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Student Mobility Networks

The Case for a Commonwealth Scheme

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Introduction

This paper seeks to contribute to current discussion about the value of a programme of student exchange among Commonwealth countries. It is a slightly modified version of a paper presented to the International Development Programme national conference on international education in Canberra in October 1992 and raises the issue both in the Commonwealth-wide context and from an Australian perspective.

The first part outlines the background to the proposal emphasising the extent to which it has been generated by policy-makers with a uniquely Commonwealth perspective. The point is made that for those without that orientation the benefits of the proposal are not self-evident.

The body of the paper looks at student mobility in Europe, the United States and the Asia-Pacific region, noting the extent to which governments in these countries actively support student exchanges. Universally it is considered that student mobility is a way of ensuring that countries will be able to maintain their international competitiveness in the future.

In the final section, the implications of the overseas experience for Australia are considered. It is argued that Australia needs to be involved in student mobility on an international scale, not merely in a regional scheme and that the Commonwealth proposal provides an appropriate vehicle for this. It is hoped that in developing this rationale for Australia, I may have contributed a useful train of thought for other member countries also.

Background

Renewed vigour was given to discussions of student mobility in member countries by the Singapore meeting on academic interchange and institution building organised by the Commonwealth Secretariat Higher Education Unit in April 1992, with a mandate from the eleventh conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers (for full details, see Part One). Some of the chief concerns expressed are given by Dr Jasbir Singh in Chapter 3. They led to the establishment in 1982 of the Commonwealth Standing Committee on Student Mobility, which for almost a decade argued energetically for adjustments to full-fee policies in the interests of maintaining student mobility but to little avail.

It is clear that governments of the industrialised Commonwealth countries will not resile from the principle of cost recovery for overseas student enrolments, preferring to channel aid and subsidies through other mechanisms such as scholarship schemes. The Standing Committee's deliberations are now focused on ways of reducing the dependency of developing Commonwealth countries on overseas education. The Commonwealth Higher Education Support Scheme (CHESS) and the Commonwealth of Learning are outcomes of a new emphasis on co-operation. The intention is to expand the overall capacity of universities in the developing Commonwealth countries to cater for local demand and to provide higher level graduate training. It is hoped that increased interaction with universities in the industrialised countries as well as co-operative arrangements in distance learning will lead to this.

Student exchanges are seen as an essential element of this co-operative approach. The Barbados Conference expressed support for student mobility as a way of alleviating the high cost of overseas education imposed on developing countries by the fees policies of the industrialised Commonwealth countries. The ministers advocated the establishment of reciprocal exchange arrangements amongst developing countries, and new linkages which would reverse the normal flow of students from industrialised to developing countries.

The Singapore meeting was called to explore the feasibility of the proposal. The meeting was very supportive of the concept of increased student mobility within and into the developing countries of the Commonwealth as a dimension of the larger exercise of developing and enriching academic institutions. However, for educational policy-makers who do not have a Commonwealth perspective the proposal is problematic.

Internationally, the trend is towards greater accountability of publicly funded education and there is little enthusiasm for the expansion of education budgets unless it can be clearly demonstrated that there will be tangible, generally economic, benefits. An initial reaction from hard-pressed policy makers is therefore likely to be:

- How will increasing student mobility in general benefit my university/country?
- Are there any particular advantages in a Commonwealth scheme?
- Will the benefits outweigh the costs?

These questions cannot be swept aside, for there is no point in turning to the basics of implementation (and no prospect of harnessing the necessary resources) if there is not at the outset the political will at national levels to set such a scheme in place. The extent to which the proposal captures the interest or imagination of governments and of participating institutions will be directly related to their perceived advantages of student mobility.

I suspect that in the current world-wide recessionary climate such advantages are not obvious to educational policy-makers. Indeed the greater likelihood is that a litany of potential disadvantages will preclude any further discussion. Such concerns might include:

- Governments of developing countries may be too concerned with unmet local demand to contemplate accommodating students from the industrialised Commonwealth.
- Universities in industrialised countries may doubt that their students will wish to study in developing countries. They may have no confidence in the capacity of those countries to provide an appropriate education for them.
- The very premise that student mobility will lead to academic strengthening of the host institutions may be questioned, or, if accepted, may be viewed as an entropic activity, divorced from the priorities of governments.

