

SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND COMPARATIVE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: *This paper shows how important is context in undertaking comparative and international educational research. It begins by showing how early UNESCO Plans for Asia largely ignored this crucial aspect. It then goes on to trace the development of the twin fields of comparative and international education, their purposes and different approaches and areas of inquiry before turning to South-East Asia. By looking at the context of South-east Asia as a region in its own right, with its diversity and complexities, and by highlighting the region's uniqueness, the paper suggests that there has been too little comparative research across the region as a whole. Too much has been concentrated on individual countries or on a couple of countries at a time. The paper ends by making some recommendations for future comparative educational research.*

Introduction

When UNESCO produced the first of its regional plans, the Karachi Plan, in 1960 concerned with the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education (UPE) by 1980, it treated the whole of Asia as one region. There was no attempt to break it down into smaller sub-regions such as the Indian sub-continent or South-East Asia. Targets were set for each individual country to achieve levels of UPE but there was scant regard for the region's diversity, that ranged from poverty-stricken and medieval, Afghanistan, through the very populous countries of India, Indonesia and Pakistan, to the tiny states of Brunei Darussalam and Singapore. Although there was a recognition 'that educational expansion must differ from country to country within the region because of the different stages of overall socio-economic development of individual member states and because of the different levels and capacity of secondary education from whence most of the teachers would come,' (Watson 1981, p.36) the region was nevertheless divided into three groups of countries that were not coterminous. The Asian region, like Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, was largely treated as an entity (see IJED 1981) and the task of achieving UPE was predominantly seen as a matter of setting targets and measuring success or failure through the gathering of statistics for individual countries (Fredericksen, 1981).

Although UPE has been superseded by 'Education for All' (EFA), and more recently by 'Learning for All' (LFA) (World Bank, 2011), and the targets have been enshrined in the Millennium Development Goals, there is still a tendency to see progress in terms of statistics and numbers and to lump large regions together (see, for example, UNESCO 2003/04, 2005, 2006, etc; King & Rose 2005). The individual contexts of each society and education system were, and often still are, largely ignored. As this author observed with regard to the Karachi Plan:

The major drawback of the Karachi Plan, as a plan, lies in the very nature of its being regional. To be effective and realistic planning needs not only to be national, taking into account national aspirations and characteristics, but also regional within a country making allowances for ethnic, religious and linguistic differences. This a regional plan cannot do (Watson, op.cit, p. 48).

There is a danger that large international target setting for educational development still ignores the uniqueness of each and every country. Yet it is the very different contexts that shape the development and rationale behind individual education systems. This was recognised long ago by one of the early pioneers of comparative and international education (Higginson, 1979; 1995; Sadler, 1900; Sislian, 2003). The importance of context for comparative education research has been pointed out even more so in recent times (Crossley & Jarvis, 2001; Crossley & Watson, 2003, pp. 6-7; Crossley, Braodfoot & Schweisfurth, 2007). It is the very diversity – ethnically, culturally, religiously and linguistically- yet with similarities and differences, together with the economic and political differences of the individual countries, that makes South-East Asia such a rich region for comparative studies, as will be shown in a later section of this paper. Before doing so, however, it might be useful to recap briefly on the purpose and importance of comparative and international educational (CIE) studies.

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The Purposes and Growth of Comparative and International Education Studies

This is a well-trodden field and need not, therefore, take up an inordinately large part of this paper. However it is as well to be reminded of why CIE became, and has become, so important, especially since the end of the Second World War. The reader is encouraged to read several recent accounts that have provided good overviews of the development of CIE, albeit from different perspectives and from particular points of view (Crossley & Watson, 2003; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2006; Manzon, 2011).

Although it is recognised that some form of comparative education took place several centuries ago, what writers have called 'travellers' tales' and the pre-history of comparative education (Brickman, 1960; Kazamias & Massialas, 1965; Trethewey, 1976) it is now generally acknowledged that the study of comparative education as an academic field, as well as the origins of international education, really began in the early part of the nineteenth century.

