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ESSAYS

## Rethinking the UTS International Studies Degree Post-Covid 19

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### Abstract

The Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) at UTS has been reimagined to address the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic and shifting priorities in higher education study abroad programs in Australia. The redesign introduces flexible global mobility options, including virtual experiences and localised intercultural learning, while embedding the Indigenous Graduate Attribute (IGA) across the curriculum. By blending physical, virtual, and local experiences, the program fosters critical reflection and equips students with ethical and professional intercultural skills, ensuring meaningful engagement with both local and global communities.

### Keywords

**International Studies; UTS; Covid-19; Intercultural Education; Global Mobility**

The international experience is a key feature of the Bachelor in International Studies (BIS) degree at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Study broad has been closely intertwined with the development of students' intercultural skills. Much of the recent work on intercultural education increasingly links intercultural competence to the idea of social justice with regard to its significance in combatting 'prejudice, racism and hegemonic discourses' (Cacciattolo et al. 2020: 78) by developing abilities to appreciate and understand cultural perspectives as 'a moral and ethical stance against forces that silence others' (Cacciattolo et al. 2020: 78). However, study abroad faces challenges related to mobility and sustainability.

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the existing Bachelor of Arts in International Studies (BAIS) degree at UTS was severely impacted. Students simply could not travel and study or live overseas for a mandatory 12-month exchange at a partner university as similar cohorts had done for more than 25 years prior. Prolonged closure of the Australian borders created an unprecedented situation that required a prompt response from the university community to rethink the future of the undergraduate International Studies combined degree. The idea was that students could enrol in a degree with international and intercultural learning outcomes yet with the capacity to complete the degree, whether on study abroad or not, through a set of embedded virtual and in-person international experiences that provided students with diverse mobility options. This redesign was also an opportunity to incorporate UTS's new Indigenous Graduate Attribute (IGA). This attribute is a key strategic priority across many Australian universities including UTS but is often overlooked in international and study abroad programs, despite the fact that it has the ability to enhance intercultural skills.

This paper examines the changing landscape of global mobility and international studies as a result of the recent pandemic and of evolving strategic priorities of tertiary education in Australia by focusing specifically on the recent iteration of UTS's International Studies degree.

At the centre of this redevelopment is the creation of a degree program with the following key aims:

1. to conceptualise a flexible approach to the embedded study abroad experience, able to accommodate different lengths for in-person global mobility, as well as an option to undertake the degree entirely from Australia.
2. to reinforce the intercultural capabilities framework in the Australian-based subjects and activities, including through the remodelling of the former core subject titled Foundations in International Studies into a new Intercultural Communication subject, and the implementation across the degree of the new UTS IGA.
3. to introduce and consolidate a range of virtual global mobility experiences, including COILS, language e-tandems, on-line experiential, and work-integrated learning with a global professional focus.

Much of the literature supports the notion that internationalisation provides students with opportunities for intercultural learning. Often this internationalisation is conducted through study abroad programs that serve as a catalyst for facilitating a global mindset in students. Studies show that this mindset can include greater awareness of individuals as 'communicative and cultural beings'; greater empathy towards peoples from diverse backgrounds and a deeper understanding of what it means to be an intercultural thinker ([Colón-Muñiz et al. 2012](#): 67). Studies also reveal that intercultural thinkers need to reflect upon their 'own cultural heritage in order to construct a cultural identity' ([Paatela-Nieminen 2020](#): 91).

While study abroad research suggests that internationalisation and physical mobility opportunities support intercultural learning ([Posti-Ahokas et al. 2020](#)), it also reveals that growing opportunities for intercultural dialogue through online learning 'challenge the rationale of collaboration based on physical mobility' ([Posti-Ahokas et al. 2020](#): 77). This supports the idea that intercultural learning starts from the local, precedes and complements physical travel that could translate in a series of place-based intercultural activities for student learning.

The concept of intercultural experience grounded in the local is reinforced by intercultural learning based on international mobility having now extended to online international experiences that provide students with possibilities to interact with people from other cultures and communities through virtual platforms and assessment designed around these encounters. Whether physical or virtual, intercultural and international learning experiences are, as Major and colleagues state, 'full of tensions and discomfort' requiring reflexive

responses (2020: 161). As such the ability to reflect critically on one's learning journey and experiences is key to developing intercultural understandings. Some of this thinking has been applied in the redesign of the International Studies degree.

