International Students – Understanding the Motives for Higher Education as Development Aid

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Abstract

This paper will examine international higher education as development aid in the context of the 'Global Knowledge Economy'. The paper will consider different schools of thought that have shaped the discourse around development assistance and offer explanations into the underlying development rationale that continues to shape policies on international and Australian higher education foreign aid scholarships. The paper will include an overview of how scholars have explained the role of higher education aid and some of the key reasons why nations and individuals would invest in international higher education. It is proposed that the broad themes that invite convergence in terms of key motivators for engagement in aid-funded higher education programs include the objectives of capacity development and poverty alleviation. The paper includes a brief overview of the Australian higher education aid-funded programs and perspectives on cultural identity change.

Keywords

International higher education; foreign aid; higher education scholarships; capacity development; poverty alleviation; inter-cultural experience.

Introduction

Higher education is increasingly international, borderless and expanding and involves unprecedented numbers of internationally mobile students and academics and collaborations across borders (Turner & Robson, 2008). Growth is driven by enrolment pressures arising from greater demands to build human capital, the 'knock on' affect of rising primary and secondary education enrolments, a rise in demand alongside insufficient capacity, particularly in developing countries and high student mobility (Altbach et al, 2009), characterised by students from Asia who enter the major academic institutions in North America, Western Europe and Australia. In addition, growth is in demand for access to international higher education, in English-speaking countries. This is influenced by the continued expansion of English as the global language of business, research and popular culture.

In response to the rising demand for higher education, many aid donors (bilateral, multilateral and philanthropic) have elected to fund higher education scholarships or fellowships for students from developing countries to access tertiary education in the more developed, industrialised countries. A scholarship is broadly defined as an award of financial aid provided for the purpose of a student to complete further education. Australian aid-funded higher education is provided by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), an administratively autonomous agency that is situated within the Foreign Affairs and Trade portfolio. Australia has provided scholarship assistance for individuals from a range of developing countries to undertake studies at Australian education institutions since the early 1950s.

Many of the international students who access these scholarships are motivated by the potential to transform themselves and develop an international worldview, as well as enrich their personal and professional experience. Benefits include improved language proficiency, access to qualifications that may not exist at home, development of international networks, career advancement, social prestige, enhanced English language and exposure to alternative social and cultural norms (Harman, 2005) that shape identity.

Australian Higher Education Aid Scholarships

The Australian aid program is managed by AusAID and aims to assist developing countries to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development, in line with Australia's national interests. The program has provided scholarship

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assistance for individuals from a range of developing countries to undertake studies at Australian education institutions since the early 1950s Colombo Plan. Investment in education aid was estimated to be over $690 million in 2009-10, or approximately 18 per cent of total Official Development Assistance (ODA).

The framework for AusAID's approach to aid-funded education, including its programs for higher education scholarships links back to sustainable development and economic growth, in line with Australia's national interest, as the means to alleviate poverty (Cassity, 2008). The scholarship program is designed to develop the capacity and leadership skills of awardees so that they can contribute to development in their home country and to build people to people linkages at the individual, institutional and country levels (AusAID, 2010). According to AusAID:

> Development awards provide opportunities for tertiary study at Australian education institutions, helping build the skills and knowledge required to lead and drive developing countries' economic and social development. Development awards are important to help build people to people links between Australia and developing countries in our region and further afield and for responding to global and regional challenges. Development awards focus on the development priorities of our country partners and build knowledge and leadership in the areas of most need. Recipients of these awards return home to contribute to their home country's social and economic development. Returning awardees are highly valued for their technical, language and analytical skills and are sought after by employers. Some former awardees have gone on to hold positions of major influence, including at the vice president and ministerial level in countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam (AusAID, 2010, p8).

The constituent programs comprise the Australian Development Scholarship (ADS) along with other programs, including the Australian Leadership Award Scholarships (ALAS) and the Australian Leadership Award Fellowships (ALAF). Up to 1000 ADS are awarded each year to students from 31 participating developing countries to undertake full-time undergraduate and increasingly postgraduate studies in Australia. Generally, programs assume that awardees completing the program will return home and contribute to development outcomes.

