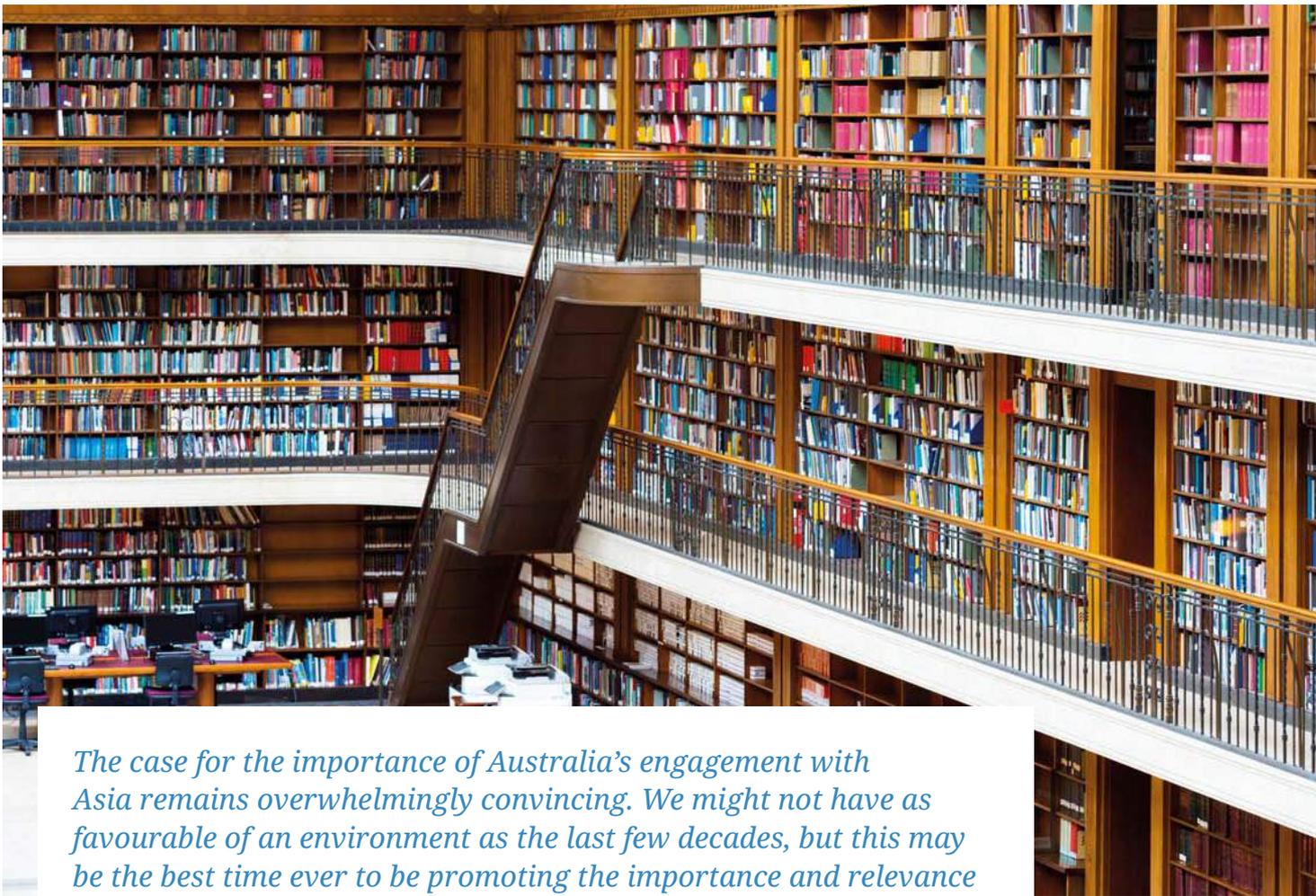


KENT ANDERSON

# Don't look back, Asian Studies has a positive future



*The case for the importance of Australia's engagement with Asia remains overwhelmingly convincing. We might not have as favourable of an environment as the last few decades, but this may be the best time ever to be promoting the importance and relevance of a deep and nuanced understanding of Asia.*

Some would say that over the last few years Australia's educational engagement with Asia has slid into quiet neglect. While acknowledging the more challenging environment, re-engagement is possible by using the institutional levers within our control to affect the improvements we desire, rather than merely meekly seeking more benefaction.

We need to reinvigorate with policymakers and the general public the support for Asia engagement, but in doing that we need, to begin with, a clear-eyed assessment of our current position. We might not have as favourable of an environment as the last few decades, but that there are many elements that make this the best time ever to be promoting the importance and relevance of a deep and nuanced understanding of Asia.

To appreciate where we may be heading, however, we still need to reflect on how the landscape has changed in challenging ways.

Asian Studies is not just Asian languages, but I use this as a proxy for the overall health of the discipline and also a marker for a deep knowledge of Asia.

