Towards a Non-Eurocentric Art History/Theory Curriculum for Australian Art Schools

Gregory Leong

Abstract
This paper examines part of the findings of the first stage of a research project undertaken by the Tasmanian School of Art at Launceston which addresses issues of internationalisation in university curricula for the visual arts. While the proposed final outcome may be the formulation of recommendations for a non-Eurocentric art history/theory curriculum, at this stage of the project, the initial investigation into the history/theory curricula of Australian art schools suggests that only a small number of art history units address the following issues:

- contact with non-European culture as reflected in Euro-Australian and European art
- non-European art in the Asia-Pacific Region in the 20th Century (from colonial to post-colonial times).

Overseas Students in Australian University Visual Arts Programs

International Development Program (IDP) Education Australia published a study in March this year which was conducted for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on behalf of the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET). The study, Curriculum Development for Internationalisation, contains findings from a survey of all 38 universities in Australia. The number of initiatives in the area of curriculum development towards internationalisation came to 1,011. Of these each university was asked to describe up to five illustrative examples each. As a result the details of 175 individual programs (97 undergraduate and 78 postgraduate) were given. Out of this, only two were from the visual and performing arts, while Business, Economics and Commerce topped the poll with 52 examples.1

Although this sample may not necessarily be a true indication of the proportion of visual arts initiatives out of the total number of 1,011, it is nevertheless a low figure out of 175 - ie. just over 1%. When one considers that there are 12,700 students in these 175 programs and 3,525 or 27.75% are overseas students, one might not unreasonably make a connection between overseas student enrolment in Australian university courses and the internationalised factor in these courses. 1.14% - ie. the percentage of performing and visual arts sample - would suggest on a pro rata basis that only 40.29 overseas students were attracted to the two performing/visual arts programs.

Yet when one puts this figure into a historical perspective, the figure may not seem so low. In 1984 the total number of private and government sponsored overseas students studying fine arts in Australia, in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs, was only 56.2 We know that in the last ten years this number has increased dramatically. For the ACUADS seminar on international issues and intercultural communications in visual arts, held in Canberra in April this year, the Canberra School of Art conducted a survey of the 30 art and design schools throughout Australia. Even though the response rate was low with only 13 respondents, the total number of overseas students came to 413. Out of this, 336 were in

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1 IDP Education Australia Canberra (1995) Curriculum Development for Internationalisation, DEET, Canberra, p. 20. The other categories were Arts, Humanities, Social Science (36); Education, Teaching (21); Health, Medical Sciences (19); Cross-disciplinary and Miscellaneous Studies (14); Science, Mathematics, Technology (7); Architecture, Building (6); Engineering (6); Law, Legal Studies (6); Agriculture, Veterinary Science, Animal Husbandry (5); Computing (1).

undergraduate programs.3 371 were full fee-paying students and significantly, the majority were from Asian countries.4

Changing Approaches to Curriculum Development in Australian Art and Design Schools

The curricula for art history/theory, drawing and studio disciplines in Australian art schools have been based on traditional European models. Until recently, little has been done to modify curricula, or teaching strategies to accommodate overseas students from the Asia Pacific region and the indigenous cultures of Australia and New Zealand. Australian art schools have been slow to address issues of internationalisation or intercultural exchange, particularly as they pertain to students from a non-European background and changing perceptions of cultural and national identity amongst Australians. The sustained escalation in intake of international students undertaking visual art and design training however has to be considered within the context of the appropriateness of current art school curricula and teaching methods.

In 1994 the Australian National University allocated Quality Assurance Funds to conduct research aimed to develop strategies to improve the quality of teaching in the visual arts within an intercultural framework. In July the Canberra School of Art appointed a Senior Research Fellow to investigate the pragmatic and theoretical issues involved in intercultural learning in the visual arts context.

At the same time the Tasmanian School of Art at Launceston was awarded a DEET grant from its Evaluation and Investigations Program (EIP) to research the development of internationalised curricula for Australian art schools. This paper examines the initial findings of the first stage of this project.

