



**Council** for the  
humanities, arts  
& social sciences

# Submission to “Australia in the Asian Century” White Paper

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March 2012

The Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (CHASS) welcomes the government's White Paper on the Asian Century as a timely and significant public consultation. We commend the government's recognition of the growth of our region and the need to redefine our place in this new context.

### **About CHASS**

CHASS is the peak body for the humanities, arts and social sciences (HASS) sector in Australia. CHASS's membership of 90 organisations includes major universities, faculties, professional peaks and arts organisations. CHASS advocates for issues that concern the disciplines it represents and addresses gaps through collaborative forums and workshops including the flagship event HASS on the HILL which is held at Parliament House. CHASS also links the knowledge disciplines it represents to current social policy debates around issues such as the environment, migration, regional matters and the government's innovation agenda.

### **Overview**

In responding to the paper, CHASS confines its comments to the areas that focus on the cultural and social terms of reference, in particular to the ways in which Asia influences the settings of our educational and social structures. In preparing this submission CHASS drew upon the draft submission of its member organisation, the Asia Education Foundation, as well as on input from scholars such as Associate Professor Kalpana Ram (Macquarie University, India Research Centre), Professor Kanishka Jayasuriya (The University of Adelaide) Professor Jacqueline Lo (Australian National University) and Dr Audrey Yue (University of Melbourne). We acknowledge their expert guidance and input into this submission. We would also like to acknowledge the information gathered from "India Studies Workshop" report (referenced later in this submission) kindly provided to us by Professor Ram.

CHASS invites the government to include a strong focus on the cultural and social implications of the Asian Century as part of its consultations. While the Issues Paper does address this area under some of the considerations, the overarching prism of economic benefits sometimes renders the discussions around cultural and social arenas as the means to an end. This will not support the critical aspect of creating a socially inclusive society in Australia that will embrace its necessary repositioning within its regional context.

In the last period, people from China formed the largest group of migrants to Australia followed by people from India as the third largest.<sup>1</sup> The implications of such trends indicate that we need to create a sufficient level of understanding and expertise in Australia of these cultures in the mainstream arena. The numbers of migrants of Asian origin are large enough for many of these groups to be considered part of the mainstream in their own right, particularly if one takes into account demographic distribution factors. The positioning of Asian studies has to be mainstreamed for Australia to build capacity in this area. This is not only important in terms of trading with our region, but more significantly, it helps build an Australian society that enables full participation and knowledge exchange between different cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> "2010-2011 Migration Program Report", Department of Immigration and Citizenship, accessed at <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/statistics/pdf/report-on-migration-program-2010-11.pdf> on 24 February 2012, p.5

The Asian Century in terms of CHASS's area of focus is defined by the following:

- The incorporation of Asian cultures into mainstream Australia, given the numbers of Australians of Asian origin who now call Australia home;
- The need for acquiring knowledge and understanding of the cultures of our region as they grow in significance in terms of trade and strategic interests; and
- The recognition that Australia can learn from the countries in our region, especially as many of them tackle the complexities of multi racial, multi ethnic and multi faith societies.

The last point is an important one for the terms of reference to consider. It is seldom recognised that Australia can have lessons to learn from its Asian neighbours. We currently face unique challenges as our population increases in cultural diversity and our existing institutions and frameworks face fundamental reassessment. Recent public policy debates from countries in the region such as India have produced innovative discussions around theories such as multiculturalism (Gurpreet Mahajan and Partha Chatterjee) which have much to offer to us in terms of facing cultural diversity within the frameworks of social justice. Economist and Nobel Prize winner, Professor Amartya Sen, has written much about legal and human rights frameworks in a culturally diverse society. We have not sufficiently sourced Asian expertise and insights to inform our own responses to the increasing challenges of cultural diversity.

Another area where there could be knowledge sharing is sustainability. According to Dr Yue, "Asia has the world's most and least sustainable practices." She suggests that "Australia can learn from Asia's eco practices on high-density" while at the same time provide Asia with the technology to lead sustainable practices in other areas.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the above, Dr Audrey Yue adds the following points which characterise the Asian region:

- a newly empowered Asian region and population with almost the same access to information as Australia
- continued economic growth that has outpaced the West and Australia
- the rise of eco-cities and issues of sustainability

Dr Yue adds that the region is now characterised by "inter-Asian" networks that do not include the West and Australia. She notes that increasingly cultural trends will include examples such as "Chinese media flows as a global force to surpass Hollywood; inter-Asian cultural consumption and network markets." At the same time, the social trends will include the rise of the consuming capacity of the middle class and "detraditionalisation and retraditionalisation".