The redesign of the International Studies degree after 2000 introduced distinct pathways and introduced three different configurations of global mobility: *Language, Culture and the Professional World* (with an option for a short study abroad experience of 2–6 weeks in length), *Language, Culture and Global Exchange* (with a built-in one semester abroad), and *International Honours* (with a built-in two semesters abroad, which allows students to graduate with an Honours degree).

## Implementing Virtual International and Intercultural Experiences

While the pre-pandemic version of the degree prepared students for a physical intercultural experience through a mandatory one-year study abroad period, some of the redesigned assessments tasks in the post-pandemic version of the degree allow students with opportunities to reflect critically on their intercultural experiences through virtual encounters in some of the core subjects such as Intercultural Communication, Contemporary Society, Language and Culture while based in Australia.

### INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

In the first year of the degree, the Intercultural Communication subject introduces concepts and debates in the field of intercultural communication and prepares students for working in increasingly globalised workplaces and intercultural environments. The face-to-face classroom in addition to traditional teaching modes has one embedded module titled Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), where students work online with peers in another world university. Small student groups with members from both universities gain authentic experience in communicating as they make progress on a short project.

### CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

Offered in year 2 of the degree, the Contemporary Society subjects provide students with knowledge about a particular country or region in the world. From 2023 one of the Contemporary Society subjects introduced a virtual exchange experience in the form of Global conversations. For this 'virtual exchange' students engage with students in other countries on topics related to social and political change.

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Offered for four consecutive semesters beginning from Year 2 of the degree, some of the Language and Culture subjects in addition to traditional classroom teachings have introduced virtual language exchange or e-tandem activities with universities overseas. An example of this is in the Japanese Language and Culture program in collaborations with Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, Ritsumeikan University, and Osaka Kyoiku University in Japan. The virtual exchanges include in-class activities, role plays, voluntary sessions and co-construction of assessment tasks. One advanced Japanese Language and Culture subject is titled Japanese Popular Culture and Film. In this subject, students are required to engage with a blended, practice-based and research-inspired learning experience. Through virtual online sessions UTS students engage with students from Kyoto University of Foreign Studies on topics focusing on Japanese pop culture and films in the target language. A series of authentic materials (books, articles and videos) are used to promote the use of real-life scenarios and situations such as interviews and discussion in the on-line sessions that inform some of the assessment tasks.

## Developing and Embedding the IGA Across International Studies Curriculum

The ability to enmesh intercultural capabilities to the university's strategy of integrating the IGA across all of UTS's programs was an opportunity to embed the IGA in subjects such as Intercultural Communication, International Research Methods, The Global Professional, and In-Country Studies and Fieldwork Project subjects (the Study Abroad Year).

The UTS IGA framework was developed by the Indigenous Teaching and Learning team at UTS as a university-wide requirement, and it represents a unique endeavour in national and international contexts. The International Studies team worked in consultation with the Indigenous Teaching and Learning team and the 'IGA Leads' in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences to embed the IGA across the degree.<sup>1</sup>

An interesting innovation, we believe, particular to the context in which we operate, is the possibility that the IGA offers in developing intercultural professional capabilities to work with and for Indigenous Australian peoples. An intercultural focus such as this one is Australia-specific. This focus builds on and enhances the understanding that our university's program has for developing intercultural professional competence in students with diverse backgrounds.

We describe here an innovation in how we scaffold and assess students' development of learning outcomes related to UTS's IGA. Our university stipulates that students are deemed to have passed a subject in the extent to which they have demonstrated learning outcomes of that subject which are in turn embedded in Course Intended Learning Outcomes (CILOs). Intercultural Communication, is one of a number of subjects in the degree program where we have embedded the UTS IGA, which aims for students to 'have knowledge of Indigenous Australian contexts to inform their capability to work effectively for and with Indigenous Australians across their professional discipline.' The UTS IGA stipulates that students will 'acquire knowledge and skills of Indigenous Australian communication, engagement, and critical inquiry to work effectively with and for Indigenous Australians across a professional context.' The scaffolding of this attribute across the subject allows students to produce work and 'relate to Indigenous peoples and Indigenous ways of being and knowing' as well as to acknowledge the ongoing impact of colonisation and recognise positive contributions of Indigenous Australian peoples in intercultural spaces.

