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## Enduring Connections?

### *Soft Power and Pedagogy in Short-Term Study Tours to Indonesia*

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#### Abstract

Since 2013, the Australian government has funded Australian students to undertake short periods of study abroad with an emphasis on Asia, including Indonesia. Universities, too, have been enhancing their study-abroad options as part of broader internationalization campaigns. In a short time, the number of Australian higher-education students undertaking study abroad as part of their undergraduate degrees has doubled, to one in five students. This significant investment follows from two beliefs: that Australia's relations with Asia are significantly impacted by people-to-people relations; and that formal, experiential learning is a particularly effective pedagogical method. But is this investment warranted? Do periods of short-term study in Indonesia enrich students' understanding of the region, and of Australia's relations with Asia? And do current undergraduates, who have unprecedented access to mobility through travel and tourism, gain anything from a formal and guided people-to-people experience? This article explores these questions through an in-depth investigation of the intensive-mode undergraduate unit 'Australia and Asia' run by the Faculty of Arts at Monash University from 2014 to 2017. It suggests that, for many students, study tours facilitate a short-term period of emotional involvement and self-reflection, rather than forging enduring connections.

#### Keywords

Indonesia – Australia – education – student mobility – soft power – Asia literacy – New Colombo Plan

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Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

FREIRE 1972:58

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Over the past decade, Australia's determination to improve its 'Asia literacy' has seen a variety of programmes designed to connect young people with their region, implemented through schools and universities. Levels of knowledge about Indonesia and its language have long been a point of concern, considering the close geographical and growing economic ties between the neighbouring nations (Coppel 2019; Hill et al 2012). As part of these efforts, in the period 2014–2018, increased interest and investment has seen a surge in the number of Australian undergraduate study tours to Indonesia. In this article, we unpick the multiple and sometimes contradictory motivations of governments, universities, and academics, who variously regard study tours as a form of soft diplomacy, a way to increase student employability, and an effective pedagogical tool. Examining the drivers and rationale for investment, we suggest there is a slippage between these motivations that can effectively blur their purpose. We also present students' experiences and responses to study tours to Indonesia, suggesting that, although they have the potential to build Australians' knowledge of the 'Other', their primary contribution is in provoking affective and emotional engagement, and inducing personal and national self-reflection. While this is an important outcome that sets the study tour apart from many other educational experiences, we point to the limits of genuine engagement possible during a short-term study tour experience.

Study-abroad programmes have been offered at Australian universities and schools since the 1960s. However, until very recently, they have not been taken up with the same enthusiasm as in Europe, where studying abroad has long been an integral part of a tertiary degree. In Europe, between 1987 and 2003, the ERASMUS programme supported 3 million students to study in another country. Until recently, rates in Australia have been similar to the US, where roughly one in ten undergraduates participates in a study-abroad programme (Hepple 2018). By 2024, globally approximately 3.85 million tertiary students will study abroad for part of their study (Jackson and Oguro 2018; Shields

2013). As the higher-education sector internationalizes and commercializes, Australian undergraduates are being offered—and are taking up—this option in significant numbers. In the short period from 2013 to 2016 there has been an exponential growth in students studying abroad for credit. In 2016, a record 20% of students of the graduating cohort of the represented universities joined a study tour as part of their degrees; an exponential growth of 50% since 2013. The vast majority of these—over 75%—took part in short-term tours of less than a semester, with most trips around two weeks in duration (DET 2018). Whilst impressive, these numbers alone cannot shed light on the efficacy of these programmes for developing intercultural capacity in students, or, indeed, increasing their Asia literacy. What are the various forces that have come together to provide opportunities for Australian students to study abroad in unprecedented numbers? How might we assess the impact of this experience on students' learning and overall university experience?

Whilst the field of study focused on the internationalization of higher education globally is maturing (Holliday 2018), insights from within the Australian context are less developed. This article is based on a close assessment of Australian government's AsiaBound programme and the New Colombo Plan (NCP), as well as universities' mobility policies and relevant literature on learning and teaching. It finds that the institutions and contexts enabling study tours to Indonesia—governmental, institutional, and pedagogical—approach them with different motivations and goals. Although each of these levels have an interest in measuring effectiveness, they measure it in very different ways, which reflect their varying definitions of success. Multiple reports from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), compiled by private-sector consultants, are primarily based on opt-in surveys of students and interviews with university NCP contact officers and DFAT staff. This mechanism overlooks the experiences of academics coordinating and running the programmes, and of students who may have been less engaged in the experience—typically ones who may not want to fill in an evaluation questionnaire. Universities' declarations of successful student mobility tend to be based on numbers, with 'scaling up' programmes and increasing mobility opportunities considered an end in themselves. Yet, pedagogical studies tend to be more critical of short-term study tours, focusing on the desirability of long-term, immersive language-learning rather than one-off visits to build long-lasting knowledge and understanding of cultural Others (Jackson and Oguro 2018).

This article brings these overlapping, and sometimes competing, points of view together, focusing on a specific AsiaBound and NCP-funded study tour to provide a qualitative assessment of the governmental, institutional, and pedagogical contexts that framed its development, as well as tracing the experi-

ences of academics and students in the field. It is based on a critical evaluation of teachers' and students' experiences of one particular study tour to Indonesia, run by a university in Melbourne. Monash University's 'Australia and Asia' ran five times over the period 2014–2017, with a total of 114 students, which we coordinated. We present a rare qualitative study to closely evaluate the study tour's curriculum and itinerary, probe students' reflections on their learning and cross-cultural experiences (submitted as assessable tasks at the conclusion of the unit), and reflect on students' subsequent study, career, and travel trajectories. The rapid expansion<sup>1</sup> of short-term mobility programmes enabling Australian students to study in Asia has not yet been supported by empirical analysis of its efficacy as a form of soft diplomacy or as a mode of learning and teaching. As intercultural-education scholar Adrian Holliday argues, 'we need to struggle against these technicalised models to find qualitative understandings that might be harder to categorise or to attach to measurable notions of success, but which go deeper into what is going on between the lines of the lived experiences of the intercultural', including 'rich data that represent student experience' (Holliday 2018:209). By turning the lens on a particular study tour programme, and evaluating the experience at institutional, academic, and student levels, this article seeks to build a deeper understanding of the effectiveness and impact of study tours to Indonesia.

