

Australian Studies in Malaysia: Why there is none, yet

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This short paper will explain why Australian Studies is not offered in Malaysia despite the strong and long bilateral relationship between Australia and Malaysia. It will also offer some suggestions on how Australian Studies can be offered in Malaysia. The first part of this paper covers the historical and contemporary links between the two countries and the second part of the paper looks at the system of higher education in Malaysia. The final part will attempt to answer the question why there is no Australian Studies in Malaysia.

Australia-Malaysia Relations

Australia’s formal relationship with Malaysia goes back to more than seventy years, even before the Federation of Malaysia came into being in 1963. In some ways the links were natural, given that both Australia and Malaya were former British colonies and adopted a British style of government and institutions. Australian troops played a role in the defense of Malaya during the Japanese attack in 1941 and Australian played a key role during the first few years after the Second World War. Australian troops were on hand in Malaya to help with the Emergency and *Konfrontasi*¹⁾ in the first decade of Malaysia’s independence. The close links between Canberra and Kuala Lumpur can be seen by Australia’s (and UK) sponsorship of Malaya to be a United Nations member state in 1957, and an Australian judge, Sir William McKell, helped draft the independent Malayan constitution.

Since independence, relations between Australia and Malaysia have been steady except for the period under Dr Mahathir Mohammad (1981–2003). During this period, the relations were cordial but not warm. Dr Mahathir was unhappy with Australian criticism on governance issues.²⁾

- 1) The Malayan Emergency was a guerrilla war fought between Commonwealth armed forces and the Malayan Communist Party (MCP), from 1948 to 1960. *Konfrontasi* was a policy of confrontation by Indonesia from 1963 to 1966, in opposition to the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963. While there was no all-out war, there were numerous raids by Indonesian volunteers on targets within Malaysia.
- 2) John Funston, Australia-Malaysia relations, *New Mandala*, 24 June 2013 (<http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/> ↗)

Present-day ties between the two countries can be easily summarized into three key areas: Security; Education, Migration & Tourism and; Economy and Trade.

There is close security cooperation between Australia and Malaysia. The formal security pact was inked in 1971, and is called the Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA). The FPDA members are the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore, and binds the five states to help each other in the event of external aggression or threat of attack against Peninsular Malaysia or Singapore.³⁾ Under the FPDA, Australia maintains a small air-force contingent in Butterworth Penang and holds regular military exercises with Malaysia. There is also an Australian Federal Police (AFP) personnel based in Kuala Lumpur to coordinate police cooperation between the two countries. The two countries have also signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) on issues such as Combating Transnational Crime and Developing Police Cooperation and Maritime Security.

The close people-to-people links can easily be seen in the areas of education, migration and tourism. Malaysia was one of the first countries to benefit from the Colombo Plan. The Colombo Plan brought thousands of young Malaysians to Australia to study at post-secondary level during the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these Malaysian Australian graduates went back to Malaysia and played a key role in Malaysia's development. From the 1970s onwards, thousands of Malaysians have studied in Australian universities as private fee-paying students. Malaysian students formed one of the largest groups among international students in Australia. From 1980s onwards, "twinning programmes" with Australian universities became very popular in Malaysia and the first full branch of an Australian University in Malaysia was established in 1998. Within a decade, Monash University was followed by Curtin University and Swinburne University of Technology in setting up branch campuses in Malaysia. It has been estimated that close to 300,000 Malaysians have undertaken courses in Australia.

In 2010, 135,610 Malaysian-born people were living in Australia as citizens or Permanent Residents.⁴⁾ In 2012, there were 262,700 visitors to Australia from Malaysia making it Australia's 7th-largest inbound market for visitor arrivals.⁵⁾ There is also a "Work and Holiday" programme for young Malaysians (18–30 years old) to spend up to 12 months in Australia.

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3) Ian Storey, Ralf Emmers, and Daljit Singh (eds.) *Five Power Defence Arrangements at Forty* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2011).

4) Community Information Summary factsheet on Malaysia-born, Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2012.

5) Tourism Australia, Fact Sheet, 2013.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the contemporary relationship is the economic and trade relations. Malaysia is Australia's 3rd-largest trading partner in ASEAN and 10th-largest partner overall and Australia is Malaysia 9th-largest trading partner. In 2012, Malaysian investment in Australia was worth about AUD\$14.9 billion, and Australian investment in Malaysia at AUD\$7.9 billion. The strong trade relations lead to the signing of a Malaysia-Australia Free Trade Agreement (MAFTA) on 22 May 2012.⁶⁾

The Higher Education Sector in Malaysia

The higher education sector in Malaysia expanded dramatically in the past two decades. There are currently three different types of tertiary institutions in Malaysia: Public, Private and Branch Campus of foreign universities. There are 21 public universities, 43 private universities (and university colleges which offer degrees) and 9 branch campuses.⁷⁾ The nine foreign universities are: Curtin University of Technology; Heriot-Watt University; Monash University; Newcastle University; Swinburne University of Technology; University of Nottingham; University Of Southampton; University of Reading and Manipal University. Three of the nine comes from Australia. There are about 100,000 foreign students studying in Malaysia and the government is aiming for Malaysia to be an "education hub". There are about 580,000 students taking their first undergraduate degree, Masters degree and PhDs in Malaysia.

