

Abstract

Although great importance is attached to the role of education in national development in Southeast Asia, its role has been ambivalent. In the colonial period, education was a central way in which societies mobilised to challenge and resist European rulers. Yet education has also been the central vehicle through which colonial and post-colonial states have sought to impose their own visions and discipline their subjects. Southeast Asia's history has been marked by a cultural willingness to borrow and adapt ideas, practices and institutions from outside. Yet this has also been a source of anxiety and conflict. The 'indigenous' is often a product of an immediate post-colonial history, rather than the expression of a longer cultural experience. Historians can try to provide a useful narrative of regional thinking about education and development in Southeast Asia, particularly during its key 'periods of transition', and thus help to set educational developments within in a wider context. Providing a historical perspective, this paper attempts to map some of the region's capacities and capabilities, and to examine how adequately they have been exploited by the formal educational sector.

Keywords: Southeast Asia, Education, Development, Colonialism, Nationalism

Tim Harper is Reader in Southeast Asian and Imperial History at the University of Cambridge and a fellow of Magdalene College