



Speaking notes for address by

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Minister for Foreign Affairs

To the
Asia Education Foundation National Forum

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Introduction

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Pleasure to be here today to address the National Forum of the Asia Education Foundation.

- And the opportunity it provides to discuss our developing educational connections in Asia with so many and such a broad range of our leading school educators from across Australia.

As one of the major programs of Asialink, the Asia Education Foundation is, through its work in promoting the study of Asia, helping to achieve Asialink's goal of promoting public understanding of the countries of Asia and creating links with Asian counterparts.

And clearly, education plays an important role in promoting understanding and creating links – including the particularly important people to people links between us and the region.

- It is also about helping to unlock the potential that exists in the people and the economies of our region.

The work of this forum in further exposing Australia to Asia – including its languages, literature, history and geography – is helping to provide young Australians with the tools and confidence to engage with the region.

Australian foreign policy priorities in the region

Before I discuss the important link between education and the development of the region and how Australia is contributing to that development, I might briefly touch upon some of the other key foreign policy challenges for Australia in the region.

Start by noting that Australia's relations in the region are in excellent shape and we are able to achieve much in the region.

- Our work in the region is aided by the strong linkages we have been able to develop including through APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum, bilaterally and in terms of trade, travel linkages – and as I will come to later, education.

On the bilateral front, I think it would be fair to say that many of our important bilateral relationships are as strong as we have ever seen them – and getting stronger and growing deeper.

- You can see this when you look at the healthy state of our relationships with key regional players such as Japan, China and Indonesia.

- And our increasing engagement with India – a rising economic, political and military power in the region.

In the South Pacific our engagement has evolved as the circumstances – including its security and economic circumstances – have changed.

- We are now taking a much more direct – hands-on – approach to assisting Pacific Island countries in addressing governance, development and law and order problems.

And our growing bilateral ties are complementing our efforts in the region to address the major security challenges of our time.

- Specifically the threats from terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and challenges posed by weak and failing states.
 - We have been working closely with other countries in the region – such as Indonesia – and in regional for a – such as APEC – to promote counter-terrorism cooperation in the region.
 - And are active both in the region and at the international level in responding to the dangers associated with a proliferation of weapons of mass destruction – including through our promotion in the region of the Proliferation Security Initiative.

We are also aware of the very great challenge presented to the region – both now and in the future – by HIV/AIDS.

- And are taking a leadership role in ensuring that the region receives appropriate attention.

On the economic side, our engagement in the region has been equally active.

- With our merchandise trade exports to East Asia exceeding \$63 billion in 2004 – amounting to some 54 per cent of total merchandise exports
- And our FTAs with Singapore, Thailand and the United States having further integrated our economy with those of the region
 - With possible new FTAs with China, Malaysia, and, along with New Zealand, the ten members of ASEAN under negotiation.

Australia is an active and constructive contributor to the region.

- Recognising that this is where our most immediate interests and responsibilities will always be.

Education and development

As is recognised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to education.

And despite the gains we have seen in some parts of our own region in recent decades, we still have much work to do if we are to meet the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals.

- That resolved to ensure that by 2015, children everywhere would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.

According to UNESCO, almost one in every seven people today is illiterate.

- That translates into a total of 860 million adults that are illiterate, of which more than 500 million are women.

That is a worrying statistic – and of particular concern to us given that this is still a major problem in our own region.

- According to UNESCO, South and West Asia are of major concern.
- In East Asia and the Pacific the average adult literacy rates has steadily improved in recent years.
- With – from 1990 to 2000 – illiteracy numbers having reduced from 233 million to 186 million – that is a 20 per cent improvement in a single decade.
- Much of this improvement can be credited to efforts by China.

But much more work remains to be done across the region.

- For example in countries like Cambodia, Laos and Papua New Guinea.

Australia's educational expertise

Australian expertise in the educational field is helping our regional neighbours to address these gaps and achieve their community and development goals.

Australia has much to offer to the region in terms of education – with our expertise and quality education services highly regarded and much in demand.

This is certainly so, on a commercial basis, when you look at the contribution that the education sector makes to our economy and exports.

- Australia has become a major supplier of international education
 - Involving many Australian education institutions – many providing education services here in Australia and some setting up off-shore campuses to help service the region.

- Education services exports have become one of Australia’s fastest growing export sectors and now our third largest export.
 - Australia’s education services exports have grown by an average rate of 13 per cent a year between 1999-2000 and 2003-04 to reach \$5.9 billion.

Over 300,000 overseas students were enrolled in onshore Australian courses at the end of 2004.

- And there were more than 100,000 international students enrolled in offshore Australian courses in 2003.

The Asia-Pacific region remains by far the major source for international enrolments, with over three quarters of students, from the region.

- Today, it is China that constitutes the largest source country for international students studying in Australia, representing over a quarter of total overseas student enrolments in 2004.
- Other large users of our education services are students from South Korea, India and Malaysia.

Education has for a long time also played a particularly important part in developing closer linkages between Australia and the region.

For the first half of the twentieth century, it would have been perhaps unusual for Australians to encounter people from Asian nations in their daily lives in Australian cities and regions.