Australian Studies

Despite the large number of tertiary institutions in Malaysia and the presence of three Australian branch campuses in Malaysia, there is no institution offering Australian Studies in Malaysia. There are three main reasons for this.

First, the Malaysian government, like many governments in developing countries, places emphasis on science and technology (S & T) rather than the arts and humanities. In fact, it is official government policy to favour S&T given that Malaysia is aiming to be an economically developed country by 2020. Hence subjects such as Australian Studies are a low priority.

Second, there is no interest from the Australian government to support Australian Studies in Malaysia at the present moment. The Australian government is more likely to support initiatives via the Australia-Malaysia Institute (AMI) (more later). Third, and perhaps the most important reason,

6) Malaysia-Australia Free Trade Agreement (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/fta/mafta/>)

7) Data from Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education.

there is a strong belief that there is no 'market' for Australian Studies in Malaysia. The conventional wisdom is that Malaysians know Australia well (given the number of tourists, graduates, trade ties, etc.) and thus, there will not be any takers for Australian Studies even if it is offered in a Malaysian university.

The absence of Australian Studies is also reflected in research on Australia. At present although there are many research institutes in Malaysia, none covers the Australasian region. The closest is Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON) based at National University of Malaysia (UKM). Under IKON, there are four research centres -each devoted to a region, namely- Centre for American Studies, Centre for Latin American Studies, Centre for European Studies and Centre for Oceanic Studies. Australian Studies will probably fall in the last centre.

The four government-named "research" universities- Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)- all have research centres devoted to international studies/affairs but none has ever undertaken any major research project related to Australia other than from the foreign policy perspectives, i.e., Australia-Malaysia relations and Australia-ASEAN relations.

The closest "research centre" that promotes the study of Australia from Malaysia is probably the Australia-Malaysia Institute (AMI).⁸⁾ According to its official website:

The Australia-Malaysia Institute was established in 2005 to strengthen people-to-people and institutional links with Malaysia and to deepen mutual understanding and cooperation between Australia and Malaysia.

The AMI is a wholly Australian initiative and is funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The Institute works with institutions and individuals in Australia and Malaysia to achieve its objectives. The Institute also seeks to enter into strategic alliances with possible sponsors and partners to enhance its programs. The Australia-Malaysia Institute is presided over by a Board appointed by the [Australian] Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The Institute is supported by a Secretariat which is located in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Canberra.

One of the areas under AMI is to provide funding for "*Promote cooperation between individuals and institutions in Australia and Malaysia which enhance learning, teaching and research in areas*

8) <https://www.dfat.gov.au/ami/>

of mutual interest and shared dilemmas.” However, it is probably more interested in funding institutional research projects rather than individual research projects. The AMI has supported academic conferences in the past, such as Australia-Malaysia ties, but rarely supports individual research projects unless the research project is of particular significance to both countries.

Suggestions and Possible Solutions

The easiest way to establish Australian Studies in Malaysia is the establishment of a Chair in Australian Studies. A centre for Australian Studies is probably too ambitious at the present time. A Chair of Australian Studies can be quite easily established if there is political and financial support from the Australian government and Australian businesses in Malaysia. The Malaysia-Australia Business Council in Kuala Lumpur and its counterpart, the Australia-Malaysia Business Council in Australia, have large companies who would be willing to give seed-funding if there is political support from both the Australian and Malaysian governments. The strong Alumni network in Malaysia, The Malaysian Australian Alumni Council (The MAAC),⁹⁾ is also a potential source of funding and support. The BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University is a good example of private sector money combined with support from Australian universities and the Australian government.¹⁰⁾

Another option is for the Australian government to support a lectureship in Australian Studies at a Malaysian university. This will be less costly if it simply involves the appointment of an existing Australian academic for a fixed-term contract to teach Australian studies in Malaysia. The Malaysian university would cover the local expenses while the Australian side will cover the salary. This is probably the most viable option in the near term. There are many universities in Australia who would be happy to grant leave to their staff to teach in Malaysia while there are many public universities in Malaysia who would welcome an Australian academic at minimum cost. This is the oldest form of academic exchange.

Another possibility is for the Malaysian government to establish some form of Australian Studies in their public university system. This is a remote possibility but may come true if the Malaysian government thinks there is a need to understand Australia at a deeper level.

In summary, for Australia Studies to be established in Malaysia, there must be political will from

9) <http://www.emaac.org/>

10) <http://www.fasic.org.au/index.php/home/chair>

Canberra, or from Kuala Lumpur. Without strong and consistent political support, it is doubtful that Australian Studies can be established in Malaysia.