

Sydney Southeast Asia Centre

2020-2021 Yearbook

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THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



We acknowledge the tradition
of custodianship and law of the
Country on which the University of
Sydney campuses stand. We pay our
respects to those who have cared
and continue to care for Country.

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Discover

Welcome

A message from the Director 3

About us

About the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre 4

Governance 6

Meet some of our people 7

Highlights

ASEAN Forum 2020 8

Politics in Action 2021 9

Singapore's GE2020: The real watershed election? 10

Doing fieldwork in the time of COVID-19 11

#WhatsHappeningInThailand: Youths in revolt 12

Social media, grassroots activism and disinformation 13

Fighting Fear: #whats happening in myanmar 15

Other events 16

Research

Fostering high-impact research 18

The SSEAC Hothouse Trifecta: Triple DECRA success 19

Combating gender-based violence in Cambodia 20

Charting the path to better health and agriculture 21

Leading animal health management in Timor-Leste 22

Reducing poverty in Myanmar 23

Exposing the dark side of social media 24

Tackling the dangers of unregulated biotechnology 25

Supporting research excellence 26

Shining the spotlight on future research leaders 27

Publishing in an extraordinary time 29

Engagement

Sharing our members' stories 31

Expanding international collaboration 32

Building bridges across the seas 33

Education

The next generation of research excellence 35

Interdisciplinary field schools 36



A message from the Director



So much has changed in the last eighteen months, with COVID-19 disrupting all our lives. It has been a particularly challenging time for those of us who work in Southeast Asia, not just in terms of losing access to our field sites, but also watching on, powerless to do anything, as our collaborators, friends – and sometimes families – battle with the impact of the pandemic.

When I wrote my forward to the last yearbook in July 2020, we were just starting to come to terms with what the pandemic would mean for SSEAC and its members. With many of our core activities brought to a halt, we needed to find new ways to engage with the region. At that stage, the virus had spread widely in Insular Southeast Asia (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore) but had left Mainland Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam) virtually untouched – although the economic impact of preventative measures, but also disruptions in global supply chains, were already being felt there as well. By July this year, the picture was quite different. Delta had begun to spread, prompting new public health crises across the region. In Indonesia, for example, the health system was overwhelmed. COVID-19 patients died while their relatives searched for oxygen, or while awaiting hospital admission, and emergency tents – even ships – were fashioned into temporary wards. But despite these challenges, the region's resilience has continued to shine through.

So, too, has the resilience of SSEAC's members. As you will see from the accounts in the pages to follow, 2020–21 has been a hive of activity for the Centre, with 40 events, 11 workshops and four writing retreats organised, and 49 podcasts released over the course of the year. We have also enjoyed seeing the fruits of our previous activities, including several cases where our members have leveraged SSEAC support to secure prestigious external grants. I am particularly proud of our 'DECRA trifecta' – Dr Rosemary Grey, Dr Josh Stenberg and Dr Sophie Webber – all of whom demonstrated an outstanding level of collegiality not only during the SSEAC Hothouse but in their broader engagement in SSEAC activities. You can read about their projects, and also other Southeast Asia-related projects that secured external funding, in the pages that follow.

Another highlight for me this year has been feedback from students who have participated in our multidisciplinary field schools. It is truly inspiring to see how pivotal our field schools have been in so many of their lives. We feature the story of one of these students, Matilde Breth Petersen, a Health Sciences student who took part in a SSEAC field school on disability and social inclusion in Indonesia. As Matilde's experience reveals, the opportunity to move beyond classroom learning can transform the student experience. This kind of inspiration is exactly what we need during our challenging times!

Professor Michele Ford
Director, Sydney Southeast Asia Centre

About the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre

The Sydney Southeast Asia Centre (SSEAC) is Australia's premier centre of interdisciplinary academic excellence relevant to Southeast Asia.

With more than 6,000 members, our work continues to expand around the region and embrace new stakeholders across disciplines. Our community includes:

- student members
- academic members
- affiliate members
- friends of SSEAC

You can find out more on our website:

- sydney.edu.au/sseac

Engaging more than 400 academics across all faculties and schools at the University, SSEAC:

- supports research excellence
- builds a new generation of Southeast Asia experts
- brings students from different disciplines together to learn from the region and its people
- partners with government, business and civil society to address real-world issues

Our researchers work in and on all 11 countries in Southeast Asia across five thematic areas:

- economic and social development
- environment and resources
- health
- heritage and the arts
- state and society

We support our members by providing funding opportunities and creating an academic community around engagement in our countries of focus.

Through our focus on multidisciplinary, we actively seek to challenge divisions to foster new approaches to the pressing issues affecting the region. This approach has proven to be particularly effective, as you can read in our research stories.

In providing a focal point for Southeast Asia-related research, we are connecting researchers across the institution, strengthening existing relationships and forging new ones, to better foster multidisciplinary research, support new learning experiences, actively engage industry, and raise the level of public debate.

SSEAC has been working closely with the Australian Government since 2014 to provide leadership training to activists from Women's Empowerment and Disabled People's Organisations across Indonesia. Through these courses, SSEAC fosters links between Indonesian and Australian activists and contributes to a deeper understanding of the universality of the struggles they face.

Our flagship interdisciplinary field schools have given over 300 students since 2014 the opportunity to engage in real-world learning in Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. SSEAC has received the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in the category of Outstanding Education Engagement and Innovation for this initiative.

