

Lowy Institute for International Policy

Thai Studies in Australia

Final Report

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Introduction

1. The Australia-Thailand Institute (ATI) has commissioned the Lowy Institute to assess the progress and viability of the National Thai Studies Centre at the Australian National University, and more broadly, the viability of the ATI funding research, teaching and outreach designed to build Australians' awareness of and interest in Thailand.

2. The Lowy Institute has conducted research on the state of public awareness of and engagement with Thailand, the state of Thai studies in Australia, the viability of publicly-funded research, teaching and outreach designed to build Australians' awareness of and interest in Thailand, and the possible strategies for most effectively building Australians' awareness of and interest in Thailand using ATI funds.

3. The research has occurred in four stages:

(a) A public opinion survey designed to gauge the extent and nature of public interest in and knowledge of Thailand;

(b) A comprehensive review of the curricula of Australian universities and research institutions with the aim of determining the extent of expertise on Thailand; and the conduct of research and teaching on Thailand, its language, politics, society, history and culture;

(c) Detailed correspondence and conversations with experts in Thai studies in Australia, including a questionnaire designed to gauge reactions to a standard set of questions about the impressions of Thai studies in Australia; and

(d) Correspondence and conversations with other stakeholders such as government officials, members of the Australia-Thailand Institute, university leaders and journalists.

4. An Interim report was requested by the Australia-Thailand Institute for consideration at its 24 June meeting, and was supplied on 23 June 2010. This final report draws heavily on the arguments made and the data gathered over a two-month research period. No respondents are directly quoted in the report, because all were spoken to on the guarantee that they would not be quoted directly.

Australians' Interest in and Knowledge of Thailand

5. The data and opinions collected strongly support the conclusion that Australians are in general well-disposed to Thailand and are broadly interested in at least some aspects of the country and its culture.

6. Lowy Institute polling of Australians' opinions on the world since 2005 reveals that Thailand is well regarded among Asian countries by Australians. On a 1 to 100 scale (where 1 is not positive and 100 is very positive), Australians scored Thailand at 59, surpassed only by Japan at 66 and Singapore at 64, but ahead of Vietnam (60), Malaysia (58), India (56), China (53), South Korea (53) and Indonesia (49).

7. A recent study of AFG Venture Group, however, points to some worrying trends. The study's survey of Asian focused business people in late 2009 found a marked and unidirectional decline of "long term attractiveness" of Thailand, which it attributed to the political turmoil in the country. The study also showed a marked rise in disillusion with the Thailand-Australia Free Trade Agreement's ability to deliver substantive economic gains.¹

8. Most interest and knowledge of the country is associated with a direct experience – most often in the form of a tourist visit. Other niche interests that often build into a broader interest in Thailand include food/cooking, Buddhism, martial arts, and massage. Independent polling on public interest in Thailand commissioned for this study shows clearly where the interests and experiences of Australians lie. Asked what attributes they most strongly associate with Thailand, the highest number nominated holidays and beaches (54%), Buddhism (42%) and friendly people (43%).

9. When asked what aspects of Thailand they were most interested in knowing more about, most nominated Thai cooking (72%; with 31% very interested and 41% somewhat interested), followed by the Thai people (61%), Thai culture (60%); Thai tourism (52%) and Thai history (45%). The weakest interest was in Thai sports (16%), the Thai economy (19%) and Thai politics (19%). There was some interest (24%) in learning the Thai language.

10. The broadness of this interest, however, is not matched by any depth of understanding or particular curiosity about Thailand's language, society, culture or history. One Thai expert characterized most Australians' knowledge as "dinner party conversation level", heavily subject to prejudices and parochialism.

11. In contrast to some other Asian countries, therefore, Thailand grabs most Australians at an experiential, not an intellectual level. It is a level of interest that is affectionate and anecdotal (in the words of one interlocutor, "bars, beaches and bargains") rather than couched in a broader framework of strategic, economic or cultural significance to Australia.

