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Education and Globalization in Southeast Asia

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Education and Globalization in Southeast Asia

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

Lee Hock Guan

Since Southeast Asian countries attained political independence,¹ they have created “national education systems ... as part of the state forming process which established the modern nation state” (Green 1997, p. 170). Framed in the context of the nation-state, education was tasked with the overlapping objectives of state and nation-building and national economic development. All states in the region nationalized and monopolized education and founded largely public-funded centralized education systems to teach literacy through the medium of a national language — in the case of Singapore, an official language — and to create a shared national culture by using a common syllabus. In recent decades, however, globalization, which has profoundly transformed the economic, social, cultural and technological processes and structures throughout the world, has also impacted in varying ways and degrees the national education systems across the region. How Southeast Asian countries should reformulate and restructure their education systems and which strategy they ought to adopt to prepare to adapt and deal with globalization clearly depended on each country’s societal make-up and economic situation and level of economic development.

How has globalization impacted and shaped the development of national education systems in Southeast Asia? In brief, globalization has brought about four interrelated changes to the education systems: (i) increasing demand for highly skilled and qualified labour; (ii) shifts in governance; (iii) privatization or commodification of education; and (iv) internationalization of education (Altbach and Knight 2007; Carnoy 2005; Robertson 2007). The emergent neo-liberal ideological paradigm accompanying globalization also dramatically altered the prevailing

post-independent centralized governance and provision of education. In Southeast Asian states, in recent times the education sector has been subjected to varying degrees of decentralization and privatization or commodification. Moreover, the privatization of the region's education sector is occurring in the context of the growing internationalization of education, especially of higher education. Increasing global economic competitiveness and the emergence of the knowledge economy have raised the national, especially for more developed Southeast Asian economies, and international demand for tertiary-educated skilled and qualified personnel. While the scope, timing and pace of these transformations to the education systems differed in each Southeast Asian state, the main observable trend is the downscaling of state role in the governance and provision of education.

Education systems in Southeast Asia are critical sites for building national identity and societal cohesion. In the centralized education systems, national languages and literatures and national histories are codified and memorialized, national customs and values are taught and disseminated, and, more generally, national identities and consciousness are created to "bind each to the state and reconcile each to the other" (Green 1997, p. 174). However, as states in Southeast Asian countries embarked on using education to construct linguistically and culturally homogeneous nations, they deprived the minority citizens of their language and cultural rights. The consolidation of a national education system which is monolingual and centralized thus had dreadful consequences for ethnic minorities' languages and cultures.

In the worst-case scenario, the smaller, weaker ethnic minority languages and cultures became or are becoming extinct when official language² and education policies aggressively assimilated their members into the language, culture and values of the dominant group. The pursuit of assimilationist cultural, language and educational policies instead of facilitating social cohesion and national integration frequently triggered ethnic conflicts in the region (Sercombe and Tupas 2014). Moreover, with the advent of globalization countries are becoming more and more diverse as globalization has generated the largest wave of worldwide migration in history. Multiculturalism has become a global trend such that there has emerged a growing demands from minority groups, including the new migrant groups, for access to education and their languages and cultures be taught in schools.

Importantly, minority groups' education, cultural and language rights are articulated in the influential United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) "2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity". In varying degrees, some Southeast Asian states have introduced the teaching of minority languages and cultures in schools and also implemented policies to enhance the minority groups' access to education. Symaco's chapter shows that the Malaysian government has helped to raise the enrolment rates among the Orang Asli in peninsula Malaysia and *bumiputra* groups in Sarawak and Sabah. Nevertheless, their enrolment rates are still much lower than that of the Malays, Chinese and Indians due to the fact that they reside in the more remote, rural areas of the country. Symaco also singled out the existing poor access to primary school education for the children of lower income foreign workers and the "undocumented children" of refugees and illegal immigrants, especially in the state of Sabah.

The emergence of English as the global language has made English as "a form of cultural capital". That the English language has become something of a commodity is demonstrated by the proliferation of programmes and schools, usually provided by the private sector, offering the teaching of English as a second language in Southeast Asia. The teaching of English as a subject has also been introduced in public schools in a number of Southeast Asian countries. A widely held opinion is that proficiency in English can help to expedite the acquisition of knowledge, especially scientific and technological knowledge, and enhance economic and business competitiveness. As English is the lingua franca of the business world, it meant that competence in the language could enhance competitiveness and employment opportunities in the global marketplace.