## 1 People-to-People Contact in Australia-Asia Relations

The impact of people-to-people contact has long been a particular feature in discussions of Australian–Asian relations, particularly with reference to Australia's relationship with its closest neighbour, Indonesia. Historically, Australia's relations with Asia have been characterized by ambivalence: the appeal of Asia's markets has been counterweighted by anxiety about potential invasions of people and culture (Walker 1999; Walker & Sobocinska 2012). Australia's relations with Indonesia have been marked by persistent anxiety, rooted

1 Indicative of this accelerated growth in student mobility numbers to Indonesia are data from the Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies (ACICIS), which has been operating since 1997. During the period 2010–2017, overall student numbers have increased by an average of 13%, but on the back of NCP-funded, short-term mobility programme grants 2017 saw a 39% increase overall (ACICIS 2018). As a participating consortium ACICIS secured A\$3.4 million in NCP Mobility Program funding under the 2016 and 2018 funding rounds. Indonesia is the most popular destination for the NCP Mobility Program. See the embassy's media release 'Indonesia still number one for Australian students'. [http://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR18\\_031.html](http://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR18_031.html) (accessed 16-7-2018).

in ignorance and suspicion (Sobocinska 2017). As Philpott (2001) argues, this anxiety is embedded in Australian identity: the insistence on Australia's difference from Asia has historically been a core element of Australian nationhood. From the Indonesian perspective, the historical White Australia policy, and ongoing political, military, and cultural ties to the United States, have sometimes led to doubts about Australia's place in the region (Hardjono 1994).

A historically ambivalent relationship at government level, often pursued with a deep awareness of cultural, racial, political, and economic difference, has imbued people-to-people contacts between Australia and Indonesia with particular significance (Hill 2012; Sobocinska 2014; Missbach and Purdey 2015). It could be argued that, in recent years, recognition of the importance of people-to-people relations as an aspect of this particular bilateral relationship, and more generally, has had an impact on government policy. Since the concept of soft power was first coined by political scientist Joseph Nye in the 1990s it has become increasingly important as a feature of the public-diplomacy initiatives engaged in by successive Australian governments. The 2012 white paper *Australia in the Asian century* (DPMC 2012) emphasized the complexity and potential of people-to-people engagement, which was then followed up by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's *Public diplomacy strategy* (DFAT 2014) offering a blueprint for how a range of soft-power tools, including cultural and student exchange, would be used for Australia's national interest (Missbach and Purdey 2015:2–3). A 2015 report by a range of eminent Australian academic councils added to this discussion and argued specifically for what it called 'smart engagement' with Asia that works 'towards nurturing wide-ranging, longterm, deep and mutually beneficial relations, based on the principle of reciprocity' (Ang et al. 2015:8).

Some of this 'smart engagement' was focused on the tertiary-education sector. In 2012, the Gillard Labor government announced a suite of AsiaBound grants and scholarships designed to send more Australian students to Asia. Then tertiary education minister Chris Evans noted that Australians 'will need to be increasingly Asia-literate and these are skills best learnt by experiencing Asia first-hand'.<sup>2</sup> The AsiaBound model was incorporated into the New Colombo Plan (NCP) under subsequent Liberal governments and first offered in its pilot phase in 2014. By 2017, the NCP was touted as a 'signature initiative' of the Australian government, which by the end of 2018 will have had funded some 31,000 undergraduate students travelling to 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific region, with 10,000 more to be added each year (DFAT 2017b,

2 Mark Kenny, 'Uni students paid to go to Asia under new federal government programme', *Daily Telegraph*, 31-10-2012.

2018a).<sup>3</sup> The NCP provides mobility grants for study tours of two weeks to one semester in duration, which are organized and run by the universities; it also awards NCP scholarships to individual students for study and internships at a host institution for a period of 3 to 19 months. For 2019, 11,817 students received mobility grants (of which approximately 7% were for semester-long programmes) and up to 120 scholarships were available (DFAT 2018b).

These developments resulted from diplomatic, rather than educational, goals: the New Colombo Plan is a 'signature' policy of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and not the Department of Education. Research into Australian government scholarship programmes for foreign students to study in Australia has shown that the anticipation of public-diplomacy outcomes from these programmes was always present.<sup>4</sup> Academic analyses of the NCP have emphasized such goals (Laifer and Kitchen 2017; Byrne 2016; Lowe 2015). As Laifer and Kitchen (2017:815) note, 'the design of Australia's international education policy was driven by soft power considerations'. Observers have been quick to praise the NCP's effectiveness, based on its promise as a soft-power programme. Byrne (2016:114) suggests that 'viewed through the lens of public diplomacy, the New Colombo Plan provides a worthy case study, leveraging student mobility to enhance Australia's attractiveness and legitimacy and, ultimately, influence within the region'.

For the Australian government, the benefit of the NCP is twofold: projecting a positive image of Australia as an exercise in soft power, and also boosting Australia's Asia literacy and capacity to engage with regional cultures and economies (Ang et al. 2015). As minister for foreign affairs Julie Bishop noted in 2014, 'our country will benefit enormously from having young ambassadors from Australia who have an understanding of and insight into the region that only comes from living and studying and working there' (DFAT 2017a). Gribble and Tran (2016:24) demonstrate that this initiative is in keeping with global trends: 'In the face of increasing economic and social interdependence, fostering graduates with both the capacity and desire to engage internationally and with other cultures is now an imperative for most nations.' As study-abroad scholars Jackson and Oguro argue further, this is based on the assumption that international educational experiences are 'transformative' and encourage

3 In 2019, the New Colombo Plan will support 11,817 students from 40 universities across Australia to take part in 792 mobility projects in 36 host locations in the Indo-Pacific region.