International education can be traced back to a Frenchman, Cesar Auguste Besset, who, in 1808, called for scholars who were free from national preconceptions to make a study of education systems outside France and to make recommendations for the reform of the French education system. This coincided with the establishment of the Napoleonic Code and the Universite de France, a unified education system spreading from the kindergarten to university level. As we shall see reform of an education system, as a result of looking elsewhere, has always been one of the main justifications for both comparative and international education.

Comparative education, on the other hand, originated with another Frenchman, Marc-Antoine Jullien. In 1817 he proposed that governments should gather statistics on different aspects of their education systems for comparative purposes (Jullien, 1817). Such information would include data on student enrolments at different levels of their education systems, educational finance and expenditures, numbers of teachers and their qualifications, and so on, in order 'to deduce true principles and determined routes so that education would be transformed into an almost positive science' (cited in Fraser, 1964, p.20).

Comparative and international education not only had different roots but, for the best part of a couple of centuries, they led to different approaches to gathering information as well as to the use of their findings and knowledge. Students, and others, have often been confused by the semantics and terminology used in these two branches of education. In order to help clarify the position Epstein (1992, 1994) and Wilson (1994, 2003) tried to unravel both the roots and the different uses of these twin educational 'fields,' and more recently McGrath (2009) has added his observations about the ambiguities and overlaps between the two. Essentially, until relatively recently, comparative education was seen as an academic, theoretical and interdisciplinary activity concerned with examining problems and issues in education from an international perspective, mainly in industrialised and 'advanced' societies. It sought to answer the questions of *why* education systems and processes differed, *what* were the causes that had led to education systems to develop as they had done, and *how* wider social, economic, cultural and political forces impinged upon, shaped and influenced the underpinning philosophy of education as well as the curriculum and practicalities in the classroom. A series of books entitled *Education, Culture and Politics in...* appeared in the 1970s to highlight this approach (e.g. Halls, 1976; Hearnden, 1976; King, 1976).

International education, on the other hand, was much more concerned with policy, planning and practical ways to improve the education systems of the 'developing countries.' During the 1960s and 1970s, as the European powers gradually relinquished control over their colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific region and as the focus of attention went towards neo colonialism and educational dependency (Altbach & Kelly, 1978; Carnoy, 1974; Hayter, 1971; Watson, 1984/2012) the two 'disciplines' became blurred and there was a gradual merging of the two into one overarching 'field,' comparative and international education (CIE). This was shown most clearly in Britain and the USA with the creation of the North American Comparative and International Education Society (CIES) in the 1960s and the moves away from a Comparative Education Society in Europe (British Section) through the British Comparative and International Education Society (BCIES) to the British Association of International and Comparative Education (BAICE) (Crossley, Watson & Sutherland, 2007; Crossley & Watson, 2011; Watson & King, 1991). Within the historical context of South-East Asia where all the countries, with the exception of Thailand, were under some form of European colonial rule, and where they have been moving from economically underdeveloped, (Low Income Countries), to developing, (Middle Income Countries), to advanced, (High Income Countries) it is an ideal region for researchers to use the methodologies of both 'fields.'

As has been pointed out by several scholars there can be no general theory or hypothesis without some form of comparison nor can there be any sound intellectual activity without comparison. To give but three examples: Farrell (1979, p.1) argued that,

...there can be no generalising scientific study of education which is not the comparative study of education.

Raivola (1985, p.261) went even further by arguing that no hypothesis can be developed from one study alone.

'All research that seeks to offer general explanations must be comparative.' Finally Phillips (1999, p.15) makes the point that

It is, after all, the very nature of intellectual activity to make comparisons. Indeed it can be argued that only by making comparisons can we properly defend our position on most questions of importance which require the making of judgment.

It is not the intention here to enter the minefield of the different methodologies and approaches that have so bedevilled CIE for decades. However it is worth pointing out that there is no single agreed method used for studies in CIE. Some early writers (Kandel, 1933; Sadler, 1900) were concerned with historical antecedents; others such as Hans (1964) and Mallinson (1975) were concerned with culture and national characteristics as shaping education, a theme developed by Bereday (1964) and King (1979). Holmes (1965, 1981) became obsessed with solving problems in education and was an early pioneer of the positivistic approach of collecting as much data as possible, a theme followed by Noah and Eckstein (1969) who sought to develop a scientific approach to CIE. As the 1960s developed and saw the acceleration of de-colonisation the economic aspects of education attracted considerable attention and they have tended to dominate the thinking behind the World Bank's reports on education and development. One of the best analyses of the qualitative/quantitative debate came as a result of Crossley and Vulliamy's (1997) work on the Pacific region. The justifications for undertaking CIE, however, have remained constant. Apart from satisfying intellectual curiosity the reform of an education system as a result of studying another, together with trying to improve policy and practice, have always been seen as key purposes of CIE. In other words CIE should always seek to understand and explain situations and it should aim to inform policy makers.

