



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 20, No. 1/2
December 2024



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Citation: Leigh, B. 2024. The Southeast Asia Major within the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies 1996–2007. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 20:1/2, 14–16. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9440>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAYS

The Southeast Asia Major within the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies 1996–2007

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9440>

Article History: Received 05/11/2024; Accepted 05/11/2024; Published 26/12/2024

Abstract

Between 1996 and 2007, the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) at the University of Technology Sydney offered students the opportunity to engage in transformative In-Country Study (ICS) experiences in Southeast Asia. These transformative experiences broadened students' intellectual horizons, fostered meaningful connections, and inspired successful careers in fields such as diplomacy, journalism, and academia. These are my reflections as the coordinator of the program.

Keywords

BAIS; UTS; In-Country Study; Southeast Asia; International Education

Between 1996 and 2007, students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) had the option of going to Southeast Asia. Students who chose this option were seen as intrepid, adventurous, and up for a challenge. There were In-Country Study (ICS) sites in three countries of the broad sweep of Southeast Asia. These were Indonesia (Yogyakarta), Malaysia (Penang and Sarawak), and Thailand (Khon Kaen). For those who designed the program, there was a belief that Australian students would choose to be involved in this region of the world, in order that they might better understand where they were living. But no. The majority of International Studies students chose to go to Europe. Those who chose to spend a year of their lives in Southeast Asia were a different and exciting crew. Part of my job was to teach the course Contemporary Southeast Asia each year. My students included those who were actually going to Southeast Asia the following year. My interests are eclectic, so

the course reflected this diversity as well as representing the vast differences in the three countries. I dived into local education systems, literature in translation, the arts both as creative expression and resistance, the place of women in the society, as well as the geography, colonial histories, and the changing politics and economics of each of the countries. So much of this teaching and learning was a necessary skating exercise, but I enjoyed the enthusiasm of the students and watched their tastes leading to further exploration during their year abroad. I was often included in group emails (the days prior to Facebook, Instagram, X, and so many other current platforms) and felt particularly privileged. Our two sons were approximately the same age as the students, so at times I felt a bit like a mother hen.

The first cohort had their year abroad in 1998. This was the year of the global financial crisis that began in Thailand, then spread throughout the region. The consequences in Indonesia were a profound political crisis with shooting occurring on the campus of the University of Gadjah Mada where they were located. The students were brought back to Australia before returning again to continue their studies. For Steven Chaytor, Steven Farmer, Kristen Vander, Ann Dale (Bonnor), and Rohini Sivakumar, their In Country Study year is one that they will remember for the rest of their lives. The events led to dramatic, rapid change in Indonesia.

1999 saw the first group of students go to Thailand. Two young women, Kristy Buesnel and Theresa Masters, were the trailblazers, involving themselves fully in the world of spirits and beliefs about the unseen world, whilst keeping their Australian feet somewhere where they could locate the red soil of home again. Samallie Kiyingi went to Penang and was so popular that she was elected the representative for foreign students on the campus. Rebecca James was the only student to go to the more conservative east coast of Malaysia as she was a nursing student and was undertaking a study on breast-feeding. The University in Penang had a branch campus in Kelantan, and the Director was a student whom I had taught at the School of Medical Education, UNSW, some years previously. This year also saw two students marry Indonesians whom they had met abroad. Xylia Ingham and Eleanor Rivers had magnificent weddings in Australia. This phenomenon was not unusual for our BAIS students. As staff members, we enjoyed the celebrations but also felt the responsibility for students who were navigating their way in the world at a time when long-term partners were often chosen and nascent careers were begun.

The years continued through to 2007 when I retired from the Institute for International Studies. To name a few careers of which I am aware that grew from In-Country Study: Todd Dias had his research published in Sarawak, which assisted him in moving into Foreign Affairs. Rebecca Henschke, a communications and International Studies student now works for the BBC, and is often reporting on Southeast Asia, including covering the deplorable plight of the Rohingya people in Burma. Sunanda Creagh was Manager of *The Conversation* academic news feed. Oliver Jones is a barrister in Sydney. Associate Professor Alexandra Crosby in the School of Design, DAB Faculty, UTS, was an In-Country student in 2001 living for a time in the abandoned Arts Institute building in Yogyakarta, whilst attending the new building for her courses. The fluidity of life and capturing the moment were expressed in her PhD thesis: 'Festivals in Java: localising cultural activism and environmental politics, 2005–2010,' which was submitted in 2013 and drew on the concerns and idealism she encountered during that In-Country Study year.

In 2000 Trevor Morgan and Warin Nitipaisalkul went to Thailand leading to a small steady stream of students continuing to accept the challenge of a difficult language and very different living conditions from those experienced in Australia. Being in the country for a year allowed Trevor to travel widely and explore aspects such as the influence of the national government in favouring the national Thai language over local languages such as Isaan, which was spoken in the Khon Kaen area. The influence of the national government extended to changing temple architecture as shown by Anne Thanudchang. Squat Khmer like temples in the east of the country were rebuilt with tall elaborate inverted V shaped roofs that are associated with temples in Bangkok.

Each year I visited the students in their Southeast Asian In-Country sites. I had a beaten path that included firstly the Australian Consortium for In Country Indonesia Studies (ACICIS) house in Yogyakarta where I stayed in a room in the home of the Resident Director and was able to meet with the students there. Elena (Eli) Williams (ICS student 2004) later became the Resident Director in Yogyakarta, then moving on to further postgraduate study at the University of Sydney. My journey took me from Yogyakarta to Penang where I stayed in a hotel close to the Universiti Sains Malaysia, then across the South China Sea to Sarawak where my husband, Michael, was working at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and then on to Khon Kaen in Thailand. This always involved a domestic flight from Bangkok. Unlike in Europe there was no single currency, so I had to make sure that at each stop I had the local currency, particularly for taxis and tips. Local contacts at the universities became friends introducing me to local cultural events and good restaurants and they were always ready for discussion about local issues, whether it be an election, a demonstration, or the latest musical or artistic sensation.

The students who went to Southeast Asia wrote excellent ICS projects on the whole. Unfortunately, I do not have a list of them. They expressed the interest and passion that these students experienced in surroundings that were very different and usually challenging.

I would like to conclude by paying tribute to one of the many Indonesian teachers on the team, Monica Wulff. She enrolled as my first doctoral student. It was not for the normal PhD, but rather for the Doctorate of Creative Arts. Up until this time, the DCA had only been given to students who were creative writers within the Faculty of Humanities. Monica used her DCA to showcase her outstanding performance skills, along with a written thesis. Just as UTS had shown innovation in establishing the Institute for International Studies, UTS showed its innovation in accepting new knowledges as legitimate within a university setting. I met with Monica last year in Bonn where she is Professor at the University of Cologne and supervising her own students in new and creative genres. Innovation that began at UTS continues to create international seeds.