

# The role of educational tourism in raising academic standards

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## Abstract

Educational tourism has received little attention as a vehicle for raising academic standards. The Program for International Student Assessment test scores (PISA) have placed the US in an average position with Shanghai, South Korea, Finland and Singapore at the top. Reports from international educators who travelled in the US, Finland and China have pointed to some differences and similarities in their cultural and educational systems that may be contributing to success and failure. Educational tourism therefore has to be encouraged and supported on a national level in a coordinated effort to learn from one another and improve academic standards and achievement worldwide.

**Key words:** Education, tourism, academic standards

## Introduction

Educational tourism has received little attention as a vehicle for raising academic standards. Instead it has been treated as a means of bridging cultural differences and promoting conflict prevention. Although severe conflicts have occurred throughout history, educational divides became deep during the Middle Ages, until the Protestant Reformation opposed the authority of the Catholic Church. Later the Scientific Revolution challenged tradition and despite the new levels of respect that science gained, xenophobia and ethnocentrism, cultivated by the emergence of new nation-states, hindered the growth and dissemination of knowledge in Europe. The famous universities established in Germany, France, England, Italy and Russia, mostly catered to the education of the elites, while the masses were left greatly ignorant (Anderson, 2004). Frictions and wars ravaged the continent until the late 1940's and the fragile

peace encouraged the embracement of new thinking on ways to prevent conflict.

Conflict prevention has been discussed by various think tanks, NGO's, governmental officials and independent analysts who nevertheless acknowledge that efforts may fail when intervening agents ignore information gathered by other analysts, and remain unaware of collaborative research techniques (Chayes, 1998). Conflict resolution techniques can never match the efficacy of conflict prevention. David L. Phillips, the director of the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity has written extensively on the need to bolster "preventive development" that targets the root causes of conflict, and thus assisting nations to manage rising tensions before violence erupts. Preventive development also strengthens the partnership between conflict prone countries and the international community (Phillips 2002). The core foundation of preventive development lies in the limitation of ethnocentrism and the process of cultural

convergence. Although opponents to globalization have often protested the loss of local cultural characteristics, they have not opposed the type of cultural integration that will enhance industriousness and promote peace. The younger generation appears better equipped to carry out the initial steps of a global cultural convergence and educational tourism emerges as an efficient vehicle for such a change.

### **Educational Tourism**

The notion of traveling for educational purposes is not new (Gibson 1998; Holdnak & Holland 1996; Kalinowski & Weiler 1992) and its popularity is only expected to increase (Gibson 1998; Holdnak & Holland 1996). Tourism motivated by the desire to learn, has prevailed for millennia. Educational tourism is a program through which "participants travel to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location" (Bodger, 1998, p.28). It is comprised of several sub-types including ecotourism, heritage tourism, rural/farm tourism, and student exchanges between educational institutions.

Many countries have committed themselves and adopted long-term well-designed programs. In the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority is launching a pioneering industry development initiative based on a three-pronged approach covering overseas school trips, enrichment or personal development programs and corporate training (2009). In Thailand, foreign universities have opened campuses or made agreements with Thai universities to run dual degree programs at Thai universities.

Within the European Union, the European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) has organized exchange programs since 1987. The aim of ERASMUS has been to encourage and support academic mobility of higher education students and teachers within the

European Union, as well as EU candidate countries such as Turkey. International programs are springing throughout the globe encouraging such exchanges. Examples are the International Students Exchange Programs (ISEP), a network of 275 colleges and universities in 39 countries cooperating to provide affordable access to international education for a diverse student population. The Fulbright organization emphasizes the importance of exchange students programs whose purpose is to humanize mankind so we can achieve a peaceful world (CIES 2009). Similarly, the Cooperative Association of States for Scholarships (CASS), sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and administered by Georgetown University's Center for Intercultural Education (CIED) in Washington, D.C., invites to the US a number of socio-economically disadvantaged, but talented young adults from Latin America and the Caribbean. Finally, besides the exchange of student populations, we also have the teacher exchange programs and lately the administrators visiting programs that aim to investigate the correlates that help other countries succeed in their educational targets.

### **PISA Score Differences**

Not only do we have an abundance of exchange programs, we also have in place an international assessment, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates students from a number of countries in math, science and reading. The most recent scores testing the performance of 15-year olds around the world in math, science and reading, painted a bleak picture for the US. With a scale of 500 as the average, students from Shanghai scored 600 in math, from Singapore 562 and from the US 487 (Dillon, 2010). In science, the Shanghai students again excelled with a 575, the Finnish came in second with 554 and the US 23rd with a 502. Finally, in reading, the Shanghai students came in first with 556, Koreans were second with 539 and the US came in 17th with

500 (ibid). At the same time the US scores showed strong disparities along ethnic/racial lines. As PISA broke down the reading results along ethnic and racial lines, one saw that Asian-Americans scored 541, White Americans scored 525, Hispanics scored 466 and African-Americans scored 441 (Reynolds, 2011).