12. There are at least three possible reasons for this experiential rather than intellectual level of interest:

¹ Glen Robinson, "Asian Perceptions", AFG Venture Group, December 2009

(a) Thailand has little or no visibility in the high school curriculum in both teaching materials and instruction. Asian elements in the school curriculum tend to follow Australians' general interest in the larger Asian countries and cultures, and there are no significant historical episodes (apart from the occasional mention of Japanese PoW camps, marches and projects) in which Australia and Thailand significantly intersect. There is thus little essential grounding for an intellectual interest.

(b) Thailand suffers from a tendency to group Southeast Asia as an homogeneous whole – and as a consequence, not to think about it too deeply. One Thai expert argued that there is a reluctance to question or analyse the problematic aspects of Southeast Asian countries' fragile and semi-authoritarian political systems which leads to a complacency and lack of interest – and ultimately to stereotypes and prejudices.

(c) Thailand may have been too successful in promoting itself as a good holiday destination, with the consequence that Australians are less likely to take it seriously as an economic or strategic actor in its own right.

13. Several experts warned that we should not take Australians' broadly warm feelings towards Thailand for granted. The recent political turmoil in Bangkok has the potential to affect public perceptions towards a tendency to include Thailand in the category of "dangerous Asian countries". Such perceptions have had serious impacts on student interest in Indonesia and to a lesser extent Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

Provision of Research and Teaching Resources

14. Research expertise in Australia on Thailand is very limited. With a broad definition of expertise (Thai language proficiency for example was not one of our criteria) we were able to count 34 scholars with an interest in Thailand. The vast majority of these are involved in Thailand out of a disciplinary interest (epidemiology, water management, archaeology etc) rather than out of a primary interest in Thailand itself.

15. Nearly half (13) of these scholars are concentrated at the Australian National University in Canberra. The rest are scattered among other universities in Australia; the next highest concentration is the University of Sydney with 4.

16. The only university that offers a Thai studies major within its Asian Studies undergraduate degree is the ANU. The ANU teaches six courses on history, frontiers, human rights, economics, and cultural studies that have substantial components on Thailand, plus a full Thai language program, including honours. It includes a “Year in Thailand” option, which allows students to study in a Thai University for 12 months. It is unusual for undergraduates to go on to Honours level in Thai studies at the ANU. There are no Masters programs in Thai studies at ANU and 15 PhD students undertaking Thailand-related research.

17. The ANU is the only university that offers a full set of Thai language courses. Its full-time Thai language teaching staff has reduced from 4 in 1990 to 1 now due to a decline in demand. There is some evidence that Thai language courses are not attractive to students from non-Thai speaking backgrounds without a professional reason for language study, because of the perception that they will do less well than students from Thai-speaking backgrounds.

18. Other Universities focus on Thailand as part of broader Southeast Asian studies courses. Australia’s premier political science specialist on Thailand told me that he has been unable to convince his colleagues of the value of a specific course on Thai politics, even in the context of the current turmoil. Another Thai studies specialist argued that there is a pervasive prejudice against teaching single-country courses on what are thought to be Asian states of “lesser importance” and in favour of addressing them through broader “omnibus” courses. There is a common logic, over several decades, for the disciplines (history, politics, economics etc) to swallow Asian Studies sub-disciplines of all but the “big three” Asian studies sub-disciplines (Japanese, Chinese and Indonesian).

19. Thai studies in Australian universities has succumbed to a pervasive “market logic” that the post-Dawkins reforms have embedded in the Australian tertiary sector. The logic behind the allocation of resources has been overwhelmingly shaped by student demand, resulting in underinvestment in and rationalisation of resource intensive, niche specialties. Australia’s expertise on Thailand is aging or being lured away to Asian and North American universities.

The National Thai Studies Centre

20. The NTSC is funded by the ANU to the tune of nearly \$15,000 per year. It receives small annual grants from the Royal Thai Embassy in Canberra. Both the Executive Director and the Deputy Director are honorary positions, and both incumbents have full-time roles elsewhere in the University. The NTSC has no ongoing administrative staff.

21. The objectives of the NTSC are to “promote the study of Thailand in all academic disciplines, Thai language instruction, and public awareness of Thailand [and to] support linkages with Thailand in a broad range of fields, including education, culture, public administration and business.”