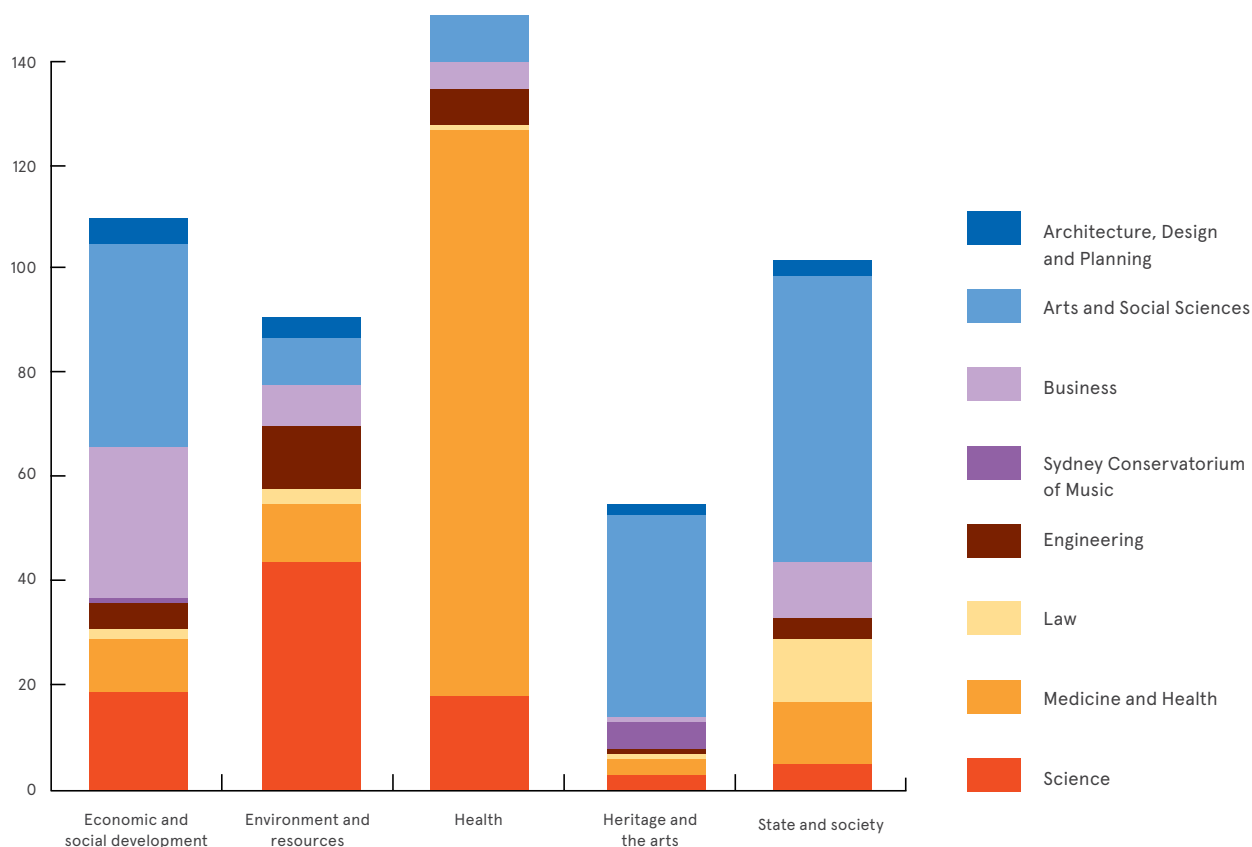
These field schools have drawn together students from disciplines including Architecture, Communications, Economics, Engineering, Heritage Conservation, International Public Health, Occupational Therapy, Psychology, and Political Economy. Students work in multidisciplinary teams to study topics including agrarian change, food security, housing policy, urbanism and health, and women's and disability rights.

Each year, SSEAC hosts a number of events designed to stimulate public engagement with Southeast Asia.

- Our Politics in Action Forum draws on expertise from Australia and around the world to inform a broad audience about recent political developments in the region.
- The ASEAN Forum – which targets policymakers, NGOs and academics – focuses on a different theme each year, from the role of China in ASEAN to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia.

We also champion closer ties with Southeast Asia by receiving visiting government and university delegations from Southeast Asia, as well as cultivating strong relationships with Australia-based embassies and consulates from the region.

Disciplinary spread of SSEAC members at the University of Sydney



Related initiatives

The University of Sydney is fostering a deeper and broader understanding of Southeast Asia through the following high-profile initiatives that work closely with regional and global partners.

- **The Angkor Research Program**, a cross-disciplinary collaboration that incorporates the Greater Angkor Project, which is creating new perspectives on urban society in the Angkor region.
- **The Centre for Asian and Pacific Law**, which has particular expertise in Indonesian, Malaysian and Vietnamese legal systems and laws.
- **The Department of Indonesian Studies**, one of the most respected in Australia, with a strong reputation for its research and policy work in Indonesia.
- **The Department of Peace and Conflict Studies**, which incorporates the West Papua Project and a concentration of researchers with an interest in Timor-Leste.
- **The Sydney Institute for Infectious Diseases**, which brings together researchers, educators and professionals from across the biological and social sciences to increase understanding about and develop new methods to reduce infectious diseases.
- **The Office for Global Health**, which facilitates international health research and works with our Faculty of Medicine and Health to contribute to health and wellbeing in the Asia-Pacific.
- **The Sydney Vietnam Initiative**, which is a leading multi-disciplinary regional network of researchers and educators, working together to improve the lives of people and communities in Vietnam. The Sydney Vietnam Initiative is one of the Faculty of Medicine and Health's Impact Centres.

