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Building Australian Research Capacity on Asia:

A New Problem-Oriented Strategy

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Key Points:

- Asia literacy – literacy about the region – has been the dominant underlying rationale for public investment in research about Australia's region leading to a strong focus on country based centres with a considerable area studies and humanities focus.
- This conventional Asia literacy strategy is prone to rent seeking, and is less effective in generating knowledge about the new social and political dynamics of the region than a strategy geared towards understanding contemporary problems of capitalist transformation in the region.
- This Policy Brief advocates a problem-oriented research strategy that addresses problems and puzzles of social, economic, and political transformations that are often transnational in nature and scope.
- Public investment on research in the region via major public funding bodies such as the Australian Research Council and AusAID as well as through public universities should develop a strategic and coordinated approach to building research capacity on the region.

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‘Accordingly, this logic suggests that in order to engage more effectively with the region we need to become more ‘Asia literate’. As such this Asia literacy strategy for building research capacity implicitly favours an Area Studies approach with an emphasis on the importance of language and culture. By giving centre stage to the understanding of the distinctiveness of cultural arrangements it sidelines the analysis of common trends, problems and processes’.

Asia Literacy Model

The recent decision to invest in a substantial multimillion dollar award to the China Studies Centre at the Australian National University (ANU) as well as the broader public discussion over the significance of Asian language teaching highlight critical issues about the nature and direction of public investment in research on Australia’s region. The most important issue is the lack of a coherent strategy to guide work on the profound social and political transformation that is occurring in the region and Australia’s role in the new Asian Century. This debate is to be welcomed but it has to be based on a clearly articulated rationale for public investment in research.

The implicit rationale of many proponents of increased research investment on the region is underpinned by an amorphous notion of Asia literacy linked to an engagement with, and an understanding of, the distinctive cultural and civilizational foundations of Australia’s key neighbors – such as Japan, Indonesia, China, and India – depending on the flavour of the era. Accordingly, this logic suggests that in order to engage more effectively with the region we need to become more ‘Asia literate’. As such this Asia literacy strategy for building research capacity implicitly favours an Area Studies approach with an emphasis on the importance of language and culture. By giving centre stage to the understanding of the distinctiveness of cultural arrangements it sidelines the analysis of common trends, problems and processes.

This model is deeply flawed and I would advocate a ‘problem oriented’ research strategy that emphasises social sciences rather than notions of literacy or engagement. The current research strategy driven by short term and contradictory imperatives is often dominated by influential groups such as the Asian languages lobby originating from the days of the Ingleson Report on Asian Studies and languages (Ingleson, 1989).

Centres for Asian Studies as well as more specific country oriented institutes are creatures of the political and institutional circumstances that led to their establishment over the last few decades. A consistent theme running across various mission statements and public policy underpinning their establishment has been the idea of ‘Asia literacy’ in the mission statements of the various reports on research and teaching of Asian Studies dating from the Achmuty Report of the 1970s, followed by those of Fitzgerald and Ingleson. Aligned with the broad thrust of the Garnaut Report on Australia-Asia relations this led to repeated calls for research capacity to help Australia to understand the distinctive cultural and social character of the region as part of its engagement strategy.

The influence of Asia literacy indeed goes back much further than the Garnaut Report of the 1980s. During the interwar period the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), based in the United States with branches in New South Wales and Victoria, stimulated a research program on the ‘Pacific’ that trained its analytical lights on the distinctive pathway of modernisation in the region (Beeson and Jayasuriya 2009). Similarly, the rationale for the influential Indonesian Economy Project established at the ANU in the 1960s was a precursor to some of the key ideas on Asian Studies and research that have echoed in public policy discussion over the last three decades. These

institutional patterns – some of which are now deeply embedded – not only served to reinforce ideas of ‘Asia literacy’ but has an inbuilt bias towards the humanities rather than the social sciences.

Issues and Problems with the ‘Asia Literacy Model’

Methodological Nationalism.