4 Oakman 2004; Lowe and Oakman 2004; Purdey 2014, 2015; see also David Lowe, 'New Colombo Plan can change how we see Asia—if done right', *The Conversation*, 25-6-2014. <https://theconversation.com/new-colombo-plan-can-change-how-we-see-asia-if-done-right-28301> (accessed 12-7-2018).

global-mindedness, even though the evidence remains to be fully gathered. Rather, so far what the research in this field has uncovered raises ‘troubling questions about what students actually gain from their stay abroad when there is no pedagogical intervention’ (Jackson and Oguro 2018:2).

## 2 Universities and the Push for Mobility

In the past decade, Australian universities have increasingly sought to boost student uptake of international exchange, study abroad, and study tours—and, as the DET data show, with great success (Salter and Halbert 2017; Hepple 2018; DET 2018). This push, and the resulting steep increase in participation, is at least partly a direct outcome of the NCP. In 2016, almost 17,250 university students travelled to countries identified as priority destinations under the New Colombo Plan (DET 2018). Beyond the selection of destinations, an effectiveness study commissioned by DFAT found that the NCP introduced outbound mobility into the university sector’s strategic planning framework, so that ‘mobility is now reflected in a range of performance metrics/indicators that did not exist prior to NCP’ (Acil Allen Consulting 2017:ii).

Although the NCP may have played a role in increasing universities’ enthusiasm for outbound student mobility, the push to increase international study programmes is in keeping with broader efforts at internationalization and global engagement. This push is at least partly an attempt to boost university rankings in international metrics and thus attract international student enrolment.<sup>5</sup> As one policy maker in international education noted, ‘student and academic mobility [has] become a strategic conversation between Vice Chancellors, a new currency in terms of how well they are performing’ (Rebecca Hall, cited in Laifer and Kitchen 2017:832). The NCP mobility programmes have been developed alongside the first Australian National Strategy for International Education 2025 (hereafter ‘the Strategy’), launched in April 2016 (Australian government 2016). The Strategy is concerned with ‘ensur(ing) Australia remains a leader in the provision of education services to overseas students’ and the growth and development of this export sector into the future. Under

5 Education is Australia’s third-largest export earner after coal and iron ore. In 2017 it was worth A\$30bn to the economy, an increase of 17.3% on the previous year. ‘Wild swings in key export data’, *The Australian*, 23-5-2018; see <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/wild-swings-in-key-export-data/news-story/e1157c6ccc0502263e0946a73f8bfff89>. Growth in student numbers is projected at 3.8% per annum to 2025 (Australian government, ‘National Strategy’, 2016).

its Pillar 2 'Making transformative partnerships', Goal 6 is 'Enhancing mobility; maximize student, academic and researcher mobility', specifically identifying the NCP and other scholarships and mobility grants 'to develop transformational relationships in our region and a more regionally engaged Australian workforce' (Australian government 2016).

This intersection of outbound student mobility, university rankings tables, and the international student market—worth over A\$30 billion to the Australian economy—is apparent in the policy and public-relations documents of several major Australian universities. Monash University made 'local and global engagement' part of its Focus Monash strategic plan for 2015–2020. The strategic plan notes that 'excellence is enhanced through the truly international reach of Monash, its students, staff, campuses and partners, including its particular focus in the Asia–Pacific'. It sets 'international education' as a university priority, pledging that 'we will work with our institutional partners and others to encourage greater student mobility, physical and virtual, and increase interaction between students from different countries' (Monash University 2015:17). Further, in 2018, the Faculty of Arts at Monash University announced a 'Global Immersion Guarantee' (GIG), funding every student in the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Global Studies degrees to take a short-term overseas study tour during their first year. Indonesia was selected as one of the four pilot destinations, alongside Malaysia and Italy (where Monash has already established campuses) and India (in partnership with the TATA Institute of Social Sciences) (Monash University 2018a). The GIG programme was awarded A\$2.2 million in NCP mobility grants for its study tours to India (2019–2022) and Indonesia (2019/20) (DFAT 2018b).

Although it is particularly ambitious, Monash University is by no means alone in its pursuit of internationalization. The intersection of the interests of the Australian university in terms of its international profile with mobility programmes is evident across the elite Group of Eight universities. To cite just one more example, the University of Queensland situates the mobility of its undergraduate students in the region as part of its wider objectives, as '[g]lobal connectivity is at the heart of UQ's vision to create knowledge leadership for a better world'. The University of Queensland situates undergraduate mobility, and specifically NCP-funded programmes, as being central to this project of 'knowledge leadership', 'particularly with our neighbours in the Indo-Pacific'.<sup>6</sup>

6 'New Colombo Plan scholars embark on global pathways', *UQ News*, 29-11-2017. <https://www.uq.edu.au/news/article/2017/11/new-colombo-plan-scholars-embark-global-pathways> (accessed 18-7-2018).



A final motivation for universities in pursuing student mobility is the belief that graduates with international experience are more attractive to employers (which in turn boosts universities' rankings on this measure). DFAT's NCP material notes that 'one of the core aims of the New Colombo Plan is to ensure Australia's undergraduates have the skills and work-based experiences to contribute to our domestic and the regional economy' (DFAT 2017a). Universities often phrase this in the language of employability. Monash University, for example, claims that its NCP programmes 'increase the number of work-ready Australian graduates' (Monash University 2018b).

### 3 Experiential Learning and Study Tours in Theory and Praxis

While outbound student mobility has been embraced for its soft-power benefits and as a boost to university rankings, the literature on learning and teaching holds that it is also an effective pedagogical tool. This is in keeping with pedagogical theory on experiential learning (Hutchings, Jackson and McEllister 2002; Deloach et al. 2003; Paige et al. 2009). Learning-and-teaching literature shows that study abroad, including for short-term study tours, can be a successful means to develop students' intercultural skills (Paige et al. 2009; Black and Duhon 2006; Welsh 2015). The 2012 Office for Learning and Teaching report *Bringing the learning home* found that student mobility and study abroad contributed to graduate attributes including cross-cultural competence and globally oriented citizenship, and recommended that study-abroad programmes 'should be promoted' (Gothard, Gray and Downey 2012:8).