Governance

SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford is supported by:

- Dr Thushara Dibley, Deputy Director
- Dr Elisabeth Kramer, Deputy Director
- Dr Natali Pearson, Curriculum Coordinator
- Ariane Defreine, Communications and Events Officer
- Minh Le, Senior Administration Officer

The team is assisted by our Country Coordinators and Executive Committee as well as by our Postgraduate Representative Daniel Howell.

Our team works closely with many of the University of Sydney's professional service units, including the Office of Global Engagement, the Office of Global Health, International Services, Marketing and Communications, the Library, Sydney Abroad, and Sydney Ideas.

The team also collaborates with other multidisciplinary research centres and Southeast Asia-related initiatives, as well as with the faculties and the new Chau Chak Wing Museum.

Executive Committee

Position	Name	Department/School
Community Outreach Adviser	Prof Hans Pols	School of History and Philosophy of Science
Community Outreach Adviser	Dr Sandra Seno-Alday	Business School
Curriculum Adviser	A/Prof Russell Bush	Sydney School of Veterinary Science
Curriculum Adviser	Dr Susan Banki	Sociology and Social Policy
Regional & Policy Engagement Adviser	Prof David Guest	Sydney Institute of Agriculture
Regional & Policy Engagement Adviser	Ms Danielle Somers	Office for Global Health
Research Adviser	Prof Simon Butt	Sydney Law School
Research Training Adviser	Prof Damien Field	Sydney Institute of Agriculture
Research Training Adviser	Dr Petr Matous	School of Civil Engineering

Country Coordinators

Country	Name	Department/School
Cambodia	Prof Daniel Tan	School of Life and Environmental Sciences
Indonesia	A/Prof Jeff Neilson	School of Geosciences
Laos	Prof Nick Enfield	School of Literature, Art and Media
Malaysia & Brunei	Prof Marina Kennerson	Medicine and Health
Myanmar	Dr Louis Taborda	School of Civil Engineering
The Philippines	Dr Aaron Opdyke	School of Civil Engineering
Singapore	Dr Yeow-Tong Chia	Sydney School of Education and Social Work
Thailand	Dr Aim Sinpeng	School of Social and Political Sciences
Timor-Leste	Dr Thushara Dibley	School of Languages and Cultures
Vietnam	A/Prof Tihomir Ancev	School of Economics

Meet some of our people



Aaron Opdyke

As SSEAC's Country Coordinator for the Philippines, Aaron helps keep the Centre's community with an interest in the Philippines engaged by organising outreach events.

Aaron is passionate about engineering research in humanitarian responses to develop resilient housing and settlements. As a Lecturer in Humanitarian Engineering, he is particularly interested in improving international responses to better assist developing communities to recover in the aftermath of disaster and conflict. In 2021, Aaron was named as one of the New Faces of Civil Engineering by the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Central to Aaron's research is the study of humanitarian practice in the face of emerging challenges such as urbanisation and climate change. Aaron understands equitable housing as much more than just four walls and a roof; instead, he conceptualises shelter in humanitarian programming in terms of its relationship with livelihoods, health and social values. He applies these ideas in a Philippines context through his research in the Visayas, Mindanao, and Metro Manila, where he has been working with partners for eight years.



Anjalee Cohen

Anjalee has been a member of SSEAC since the Centre's inception in 2013.

As a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, Anjalee has a longstanding interest in Southeast Asia and in particular Thailand. She attributes her curiosity about the region to her background: her mother is Thai, and her father, an Australian anthropologist, has been conducting research in northern Thailand since the late 1960s. Anjalee visited Thailand regularly as a child, and later undertook ethnographic research on youth culture in northern Thailand for her doctoral research.

Before joining the University of Sydney, Anjalee worked at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. In this role, she spent time in Laos, Vietnam and Thailand, where she collaborated with academic institutions, government agencies, and bilateral and multilateral organisations. Anjalee has conducted several research projects on youth drug use in northern Thailand, one of which was funded through a prestigious Endeavour Research Fellowship.

Anjalee's current research aims to understand Thailand's early success in controlling the COVID-19 pandemic, and its subsequent failures in doing so.



Daniel Howell

Daniel joined the Centre as its Postgraduate Representative in March 2021.

Daniel is a PhD candidate in the School of Life and Environmental Sciences working on integrated plant disease management for rice in northwest Cambodia. His PhD research is aligned with an Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research-funded project: *Sustainable intensification and diversification in the lowland system in northwest Cambodia*.

Daniel has extensive experience in biology and plant science, and has contributed to a range of projects in Australia and Southeast Asia, including quantifying the population of the endangered Blue Mountains water skink, managing the fruit fly facility at the Charles Perkins Centre, relocating a fruit bat community in Avalon, investigating photosynthesis of an epiphytic fern species in Thailand, and researching a wide range of plant diseases in northwest Cambodia.

In 2019, Daniel completed an intensive Khmer language course with support from a SSEAC Language Training Initiative Grant, which he says made him "more confident working with Cambodian stakeholders".

ASEAN Forum 2020

The eighth annual ASEAN Forum focused on responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and showcased SSEAC's multidisciplinary expertise in the region.



In 2020, due to ongoing travel and meeting restrictions, the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre held its first ever virtual ASEAN Forum. Showcasing the University of Sydney's multidisciplinary expertise in the region, this year's ASEAN Forum featured five of our own academics who explored ASEAN countries' response to the pandemic from a government, economic, health, and livelihoods perspective.

The keynote address was delivered by SSEAC Deputy Director Dr Thushara Dibley, who provided an overview of ASEAN's institutional response to COVID-19 in early 2020. She argued that while the initiatives ASEAN developed were premised on a commitment to a unified regional response, in practice, ASEAN Member States tended to prioritise their national interests over the needs of the region.

