

Australian aid for education Alex Stevens*

Australian aid specifically *for* education is used not as an expression of generous solidarity, but as a clearly identified means to a very specific end: the promotion of Australia's 'national interests', and the undermining of the potential to build popular movements that challenge the place and policies of government authorities considered acceptable by Australian governments.

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Often characterised by the use of slogans and short-term, politically expedient policies, social discussion about education in Australia commonly presents the education system as having undeniable flaws, but that ultimately it is fundamentally democratic, encouraging of critical thinking and allows for individual and social improvement. Australia's aid program is also often discussed in similarly narrow terms - again, some flaws are acknowledged, but ultimately, it is claimed, the aid program effectively serves both moral and practical purposes for donors and recipients. To be sure, significant challenges in the academic and public arenas have been mounted to both of these separate arguments, but the focus here is on the *intersections* of aid and education, and the ways in which Australian aid specifically *for* education is used not as an expression of generous solidarity, but as a clearly identified means to a very specific end: the promotion of Australia's 'national interests', and the undermining of the potential to build popular movements that challenge the place and policies of government authorities considered acceptable by Australian governments.

Of the seven 'Investment Priorities' identified by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), spending on Education accounts for almost one-fifth of total spending, second only to the category of 'Effective governance' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016). DFAT's 'Australian Aid for Education' fact sheet states that 'A quality education helps individuals, families, communities, and nations to achieve their aspirations and realise their full potential' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, October 2015) - surely a laudable goal. Closer inspection of the detail of the aid program, however, reveals that much of this aid is simply a disguised funnelling of money to private corporations, including increasingly powerful 'edu-businesses'.

Over the last several years, the narrative about Australian international aid has changed, in line with the material changes that have been seen. In brief, a decline in the relative proportion of Australia's Gross National Income that is spent on aid and, in tandem, an increasingly brazen willingness to locate *Australian* interests at the centre of arguments about foreign aid and an abandonment of arguments for aid centering on moral and international responsibility. The concept of 'Australia as a good international citizen' (Smith, S & McMullan, B 2009, p. 6) has made way for a more 'pragmatic' approach - one that baldly states, 'The purpose of the aid program is to promote Australia's national interests... focusing on two development outcomes: supporting private sector development and strengthening human development' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade n.d.)

'National interests', of course, are by no means clearly defined or universally accepted. DFAT's own documents repeatedly reveal that *their* view of national interest is one firmly centred on shoring up private companies and reinforcing Australia's dominant geo-political role in the Asia-Pacific region, with the neoliberal language of accountability, efficiency and outcomes placed squarely at the centre of public discourse. Their appeal to private sector 'partners' in aid programs is simple: 'We offer business... the ability to convene, broker and influence' (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015). Those individuals and groups without the resources necessary to join the partnership are not invited to be part of the process of convening, brokering and influencing.

Figure 1 shows a breakdown of Australia's aid spending (ODA - Official Development Assistance) over the year 2014-2015 (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2016). Although precise figures have altered over the last two years, this graph nevertheless usefully indicates the ways that aid is divided. Only a relatively small amount (11% in 2014-2015) is passed to national governments, with the bulk going to academic institutions and private contractors - and this proportion has only increased since this graph was released, as is described below. Directing money through the private sector is a significant plank of Australian governments' neoliberal outlook, casting the private sector as a necessary counterweight to (what is portrayed as) the inevitable inefficiencies of public-sector education provision (Verger, 2012).