Assignment 1 in this subject is described thus, with the section relevant to the UTS IGA underlined:

In this assignment, you present five different intercultural spaces in your neighbourhood and discuss how these spaces reflect interculturality in its many different facets, and how you are positioned in these spaces. You will do research about the history, social and cultural composition of your neighbourhood as a local space of intercultural importance. You will acknowledge and reflect upon Indigenous cultures and communities, intercultural encounters, and diversity. You will present these different spaces, reflect on the mix of cultures and diversity found there, what intercultural encounters happen in these spaces, the ongoing impact of colonialism and your relation to/positionality in these spaces.

The innovations grounded in the subject's IGA implementation are many. They include the fact that previous iterations of this Intercultural Communication did not explicitly link the development of an *intercultural* orientation to developing specific knowledge to work with and for Indigenous Australian peoples and communities, which is now a focus of modules and assessments.

<sup>1</sup> We would like to extend our gratitude to Annette Gainsford and Sally McCarthy from the UTS Indigenous Teaching and Learning team, and to Katrina Thorpe and Graham Akhurst, IGA Leads in FASS at the time of the development of the International Studies IGA implementation plan, for their generous guidance and suggestions during the consultation and implementation phases.

With a predominately intercultural orientation in the subject within a large group of internationally focused modules, the subject also offers an opportunity to reflect on Indigenous peoples and issues from other parts of the world, such as Indigenous issues found in Canada and Latin American countries, and still maintain an essential focus on First Nations in Australia. The IGA scaffolding and embedding in Intercultural Communication allowed us to reinforce with students the idea that intercultural learning starts from their neighbourhood, supporting the development of professional skills to engage positively, ethically, and mindfully with Indigenous Australian peoples, places and communities.

Students in the subject are judged then on:

- (i) Depth of recognition and discussion of Indigenous and contested spaces and the ongoing impact of colonisation, and
- (ii) Effective communication; use of non-essentialist and positive language when speaking about and acknowledging Indigenous Australian Peoples, Communities and Places

Those two marking criteria are two of a total of five criteria, and total 50% of the assignment weighting.

As a result, the final assignment presentations show how the student explore their local neighbourhood, and how they engage with Indigenous narrative and stories in places such as parks, buildings and other gathering places, many in the natural environment, not the built environment. Having watched many of these video assignments, we can attest to depth of engagement of students reports as they discover the Indigenous narratives in their neighbourhood places and spaces of interculturality.

#### IN-COUNTRY STUDIES AND FIELDWORK PROJECT SUBJECTS: STUDY ABROAD YEAR

As the final set of requirements for the International Studies part of the combined degree, the optional overseas component proposes student mobility in various locations around the world, where skills gained through the degree are applied and developed via (i) real-world authentic communication experiences as students live and study in a new overseas context, and also (ii) an investigation project where students plan, design, operationalise, analyse and report on a 'problem' they research which they see as 'simmering underneath the surface' of their host context while guided by an academic mentor based at the home university.

The In-Country Studies and Fieldwork Project subjects completed over two semesters require students to undertake studies at a host university, while completing reflective pieces about studying abroad and on-the-ground research projects for the home university through the support of a UTS mentor. The assessment tasks include two reflective pieces of writing known as 'First Impressions' completed in the first month of exchange and 'First Impressions Revisited' completed at the end of the year.

The redesign of the degree has reinforced the IGA, which is now a component of the assessment marking criteria. For instance, the reflective pieces are intended to encourage students to reflect on what it means to be an Australian student abroad and to acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing and being in their work; their framing also gestures back in the degree program to the work they did in the Intercultural Communication subject.

In addition to these two reflective pieces, students also work independently towards a research project exploring an aspect of the host society chosen for investigation by the students but also drawing on Australian Indigenous ways of knowing in research that demonstrate knowledge and mindful application of research ethics and protocols. With intercultural learning in mind, the aim of the scaffolded research assessments in the study abroad year is to expose students to diverse socio-cultural aspects of their host society in order to encourage them to look beyond essentialist notions of nations, cultures and identities while also understanding diverse research methods.

## Concluding Remarks

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges that impacted study and global travel, the examples above identify how the Bachelor of Arts in International Studies degree has had to innovate and adapt to global challenges, technological opportunities and Australian university strategic priorities to draw on the layers of intercultural education and international societies. In its current form, the International Studies program not only presents students with physical study abroad opportunities but also draws on advances in online technologies to take advantage of virtual possibilities with international contexts so that students can enhance and develop their international and intercultural learning. The impactful scaffolding of the IGA across the curriculum allows the team to demonstrate that a mindful intercultural learning and research experience starts from our position in and understanding of the places we live and dwell in, a trajectory that we hope will translate in concrete professional and personal actions aimed at achieving positive social change.

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