Internationalising Art School Curricula

The project undertaken by the Tasmanian School of Art at Launceston seeks to establish new directions in university curriculum development in the visual arts, as the emphasis in current curricula is still very Eurocentric. The research is positioned within the Asian context and addresses two main issue areas which deal specifically with:

- contact with non-European culture as reflected in Euro-Australian and European art; and
- non-European art in the Asian Region within the framework of modernism/colonialism and postmodernism/postcolonialism.

The research will then inform

- the development of a non-Eurocentric internationalised art history/theory curriculum,
- the teaching of drawing to international students from non European backgrounds, and
- the development of new strategies for curriculum change in studio practice.

The narrowing of the investigation to curriculum development, and in particular in Art History and Theory, within the context of both accommodating Asian students and expanding our own perceptions of our geographical, economic and cultural position in the region has been in the main influenced by the Schools experience of international students.

They have mainly been Asian and mainly from Singapore and Hong Kong. They have been most interested in learning about contemporary issues and practices in art and have pointed out that the greatest difference in art education is that the teaching of Art History and Theory is much more

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3 Atkinson, C (1995) Internationalisation of Education in Art and Design Schools, Canberra, School of Art, Australian National University, p. 4.
4 Ibid, p. 2. A precise figure for Asian students is not available because one respondent did not specify the number of international students from different countries.
intellectually rigorous. This does not necessarily mean however that this difference must be the universal perception amongst all Asian students. Similarly, comparative levels of technical competence, differences in education ideology and so on, between host and different countries must be taken into account.

Several major art schools have taken advantage of the trend of a growing overseas market for Australian university education and which has as a significant segment many sponsored and private students from Asia. These schools have developed major marketing campaigns, twinning and off-shore arrangements with Asian universities. Even the Tasmanian School of Art at Launceston - a small art school - has for several years now undertaken a modest marketing thrust into South East Asia which has resulted in a relatively high percentage of overseas students in the small overall art school student population - currently nine out of 120 or 7.5% of full-time BFA students.

It is stressed however that the School has a genuine belief in the benefits of developing its approach to curriculum development as it acknowledges that significant shifts have occurred amongst Australians about their own identity and position in the world. The repositioning of emphases in art school curricula, in other words, aims to benefit overseas students from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as Australians. Drawing and painting lecturer Penny Mason from the School has already separately undertaken research into thematic concerns with regard to the School’s curricula. The scope of this is restricted to a case study of Singapore students. Findings from her recent research in Singapore and in Launceston, are however likely to contribute significantly to the current project.

**Initial Findings**

The purpose of the first stage of the project was to identify the approach by Art Schools to and their record in the areas of curriculum development in Art History/Theory, drawing and general studio programs. A questionnaire survey was sent to all 30 art schools in Australia. At the same time, Art History/Theory syllabuses were requested from the heads of theory departments. The data collected is nearly complete at this stage. Because three art schools are still to respond to the questionnaire and eight theory syllabuses are still outstanding, the following comments, based on 90% and 73.3% response rates respectively, will need to be updated over the next few months, the aim being to be comprehensive. Also, because of this, the information given in this paper does not include certain details such as the names of art schools. These will he published only when the research has been completed.

In addition, only the information relating to Art History/Theory will be discussed, ie. issues regarding drawing and other studio disciplines will be contained in a later full report. The present discussion focuses on history/theory.

**Asian Students In Australian Art Schools**

Of the 27 returned questionnaires, one large art school did not have information regarding the number of their full-time students from Asian countries. The 26 other art schools had a total of approximately - several schools only gave approximate figures - 7791 undergraduate students. Of these 332 (4.77%) were Asian. There were 91 students in honours programs in 14 art schools, of whom two (2.2%) were Asian. 774, including 41 Asian students (5.3%) were undertaking postgraduate studies (full and part-time) in 21 art schools.

Five (18.52%) out of 27 art schools did not have any Asian students.

Individual percentages of undergraduate Asian students in different schools ranged from 0.54% to 21.7%.

There was a total of two schools with under 1%, 15 with between 1% and 5%; three between 6% and 10%; three between 11% and 15%; none between 16% and 20% and one with over 20% of Asian students.