Over the past 5 years, many university language programs have been threatened (La Trobe, Curtin, Western Sydney and the Australian National University) or closed (Indonesian at UNSW and all

language programs at University of Canberra). The situation is equally bad in the school's pipeline where the most recent measure has only 6 per cent of Year 12 students currently studying an Asian language and spot surveys suggest that it is declining.

Even more troubling for me has been the defunding of the Asian Education Foundation

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(AEF). Established in 1990 by the Commonwealth government and Myer foundation to promote Asian literacy in schools, it has succeeded impressively to become a tremendous resource in the school's sector.

In 2015, however, it lost its core \$1.5m annual funding and its transition funding just ran out. This will have a tremendous impact on the Asian Studies pipeline in universities. Similarly, the Asian Arts program of Asialink also lost its core funding from the Australia Council, meaning many of its programs will terminate. This will result in less exposure to Asia and Asian culture for the broader community.

One of the most visible challenges recently has been the stepping back from a leadership role in Asian Studies by the Australian National University (ANU) for financial reasons. Certain national institutions receive special funding to provide national leadership. ANU historically received special funding to fulfil a national leadership role including since its establishment in 1946 in Asian Studies. If the institution is to back away from that role for financial reasons, then such action undermines the rationale for that special allocation; in fact making the institution even more vulnerable to the loss of funding.

Thus, the question is to what extent do we accept ANU Asian Studies is special and therefore deserves extra funding. Or to what extent are you willing to forego funding at your institution to support a leadership role in the field by ANU? I'm willing

to argue from my perspective at a competitor university that I am willing to support ANU's leadership claim in Asian Studies (albeit I would seek to get a quid pro quo about UWA's leadership role in agriculture and I would note there are a number of successful 'hubs-and-spokes' models in other disciplines).

## The lost zeitgeist of an Asia narrative

These are ugly developments but I worry about them less than more fundamental developments which are harder to change.

Since the archiving of Asian Century White Paper in 2013, the bigger challenge is the loss of the popular narrative around the importance of Asia and Asian capabilities. This has been a subtle shift and it is worth putting it in a more modern historical context.

The modern priority position of Asian Studies in Australia gathered pace in the Keating years with his calls for Australia to join Asia. This roughly coincided with 1989 policy paper by Ross Garnaut and the 1990 establishment of the AEF. Following on from this was the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) program that put

real resources into schools, developing our pipeline of capable and informed students.

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NALSAS ended in 2004 but by that stage the Howard government "got Asia" and after the 2020 Summit Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister revived the policy as the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program. Subsequently, Prime

Minister Julia Gillard wanting to differentiate herself from Rudd commissioned the Asian Century White Paper which made one of the most comprehensive and lucid arguments for the importance of Asia and how to deliver real outcomes for the broader Australian public.

But more significant than the white paper's shelving has been the refocusing on the deficiencies in Australia's science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) capability and the need for an innovation dynamic in the 21st century.

With the slowing economy in a rapidly digitalising world, Australia's disappointing performance in international comparisons of maths and science students and studies showing weak Australian industry engagement with the research sector,

the importance of STEM and innovation made for a powerful narrative. The cumulative effect has been to suck the public policy oxygen for Asian Studies from the room.

I strongly support the STEM agenda and would argue for a sweet spot around an innovative Asia engagement strategy. But we need to acknowledge that Asian Studies has had a blessed run over the past 25 years and has become much harder in a more crowded space.

### The way forward in a new Asian century

Despite these setbacks, there are new, more optimistic developments.

First, there is more deep and authentic engagement between Australia and Asia in the academic space than we've ever had at any stage before. We have more Asians studying and experiencing Australia than in the past, now over 300,000. And, our students are reciprocating by studying in Asia.

We can do better in this space, but presently 16 per cent of Australian students study abroad, the highest percentage of any country in the world, and a third of them go to Asia. The Coalition's New Colombo Plan (NCP) is having a popular impact, and Labour's nearly identical program of AsiaBound is wholly consistent with the push.

Perhaps more importantly, Asia is no longer out there and Australia here. We have record numbers of Australians travelling to Asia as a regular matter of course. Some of that might be to the beaches of

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Bali and Phuket, but a lot of it also includes culturally rich and authentic experiences such as onsens in Japan, temples in Cambodia, and business lunches in Xi'an.

Matching that outbound travel, the number of inbound Asian visitors is increasing. Chinese tourists have replaced Japanese tourists of the 1980s, but the total numbers are

well-passed anything we could have ever hoped for then. Moreover, Australia migration is now coming largely from Asia, and that is especially the case in academic migration.

The combination of academic migration and student movement means we have also reached the highest level in the history of research co-publication

between Australian and Asian researchers. These people-to-people engagements are the most effective and transformative in convincing the general population of the importance of a deep knowledge of Asia.

I'm also an optimist because both major political parties agree on the importance of Asia and are willing to do something about it. The Coalition's flagship policy remains the NCP and its funding nearly doubles going forward. It is having serious impact in getting non-traditional students into Asia and providing them with authentic engagement. In the last election, Labor said it would keep the NCP albeit cutting funding in half to fund more teacher training in Asian languages.

