

We must look to Asia to change our teaching models

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We need to ask whether our education systems are adequately preparing us for dealing with the rise of Asia. The depressing answer must be, almost certainly not.

Asia's rise has made us wealthier than ever before, but with that wealth has come comfort and complacency.

We now engage with the world on a regular basis, but have become increasingly incurious about it. This can be seen in the falling number of students studying crucial Asian languages such as Indonesian and Korean. It can be seen in the abandonment by governments of both sides of funding the teaching of Asian languages and cultures in Australian schools.

But the Australian education sector itself bears part of the responsibility for this yawning failure. Australian schools, colleges and universities have benefited enormously over decades from the Asianisation of their student bodies -- but have seen this in almost solely monetary terms.

During those years of the growing presence of students from Asian societies in our classrooms and lecture halls, Australia's educators have continued to teach using the same knowledge frameworks and teaching techniques they always did. While the demand for Australian education has become more cosmopolitan, the supply has remained doggedly monocultural. Despite Australia's proximity to Asia and increasing dependence on Asian student demand, its pedagogical techniques and knowledge content today look remarkably similar to how they looked a century ago.

The unwillingness to change our education models is the product of an arrogant belief that in the Western school, college or university rests the pinnacle of knowledge and teaching achieved by humanity. From this pinnacle, Australian educators have been able to pass on the ultimate knowledge. They transmit to their students; they have nothing to learn from them. This is a major problem. Even those schools and university departments that teach the history of Asian societies rely almost overwhelmingly on Western historiographic frameworks and learning techniques.

Very few have acknowledged the very different ways in which different cultural traditions see history. Without this knowledge and nuance, it will be very difficult for Australians to understand how historical experiences, which to us seem remote and irrelevant, may be immediate and compelling for the newly powerful and wealthy societies in Asia.

In my own discipline, political science, I know of no Australian academic who deviates from the standard Western understandings (and critiques) of that central concept to the discipline, power.

Power remains to us something that can be observed, counted, classified and used. But this is not the way different cultural traditions in Asia view and understand power and influence. Without the capacity even to conceive of different ways of understanding and reacting to influence, Australians will be unable to comprehend the changes going on around them, from the boardroom table to the diplomatic demarche.

This is a problem with knowledge content and frameworks; it is also a problem of pedagogical techniques. As we smugly observe the lower analytical and synthesising capacities of students brought up in rote-learning traditions, we have lost sight of Australian students' falling familiarity with the classics of the disciplines they are studying. Rarely do we stop to ask what this lack of grounding in the classics does to the educational product we are contributing to.

The challenge of the Asian century to Australian education lies in the questions it asks about the adequacy of its pedagogy and knowledge content. If we cling to our European traditions of research and teaching we will miss the qualitative implications of the Asian century.

The real urgency is to match the Asianisation of the student demand in our lecture halls and classrooms with an Asianisation of the knowledge we pass on and the techniques we use.

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