Making the case for a student mobility scheme that is restricted to participants from Commonwealth countries will be even more difficult. For many member governments the Commonwealth is no longer a 'salient category'. Australia and Canada are both actively pursuing economic ties with Asia, and the United Kingdom is increasingly looking towards an expanding and economically vibrant Europe.

Singapore is extensively involved in joint ventures and development projects with countries throughout Asia and is a member, like Malaysia, of ASEAN, an economic grouping which owes nothing to Commonwealth ties (and which excludes Australia). Similarly, in Africa economic benefit rather than a shared colonial history forms the basis of continuing diplomatic and trade alliances, such as ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States. For the West Indies, ties with the United States or South America are likely to be of higher priority.

Thus economic regionalism sets a framework for policy makers which is not conducive to supporting the Commonwealth proposal. The scheme is global rather than regional and may appear to offer no particular benefits in terms of economic alliances for the participating nations.

Yet there is evidence that international student mobility is increasing. Before discounting the potential benefits of a Commonwealth student mobility scheme it seems sensible to see why more students in various parts of the world are taking up opportunities for student exchange, and why their governments are helping them to do this. The main section of this paper is therefore devoted to examining the overseas experience of student mobility against the background of government labour market and human resource development policies.

Student mobility in Europe

There are a number of student mobility schemes operating in the European Community. ERASMUS, the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, is the best known, both for the number of students it assists and the extent of Government funding provided. In 1991–1992, 74 million ECU (approximately \$A35m) was allocated to the scheme, with 60 per cent earmarked for student mobility grants. Approximately 1,500 grants were provided, involving 59,000 eligible students, or four per cent of the Community's total student population. This level of central EC support for ERASMUS is the more remarkable when one considers that, within the parameters set by the Treaty of Rome, education is *not* a joint community responsibility but a responsibility of each member state.

The rationale for ERASMUS is summarised in the background paper for the 1990 Conference in Siena. It notes:

The ERASMUS programme sets out primarily to achieve a significant increase in the number of students from higher education institutions

spending an integrated period of study in another Member State. It sees this experience as a means of producing graduates, more European in outlook, with the experience, background and language skills necessary to develop and support the intensified co-operation in the economic and social sectors implied in the Single European Act. It also sets out to promote intensive co-operation between higher education institutions across boundaries of Member States and through mobility of teaching staff and other means, to secure improvement in the quality of higher education and training and thus assist the Community to maintain its competitiveness (*sic*) in world markets. The interactions seen in these exchanges are seen as contributing to European cohesiveness. (Commission of the European Communities, 1990a:41).

The Siena Conference concluded that the European dimension should be the primary focus of strategic planning for higher education, foreshadowing changing employer expectations about the mobility of labour and the formulation of directives concerning the mutual recognition of degrees. It recognised the value of ERASMUS and other mobility programmes in preparing young people to live and work in the complementary national programmes (Commission of the European Communities, 1990b).

The same emphasis is found in reports of the Industrial Research and Development Advisory Committee (IRDAC) on Skills Shortages in Europe and on School and Industry. They argue that the Community needs to pay greater attention to education and training if Europe is to have the highly skilled and flexible workforce needed to exploit its advanced technologies and to maintain its competitiveness in the face of the rapid growth in productivity evident in Japan and other newly industrialised nations of North-East Asia. In a comparison of the age profile of member states with their Asian competitors, it is concluded that it will not be easy to compete with countries with a younger, cheaper and more highly skilled workforce. Student mobility programmes are advocated as a strategy for combatting this competition.