Given these positive developments within a challenging context nevertheless, pose the question of how to realise the full potential for promotion of Asian Studies. We no longer have the luxury of passivity and our message will be more effective if we present a solution to other problems.

### Asian Studies 101: good teaching and leadership matters

Student revenue drives modern universities, so to assert that Asian Studies matters we must accept that if students like you, you will be relevant and matter. If they do not, you will be marginalised.

Subject matter is important, but good teaching matters more to the attraction and retention of students. We can all list dull topics with robust enrolments because of the success of a lecturer, and the counter-example.

This is not a solo endeavour. I think we as a community need to be committed to the best teaching practice and constantly holding ourselves and our colleagues to that standard.

It is not all about individual classrooms, however. The structure of the degree does matter. There is a natural tendency among academics to seek specialisation and narrow rigidity. To some extent, we must resist this and advocate for degree breadth and flexibility.

Languages provide a good lesson. In the 1960s 40 per cent of Year 12 students studied a language. By our most recent measure, it had dropped to 12 per cent and was falling. University enrolments largely matched this with decreasing numbers.

UWA and University of Melbourne have gone against this trend, however. The introduction of choice into the undergraduate degrees in 2012 has seen an explosion of UWA language enrolments. And, over

half of this growth has been students enrolled in science and engineering degrees – a STEM student rounded with Asian STEAM is not only relevant but persuasive.

Given the opportunity, students will choose languages and Asian languages. These students are a different kind of learner, what I call “tourists” or others call service teaching. Moreover, you must be persuasive in advocating with non-language and non-Asian Studies colleagues in your institution for the flexible changes to traditionally rigid curriculum, but by modifying university structures you can revive enrolments, which translates into institutional power.

Third, as already mentioned, study abroad is booming. Behind the NCP, study abroad is the new black. Australia now has the highest percentage of study abroad and a third of that is in Asia. The real growth is in the non-culture, society, and languages area, and for short-term programs in English. We as hardcore Asian Studies specialists can dismiss these experiences, but if we positively leverage them to work with our colleagues in other disciplines and

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engage students, we will be the long-term beneficiaries with more students coming to do our courses seeking to feed their curiosity.

Finally, I believe Asian Studies and Asian languages are financially viable. Here are the basic numbers:

The Commonwealth gives

a university \$12,455 per full-time equivalent student studying language and the student contributes \$6256. This means your university receives \$18,711 per student or \$2339 per student in a classroom. Social science students generate \$2050 less and international students, which make up a quarter of students, generate roughly \$10,000 more. Assuming university overheads take half of this, it means roughly \$1250 goes to the local area for each student in a class. Assuming an average Asian Studies academic costs a total \$200,000 a year, this means a typical lecturer needs to teach four courses a year with roughly 40 students in each class. If you are teaching more than this, you are a net revenue generator. This rough back-of-the-envelope calculation does not take into account the other 40 per cent of university revenue including research funding and philanthropy support.

The calculations are complex but popular Asian Studies and Asian languages courses are or should be, money earners. We are not emasculated orphans begging for generosity but in fact a crucial

and empowered engine to the whole who can respectfully ensure that our institutions support Asian Studies appropriately. We have an influence on the most important financial variable – student numbers and satisfaction.

Lastly, leadership matters: leaders influence culture, set agendas, make critical decisions and often have veto rights. So we need more Asian Studies experts to put their hands up to be leaders for local internal areas. Heads of disciplines, associate deans, deans

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are critical roles that make the operation run and have disciplinary leadership. We also need colleagues in roles not directly related to our disciplinary expertise, across the research agenda, the internationalisation strategy, the methodology of teaching and learning.

Beyond the internal, we also need more of us to put our hands up to lead across the institution. In these

roles, leaders have an impact across an institution and they are able to inject Asian content, insight and nuance into mainstream and unexpected places.

But leading internally and institutionally, however, is not enough. We need to stand in the public policy space to advocate for the importance of Asian Studies. The strong foundation from which we have been working over the past few decades is due to Asian experts' willingness to participate in the harsh cut-and-thrust of public debate.

They include people like China expert Ross Garnaut, Japan expert Peter Drysdale, Japan and international education expert Phil Honeywood, and China expert Kevin Rudd. We may not always agree with their general political positions, but our interests in Asian Studies are better served when we have one of our own doing the hard yards of pushing Australian public policy.

## **Asia (still) matters**

The case for the importance of Australia's engagement with Asia remains overwhelmingly convincing. By 2030, two-thirds of the world's population will be in Asia. By 2030, five of the top ten economies will be in Asia. And, even today, Asia remains the most vibrant and dynamic region in the world in the face of an ageing and stagnating Europe and North America.

In an environment where we have faced some setbacks, I remain positive that we can leverage the good to build a relevant and rich Asian Studies for tomorrow. This is vital for the vibrancy of Australia and it requires all of our commitment to good teaching, affirmative leadership, and constant commitment.

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