

## **SASNET workshop 2006 on The role of South Asia in the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden**

***Presentation by Niklas Tranaeus, Swedish Institute in the  
introductory session.***

### **On the importance of student exchange**

There are numerous stories of how a study experience abroad opened up the eyes, changed the lives of or set off successful careers for students. We all know that to go to another country and study is something which can benefit us as individuals enormously. But why is student exchange important in a wider sense?

I have been asked to speak about the benefits of student exchange in the context of Sweden and South Asia. I come from the Swedish Institute which for more than sixty years has worked with public diplomacy, including the promotion of academic exchange between Sweden and other countries. My specific task is to promote Sweden as a study destination for foreign students.

First I want to make clear that I use the term *students exchange* in a broad sense which includes exchange agreements and other forms of co-operation between higher education institutions and bilateral agreements between countries as well as recruitment of free mover students by either of or both of, the two countries. I will argue that regardless of what type of exchange, both countries will benefit - in the long run - for a number of reasons. This is much more so in a world where globalisation - in all its facets - is a reality.

Not too long ago student exchange was a rather marginal phenomenon. It took place largely within the framework of bilateral agreements between governments. A few foreign students also found their way to Sweden on their own, made the effort to learn Swedish first and – if successful - continued to study for a degree. Some stayed on and became researchers. Very few Swedish students went abroad. Those that did go, largely went to the United States. In a world divided by the Cold War, in which traditional diplomacy still reigned and to a much larger extent determined relations between countries, this was sufficient. Today the situation is very different. I want to explain why exchange is more important than ever.

From a national point of view, student and researcher mobility is important as a means to build networks with other countries, but also to attract talent from other countries. Building networks is vital for public diplomacy. The Fulbright programme in the post war era, is a case in point. Numerous leaders and executives around the world have been educated in the US. For a small country, to have a large body of alumni that have studied there is invaluable for both public and traditional diplomacy, for your export industry, for foreign investments in your country and even for the tourism industry. And of course the students themselves can contribute to the country's economy. In addition to all this, academic exchange vitalises your country's higher education institutions and open them up to new ideas.

As for attracting talent, this sometimes gives rise to fears that rich countries will plunder poorer countries of their best minds – the phenomenon referred to as “brain drain”. I believe this fear is largely based on a view of economics as a zero sum

game – the idea that one side’s gain necessarily must lead to the other side’s loss. In the short run, there may indeed be a loss. As we all know students who go abroad often stay on and work – if not in the country where they got their degree then in another country which welcomes skilled labour. But the skills they acquire while doing so – not to mention the money they may make – is highly likely at some point in time to flow back to the country where they came from, unless their home country is extremely repressive or unwelcoming to its expatriot citizens. When it does flow back it is likely to repay the loss many times. Look at what Chinese and Indian students in the United States have done to fuel growth in their respective countries. Yesterday, I came back from New Delhi, where I participated in the European Higher Education Fair and in a symposium on Indian-European exchange focused around the EUs Asia-Link Programme. One of the speakers Ms Sukatra Singh, Joint Secretary at the Ministry for External Affairs, said that Indian students who have studied and worked abroad are now returning in increasing numbers. Indian immigrants in the US have played a key role in convincing US companies to invest heavily in India. Some of these companies are even run by Indian immigrants, notably in the IT-sector. Increasing numbers of Indian students will continue to go abroad to study in the coming decades, but ultimately they will benefit India itself. And what is true for India can also be true for smaller countries and probably already is to some extent. While smaller countries in South Asia may be more sensitive to a short term loss of talent, wealthy countries are unlikely to aggressively market themselves to students in those countries. The general view in Europe also seems to be that campaigns to recruit students need to be balanced by efforts to co-operate with universities in the target countries. We see this in connection between

promotion and co-operation in the events that the Swedish Institute and three Swedish universities participated in during this weekend in New Delhi. The existence of a global education market is an undeniable fact and competition in this market is increasing, but at the same time there is also a growing awareness of the importance of international co-operation between universities and between countries in this area. In the long run a mix of competition and co-operation is in the interest of everyone. I believe that the value of institutional co-operation as a form of development aid is underestimated, especially in comparison with other forms of aid.

From an individual university's point of view attracting foreign students and researchers is a way to stay relevant and in touch with the outside world. This is true in particular of a research university but is true also of other higher education institutions. For even if the latter do not do as much research they need to excel in some areas and to do so they will need to be outward looking, especially if they are located in a small country. There may be potential conflicts of interest between domestic students and international students, but in the long run the domestic students will benefit enormously from the presence of foreign students on campus. And of course research must be international to survive and for that reason it must also be open to foreign talent. Universities in developing countries can potentially benefit enormously from institutional co-operation.

Today any country which does not open itself to foreign students, encourages its students to go abroad and whose universities do not engage in co-operation with institutions in other countries, risks being marginalised in the long run.

Student exchange – even in the broad sense – is today but one aspect of internationalisation in higher education. Perhaps it is time to speak of *globalisation* of higher education. Consider the far reaching impact of the Bologna Process, which transcends not only national borders but also continents; or the phenomenon called transnational education, exemplified by the plans to build an affiliate of KTH, the Royal Institute of Technology in Pakistan; or the spread of MBA as a concept around the world. All of these are examples of global phenomena which are transforming higher education and relations between countries fundamentally. Higher education is no longer exclusively an issue for ministries of higher education. Nor is diplomacy - in its broader sense - exclusively an issue for ministries for foreign affairs.

The true meaning of globalisation is that the difference between the domestic and the foreign is disappearing. This is hardly a new insight a decade after the term *globalisation* began being used in daily language. But the changes are so profound that it takes time to appreciate the effects of them. We are too used to thinking in our old ways. What all this means is that what a university is doing is no longer merely a national issue. More and more it affects people outside the country it is in. And to an even greater extent a university cannot ignore what is taking place outside its borders. It must in everything it does, from research to teaching, from communication to student recruitment consider the impact it has, not only in the country where it is located but also in the surrounding world. It must live with the fact that it will be judged and measured by a curious and often critical surrounding world. It must accept that it will be compared to universities from all over the world. And the universities that excel are not only found in the post industrial world. The IITs

in India are a case in point. IIT Delhi enrolls – on average - one student for every 75 applicants, which makes it one of the most competitive universities in the world to gain admission to. In the end if we believe in the free exchange of ideas, in the long term importance of research as a driver of growth and generator of wealth it seems there is no other option. Higher education will need to continue to globalise. But ultimately of course, the biggest benefit of international student exchange and an increasing globalisation of higher education is that it contributes to peace as it draws countries nearer and increases mutual understanding between different cultures.

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