



UTS
ePRESS

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 20, No. 1/2
December 2024



© 2024 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

Citation: Mikula, M. 2024. International Studies at UTS: A Personal Perspective. *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 20:1/2, 17–19. <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9451>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by UTS ePRESS | <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>

ESSAYS

International Studies at UTS: A Personal Perspective

Maja Mikula

Independent Scholar; University of Technology Sydney 1999–2014

Corresponding author: Dr Maja Mikula, maja.mikula59@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/pjmis.v20i1-2.9451>

Article History: Received 28/08/2024; Accepted 28/8/2024; Published 26/12/2024

Abstract

Reflecting on my time at UTS, this piece highlights the transformative role of the International Studies program, particularly the immersive In-Country Study (ICS) experience. By combining language, culture, and contemporary society studies with global partnerships, the program fostered adaptability and global citizenship. My experiences at UTS, and later in the UK and China, affirm the enduring value of intercultural education.

Keywords

International Studies; UTS; BAIS; Intercultural Education; In-Country Study

Thirty years ago, international education was very much *du jour* in Australia and was actively encouraged by the government. The political focus was increasingly on Asia, with the view of building stronger ties within the region. Colonial Australia was waking up to the Asian century.

I joined the Institute for International Studies (IIS) at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) in 1999. Founded in 1994, the Institute was still a new kid on the block. International Studies could not be studied as a freestanding degree, but only in conjunction with another degree offered at UTS. Students were thus able to work towards an old-style qualification traditionally considered as the core of a profession, including engineering, science, design, engineering, IT, health, law, nursing, business, education, and communication. At the same time, they could claim a host of other valuable attributes, not the least among which was a first-hand understanding and appreciation of a language and culture other than English. Personal qualities such as flexibility and a get-go attitude were also typically flagged as desirable to employers.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. **FUNDING** The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

A key component of the brand was In-Country Study (ICS). Students spent the fourth year of their double degree at a host overseas university, where they followed a pre-approved set of subjects in the local language, while also completing research-based and reflective tasks for UTS in English. After two years of fast-track language and contemporary society study at UTS, by their fourth year most of them felt sufficiently prepared to be launched into the world beyond. In the vast majority of cases, the year of In-Country Study was an eye-opening and formative experience. Roshelle Fong, a brilliant student from the Italy Major, described this eloquently in her Cultural Report:

It's as if we were [...] squeezed through the birthing tunnel and popped out as born-again 'Italians.' These 'Italians,' who have a very basic power of speech, juvenile taste buds, minimal sense of socially acceptable behaviour and customs, and a confused sense of self, can perhaps also live and see as if for the first time. Just as Swiss painter Paul Klee tried to adopt the point of view of an infant to explore imaginative and chaotic realities and confront the instability of existence, our surreal adventure, particularly in the first month of 'euphoria', has prompted a childlike means of exploring Italian culture. Sights, sounds, tastes, textures and smells are received with heightened senses, and modes of everyday operation usually taken for granted, such as transport, shopping and hygiene, are discovered and questioned on the basis of preconceived notions of normality. What's the bidet for? What's cleanliness? (Fong 2009)

As their lecturers and academic mentors, we were privileged to witness our students' excitement, and in some ways participate in it. We were in charge of their pre-departure contemporary society curriculum. We continued following them closely while they were overseas, through regular visits and various forms of online contact. We were their main safety net if anything went wrong at the host university, so our role went beyond distance teaching and research supervision, to also include curriculum guidance, pastoral care, and crisis management.

The earliest language and culture programs and the first partner university negotiations both had a regional Asia-Pacific focus. This core, however, expanded almost immediately, with the first contacts established with possible future partner universities in an eclectic array of countries: Germany, France, Italy, Croatia, Spain, Malaysia, Indonesia, Argentina, Chile, central and eastern Europe, Cuba, and Mexico. This expansion would continue, following a fluid trajectory dictated by students' interests, availability of resources and political forces at different levels. The later introduction of Heritage Study and Independent Study Majors, for students with prior exposure to a country's language and culture, reinforced the feeling that everything was possible.

Yearly research conferences and collaborative projects meant that individual disciplinary perspectives of colleagues spilled over to engage in productive communication. For the first time, I was touching areas such as nationalisms across the globe, queer identities, online communities, cultural memory, transnational identities, and digital media, and these areas would continue to tickle my intellectual curiosity in the years to come.

Among the core components in face-to-face teaching were the contemporary society subjects, each covering recent history and contemporary issues relevant for a particular country-related Major. Contemporary Europe was co-taught among colleagues who specialised in France, Germany, Spain, and Italy, respectively. This collective teaching experiment re-enforced a feeling of community and collegiality among us. We were all interested in Europe from below, as seen from an Australian perspective. At the same time, Europe was 'affecting us and re-writing itself on us in ways perhaps unimagined in the Eurocentre' (Allatson et al. 2002). Europeanness, albeit perhaps stray, was an identity we all eagerly adopted.

My career in the fluid fields of international humanities later took me to the United Kingdom and China, where I experienced different pedagogical and institutional models, all aimed at encouraging cultural and disciplinary openness in tertiary education. In the United Kingdom prior to Brexit, student exchanges

under the Erasmus umbrella were dominated by incoming Erasmus students, while very few local students chose to spend time studying overseas. In China, I worked at a tertiary institution that was constituted as a Sino-British venture, and the local, mostly Chinese, students spent the final two years of study in the United Kingdom. This was perhaps not surprising, due to the well-established appeal of the United Kingdom as a former colonial core and a traditionally attractive study destination for foreign students. Regardless of the patterns of mobility, overseas study was almost without fail a rewarding experience for both the students and the teaching staff in the institutions I worked for after leaving UTS.

No doubt, international education will continue to evolve in constantly changing global contexts. In its thirty years of existence, International Studies at UTS has, I believe, built a robust model to withstand the hazards of the current geopolitical moment, characterised by global conflicts, pandemics, and a growing chauvinist and anti-immigrant sentiment. My years spent there were certainly some of the most rewarding years of my career.

References

Allatson, P., Le Nevez, A., Lu, Y., Mikula, M. & Pratt, M. 2002, "Average stray aliens": An average Australian conversation on eurocentrism,' *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 43, no. 1: 17–32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735780110118436>

Fong, R. 2009, *Cultural Report: First Impressions*. UTS Sydney.