DOING BUSINESS WITH ASIA: THE CASE FOR ASIAN BUSINESS STUDIES ENGAGEMENT IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to explore the two main viewpoints on Australia’s relationship with Asia; first, the highly visible informed pro-Asia protagonists, and second, pervasive public opinion as informed by history and the Australian self-image. The purpose is to present the polemic internal to Asian Studies and Business Schools currently. This paper postulates that only an (uncomfortable) whole-of-sector introspection would result in an authentic national narrative to drive mutual respect and business between Asia and Australia.

Design/methodology/approach – The current dismembering of Asian Studies degrees and Asian Business specialisations at Australian universities indicates a waning national support to the production of Asian specialists able to link the Australian economy into the advancing Asian commercial dominance. But such an assessment would not be completely accurate. The authors argue that as an important component of Asian business and economics, understanding the current situation is vital to breathing life back into the Asian Studies and Asian Business Studies disciplines at Australian national universities.

Findings – This paper concludes that the responsibility for creating specialists should fall to the university sector but is currently defaulting to the business sector. This paper proposes that business schools need to be more active participants in Asian engagement strategies. Thus, Australian universities and disciplines such as Asian Studies and Asian Business must have the academic will and the business support to take up a major role in positive evolution of the Eurocentric elements that currently hold back meaningful engagement.

Originality/value – This is a current issue that needs to be addressed.

Keywords Australia, Asian studies, Business engagement

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Comprising more than half the world’s population and with a combined gross domestic product of close to a quarter of the world’s output, Asia is on path to take the economic center stage in the coming decades. And while the pandemic has put a damper on some of the growth prospects, the prediction of the “Asian Century” becoming a reality over the next few decades remains completely plausible.

How Australia plays it cards, both in contributing to and benefiting from this change in the economic power centers from West to East, can have transformational effects on its economy and citizens. From a business standpoint, Australia has been swift in maximising proximity knowledge to position itself as the knowledge/business gateway to Asia. Citing geographical closeness (despite the truth that both London and Washington D.C. are closer to Beijing than Sydney or Canberra), Australia has promoted itself as understanding and engaging Asia. This confidence in making
claims of Asian expertise typically arises from the success in establishing many free trade agreements (FTAs) (14 FTAs with 20 countries) mainly in Asia and the region (ADFAT, 2021). Like many before and after him, Trade Minister Robb “urged the US to use Australia as a gateway into Asia” (SBS News, 2016).

Business in Asia and Doing Business with Asia have also evolved as the central themes in Australian deliberation. The government sector wishes regional trade between Australia and Asia to continue to grow to benefit the Australian economy. Hence, the rhetoric of the advantages of geographical closeness abounds: “The strength of Australia’s economy reflects the country’s unique position in the world’s fastest-growing economic region – Asia” (Tang, 2019a). The intent is to consistently highlight how being in the neighbourhood allows Australia to take advantage of the predicted growth in Asia and the Australian economy is coupled to Asia’s growth and economic success. Twelve of Australia’s 15 largest trading partners, for example, are situated in Asia. Prior to the pandemic, these 12 partners represented AU$520bn which represents 65% of total Australian trade (Tang, 2019b).

Every transactional relationship needs a firm bedrock of trust

Transactional relationships, however, can be limiting if broader understanding between the partners is also not developed. One example are the 2020 tensions (Wibawa, 2020) between Australia and China that proved intransient due to a lack of broader authentic relationships beyond trade relations that could open doors or phones for a dialogue. As long as China views Australia as the lacky (Scott and Mayger, 2020), or deputy sheriff of the USA (Fickling, 2004), there will be insufficient authentic engagement by Asia capable Australians and misunderstanding of Australian national interest by its Asian neighbours.

Profiting from relationships with Australia’s Asian neighbours will not only require continued and expanded ties from the business sector, it will also necessitate firm commitments from sectors such as the government and educational community to understand the region. While many Australians interact daily with Asia through their work, tourism, or family, engagement with Asia is diffused throughout multi-sectorial and multicultural influences including business, religion, marriages and food. Logic, therefore, would seem to dictate a close relationship between Australia and Asia as inevitable. Yet, sadly, this is not always the case. Engagement seems to occur in one of two ways: either in a thoughtful and reflective echo-chamber where like-minded and pro-Asia individuals advocate for better, deeper and more meaningful relationship with Asia based on well-informed education and understanding, or an unreflective engagement that takes for granted historical Eurocentric views about Asia, and “their” position regarding any relationship with “us”. The segregation of ideas has contributed to a situation where Asian Studies in Australian universities has become undervalued at the very time when Australia’s economic growth and business relationships are reliant on the Asian post-COVID-19 economic recovery and leadership.