What should researchers be comparing? The nation state, the administrative structure, different levels of the formal system, the curriculum, teacher training, universities, non- formal aspects of education (e.g. Brock, 2011), classrooms and the interaction between teachers and students, examinations and student achievement, the economic benefits of different types of education, the impact of political ideology, policies on such things as the language of instruction, teacher recruitment or private schooling have all been subject to CIE scrutiny and could all be usefully explored within the context of South East Asia. Should what we are comparing be in one historical timeframe or is it possible to use comparisons across different historic periods as Phillips (1994) has argued? Should the unit of analysis be the nation state, as has traditionally been the case, or should it be a smaller unit, such as regions or areas within a given country? Or should it increasingly be seeking to identify trends in larger regions such as the Asia Pacific region or South- East Asia, especially the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) group of countries? There are no definite parameters for CIE research. As Thomas (1998, p.1) observed some years ago:

In its most inclusive sense, comparative education refers to inspecting two or more educational entities or events in order to discover how and why they are alike and different. An educational entity in this context means any person, group or organisation associated with learning and teaching. An event is an activity concerned with promoting learning.

This idea that CIE can embrace any educational activity was developed further by Bray and Thomas (1995) when, in a seminal paper in the *Harvard Educational Review*, they portrayed such thinking in a multilevel diagram and analysis. Their framework takes seven Geographic/Locational levels; seven Non-locational Demographic groups; and seven Aspects of Education and Society. The first group moved downwards from World Regions/Continents, through Countries, States/Provinces, to Districts, Schools, Classrooms and finally to Individual Pupils. In other words, CIE has a role to look at anything from the global through to the local, from school systems through to individual classrooms and to the individuals within them. The danger is that it can become too all-embracing. The Nonlocational Demographic Groups range from ethnic, age related, gender, religious and other groups to entire populations. These demographic entities should resonate with anyone who has any knowledge or understanding of South-East Asia. Certainly all the above distinctions and areas of inquiry can usefully be applied to South-East Asia. It is a distinct sub-region within a larger Asian region. It is made up of a variety of political entities, most with distinct ethnic and linguistic groups. There are differing levels of development both within and between the countries of the region. One common feature is that, with the exception of Thailand, they were all colonised. These aspects will be expanded in the following section. The Education and Society aspects covered by Bray and Thomas – curriculum, teaching methods, educational finance, management structures, political change and the labour market- can apply to any country or region. Surprisingly two very obvious omissions from their lists are the urban-rural divide and the growth of private schooling, both of which are important in the context of South-East Asia.

The South-East Asian Context

One further common feature that unites all the countries of the region is their very diversity. *Geographically* there are great variations. While most of the countries are on the Asian landmass somewhere between a quarter

and a third of the region is covered by water. The two largest countries in terms of size and populations, Indonesia and the Philippines, are large archipelagos which in turn create their own problems, especially in terms of administration and providing educational equality. Because they are also mountainous, including several volcanoes, it means access to schools can prove somewhat difficult. In all the countries, except for the city-state of Singapore and Timor Leste, there are considerable disparities between a few major cities, such as Bangkok, Rangoon, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta and Jogjakarta, Kuala Lumpur and Manila, and the rural hinterlands. These can vary from rice growing paddy field areas to sizeable teak forests and rubber and other plantations to areas where subsistence farming and slash and burn agriculture are the norm. It is in the latter areas that can be found many of the indigenous tribal peoples. The disparities alluded to can be in terms of income, employment opportunities, housing and educational provision. Even within apparently affluent and Westernised cities there are appalling slums sitting side by side with the offices of international organisations.