Therefore Singapore's decision to retain English as the medium of instruction helped to better prepare its citizens in the globalized world, while Malaysia's decision to switch to the Malay language as the main medium of instruction may have contributed to limiting the country's economic competitiveness (Alsagoff in this volume). The downside for Singapore, however, is that Singaporeans' have increasingly adopted English as their "native step tongue" such that "fewer and fewer Singaporeans [are speaking] mother tongues outside of second language classes in school". In contrast, the Malay language has expanded its role as Malaysia's integrative language and national identity marker, but, nevertheless, inconsistent educational policies and ineffective teaching of

English as a subject has led to students failing to master communicative competence in that language.

Unsurprisingly, English is the medium of instruction usually adopted by private and international education programmes and institutions in the region (Lavankura and Lao; Tan and Santhiram; and Mukherjee, Singh, Fern-Chung and Marimuthu in this volume). The growth of private English medium private education programmes and institutions may result in reinforcing (and creating new) inequalities based on English proficiency and accentuate ethnic and class segmentation in education (Lavankura and Lao; Tan and Santhiram; and Mukherjee et al.). Valorization of the English language can lead to a downgrading of the status of national and minority languages where English becomes the preferred language of communication for the cosmopolitan national elite and the language of choice for those who aspire to that status. More broadly, the widespread presence and adoption of the English language can have undesirable impact on the local linguistic and cultural diversity. This is because “languages are not merely tools for communication ... [but] are also the carriers of entire worldviews, the ‘repositories of culture and identity’ ... [which] means that decreasing lingual diversity can lead to the loss of irreplaceable bodies of knowledge and tradition” (Johnson 2009, p. 137).

Since globalization has raised the global demand for highly skilled and qualified individuals,³ the demand for university education has grown substantially. The increase in demand for university education in turn pushed states to expand their higher education systems, and, correspondingly, to increase the number of secondary school graduates ready to attend post-secondary. Multilateral organizations (MOs) played an important role in shaping the policies to enhance the provision and quality of education in the developing world. Globalization empowered the role of MOs such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP) especially in influencing and shaping educational policies in developing countries. Being largely influenced by neo-liberalism, MOs viewed centralized education systems as inefficient and providing poor access to and delivering inferior quality education. As such, they proposed decentralizing education systems as a means to enhance efficiency, improve quality and access, and better serve the local needs.

In Southeast Asia, countries in the region have embarked on different forms and varying degrees of decentralizing their education systems to

improve efficiency, transparency, accountability and quality (London 2011; Suryadarma and Jones 2013; Welch 2011). But the concept of decentralization is rather vague and moreover definitions of decentralization have rapidly changed overtime. Zobrist and McCormick's chapter shows that decentralization can be taken to mean "devolution", "delegation", "deconcentration", "divestment/privatization", "administrative decentralization", and "financial management decentralization". In their Myanmar case study, they argue that the decentralization of the education system in Myanmar is limited by the institutional culture of the Ministry of Education, the societal attitudes towards education and the roles of students, teachers, and Ministry staff. Also, the Myanmar state tries to retain control over the decision-making process while off-loading some of the fiscal burden of education service provision to the local government.

The privatization or commodification of education has been the main approach adopted by most Southeast Asian countries to increase student enrolment especially in higher education. Undoubtedly, the privatization of higher education has helped to raise dramatically the total higher education student enrolment in Southeast Asia especially in Malaysia (Mukherjee et al. this volume; Welch 2011). Malaysian private higher education indeed has expanded greatly because the number of students wanting a degree far exceeded the places offered by the public universities. In terms of quality, the picture in Malaysia is rather mixed in that there are first-rate and mediocre universities in both the public and private education sectors. Foreign universities and twinning programmes, usually with Australian, British and American universities, provide quality higher education while several local private universities provide lower quality education.