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5 ‘Asian Students” refers to full-fee-paying students from Asian countries.

6 In this instance, the institution (RMIT) has large schools of Fine Art, Design, and Visual Communication. The statistic refers in particular to its Design School. For the purpose of the survey, numbers from the School of Fashion and Design have not been included.
Asian countries included Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Malaysia, China, Taiwan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam, with the first three countries cited most often.

Data on the distribution of Asian students in the various art school disciplines in undergraduate programs showed that apart from first year students, out of 252 second and third year students, 76 (30.16%) majored in Visual Communications\(^7\) (all at the one institution), 28 (11.11%) in Painting, 23 (9.13%) in graphic & multimedia, 16 (6.35%) in Graphic Design, 15 (5.95%) in Ceramics, 13 (5.16%) in Interior Design, twelve (4.76%) in Textiles, ten (3.97%) in Photography, eight (3.14%) in Printing, Sculpture and Film, four (1.59%) in Drawing, three (1.19%) in Jewellery, and one each (0.4%) in Glass, ‘design’ (not made clear what kind of design), Animation and Museum Studies (the only theory major).

**Current Art History/Theory Curricula in Australian Art Schools**

All art school courses include Art History/Theory as a core subject at some if not all stages of the three-year undergraduate program. Degree programs in Art History/Theory are available at seven universities.

The questionnaire returns indicate that 40% (12) of all Australian art schools have not introduced Asian content in their Theory program. The small numbers of Asian students and the lack of appropriate staff are cited as reasons. One school said that Asian content would be introduced in 1996.

Four schools (13.33%) have said on their survey forms that independent of the enrolment of Asian students, they had introduced Asian content into their programs. In cross-checking questionnaire results with the theory syllabuses submitted, it was discovered that two more schools who had answered ‘no’ (not included in the figure above) did in fact have Asian content, bringing the total to six (20%). The subject areas included cross-cultural studies, multiculturalism and Asian and Indian Art Theory.

Six schools (20%) claimed that they had introduced Asian content due to the enrolment of Asian Students. Three schools have not yet returned their questionnaire, and three did not answer this question, making up the other 20% of Australian art schools.

While the above results would suggest that a relatively high proportion (at least 40%) of art schools have introduced non-western content into their history/theory curricula, the actual amount in fact represents a very small percentage of all art history/theory units on offer. An examination of the 22 history/theory syllabuses received reveals that there are at least 260 semester length units plus 23 shorter ones. For the purpose of discussion these have been divided into the following categories:

- General introductions to Art History
- Pre-history, Antiquity and Medieval
- Renaissance and Post Renaissance
- 9th and 20th Century Western Art (excluding Australian Art)
- Australian Art (including Aboriginal Art)
- Non-Western Art
- Cross-cultural and Intercultural Art
- Thematic Units
- Inter-disciplinary
- Professional Practice
- Research (including writing)

To show the weight put on these subject areas, information about each of them will include the number of units, the number of institutions\(^8\) offering them, and an approximate range of topics within each category. The percentage refers to full semester units only and reflects the overall position the particular category occupies in the overall range of theory subjects.

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\(^7\) This course available at RMIT includes Photography and Film. This has been separated from discrete photography and film courses,

\(^8\) The art schools offering these units and unit titles will be identified in the final report.
General introductions to Art History - 6.9%
18 units are offered by 11 art schools.

Pre-history, Antiquity and Medieval - 2.3%
6 units 2 art schools
8 short units 1 art school
Subjects include, archaeology, prehistory, early Celtic art, early Christian Islamic, ancient cultures, late Middle Age English and French, Greek art, Gothic architecture, Greek vases, Roman Architecture.

Renaissance and Post Renaissance - 2.69%
7 units 4 art schools
6 short units 1 art school

19th and 20th Century Western Art (excluding Australian Art) - 15%
39 units 13 art schools
6 short units 1 art school
This category covers all the major artists, cultural developments and issues in art of the periods and are too numerous to list.