As an important component of Asian business and economics, understanding the current situation is vital to breathing life back into the Asian Studies discipline at Australian national universities. Thus, this paper will explore the two main viewpoints
on Australia’s relationship with Asia; first, the highly visible informed pro-Asia protagonists, and second, pervasive public opinion as informed by history and the Australian self-image. The paper accepts the prevailing public opinion as a constant that lays the foundations over which the pro-Asia protagonists strategise their analysis and call to action. The two viewpoints are simultaneously mutually exclusive and symbiotic. Together they create an environment which holds back the formation of an authentic relationship with Asia in trade and broader social ties. Advancing Australia fairly with Asia will require an uncomfortable introspection on behalf of the people, business and the government of Australia to gather all Australian stakeholders into a positive relationship with Asia that is genuine and future facing. Thus, Australian universities and disciplines such as Asian Studies and Asian Business must have the academic will and the business support to take up a major role in positive evolution of the Eurocentric elements that currently hold back meaningful engagement.

The purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to present the polemic internal to Asian Studies and Business Schools currently. Business Schools, for example, are well-placed to oversee disruptive multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary degrees that bring Asia-facing businesses into their design and delivery. Currently, they are well practiced in using local connections for practice-based degree content, internships and student experiences. While these work integrated-learning (WIL) elements of current degrees are seen as vital for employability of graduates, the question that must be asked is what business environment are the graduates being prepared for? Local WIL produces local capable graduates. Yet almost any metric on international trade and economic growth returns Asia to the powerhouse center. The local nature of WIL ignores future trade trends and perpetuates the general public ignorance of the importance of Asia to Australia. For Australian universities, this results in a concentrated mirroring of the bifurcated Australian society: Asian expertise is suppressed and eroded in favour of popularist belief that local business is the key to future growth. Unfortunately, neither government nor corporate Australia support this synopsis: they conversely argue the Asia is vital to future Australian growth.

Government and the big-end-of-town repeatedly call for cooperation between all three sectors: government business and universities, to create cooperative relationships to advance dependable relationships with Asian partners. Most importantly, they call out to university to produce Asia capable graduates with WIL and who are work-ready. In short, they are asking universities to take a lead position in re-balancing the internal polemic between Business School graduates, Asian Studies experts and Australian transactional relationship with Asia.

But can universities do it?

Nothing is impossible. Advisory boards could, for example, not just draw on local business expertise, but target Asia-facing corporations with their myriad of opportunities for both content input and offshore experiential learning for students. Purposely linking with Asian academic partners opens embedded learning prospects for both faculty and students. In short, creating diverse learning and partnering
scenarios will disrupt the business degrees as they are constituted currently and have these same degrees pivot to respond to industry and government calls for greater Asia engagement and trade.

Connections as outlined above will not occur by happenchance. Rather they will need to be supported and guided. Therefore, it is great fortune that universities do have Asian experts remaining who can upskill others while Asia capabilities are rebuilt across the Business School. But most importantly these academics have the skill to devise curriculum that pivots Asian Studies discipline diversity to a laser focused trade-oriented degree seeking to produce work-ready and Asia-skilled graduates. Asian Studies as a discipline does need to change – but there is no reason to throw the content out with the dated approach held by the discipline.

Developing skills such as global business capabilities can be a daunting challenge but is essential to both undergraduate and graduate business programs. The role of Asian Studies is an important component in such an endeavour as it is at the forefront of the internationalization of curricula, broadly defined as not on internationalization of the curriculum, but their research, services to the society and reflected through the roles and activities of faculty, students and administrative staff (Bartell, 2003). Schworm et al. (2017) note that international business education, for example, can be a “transformative learning process that results in international awareness, competence, and expertise, and which involves all stakeholders, especially those students likely to become managers”. The intellectual growth noted by Schworm et al. connects neatly with the capabilities called for by Australia Asian-facing businesses and all fall within the scope of an Asia literate Business School currently: useful level of language proficiency; capacity to deal with government; ability to adapt behaviour to Asian cultural contexts; long-term trusted relationships in the region; extensive experience operating in Asia; and sophisticated knowledge of Asian markets.