In the discourse on global mobility programmes in higher-education settings there is often a tension between an interpretation of these programmes as experiences through which students can 'differentiate their skill set in globally competitive knowledge economies', and 'more philanthropic discourses that seek to encourage students to seek out mobility experiences to develop empathy and ethical responses to global challenges' (Salter and Halbert 2017: 694). The benefits of student mobility for constructing global citizens who are 'interculturally aware, active members of both local and global societies' (Salter and Halbert 2017) are often simply stated and rarely in dispute (Jackson and Oguro 2018).

However, the concern, as expressed by Salter and Halbert and in this article, is with regards to the 'exclusive focus on mobility' for 'developing students' global perspectives' and the relatively untested efficacy of the short-term mobility programmes, which make up the majority of experiences for Australian students. By 2018, one in five Australian students had had a study abroad

experience during their undergraduate degree. This number increased six-fold in the period 2005–2015, and with the forward budget for the NCP (2018–2021) at over A\$50 million a year, this trajectory will continue (Tran and Phuong Vu 2018a; 2018b). Studies also show that there is a striking and growing preference among students internationally for short-term over semester-long programmes (DET 2018; Gribble and Tran 2016:24).

The desirability of Australian study in Asia has been particularly emphasized. The Asia Education Foundation has identified Australians' lack of Asia literacy as a widespread concern (Asia Education Foundation 2012). AEF also identified increased rates of student mobility to Asia as a core priority if Australia was to build an Asia-capable workforce (2012:5). However, the rate of uptake was slow, with evidence that students are unwilling to study Asia-specific units or to study abroad in Asia (Australia Education International 2013). Research suggests that this is because students consider Asia literacy as a long-term, high-investment path, requiring an Asian language as well as specialized knowledge of Asian history, politics, and culture.<sup>7</sup> It also suggests that students do not see a period of study in an Asian university as prestigious or advantageous to their careers.<sup>8</sup> The introduction of short-term study tours beginning in the 2000s, partly funded by DFAT, presented an opportunity to attract new students to the study of Asia through removing some of the financial and institutional barriers (Salter and Halbert 2017).

In practice, studies have found that the in-country study of Indonesia has been particularly effective for language learners, but also for enhanced cultural competency. Comparing in-country students with those who undertook their language study purely in Australia, Welsh (2015:152) discovered that those who had undertaken formal study of Indonesia and Indonesian only in Australia 'tended to focus on differences between self and other, in a dialectic manner, conceptualizing self and other as binary opposites'. The in-country experience, on the other hand, allowed them to understand 'Indonesia' through social interactions and 'tended to focus on Indonesian people to extrapolate what Indonesian culture is like' (Welsh 2015:167).

Welsh's research and others like it are largely based on analyses of longer-term, immersive experiences, rather than the short-term study tours that form the bulk of NCP-funded programmes. Welsh's empirical research is related to longer-term, in-country language study of a semester or more, and, as such, he expresses concerns about the short-term study tour model. He warns that

7 Percival Wood 2012; see also Relye, Cocchiara, and Studdard 2008; Sanchez, Fornerino, and Zhang 2006.

8 Michael Wesley, 'Australian education in the Asian century', *The Australian*, 26-10-2011.

it 'risks placing students more as tourists and as consumers of the other culture, rather than as co-participants in shaping cultural understanding [...] [it] is likely to provide very limited opportunity for in-depth social relations' (Welsh 2015:168). This is exacerbated when the students have no proficiency in the local language.

Long-time observers of Australia's relationship with Asia are also cautious in their assessments of short-term study tours. In its *Smart engagement* report, the Australian Council of Learned Academies was particularly pointed in its assessments of such programmes: 'Embracing long-term relationship building will be more effective than short-term, one-off programmes to foster sustained regional connectivity' (Ang et al. 2015:11). Indonesianist Howard Dick is among those who, like David Walker (1999), posit that the impediments to engaging with and knowing Asia indeed lie first and foremost with ourselves: 'We still struggle to confront the awkward facts that we were both colonized and colonizer [...] and there is the defensive, huddling instinct of the island nation' (Dick 2015:42). One does not preclude the other. However, as Welsh's study shows, it is in sustained intercultural interaction that the potential for transformative individual experience is found; bringing the student 'enhanced self-reflexivity and a more critical view of their own background culture' (Welsh 2015:152).

Notably, when it comes to the short-term mobility programmes sponsored by the NCP, neither the broader pedagogical effectiveness nor the more nuanced sentiments regarding Australians' self-awareness in relation to Asia have yet been evaluated. The NCP's effectiveness has been measured by DFAT-contracted independent consultant Acil Allen over several years, but the views of academics coordinating, teaching, and supervising mobility programmes are notably absent from their reports. Instead of academics, Acil Allen consulted and interviewed NCP contact officers in universities, who are typically administrative/professional staff without any involvement in the programmes' pedagogical goals or outcomes. Students' views were also captured only through a self-selecting survey, which by its very nature threatens to skew responses towards the most engaged students, and by a single focus group of 20 students. The report found that students claimed to have 'improved their knowledge of their host location' and become 'more "Asia-capable"', and that they 'valued' off-campus activities such as field visits and cultural events more highly than on-campus pedagogy. However, whether this reflected student enjoyment rather than pedagogical enrichment was never probed; nor was their claim to improved knowledge substantiated. In effect, the New Colombo Plan has been praised as effective by scholars assessing its soft-power objectives, and by evaluations of administrators and students. The questions of what students actually learn during their study tours, and whether their experiences represent more

than a surface experience equivalent to tourism, have not been analysed. Preliminary research by Tran and Phuong Vu (2018a; 2018b) also highlights this lack of research and the imperative for greater insight into the student experience to assess its impact as a tool for public diplomacy. In effect, whilst early indications are that the NCP has been effective in its soft-power objectives, our question is: is it the role of the university to further the nation's soft-power objectives or to facilitate an enriching pedagogical experience?