The ASEAN Forum continued with a talk by Dr Aim Sinpeng (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences), who outlined the diverse range of governmental responses across ASEAN. Dr Sinpeng illustrated the important role of civil society and religious organisations in filling the gaps in government responses.

Professor Gregory Fox (Faculty of Medicine and Health) discussed the health response to the pandemic. He explained how differences in living density across ASEAN accounted for some of the variation in how the disease spread. Other factors, including disparities in testing resources, previous experience managing

similar viruses, and health inequalities within countries, all contributed to the mixed range of responses from health departments across the region.

Dr Sandra Seno-Alday (Sydney Business School) focused on how the pandemic had revealed the vulnerability of ASEAN's economic infrastructure. As she noted, ASEAN countries rely on trading partnerships with the same five countries, all of which were significantly impacted by the pandemic.

Finally, Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson (Faculty of Science) explored the pandemic's impact on livelihoods. He argued that restrictions on mobility and social gatherings have severely restrained informal systems of wealth transfer and social protection in some countries, such as in Indonesia. Coupled with poorly implemented government support programs, vulnerable households were facing further stress.

The forum concluded with a panel discussion that addressed the audience's questions, ranging from how ASEAN countries can allow uninterrupted healthcare for people with other diseases, to how the pandemic has impacted supply chains, through to the way religion has been weaponised as a contributor to the spread of the virus.

If you missed this exciting online event, head to [our website](#) to catch up on the videos and podcasts.

Politics in Action 2021

Featuring leading experts on Southeast Asia, the sixth annual Politics in Action Forum drew crowds from across the globe to discuss the region's political developments.



The perfect format for busy people who want to keep up to date with regional politics, Politics in Action is one of SSEAC's flagship annual events. SSEAC's sixth annual Politics in Action event was again held online due to pandemic-related restrictions. In 2021, experts from around the world took to Zoom to share the latest country developments and their own academic insights with a global audience.

This year's Forum focused on the latest developments in six Southeast Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Our expert presenters for 2021 were:

- **Cambodia:** Dr Astrid Norén-Nilsson
University of Lund
- **Indonesia:** Dr Burhanuddin Muhtadi
Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University
- **Myanmar:** Professor Melissa Crouch
UNSW Sydney
- **Philippines:** Professor Maria Ela L. Atienza
University of the Philippines, Diliman
- **Singapore:** Dr Elvin Ong
National University of Singapore
- **Thailand:** Professor Duncan McCargo
University of Copenhagen

Key themes emerging from the forum included the ongoing response to COVID-19 in the region and the impact on government, as well as reflections on social and political tensions that have emerged over the past year. The pandemic has not only restricted movement but also posed serious questions about how governments attempt to control and coerce citizens. Covering a vast array of topics, the talks ranged from discussing civil unrest in Myanmar, to the general election in Singapore, and a host of other ongoing situations that are currently unfolding.

Each presentation was followed by questions from the audience, allowing presenters to hone in on particular topics of viewer interest. With more questions asked than time available to answer them, the sessions certainly left viewers wanting more!

While the buzz and excitement of the usual in-person event was poignant for its absence, the webinar format did have its benefits, with a broad international audience joining our experts live for their presentations. In addition, videos from the presentations were available via a range of social media platforms, offering viewing opportunities for those unable to join us live. With close to 3,000 views just one week after the event took place, SSEAC's Politics in Action forum is now more popular than ever.

Catch up on all the talks on the [SSEAC website](#), [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#)!

Singapore's GE2020: The real watershed election?

SSEAC, together with the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia, convened a panel of experts to discuss Singapore's controversial 2020 general elections.

General elections were held in Singapore on 10 July 2020, with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) winning its 13th consecutive election since independence. However, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong did not win the strong mandate he had hoped for. Instead, the PAP experienced a drop in popular support while the opposition Workers' Party enjoyed its best performance ever.

The term 'watershed' has become a euphemism for every general election in Singapore in which the opposition has made gains. What made the 2020 general election so significant, however, was that the opposition gains were so unexpected. Was this, therefore, the real watershed election for Singapore?

To discuss these issues, SSEAC partnered with the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia (MASSA) to convene a panel of expert speakers on 11 September 2020. Moderated by Hoe-Yeong Loke (independent), the live online panel featured Associate Professor Michael Barr (Flinders University), Associate Professor Terence Lee (Murdoch University), Professor Lily Zubaidah Rahim (Monash University), and Associate Professor Kenneth Paul Tan (National University of Singapore).

Associate Professor Tan began by observing that the PAP's extended incumbency has made reform impossible. Whereas the PAP's original paternalism was forged in heroic times, it has since become entrenched