Klarin et al. (2021) further elaborate that it is imperative for interdisciplinary researchers and to those who are relatively new to the field to gain a broad systems view of the entire scholarship to be able to identify how various disciplines in the field of study are structured and related to each other. Addressing the Asia capabilities with the curriculum reinforces the importance of Klarin’s findings. The pedagogy of Asian Studies remains interdisciplinary to produce insightful knowledge about Asian government, societal and business systems. Transferring the focus to trade and Australia’s transactional relationship with Asia does not undermine those knowledges – rather the business focused curriculum would be underpinned with Asian expertise garnered from the many fields of study required to fully understand the trade system of Asia. Asianists have long understood that successful trade in Asia requires broader connections to ensure trust is established and built upon for enduring trade relations.

The diplomacy of Australia and Asia relations

It must also be noted that Australia’s relationship with Asia extends beyond business and economic fields with both defense and cultural cooperation important components of Australia’s foreign policy. The hard power nature of defense
relationships includes the recently signed Reciprocal Access Agreement with Japan negotiated in response to concerns about perceived Chinese threats on freedom of navigation in the region (Reuter,...
leadership of Professor Ho Peng Yoke, the School of Modern Asian Studies set about attracting academics known for their expertise and engagement with “Asia” across many academic disciplines. Griffith University was responding to the Australian foreign policy of leaning toward engagement with Asia – a motivation building since the end of the Cold War and formalised into a two pronged approach.

First, Australia would establish its “middle power” reputation by participating in regional forums focused on the “Asia-Pacific” region. Second, a change to security cooperation with Asia – rather than against Asia. Security cooperation was broadly interpreted and included economic, diplomatic, environmental and cultural relationships. To operationalise both aspects of the foreign policy, however, Australia needed representatives in all spheres who were Asia competent. Universities responded and were supported in their building of Asia literacy programs by the 1988 Ingleson Report that recommended “the target for undergraduate students studying aspects of Asia should be 10% by 1995 and 20% by 2000, spread across commerce, arts, education and law” (Fitzgerald et al., 2002).

However, those heady days of Asian Studies were short lived. By the late 1990s, “Asia” as a region of study slowed. Interest declined as the economic woes sweeping across Asia minimised career potential for Australian graduates. Concurrently Asianist academics were head-hunted overseas as the rest of the world tackled the idea of the forthcoming Asian Century. Universities confronted with flagging student interest and diminished academic ability to timetable courses undertook specialisation rationalisation and culled Asian offerings. By the early 2000s, guestimates put university Asian engagement content at less than 3%.

Fast forward to the present and little has changed over the past two decades. Currently there appears to be little verve remaining in Asia Studies as a discipline across the university sector. At Griffith University, the BAS ceased at the end of 2020. Moving forward there will be only two majors (the Asian Business major and the Asian Engagement major) in a Bachelor of Business. While the Asian Business major is an important component for those interested in engaging with some of the business aspects of Asia, such majors cannot stand alone in degrees devoid of other aspects of Asia. Much more needs to be done if the educational sector desires students to truly understand Asia and how to engage with their economies.

Unfortunately, the dismantling of Asian Studies is not unique to Griffith University and has been mirrored across the Australian university sector. This is cause for concern to various interested parties. The Asian Studies Association of Australia recently commenced work on a review of the state of the discipline across Australia. Their opening salvo supports a grim reading of offerings in universities:

Asia specialists have frequently complained of an accelerating slide in support for teaching and research on Asia. Several universities have cut back Asia-related programs, and enrolments in some Asian languages have plunged. Specialists sometimes allege a decline in the depth of Asia expertise at Australian universities and other national institutions (witness the National Library of Australia’s recent move to downgrade its long-standing emphasis on collecting from the region). (Aspinall, 2020)
While the present situation presents a gloomy portrait, the decision to reduce resources devoted to Asian Studies was inevitable against a fiscal reality of insufficient enrolments to cover the costs of a depleted Asianist academic cohort. Contributing to this decline was the inability to expose students to the multi-discipline areas that are required to be covered within an Asian Studies degree addressing the many regions and countries of Asia. At Griffith University, the establishment of two majors was a compromise decision by the school to hold true to the university’s founding belief in the importance of Asia to Australia and maintain student engagement with Asia where possible and in the spirit of the Ingleson Report ideals.