Dr Yue writes that Inter Asian flows are distinctive and "while they reflect the global trends of social media use, participation and mobility, the capitals generated by this network has the capacity to by-pass the West and Australia." In her view there is a real danger of Australia becoming sidelined in the region due to prevalent social attitudes in Australia.

The role of the diaspora in Australia and the links with them are important in assisting with an understanding of the complex interplay of the new and the traditional in Asian cultures. Thus, in the policy settings of the Asian Century White Paper, we need to be both outward and inward looking. We need to build relationships with the countries in the regions *and* with the various diasporas from those countries within Australia.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr Audrey Yue emailed notes dated 29 February 2012. All other references in this paper to Dr Yue are to the same notes.

## Asia in Research, Education and Policy

Education is the primary site of knowledge and information dissemination. It thus plays a critical role in laying the foundations of a society that is appropriately equipped with relevant information and skills to deal with the reality of its social and political reality. In discussing the current reality of Australia's regional context, the White Paper raises the question of rapid change in Asian countries, and the importance of being able to understand the direction and sources of shifts occurring there. It also raises the importance of increasing 'cultural literacy' and 'proficiency in Asian languages'.

According to Professor Kalpana Ram, in both of these areas, there has been a long standing absence of leadership in Australia.<sup>3</sup> She notes that it takes time to build up a generation that can teach in these areas, and at present there is not enough resourcing within universities to enhance this capacity. While there are opportunities for seminars and lectures in strategic areas of policy and economics in some institutes, teaching to equip Australians with the skills they need to become 'Asia literate' at a level of reflexive awareness is not adequate.

CHASS supports the submission made by the Asia Education Foundation (AEF) which provides some overarching factors that shape issues of "Asian Literacy" in Australia.<sup>4</sup> AEF has noted that Asian literacy is on the decline at a time when it should be strengthened and enhanced<sup>5</sup>. The key causal factors as identified by the submission and pertaining to schools education are teacher education, availability of quality resources and the lack of a cross curriculum approach to the study of Asia. Content around Asia is a minor component of teacher education. Where Asia is present in the school curricula, it is often presented through the prism of western experience- for example the Vietnam War or fiction written by western writers set in Asia. There also seems to be a perceived need to choose between the countries in the region and thereby ignore some of the others such as Thailand, India and Pakistan.

Professor Jacqueline Lo<sup>6</sup> notes that there is a loss of Asian language expertise at school levels due to a lack of native language experts available to teach. This means that many schools which set out to teach an Asian language end up teaching a "social studies" course about the country rather than a language and culture based one. The commitment to recognition, capacity building and retention of Asian language and cultural expertise at school level is foundational to building expertise and "Asian Literacy".

Professor Kanishka Jayasuriya suggests that the current Asia literacy models which favour a nationalistic approach to studies of the region, may, in practice, create the ghettoisation and marginalisation that currently exist<sup>7</sup>. He proposes a "transnational" and "transdisciplinary" approach to studies of Asia which locates common problems and issues in the region and focuses on regional studies and research in

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<sup>3</sup> Notes from Professor Kalpana Ram for this submission dated 14 February 2012.

<sup>4</sup> "Submission to the Australian Government White Paper Australia in the Asian Century", The Asia Education Foundation, draft 17 February 2012

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p.12

<sup>6</sup> Notes from Professor Jacqueline Lo for this submission dated 24 February 2012

<sup>7</sup> Professor Kanishka Jayasuriya, "Building Australian Research Capacity on Asia: A new Problem Oriented Strategy" Indo-Pacific Governance Research Centre Policy Brief Issue 1 January 2012, The University of Adelaide Indo Pacific Governance Centre

addressing and solving them. His view is that contemporary Australian social policy models would respond better to such an approach. He also identifies social sciences as a way of approaching this transnational model. Such approaches have to be supported by “institutionalising collaboration”<sup>8</sup> and creating strategic and structured responses to regional concerns such as inequality and climate change.

CHASS supports a strong education model with an emphasis on cross curriculum study of Asia and a social sciences focus in research and higher education in addition to studies of culture and languages as the best way to support a holistic understanding of our regional context.

### **Harnessing the knowledge of the diaspora**

Understanding of Asia or “Asian Literacy” in all its nuances can only be fully comprehended by cultivating structured (institutionalised and supported at government policy levels) relationships with the various diasporas in Australia. The government already supports several ethnic advocacy bodies, business councils and the like. However, these networks continue to be narrow and inadequate to understanding the broad range of issues that affect our relationships with our Asian neighbours.