Student mobility in the European context is very much an expression of European Regionalism. The arguments are put forward from the perspective of the urgent human resource development needs of an advanced industrial federation keen to maintain its international competitiveness. The focus is on a flexible and mobile workforce that can operate effectively in a given profession in several member states. In pursuit of this objective, recent pilot schemes within ERASMUS have refined the model, to ensure that high quality, portable, professional

training is provided. Secondary to that goal is the desire to create a measure of understanding of other cultures, and ways of thinking and behaving, that will support the development of greater intercultural understanding amongst member states, leading ultimately to the forging of a European identity.

What is most surprising is the extent to which the political and economic agenda of European student mobility has been enthusiastically embraced by universities and by students. This is evident in Britain in the readiness to develop new courses which combine professional training in, say, Law or Engineering with European Studies; in the acceptance of significant numbers of students from elsewhere in Europe at home student fee levels; in the active participation in pilot credit transfer schemes. It is an orientation, which were it not for the diversity and the political and economic significance of Europe, could be characterised as parochial.

There are, nevertheless, traces of broader concerns in those very policy documents which argue for the primacy of the European Dimension. Ecology is seen as the prime existential question for the society of the future, raising global rather than merely regional issues. It is recognised that the increasing dependence of economic development on technological development and the centrality of communications technology to advances in scientific research will give rise to problems and opportunities best resolved in a supranational context. There are signs that an international orientation to student mobility might coexist with the current regional focus in the network of relationships which some universities have fostered outside the European Community.

Although the focus of the European position is strongly regional the need to develop and maintain international contacts is recognised. There is strong support for student mobility in the European Community on the grounds that such programmes contribute to:

- the development of a European identity
- increased portability of professional qualification
- a more flexible workforce
- increased language skills and greater understanding of cultural differences

The extent of public funding for the ERASMUS Programme demonstrates that the EC member states are prepared to pay in order to achieve the skilled human resource base required to maintain their international competitiveness.

Student mobility in the United States of America

Student mobility in the United States is characterised by a major imbalance between outward and inward student flows. At present about 400,000 students from overseas study in American higher education institutions each year. In the main they come from developing countries and the Pacific Rim. They are chiefly enrolled in full-degree undergraduate or postgraduate programmes and they ultimately take out American degrees. By contrast, only about 70,000 American students study overseas each year, about three-quarters of them in Europe, as part of a junior year (or semester) abroad. Most live together and study in special programmes taught in English. (IIE, Annual)

United States government policy has been very much in evidence in the development of programmes to recruit overseas students to America throughout the eighties. Glen Shive (1991) summarises a decade of development of the American overseas student programme from the recognition of the recessionary impact of the downward demographic trend on the traditional sources of students, school-leavers, through the early days of marketing American education overseas with perhaps too much commercial zeal, to the more mature, highly professional approach of the nineties. A critical contribution of government has been its direct and indirect role in providing financial assistance, particularly for postgraduate research students. This has earned for the United States a reputation for generosity and altruism which other countries find hard to match. Yet the great majority of students pay their own way, and despite the protestations of the international professionals, the commercial nature of the activity is not lost sight of. Robert Atwell, President of the American Council on Education, speaking at the ACE's 1992 annual meeting, noted that:

... as an industry, higher education is a net exporter by any number of measures, not the least of which is that over five times as many students come to our universities as we send to other nations ... (Atwell, 1992:14)

The imbalance between inward-bound overseas student programmes and outward-bound Study Abroad programmes is now attracting the attention of educators and policy makers. International educators have argued convincingly in recent years that America is in danger of succumbing to an inherent isolationism if more young people do not, during the course of their post-secondary education, gain some understanding of what it means to live and work in another culture. The National Task Force on Undergraduate Education Abroad (1989)

concluded that: 'as a people [Americans] are poorly educated to deal with the political, economic and social issues which [they] will face in a new global era' and urged that opportunities for American students be broadened and diversified (quoted Burn, 1990).