Perhaps, such an outcome was inevitable. Asian Studies, like many other academic disciplines, should change with the times. The economic-geo-political relationship Australia had with Asia in the 20th century is different to the current framework of engagement. How and why Australia engages with its near neighbours too, should reflect the change in international relations. As a result, there is ample room to argue that the academic discipline must also evolve. We know evolution is typically a response to an environmental or behavioural shifts, and introspection by Asianists as to the state of affairs of Asian Studies has been successful in recognising the change stimulus: the end of the age of the Asian economic miracle, the resulting rhetoric of a transactional approach to Asian relations and Australian government withdrawal of funding to tertiary institutions plus the championing of vocationally aligned qualifications.

**Academic and business necessity responses**

As a general statement, Australian academic, government communities and businesses agree that engaging with Asia is a good thing. The periodic reports and research papers that emerge from the sectors all start with acknowledging the importance for Australia to build comprehension about Asia and build relationships with Asians. That importance is seen as particularly significant across the areas of trade, business, diplomacy, security and cultural appreciation. All note, however, with a stern tone, that much more needs to be done to improve the Australian position in its geographic location. They warn of negative consequences if Australia does not improve both comprehension and engagement. Conversely, improving Australia’s relationship with Asia, it is agreed, will progress the Australian economy and place in the region.

At the highest order of combined University messaging, the Australia Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) are forthright in their desire to turn University and government attention to the importance of Asia and the skills typically deployed in “Asian Studies” degrees:

> The depth of Australia’s linguistic and inter-cultural competence will be a determining factor in the future success of developments in innovation, science and technology, research capacity, international mobility, trade relations and economic competitiveness. In the medium to longer term, the Asia Pacific region will be a principal focus, presenting major challenges and opportunities economically, socially and culturally, for our national security interests (Ang et al., 2015).
In short, the argument is made that stronger transnational links with Asia is part of Australia’s national interest. Couched in political rhetoric, their reports focus on more than the pragmatic trade ties, to seek broader and deeper long-term relationships maximising competencies across language, research and cultural familiarity for the varied Asian countries to our near neighbours. The strategic influence of collaborative research projects is not explicit in Australian foreign policy. But we know that inter-national communities that cooperate on research projects improve networks and foster greater understanding between nations. Research collaboration here includes, but is not restricted to, joint projects, on-site capacity building, advice about the development or governance of research institutions, and traditional research training (Ang et al., 2015). Undertaking collaborative research, however, requires dedicated funds and time: assets in short supply in depleted Asian Studies departments as Australian universities focus on STEM and vocational degrees.

Not resting on their laurels, in 2016 ALCOA explored the advantages of Asia engagement alignment suggesting the advantages Australia could maximise with existing and future Asia diaspora linkages. The report’s Executive Summary, however, reveals the propensity to imagine the relationship as one predominantly about trade and finding ways to be successful in those transactions:

> Australia’s Asian business diasporas are a rich source of innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurialism. Yet they are under-utilised. They have significant potential to further enhance Australia’s economic engagement with Asia and help the nation’s economy to thrive, for the benefit of all Australians. (Rizvi et al., 2016)

At the same time, Australian universities redirected multi-disciplinary Asian Studies degrees towards business studies where graduates use their knowledge to contribute to economic and business interactions with Asia. Justification was found in history: Australia has long maintained a transactional relationship with Asians. Makasan traders are credited (Clark and May, 2013) as being the first inter-regional traders with the indigenous Australians for Trepang [1] (until the practice was halted by the Australian Government in 1901). But the experience of this inter-generational and cross-cultural trading relationship is also a cautionary tale: the trade did not happen in transactional isolation. The practice of trade was a part of broader relationships and exchanges occurring across cultures and influencing culture, government and familial lineage.

The idea of the diaspora is important in Australian contemplations of the “distance” to Asia. According to the 2016 Census, of the 26% of Australians born overseas, between 32.0% and 39.7% were born in “Asia” [2]. The most frequent Asian states of origin were China, India and the Philippines (Chang, 2017). Within this Asia diaspora, ACOLA argued, there is an underutilised strength of innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurialism that would grow engagement and economy simultaneously. The diaspora, with all of its “other than business” qualities becomes a quantifiable aspect of the Asia–Australia transactional business relationship.

