

Chapter 2

Asian-Australian Nexus: An Educational Challenge

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Abstract The Asian century raises a number of challenges that derive from convergence, global multicentredness, and the emergence of a more engaged diverse world. Some nations use multiculturalism as a tool to address these challenges. However, in a diverse and globalizing world, it is appreciating what we share in common rather than notions of difference that will become more important in enabling harmonious and evolving relationships to prosper and feed creativity.

At James Cook University, the School of Arts & Social Sciences has pondered these issues while planning for a new interdisciplinary major. The purpose of the Asian Nexus major is not to introduce notions of difference or exoticisms; rather, it is to contextualize the Asian century within the human story, to prioritize intertwined histories and cultures, and to focus on common goals that confront shared social, economic, environmental, demographic and educational issues.

2.1 White Paper

In October 2012 the Australian Government released a *White Paper on Australia in the Asian century*. It begins with the following words:

Asia's rise is changing the world. This is a defining feature of the twenty first century—the Asian century. These developments have profound implications for people everywhere. . . . Within only a few years, Asia will not only be the world's largest producer of goods and services, it will also be the world's largest consumer of them. It is already the most populous region in the world. In the future, it will also be home to the majority of the world's middle class [1].

It describes the Asian century as an 'Australian opportunity'; the tyranny of distance that North America and Europe once presented has been replaced by the 'prospects of proximity'[1].

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The *White Paper* set out five broad policy directions for Australia ‘to make the most of opportunities presented by the Asian Century’. These included building capabilities (understanding Asian cultures and languages), operating in and connecting to growing Asian markets (growing Asia-capable leaders), and deeper and broader relationships (involving two-way movements of people, especially students). It envisaged that ‘By 2025, Australia will be a more prosperous and resilient nation, fully part of the region and open to the world’ [1]. Its people will be more literate in Asian languages; indeed many will have studied in Asian countries.

Refocusing Australia to profit from the shift in economic and political power to Asia makes national sense given the region’s importance to Australia’s economy and the rise of new world powers such as China and India. However, none of this is entirely novel. Japan began its postwar recovery in the 1950s. Its resultant trading partnership with Australia helped end the country’s discriminatory ‘white Australia policy’. Likewise, so did education. The Colombo Plan, the famous scholarship aid program, operated between 1951 and the mid 1980s bringing Asian students to Australia to study. Successive governments have deepened and extended diplomatic, cultural, and economic linkages with Asian states and regional institutions. Asia’s share of Australia’s trade in goods rose from one third in 1980 to two thirds by 2010 [1], transforming Australian businesses in the process. The growth in minerals trade with Asia has had a similar impact on Australia’s workforce and industry, and lifted living standards. As Asia’s middle classes expand, Australia now sees new opportunities for businesses and services, especially in manufacturing, agriculture, tourism and education. Education is Australia’s third largest export.

2.2 Deeper Engagement

However, the *White Paper*’s economic opportunism (‘cashing in on an emerging Asian middle class’) might very well prevent ‘Australia’s search for deeper engagement with its region’ from being realised [2]. In other words, if Australia really wishes to engage with Asia then it may have to do things differently. In Ramesh Thakur’s words, Australia’s embrace of Asia must be familial, not simply transactional:

Australian leaders are yet to grasp that the criteria of validity and authority that facilitate the creation of deep and lasting bonds are culturally constructed [3].

By this Thakur means much more than the *White Paper*’s—as yet unfunded—focus on languages and cultures, which—under the banner of Asian literacy—has already been tried variously over the past 40 years with only limited success [4], in large measure because there exists little infrastructure outside of migrant communities to sustain language acquisition. Perhaps these communities offer other opportunities for familial engagement that go beyond the current focus on languages and culture.

Nine per cent of Australia’s population were born in Asia, with the largest number of arrivals today being from India and China. Over 10 % of Australians speak an Asian language at home [1]. Presumably these people do not require a refocus and could be

further skilled to provide valuable educational and business linkages with Australia's northern neighbours. Moreover, Asians dominate Australia's skilled migrant intake as well as its international student population. Indeed some commentators argue that this Asian presence means that 'Australia already has the human capital necessary to prosper in the Asian century', and that the real barrier to engagement lies not in any lack of Asia-relevant capabilities but in regional and, importantly, local Australian obstacles [5].