Most Asian Studies centres developed in a period where Asian literacy was seen as a supportive element of Australian engagement with a rapidly growing Asia. It therefore has a strong flavour of ‘methodological nationalism’ that seeks to understand ‘countries’ as a whole in terms of their distinctive cultural characteristics ignoring the broader commonalities of trends and problems that shape both Australia and the region. What is needed is 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 in turn implies greater focus on theories and concepts associated with the social sciences rather than the humanities

Changing Circumstances.

One of the problems with many of the Asian Studies centres around the country arises from the fact that they are constrained within the parameters of the 1980s doctrine of Asian Engagement and the even older notion of Asian literacy. This perforce seeks to become literate about a region ‘out there’ rather than generate an in-depth knowledge of a common set of problems pertaining to the region as a whole. Increasingly the governance challenges confronting the region, such as the issue of climate change or financial governance are the same as those confronting Australian policy makers. Clearly, we need to focus much more on confronting and dealing with these common sets of issues that are often transnational rather than national in origin. While at the same time understanding how they are contested within particular contexts and for this reason it is imperative that we understand the specificities of countries within our region. Of course, it is not Area Studies per se that is problematic here but the fact that these approaches are located within an Asia literacy strategy that rests on a particular set of assumptions about the mainsprings of social and political change that can no longer serve as guideposts for research policy. Changing social and political circumstances have made the Asia literacy model increasingly ineffective and redundant in the new Asia confronting Australian policy makers.

Internationalisation of the Universities

Just as much as an Asian engagement and literacy approach to Asian Studies has been a product of its time, there have been deep-seated changes in the internationalisation of universities across a range of disciplines. Accordingly a strategy for research on the region must be based not just on partnership but also on institutionalising collaboration with researchers in the region and it is difficult to see how Asian literacy can provide the basis for this collaboration which must be based on common research themes much like the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR).

‘As such, the PORS fits in with the broader shifts in the nature of knowledge production, which the social science community— particularly through its key professional organizations—fails to recognize. Consequently these organizations have not been able to make a persuasive case for the importance of investing in social science research as a means of dealing with pressing social and economic problems in the region’.

A Problem Oriented Research Strategy

To overcome the limitations of the Asia literacy model research strategy which has been dominant in recent times, we need a Problem Oriented Research Strategy (PORS) based on the new social and political circumstances of the region. This strategy will mould research around key issues, problems, and puzzles of social, economic and political transformation pertaining to the region as a whole. These problems are rooted in tangible real world problems, but their analysis has broader theoretical relevance for social science/humanities disciplines. As such this orientation will enable us to move beyond simplistic distinctions between applied and basic research, and involve the participation of a broader range of actors – stakeholders if you like – in the research enterprise. No doubt this approach is not devoid of problems – such as issues of academic autonomy – which will need to be properly managed and organized. There is also the danger of research becoming instrumental and driven by short term considerations.

One interesting example of such an approach is what the World Bank calls a ‘problem driven approach to governance reform and political economy analysis’, where it is argued that studies of governance and institutional reform have much to gain by adopting a problem driven approach. This approach to governance and political economy analysis ‘focuses on particular challenges or opportunities, such as analyzing why reforms in the power or health sector or those aimed at improving urban development might not have gained traction and what could be done differently to move forward’ (World Bank 2009: viii).

By adopting such a perspective it enables a specific approach to research on issues governance reform that focuses on the specific vulnerabilities and problems for reform. This also enables identifying specific institutional and political economy drivers of either successful or failed reforms. While we may quibble with conclusions reached by this approach – and I certainly do – it has much to warrant serious consideration as a problem oriented rationale for research on governance reform, and provides an example of the sort of PORS advocated in this Brief, which differs from the standard hitherto operative Asia literacy mode of research.

