

Colin Brock and Lorraine Pe Symaco (Eds.) *Education on South-East Asia*. Oxford: Symposium Books, 2011. 348pp.

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It is always good to see collections such as this one bringing together descriptions and analyses of diverse education systems in an important region of the world. As the Editors point out, all the countries represented in this book, apart from Timore-Leste, are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). This is an interesting regional bloc containing countries on every level of the 2011 Human Development Index ranging from Very High (Singapore, Brunei), to High (Malaysia), Medium (Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) and Low (Myanmar). This diversity of development contexts provides a good basis for comparison.

Added to these country studies there are five thematic chapters that examine gender, higher education, language policies, quality assurance and sustainable development across the region although. The stated rationale for these is “to highlight issues that are of regional significance” (p.9).

In terms of the country studies there is not a single template but each author focuses on issues of relevance and importance to the particular context. As expected, the focus differs somewhat and to some extent this can be explained by the development issues that are most salient. Singapore and Malaysia, for example, are focused on human capital development for the knowledge economy while Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar still struggle with participation rates and infrastructure. These differences are important to understand in a region of the world that is characterized by diversity rather than uniformity. The religious and philosophical influences alone – Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism – also highlight the diversity of the region that is often masked by the geographical concept of “Asia”. Indeed, reading these chapters it becomes clear that despite influences such as globalization each country context is unique and responds to particular local issues as it seeks to provide education for its citizens.

As instructive as the cases are in this collection they are also somewhat dated with 2007 representing the most recent reporting date in most chapters. There is now a second wave of educational reform in many Asian countries including Singapore, Thailand, Brunei and in places such as Vietnam there is now a significant emphasis on higher education reform. This suggests that the landscape of education in the region is fast changing and while this book makes a contribution to better understanding it already needs to be updated.

Finally, while the cases and the themes are interesting in themselves it would have been good to have seen a final chapter attempting a cross case analysis to distil the essential features of regional efforts in education. In particular such an analysis can provide insights that transcend the cases themselves. For example, what are the common features of educational provision in the region, how important are cultural values in this provision and what are the prospects for the future in eliminating the development gap across the region? These remain important comparative questions for future scholars.

This is the pre-published version.

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