Research on business and adjacent sociological phenomena occurs most often, now, through university affiliated research groups. One example is the Griffith
University Asia Institute performs a pro-Asia supportive function as a global research leader (18th worldwide/1st in Australia) (McGann, 2019) in the politics, security, economies and development of Asia and the Pacific. The institute serves as an important clearing house of research and is assistance in setting agendas in relationships with Asia is well received by the government and business communities.

But it is at this level where the cracks in the state of Asian Studies is also starting to appear and portends problems in the future. Universities and research institutes once filled with PhD candidates who have travailed years of specialist learning are thinning, in line with declining numbers of specialist academics. David Hundt considers the Australian Research Council grant system the “most valuable” of public-funding schemes, and where it is possible to see the proportional importance of Asia related research. Hunt found that while funding commenced for 163 projects in Political Science between 2010 and 2019, only slightly more than a quarter were related to Asian politics” (Hundt, 2021). Without dedicated funding, researchers have little choice but to pivot to topics that are attractive to current funding preferences. As a result, Asian knowledge can be reduced to an Asian-focused case study within a broader thesis. In sum, depth of knowledge is lessening. One known consequence is the declining link between research and research informed teaching.

**Diminishing Asian university teaching**

Establishing commitment to Asian Studies by individual universities is a complex task. In many cases, Asian Studies, unlike engineering, for example, generally does not exist as a discrete field of interest recognized across academia. A search of the government education websites focusing on Asian Studies, for example, will produce a copious amount of “student stories” about the success of Asian students in Australia. However, this information inadvertently informs us about the focus of Australian educational institutions when they consider how “Asia” is important to business and economics. For Australian universities “Asia” is primarily a source of income from international students, rather than an area of intellectual enquiry.

Once a popular degree option, especially when co-joined to other academic pursuits, there are few full degree options in Asian Studies remaining in Australia at the undergraduate level. Currently there are only three universities with bachelor level options: Melbourne University, La Trobe University and the University of New South Wales. While there are Asia options at most universities, the possibilities are limited to an Asia focused major or a minor in Asia based on fulfilling a certain number of electives (Australian Government). All would fall below the Ingelson target of 10%–20%. Teaching units that focus on Asia have declined in number over the past decade resulting in shrinking staff and teaching capacity. Asianists have developed secondary areas of expertise and scattered to other “fields of study” to secure their career survival. Those that remain in the specialization have become generalists by necessity.

**Business “universities”**
The withering of Asian Studies and academics in Australian universities has created an associate deficit of research findings being available to the government, business and public sectors. Fortunately, part of this vacuum has been filled by large consultancy groups pumping out timely business-oriented reports that now substitute for academic research on Asian business in particular. For example, Deloitte, Price Waterhouse Coopers and others are generating snapshot reports that cover business trends, leadership, management strategies and many other business aspects of importance to C-suite leaders [3].

The reports provide timely business and economic information to peers in the business sector and the government and general community where there appears to be overwhelming recognition of the importance of Asia, Asian economies, Asian leadership and Asian political and international relations. Across the board of business consulting, business groups, government business focused agencies and individual corporations, there is agreement in the importance of Asia to the future of the Australian economy [4]. Ian Thatcher, Deputy Managing Partner of Deloitte Asia Pacific noted Australia as being:

[. . .] very well positioned to sell into the changing growth dynamic in Asia. Having ridden a massive wave with China and mining, the coming potential out of Asia will lie more in other countries and other sectors. Australian businesses in tourism, agribusiness, health care, education and wealth management will all see a tailwind of Asian demand in the years ahead. (Findlay and Crichton, 2017)

Mr Thatcher is unambiguous: Australia has current and future transactional self-interests with Asian business. He is not alone in that summation. Asia interest groups that declare a broader cross-cultural interest with Asia are keen to see a future where Asia is central to the Australian success story.

**Asian interest societies [. . .] also leading the way**

The Asia Society (AS) has self-declared itself as the leading national centre for engagement with Asia. As a not-for-profit, non-government and independent organisation, they unambiguously state their mission as “to prepare our Australian leaders and community for a deeper and sustained engagement with Asia”. The AS further claims they are empowered by “leading Australian and regional business, government, education and cultural institutions” (About Asia Society Australia, 2021).

