

## **Graduate Students and Professors: Who innovates; who conserves?**

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Academic teaching is always a transaction between generations -- the cutting edge of change, one might think. Yet universities remain among the most conservative of our institutions, relying a great deal on their legitimating function rather than innovation in their handling of new knowledge. At their worst (and this is a temptation all of us have felt, I suspect), academics appear more interested in reproducing themselves in a new generation, ensuring that a particular kind of approach continues, than in responding to the extraordinary changes of the times. To some extent the process by which graduate students are recruited from around the world reinforces that tendency. The graduate student or his advisor on the other side of the world is likely to be attracted to work that the potential supervisor did 10 years earlier, in time to be published and cycled into teaching. In my case work of the 1960s attracted students from Japan and elsewhere in the 1970s and eighties; work on the revolutionary 1940s done in the 1970s attracted students in the 1980s. Only in the 1990s did I get a couple of students working on early modern Southeast Asia (Jane Drakard and Ruurdje Laarhoven) which I had already been working on for nearly 20 years. Whereas undergraduate teaching often forces one into new areas, there is a tendency for graduate teaching to pull one back.

These thoughts will reflect on the relation between graduate students and their teachers on the basis of personal experience rather than theory. I apologise if these thoughts are not fully developed. The last weeks were dominated by the biggest move of my life, back to Australia after ten years away, punctuated by a multitude of farewell presentations in Singapore. Indeed that transition of last weekend is

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seems to impose a dominating question about transmissions - what effect does it have to shift one's gaze as a Southeast Asianist from 'this region' one is part of (which therefore needs no justification, only the author does as an outsider to it) to 'that region', to some extent exotic and always contesting its place in the syllabus?

In a globalising world, what is the role of the SE Asian "expert" in teaching graduate students. Is it to reproduce ourselves, by training Australians or some other outsiders looking for academic jobs in our home countries to teach about SE Asia? Is it to train SE Asians in English language and western methodologies for understanding their own societies? Or rather to act as some kind of global mediators, helping Southeast Asians better understand the world and vice versa.

I am not really up to speed with the overall pattern of change in Australia, and will primarily speak in terms of personal experience. But even a little work on the web yesterday (June 09) shows an astonishing increase in overseas students in Australia over the past 4 years, with India soaring to the top of the charts (with a 4-fold increase in those 4 years), and Nepal and Brazil also increasing remarkably, to higher levels than the historic 'neighbourly' sources in Indonesia and Thailand. The increases must be highest at the Masters level, with 53% of Masters enrolments last year comprising Overseas Students. PhD study is not doing so well. Only 19% of Ph.D starts was an Overseas student, while according to Ian Chubb "the number of Australian students starting higher degrees by research fell by 30% from 1995 to 2006".<sup>1</sup> Overall, it looks as though the trends show a huge internationalization of education, with graduate study in particular seen as a means to go overseas (Australians foremost among them) looking for the most marketable graduate degrees. The thesis-only Ph.D. study of the European or traditional Australian type may be in a kind of crisis, with many of those who went through it in the post-Dawkins expansion of graduate education in Australia not finding it the right kind of meal ticket. Instead, the top global

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<sup>1</sup> Group of Eight Press Release,  
[http://www.go8.edu.au/storage/news/media\\_releases/2007/Go8\\_election\\_statement\\_on\\_research\\_training091107.pdf](http://www.go8.edu.au/storage/news/media_releases/2007/Go8_election_statement_on_research_training091107.pdf)

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universities, mostly in the US, become the places of choice for ambitious wannabee academics.

Let me put in that global context my own experience as a supervisor of Ph.D. students over 40 years. I can play that like an AFL match with 4 quarters, each decade covering about 8 students (all cherished as individuals, and many of them wonderful creative intellectuals and teachers as well as friends). The most striking trends:

- Gender: incredibly as I look back, my first 14 students through 1970s and most of the 1980s were all male; but finally by the last decade a majority female (5/3).
- Malaysia/Singapore students prominent in first 2 quarters (2 + 2), but not thereafter.
- Japanese have been consistent, one each decade.
- Australians were also fairly consistent as long as I was in Australia, rising to half the total (4/8) in the 1990s, but with fewer heading for the academic high road. There were more mature students and interesting strugglers.
- Indonesian students (and indeed other Southeast Asians outside English-educated Malaysia/Singapore) are poorly represented in my little sample of 32. Only two Indonesians went through to a successful Ph.D., though there were plenty of others in other kinds of programs. The thesis-only approach Australia favoured seemed completely unsuitable for students straight from Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand.
- US students were always there (and I note are today the fourth-highest source of foreign students in Australia today), and dominate in the last decade (UCLA), though no Singaporeans in Singapore. Singapore has internationalised more fully and successfully than any country I know well, giving scholarships tactically to foreigners in the knowledge that many of them will stay after Ph.D. or after a spell away as post-docs. Probably 80-90% foreign Ph.D. students.