Economically, also, there is considerable diversity. This in turn implies differing standards of educational provision. At one extreme Singapore and Brunei Darussalam are classified as High Income Countries. At the other, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar [Burma] are classified as Low Income Countries. In between are Malaysia, a High Middle Income Country with the aspiration to become a High Income Country by 2020, and Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, all of which are classified as Lower Middle Income Countries (World Bank, 2010). Malaysia's ranking is slightly distorted by the fact that Peninsular Malaysia has a much higher standard of living than do Sabah and Sarawak.

Undoubtedly modern South-East Asia has been shaped by its interaction with the European colonial powers. While the colonial legacy is not as marked as it has been in Africa and Latin America it has nevertheless had a profound impact in several aspects. For one thing it led to clearly demarcated national boundaries. The Indo-China countries of Cambodia and Laos owe their very existence to French involvement, though Osborne (1987, pp.67-8) has suggested that Vietnam was shaped more by geography than the French. French cultural and gastronomic influence is still strongly felt. It was Spanish, and later American, control of the Philippines that led to the creation of a country out of a disparate archipelago and led to the dominant place of Roman Catholicism though the cultural influence of the USA is probably just as strong. Thailand managed to maintain its independence, and secure its borders, by the astuteness of the Thai kings, especially king Chukalongkorn, in playing off the French and British colonial authorities (Wyatt, 1984). Nevertheless British influence on the early development of the Thai education system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was considerable (Watson, 1980). Since the Second World War, however, American cultural influence has profoundly touched Thai society, especially in metropolitan Bangkok.

The rivalry of the Portuguese, Dutch and British was to shape not only Malaysia and Singapore but also Brunei Darussalam and Indonesia. European penetration first began when Portugal seized Malacca in 1511 and gained a foothold on the Malayan Peninsular. Their influence was soon surpassed by the rivalry between the Dutch and English East India Companies battling for control of the valuable spice trade in the East Indies, which became known as Indonesia from the seventeenth century onwards (Milton, 1999). Only by the late nineteenth century was Dutch supremacy assured, but by then the British had established themselves as dominant in Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam, while the Portuguese had moved on to Timor and Macau. Although their primary interest was economic the establishment of protectorates enabled the British not only to trade but also to shape the economic, political and ethnic make up of those countries. Their legacy was very much the school system, the bureaucracy, ethnic pluralism, and the English language. One other lasting legacy was that by encouraging the work of mission organisations, especially in schools, all the colonial powers helped Christianity gain a foothold in South-East Asia. While the role of Christian mission schools has had a positive effect in most countries of the region (e.g. Watson, 1982, 1983.) there has been a backlash against Christianity in Laos and Vietnam, Myanmar, and in parts of Indonesia where many Christians find themselves facing persecution and local hostility. On the other hand, in the Philippines, with the exception of the predominantly Muslim Mindanao where a secessionist insurgency has been simmering for many years in Timor-Leste and Singapore, Christianity has a key role to play in society.

In nearly all the South-East Asian countries *religious diversity* is clear to see and predates any Western involvement in the region so that the Christianity brought in by the West was often added on to existing religious beliefs. For example animism and spirit worship are common in rural and mountainous regions, though even in urban Bangkok it is not uncommon to see spirit houses in the gardens of many houses, even those of the affluent and well educated. Confucianism, and to a lesser extent Taoism, were brought in by Chinese migrating from southern China; Hinduism and Buddhism spread across from India, Nepal and Sri Lanka [formerly Ceylon]; while Islam spread as a result of trade from East Africa and the Middle East. Today Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam are predominantly Muslim, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam are predominantly Buddhist, though of differing schools, while Hinduism can be found in parts of Malaysia and Singapore.

Because western involvement was to some extent relatively superficial and hardly penetrated the hinterlands of the various colonies, and because it largely interacted with urban educated elites, and because local languages

were still widely spoken, an indigenous society and culture, with roots in the countryside, as opposed to the cities, was allowed to continue alongside the colonial society. The result was that, at the end of the Second World War, wars of independence and anti-colonial revolutions were able to generate so much support so quickly and the re-establishment of the old colonial order proved to be so difficult (Jeffrey, 1981).