Australian Art (including Aboriginal Art)
Aboriginal Art - 3.08%
8 units 6 art schools
-Other Australian Art - 6.54%
17 units 11 art schools
Subjects: Craft and Design, Film, Photography, Art, Architecture.

Non-Western Art - 3.08%
8 units 6 art schools
Subjects: Latin American Art, Pacific Arts, Indonesian and South East Asian Film and Television, Asian Art. Note: Asian art occupies 5 of the 8 units and includes Indian, contemporary South East Asian art, as well as Art and Cultural Revolution (China, Indonesia and Vietnam).

Cross-cultural and Intercultural Art - 4.23%
11 units 7 art schools
Subjects: Multi-culturalism, Cultural difference, Post-Colonial Issues (including Aboriginal, Asian cultures, Vietnam).

Thematic Units - 43.46%
113.5 units 16 art schools
Subjects: Colonisation/Colonialism (4 units), Gender and Sexuality (14.5 units), Philosophy and Critical Theory (35 units), Film/TV/Video (15 units), Studio Specific (28 units covering Printmaking, Ceramics, Sculpture, Installation, Performance, Electronic, Sound, Cross-media, Decorative Art, Craft, Objects, Drawing, Art and Public Spaces, Photography), Museology (one unit), Architecture (five units), Politics and Art (two units), Art and Technology (three units), Landscape (three units), 'Venice', Popular Culture and Food (one unit each).
Inter-disciplinary - 3.45%
9 units          3 art schools

Professional Practice - 3.85%
10 units         9 art schools

Research (incl. writing) - 5.38%
14 units         7 art schools

This initial information gives a fair idea of the emphases placed by art schools on theory areas. The major bias is undeniably Eurocentric. Apart from the four units on Colonisation/Colonialism, all the other 109.5 Thematic Units are premised on Western perceptions of visual culture. 19th and 20th Century Western Art occupies 39 units. If one excluded non-Western, Australian, Cross-Cultural, Professional Practice and Research subjects, the Art History/Theory syllabuses with predominantly Western content would take up 73.8% of all units offered, and this is not taking into account that much of the Australian Art content is Eurocentric.

It is ironic that while one can point to the small non-Western content in Australian art school syllabuses, occupying a mere 3.08% of the total, Aboriginal Art is given exactly the same emphasis (3.08%).

The Immediate Future for Internationalising Art School History/Theory Curricula

It would appear that several Australian art schools are sympathetic to the idea of initiatives in internationalising art school curricula. In answering our request for Art History/Theory syllabuses, one Western Australian art school theory co-ordinator commented

"The School of Art at Curtin has strong links with South East Asian Universities and as a result our Visual Culture Studies program is moving towards greater international content in its curricula. We are aware of the importance of teaching/learning in a climate of cultural diversity so, where appropriate, we include lectures on topics related to other cultures within current courses. In 1996, we will offer a number of specific units dealing with South East Asian art practices.

A selection of comments collected from the questionnaire survey would support this growing awareness of the need to diversify -

In small ways all of the examples cited have been introduced into a number of our courses. A more sustained enhancement of the teaching of Asian art theory and practice has been achieved by: hosting writers in residence here who have lectured in our theory units and consulted in studios; the introduction of a theory unit 'Peripheral Visions' in 1994, which deals with modernism outside the west and has a particular emphasis, nearly half of the material of the course, on India, Indonesia and the Philippines.

Individual research project unit available to selected students. Content for 1996 will change - to include offshore units in Asian Art History. Slides sometimes include examples of Asian art and artists. Visiting Asian artists - guest speakers (eg. ARK). Support available through International Centre for English.

Changes have occurred, however, due to regional location and an interest from all students in studies in Asian art. The School is also in the process of introducing an Asia Pacific focus in its BFA. Assistance with language skills is available also.

Content — using a cultural theory base, comparative studies in philosophy, artforms and aesthetics as basis for more advanced studies. Students encouraged to approach studies from their personal cultural perspectives.

We have always found great benefits having Asian students in our course. It has so far been reciprocal. Some staff have had to rethink teaching methodologies and course content and we still have some work to do in this
Seminars on cross-cultural issues may appear useful on the surface but sometimes there is a shortfall in the application of ideas that arise from these! (Old habits die hard.) We have recently formed a School of Art International Committee. This group is an ‘action’ committee for all issues on internationalisation.