The Development rationale for Australian aid-funded higher education

Key drivers of Australian aid policy, since the late 1970s, have included an eclectic mix of foreign policy and economic objectives that are associated with a neo-liberal, or free market approach (Kilby, 2007). Scholars from the orthodox neo-liberal school would argue that investment in higher education is a key element of the development process that enhances the skills, knowledge, attitudes and motivation necessary to drive forms of economic and social capital accumulation (Woolcock, 2007), with 'trickle-down' effects (Stiglitz, 2004) that provide for economic and social development to occur (Schultz, 1961; Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985; Tilak, 1994; Kapur & Crowley, 2008; Collins & Rhoads; 2010). Higher education as aid is therefore built around the logic that developing countries will benefit from aid scholarships.

In contrast to the orthodox, are those scholars from the heterodox school who propose that human development aligned to the market economy is not deterministic of economic development. These heterodox scholars tend to focus on the inherent social, political, geographical, historical and cultural power relations, denying that higher education scholarships have assisted economic development outcomes and arguing that such forms of aid have been of greater benefit to the donor countries and elites in the recipient countries (Hughes, 1998; Hunt, 2004; Marginson & McBurnie, 2004; Nilan, 2005; Ninnes, 2005; Altbach, 2009).

Development Effectiveness of Higher Education Scholarships

Overall Australian Scholarship Award impact studies or reports on development effectiveness are seriously lacking. The last audit of the AusAID scholarship program was conducted in 1999 by the Australian National Audit Organisation (ANAO). In the 1999 audit, it was noted that performance indicators to measure the outcomes of the ADS program were lacking, in terms of measuring how students contribute to their country's development on return. Factors that precluded performance measures, included time lags related to returning students and their contribution to their country's development, as well as the difficulty of relating individual efforts to broader economic and other developmental outcomes.

AusAID will need to develop strategies and methods to document development effectiveness and demonstrate the extent of impact arising from its Scholarship programs. Issues and challenges include the need to draw comparative data from non-awardee international scholars who presumably also attain skills, experience and develop professional linkages whilst abroad and provision for a review process that is independent of government and publicly accessible. Harman (1995) noted there has been little written about the views and experiences of the home governments of sponsored students and longer term follow up studies on awardees who have completed studies at Australian universities. Cuthbert et al (2008) state there is little known about the outcomes of Australian higher education for

international students, with research to date unable to establish the connection between the private benefits of education for individual graduates and the public good. A number of independent tracer studies (Keats, 1969; Kiley, 1999; Daroesman, 1992; Cannon, 2000) highlighted problems of relevance of Australian education training for returned graduates, with many reporting limited opportunities to utilise their education and training opportunities in the workplace, suggesting an inherent mismatch between the education provided in Australia and local conditions.

What factors are motivating aid-funded higher education?

Factors motivating the ongoing provision of aid-funded higher education scholarships include a focus on poverty alleviation, capacity development and national interest, both that of the donor and the recipient country. In addition, the motivations of student awardees are also important factors.

Poverty Alleviation

A critical consensus amongst the key actors in development (governments, multilateral agencies, civil society, teachers, industry) is that aid-funded higher education should be aimed at reducing poverty. Poverty is defined as a denial of choices and opportunities, a violation of human dignity and the lack of access to basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) as well as the basic capacity to participate effectively in society. The notion of poverty alleviation, was articulated by the UN World Summit for Social Development in 1998 and it is reflected in the later Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), which target the halving of poverty by 2015.

Scholars from the orthodox persuasion would tend to argue that investments in education represent an important key to long term strategies of reducing poverty. Tilak (1993) notes that education affects poverty directly by imparting knowledge and skills that are associated with higher productivity and higher wages and indirectly by influencing fulfilment of basic needs like better utilisation of health facilities, water, sanitation and shelter.

Capacity Development

Capacity development is the process by which individuals, organisations, institutions and societies develop abilities (individually and collectively) to perform functions, solve problems and set and achieve objectives. The ultimate purpose of capacity development is to leave behind better skills individuals and more effective institutions. The aim of capacity development is inherently linked to the goals of poverty alleviation and the ideas offered by Human Capital theorists who have sought to link economic development to the rapid accumulation of better-educated workers and the downstream economic and fiscal impacts (Schultz, 1965). In terms of human capital, investing in higher education is seen as a pre-requisite for economic development. Griffin & Knight (1990) put forward the assertion that well directed expenditure on raising human capital can accelerate growth, reduce inequality and alleviate poverty with the ultimate aim of raising the capabilities of people, with human development akin to what development is all about.