More generally, the privatization and marketization of higher education in Southeast Asia reinforced the existing ethnic and class educational inequalities. In Malaysia, race-based preferential admission policies into public universities resulted in an ethnically divided higher education system; a largely Malay public sector and non-Malay private sector (Tan and Santhiram). In addition, the majority of students enrolled in the first-rate private universities are usually from higher income groups and, conversely, majority of students in the mediocre private universities are from the lower income groups (Mukherjee et al. and Fahmi this volume).

Internationalization of education varies across the countries in Southeast Asia with Malaysia probably having the most extensive and varieties of internationalized education from the primary schools to universities.

The concept of internationalization, similar to that of privatization, is also rather vague and has changed rapidly (Altbach and Knight 2007). In Lavankura and Lao's chapter on the internationalization of higher education in Thailand, they define internationalization to mean "the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". The rationale for implementing the internationalization of higher education is that it can "improve the effectiveness and efficiency of what is currently done" and "alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures and roles". However, because of ambiguities in government policies and regulations, the internationalization of education in Thailand only brought about creation of new programmes, new offices and new campuses", there is, however, little changes "in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing programmes".

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Malaysia and Singapore shared the common experience where an imported foreign language (English) was adopted as the de facto language of administration and main medium of education from primary to tertiary level during the colonial period. The two former colonies' multilingual landscapes were made more complex by the influx of immigrants — Chinese and Indians in particular — who brought with them their own foreign languages. Both countries inherited multilingual school systems consisting of English, Malay, Chinese, and Tamil medium schools from the British colonial state. While English was spread through the educational process, still an English education was limited to a few such that both their populations came to be divided into an elite that could speak English and the masses that were either illiterate or literate only in their mother tongue.

Alsagoff's chapter examines the "different pathways" Singapore and Malaysia had taken in their language planning since political independence. While both countries adopted a bilingual educational policy, different ideologies influenced their choice of medium of education and language planning in general. Singapore strived to manage its "linguistic and cultural diversity through a narrative of cultural pluralism, [and] equality for all 'races' and languages was achieved through an ideology of instrumentalism in language management in which both the economic as well as symbolic value of the official languages were recognized". English, Malay, Chinese

(Mandarin) and Tamil are all recognized as official languages, but only English is anointed as the medium of education and primary working language. The other official languages are treated as heritage languages and taught as second languages to enable the maintenance of ethnic identities and values. In contrast, Malaysian language planning is influenced by a conflicting admixture of “ethnic chauvinism and strong nationalistic fervour”, minorities, principally Chinese and Indians, language rights and pragmatic recognition of mastering English for knowledge acquisition and economic development. Inter-ethnic bargain in Malaysia led to the establishment of a multilingual primary school system consisting of Malay, English (until 1976), Chinese and Tamil schools, and from secondary level onwards all instruction are in Malay — the sole national and official language — medium since 1982. Although Malaysia recognized the advantages of mastering English, the “government put far more focus on the way language rights were managed and were circumspect about the value of English in nation-building”.

With English attaining the status as the language of globalization, Singapore benefited from the advantages of adopting English as the medium of education and primary working language. However, Singapore also encountered the dilemma of increasingly more Singaporeans adopting English as their native “step-tongue” and as part of their cultural identity. As such, “it seems unclear how the formulaic functional division of English as a working language versus the mother tongues as languages of cultural heritage can be sustained, especially when fewer and fewer Singaporeans even speak these mother tongues outside of second language classes in school”. In contrast, in Malaysia inconsistent educational policies and the switch to Malay as the main medium of education appear to have contributed to eroding the quality standards of education, while the ineffective teaching of English as a subject has led to students failing to master communicative competence in that language. Nevertheless, Malay has expanded its role as the country’s integrative language and national identity marker, and the multilingual character of Malaysian society is maintained with a majority of Chinese and Indians, majority Tamils, remaining fluent in their mother tongues.

In Chapter 2, Tan and Santhiram observe that “globalization has further raised the global presence of English ... [and] had a profound impact on the development of education worldwide”. Two key agents helped in the global spread of English; the “transnational corporations

that use English as the in-house working language and the advent of ICT that relies on English as its operational language". In Malaysia, the same two key agents have further enhanced English as the primary working language in the business world despite the status of Malay as the official language and main medium of education. Moreover, the government, convinced by the advantages of raising Malaysians' linguistic competence in English, introduced various measures to expand the usage of English in the education system. Especially since the 1990s, the government elected to permit private sector provision of primary to tertiary education in English medium. At the tertiary level, effectively today there is a dual education system consisting of a Malay-medium public sector and an English-medium private sector in the country.