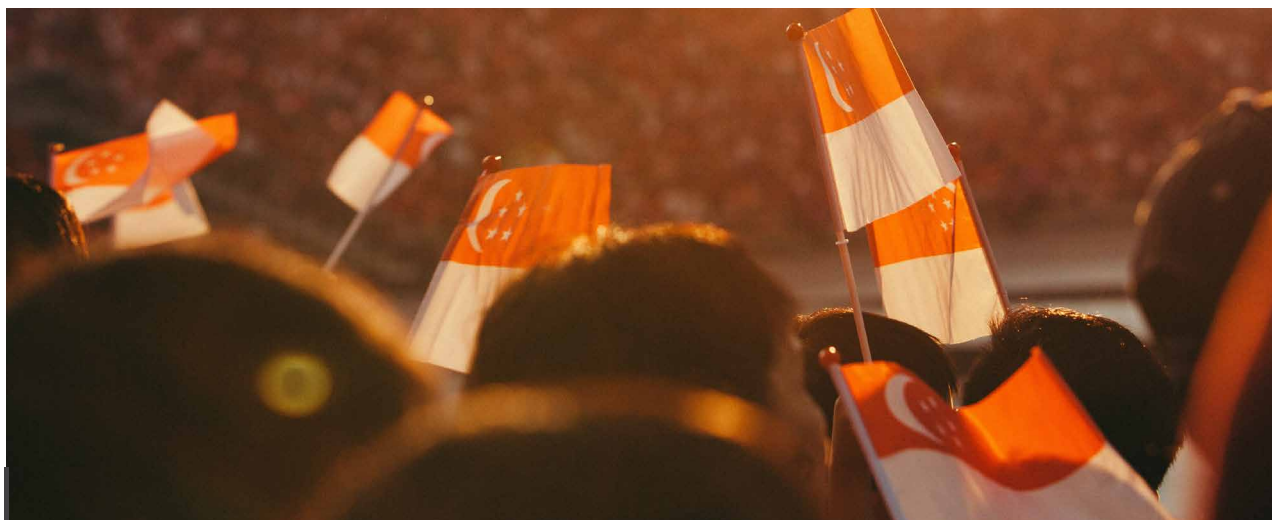
in a way that is less inspiring and less transformative, and that confuses dogmatism with pragmatism. Instead, Associate Professor Tan suggested, we are witnessing the fracturing, and indeed the implosion, of the elite.

Professor Rahim, meanwhile, drew attention to the need to reimagine Singapore. Even before the election, national debates were ongoing about whether Singapore's authoritarian governance arrangements are suited to the development of a sophisticated knowledge economy. Fundamental questions also remain about social justice, economic and political equality, and citizenship rights.

Associate Professor Barr provided a historical perspective, pointing to developments in the 1980s and particularly the 1990s as the starting point for the PAP's current struggles. In particular, he noted the technocratic legacy evident in the current generation of PAP leaders, characterised by a lack of innovation and creativity.

Finally, Associate Professor Lee focused on the influence of media policy on the election, including Singapore's controversial Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act.

The panel discussion was followed by a lively question and answer session with the audience. The event was livestreamed on the SSEAC Facebook page, and the recording is available [there](#) and on [YouTube](#).



Doing fieldwork in the time of COVID-19

Recognising the challenges and limitations of using field-based methods to conduct research in the context of a global pandemic, SSEAC brought together some of its most experienced scholars to identify new opportunities that may present themselves instead.

Throughout 2020, researchers who rely on fieldwork for their data collection were seriously affected by the combination of travel restrictions, reduced budgets and health considerations associated with the global pandemic. While some scholars were able to shift their projects online, many others were compelled to re-evaluate the feasibility of their research plans altogether.

In August 2020, SSEAC convened an online workshop for University of Sydney scholars whose fieldwork-based research in Southeast Asia had been impacted by the pandemic. The workshop recognised the challenges and limitations of using field-based methods, and the uncertainty around when fieldwork may be possible again, and in what form. But it also asked what opportunities might present themselves, what strategies researchers could use to identify and capitalise on new research methods, and what these changes might mean for knowledge production in the future.

In the opening session, Professor David Guest (School of Life and Environmental Sciences), Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson (School of Geosciences) and Dr Aim Sinpeng (School of Social and Political Sciences) reflected on what was required to adapt to 'the new normal'. One of the key issues arising related to capacity building, with speakers emphasising the value of building sustainable collaborations from pre-existing relationships.

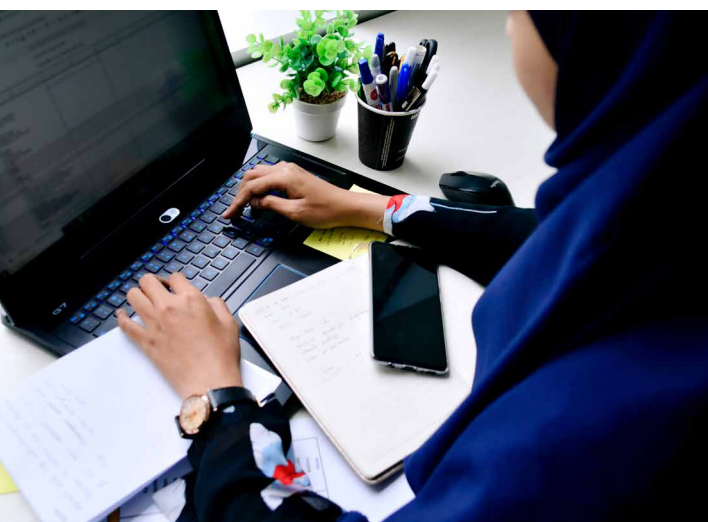
In session two, Dr Justin Beardsley (Marie Bashir Institute), Dr Sophie Chao (School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry) and Dr Josh Stenberg (School of Languages and Cultures) explored alternatives to traditional fieldwork, such as engaging local researchers, skilling-up with online interview techniques, exploring creative data collection ideas, and using different types of secondary data. As they observed, stepping back from field-based research had created space for and empowered in-country scholars to become more involved in collaborative projects. The speakers also encouraged workshop participants to use this time to consolidate their language skills.

The final session, with Professor Michele Ford (SSEAC), Associate Professor Holly High (School of Social and Political Sciences) and Dr Aaron Opdyke (School of Civil Engineering), focused on the long-term impact of researchers' experiences during the pandemic on knowledge production. As the speakers suggested, limitations on fieldwork represent a chance to address the problems of extractive research through recognising shared responsibility in research partnerships, while also prompting a fundamental reconsideration of methodological assumptions in certain disciplines.