22. The NTSC lists its strategies as follows:

- Support the study of Thai political, economic, social and cultural issues, at universities and schools in Australia
- Support the teaching of the Thai language in Australia, including by production of teaching materials for this purpose, and supporting continued acquisitions for the outstanding Thai holdings at the Australian National Library and ANU’s Menzies library
- Hold regular seminars and an annual or biennial Update Conference on contemporary Thai issues, featuring experts from both Thailand and Australia
- Act as a contact point for requests from the media and other sections of the community for expert opinion and information on Thailand
- Establish a national database of educators, students, officials, private sector representatives and members of the Australian public who are interested in Thailand, and keep in regular email contact with them about relevant activities
- Initiate and foster links between relevant institutions and organisations in Australia – particularly the Australia-Thailand Institute – and others (universities and research institutes) in Thailand
- Maintain a website that provides information on activities related to Thailand in Australia, contemporary developments in Thailand, and useful linkages.

23. There is very little awareness of the NTSC outside of the community of Thai studies specialists, and a wide variety of opinions on it from within the Thai studies community.

24. Some specialists are very positive about the role and performance of the NTSC, believing it to have a clear mandate and set of objectives and a vigorous approach to meeting these. There is strong belief in the value of its regular Thailand updates and a general acknowledgement that without the NTSC, there would be no natural “centre” of Thai studies, able to co-ordinate among government, business and academic interests.

25. Supporters of the NTSC are unanimous that it is under-resourced as an institution, and that it could achieve a great deal more if properly funded. One respondent remarked that the NTSC suffered from the legacy of the great hopes and expectations that had attended its early years, and was destined to disappoint these expectations as its funding base declined.

26. On the other hand, there are quite a few critics of the NTSC among the community of Thai specialists. Some of this seems to be the product of the rivalries that are so common within academia. But there are some serious criticisms which tend to recur among the institution's critics.

27. One common complaint is that the NTSC is not a national institution, being located within Canberra and the ANU. This draws on a tension common to many of the ANU's "national" centers, which have to at the same time try to function as national institutions while being expected to be part of "team ANU" by internal interests. Many Thai scholars complained that the NTSC makes little attempt to reach outside of Canberra, and several suggested that the NTSC should be located in one of the major population centers: Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane.

28. Another set of respondents argued that the NTSC's two objectives – to promote Thai studies nationally and to function as a centre of Thai research – were incompatible, particularly for a centre located at the ANU. There was a strong argument from within the ANU that it was no longer an objective of the NTSC to be a national promoter of interest in Thailand (despite this being clearly listed as an objective on the NTSC website).

29. Some Thai specialists were critical of the NTSC's leadership over many years, arguing that it is a shell of an institution, with little vision or dynamism for the future other than keeping the shop-front upright. One respondent compared its role in promoting interest in Thailand unfavourably in comparison to AsiaLink.

30. Senior academic leaders within the ANU were careful to separate the NTSC from the ANU's interest and commitment to investing in Thai studies. One remarked that "the NTSC is neither the repository of all of the ANU's Thailand expertise; nor does the ANU channel its resourcing of Thai studies through the NTSC". It was made very clear that the ANU is committed to Thai studies in the long term irrespective of the NTSC's fate.

31. Several interlocutors raised concerns about the NTSC's growing relationship with the Royal Thai Embassy in Canberra, particularly in the past 4 years, as the Embassy has increasingly used the NTSC as vehicle for Thai government organised public relations events. One respondent observed that even before political tensions in Thailand bought some of these issues to a head, there was discomfort among some Board members that government and business interests compromised the academic independence of the NTSC. In his opinion, there is a significant reputational risk for Thai studies in Australia if an umbrella entity such as NTSC is seen as limiting full and frank discussion.

32. Several commentators argued that the NTSC faces the same malaise that confronts Asian studies in general in Australia. They argued that the NTSC arose in the wake of

Australia's profound "awakening" to the new Asia embodied in the FitzGerald, Ingleson and Garnaut Reports of the 1980s, which imbued it in its early years with a sense of national mission and purpose. That sense of purpose has dissipated over time with a greater questioning of the importance of Asia for Australia, while Asian studies in general has been dispirited by a slackening of student demand and the gradual withdrawal of resources and non-renewal of specialist expertise. The conclusion of these commentators was that Australia as a society needs to re-examine its relationship to Asia and renew its sense of purpose in engaging with the region – and that the best prospects of a renewal of purpose for a Thai studies centre lies in the context of a broader national renewal of purpose on Asia.

