

Thai studies in Australia



[Here](#) is a copy of the Lowy Institute's report on Thai studies in Australia. Very interesting reading. Some extracts (with my emphases):

1. The Australia-Thailand Institute (ATI) 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. ...

11. In contrast to some other Asian countries ... 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. ...

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. ...

20. The NTSC [National Thai Studies Centre] 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.

39. ... The ANU has indicated that it has an ongoing commitment to invest in Thai studies and Thai expertise, irrespective of the fate of the NTSC. The ANU's reputational considerations make it unlikely that it will suddenly choose to disinvest in Thai studies in the near future; rather it is likely to maintain levels of expertise necessary to satisfy student demand and fulfil its mandate as Australia's leading centre of broad Asian studies expertise.

40. The other serious player in this field is the Thai government. The Royal Thai Embassy (RTE) in Canberra has a strong view on the need to build Thai studies expertise in Australia outside of Canberra. It believes that Thailand is "under-appreciated" and "misunderstood" by Australians, despite extensive tourism, trade and people-to-people links; and it believes that media reporting in Australia is not adequate and is often biased. It is the strong preference of the RTE that Thai studies should focus less on Thai language and culture and more on the politics, economics and social aspects of contemporary Thai society. It believes that a broad network of balanced Thai specialists within academia, government, industry and the media is needed in Australia.

41. The RTE would like to establish a Thai studies centre in Australia in 2012, the 60th anniversary of the establishment of Australia-Thailand diplomatic relations. The Thai government has already set aside funds for the establishment of the Centre, and the RTE is hopeful that the Australian government will also contribute funds. Ideally the RTE would like the Centre to be established in Melbourne and believes that Asialink is the "natural partner" for this enterprise. Its initial plans are modest, and could comprise an academic Chair in the first instance, building to a graduate studies program and Thai-government sponsored visits to Thailand.

42. The establishment of this Centre, while it would need to be careful to avoid some of the issues surrounding the sensitivity of the Thai government to critical views of Thailand, would go some way towards further investing in the depth of Thai expertise in Australia, in one of its major metropolitan centres, thereby making it more accessible to a larger

population. ...

46. Several interlocutors argued that new communications technologies offer the most powerful and cost-effective multiplier effect to a public interest strategy. The internet in particular has made material on Thailand available to anyone who is interested. 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.

47. 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.

48. 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 [...?]

49. There is significant potential to use public funds creatively and efficiently to build Australians' interest in and knowledge of Thailand. One way of stimulating and harvesting ideas would be to begin a genuine and iterative conversation among stakeholders in Thai studies in Australia, connecting them in a way that hasn't occurred for over a decade, and challenging them to think about broadening public interest in their area of specialisation. ...

54. The ANU and the Thai government are committed into the medium term future to supporting the development of academic expertise on Thailand, in Canberra and Melbourne respectively. Given these commitments, the most effective use of ATI funding would be towards building greater public interest in and engagement with Thailand and Thai society, politics and culture. Several possible avenues for the use of ATI funding were identified in the course of this research, yet there are likely to be many more. One initial method for stimulating and harvesting ideas would be to convene a new conversation among Thai specialists across Australia with the explicit purpose of arresting Australia's declining engagement with Thailand.