In the light of the above observations it is worth quoting Osborne's (1987, p.63) summarisation of the European impact on the region, especially on Vietnam:

In some aspects of history the European role was vital in determining developments of far-reaching importance. The establishment of international boundaries in the Southeast Asian region was one such case. But in other aspects of life the part played by the Europeans was much less important than it was once thought to have been. French officials in Vietnam, for instance, were often depicted in histories of that country, written before the Second World War and by their countrymen, as presiding over the implantation of French culture among the Vietnamese population. The error of such a view was most clearly revealed in the extent to which Vietnamese revolutionaries were able to strengthen their capacities to challenge the French through the promotion of literacy in the Vietnamese language. French language and culture, all French claims to the contrary, never supplanted the indigenous values and the indigenous language.

This latter point still holds despite Kelly's (2000) claim that the French colonial authorities tried to enforce French dominance through language, the courts of law and the school curriculum more ruthlessly than any other colonial power.

Although in recent years there have been moves towards democratic forms of government in most of the South-East Asian countries, including most recently in Myanmar, *politically* there has been great variation in styles of government. Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia and Thailand are constitutional monarchies though Thailand has had several periods of military rule. Indonesia and Timor-Leste have moved from dictatorship to republican forms of government, ostensibly democratic. Myanmar is still under military rule, albeit with a semblance of democratic elections. Cambodia, Laos and North Vietnam were all under communist rule following the end of colonialism. Only Laos, officially the Lao People's Democratic Republic, remains under a communist government; the other two have embraced both capitalism and democracy. The Philippines and Singapore are democratic republics.

Perhaps the most striking feature about South-East Asia, however, is the *ethnic and linguistic pluralism* of the region. It is possibly one of the most ethnically complex regions in the world. This came about as a result of a mixture of trade, migration, colonialism and, more recently, globalisation. Many different ethnic groups migrated from southern China and the Himalayan region over the centuries and even now, where the borders are porous, as between Myanmar and Thailand and Thailand and China various tribal ethnic groups criss-cross the borders. The Thais originated in Yunnan in southern China and migrated south into what are now Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. Some form of the Thai language can be found in all these countries. Some Chinese also migrated this way but their presence in nearly all countries of the region came about as a result of trade and the stability provided by the European colonialists. The result, even now, is that

Despite living in the region for more than a hundred years, ethnic Chinese are still regarded with fear and suspicion by most Southeast Asian governments, partly because of their entrepreneurial success (MRG, 1997, p.593).

Some research has been done to show how different governments have used their education and language policies to discriminate against their Chinese minorities (Watson, 1976a, 1976b) but more needs to be undertaken in the light of renewed Chinese economic and political assertiveness since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

The presence of sizeable Indian communities, mostly of Tamil origin, in the plantations of Malaysia and in Singapore, for example, is largely because they were brought across as indentured labour by the British colonial authorities (Santhiram, 1999). Based on the work of the British Minority Rights Group and the American Summer Institute of Linguistics it would appear that there are at least 875 ethnic groups within the South-East Asian region with 975 known languages (Grimes, 2000; MRG, 1997; Watson, 2011, pp. 291-292).

From all of the above points the very least that can be said about South-East Asia is that it is a region full of complexity, diversity, difference, economic and political variation, and educational opportunity. It is a kaleidoscope of cultures, religions and languages. It is a region full of potential for CIE and it is this to which we shall now turn.

Areas for Comparative Educational Research

This paper has so far discussed the importance of context and the dangers of cultural-and educational-borrowing. It has looked at the growth and distinctiveness of both comparative and international education and the growing merger of the twin fields into one- CIE. It has explored the different ways in which CIE can be undertaken and the potential areas for research and study. Above all it has looked at the diversity and complexity of the region

known as South-East Asia. In this concluding section it will identify a few of what the author considers are key areas for more intense CIE research in the future.