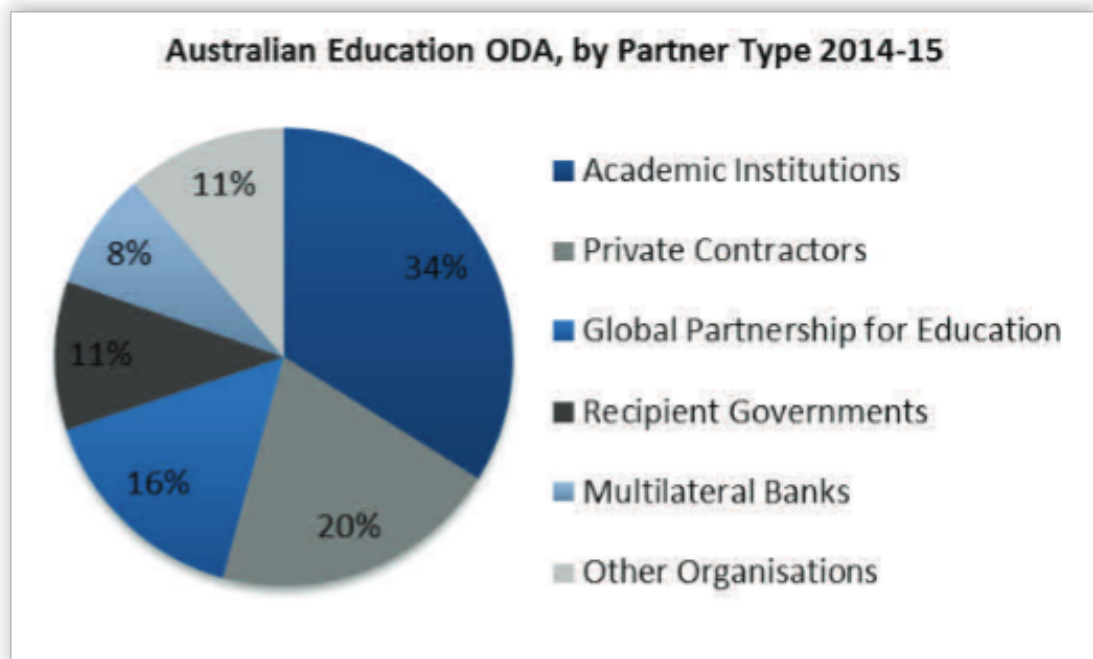


Figure 1: Recipients of Australian education aid by 'Partner Type'

Academic institutions

Over 2015-2016, an estimated \$360 million will be spent on the Australia Awards program, out of the \$745.2 million allocated for education aid (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2015). The Australia Awards program provides scholarships and fellowships to students from targeted countries to complete degrees and professional training, usually in Australia, but sometimes in nominated institutions in their own countries. It also provides for some Australian citizens to study in specific countries, although it prioritises scholarships and fellowships in Australian institutions. This program is a important plank in the Australian Government's efforts to provide aid that 'pursues our [sic] national interest and extends Australia's influence', because it specifically aims to 'build a new generation of global leaders with strong links to Australia' (ibid).

In 2015, a total of 4,107 Australia Awards were offered, 87% of which were offered to people in the Asia-Pacific region. Almost \$170 million went to ten Australian universities, as Figure 2 indicates. Of these ten, seven are part of the powerful Group of 8 universities.

AUSTRALIA AWARDS SCHOLARSHIPS FUNDING TO AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTIONS: TOP 10 IN FY 2014-15		
Rank	Institution	\$m
1	The Australian National University	28.9
2	The University of Melbourne	27.2
3	The University of Queensland	22.8
4	Flinders University	20.6
5	The University of Sydney	15.8
6	The University of New South Wales (including ADFA)	12.6
7	The University of Adelaide	12.3
8	Monash University	10.9
9	Curtin University	10.5
10	James Cook University	8.0
Total Institutions (52 active)		249.4

Figure 2: Australia Awards Scholarship Funding to Australian Institutions

Source: <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/australia-awards-statistical-profile.pdf>

Private contractors

The proportion of total aid money that goes directly to private contractors via Australian aid has declined over the last decade (Keane, 2016). However, private contractors, including increasingly powerful edu-businesses, have been able to effectively position themselves as education experts and necessary partners in international education aid, particularly in data collection, policy development and implementation, training and resource provision. By identifying problems, these companies can then sell their own solutions (Hogan, 2014), in the form of consultancy, curriculum and resource development, and assessment for all levels of education, from pre-primary to university level.

Massive edu-business Pearson, despite recent financial problems (Sweney, 2016), remains a multi-billion dollar company with interests in dozens of countries (Junemann & Ball, 2015), including in Australia. Their North American CEO, Don Kilburn, was quoted in an August 2015 report as asserting that, 'In the future world there are going to be more public-private partnerships in education' (Kamenetz, 2015), and this perspective undoubtedly reflects the ambitious trajectory of a relatively small but

powerful group of companies (including some that are ostensibly not-for-profit operations).