Australian National Interest

International aid, including the funding for higher education has become an indispensable part of international relations and is closely related to national policy and generally used as an instrument of foreign policy and often used for the purpose of strengthening diplomatic relations (Kapur & Crowley, 2008). International students bring intellectual capital and in many cases study at high quality universities with firm plans to stay. Hughes (1998) maintains that Australian aid is blatantly aligned with Australian economic national interests. According to her analysis, the Scholarship program is effectively another delivery mechanism for exporting Australian education, with the principal mode being the training of foreign students in Australia. According to Hughes analysis, in reality higher education delivered under the aid program was effectively another form of subsidy that was justified in terms of the externalities created, including better economies of scale for Australian higher education as purchases of Australian goods and services during studentship or following returns abroad. The significant proportion of the aid budget for education is spent in Australia with tertiary education suited to Australian interests, with substantial multiplier effects and externalities accruing to Australia which would be lost if aid were spent off shore (Hughes, 1998).

Recipient Country Interest

The scholarship program is built around the logic that developing countries will benefit from aid scholarships. Recipient countries support their students gaining skills and experience offshore and this is demonstrated by their involvement in foreign aid scholarship programs. Whereas in the 1960s, concerns regarding 'brain drain' were high on the foreign aid agenda of governments in developing countries, more recently the virtues of having an overseas Diaspora in terms of foreign currency remittances, potential lobbyists and facilitators of trade can be of enormous benefit to an international student's home country.

Higher education aid programs assist developing countries to meet some of the increasing demands by students and parents for higher education that provides for research and training quality. De Wit (2008) identifies reductions in state funding for higher education and the expansion of demand for trained personnel as forming part of what he terms is the 'push' factor affecting flow patterns of international students from less developed countries to OECD countries.

Student Awardees

According to the literature on the international student experience, there are many claims as to the benefits, both intrinsic and extrinsic, that arise to the awardees. Many international students are motivated by the potential to transform themselves and develop lifelong learning skills, an international worldview, as well as enrich their personal and professional experience. Benefits include improved language proficiency and familiarity with other cultures, access to qualifications that may not exist at home, development of international networks, exposure to the GKE, career advancement, social prestige, enhanced English language, exposure to new teaching methods and support services (Harman, 2005). Lee (2007) adds that students go abroad to study because of the market value of foreign degrees and subsequent job opportunities in the global labour market as well as the potential for migration to the host countries.

De Wit (2008) identified the availability of scholarships abroad as a 'push' factor for international students, along with poor quality educational facilities, lack of research facilities, difficulties in access, and the enhanced value of a foreign degree. "Push" factors are related to the home country circumstances that prompt a student to migrate to another country, whereas 'pull' factors include the incentives generated from the receiving country for students to migrate. In terms of pull factors, access to quality education and the prospects for career development following international study is identified as important in terms of going and remaining abroad (Tansel & Gungor, 2002). Other factors that form part of the 'push' include enhanced foreign language acquisition, broadening of personal and life experiences and the exposure to new cultures,

Cannon (2000) argues that for international students, the value of the overseas experience lies primarily in what he terms is occupying a 'third place'. According to Cannon, the notion of a 'third place' gives rise to a distinct inter-cultural group in professional society, which provides advantage to employers, individuals and communities through its unique potential and relationships within global society. This "third place" or "home" is the place where the graduate has made accommodations with family and friends, is comfortable in the lifestyle of the home community, has integrated their world view change, and has adjusted to their situation within the work environment. Butcher et al (2003) extends the notion of 'third place' in his study of New Zealand aid-funded higher education. He argues that international students gain from the transformative space whereby they learn to work cross-culturally and gain from personal experience and understanding of multiple cultures.

