

Notes from Asia Pacific, early March 2013

Indonesian Focus

“Any dream will do”

Indonesians are cheerful and resourceful in almost all circumstances. No matter what life throws at them – financial problems, corruption in the courts and governments, earthquakes and floods – they keep smiling and find a way round the problems. This may seem a dangerous generalisation about the fourth most populous nation in the world, with over 240 million people speaking more than eighty languages and spread across some 17,000 islands (more when the tide is out, one is told with a smile), but it is true nonetheless. In the cheerfulness index their nearest rival in this part of the world is the Philippines.

Last week Cambridge held a seminar for our schools in Indonesia on the subject of the relationship between national and international education. This was highly topical for the schools attending and they were keen to discuss it. In Indonesia, as in many Asia Pacific countries, recent years have seen increased concern by governments to promote “national education”, cultivating love of the student’s own country and knowledge of its language, literature, history and values. Recently there have been a flurry of new regulations applying to all schools teaching Indonesian children, ensuring that primacy is given to the Indonesian language and to the teaching of civics and religion. These appear to require changes in schools offering Cambridge primary and secondary curricula.

At the same time, however, the same Asia Pacific governments are promoting “international” - or “global” - education, not just for the children of foreigners but for their own young people. They want them to be more aware of global issues, speak other languages and prepare to live and work in an increasingly interconnected world. Some of the schools attending our seminar in Jakarta are called “international schools” while others are part of the state system and all have Indonesian students. They are preparing students for Cambridge “international” examinations. So what are they to make of the revitalised drive for “national education”? Is it in conflict with the requirements of international education? Does pursuit of one have to be at the expense of the other or can they be complementary?

The seminar took place at the Ghandi Memorial International School in Jakarta and began with the school’s primary choir lustily – and appropriately - singing “Any dream will do” from Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd-Webber’s “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat”.

Isabel Nisbet from Cambridge International Examinations [gave an introduction](#) exploring the theoretical issues at stake and giving examples of national and international curricula from countries other than Indonesia. She was followed by an academic adviser to the Indonesian Government, who was the personification of cheerfulness. He explained the objectives of the Government’s policies to improve standards in education and encouraged the schools present to take the long view and concentrate on how they could lead the way in improving the quality of education. “Don’t worry about detailed rules and regulations”, he said, “as long as you keep the important end-points in view.” After that, the principal of our host school described how they promote international understanding and lead by example in showing respect and value to children of all races and abilities in the multi-racial school community.

The school delegates welcomed the messages, but many remained concerned. They were unclear what changes they would be required to make to their curricula at both primary and secondary level, and some felt that the future of their schools was under threat. The second speaker gave them tactical advice that the best approach to new Government requirements was to consider what they could best do to further the objectives behind the directives they

received and take the initiative to go and tell officials their proposals. That was much more likely to have a positive outcome, he said, than putting the shutters down and waiting anxiously for the Government inspectors to arrive.

Some writers from the early twentieth century – John Dewey for one – considered international education superior to national education, because it focuses on what unites men rather than on what divides them. Some forecast that by the millennium programmes of national education would have been overtaken by wider, global, approaches. Well, they were wrong, at least with regard to the Asia Pacific region. National education is thriving here, and the importance of telling the national story and passing on national values to the next generation is recognised by almost all governments. It features strongly – along with international education - in the “citizenship” section of the Australian National Curriculum, where the objective is for Australian youngsters to become “local and global citizens”.

A striking aspect of the discussion at the seminar was that everyone present, including those from international schools, agreed that it was important to teach children their national language, literature, history and values. They saw international education as extending and complementing that enterprise, not competing with it. There are many issues which are common to national and international programmes – respect for people of other races, for example, and environmental issues around sustainable development. It would be complacent to overlook the areas of genuine tension around aspects of some national programmes (such as the coverage of controversial historical events in textbooks) and some international programmes, particularly those designed in the West around the structures and philosophy of the United Nations. However, there did appear to be a consensus that national and international education could go forward together.

The next day the Economist magazine ran an “Indonesia Summit” at which the speakers included no fewer than four Indonesian Government Ministers, with the keynote address given by the Vice President. Delegates were from many countries and many sectors of the economy, including education, and the position that emerged time after time was the same - a rapidly-growing economy in a country with unrivalled natural resources, a young population which, in contrast with other Asia Pacific countries, is continuing at replacement rate, some progress in improving national institutions, reducing corruption and growing democracy, but still a way to go.

Elections are due in 2014, and between now and then we were told to expect continued domestic pressure for measures which visibly “put Indonesians first” and protected the national interest. Those who were looking for further reforms to open up the international economy and reduce protective subsidies and legislation restricting inward investment should not expect much progress until after the elections. But conference delegates were urged to take the long view and not be put off too much by short-term measures which might appear nationalist or protectionist.

Isabel asked the Education Minister how international schools could help with the national project to improve the quality of education. He said that “as long as international schools teach civics, religion and the Indonesian language to Indonesians they have nothing to worry about”. However, it was clear from discussion during the day that there were a lot of problems in the school and university sector. Invitations to negotiate ways around new directives raised spectres of encouraging behaviours which reputable organisations are rightly not prepared to undertake. The same kinds of problem were discussed in relation to the mining and oil industries. More generally, investors do not like uncertainty and there was a danger of not attracting enough investment support in the period between now and 2014.

The strongest memory of the two days was of the children’s choir singing “Any dream will do”. The opportunities and potential in Indonesia are huge and it is a very attractive potential

partner and base for many overseas countries. Indonesia wants to work with others to grow further and strengthen its international standing and other countries want to help. There is the potential to make many dreams come true there. However, short-term protectionism and restrictive rules aimed at national political audiences can hold progress back. Those of us involved in international education in Indonesia owe it to our students to work with the schools to find ways forward.

The message from the children in the choir to the authorities governing their education was well expressed by WB Yeats:

“I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”¹

¹ From “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”