#### 4 Accessing 'Australia and Asia'

The short-term study tour 'Australia and Asia' was established within the Faculty of Arts at Monash University in 2014, running five times over the period 2014–2017. It was an interdisciplinary unit examining Australia's past and present relations with Asia through the lenses of history, cultural studies and politics/international relations. Facilitated by government and university interest in student mobility, and inspired by the pedagogical literature, 'Australia and Asia' was designed to allow students both to learn about the history of Australia's relations with Asia and to experience people-to-people contact at both formal and informal levels. The curriculum was written by Sobocinska, a historian, with the primary aim that students recognize that contemporary affairs are profoundly affected by history and culture as well as politics. A further aim was to provide students with an experiential basis for understanding international affairs, by examining the question of Australian–Asian relations both from an Australian and an Asian perspective. To this end, the unit comprised one week of intensive lectures on campus in Melbourne and a two-week study tour of Indonesia.

Although this was a senior-level unit, it did not carry prerequisites in Asian Studies or languages. This allowed 'Australia and Asia' to function as an entry-level unit that brought in students who may not have been interested in studying Asia before. The vast majority of students enrolled in the unit had never studied *bahasa Indonesia*. Of the 114 students taught over five cohorts in 2014–2017, only a handful were taking majors or minors in Asian Studies, Asian History, or Asian languages. The majority were enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Education, or Bachelor of Law programme, although students also came from degrees in business, commerce, science, and medicine.

'Australia and Asia' benefitted from the previously discussed enthusiasm for student mobility to Asia at faculty, university, and government level. The Faculty of Arts provided increased visibility and promotion of the unit, as the first study tour of its kind. Monash University offered each student a A\$500

subsidy to go towards travel costs, as it does for each of its student mobility programmes. Students also benefitted substantially from DFAT's investment in Australian student mobility to Asia. In 2014, ten 'Australia and Asia' students had access to A\$2500 AsiaBound scholarships, with an additional A\$1500 for course development costs. From 2015 until 2017, students were able to apply for one of 20 allotted A\$3000 New Colombo Plan scholarships per year.

## 5 Teaching 'Australia and Asia'

Seminars in week one began with David Walker's assertion that Australia is an 'Anxious Nation' living in the shadow of an Asian behemoth (Walker 1999). Students learnt something of the history of Australian contacts with Asia, beginning with Gold Rush-era fears of an influx of Chinese migrants and European colonialism in Asia. They learnt about Australia's contacts with Asia during the Pacific War and the Cold War, and traced the origins of later Australian enthusiasm for 'engagement' with Asia. Students paused for some time to consider the 'levels' at which relations with Asia have been shaped: government and diplomacy; business and economy; and people-to-people contacts. They then uncovered contemporary issues in Australian–Asian relations, with a particular focus on Indonesia. This prepared them to take account of the continuing resonance of the 'Anxious Nation' discourse, along with the contemporary importance of economic globalization, media portrayals, and mass tourism.

These seminars laid the groundwork for the study tour of Indonesia, which began the following week. After landing in Jakarta, students travelled by coach to Bandung, where they spent the first week based at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (UPI). The Bandung component of the study tour was intended to immerse students in Indonesian student life, away from the tourist trail, and four days were devoted to intensive *bahasa Indonesia* lessons. For most students, this took the form of absolute-beginner level, although students with prior knowledge were catered for at their level. A small number of students were native Indonesian speakers, enrolled either as domestic or international students, and they were integrated into the programme as student-teachers.

In addition to language classes, students visited the Museum Konferensi Asia Afrika (Museum of the Afro-Asian Conference) and attended a related seminar on the legacies of colonialism in Australian–Asian relations. In the evenings, students attended a welcome dinner with student performances of *angklung* and traditional dance; together with their *mitra* (lit. partner or buddy), they later went out to a karaoke bar and to view an Indonesian film (with subtitles). A final day was spent visiting Bandung's natural and tourist

attractions, including a nearby volcano and hot springs. Many students also took advantage of the opportunity to go shopping in Bandung's famed discount outlets, usually with their *mitra* by their sides.

After Bandung, students travelled by train to Yogyakarta, where the focus was on formal modes of Australian–Indonesian engagement. Students met representatives of the ACICIS programme, and were introduced to Australian students undertaking longer-term mobility programmes for one or two semesters. They visited a site of Australian–Indonesian scientific cooperation, either the Eliminate Dengue Project (a multinational project including Australian researchers from Monash University and Indonesian scientists and public health experts from Universitas Gadjah Mada [UGM]) or the Rotavirus Project (involving cooperation by scientists at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute and the Paediatric Research Centre at UGM). They also attended a seminar at Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Sunan Kalijaga, followed by a lively discussion about religion in Indonesian and Australian society. At UIN, 'Australia and Asia' students presented a group assessment task by which they tried to define 'Australian values' to Indonesian students. The students finished their visit with a walk through the university's mosque. The visit to Yogyakarta was rounded off with a visit to the Ramayana ballet and an early start to watch the sunrise over Borobudur.

The final component of the study tour took place in Bali. The focus in Bali was on tourism's effects on Australian–Indonesian relations. Students attended a seminar about Balinese tourism at Universitas Udayana, and undertook a walking tour of Kuta's tourist centre. This tour included a visit to the Bounty Hotel, a renowned party spot for young Australians. At the Bounty the students were hosted by the hotel's general manager, who explained the broader impacts of party tourism, including on locals. The walking tour also took in the memorial to the 2002 Bali bombings, and surrounding shops and nightclubs. In the early iterations of the trip the final activity involved a briefing from the Australian Consul, who explained the difficulties of working at Australia's busiest consular post. Since 2015, with the roll out of the New Colombo Plan, this connection with the consulate has evolved from one of briefing the students on their work, to including the students in the consulate's community and business outreach activities—its public diplomacy. This has included attendance at gatherings in which the students, as NCP awardees, became the focus of the event itself and representatives of the programme. Formal teaching on the unit concluded with seminars and a final lunch. Students continued to work on their final research essay, due approximately two weeks after the tour's conclusion; some chose to remain in Indonesia or travel on independently to other destinations.

