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Post pandemic positions. Australian NGOs and Education in a Century of Internationalism: Students, Experts and Friends



Students from Papua New Guinea and Thailand attend the Centre for Continuing Education at the Australian National University, part of a Kellogg Fellowship scheme involving twelve South East Asian and Pacific countries [c. 1981]. Source: ANU Archives, AU ANUA 226-387.



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Workshop Report

Workshop Details

Title: *Post pandemic positions. Australian NGOs and Education in a Century of Internationalism: Students, Experts and Friends*

Convenors

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Professor Kate Darian-Smith, University of Tasmania

Professor Melanie Oppenheimer, Australian National University

Dr Jon Piccini, Australian Catholic University

Date and Place

21-22 November 2022

Deakin University, Deakin Downtown, 727 Collins Street, Melbourne

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The Post Pandemic Positions workshop was held at Deakin University's Deakin Downtown campus in Collins Street, Melbourne, on 21 and 22 November 2022.

Ten years after the 2012 White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century, this workshop asked what had become of some of the major components of the people-to-people aspect of Australia's engagements in its region, noting that this general heading was the subject of most submissions to the White Paper process in 2012.

Australia's advancement of educational and training opportunities within the Indo-Pacific has been core to nation-building, regional co-operation and public diplomacy, but these patterns of educational exchange — and the associated economic, social and cultural benefits — have recently been disrupted by the COVID pandemic and shifting international relations. Drawing upon past and present case studies, this workshop brought together those from government, NGOs and academia to understand the evolving role of public and private actors in shaping international education for Australians at home and abroad, and to identify new and innovative ways to conceptualise the role of NGOs in future educational policy and public diplomacy initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

Participants

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Post Pandemic Positions

Ten years on from the Asian Century White Paper: people to people connections

There is now uncertainty about what might be called Australia's 'Asian experiment' – the rise of Asia in the latter years of the 20th century and early years of the 21st in Australia's sense of its role in the world. For a time, closer integration with Asia seemed to sit alongside new national symbols, republicanism and a post-imperial identity.

The current political framing of the Australia-China relationship in ideological/cultural terms potentially restricts Australian foreign policy options and is out of step with Australian multiculturalism.

While threads of important people-to-people continuity between Australia and Asia still provide foundations – witness the legacy of the original Colombo Plan evoked in the government's New Colombo Plan – there is a danger that a heavy-handed application of security considerations will dominate Australian policy at the expense of people-to-people connections.

Mobility through education and training, and changing notions of 'home'

One of the most dynamic fields of research is the nexus between education and globalisation. This includes the growing diaspora communities in Australia and the relational qualities of home. In broad terms, two different notions of migrant operate in Australia. The first, relating to the period up to the 1970s, was externally assigned and assumed permanent relocation from one state to another (Australia).

The second, from the 1980s onwards, assumes much greater ongoing connectivity with the country of origin, and is more a self-identified position. The modern diaspora need not be geographically stable, as it encompasses not only ethnicity and identity but the dynamism of transnationalism. International education has informed diaspora construction, with students building discrete networks and acting as cultural mediators between communities. The role of international students in building further connectedness, in Australia and countries of origin, is logically a major focus for government policy.



Education, exchange and friendship

Overseas scholars have made temporary homes in Australia since the 1920s. From Australian perspectives, the experiences of international students at Australian universities needs examination through several lenses, including government, local host families, universities and community organisations such as the Red Cross and Rotary. Additionally, the history of international development and the history of Australia's development, conceptually and in practice, are necessary dimensions of student experiences.

Increasingly, research now interrogates the legacies of settler colonialism as shaping the paths most commonly travelled in student movements. It includes sensitivity to important moments in postwar decolonisation, felt internationally, and also scholarly exchanges between First Nations peoples.

Student perspectives and policy initiatives

Given that international students from the Asian-Pacific region have profoundly shaped Australia's higher education system for several decades, and contributed to diplomatic relations in the region, the perspectives of these students themselves is vital. Student motivations relating to work opportunities and the possibility of permanent residency have always been, and continue to be, important. Changes to Australia's temporary workforce provisions or to the points system for immigration have big impacts.

Students have demonstrated over their time in Australia that they have significant agency, taking part in a variety of forms of political engagement within Australia. Sometimes these have been restricted by sponsoring governments and are also watched closely by Australian governments.

Policy initiatives of the Australian government, such as Special status scholarship schemes like the now-discontinued Endeavour Scholarships and the ongoing New Colombo Plan have proven capable of generating distinctive profile in Australia's region.

The diplomacy of doing good

Australian NGOs and volunteers have facilitated the development of technical aid in different contexts. Case studies include the Australian Red Cross and its international study visit program of the 1950s-70s, drawing on involvement by Lions and Rotary Clubs; and trade union-based regional education programs incorporating international trainees. Underpinning some Australia's host diplomacy has been a shared sense of civic culture fostering greater connectedness. At times, such as in the 1980s, this has been buttressed by Australian diplomacy aligning with that of member states of the Indo-Pacific on human rights (including in the United Nations) and development issues. The sense of shared civic culture and aligned diplomacy of 'doing good' has not been easy to maintain into the 21st century, yet these remain important dimensions of people-to-people connection. The goodwill generated by their cultivation in the past is something that current policy-makers should not overlook.

The changing nature of networks and public diplomacy

The two-way flow of people between Australia and Asia facilitated by educational and training opportunities has created networks of influence. Detailed studies show that one-third of the alumni who have benefited from Australian scholarships have also developed professional partnerships with Australians, especially with universities; and 90 per cent of the remaining two-thirds want to build such partnerships.

There are several ways in which Australia might build on these networks and better harness underappreciated sources of connection between Australia and the Indo-Pacific region. These range from greater attention to network-building while students are present, to greater engagement with alumni and supplementary opportunities post-awards, such as short courses. Some of the significant government investments in engaging with sponsored student alumni are indicative of hopes in this direction. In addition, broadening the nature of engagement, such as by exploring global flows of Indigenous knowledges, the creative arts and the importance of the media in cross-cultural understanding are worthy of attention.

What next for Australia in the region?

COVID-19 may have been hugely disruptive but domestic and international politics, and changing technologies have also unsettled earlier patterns of short and longer-term flows of people and ideas between Australia and its region. There are no easy markers to help navigate what this means in a post-pandemic world, and how the historic legacies and benefits of non-government exchanges between Australia and Asia, and the arising people-to-people links, can be best optimised in what will be a new regional context.

We can identify huge opportunities, for example, in the burgeoning technological relationships between Australia and India, there are also shortfalls in Australia's capacity to realise opportunities. The role of universities in relation to public diplomacy is one example of mixed messages, with universities trying to fulfil both a traditional role in fostering skills while becoming more transactional and with fewer resources to foster deep understanding of histories, cultures, languages in the Indo-Pacific.

A forthcoming issue of Higher Education Review will feature selected papers from this workshop.