The Role of the ATI

33. This study did not set out to gauge views on the ATI, and asked no questions that related to the ATI or its role. Nevertheless it was remarkable how many Thai specialists offered views on the ATI and its role unprompted. Although it falls outside of the agreed terms of reference, this section covers a summary of the view expressed, out of an expectation that the ATI will be interested in such perceptions.

34. Views on the ATI among Thai specialists seem to be strongly felt, but are as divided as views on the NTSC. Some Thai specialists are very positive about the role played by the ATI in funding innovative programs of outreach and research.

35. Others are less complimentary, and many are willing to speak for the entire Thai studies community in saying that the ATI does not enjoy a good reputation among academics (despite a good number of specialists saying positive things about the ATI). Several questioned the role of the ATI, describing it as a “second-track” booster of Australia-Thailand relations rather than an entity truly committed to supporting scholarly excellence in Thai studies.

Options for Investing in Thai Studies

36. Public investment in Thai studies in Australia confronts a basic strategic choice:
- (a) whether to promote broader and more sustained public interest and knowledge of Thailand; or
 - (b) whether to concentrate funding towards building and sustaining a world-class centre of expertise on China within one or more of Australia's universities.
37. Option (a) contains further questions, including whether it is possible to promote public interest and knowledge with necessarily limited funds, and where such funds can best be directed (to schools? Thai institutes? Media?). A choice in this direction would be based on the judgment that broad public engagement with Australia's region is an overriding national interest. It would also need to confront the issue raised in 12(b) above – the general tendency in Australia to generalize about and overlook Southeast Asia.
38. Option (b) on the other hand would be based on the conviction that more important than broad public engagement is a capacity to project an Australian perspective on Asia into global debates – and an assumption that Australian perspectives on Asia are different from, and can therefore enrich, European, North American and Asian perspectives on Asia. This option would need to be based on a positive vision of Thai expertise – a vision of growth and dynamism in the Australia-Thailand relationship – rather than a negative vision - the need to maintain a basic structure of Thai expertise that could be used for advice when things go wrong in Thailand.
39. There are several rationales for investing in Thai expertise in Australia. Perhaps the most compelling is the steady decline in genuine Thai studies expertise in this country. Even more alarming is that at least four recent junior appointments to Southeast Asian studies courses at different Australian universities were filled by American graduates – a worrying sign that this country is not producing enough PhD graduates to satisfy the meager demand that does exist.
40. One respondent argued strongly that a vibrant and diverse community of Thailand scholars is necessary particularly as Thailand enters a period of internal unrest and insularity. Several commentators remarked that a worrying cycle has developed, whereby unrest in Thailand leads to external analysis and critique, which leads to Thai interests accusing those who criticize Thailand as having an anti-Thai agenda, which then leads to further criticism of Thailand, and so on. The problem with the small number of Thai-speaking specialists, one respondent argued, was that the Australian media is limited to a very narrow range of views on events in Thailand, which in turn has a powerful effect on shaping public perceptions. A broader range of views, she argued, would lead to a much more nuanced view of developments in Thailand.
41. If the decision is taken to invest in Thailand expertise in Australia, a further decision needs to be made about how concentrated such expertise should be. Currently there is a clear center of gravity focused on the ANU, with a scattering of expertise elsewhere in the country, but with no essential connection among the

scholars. The role of constructing and maintaining a community of scholars is clearly not being played by the NTSC.

42. One possible option, given ANU's stated strategic intent to continue to invest in Thailand expertise, is to invest in building another center of Thailand expertise, in Sydney, Melbourne or Brisbane. This would solve the problem of the "disconnection" that some Thai specialists felt existed by the location of ANU expertise and the weight of population with an interest in Thailand. Such expertise need not be housed within a university, where it may be subject to the prevailing pressures to focus more broadly on regional studies, but could be housed within a non-university research institution.