## 6 Evaluating Effectiveness

These were the unit's aims and content; but to what extent did they succeed? Did students take away a richer understanding of their subject matter than if the unit had been taught solely at their home campus? And do current undergraduates, who have unprecedented access to mobility through travel and tourism, gain anything from a formal and guided people-to-people experience? We evaluated student outcomes through qualitative data in the form of formal assessment responses and both formal and informal feedback, including students' travel journals. Based on these sources, we argue that 'Australia and Asia' was successful in providing a richer experience of Indonesia than students would typically access by studying at home or through tourism, largely because of the affective and emotional aspects of people-to-people contact. However, we found that the long-term impacts of this study tour were variable. For some students, the study tour had an ongoing impact, whereas others returned home (or stayed in Bali) without any perceived impact.

The brief programme of language study may seem insignificant; however, this was not the case in practice. We argue that the initial week spent at UPI engaged in language learning and the *mitra* system was in great part responsible for any success that the unit had on both a reflexive and a pedagogical level. In large part this is due to the fact that UPI's language teaching programme was rendered outstanding by the integration of *mitra*, or language-learning partners. *Mitra* are young Indonesians, many of whom are graduate students, employed within the programme and assigned as 'buddies' to the visiting students, for discussion during meal breaks and after class. In his study, Welsh highlighted the important role *mitra* or *pendamping* (buddy or mentor) play, enabling them access to an 'experience of social interaction [that] tended to emphasize the human dimensions in articulating an understanding of the cultural other' and thus closing the gap between us and them. As we indicate below, the combination of intensive language lessons and the buddy system meant this awareness can be achieved in a relatively short time.

The group presentation assessment task delivered to students at UIN was designed to be, and in most cases was, a challenge for the students. The act of defining and articulating to a foreign audience their understanding of 'Australian identity' and 'Australian values' saw the students critically reflect on their own identities, provoking new insights into the political usage of these constructs. It also built on group dynamics wherein each member was potentially from a different background and with a different understanding of 'Australia'. This built on previous lectures highlighting the rhetorical and political

uses of 'Australian values' or 'Australian identity' when positioned in opposition to Asia, and encouraged students to analyse these as political constructs. As Ann-Marie<sup>9</sup> (Summer 2016) explained:

A consistent theme throughout all the presentations was that defining an Australian culture and lifestyle is very difficult. When [Pauline] Hanson refers to our culture and lifestyle she doesn't articulate what she believes this is, therefore making it very difficult to determine what she means by this. In recognition of this, it would suggest to me that Hanson's definition of Australian culture and lifestyle is based on what it is not, or rather, the construction of the 'Other'.

Students insist that they gained a richer understanding of Indonesia, and Australian–Asian relations, than they would have in a lecture-based university course. One of the unit's assessments, a reflective diary or video-diary, was directly designed to elicit discussion of this question. In their diaries, students often pointed to the importance of their emotional responses in helping to build an understanding of Indonesia, arguing that these emotions could only be engaged through direct experience. Rex (Winter 2015) noted: 'In many cases I could learn a great deal from lectures and journal articles. However, there is no way that I could gain the emotional connection that I gained on this trip.' For Charlotte (Summer 2016), who had studied the Indonesian language for many years and other subjects on its history and culture, the sentiment was shared that

'[b]eing here', particularly making new friendships, has led me to view the nation differently. This new perspective isn't because Indonesia is not what I imagined; I expected much of what I have seen. However, I'm starting to feel more of a personal connection to the country. I studied the Malay world for a whole semester this year without relating to any of it but now that I have begun to experience Indonesia in real life, my attitude is changing.

A common refrain was a feeling of warmth generated by Indonesian hospitality. As Rex continued, 'Indonesia is nothing like what I thought. The people are kind, the society is sophisticated, and there wasn't an overwhelming sense of exclusion'. Claire (Winter 2015) reflected that

<sup>9</sup> Students' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.



[d]espite much western fear mongering about Muslims, the people in Bandung were some of the kindest, most welcoming people I have ever met. This kind of raw evidence, people-people relationships, has changed my understanding and perceptions of Indonesia in a way that I don't believe an academic source ever could.

Madyson (Summer 2014) was also struck by the friendliness of the Indonesian people, concluding that 'the exposure I had to the Indonesian people during this time allowed me to conceptualize the character of the Indonesians differently to how I would have if this concept was developed purely on an in-depth study from Australia'. For many, this led to reflection about the relative lack of welcome Australians extend to visitors, leading to the question 'what could we be doing better to greet travelling parties back home?' (Jak, Winter 2015). Bec (Winter 2015) wrote: 'I noticed how nearly every single person smiled at me and many made an effort to speak to me. Instantly, I compared this to Australia, where people actively avoid my eye contact and rarely utter a word.'

The question of whether students had a categorically different and higher-quality experience than if they were to travel to Indonesia alone is also important. Young people attending university today have unprecedented access to travel and tourism. In 2016, 1.25 million Australians travelled to Indonesia alone.<sup>10</sup> As Sobocinska (2014) has shown, travel to Asia is deeply ingrained in the Australian experience, particularly for young people. A trip to the region is considered a rite of passage for Australians coming of age. On the whole, however, this experience typically takes place in the 'bubble' of Southeast Asia's tourism circuit, with tourist travel to Indonesia largely limited to Bali (Sobocinska 2014). Moreover, like many of our students, Ben (Summer 2016) was already well-travelled in Asia and was not the only one to admit that his previous tourist experiences in Bali had clouded his view of Indonesia as a whole:

I was one of the morons who basically forgot Indonesia existed other than Bali before I did this course. I went there when I was 18 [...] The peanut gallery of sweaty 18 year olds in Bintang shirts [...] pretty much broke the country for me and I hadn't considered going back.