This new approach has a strong trans-disciplinary focus in examining the nature of research problems coming within its purview. At the same time, it places emphasis on the transnational nature of many contemporary problems that simply cannot be dealt with in Asia literacy research models. While, I do not intend to buy into what has come to be known as the broader debate on Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge, the PORS advanced here clearly has affinities with the so called Mode 2 knowledge productions that lay emphasis on real world problems and notions of trans-disciplinarily (see Nowotny H; P. Scott, & M. Gibbons 2001). Mode 1 knowledge is discipline based on basic research while mode 2 knowledge places emphasis on problem solving and inter-disciplinary approach to knowledge production.

As such, the PORS fits in with the broader shifts in the nature of knowledge production, which the social science community— particularly through its key professional organizations—fails to recognize. Consequently these organizations have not been able to make a persuasive case for the importance of investing in social

science research as a means of dealing with pressing social and economic problems in the region. A striking contrast here is the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the US which has been active in promoting the kind of problem solving strategy advocated in this Brief. Nevertheless the rationale advanced here for a PORS does not depend on arguments over the changing notions of knowledge production. Neither do we argue that we abandon country or area studies –expertise which is also crucial to our strategy – but these are situated within an orientation that departs from the outdated notions of Asia literacy.

Key Features of this Approach

- an issue or problem oriented strategy that bypasses the country or area studies ‘Asia literacy models’
- a research enterprise which gives weight to the transnational and trans-disciplinary nature of contemporary problems such as inequality or climate change, and as such calls for work across the disciplines
- the importance of solving problems as a way of advancing basic social science, and the potential to build partnership with actors – academic and non-academic– in the formulation, organisation, and funding of research though this needs be couched in non instrumental ways

Conclusion

The advantage of the PORS approach is that it enables us to move beyond the orthodoxy of the Asia literacy model which is ineffective in a region where rising powers such as China present issues and problems that equally impact on Australia and the region as a whole. The PORS approach acknowledges and recognizes some of the key issues of our time – inequality, climate change, and financial governance – all of which have similar trans-national roots, but for which broadly common technical solutions need to be tailored to specific political and social contexts. In short, we need to move to a research strategy that emphasizes issues and broad themes rather than the cultural and linguistic specificities of the region. Don’t get me wrong: country studies- and associated expertise have a pivotal role to play, but it should be the problem oriented strategy that should wag the country studies tail not the other way around.

One of the distinct advantages of the PORS is that it allows us to build capacity on the region within the mainstream social science disciplines which, in many institutions have failed to incorporate the study of the region into their core research agenda. It is essential that the ARC through its social science panel develop a coherent strategy for developing social science research capacity on the Indo-Pacific region. Where such strategies have been implemented it has too often been relegated as an issue for Asian Studies. It is refreshing that AusAID’s recent approach to research on aid governance seems to shift towards the PORS advocated here and this could well be a model for other research funding agencies.

Finally, the PORS allows us to move to more solid partnership-oriented research projects with academic organisations and professional groups within the region. The preferred model here is something like the European consortiums of political

research that bring together political scientists across the region to work on common research problems and themes. Of course, there are invaluable partnerships with Asian institutions through our various centres of country studies, but a PORS provides a coherent rationale for such partnerships across regions. It allows us to contribute to the development of a region-wide research area and potentially allows Australia to act as a hub for social science research. It has the added advantage of removing the whiff of orientalism that underpins the Asian literacy models which have dominated research policy over the last few decades.

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IPGRC Research Mission

A primary focus of our research agenda is on political dynamics of governance and institutional innovations in the provision of public goods and regulation especially as it relates to economic and social development in the region.

This will address issues relating to the organisation of markets and politics, and their effectiveness and fairness in addressing complex economic and social problems. It will also include an examination of the transformations of political organisation and authority at various scales – global, national, and regional – which have a bearing on the complex multilevel governance of the delivery of public goods and regulations.

The centre has a particular focus on the global and regional challenges arising from the shifting tectonic plates of economic and political power to the Indo-Pacific region.