Although the nation state has always been seen as an essential starting point for CIE it is surprising how little work has been done on comparing and contrasting the countries of South-East Asia. There have been numerous case studies, such as individual government's educational reports, and articles in Pergamon Press's International Encyclopaedia of Education, but there have been remarkably few works that have examined the region as a whole. Postlethwaite and Thomas (1980) was one of the few books that looked systematically at the education systems across the whole of South-East Asia, while Wong and Gwee (1972) did the same for Malaysia and Singapore. A more recent work by Brock and Symaco (2011) has brought together an eclectic mix of chapters on the different countries of the region but without a coherent overarching narrative pulling them all together. It would be exciting if a truly CIE piece could be done comparing and contrasting the education systems, policies and practices throughout the region in a more standardised format.

A recent work (Ho, 2009) explored the contrasting philosophies of the East with those of the West to show what lessons can be learnt. This approach could provide a useful springboard for examining and contrasting the assumptions behind the curricula in the ASEAN countries, behind the teacher-student relationship and behind the teacher-parent relationship. Since at least three of the region's countries have a specific underlying philosophy that underpins their education the origins and purposes of these philosophies, together with how they are worked out in practice, could also prove an interesting and informative area for research. Indonesia has its *Pancasila*, dating back to 1928; Malaysia has its *Rukunegara*, dating back to the late 1970s; and Brunei Darussalam has its *Malayu Islam Beraja (MJB)* (Saxena, 2007). It is an interesting fact that all three countries are Islamic. Is there some reason for this? How do these 'philosophies' compare and contrast? How successful are they? Have they bred cynicism or are they largely accepted?

Inevitably educational policies that embrace linguistic and ethnic pluralism in a region as diverse as South-East Asia provide rich pickings and are fertile ground for CIE. Unfortunately most of the research in this area has tended to be concentrated on individual countries and has been undertaken by linguists rather than by comparative educationists (e.g. Tsui & Tollefson 2007). An interesting, and perhaps vitally important area for research regarding language policy, is that of comparing students' academic achievements where they have been educated in their mother tongue with students who have been taught through a language that is not their mother tongue. Brock-Utne (2010, 2011) has been a long time advocate for mother tongue teaching, arguing, rightly in my view, that students who are forced to learn through a foreign, or unfamiliar, language under perform academically simply because they cannot grasp concepts in a foreign language, let alone express themselves. This in turn acts as a drain both on individual development as well as economic development. While much of Brock-Utne's work has been in Africa, and while the use of colonial languages are not so acute in South-East Asia, her underlying argument applies just as much to many of the ethnic groups in South-East Asia.

In an age of global uncertainty and shifting economic power from East to West (Ferguson, 2010), especially notable with the rise of China and the decline of the USA and Europe, there are at least three further areas for fertile research. These are the impact of education on employment; the place of, and attitudes towards, the local Chinese communities; and the place of private schooling in an increasingly competitive world. Work has been done on the former with regard to the Philippines and Malaysia (Symaco, 2009, 2011), and there have been numerous studies of the impact of education on overall development in different parts of the world, but more critical analyses of education's role in the development of South-East Asia as a whole could prove invaluable. There have also been historical studies made of the place of the Chinese communities in certain countries (e.g. Watson, 1976b) but with the anxiety concerning the impact of a resurgent China on the region more up to date work in this area can only be beneficial. As for the place of private schooling in the region Bray (1999, 2006, 2009) and Bray and Bunly (2005) have begun to lift the lid on what is happening but again there is scope for many more similar studies.

The above are by no means intended to be definitive. Other areas for comparative research that spring to mind for South-East Asia are the comparison of academic results along both ethnic and gender lines; the rural-urban divide; the place of non-formal education in society; educational provision in the conflict zones of Myanmar, southern Philippines (Mindanao), parts of Indonesia and southern Thailand. Finally what are the effects of religious schooling? How do these schools fit into modern society? Again there are differing examples- monastic schools, temple schools and madrasahs all offer some form of basic education outside the state system. Some of these studies could be across different historical periods; most need to be contemporary with an intention of informing policy makers in government.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to show that a region like South-East Asia provides ample scope for CIE researchers to break new ground or to update older research. It has stressed the need to recognise the national and local contexts of any research. It has looked at the growth of CIE and the potential areas for undertaking comparative educational

research and in looking at the specifics of South-East Asia it has tried to make suggestions for new work to be undertaken. Above all it has tried to show that CIE is not only about EFA or education for economic development; it is as much concerned with philosophy, history, culture and language and all that makes any society unique.

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