Selling education has become big business - the global education 'market' has been estimated at about \$5 trillion (*Education International*, 2015). And there should be no doubt that 'market' is exactly what global education has become, with more and more 'gaps' in the market being defined, and, of course, products being designed and sold to fill these gaps. Almost every aspect of international education has been commodified, and products are bought and sold on the basis of market forces rather than educational value. A whole new sector of potential profitability has opened up (Kamenetz, 2015), and private companies will continue to seek opportunities to expand their market share and improve their profitability.

Liberia, in eastern Africa, provides an extreme example of this, announcing in January 2016 that the running of its entire pre-primary and primary education systems would be subcontracted to the private company Bridge International Academies (BIA) (Mungai, 2016). The approach that BIA uses is straightforward. Teachers deliver scripted content from tablets, and are instructed not to vary from the script. Trained and qualified teachers, then, including those who will modify activities based on their interactions with students, are not required - a five week training program to cover the delivery of the script is considered sufficient (*ibid*). Australian aid is concentrated in the Asian region and Liberia has not been a significant recipient of aid money from Australia, although a number of Liberian students have been recipients of Australia Awards scholarships.

Global Partnership for Education

There are significant overlaps between this category of Australian aid, and the category of private contractors. The Global Partnership for Education focuses on 'quality basic education' (Global Partnership for Education, 2016) and is made up of 22 First World donor countries, international organisations including the World Bank, UNICEF and UNESCO, 61 recipient countries (mainly from Africa, the Middle East and Asia), NGOs, and the private sector, including Microsoft and Pearson.

Microsoft and [Pearson](#) will provide a combined \$30 million between 2012 and 2015 to increase school access, improve teacher development, school innovation and effective use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in Global Partnership [developing country partners](#).

from the *Global Partnership for Education* website

These companies are not acting as generous charities; both have long histories of tying their contributions to education programs to ongoing, profitable contracts that ultimately make more money for the company than any of their 'donations'.

Microsoft has been a world leader in distributing 'free' products that come with a high cost. At the end of 2002, Bill Gates visited India to distribute large amounts of 'free' software, millions of dollars of their own proprietary software. Distributing this software ensures that larger numbers of people become familiar with the programs and

feel unable to investigate better and/or cheap or free options, such as open source software (Microsoft versus Open Source, 2002). At that time, Microsoft also announced that it was investing \$400 million into education programs to promote computer literacy in India. This is a tactic that has been effective across many Third World countries, and schools have been particular targets of Microsoft's.

In 2007, Microsoft announced that it would be selling very cheap versions of its operating system and office software to some Third World countries for US\$3. Observers suggested that this was hardly an act of pure generosity, and indeed Orlando Ayala (currently Microsoft's Chairman of Emerging Markets and Chief Strategist of National Competitiveness) was quoted as saying, 'This is not a philanthropic effort, this is a business' ('Microsoft Aims to Double PC Base', 2007).

Microsoft intended its profits to come not from \$3 sales of software, but from the condition that recipient governments buy and distribute computers that can run those versions of Windows (Blass, 2007).

Older PCs would have been cheaper, and capable of running open source software - but that was not part of Microsoft's plan, and open source supporters don't have Microsoft's advertising budget for promotion. A key aspect of Microsoft's campaign is to require users to regularly update their programs and acquire 'add ons', both of which require spending more money (Microsoft versus Open Source, 2002).

In the same way that Australia's aid is designed to 'promote Australia's national interests', so too are these companies' contributions intended to deliver greater market share and profits.

Partnerships with these companies are not innocuous efforts to further an anti-poverty agenda, but part of an ongoing campaign to practically reinforce and ideologically legitimise the private sector by framing the public sector as a failure. (Junemann & Ball, 2015)

Pearson, meanwhile, has a similar history of manoeuvring to get a stake of the growing Third World education market. In 2012, Pearson launched its Pearson Affordable Learning Fund, which was built on 'high quality, for-profit education solutions' and had an intended 'investment horizon of 5-10 years with competitive market returns generated over the investment lifecycle' (ibid). A key plank of Pearson's strategy has been its marketing of itself as an indispensable resource in the development and implementation of education projects, with uniquely useful knowledge and expertise in what are termed 'newly emerging' markets (which could justifiably be called newly *created* markets).