In Art Theory there are plans to introduce a subject that looks at elements of colonisation in the Asian region. Students from the Asian region are still in relatively small numbers. However, staff have mentioned that it is through teaching involving Aboriginal & Torres Strait students that different teaching strategies have evolved that utilise a much greater emphasis on individual negotiation.

Naturally with a high Asian population here we see their presence as an advantage.

However, greater needs for special assistance exists for Aboriginal students at the moment and Asian students’ English language skills have been sufficient so far. As previously stated this school is moving towards an international program where diversity is encouraged and an advantage.

Benefits: staff and students learn much from Asian students’ cultural input re: imagery; symbolism, visual codes, etc. Difficulties: assumptions from some staff and students about the supremacy of Western art - often Asian students believe they must Westernise and deny their own cultural heritages — some staff believe allowing for differences denotes making exceptions.

As our university is located in an area of intense population growth, we are very much involved in multi-culturalism and the benefits of students of all nationalities has made an enormous contribution to the richness of the course and has influenced our program.

The benefits of having Asian students are (1) developing an awareness in staff and local students of a wider vision of arts practice; (2) allow for personal and institutional exchanges and visits to develop; (3) introduction of a different work ethic encourages a reevaluation of values and attitudes.

Any adverse comments (not cited above) were easily outnumbered by the positive response received. Several new courses containing Asian content have already been identified for 1996. These include Asian Cinema, cross-cultural courses with an emphasis on Australian Art and Art of the Asia Pacific Region, research topics in South East Asian Visual Culture, Women, Craft and Development in the Asia Pacific Region and Modern and Postmodern Perspectives in the Art and Design of South East Asia.

This is also reflected in the majority of positive responses to the survey question on changes in delivery in teaching methodology - 66.7% of respondents had adjusted their teaching methodology. This includes:

- Negotiated individual programs where necessary.
- Consideration of Asian students’ use/understanding of English - especially the need for language support systems.
- Appointment of a specialist staff member as adviser to international students, responsible for their tutorial program. Also in some cases gives individual assistance to 1st and 2nd year in essay writing.
- At Masters level, the employment of a Chinese language specialist.
- Extensive consideration is being given to changes in delivery with the large variation in needs. Peer assisted study scheme and learning programs available to NESB students.
- Consideration of cultural background and previous training prior to entering the BA Visual Arts.
- English language help is offered by external studies courses — students can do this as extra subject that counts towards the degree.
This issue to be addressed as part of planning.

The course is designed to cater to differences in students’ backgrounds — the teaching program is sensitive to differences in forms of communication.

Extra tutorials. Mentors and paid post-grad/senior student tutors.

The Student Disability Office and ESL Centre give assistance.

A senior member of staff is Asian and is encouraged to assist and monitor Asian students, particularly post-graduate.

Staff aware of University policy on delivery — use of colloquial language and local examples without context.

**Concluding Comments**

This paper was given at the Sixth International Conference of the Australasian Association for Institutional Research, Western Australia, December 1995. The entire project which covers a much broader range of curriculum development and pedagogical issues than is dealt with here, has since been completed and the full report of findings may be published at a later date by the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth affairs (DEETYA). The paper is published with permission from DEETYA.

This is not a conclusion because this stage of the research has still to be finalised. It is hoped however that the evidence collected so far demonstrates a need to redress the balance between Australian, Aboriginal, Western and non-Western Art; and that moreover there is a budding desire manifest in a significant number of Australian art schools for this to happen - both in the expansion of curricula to include non-Western art and in the apparent willingness to develop strategies to enable students from non-English speaking backgrounds to fully participate in study areas in which language skills remain paramount for the successful comprehension and completion of a course of study. Perhaps the strongest argument for an internationalised art history/theory curriculum is summarised by Michael G Fullan:

> Seeing ‘our connectedness’ to the world and helping others to see it is a moral purpose and teaching/learning opportunity of the highest order.9

**References**


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