For example, while Australia claims to be a successful multicultural country, it has done little to transform its national identity or symbols of nationhood to accommodate diversity. Asians may be part of the demographic mix, Thakur notes, but they are scarcely visible in Australian public or corporate life. Indeed no Asian formed part of the *White Paper's* taskforce—perhaps one reason why the paper tends to view Asia as something only to be experienced (consumed) or learned about; the quintessential 'other' [3]. Nothing short of a 'fundamental change in [Australia's] national psyche is required for the Asian century', argues Australia's former UN Security Council representative, Richard Woolcott [6]. Asian engagement can only happen once the 'otherness' of Asia is minimized through 'cultural learning' and the evolution of an all-encompassing national identity [2].

Much of the criticism of the White Paper has focused on its mercantilist tenor [2], on the Government's failure to envisage Australia's future as anything other than a primary producer fortunately located alongside the world's new growth centre [7], and on Australia's reluctance to change familiar European and American allegiances [8]. However, some commentators, like Adelaide University's Professor Kanishka Jayasuriya, see the White Paper's emphasis on engagement through literacy as an instance of rent seeking by vested language interests that will ultimately make more difficult the symbiotic generation and application of critical knowledge about Asia's new social and political dynamics that Australia seeks [9]. He is not alone. Others have argued that 'Encouraging students to grasp Asian history, without necessarily requiring the commitment to learn a language, is more likely to be the seed of a lifetime interest.' Language is a perishable skill, 'subject to market demands'; hence businesses will always judge the option of buying skills according to need a cheaper option than financing state-mandated mass language acquisition. Journalist Daniel Flitton argues that 'rich Australian miners haven't been stymied by any language barriers in helping turn China into Australia's largest market' [10].

2.3 Transnational Education-Engagement

That the White Paper views educational engagement as a central component of its Asian century strategy is not in itself at bad thing, particularly if it encourages greater educational mobility and transforms Australia's self image. But, says Jayasuriya, a focus solely on languages and culture—the platform for Australian engagement since 1945—misses the whole significance of changes in Asia over the past two decades. It imposes a form of "methodological nationalism" that seeks to understand

“countries” as a whole in terms of their distinctive cultural characteristics’. He argues instead that ‘We need to focus much more on confronting and dealing with. . . sets of issues that are often transnational rather than national in origin’[9].

Jayasuriya does not suggest that the detail of countries and their cultures be neglected, but that academics must develop ‘an approach that combines an understanding of the specific political and social contexts that characterise the region with one of larger global and regional processes.’ This approach avoids ‘the particular set of assumptions about the mainsprings of social and political change’ inherent in Asian language and culture strategies and enables collaboration with researchers in the region to be institutionalized. The focus is on ‘real world problems [such as inequality, urbanization, environmental issues, health, governance] and notions of transdisciplinarity’[9]. These problems are not country-based; they have transnational roots and consequences. Herein lies the challenge that the Asian century poses for academics, and not just Australian ones. The challenge comes in several forms.

2.4 Convergences

First, the Asian century heralds the possibility of eventual global economic convergence, no matter how unevenly. Asia contributed over 60 % of world GDP in the late eighteenth century but 150 years later its proportion had fallen to one quarter. It is often said that victors write history; certainly among the beneficiaries of what has been termed the Great Divergence [11] were people who used their new fortunes as evidence of their genetic superiority. Such comfortable Spencerian notions lingered painfully throughout the last century and proved detrimental to international relations and development. However, behind them lay other less directed assumptions that have proven much more difficult to overcome. These relate specifically to the role of ‘Western’ civilization in driving development and change.

In Australia today such misunderstandings of the complex shared nature of human development and change, often results in dichotomous notions of development—the West versus the rest. Accordingly Asia’s resurgence is often viewed as a threat to an otherwise indisputable (Western) heritage; hence former Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s recent attack on a proposed new national school curriculum for failing to prioritize Australia’s ‘British heritage’ [12]. However, such attacks are not always welcomed. NSW Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Bathurst believes that such attempts to impose a uniform national identity ignore ‘the great social, cultural and economic benefits that Australia has reaped from. . . diversity’ [13]. Indeed, creating a national identity inclusive of diversity and relating it to a common human story might seem sensible in an age of visible, albeit uneven, economic convergence. After all Asia now contains 60 % of the world’s middle classes, its proportion of world output is set to rise to at least 50 % by 2030, and its consumption to 60 % [1]. Yet, in the face of this remarkable transformation, Australia’s national conversations seem unconnected to the diverse contours of this emerging Asian century.

2.5 Multicentres

Second, the Asian century promises a much more multicentred world. After nearly two centuries of American, European and Japanese dominance, Brazil, Russia, India, China and Korea (variously configured as BRIC and BRICK nations) now figure prominently alongside the former imperial centres. This transformation requires a considerable change in popular perceptions, but such change, as we know from past experience, does not come easily. The parallel to this multicentred change is the decline in the one people-one nation foundations of many countries. Many states now promulgate forms of multiculturalism to realise adjustment to very different societies from those originally conceived.