10 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Overseas arrivals and departures, Australia, February 2017—time series'. <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/3401.oFeb%202017?OpenDocument> (accessed 13-10-2017).

Insights into Indonesian religious practice are rare on the tourist trail, particularly as Australian tourists are highly concentrated on Hindu Bali, which is of course an outlier in majority Muslim Indonesia. However, religion was a core theme for many 'Australia and Asia' students' reflections. At the end of the trip, Jak (Winter 2015) found his view of Islam had undergone a major shift. Where previously he had assumed that travelling in a Muslim country would be 'stepping into a totally different universe', he found he had 'underestimated the capacity of likeness between the Muslim locals of Indonesia and us', concluding that 'for me it was a steep cultural learning curve'. Similarly, Madyson (Summer 2014) 'found it fascinating speaking to the students at the Islamic university, and learning not only about how we are different, but how we are similar as well'. Again, the emotional register was of key importance. Ben (Summer 2016) reflected on how his encounters with the *mitra* impacted on his existing and unconscious prejudices, as

the warm, inviting and open attitude of all the students and staff we encountered made me realize how insular I am in my own attitude towards foreigners. In many ways I think this is tied into a lack of understanding of Islam, and a fear of causing offence by asking questions and engaging with the issues.

Further reflecting, he added: 'In my mind I became profoundly aware of how conditioned I was to fear cultural difference.'

Travelling during Ramadan, Claire (Winter 2015) reflected that she felt a 'community atmosphere', particularly at the breaking of the fast every evening, leading her to reflect that, contrary to her expectations, 'Ramadan seems to be an enjoyable time, but most importantly a choice'. She noted that '[h]earing this directly from Muslims had a stronger impact than it otherwise would have and gave an authenticity'. Alir (Summer 2014) found a chance conversation with a student at UIN to be a major learning opportunity, writing: 'One student who was undertaking a PhD in queer theory challenged all popular Australian perceptions of Islam.' This contributed to his conclusion that 'my personal experiences have allowed for an altered perception of Indonesia [...] I don't believe I would have obtained as much benefit from merely spending the same duration studying at home.' For those students who have studied Indonesian culture and religion at home, the direct experience provided an altogether more nuanced insight. As Charlotte (Summer 2016) explained:

Sometimes what I read is quite factual and rigid—for example, 87% of Indonesians are Muslim—but everything has seemed more variable. I did

not come to a homogenous Islamic nation where everyone wears hijabs, but one with many different types of people.

'Australia and Asia' was designed to draw a contrast between an immersive and a tourist experience of Indonesia. Although it is popular with domestic tourists, Bandung is not typically on the tourist trail for Western visitors. Students stay at UPI's guesthouse, run by tourism students and located at UPI's main campus, some 30 minutes' drive from the town centre. As a result, 'Australia and Asia' students are surrounded by Indonesian university and community life. Foreign tourists are rarely seen, and instead students quickly come to rely on their *mitra* to help them navigate their surroundings. Indeed, we have been struck at the depth of the relationships that have developed between students and *mitra*. As Jak (Winter 2015) noted in his reflective diary, 'it took no time at all for the nervous energy felt on Monday to turn into calmness and affection, in some cases alarmingly deep, between us and the Indonesian *mitras*'. In some cases, these friendships have continued after the tour's conclusion, usually through Facebook but occasionally in real life; a couple of students have since returned to Bandung to visit *mitra* (and at least one became romantically involved with a *mitra*, although the relationship doesn't appear to have withstood the long separation that followed this student's return to Australia).

Having developed friendships with Indonesian *mitra* and internalized the importance of respect in cross-cultural interactions on Java, many students found Bali confronting. Claire (Winter 2015) wrote that '[t]ravelling through Bandung and Yogyakarta first, and now seeing the way tourists act, and encouraged behaviour at party hotels in Bali is shocking'. As Elizabeth (Winter 2015) noted, 'our walking tour throughout Kuta was a shock [...] being confronted with a horrible and conflicting representation of Australia in Bali caused some re-evaluation [...] Tensions ran high.' The visit to the Bounty Hotel, during which students heard of the exploits of young Australians interested in the 'sun, sand and schooners' experience, evoked particularly strong emotions. Some students became angry, others withdrawn. Interestingly, these reactions came from students who had previously been to Bali, as well as those who had not. As Jak noted, 'Bali has been a genuine shock [...] Despite having been to Bali before.' This was because

[d]espite already knowing of the tourist devastation of the Balinese culture [...] seeing more of Indonesia has given this cultural and environmental devastation [context]. I can now put a face, name and culture to what I imagine as Indonesia. This made it hurt when I saw [Kuta] a small town of tanned bogans with southern cross tattoos.

These responses mark students' experiences as different: young Australian visitors to Bali rarely discuss theirs as 'a confronting, challenging, and thought provoking experience' (Rex, Winter 2015).

Of course, not every student was so deeply affected, nor did this impact necessarily last. Some students were neither surprised nor particularly moved by Kuta's tourist landscape. Others, who had been moved on the day of the Kuta walking tour/Bounty Hotel visit, seemed to quickly forget their shock and disgust at Australians' incursion on Bali; indeed, judging from post-study tour photographs posted on Facebook, some students made a speedy transition into the role of tourist. Moreover, while many students found their intense emotional response to Indonesia to be valuable in building understanding, others found themselves confused. Elizabeth noted that 'I am nowhere near able to understand and draw conclusions about what I have experienced. I still continue to sit in this murky swamp of ideas, emotions, conflicting views, solutions, as well as my own biases and unease with defining what it is I have gained.'

Experiential learning provides a frame for students to engage as critical and committed thinkers and actors. In the new millennium, as young people arrive at university with an increasingly 'global' outlook and repertoire of experiences, our experience shows this is a vital starting point for the study of Asia in the Australian academy. As Kim (Summer 2016) reveals, her experience on the study tour amounted to something of a personal journey of discovery of self which is not in opposition to an 'Other':

I think that being here has taught me more than I could have learnt in a classroom, but I think that it has taught me different things. It has taught me about the people and how they view their country. It has showed me how similar they are to me, despite differences in culture, language and religion.