The evident superiority of the Finnish and the Chinese results initiated a wave of educational tourism towards these two countries, with US educators and administrators travelling to the North of Europe and the depths of Asia in an effort to understand and assess the correlates of success (Partanen, 2011).

### **Characteristics of Finnish and Chinese Systems**

The results of the discussions between American administrators and their counterparts overseas, pointed to marked similarities and differences between Finland and China. The similarity was that both nations were greatly homogeneous and both placed a great value on education. Yet, there was a marked difference. Whereas the Chinese system based its success on culturally injected norms of intense studying, cramming of information and parental discipline, the Finnish system was relaxed and creative. Students take off their shoes inside the school, call the teacher by their first names, and spend fewer hours in school. Interestingly enough the system is so trusted that teachers' evaluations do not exist. Pasi Sahlberg, the director of the Finnish Ministry of Education's Center for International Mobility, explained that accountability is necessary when responsibility is absent (Partanen, 2011). It is the principal's job to notice if a teacher is ineffective and deal with the problem.

Another difference stems from the American emphasis on competition, an orientation that makes Finns quite uncomfortable. Sahlberg quotes a line from the Finnish writer Samuli Paronen: "Real winners do not compete." It's

hard to think of a more un-American idea, but when it comes to education, the country's success shows that the Finnish attitude might have merits. There are no lists of best schools or teachers in Finland. The main driver of education policy is not competition between teachers and between schools, but cooperation. Children do not have to change schools when they turn 12 but continue with the same teacher until they graduate (Burridge, 2007). School teachers have Master's degrees and the profession is well respected. They also have an unusual degree of autonomy over the curriculum as they can choose their own texts while adhering to nationally established objectives (ibid). The relationship between students and teachers is informal while the attitude of parents toward teachers is that of trust and not suspicion. In each classroom there are two teachers supporting students with disabilities or working independently with the gifted ones. There is no tracking and the hours spent in classroom are among the fewest in the developed world (Jimenez, 2009).

The trust shown towards the teachers stems from the status and prestige of their occupation. If the teacher feels he should take the students on a field trip unexpectedly, he does not need parental consent. Test-based accountability and externally determined learning standards have not been adopted by the Finnish system. External standardized tests do not exist, whereas all assessments are based on tests designed by the teachers.

More importantly, the system appears to emphasize equality in opportunity. As tracking does not exist, better students tutor the weaker. There are no private schools either. A few independent schools do exist but are publicly financed. None is allowed to charge tuition fees. Furthermore, there are no private universities. Partanen, again citing Pasi Sahlberg, compares the Finnish ideology to the prevailing American one and emphasizes that the US bases its educational strategy on the following premises: That constant testing is

the only way to keep track of students' performance, and teachers' improvement should be based on evaluations and merit pay. Furthermore the belief that competition will enhance the outcome is deeply engrained in the US belief system whereas there is wide support for the involvement of the private sector and free market approaches (Partanen, 2011).

The Chinese system proved less intriguing. Although there is a compulsory 9 year education, the curriculum is centrally designed and so are the tests. The Chinese students are culturally expected to treat education honorably and perform their best. Studying outside school hours and during holidays is the norm. Cramming of information is expected. Failure is treated as a personality fault and discipline by parents discourages such deviations. Corporal punishment is frequent and parents do not consider it abuse. Teachers are generally feared and revered, and their authority is seldom challenged (Suren, 2009).

When students enter high school they have to choose between sciences or humanities curricula that eventually lead to highly specialized National College Entrance Exams. The provincial education authorities design and distribute student applications, conduct highly competitive examinations, and develop recruitment plans according to provincial needs (Research on China's National College Entrance Examination, 2009). One should not generalize the results from Shanghai to the rest of the country where one observes significant performance gaps. However, throughout the region, there is a strong Confucian emphasis on the value of education that is steeped into the culture (Kristof, 2011). Accordingly, one observes Chinese students studying hard even on holidays, while failure at school is a disappointment to family and society alike.

