Who will study Indonesia in the future?

Back in the 1990s, when Indonesia was the subject of former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating's "magnificent obsession", courses on its language and culture were booming in Australia's universities.

For a while, it seemed as though the boom would last (after all, "no country is more important to Australia than Indonesia", according to Keating). But the enthusiasm for Indonesian studies waned rapidly, and the intervening decades have seen a dramatic decline at all levels of Australia's education system.

By 2019, the numbers of students studying Indonesian at Australian universities had dropped back to 1988 levels, and the language is taught much less in primary and high schools than it used to be. The decline, which is also visible across Asian studies as a whole, has been even further exacerbated by Covid-19, with Indonesian language programs shutting throughout the country, most recently at La Trobe University.

The decline has been so bad that Australia risks not producing enough graduates who can speak Indonesian for key roles in government and business.

This month marks the 30th anniversary of the University of Melbourne's Indonesia Forum, a network of staff who share a common interest and professional involvement with Indonesia across the University and its partners. While the anniversary is a moment for celebration, it also prompts us to reflect on how the landscape has changed since the forum's launch in 1991.

Since the early 90s, the rise of global English, a downturn in Indonesian language teaching in schools after the Bali bombings, and failures of national leadership to seriously commit to strong regional engagement have all contributed to Australia's decline in Indonesian studies.

We are left with islands of Indonesia-focused teaching and research, with the uneven landscape dominated by a few key research universities, notably the University of Melbourne, the University of Sydney, Monash University, and the Australian National University.

Despite decades of leaders acknowledging that Australia's future in inextricably tied to Asia, the funding rarely matches the rhetoric. Indeed, beyond our 'bubbles' of Asian studies scholars, there is very little institutional investment in Asia.

But that lack of investment is short-sighted.

In an increasingly interrelated world where our problems cross borders (just look at Covid-19 and climate change), Australia will have to work closely with its neighbours to ensure we can continue to enjoy our high quality of life.

Sadly, economic and cultural biases tend to lead to Australian governments prioritising anglophone relationships above all others.

We are left with mixed messages about the importance of our relationships with Asia, and a sector in rapid decline.

How do we reverse the decline?

We see three important areas for action: institutional investment, educational reinvigoration and research collaboration.

First, we need the government to put its money where its mouth is, and commit to serious, long-term investment in our relationships with our Asian neighbours, and particularly with our largest neighbour, Indonesia.

Universities shouldn't be let off the hook, either. Often the rhetoric on prioritising relationships with Asia boils down to one thing only: recruiting international students.

Second, as educators, we need to reinvigorate studies of Indonesian language, culture and society at Australian schools and universities. The Asia Education Foundation at the University of Melbourne has just launched a roadmap on how we could do this.

And finally, as researchers, we need to shift to a new phase in our relationship with our Indonesian colleagues, in recognition of their rapidly developing research sector.

Australian researchers must take the intellectual contributions of our partners in Indonesia more seriously, establishing equitable research collaborations with them. Doing so would enrich the study of Indonesia in Australia and enrich the study of

Indonesia by Indonesians.

Welcoming more Indonesians scholars at Australian universities is another important area of focus, along with embedding Indonesian expertise across disciplines. This is already happening across the sector, and it's a welcome change since the 1990s.

Embracing these changes hinges on letting go of an exclusive focus on cultural, political and economic ties to Europe and North America that still linger in corners of Australia's elite institutions. If these universities continue looking past Asia in favour of Europe or America, they may miss out on important new opportunities.

The opportunity to establish new ways of working with Indonesian research partners offers perhaps the most fruitful avenue for building relations between the two countries in the short-term.

But we also need to continue to advocate for more students to engage with Indonesian language, culture and society at school and university, and for greater government investment in the relationship.

Every Indonesian studies program that closes down potentially impoverishes Australian academia and Australian society in general.

We hope we have seen the last of these closures.

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This article is co-published with Indonesia at Melbourne.

Image: People crossing the road using the new 'Pelican Crossing'. Credit: Fauzan/Unsplash.