In their recent Discussion Paper titled **Spotlight, Secure, Scale-up and Strategise (2020)** authored in conjunction with the Business Council of Australia, they advised:

Effective engagement demands capability - a new emphasis on Asia-related skills and expertise, familiarity with the region, and an ability to navigate complex sets of relationships, regulations and dynamics within a diverse and contested world. Policymakers and business leaders are right to be concerned. The skills required are not only in short supply, they are at serious risk of being overlooked and undervalued just at the time they are needed most.

There can be doubt that this is a call for a return to the depth of training initially identified as necessary for Asian Studies to be a multi-disciplinary, multi-vocational
outcome tertiary degree. And the role that Asia will play in Australia’s future cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, various issues will need to be confronted as eloquently stated by Mark van Dyck:

Perhaps the single greatest opportunity for the Australian economy lies in Asia [. . .] Australia will have to look for new sources of growth if future generations are going to enjoy the standard of living that we have become accustomed to. Asia presents an attractive option, but to succeed we will have to tackle some difficult reform issues at home, and we must lift our economic engagement in Asia. (Dyck, 2020)

Those reform issues are not restricted to multi-lateral trade pacts or bi-lateral agreements. The reforms need for Australia to look inward to identify what has hindered her development of an authentic relationship with Asian states and Asians.

**Australia’s persistent cultural handicap**

Enhancing economic engagement with Asia requires reflection on Australia’s relationships with her neighbours, and where differences have originated. White privilege is central to the history of Australia. Our forebears have taken as truth the Western civilising and civilisation model. From the arrival of the British and the concept of Terra Nullius, successive governments have maintained an Anglophonic and Anglophilic identity of Australia. In the post–Second World War period, Australia had few interactions with Asia or Asians, and “Australians’ knowledge of the region was filtered through outdated texts, stereotypes drawn from popular culture, and scientific methodologies such as psychiatry, psychology and anthropology” (Wood, 2013). Australia simply ignored geography for alignment with cultures akin to the dominant “white” identity adopted for the Australian identity.

The public debate largely turns away from discussions about Australia’s geographical location and the incongruity with Eurocentrism. It seems that the stereotypes have remained firmly wedged into the Australian psyche. When asked about relationship with Asia, Australians tend to acknowledge the importance of Asia for trade and economic growth – but they are less warm about security or neighbourliness. A Lowy Poll in 2013, for example, offered the following summative statement:

Seventy-six of Australians identify China as the most important economy to Australia at the moment (up 13 points since 2009), compared with 16% identifying the United States (down 11 points). However, more Australians place a higher value on our relationship with the United States (48% say the US is more important, compared with 37% saying China). (Lowy Institute, 2013)

This Anglophilic propensity has changed little in the interim as reaffirmed in a 2020 Lowy Institute poll of 2020 that found the public debate surrounding Australia’s ties to the world’s two largest economies – China and the USA – has only been sharpened by the COVID-19 pandemic, and Australians appear to be leaning towards the USA. In 2020, more than half of the adult Australian population (55%) says Australia’s relationship with the USA is more important than the relationship with China. Only
four in ten Australians (40%) today say China is the more important relationship (Kassam, 2021).

What the public want [. . .]

The Lowy extracts are telling of the public mindset: the preference for and trust placed in another “white” post-colonial country. The Poll also indicates the perpetuation of stereotypes of Asia and Asians that Lowy has shown are stubbornly hard to alter. When considering the Australian bi-lateral relationship with the USA, the predilection to consistently prefer their geographically distant company indicates a deeper twinning more meaningful than any transactional relationship or hopeful security protections through The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty. Australia has relentlessly promulgated the stereotype that any security threat was destined to arrive in Australia by traversing Asia – and so linked threats to Asia. Australia faced an existential potential threat to its near north by peoples who shared no common language or culture. This is an isolating notion.

While Australia likes to posit that it is a multi-cultural community, there appears to be a decoupling of rhetoric and reality. The Asia diaspora in Australia is substantial, multigenerational and multi-cultural. Marriages and consequential births have resulted in broad community enmeshment of Australians of Asian descent and European descent. Yet there does not seem to be an elevation of that grassroots family history into family stories, political leadership, strategic or regional planning. Rather, the rhetoric remains fixed to profit and trade with Asia, and, to find alliance strength with powerful Anglo allies.