A vital link between Australia and Asia lies in the immigrant communities from Asia that form integral parts of Australian society. They are mentioned in the consultation document and would need to be actively solicited for their inputs into shaping policy. These communities continue to enjoy vital familial and professional networks in their countries of origin, and are very much concerned with the way in which their countries of origin are represented in Australia in media, in education, as well as in policy.

We may extend the importance of the diaspora not only as a source of community engagement and discussion of the document, but it is important to see an explicit discussion of the mediation offered by Asian Australian diasporas in terms of the various concerns of the White Paper: economic ties, cultural exchanges, in offering potential ways of informally educating Australians about Asia. Each of these concerns could make more use of immigrant networks as a bridge – for with the increased possibility and affordability of travel migrants are able to maintain a strong presence both in their country of origin as well as in their country of residence.<sup>9</sup>

Australia has traditionally undervalued the cultural expertise that is available in our own country at government and policy levels. This underselling of the richness of the local cultural diversity disadvantages Australia as a place for new multinational business and trade. In our discussions and policy around innovation we do not mention the innovation that is an outcome of our cultural diversity in terms of government service and policy design, ethnic business models and ethnic entrepreneurship and cross cultural arts.

For example, Asian art and artists have profoundly shaped the evolution of cross and multicultural arts practices in Australia. Taking just the realm of performing arts as illustration for this example, choreographers such as Dr Chandrabhanu and Kai Tai Chan looked at issues of identity and transformation through their artistic practices as early as the eighties. Asian artists have arguably led the way in cross

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Kanishka Jayasuriya, “Building Australian Research Capacity on Asia: A new Problem Oriented Strategy” Indo-Pacific Governance Research Centre Policy Brief Issue 1 January 2012, The University of Adelaide Indo Pacific Governance Centre, p.3

<sup>9</sup> The section above under the sub heading “Harnessing the knowledge of the Diaspora” is content provided by Professor Kalpana Ram.

cultural work in Australia, coming as they did from very codified and disciplined traditions which paralleled classical western forms. In 1994, Australia's eminent choreographer, Meryl Tankard, made "Rasa" for the Adelaide Festival of the Arts which combined contemporary western dance with Indian dance. These experiments are some of the earliest ones internationally where a mainstream artist worked with other cultural forms for a mainstream audience. Currently performing artists such as Yumi Umiuare (<http://yumi.com.au/>) and writers such as Professor Brian Castro have continued to mainstream their cultural influences in their work. Professor Castro's (<http://www.lythruppress.com.au/castro/>) work has spanned both novels and scholarly essays on a range of themes including hybridity and interdisciplinary approaches such as the link between melancholy and creativity.

## Conclusion

Strategies in developing capacity in Australia as we continue in this Asian Century would need to be mindful of "recent shifts in youth cultures and the ways in which new technologies are changing the organization and dissemination of knowledge."<sup>10</sup> Educational approaches that encourage an "immersion"<sup>11</sup> in cultural experiences through study tours and exchange programs with a vocational orientation where there are pathways to professional development and preparation would be best placed to address the needs of the Australian context.

The "India Studies Workshop Report" identified some key ways forward. While the report discusses this specifically in terms of Australia's engagement with India, the same could be applied in the broader context of our engagement with other Asian countries as well. Some of the key recommendations of the report are:

- Narratives around engagement with Asia to reflect the globalised perspective and strategic importance of the countries in our region
- Asian countries to be perceived as a "distributed concept"<sup>12</sup> that includes the diasporas
- Acknowledgment of student interests as "differentiated across undergraduate, post graduate and research levels"<sup>13</sup>
- Online and dual mode programs made available to create accessibility and reach
- Multi-disciplinary approach

Dr Audrey Yue suggested that there be a "committee of stakeholders" formed at the federal level which included community leaders, to "initiate and co-ordinate the promotion of this conversation and steer policy directions."

It would seem that the way forward is a to strongly acknowledge Australia's positioning in the Asian region and to be proactive in engaging with countries in the region through knowledge exchange and strategic partnerships based on contemporary understanding of the social, cultural and political narratives of our regional neighbours in addition to the economic ones.

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<sup>10</sup> "India Studies Workshop" Report, Australia India Institute, 28 October 2011, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid p.3.

CHASS thanks the government for the opportunity to provide feedback and looks forward to working towards an enhanced capacity in Australia to engage with the Asian Century.

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