However, multiculturalism—if understood as a mix of disparate cultures—is limited as a definitional and imaginary tool. Multiculturalism exists principally to accommodate cultural differences within increasingly multicentred countries. In this scenario national transformations mirror international changes and require similar changes in perceptions. Wherever imperial or contemporary policies have brought once disparate peoples together, multiculturalism has become an important initial means to build harmony and trust. But multiculturalism also draws attention to differences that in the longer term need to be deemphasized if cultural stereotypes are to be overcome and societies transition to something new.

In our view, it is appreciating what people share, or face, in common—while acknowledging differences—that will be more important in growing enduring harmonious and evolving relationships that promote creativity for a sustainable and increasingly urban middle class world. Indeed it is this ‘commonsense image of society’ that Judith Brett believes most Australians hold, ‘of a society composed of individuals and families [rather than distinct ethnic or religious blocs] mixing in the day-to-day world’, learning from and mutually respecting each other [14]. This approach needs also to be applied to relations outside national boundaries, especially given that the Asian century is occurring within the context of growing global interconnectedness.

2.6 Connectivity

Herein lies the third challenge for academics. Connectivity is not the same as economic convergence and, contrary to popular thinking, difference—often impacted on by distance—remains a crucial feature of contemporary globalization [15]. Difference still affects the movement of people, goods and services across borders; it reflects self-interest, and often correlates with geography. In an age of globalization, we continue to live very differentiated localized lives. Economist Pankaj Ghemawat, in his seminal *World 3.0*, argues that the market recognizes the importance of difference. McDonalds—the archetypal globalizer and *bête noir* of antiglobalizers—deliberately blends standardization and localization to satisfy the tastes of its different markets [15]. This was famously introduced in the hamburger

scene of *Pulp Fiction* [16]. At a recent Parliamentary Inquiry into IT pricing in Australia, Microsoft's managing director, Pip Marlow, argued that

At Microsoft, while we operate in over 100 countries around the world, we don't operate on a single, global model. In fact the countries that we operate in are very different and therefore the way that we compete and... deliver products and services every day in these countries can be very unique. [17]

Such fragmentation has political as well as economic objectives, as recent concerns about the future of the Internet suggest [18]. Globalisation, whether digital or physical, does not create a flat earth of smooth homogeneity. The landscape remains differentiated, rough with clusters and gaps, hills and troughs. Indeed we recognise difference in the way we function as individuals; it shapes our emotions and personal relationships [15]. Yet we have also to learn what we share in common if difference is not to strangle growth.

Ghemawat argues that today's challenge is to find 'a new way to look at the world', not past ways of viewing the world such as nationalism or notions of global citizenship. Certainly there can be no gain from a return to localization or the restoration of national exclusivity. That lesson was learned painfully during the 1930s and 1940s when interconnectivity was denied and national agendas ruled supreme, producing both depression and wars. That is a past with no sustainable future. And yet despite everything that we know of that past, we stand in a very uncertain position, having glimpsed the beginnings of a radically different future for humankind, yet knowing that much of what we have conjured as globalized remains unrealized and mired in the politics of nations, ethnicities and religions. To move forward we need to ground ourselves in a shared reality still foreign to us, one that recognises the importance of building bridges that span distances and fostering multiple contacts and engagement over time [15].

2.7 Asian-Australian Nexus

At James Cook University—an Australian international university with campuses in North Queensland and Singapore—our School of Arts and Social Sciences has been pondering these issues while planning for a new interdisciplinary major addressing this Asian Nexus. The purpose of this major is to introduce our students—Asian, Australian, Eurasian, Indigenous, European—to a suite of subjects that contextualize the Asian-Australian nexus within the greater human story. Rather than reinforcing an imaginary exoticism of Asia or Australia by emphasising difference, the major will prioritize entwined histories and cultures, focusing on common goals that confront shared social, cultural, economic, environmental, urban, demographic and educational issues. This is no easy task, not least because it incorporates a substantial challenge to how we organize ourselves to think about others and ourselves.

There are institutional constraints as well. Universities recreate the world according to specialisms—in part because specialisms enable very specific skills to be developed, and in part also because they create structures that can be managed

and programs that can be marketed. These are all sound educational-managerial principles. However, within the ‘universe’ of the university discipline specialisms can encourage the creation of ‘sacred turf’ that requires special protection. Such protection strategies can take many forms. Historians, for example, might prioritize national histories or promote histories deemed relevant by tradition, by victors, by the location of their institution, or by perceived continuities of history—thereby sanctifying certain histories and placing them beyond revision.