Malaysia's language planning policy towards augmenting the role of English in education aims to develop a stable diglossic relationship between Malay and English that will help to strengthen the nation-building process, as well as make its economy more competitive. However, Tan and Santhiram assert that "a stable diglossia should be underpinned by equal emphasis given to both languages by their users to ensure that they are not mutually displacive". In Malaysia that means it "should ideally result in balanced bilinguals, who are equally competent in both" Malay and English. A stable diglossia may not materialize in Malaysia because among the non-Malays, for a number of reasons, they tend to favour English over Malay. This linguistic preference contributed to an ethnic divide in the educational system where the majority of students enrolled in the private tertiary institutions are non-Malays, while Malays made up the majority of students enrolled in the public tertiary institutions. This ethnic divide could "result in the widening of linguistic divide" where the non-Malays' greater mastery of English would advantage their economic opportunities in the private sector. That non-Malays would prefer English over the Malay language is "inevitable given the limited role of the Malay language within their socio-cultural domains and the strong instrumental value of English in the (globalized) private sector". The resulting ethnic divide in the educational system and widening linguistic divide between Malays and non-Malays can have "serious repercussion to the nation-building process".

Lavankura and Lao's chapter examines the internationalization of higher education in Thailand. Broadly speaking, internationalization of higher education is usually taken to mean "the process of integrating an

international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education". If properly implemented, the internationalization of higher education could bring about changes "that improve the effectiveness and efficiency of what is currently done" (first-order changes) as well as also "alter the fundamental ways in which organizations are put together, including new goals, structures and roles" (second-order changes).

In Thailand, the internationalization of higher education involves three key actors namely; "the state, the market and the academic oligarchs (members of private and public universities)". Initially, the state played the key role in introducing the internationalization of higher education, but, since the late 1980s, the market has become the dominant actor in shaping Thai higher education both at the institutional and national levels. Consequently, increasingly the internationalization of Thai higher education has been implemented largely to meet market demands that will help boost tertiary institutions' revenues. This has led to the introduction of market-friendly international programmes which are in high demand. The authors argue that ambiguities in government policies and regulations of the internationalization of education enabled tertiary institutions to offer international programmes which brought about second-order changes — but without first-order changes. In particular, the government policy which allows "a programme using any foreign language as a medium of instruction" to be defined as an international programme has resulted in the proliferation of international programmes which are simply Thai curricula conducted in a foreign language, usually English, but without any particular international elements introduced into the curricula and teaching methods. While there are second-order changes in such programmes in terms of the "creation of new programmes, new offices and new campuses", there is, however, little changes "in terms of the effectiveness and efficiency of the existing programmes" (first-order changes).

Mukherjee et al.'s chapter examines the access, equity and quality issues involving the higher education sector in Malaysia. The Malaysian higher education was elitist until the 1990s when the government initiated a comprehensive strategy to raise the proportion of tertiary-educated individuals in the country's labour force. Between 1995 and 1997, the parliament approved a series of legislative acts covering "accreditation and quality assurance, regulations regarding HEIs and international branch campuses, use of English as medium of instruction,

corporatization and the Higher Education Student Loan Fund". Perhaps the most important change in the government policy was to allow the private sector to play a bigger role in the provision of higher education. Consequently, the end result was the democratization and massification of Malaysian higher education.

Access to higher education was greatly enhanced with the massification of higher education; the higher education enrolment rates increased from 2.9 per cent in 1990 to 8.1 per cent in 2000 and an impressive 37.8 per cent in 2012. While access to higher education has improved significantly for all ethnic groups over the last four decades, inequity in educational opportunities remains very contentious, and there is also rising concern over the quality of education. Ethnic preferential educational policies continue to create inequities especially in terms of unfair access "to publicly funded higher education; how inputs are allocated; and how benefits are distributed". More worrying, the existing higher educational policies and practices have resulted in producing a limited talent pool and failure to develop a meritocratic academic culture. Also, students are graduating with poor linguistic competency in English and thus are not competitive in the global economy. The authors propose a number of fundamental systemic reforms to the "Malaysian higher education, and indeed the education system as a whole", in order to redress the higher education sector's various maladies.