Student Challenges to Cultural Identity

The needs, expectations, challenges and opportunities for international students differ from that of domestic students and are influenced by their educational, social, personal and cultural backgrounds (Turner & Robson, 2008). The literature on international student adjustment documents further challenges related to the unmet desire and need for social contact with host nationals. Enabling graduates to develop competencies that will equip them for to compete in the GKE requires attention to their employability, cognitive, attitudinal and intercultural needs, particularly aspects of dealing with people from different cultural contexts, ethnicities and languages (Turner & Robson, 2008). The combination of such issues and challenges can impact substantially upon the experience of international students who engage in aid-funded higher education in Australia.

Cultural identity or ethnicity (Friedman, 1994) is understood variously across the literature, starting with the notion that identity categorises people relative to other people (Rizvi, 2008; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2010) and is transferred by succeeding generations. Many psychological, sociological, situational and contextual (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991) factors influence the cultural identity of international students. "Students cross over into borders of meaning, maps of knowledge, social relations, and values that are increasingly being negotiated and rewritten" (Giroux & Robbins, 2006, p51). Whilst there is no single common theoretical framework for the study of cultural identity, strong themes in the related literature include the process of adaptation or acculturation (Searle & Ward, 1990; Berry, 1994; Martin & Harrell, 2004; Tran, 2007; Leask, 2008), and re-acculturation, or re-entry (Marks, 1987; Searle & Ward, 1990; Cannon, 2000; Butcher, 2002; Sussman, 2002; Szkedlerek, 2010).

Cultural identity change becomes apparent on entry to a foreign cultural environment (Searle & Ward, 1990; Sussman, 2002) and is most salient at the time of return to the home country (Sussman, 2002; Cox, 2006). Subsequently research on cultural identity at both the acculturation and re-acculturation phase is relevant to the provision of Australian aid-funded higher education. The literature strongly suggests that the greatest challenge takes place at the latter re-entry phase. Given that the end point of the cultural transition cycle for the educational sojourner

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is the return home and subsequent contribution to home country development, understanding how students re-acculturate is critical for the Australian aid-funded Scholarship Program.

Rizvi's study of cosmopolitanism (2005) considers how cultural identities are subject to change during transnational educational experiences. His study based on student interviews before and after completion of studies in Australia, argues that research on cultural identity should take into account how students view their experience but importantly incorporate understanding of how their identity is shaped by mobility, transition and formal learning and how this influences their perception of their own culture and that of the emergent global culture. His proposition confers with that of Doherty & Singh (2005) whose research on international student subjectivities supports they demonstrate global imaginings with emphasis on notions of mobility, trans-culturalism and Diaspora. Other scholars have examined the nature of cultural hybridity (Keohane, 2005) and inter-culturalism (Kim, 2008), to explain how sojourners suture collective and individual subjectivity, develop multiple frames of reference and develop cultural identities that transcend national identity and span global and local contexts (Appardurai & Breckenridge, 1988; Giroux & Robbins, 2006).

Research on cultural identity indicates that sojourners with multiple international experiences generally exhibit a sense of belonging to a global community and are found to adapt and repatriate positively (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Cannon, 2000; Sussman, 2002; Kim, 2008). A 'third culture person' is said to bridge the identity gap between their home culture and their host culture and it is argued that this may represent a source of cultural advantage (Cannon, 2000) that could impact in terms of home-country development outcomes, following an aid-funded higher education experience.

Conclusion

This paper has examined Australian aid-funded higher education and the development rationale that underpins the program which involves contested goals of alleviating poverty, building capacity whilst contributing to Australia's national interests for economic growth and political stability. In spite of the scale and longevity of the Australian scholarship program, there has been an overall lack of accountability to the Australian public in terms of understanding the program's effectiveness and it is argued that this constitutes a major, unresolved public policy issue. The paper has examined some of the key motivators for donors and recipient countries as well as students to engage in aid-funded higher education programs. What is currently unclear from the literature is the extent to which aid-funded higher education has assisted economic development outcomes in the recipient developing countries, or whether in fact this form of aid has been of greater benefit to Australia.

The paper has also raised the issue of cultural identity and its relationship to aid-funded higher education, particularly the challenge of cultural identity change and the implications for home country development. It is argued that further research to understand the implications of cultural identity change is warranted, as part of addressing one of the gaps in understanding the development effectiveness of the Australian Scholarship program.

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