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In the 1990s it seemed clear that the lack of scholarships for international students was already making it rather pointless to boast that we were the world's best place for Southeast Asian studies. The best Australians naturally wanted to go abroad for their PhD, like the Singaporeans, and there was no system for bringing international students here on any scale.

During my time at ANU I did encourage a masters by coursework in Southeast Asian studies, and encouraged all students (especially those from non-English language backgrounds) to do the courses even if it was not in their contract as a PhD student. Australia has been evolving away from the one-on-one Germanic type of thesis-only Ph.D., but I believe not quickly enough.

Two factors have become critical:

**1. Globalisation**, especially of communication and of education. People have always travelled to study, but there was indeed a kind of national phase in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when these pilgrimages became largely national (or in the British Commonwealth, imperial, to Oxford and Cambridge). Now it is possible, desirable, and manifestly beneficial for everybody's career that they should move transnationally for graduate study, especially to an English speaking system if not in one already. People are doing this on a massive scale, partly to become more internationally marketable in general, but also to learn something specific in well-credentialed coursework programs.

**2. Competition** is also critical. UCLA and NUS, where I spent the last 10 years, proved good places to observe this phenomenon, at national and international levels respectively. The ARC and Canberra's whole competitive funding apparatus makes it also very familiar. Here the point I want to make, that policy-makers can radically reshape the academic scene by dangling quite a modest amount of competitive funding before us. It is less the money itself that makes us jump than the competitive measurement that goes with it, making it possible to construct rankings of universities and programs, however inappropriately. These reinforce themselves in a vicious circle. U.S. Universities (and NUS) only want to hire from the

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best-ranked graduate schools, and ambitious students therefore only want to go to these schools. The older pattern was of status, whereby Oxford in the British world, Harvard and Princeton in the US, and Tokyo University in Japan, extend their patronage networks throughout the system. The new US-style competitiveness is an improvement over that hierarchy in allowing for change. In our Area Studies fields, the Title VI mechanism competitively defined the 'National Resource Centres' in each area (usually 6 in Southeast Asian Studies), and even though the money that came with that was limited, the status of a national top centre was infinitely precious. More generally, a university like UCLA no longer just hired from Harvard or Princeton; each department knew very well what the national ranking was in each discipline, and they would take from the top half-dozen schools so defined.

In Singapore, the effect was even more startling because it was globalised. In the promotion procedures I was part of, I was dismayed to see that too many Australian experiences or referees could weigh against candidates. Peer assessment should ideally come from top US universities or their handful of peers elsewhere around the world. Publications must be in high-impact and top-ranked journals. People readily learned to jump through whichever hoops are defined for them to jump through, even if it meant, as it did, that increasingly few people at NUS write about Singapore, or to a lesser extent anywhere Asian, because it is harder thereby to get into top-tier journals.

***Looking ahead***

My academic life has been centred around those 32 PhD students and I wouldn't have changed it for anything. But I don't see that pattern of one-on-one supervision as the future at all. Graduate students learn most from each other, especially in a globalised and cosmopolitan class where they are being asked to think globally and comparatively.

To have begun and ended my career teaching in Southeast Asia, the region I studied, was only partly serendipitous. I believe in both cases

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(1965 and 2002) I had the wit to understand that the future of studying any region is in the region, and especially so in fast-changing Asia. But I do indeed feel extraordinarily fortunate that that was able to happen. I believe there will be much more of that in the years ahead. The role of Asianist will be less and less the 'expert', explaining exotic cultures to a home audience, and more and more the 'broker', mediating between systems including their attendant cultural traits. Those who will flourish will be those most able to move back and forth between Asia, Australia and elsewhere, and to market themselves as much to Asian universities as to others. For the new generation growing up in this world of international education, I believe the prospects are just as exciting as they ever were to my generation – and we thought discovering Asia immensely exciting.

To return to the transmission of academic values, what we must NOT be doing is trying to reproduce ourselves. The assets we have in a globalised world are some facility with the now-global language, some gate-keeping prestige that stronger and older institutions bestow on others (unfortunately) and, more important, the organisation of a learning environment in which students learn to be modern global citizens, as well as local ones.