Each session was supplemented by small group discussions in breakout rooms, and the use of innovative technologies that enabled participants to share their reflections, identify strategies to overcome these challenges, and discuss potential benefits and opportunities for their research partnerships.

"I have never been to an online seminar that was as engaging or well organised. I am now brimming with ideas about new research directions."

Dr Kristy Ward





#WhatsHappeningInThailand: Youths in revolt

Armed with smartphones, face masks and three-finger salutes, young people all over Thailand have been leading the country's largest anti-government protests in decades. SSEAC partnered with the Department of Government and International Relations for a panel discussion to shed light on these events.

Seeming to emerge out of nowhere, millennials and Gen Z took to the streets and to social media to make radical demands to reform the country's politics, economy and the monarchy. These protests were the country's largest anti-government protests in decades.

To shed light on these events, SSEAC partnered with the Department of Government and International Relations for an online panel discussion that examined the protests from a diverse range of perspectives.

History has played an important role in fuelling the protests. But, as Associate Professor Patrick Jory from the University of Queensland observed, this appears to be a radically different type of history to that which has traditionally been taught in Thailand's schools. The past two decades has seen a rise in publications that de-centre the role of the Thai monarchy, with sales of history and politics books doubling since the 2014 coup.

Dr Gregory Raymond from the Australian National University reflected on the significance of the protests from the perspective of the military and the monarchy. In particular, Dr Raymond examined a 2019 decision by the Future Forward Party to oppose the transfer of two Regiments of the King's Guard to the Royal Security Command. This extraordinary public act drew attention to one of the most sensitive issues in the Kingdom, that of the relationship between the monarchy and the military.

The protests have been widely represented as indicating a generational divide. The University of Sydney's Dr Gavan Butler examined this divide, noting the disdain with which the youth have been met by their elders. At the same time, these are children who share material interests with the older generation. Such commonalities raise questions about how durable a generational opposition can be.

Dr Chavalin Svetanant from Macquarie University examined the language of the protestors, characterising it as impolite, satirical, and coded. As she argued, this protest language is deployed strategically. Language that is offensive and rude, for example, is a way for the protestors to challenge the normatively polite and hierarchical Thai language.

Social media has played a key role in mobilising these anti-government protests. In particular, the University of Sydney's Dr Aim Sinpeng drew attention to the role of Twitter, which has emerged as a critical space for political mobilisation in Thailand.

Assistant Professor Jacob Ricks from Singapore Management University concluded formal proceedings by looking at grievances against the Prayuth regime from the perspectives of rice farmers.

The panel was followed by a lively discussion, with questions from an engaged online audience. You can catch up on this discussion on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).

Social media, grassroots activism and disinformation

Delving into the paradox of social media as a powerful tool that has the potential for both repression and liberation, SSEAC hosted a live webinar to discuss the role of social media in Southeast Asian politics.

Social media has become a crucial avenue for political discourse in Southeast Asia, given its potential as a 'liberation technology' in both democratising and authoritarian states. Yet the growing decline in internet freedom and increasingly repressive and manipulative use of social media tools by governments mean that social media is now an essential platform for control. 'Disinformation' and 'fake news' production is growing rapidly, and, while national governments are creating laws that attempt to address this trend, these efforts often only serve to exacerbate the situation of state control.

How did social media shift from being a vibrant space for grassroots activism to becoming a tool for disinformation? Who were the main actors in this transition: governments, citizens or the platforms themselves? Can reformists 'reclaim' the digital public sphere? And if so, how?

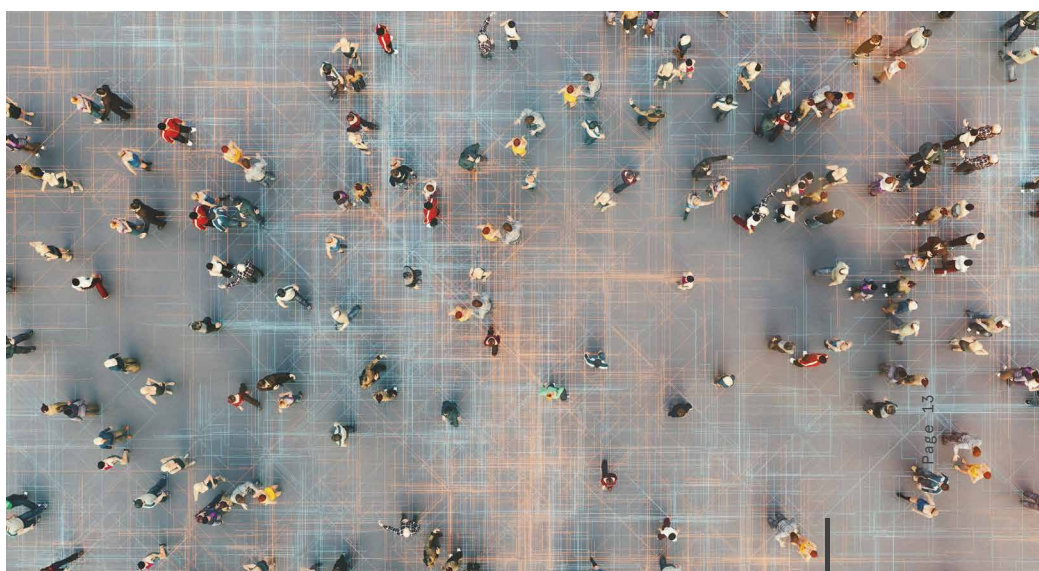
To address these questions, SSEAC convened a live public webinar on 30 November 2020. The webinar featured Dr Aim Sinpeng (The University of Sydney) and Dr Ross Tapsell (Australian National University), whose new co-edited book, *From Grassroots Activism to Disinformation: Social Media in Southeast Asia* (ISEAS Publishing, 2020), directly addresses social media in a Southeast Asian political context. They were joined by Dr Amelia Johns (University of Technology Sydney), who chaired the discussion that followed.