We have no issue with students learning the specific techniques of disciplines, this is desirable; but rarely are disciplines as unique or self contained as we imagine. For instance, geography might incorporate a variety of strands: physical, economic, human, urban, development, cartography and so on. In other words, most disciplines recognise that diversity is required in order to understand the world and that specialisms can in effect stretch into infinity. Nor do we actually live as geographers, historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, political scientists, literary theorists, language experts etc. Society is not constructed according to disciplines.

The time has come (in fact, has been here for some time; the notion having been well articulated since the 1960s) to recognize the value of bridging disciplines to produce interdisciplinary academic practitioners able to understand the value of different specialisms and able to put them to work for common objectives. At one time, in its own narrow way, development studies promised this outcome. [A more broadly conceived program was similarly envisaged through the history and philosophy of science.] Certainly for people who worked in such fields sharing projects with economists, sociologists, demographers, historians, economists and political scientists [or with scientists, anthropologists, philosophers, literary theorists, historians and sociologists as well as writers, poets and artists], the results were always more exciting and rewarding than if pursued through the solitary lens of one discipline. And this to some extent is the rub. Disciplines provide valuable perspectives and skills, but the goal of tertiary education should not be to lock people into an academic strait jacket; rather it is send them forth on a lifetime of exploration, collaboration and innovation.

2.8 Networked University

As a University with campuses in northern Australia and Singapore, and with an explicit tropical agenda, we need to prepare our students for the changes and consequences that will derive from the Asian century. Evidence from our School’s departments suggests that no one major or stream of subjects specifically addresses these changes or their consequences. Accordingly we have determined that each of our Bachelor of Arts disciplines should have at least one subject specifically on an Asian topic. These subjects will be grouped to form a new secondary major addressing the Asian Nexus. In keeping with Jayasuriya’s strategy for problem-oriented study, the Asian Nexus will generate in-depth knowledge of a common set of problems pertaining to the wider region. It will be interdisciplinary in form and transnational in

scope; its aspiration—to provide students with the necessary background knowledge to understand the regional and global contexts of the issues it raises.

Although the major is not intended to begin until 2015, we have attracted eight possible subjects: a historical background to the making of the Asian century, an examination of Asian urban development within a global context, an analysis of leadership for the Asian century, an investigation of intercultural psychology, Asia's archaeological and anthropological diversity, and studies of Asian cinema and cross-cultural literature. We are hopeful that other schools in our University will provide us with subjects on health, demography, economic development and environmental issues.

In addition, we are planning a new subject on intercultural learning, designed to expose students to an understanding of their cultural selves through cross-cultural experiences. This subject will embed students for up to a month in universities in Thailand and India where we have already established teaching, research and placement relationships that we hope eventually will form the basis for networked mobility. A variety of activities will be arranged for these students; for example work with museums, international offices, welfare and community-based organizations, as well as special projects. Students in Australia would have access to national Asia-Bound grants. In effect, these grants are part of a 'reverse Colombo Plan'. Rather than students from Asia studying in Australia—which played a crucial role in the demise of the notions of difference that promoted the 'white Australia policy'; students from Australia are encouraged to study in Asia—and we would hope with similar positive intercultural effects.

Because we intend to teach some of these subjects in Singapore or offer them from Singapore, the opportunity also arises for Australian students to study four of the major's subjects during a semester at JCU's Singapore campus. Singapore's trimester organization could make it possible for such study to occur over the Australian summer vacation period. Alternatively, single subjects might be offered in block mode in Singapore to attract students between Australian semesters. Additionally we anticipate that our Singapore campus will enable us to expand the range of language majors that we currently offer; thus for language students the Asian Nexus major might complement an extended study in Singapore. And, of course, we hope to encourage students on our Singapore campus to study for a semester on our Australian campuses.

2.9 Conclusion—Asian Century to Asian Nexus

The major addressing the Asian Nexus, seeks—within normal academic constraints—to transform our students into practitioners able to engage with the University's location in the tropical world, the University's location at a cross-roads of Asia, and further to the global world—with all its promises and dilemmas. We want to offer our students authentic opportunities to become problem-solvers and partnership builders. Above all, our students must grasp how Asia is transforming our common human story into something that will be both challengingly foreign, yet

unmistakably familiar (for all the world). But this will not be a unique shift in the human story; indeed before this century is over we will be talking about the African century.

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