### **An assessment from the Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore**

In 2006, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, in his then capacity as minister of education, was interviewed by Fareed Zakaria on a paradox the latter had observed: Zakaria wondered how it was possible that when one looks at the same students ten or twenty years later, few students from Asia or Finland were worldbeaters anymore, with few top-ranked scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors, business executives or academics to show for (Zakaria, 2006). Shanmugaratnam pointed out that although both countries cherished meritocracies, the US system is based on the meritocracy of talent whereas the Singaporean system is based on the meritocracy of tests. Moreover, he applauded the culture that allows US students to challenge conventional wisdom, even if it means challenging authority. Finally he pointed to the excellent qualities of the tertiary system with American universities being unrivalled globally. Despite all the praise, Shanmugaratnam pointed to a huge American failing. "Unless you are comfortably middle class or richer, you get an education that is truly second-rate by any standards. Apart from issues of fairness, what this means is that you never really access the talent of poor, bright kids. They don't go to good schools and, because of teaching methods that focus on bringing everyone along, the bright ones are never pushed. In Singapore we get the poor kid who is very bright and very hungry, and that's crucial to our success."

### **The power of equal opportunities**

Indeed the Minister's observations are supported by the PISA results when one breaks them down according to ethnicity. In the latest tests Americans ranked 17<sup>th</sup> in reading, 24<sup>th</sup> in science, and 30<sup>th</sup> in math (Becker and Posner, 2011). The authors pointed out that 15-year-old kids in East Asian nations (including Australia and New Zealand), along with Finland, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Canada, outperformed the U.S. However, when they examined the social background of the students they saw that in American schools in

which only a small percentage (no more than 10 percent) of the students received free lunches or reduced-cost lunches, which are benefits provided to students from poor families, the PISA reading test scores were the highest in the world. Students from schools in which 75% or more of the students were from poor families, the scores were the second lowest among the 34 countries of the OECD that included such countries as Mexico, Turkey, Portugal, and Slovakia. They also observed that private schools on average did not outperform public schools after adjusting for the quality of students upon entrance. Nor did competition for students correlate to improved average performance either. Finally the data showed that poor kids did better in a school with mostly middle-class kids. The US system remains however greatly segregated, as a reflection of income inequality, which is reaching the highest levels ever.

### **Comparative Observations**

Educational tourism has enabled an in depth analysis and comparison of various systems around the globe and the identification of the correlates that contribute to success or failure. To that extent, the American educators and politicians can learn the benefits of parental discipline as exercised in China and the societal enforcement of equal opportunities as practiced in Finland. However, what stands out as an interesting observation are the similarities between the secondary school system in Finland and the college system in the US. Both the Finnish secondary system and the American tertiary system demand highly educated teachers. Both systems have enforced the maximum academic freedom in the design of the course and the tests. Both systems encourage creativity. Both systems are based on informal relationships. Both systems have rejected standardized testing. And in both systems, one will find trust between teachers and students.

Two totally different models of success force us to rethink the debate on how to improve the

US secondary education system (as the tertiary remains of high quality). The wave of criticisms against the teachers coupled with tenure removal and complicated multiple teacher assessments divert the focus from where it should really be: the cultural determinants that undervalue education especially among the poor and minorities. These determinants include dysfunctional families, an overemphasis on extra curriculum activities at the expense of education, peer pressure effects, and a lack of role models in the inner city poor areas. According to Charles Butt, schools are “inheriting an over entertained distracted student” (quoted in Dillon, 2010) whereas Moorman and Haller (2005) published guidelines for parents on how to motivate their children to do homework, as if homework were unpaid hard pointless labor.

Although the US cannot adopt the strict disciplinarian Chinese family style that pushes students to excel, American educators can emulate parts of the Finnish secondary school system. However, this will not be enough to bridge the racial gap. To achieve the latter goal, one will need far more research that will channel resources to the most efficient agents of change. It is strongly recommended that interviews and surveys should be conducted to purposeful samples of students in order to reveal the factors of academic success for some and the obstacles that promote failure for others. To that extent, interested professors should collaborate on the design of the questionnaire and the administration of selective interviews. The results of such a research could prove pivotal in identifying the causes of success and failure alike.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

The main advantage of educational tourism is the in-depth knowledge of the correlates of success in other countries. This type of tourism may further contribute to cultural integration and should be assessed as a force fighting xenophobia, ethnocentrism and cultural misunderstandings. Furthermore, when

students spend a semester in another country, their exposure to different values on individualism or collectivism, equal rights and meritocracy makes them agents of social change in their native countries.

Despite its benefits, educational tourism is practically unmentionable in local and national tourism planning strategies. Policy recommendations therefore should include a more efficient adoption of this type of 'alternative' tourism and allow its benefits to be more widely felt through arranging frequent encounters of the local population with the foreign population.

Exchange programs should be adopted on an intensive basis and the pool of participating members should expand to include developing countries. Exchange students, teachers and school administrators may gain knowledge that not only will weaken ethnocentrism, but may contribute to rising academic standards and achievements in both the developed and the developing world.

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