But the Colombo Plan had an enormous impact on Australia by introducing students from many parts of the region into our society.

- Under the Plan and over 35 years, some 40,000 students from Asian nations were sponsored to study or train in Australian tertiary institutions.
- And, in doing so, provided an important vehicle for our engagement with the region.

Australia’s aid program – education to build for growth and development

Under the restructuring of Australia’s aid program in the 1970s, the Colombo Plan wound down and other means of providing development assistance to Asia have emerged, including in education.

Australian development assistance is playing its part alongside our booming commercially-based education services sector I mentioned earlier.

Effective aid programs help foster an environment where developing countries can overcome poverty.

- The Australian aid program has, as one of its guiding themes, the building of human capital – and helps countries develop better and more cost effective education services

The Australian aid program assists developing countries, particularly in the Asia Pacific region, to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development.

- The Government has provided a real increase in our Official Development Assistance of nearly ten per cent this financial year, bringing the total to over \$2.1 billion.
 - And is increasing the overall aid level to \$2.4 billion next financial year.

Major education programs form part of Australia's aid assistance in many partner countries.

- Our education efforts concentrate on providing a broad range of education assistance, with a particular focus on basic education and vocational and technical education.
- With selective assistance for institutional strengthening, distance education and higher education also priorities.

In providing education to the region, we are making the most of recent technological advances.

Australia is an international leader in distance education using flexible study options and cutting-edge technology.

Back in 2001, the Australian Government and the World Bank launched the Virtual Colombo Plan – involving a \$200 million contribution by Australia over five years.

- Focused on improving education and access to knowledge in developing countries, through distance education and support for policy development using information and communication technologies.
- Provides a new platform for Australia's world-class education providers, research institutions and technology companies to share their knowledge and skills.

The Australian Government also recognises, through experience, that scholarships can be one of the most valuable forms of development cooperation.

- Providing training which facilitates the contribution of the scholars to the economic and social advancement of their country.

Bilaterally, the Australian Government funds a program of Australia Development Scholarships to assist a range of developing nations.

- As at the end of March this year, there were 2430 students on Australian Development Scholarships studying at Australian universities and TAFEs, with the main recipient countries Indonesia, Vietnam, PNG and the Philippines.

Promoting education in Indonesia

A further example of how the Australian aid program continues to promote education assistance is through Australia-Indonesian Partnership for Reconstruction and Development.

- A new Partnership agreed with the Indonesia to assist that nation in the aftermath of the Boxing Day tsunami disaster.

Amongst its many measures, the Partnership will fund up to 600 Australian Partnership Scholarships for Indonesian post-graduate students to study in Australia.

- Effectively doubling the number of scholarships awarded to Indonesian candidates over the next two years.

Engaging Young Australians with Asia

Note that the theme for your Forum is “Engaging Young Australians with Asia”.

Education and learning are dynamic – we have much to learn from one another.

We are delighted that the region chooses Australia as a destination for so many of its students.

- And in 2004 around 17,000 Australian residents visited Asian countries for education purposes.

One Australian Government initiative which has helped to promote the two-way flow of information between youth in Australia and the youth of our region has been the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development Program which I launched in 1998.

- Strengthening mutual understanding between Australia and the countries of the Asia Pacific and making a positive contribution to development.
- Offering young people a wonderful opportunity to go on short term assignments in the region – making a contribution while also learning about other cultures.

Earlier this year I had the pleasure to meet with the 147 young Australians who formed our latest intake of Youth Ambassadors.

- Now representing us in 17 different countries.
- And have brought the total number of young Australians placed overseas under the program in the Asia Pacific region to 1,258 since 1998.

And the program is expanding.

- By 2006, up to 400 young people per year will be selected to take up short-term volunteering assignments in the Asia Pacific region.

A distinctive feature of the AYAD program is the involvement of Australian “partner” organisations from the business, education, community and government sectors.

- Placing their young professionals into development projects in the countries where they currently conduct business or are seeking to expand their activities.

We are looking at increasing the number of Australian Partner Organisations who want to strengthen their networks within the region.

I would also note the excellent work done by the Australia-Asia Young Leaders program in fostering friendship and furthering mutual understanding between Australia and its Asian neighbours by organising exchanges of young and potential future leaders.

People-to-people links

Education has many aspects and advantages for Australia and the region.

Not only can it greatly aid the economic development of the region and contribute to Australia’s export success, educational exchange can have many flow-on benefits to our engagement with the region.

- Improving understanding and developing friendships.

The role of people-to-people links, forged through education, in promoting global stability and harmony between nations should never be underestimated.

Flowing from the Colombo Plan and similar educational opportunities, Alumni networks continue to play a role across South and South-East Asia, facilitating business and other networking.

And are also important at the government-to-government level, with many Alumni of Australian tertiary education institutions at the ministerial-level in the region.

Conclusion

According to an old Chinese Proverb “If you plan for one year, plant rice. If you plan for ten years, plant trees. If you plan for 100 years, educate mankind.”

I welcome your efforts to plan for that long-term future.