The panel drew attention to the sweeping paradigm shift that has taken place in Southeast Asia in relation to social media. Whereas platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were initially adopted by pro-democracy activists, disenfranchised citizens and opposition figures to voice resistance, they have now become a tool of state control in support of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. Rather than reducing hate speech and fake news, new laws regulating social media across Southeast Asia instead lend themselves to political manipulation.

Health disinformation has become particularly pronounced throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with potentially devastating consequences for social media users. This serves to highlight the role of the region's governments in providing accurate information to their citizens. Social media companies also have responsibilities, through their business models, to promote digital literacy in the region. Panellists also noted the role of digital labourers in manipulating online discourses, and the need to raise awareness about the role cyber troops play in shaping information flows.

The webinar attracted significant interest, with over 300 people watching on Zoom and many more watching the Facebook livestream. You can catch up on this discussion on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).

How did social media begin as a vibrant space for grassroots activism to becoming a tool for disinformation? Who were the main actors in this transition: governments, citizens or the platforms themselves? Can reformists 'reclaim' the digital public sphere? And if so, how?





Fighting Fear: #whatshappeninginmyanmar

Since the military seized power on 1 February 2021, art has played a central role in Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement. SSEAC partnered with a local gallery to celebrate some of the artists on the frontline of Myanmar's protests.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar prompted an outpouring of local protest art, including posters, videos and other visual responses. A selection of such artworks was displayed in the *Fighting Fear: #whatshappeninginmyanmar* social art exhibition at [Sydney's 16albermarle Project Space](#), the title of which riffed off a popular hashtag on social media. The exhibition was curated in partnership with [Myanm/art](#), a contemporary art space in Yangon, in solidarity with the artists, activists and art workers of Myanmar as they have worked online and on the streets to support the Civil Disobedience Movement.

To coincide with the exhibition's closing in June, SSEAC hosted an event for its members at 16albermarle Project Space that drew attention to these artworks while also providing an opportunity to hear from Myanmar activists and researchers in Sydney.

John Cruthers, Director of 16albermarle Project Space, welcomed guests to the exhibition, noting the gallery's particular interest in Southeast Asia-focused exhibitions. As he observed, *Fighting Fear* sought to address the critical relationship between art, culture and democracy in a Myanmar context.

Sophia Sarkis, a member of Sydney's Myanmar community and outspoken political activist, then shared her testimony from Australia.

She spoke about her experiences growing up in Myanmar, where she witnessed political violence as a child, before moving to Australia as a refugee. Now based in Sydney and with a young family of her own, she continues to advocate for political freedom and social justice in her homeland. While acknowledging the diaspora's feelings of helplessness, Sophia highlighted the opportunities afforded by living overseas and encouraged the audience to demand action from the Australian Government.

Dr Susan Banki (The University of Sydney) concluded formal proceedings by sharing her insights on the political situation in Myanmar. Determined to end on a positive note, she praised the new generation of protesters who have not backed down even as violence escalates, and urged those of us watching from the sidelines not to be complacent. She called for greater awareness of the coup, including through international exhibitions such as this one that showcase the relationship between art and activism.

Participants then mingled with each other while viewing the exhibition, which included works by artists 882021, Baka, Bart Was Not Here, Emily Phyo, Ko Latt, Ku Kue, Kyaw Htoo Bala, Richie Htet, Soe Yu Nwe, Sawangwongse Yawnghwe and Thee Oo. These works shared a common theme, namely the demand to urgently reinstate Myanmar's democratically elected leaders.



Other events

SSEAC hosts a wide variety of events each year, reflecting the diverse interests of our clusters and our membership.

Every year, we partner with institutions across the University and beyond to draw together a calendar of high-impact events that showcase the depth and breadth of our expertise on Southeast Asia. We also serve as a focal point for visiting scholars and experts on the region to share their research and engagement with the University.

While opportunities to host in-person activities and events have been curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, these restrictions have not prevented SSEAC from continuing to showcase our leading researchers of Southeast Asia through a variety of innovative events and activities.

Together with the Sydney Vietnam Initiative, SSEAC held the second Sydney Vietnam Symposium on 24 September 2020. Led by Professor Gregory Fox, researchers, educators and students from across all faculties and schools with an academic interest in Vietnam showcased ongoing collaborative research being undertaken in Vietnam and explored opportunities for new cross-disciplinary collaboration in research and education.

Partnering with [Academia.SG](https://www.academia.sg/), SSEAC hosted *The Storytelling State: Performing Life Histories in Singapore* on 5 February 2021. In this special webinar, Honorary Affiliate Dr Cheng Nien Yuan discussed her research on Singapore's development into a storytelling state over the last decade, in conversation with Assistant Professor Charlene Rajendran.

On 18 March 2021, SSEAC partnered with the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia (MASSA) and World Scientific to launch *Journey in Blue: A Peek into the Workers' Party of Singapore*, a landmark book by Yee Jenn Jong, a former Non-constituency Member of Parliament of the Workers' Party. Yee was joined in conversation with London-based political analyst Hoe-Yeong Loke, and revealed the inner workings of Singapore's leading opposition party, as it thrives in a landscape dominated by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) for over six decades.