This self-confidence may not be warranted. Australian corporations self-report their lack of Asia capability with Boards acknowledging 67% do not have extensive experience operating in Asia and 55% claiming little to no knowledge of Asian markets (PwC, 2017). In every “Asia capable” [5] category, Australian businesses and Boards scored woefully. How that deficit of knowledge has been allowed to continue despite the known advantages of trading with Asia is attributed to Australian public perceptions.

In the words of an anonymized corporate leader:

> Asia capabilities are skills, not characteristics. They are like skills in digital or finance or law. It’s not a question of diversity but of making sure that people with the right skills and experiences are making decisions about an Asia strategy. (PwC, 2017)

The question then becomes, where do individuals gain the skills so valued by business? Companies do not question that digital or legal competencies are the remit of universities to provide graduates with work-ready skills. Indeed, “digital (IT), finance and law” are mainstays in many universities. Yet the Asia competency skill required by business is in decline in all Australian universities. Herein too lies the decoupling of sound Australian engagement with Asia.

In 2020, the Australian Government passed legislation to make social science and humanities degrees and courses roughly 100% more expense than 2019 fees. At the
same time, the “job relevant” subjects of mathematics, agricultural, linguist, nurse, teacher and clinical psychologist degrees will benefit from fee decreases (Duffy, 2020). Asian Studies, no matter the school nor the degree where the courses reside, is impacted by the increase.

Turning students onto the reality that their future careers will involve Asia in some capacity must occur early in their degree studies to best assist their vocational outcomes. This will involve two discussions that shake off all previously held stereotype opinions regarding the role of Asia in their futures. First, is the discussion that leads to a realisation that Asia has historically been central to the global economy. Understanding the economic centre of gravity will be in and across Asia within their working life challenges the Eurocentric approach in their world view. As students learn the economic predictions of growth in the Asian region, their focus on Asia sharpens.

Standing apart as a graduate has never been more critical than in our new COVID-19 world. The informed business or economics student making choices will recognize their future career will most likely involve Asia in some way: either working in Asia or working for a company doing business in Asia. Businesses are well aware that Asia will lead the global economy out of the post-COVID-19 national and global recessions (IMF, 2020). It is most likely that:

Winning in Asia has never been more important to Australia’s economic prosperity and security. Going forward, sustainable long-term growth in the performance and returns of Australian businesses will be even more dependent on Asian markets. Winning in Asia’s highly competitive markets will be central to sustaining our per capita income levels, adding sustainable jobs to the workforce, and growing our long-term pool of national savings. Our largest companies will be central to this proposition. (PcW, 2021)

Yet Australian companies admit that they are in serious deficit in Asian skills and leadership with just 7% of board members and senior executives of ASX 200 companies self-reporting as Asia capable (Topsfield, 2020). Of the 7% leadership cohort, the strongest capability is an understanding of Asia markets, and the weakest is their ability to adapt to Asian cultural contexts. The unresolved deficit in competencies is an enlarging crevasse for the future of Australian business opportunity.

To be successful in international diversification in Asia, however, requires Asian knowledge and skills. As noted by Nicola Wakefield Evans, non-executive director of Macquarie Group, Lendlease, BUPA and Australian Institute of Company Directors, “Asia-capable is not just about being able to speak a particular language, it is about being able to navigate the local system and being comfortable with dealing with people from that system” (Topsfield, 2020). Thus, there is a need for a whole-of-culture approach in business, education and beyond.

Conclusion

The whole-of-culture approach needs also to be applied in strategies to create an Asia facing Australia which will do much to advance business and economic
relationships. This paper argues that deep introspection is required. Only with that uncomfortable process can Australia begin to experience a pro-Asia zeitgeist where the whole-of-country understands the benefits of “those neighbours”.

Currently, Australia, like elsewhere, is mired in the politics of popularism with shock-jocks and news-by-comedy support. The general population is largely unable to access enlightening information, neither in its academic nor edutainment form. Only repeated stereotypes, often in echo-chamber social media silos, and sensationalist stories, holds sway with the general population. In addition, the Eurocentric propensity of Australia has ensured a discomfort with the neighbours while finding comfort in anti-Asian attitudes.

Together with global events, such as war, terrorism, and the COVID-19 pandemic, the neighbours have been cast as a distrusted community that is not always tolerated and sometimes feared. Deeper genetic links with Asian family ties and a deep love of Asian food has not lessened the distance. In general, the publics’ opinion making activities perpetuates a distancing and an Asian illiteracy status quo.