Multilateral banks

Multilateral banks received 8% of Australia's total aid money over the 2014-2015 financial year. This includes money that is handed over to organisations such as the World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank to support what is described by DFAT as their 'development and poverty alleviation mandate' as well as funding for specific projects or 'targeted assistance' programs that are administered by one of these

multilateral banks (either alone or together with the government of the specific country or region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, April 2015).

The policies of the World Bank and Asian Development Bank have long been supported by Australian governments (AusAID, 2013; Australian Government - The Treasury, 2013; Australian Government - The Treasury, 2015) and today, DFAT justifies its continued work with these banks because '[a]s a multilateral organisation, they often have the advantage of being perceived as a relatively neutral player'.

But neither the World Bank nor the Asia Development Bank are charitable organisations. They gain income from interest on loans they make, but unlike private banks, do not have shareholders that receive portions of this profit (Anderson, n.d.). Moreover, both attach significant conditions to the loans that they make - these typically include measures such as the removal of price and trade controls, the promotion of export industries, the implementation of high interest rates, and privatisation (ibid), all measures with a disproportionately negative impact on already disadvantaged communities and group.

An example can be found with a brief look at the operation of the World Bank and Asia Development Bank in one of Australia's key recipients of aid, Papua New Guinea, which in 2015-2016 is expected to receive \$1,119.1 million in aid from Australia (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016). In the mid 1990s, the PNG government was forced to accept loans from the World Bank, with attendant conditions focused on public sector 'reforms' - wage freezes for public sector workers, the sacking of 7.5% of the public sector workforce and privatisation (Turner & Kavanamur, 2009). While such measures have continued to be an important aspect of loan 'conditionals', the focus has expanded to include agriculture. In a report prepared for the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights (Anderson, n.d.), Dr Tim Anderson examined the intervention of the World Bank and Asia Development Bank in PNG. He outlined the ways these institutions had undermined the sovereignty of the PNG government and created the conditions for the strengthening of international capital at the same time as weakening traditional community support structures. In the report, he referred to the years between 2000 and 2005, when Australia's aid program focused on improving facilities at two tertiary institutions in Madang, despite the lack of secondary schools in the region. Clearly, while large development projects have spread in PNG, these have held limited benefit for most communities and it has primarily been existing elites that have benefited. Foreign investment has focused on development projects including large scale logging, mining and the enforcement of a system of cash cropping (where crops are grown not for use by the farmer, but for sale, often international sale). Export-driven policies have been demanded by the World Bank and have been made conditions of aid, even while dependence on imported food grew.

The World Bank uses noble language - it has, for example, changed the name of its Structural Adjustment Programs to Poverty Reduction Programs in the wake of international popular condemnation of its policies. Its actions speak louder than words though, and the outcomes of its policies speak to its real intentions - making Third World countries more economically open and politically amenable to the influence of

international capital. Australian money that is given to multilateral banks such as the World Bank and Asia Development Bank is then most certainly not going to a 'neutral' party, but is, rather, reinforcing the subordinate position of recipient countries *vis a vis* donor countries and the international banks that clearly act on their behalf (Anderson, n.d.).

The commodification of all aspects of education – of learning and teaching, of school buildings and curriculum resources, of software and sports equipment, and more) is being advanced by corporate manoeuvring and government manipulation, for increased profit and increased power. Stark indicators of this can be found in all areas of the globe: undermining of teacher unions; the spread of standardised testing and increasingly punitive measures used against opposition to testing regimes; a growing willingness to blame teachers for 'underperformance', with little or no analysis of other factors such as decreased funding; cuts to funding for special education, school libraries and classroom resources; and so on. In this way, democracy is undermined and existing national and international power relations are reinforced.

This is neither inevitable nor unintentional, but is the result of a conscious and consistent approach by corporations and governments, who seek to entrench their power and profit, and avoid the danger of an education system that could serve as a focal point of social change. As in other areas of Australian aid, Australian spending on education aid is wielded as a weapon to maintain Australia's position as a regional power and to strengthen neoliberal political structures, both in Australia (including by presenting Australian government aid as fundamentally moral, benevolent and humane) and in the recipient countries of this aid. As even this limited essay demonstrates, though, a serious consideration of Australian aid in education reveals clear manipulations for financial and political gain, sometimes baldly stated and sometimes described in terms of generosity and unselfish intentions but always with a political agenda that serves the already powerful.

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