43. There is a further decision to be made about whether public investment can most effectively be used to strengthen and rejuvenate existing infrastructure of Thai studies, or whether the Thai studies strategy needs to be rethought afresh. Thai specialists were divided on this question. Several argued strongly that the NTSC needs to be reconstituted, beginning with a genuine conversation among all of Australia's Thai specialists.

44. Several interlocutors argued that the internet has eroded the NTSC's broader information function, by making material on Thailand available to anyone who is interested. This returns the focus to the question of whether investment in Thai studies can be effectively used to broaden public interest in Thailand beyond the current "experiential" engagement. The new media, with its capacity to construct communities of interest and connect users to vast domains of information, has the capacity to provide vital support to a community interest campaign.

45. As an example, many Thai specialists referred to the ANU's "New Mandala" website, which provides analysis of contemporary events in Thailand and Southeast Asia. Since its establishment in 2006, New Mandala has published more than 2500 posts, and has received about 25,000 reader comments. Over the past year New Mandala has averaged around 2000 hits per day. This spiked considerably during the recent Thai crisis with many days around 10,000 reads, several above 20,000 and one above 30,000. It is regularly used by the public and the media, in Australia and abroad, and is a highly effective disseminator of high quality analysis on Thailand.

46. Another innovative use of the new media to promote knowledge is the ANU's use of Youtube. This year, the ANU Youtube channel, in conjunction with New Mandala, began producing a series of videos on "Thailand in Crisis." These have attracted thousands of viewers and have lifted the ANU channel to close to the top of Youtube's Education Page. Investment in public engagement could realistically leverage the new media to gain maximum impact from the new media.

47. A further question arises in relation to the investment being made by the Thai government in Thai studies in Australia. In view of the concerns raised in (31) above, there may need to be a strategy oriented towards directing Thai government funding towards broadening public engagement and interest, while Australian public funds are concentrated towards building research capacity.

Conclusions

48. In summary, there would seem to be a threshold level of public interest in Thailand that is poorly matched by either deeper knowledge or the infrastructure needed to provide that deeper knowledge.

49. There is also a strong national interest in maintaining and further developing Australia's expertise on a pivotal country in Australia's region, which is likely to experience internal instability for some years.

50. The current state of Thai studies in Australia's universities points to a gradual decline in Thai expertise, even at the traditional center of Thai studies, the ANU. This is partly the result of the shrinking of funding due to slowing student interest; a general prejudice against country-based courses in favour of comparative or regional courses; and a general atmosphere of demoralization among Thai specialists (best summed up in the almost universal judgement that Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian are monopolizing Asian studies).

51. There is great disagreement over the role of the NTSC, with the majority of Thai specialists of the opinion that it no longer functions as a national center, that it no longer contains much Thailand expertise, and that it only sporadically fulfils its public information function. There is almost universal agreement that without further funding it will continue to decline.

52. Given these conditions, there would seem to be a good prospect that public funding can be used profitably to shore up and rebuild Thai studies in Australia. There is a basic choice to be made between the agendas of broadening public interest and deepening expertise, but this need not be an exclusive choice. In both tasks, public funding can be leveraged with existing commitments to positive ends. For example, the ANU's commitment to maintaining Thai studies could be either supported at the ANU, or complemented by investing in Thai studies expertise elsewhere. Or public funding could be combined with the new media and funding from the Thai government to broaden public engagement with Thailand.

APPENDIX 1: SPECIALISTS CONSULTED*

Tamerlaine Beasley, Beasley Intercultural

Michael Connors, Latrobe University

James Coughlan, James Cook University

Anthony Diller, Australian National University

Lindsay Falvey, University of Melbourne

John Funston, Australian National University

Cavan Hogue, Macquarie University

Peter Jackson, Australian National University

Chris Lyttleton, Macquarie University

Andrew MacIntyre, Australian National University

Surin Maisrikrod, James Cook University

Craig Reynolds, Australian National University

Glen Robinson, AFG Venture Group

Chintana Sandilands, Australian National University

Adrian Sleigh, Australian National University

Nicholas Tapp, Australian National University

Carl Trocki, Queensland University of Technology

Andrew Walker, Australian National University

Peter Warr, National Thai Studies Center

*Another 10 stakeholders were approached but declined to be involved or listed among the respondents.