In the chapter on higher education participation in Indonesia, Fahmi uses a non-linear decomposition method to appraise the effect of upper secondary school quality on participation in higher education. The Indonesian secondary school level has four different types of schools, namely: public secondary school, private non-religious school, private Christian school, and private Islamic school. In 2010, the lower and upper public secondary schools enrolled 63.7 per cent and 50.2 per cent of the lower and upper secondary students, respectively. For admission into higher education, students must attain a certain passing grade in the National Examination. Institutions offering higher education in Indonesia include academies, polytechnics, colleges, institutes and universities.

Fahmi's findings show that students enrolled in private Christian schools have the highest rate for higher education participation followed by, in descending order, students from public schools, private non-religious schools and lastly private Islamic schools. Unsurprisingly, the private Christian schools have the best inputs which include superior funding, better qualified teaching staff, students come from higher socio-economic

background, and so on. Conversely, on the other end of the spectrum the private schools are poorly funded, teachers have lower qualification, students are from lower socio-economic status, and so on. The quality differences and “unobservable variables” contributed to the differential rate of higher education participation among students from the private Christian, public secondary, private non-religious and private Islamic schools. As such, the government policies of the further privatization of education would widen the educational inequalities between the upper and lower stratum of Indonesian society.

In the chapter on primary schooling in Malaysia, Symaco examines the patterns of and policies affecting access and retention in the primary school sector as well as address the question of quality and equity. In Malaysia, strong political commitment and consistent substantial government spending on primary and secondary school education enabled the country to significantly raise its “youth literacy rate from 88 per cent in 1980 to near-universal literacy of 99 per cent today”. Since the mid-1990s, primary school net enrolment has remained in the high 90 per cent, and the survival rate to year 6 in primary school has also stayed relatively high, averaging 96 per cent from 2005 to 2010. Importantly, “there is no significant gender disparity in enrolment and completion of primary schooling”. While there has been “improvements in the quality of education”, at the international level Malaysia still lag behind in terms of its students’ performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

Malaysia has successfully eliminated the historical ethnic disparity in primary school access and retention among the Malay, Chinese and Indian communities. However, while there has been progress made in raising the enrolment rates among the Orang Asli and *bumiputra* groups in Sarawak and Sabah, those rates are still much lower than the enrolment rates for the Malays, Chinese and Indians. As the smaller minority groups such as the Orang Asli and the *bumiputras* in Sabah and Sarawak reside in the more remote, rural areas of the country, to further increase their access to primary school present great challenges. Two other groups of children who have poor access to primary schooling are the children of lower income foreign workers and the “undocumented children” of refugees and illegal immigrants, especially in the state of Sabah.

Since the political changes in Myanmar starting in 2011, the government has announced a number of reforms to the education sector. The chapter by Zobrist and McCormick examines the various government reforms,

especially the decentralization policy, to address the various deep-seated problems in the education sector. Among the reforms, the government has raised the education expenditure, decentralized the provision of education, increased the numbers of schools and teachers, expanded the number of years of compulsory education, reformed the curriculum, and drafted an education law. Nevertheless, the authors argue that in reality these reforms have limited impact. For example, “state resources to provide more schools and teachers are constrained, and the possibility of preparing enough teachers, with the proper qualifications, in a short amount of time, is also limited”.

The government is cognizant of the need to get “the right kind of legislation, funding, and advice to improve education”, and has “placed an emphasis on reorganizing and rationalizing administration and administrative practices”. However, besides reorganizing and rationalizing administration and administrative practices, policy reforms must also take into consideration the institutional culture factor. In their case study of the decentralization policy, the authors’ findings show that “the institutional culture of organizations like the Ministry of Education, together with societal attitudes towards education and the roles of students, teachers, and Ministry staff, all limit the possibility of decentralization”.

Notes

1. Except for Thailand which was never under direct European colonial rule.
2. Most countries do not make the distinction between national and official language.
3. See Carnoy (2005).

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