## 7 Effectiveness or Surface-Level-Only Engagement

In their preliminary study of mobility programmes, Tran and Phuong Vu (2018: 15) stress the importance of including within the study tour curricula '[g]uided and structured learning through critical reflection and specific learning activities aimed at validating, integrating and extending students' international experiences in the curriculum'. They warn that without it, 'the learning and engagement may be at a superficial level and sometimes pose the risk of reinforcing imperialist perspectives or stereotypes about another culture and its practices to which students are exposed during their brief encounter with

the Indo-Pacific' (Tran and Phuong Vu 2018:15). As described above, the unit 'Australia and Asia' explicitly adheres to this advised pedagogy in many ways. However, based on our experiences with the unit over the past five years, we would argue that even this approach may fall short in terms of avoiding a surface-level engagement, simply due to its short-term nature coupled with a lack of language proficiency among students.

Despite their emotional attachments and dawning self-reflections, the fact remains that many students were less interested in learning the language, or finding out more about the nation's history, culture, or politics, or even meeting locals, than going to sites and attractions and eating lunch. Whilst taken out of their comfort zone, the fact that the students remained within the group setting for the duration of the study tour meant that unique and independent engagement with the place and people was rare. Welsh's study identified two key factors shaping students' perceptions of the cultural other: formal study and social interaction with Indonesians (Welsh 2016:165). Social interaction with a range of people that occurred outside the classroom was deemed by far more efficacious: 'Student participants who had extended, in-depth experience in social interaction challenged the dialectic logic of self and other as binary opposites. These students were able to reflect on a broad range of experiential encounters with individuals rather than relying on stereotypes' (Welsh 2016:166). Collins et al. explain this as situated learning, whereby the student acquires knowledge of 'the everyday life of places, the affective dimensions of independence abroad, and [...] cultural difference, encounters, and experiences' (Collins et al. 2017:3). For the unit under discussion, and many other similar short-term units now available for Australian students under the NCP and other institution-led initiatives, neither formal study of the place they are visiting (its history, politics, culture) nor deeper social interaction with locals was emphasized, or, it might be argued, possible.

The DFAT self-selection survey found 97% of students 'gained useful knowledge and understanding of [their] host locations'. But to what extent was that knowledge genuine rather than surface? In the medium to longer term, a more significant measure will undoubtedly be how many NCP alumni continue in Asia-focused study and, ultimately, how this is translated into their 'after-study' lives, in terms of cultural capital and its applications in careers and onward mobility (Collins et al. 2017). Based on informal canvassing of 'Australia and Asia' students, only a very few appear to have pursued lives or careers in Indonesia or other parts of Asia, and these students had prior and richer knowledge of Indonesia through immersive language-learning or family connections. While a short-term study tour may be thought-provoking, and at best a catalyst to students' questioning of the Us vs Them dichotomy, it is simply too short a visit,

and at too shallow a level, to encourage most students to shift their future trajectories towards an alignment with Asia.

## 8 Breaking Down the Us vs Them Dichotomy

As an intensively taught unit and study tour, 'Australia and Asia' introduced students to experiences of Indonesia they would otherwise be unlikely to have. These experiences were tailored to provoke reflection on Australian–Asian engagement at official and unofficial levels. However, for many students the emotional responses to Indonesian hospitality and increased awareness of Australian bad behaviour were the standout outcome. Interactions with Indonesians of their own age, in particular, allowed for a higher level of critical self-reflection as they found themselves in intercultural spaces which created uncertainties, 'in-between-ness', and a blurring of cultural boundaries. This equates to what Welsh (2015:167) describes as a 'transformative potential as they come to see the cultural other as equal, despite differences'. The major outcome, therefore, was not so much knowledge of the Other as knowledge of themselves, and the fact that responses to Indonesia had been structured by historical constructions of Asian Otherness. While the soft-power effectiveness of NCP and the Asian Studies component of study tours are very much open to criticism, the self-reflective understanding that Orientalism lies within themselves and that more than 150 years of suspicion of the Asian Other had powerfully informed their own response to Indonesia (even despite previous travel) is a powerful potential of experiential study tours.

When announcing the 2019 mobility grants Minister Bishop stated with some confidence that the NCP was already achieving its goals: 'The New Colombo Plan is contributing to a generation of regional leaders with a deep understanding of, and enduring networks across, the Indo-Pacific' (DFAT 2018a). Indeed, the number of Australian students taking up NCP-funded mobility opportunities has surged since 2014. However, the vast majority of these students were on short-term study tours of no longer than two weeks. In July 2018, in a media release to announce the latest round of awarded NCP grants, the Australian ambassador to Indonesia stated: 'The New Colombo Plan is creating a generation of young Australians with an enduring connection to our nearest neighbour.'<sup>11</sup> Though the ambassador's faith in this generation of young Australians is admirable, it remains to be seen just how enduring

11 'Indonesia still number one for Australian students'. [http://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR18\\_031.html](http://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR18_031.html) (accessed 16-7-2018).

and deep the connections and understandings gained through their involvement in the programme will be.

The Australian government's optimistic rhetoric belies their focus on the soft-power potential of study tours, rather than pedagogy. Universities, too, have been enthusiastic proponents of international study tours, with an eye to university rankings and 'engagement' metrics. However, as we have shown, the pedagogical and cross-cultural outcomes of short-term study tours to Indonesia are less apparent. Short-term study tours may provide students with some new knowledge about the country they visit and, more particularly, insights into their own identities, which wouldn't otherwise have been gained. However, unless accompanied by ongoing study or longer-term in-country experience, it is unlikely that they will become anything more than surface-level engagements with the people and places they are visiting. For many students, study tours facilitate a short-term period of emotional involvement and self-reflection, rather than forging enduring connections.

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