Commenting on the Task Force's report, a well-known advisor to the government on international education, Barbara Burn, writes:

Opportunities for experience abroad are confined to a small fraction of American undergraduates, mainly upper-middle class, and still focus predominantly on Western Europe and on studies of the humanities and social sciences At a time when American citizens and professionals require much more international knowledge, the narrow scope of undergraduate education abroad constitutes a grave neglect of extremely important needs (Burn, 1990).

By comparison, Burn notes that ERASMUS will prepare European students

... not only for the professional, commercial, technical, linguistic, academic, and diplomatic needs of a united Europe, but also for performing effectively in the world market of ideas and trade.

Evidence that these views constitute something more than special pleading on the part of language teachers and international educators is in the action plan for making the United States 'more nationally competent and globally competitive' (Hefferon, 1990:19, 20). This report summarises the outcomes of a two-year study which collected views from a very wide cross-section of American society including all levels of education, business organisations, state and local governments on the relation of international education to the ability of America to cooperate and compete with the rest of the world. Of particular interest are the recommendations encouraging the educational and exchange sector to be more responsive to the private sector's needs in the globalisation process.

That message has permeated educational thinking to the extent that international competence and competitiveness are now the focus of policy for schools as well as for the post-school sector. AMERICA 2,000, a statement of the nation's educational goals, includes as one of its six goals the following:

By the year 2,000 every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global society ...

Recent changes in legislation governing the funding of higher education demonstrate the extent to which the rhetoric of study abroad for global competence has prevailed. In the past two years a series of legislative amendments have supported increased participation in study abroad by making existing loans and financial assistance to students portable and recently by providing funding for 5,000 additional scholarships by 1994. Five thousand scholarships will also be provided to students from Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and non-European countries.

At the level of educational diplomacy, steps have been taken to give American students access to European universities (Cardiff, 1990), and more effort is being directed to developing Study Abroad and exchange opportunities in non-traditional and 'exotic' locations, for example, Africa, Korea, Australia.

In spite of what from the Australian perspective appears an admirable record in internationalising education, there is little complacency amongst American professionals. Atwell continues:

The lack of financial aid to meet the costs of studying abroad explains the pitiful reality that less than 1% of our students have an international experience - at a time when the European Community, through projects like ERASMUS and TEMPUS, is striving for 10%. But I believe it is just another manifestation of our perilous disdain for and disinterest in the rest of the world (Atwell, 1992:15).

He goes on to say that budget woes must not be allowed to deflect American institutions from the critical task of developing programmes which address American ethno-centrism. To do so would be to succumb to neo-isolationism.

Although considerable numbers of American undergraduates study abroad, this only amounts to about one per cent of the undergraduate population. There is increasing recognition from the private sector and from government that study abroad programmes will contribute to increasing global competence and competitiveness. The current approach is at once broader than the more regionally focused policy framework of the European Community and less specific in not providing opportunities for students in professional courses to add to their professional training while overseas. The promotion of study abroad in non-traditional destinations including non-English speaking countries demonstrates awareness of the need to be internationally competent.

Student mobility in the Asia-Pacific Region

In recent years, the West has watched with admiration and even dismay as one Asian economy after another has set off on the rapid rise to fully developed status. Garnaut (1989) maps the rise of the vibrant internationally-oriented economies of North-East Asia; Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Hongkong. To these should now be added Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. The People's Republic of China, the sleeping dragon, is stirring, promising rates of growth that could eclipse its neighbours. Vietnam is poised for development in the wake of the anticipated lifting of the IMF embargo.

A common feature of government policy in all of these countries is the high level of resources committed to education and the exponential rate at which the educational infrastructure has developed. In some countries, for example, Korea, spending on education has matched defence spending. In spite of this, all countries in the region still have a level of unmet demand for higher education.

The pattern of student flows to the West is well-established, with the dominant flow being to the United States. In brief, some students study overseas because the expertise is not available locally, others because they were unable to gain a place in local institutions.

