home.

Discussion

I have suggested in this paper that there needs to be greater synergy between New Zealand’s export education and foreign policies, but that is only at best a part-way response. The twin realities of New Zealand’s (and Australia’s) growing Asian population domestically and both countries’ strengthening ties to the Asian region internationally mean that ‘Asia’ in all its forms should become an integral part of all policies, foreign and domestic. While focusing on Asia finds a natural affinity in foreign affairs policy and also finds resonance in immigration policies, there is a need to place it within other policy settings as well, such as justice (Asians as victims and perpetrators of crime), health (responding to the particular health needs of Asian communities), the labour market (Asian businesses in New Zealand; though see Spoonley and Meares 2009) and education (Asia literacy in schools). Space does not allow for more to be said on these areas, but they deserve greater examination in both policy formulation and in policy debates and literature generally.

Realigning New Zealand’s export education and foreign policies will serve to reframe the issues regarding international (and especially Asian) students in New Zealand, in terms of scholarships that might be offered to them (viz. Australia), pastoral care offered to them (again, compare Australia), the over-reliance of institutions (particularly universities) on foreign student fees and the policies that create that over-reliance (cf. Wesley 2009); and the efficacy of the courses they are taught to international students and the relevance of those courses to their subsequent employment in Asia, New Zealand or elsewhere (see Beath 2007). Drawing a convergence between foreign and export education policies, however, is more than just a nostalgic trip down memory lane.

Bringing export education into the wider ambit of foreign affairs will achieve a number of strategic and salient objectives.

- First, it will support the new government’s ambitions towards a ‘New Zealand Inc’ approach off-shore. This draws on the point noted earlier, about ensuring that there is a unified voice, both on- and off-shore with respect to export education policies and practices.
- Second, it will serve as a useful contribution to the exercise by MFAT in assessing New Zealand’s off-shore ‘footprint’.
- Third, it will highlight the significant importance of New Zealand’s diaspora populations throughout Asia (on this point especially, see Didham in press).
- Fourth, it will signal a move away from a fragmented approach adopted by New Zealand universities toward their alumni, where each university vigorously protects its own alumni data and holds independent alumni events throughout Asia, even within weeks of one another.
- Fifth, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, it will allow for alumni to be better tracked and address one of the greatest weaknesses in terms of reliable data.
- Sixth, and most importantly, the greatest benefit to New Zealand’s foreign policy long-term will be to establish these ‘friends, foreign and domestic’ in a region that is increasingly important economically and

strategically for New Zealand's future. In this respect, then, nostalgia has no place, but strategic alliances do.

Conclusion

The historic links between international education policy and foreign policy in New Zealand reflect their context. International education was not an 'industry' in the way that it is in 2009. The numbers of Asian students in New Zealand are vastly greater in the 21st century than they were in the 1950s and 1960s and will continue to grow. The threat of communism is gone as has (most of) the political instability in Southeast Asia. The ideologies of government policy in 1950 and in 2009 have changed and these changes have particularly affected the public sector and education policy during this period. These changes may be used to explain why 'export' education is not as much in the frame of foreign policy as it used to be. But other changes can support why it should be more in the foreign policy frame than it is. New Zealand's links with Asia are thicker, wider and deeper than they were in 1950. New Zealand's Asian population has grown from less than two percent of the total population in 1950 to over ten percent in 2009. In 2009, New Zealand's primary economic partners are not in Europe, as they were in 1950, but are instead in Asia. The New Zealand Government remains focused on Asia, as it was in 1950, but for very different reasons. The future with Asia that was painted of Asia through government documents of the earlier era was one of conflict, fear and instability, with a touch of humanitarian benevolence. The picture painted in recent government documents is quite different. New Zealand's future is intricately tied up with Asia's prospects. Now, more than ever, there is a need to act strategically in how we engage with New Zealand's Asian alumni and bridge the gap between international education and foreign policies.

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