Such a situation begs a society’s education system to step up and adopts some responsibility in illuminating the issues and assisting all of society to move forward. The current polemic of national interest, Asian neighbours and a trade-oriented economy would benefit from universities, as the authors wish to promote here, bringing clarity to that which has been a Gordian knot for some time in Australia.

Business schools have both an immediate and long-term financial interest in being leaders in this space. Being at the forefront of the Asian, trade engagement will lead to degree enrolments as businesses and exporters demand employees who are Asia capable and literate. Those degree enrolments will originate from regional sources as they do currently, but relevancy will increase participation. Further expansion will occur with enrolment from other far-flung continents, as the Australian business degrees garner reputation for producing Asia business savvy graduates. The “use Australia as a bridge to Asia” trope will sit on legitimate academic and business bedrock.

Government practicality will pull attention and support to the business schools that produce positive gains in international trade. Government already recognises the necessity for whole-of-country engagement to leverage consumer growth in Asian and grow the Australian economy. Development of active strategies between universities-business government will provide the talking points and leverage to begin the behemoth task of changing public opinion from entrenched Anglophilic ideas.

The authors suggest that given the primacy of trade is Australia’s governmental strategy to dealing with Asia, there is a strong fiscal and reputational benefit in appraising business school offerings and relations with Asia through the same lens. In short, the trade statistics quantify the government and business pro-Asia positioning and speak to the business of business schools to be tracking the latest trends in trade and business. The authors submit the business environment already exists to support experiential learning for the next generation of business graduates.
Embedding experiential learning in businesses already trading with, and in, Asia elevates the skills of the graduates. Underpinning experiential learning with the skills which have always been embedded in Asian Studies and which now correlate with the Asian capabilities desired by business and future employers makes sound academic and fiscal sense; cultural training, critical thinking, business theoretical and practical skills and language.

The resulting clarion call directs Australian universities and business schools to pivot their fatigued Asian Studies offerings into business programs that prepare graduates who can develop trading opportunities built on experienced and authentic relationships established as undergraduates and that endure beyond graduation into career. The authors accept the primacy of trade in the Australia’s relationship with Asia and propose academic relevancy requires a more applicable model of business school graduate in-tune with increased regional geo-strategic complexity and better able to succeed in developing authentic and enduring business relationships. To ensure this occurs, further research should now be undertaken on development of the Asia capacities. Liaison with industry should focus on refinement of expectations of graduates at undergraduate and post-graduate level so that curriculum and learning outcomes can be aligned in a meaningful way in business. On a broader research agenda, work on the state of the bifurcated Australian society would now also be timely. Research questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 and the four years of ecological disasters (fire, flood, fire, once in 100 years flood) on perceptions of Australians about Asia and Asians would be judicious. We speculate, from anecdotal evidence, there has been a shift towards pro-Asia. But this needs to be verified and its impact of business school offering assessed.

As the Australian economy emerges in the post-COVID-19 world, Australian Business Schools have the opportunity to recalibrate their offerings to better link the transactional relationship with Asia to Asia’s overall importance to the Australian economy. Government and business stubbornly advocate for graduates that are Asia capable and literate. Educators seem at a loss as to how to respond and reinvent an aged and tired “Asian Studies” discipline and incentivise students to back their future career with an Asia facing business degree. A disruptive force is required, and so business schools should do as they teach: embrace disruption and put the transactional relationship at the center of learning scaffolding – a Bachelor of Asia and Trade, for example. By placing transactional relationship building with Asia at the center of learning, graduates would emerge with the professional and personal skills essential to succeed in the Asia facing post-COVID-19 business environment. Business schools, too, would be partners with government and business in strategies that grow the Australian economy through comprehensive transactional relationships with all of Asia.

Notes
1. When the trade commenced is a highly contested idea. See Clarke and May, Chapter 1.
2. The category included but was not limited to India, Pakistan, Georgia, Philippines, China, Maldives, Japan, Nepal, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Armenia and Afghanistan.
3. See, for example, PwC Asia Pacific (2021) at www.pwc.com/gx/en/about/pwc-asia-pacific.html


5. Sophisticated knowledge of Asian markets, extensive experience operating in Asia, long-term trusted relationships in the region, ability to adapt to Asian cultural contexts, capacity to deal with government and useful level of language proficiency.

References


**Further reading**