Governments vary in the extent to which they support their citizens studying overseas. In Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand governments offer sponsored places overseas for selected students as part of their overall human resource development policies. In Japan and Korea both private sector and government support doctoral and postdoctoral studies for significant numbers of students each year, chiefly (but not exclusively) in the United States. Their commitment to these programmes is to ensure that they are in a strong position to maintain their international competitiveness. Singapore and Hong Kong similarly recognise the need for a future professional workforce that is technically advanced and globally competent, and are seeking to meet their needs, not by sponsoring students to study overseas, but by recruiting nationals and others who have trained overseas at their own expense. Hong Kong does not expect in the foreseeable future to be in a position to train more than about seven per cent of its required graduate workforce, so great is its anticipated need for highly trained professionals.

An interesting development is the number of Asian students studying elsewhere in Asia. Korean students are studying as fee-paying students in the Philippines; the University of the South Pacific recruits fee-paying overseas students; and Singapore, with its technological

sophistication, is increasingly attractive to students from Australia as well as other parts of Asia. The lower fee regimes in all of these countries, as compared with the fee structures of the United States, the United Kingdom or Australia, is undoubtedly a factor. So too is the fact that English is the language of instruction in all of these countries, given the status of English as the international language of business.

The nations of the Asia-Pacific region are experiencing rapid rates of economic growth and social development. It is recognised that the workforce of the future will have to be scientifically and technically advanced and able to operate in a global context. Mastery of English is recognised as important for access to advanced science and for competing in the international business environment.

Education is recognised as the key to further development and country after country is committing massive funding to developing its educational infrastructure. In spite of this, there is a level of unmet demand in all of the countries of the region which generates an outward flow of students to the industrialised nations of the West. This dependency is unwelcome to students and home governments alike because of the financial drain on families, the outflow of capital and the potential loss of intellectual capital if students do not return. A new consumer culture is developing, however, as students and governments recognise that they can exert leverage over host institutions where these are financially dependent on overseas student fee income.

The implications for Australia

Mobility, particularly overseas, is not a dominant feature of undergraduate life for Australian students. According to the Unesco figures, approximately 2,600 students studied overseas in 1990, the majority of them undertaking postgraduate study in the United States. All this is, however, about to change.

It is now widely recognised that in a world where economic and possibly diplomatic activity will be dominated by a handful of large regional trading blocks, Australia is at risk. Government policy is firmly committed to building strong economic ties with Asia, but the reverse is not the case. The dominance of English as a global language has paradoxically not favoured Australia in establishing themselves in Asia. Those many students from Asia who have studied in Australia since the 1950s have learned much more about Australia than Australians have about Asia. It is true that there are some outstanding examples of economic and diplomatic links that had their roots in student days, but

the simple assertion that it is worthwhile making friends with future leaders of Asia by educating them in Australia needs to be tested. Malaysia and Singapore do not appear to favour Australia economically because of this. Similarly, Australian involvement in the Korean War does not appear to carry any weight in contemporary business negotiations.

There is a need to increase the outward flow of students to Asia if Australia is to become integrated with the region. A deeper understanding of the ways in which contemporary Asian cultures operate is needed. Knowledge will come, not from Asian students who are studying in Australia, but by having a significant number of young Australians spending a period studying or working in Asia during their most formative years. This view has now crystallised in an initiative of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee to establish a student mobility scheme in the Asian-Pacific Region. Although the University Mobility in the Asia Pacific (UMAP) Programme is in its infancy, it has already achieved the support not only of the Australian Government but of a number of key governments in the region.

How then does Australia rate against its industrial competitors in Europe, the United States and Asia?

A common theme is the recognition that the future is one of increasing global interdependence. There is strong support at government level for student mobility as a necessary element in training the flexible, mobile and internationally competent workforce of the future. There are also differences; Europe displays a strong regional focus in contrast to the broad-based global orientation of the United States.

The Australian focus at present is also very regional. This is a risky position for Australia. Asia must clearly be a priority for Australia but not the only priority. Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim are equally legitimate targets for Australian companies and as relevant as the Pacific Rim to business in the West. To maintain Australia's international competitiveness it is likely that more and more Australian companies will become part of international consortia or will move off-shore to take advantage of cheap labour. This means that there will be an increasing need for managers who can deal with government officials in foreign countries, and negotiate with private companies, for example, those offering infrastructure support: cleaners, refuse collection, transport, providers of raw materials, language problems of workers.

The focus will not necessarily be Asia. For companies in Western Australia, Africa, India or even Europe may be a more logical

destination. Australian wine makers are growing and making wine in France, many companies are now seeking out opportunities in Eastern Europe. ANZ Bank through its international affiliations is active in Africa and the Indian sub-continent. South America too is being explored by outwardly oriented Australian businesses.

What then are the implications for those involved in the development of Australia's most valuable resource, the future workforce?

It would seem that Australia, no less than its international competitors, must see to it that it has a workforce that is technically advanced and internationally, not just regionally, competent. There are many Australians in professional and managerial positions who are competent in living and working in another country, in another culture. People who can communicate across cultural and linguistic barriers are needed. To expose a high percentage of the future professional workforce to the experience of living, working and studying in another country during the formative undergraduate years is recognised by competitors as the best way of achieving this objective. Can Australia afford to do less?

The case for involvement in a Commonwealth scheme

Increased international student mobility must be a goal for Australian universities. The final issue to address is why should Australia become involved in a Commonwealth scheme? Is it not enough for universities to pursue linkages with overseas universities in Asia or elsewhere, independently of any formal scheme, just as they have for many years built up their academic networks on the basis of personal contact? If there are advantages in being part of a formal scheme why not concentrate its energies on the development of UMAP?

The advantages of being part of a Commonwealth scheme are these:

1 An international scheme

A Commonwealth network of student exchanges provides a global network of relationships. In addition to providing a continuing link with the other industrialised Commonwealth nations, it gives Australian students access to India and Africa, key points on the Indian Ocean Rim. Although this region is not a priority area for government, business sees it as an area of opportunity. There are opportunities for Australian universities to contribute to the resolution of the economic, political and ecological problems of

Africa through participation in externally funded aid projects. Some universities are very keen to do this.

Being involved in a Commonwealth scheme does not preclude involvement in a regional scheme. UMAP clearly offers the potential to integrate with Asia and it is important to make the most of that opportunity. But a solely regional approach is not sufficient. A Commonwealth scheme complements Australia's own regional initiative.

2 A formal framework for student exchange

The experience of international student exchange shows that student mobility is fostered by establishing a formal framework within which the potential barriers to exchange can be discussed and conditions satisfactory to the exchange partners can be negotiated. Thus ERASMUS provides a set of principles to guide decisions on such matters as credit transfer and mutual recognition of qualifications. The pilot UMAP Programme aspires to do the same. On the financial side, it is virtually impossible to rally government support in the form of contributions to student travel outside the framework of a formal scheme.

3 A common language of instruction

English is the language of instruction of the Commonwealth universities. This removes a formidable barrier to student mobility although it does nothing to broaden the very narrow language base of many Australian undergraduates. In terms of the sheer pragmatics of getting a pilot student mobility operating, the status of English as the lingua franca of Commonwealth universities is a bonus.

4 A shared academic culture

The common heritage of the Commonwealth universities is still evident in the large degree of conformity in their ideals, their structures and their processes. Albeit there are major differences in standards across universities, the quality control mechanisms are well understood. The basis structure of degree programmes, the concept of the Honours degree and the practice of external examining, are all sufficiently familiar to answer many of the questions raised by the difficult tasks of assessing comparability and setting standards for credit transfer.

In the next few months several Australian universities will begin to plan with the Commonwealth Secretariat the first stages of a Commonwealth student mobility scheme. The mechanics will be easy

compared with the difficult logistics of UMAP or the bureaucracy of ERASMUS precisely because the Commonwealth universities share a common academic tradition and for the most part a common language of instruction. These two factors alone remove the most significant barriers to student mobility, leaving funding as the major obstacle. I am confident that when the substantial long-term advantages of this programme to Australia's future development are recognised, even the funding obstacle will fade.