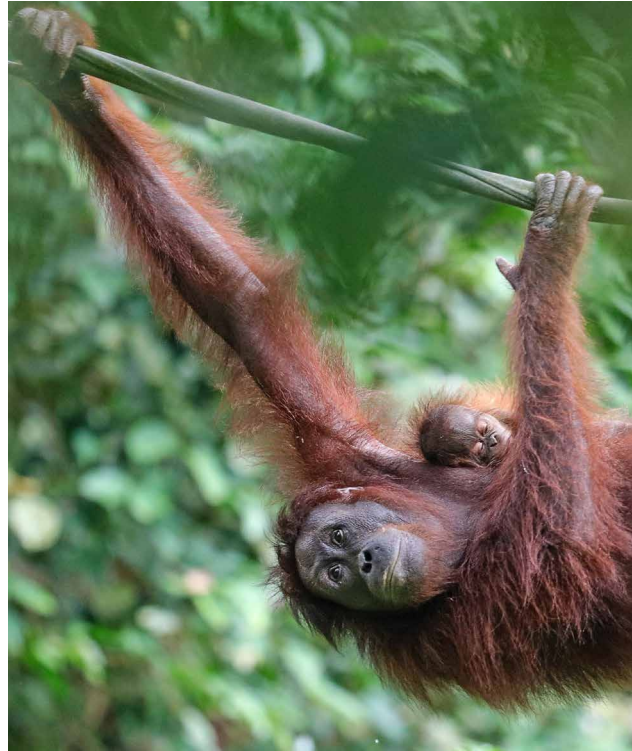
The results of our object-based learning workshops for undergraduates culminated in the launch of student-curated exhibitions at the Chau Chak Wing Museum on 1 April 2021 (pictured below).





The launch was attended by students, their guests, and academic engagement curators from the Museum. The success of these object-based learning workshops resulted in similar offerings being rolled out to our postgraduate students and academics, themed around our five research clusters. SSEAC also offered a special object-based learning workshop to staff within the Research Portfolio. Together, these workshops presented a unique opportunity to engage with Southeast Asia through its material and visual culture, and to showcase the new Chau Chak Wing Museum as a valuable teaching and research resource.

Throughout April, SSEAC's inaugural Webinar Series brought together our best and brightest health scholars from across the University. Dr Ngatho Mugo launched the series on 8 April with a presentation on the cultural perspectives and experiences of female genital mutilation / cutting among communities in New South Wales, including communities from Southeast Asia. The following week, Dr Justin Beardsley shared his research on fungal pathogens, specifically how agricultural azole use is driving antifungal resistance in Vietnam. On 22 April, Associate Professor Navneet Dhand spoke about his experiences training animal disease detectives in the Asia-Pacific to prevent the next pandemic. Finally, Dr Shannon McKinn presented on community experiences of COVID-19 prevention and infection in Vietnam through the lens of the media. You can watch these talks on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).



In May, the Webinar Series focused on Environment and Resources. On 13 May, Dr Aaron Opdyke shifted our attention to the Philippines, where he looked at disaster risk reduction at the nexus of local and scientific knowledge. For World Bee Day on 20 May, Dr Rosalyn Gloag took us into the world of the Asian honey bee to examine the genetic paradox of invasive species. From bees to volcanoes, Dr Sabin Zahirovic shared his work on the geological evolution of Southeast Asia and the region's tectonic influence on climate, resources and natural hazards. Dr June Rubis wrapped up the Environment and Resources focus by advocating for a decolonial Indigenous approach to orangutan conservation in Malaysia. You can catch up on all the talks on [Facebook](#).

In June, the series turned to the theme of State and Society. Dr Rosemary Grey examined wartime sexual violence against men, reflecting on her efforts to make sense of the silences in Cambodia's war crimes tribunal. Dr Aim Sinpeng then took us to Thailand to discuss her work on Thailand's state-controlled information operations. Watch the talks on [Facebook](#).

Also in June, SSEAC hosted a well-attended webinar by Patrick Burgess, co-founder of [Asia Justice and Rights \(AJAR\)](#), who explored the links between violent extremism and past mass crimes, and discussed how transitional justice can help prevent the growth of violent extremism in Southeast Asia. You can watch the talk [here](#).



Fostering high-impact research

The Sydney Southeast Asia Centre unites academics across all disciplines to produce high-impact research and engagement with one of the world's fastest growing regions.

Over the years, Southeast Asia-focused researchers at the University of Sydney have performed very well in the national competitive grant schemes run by the Australian Research Council (ARC), the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC).

In the last 12 months, the following SSEAC members have been awarded new ARC, ACIAR and NHMRC grants on Southeast Asia-related topics:

- **Professor Adrian Vickers**, whose team was awarded a Discovery Project grant for a project on Australia's multilingual archives, which includes a focus on sources in Bahasa Indonesia
- **Professor Michele Ford** and **Dr Kristy Ward**, who were awarded a Linkage Project grant to combat gender-based violence in the workplace in Cambodia
- **Professor Daniel Tan** and **Dr Van Touch**, who received an ACIAR grant that builds on SSEAC-funded research to improve small-scale farming resilience in northwest Cambodia
- **Dr Justin Beardsley**, who drew on previous research funded by SSEAC to secure an NHMRC Investigator grant to develop new approaches to advance chronic pulmonary aspergillus diagnosis and treatment

In addition, one Future Fellowship candidate and three DECRA candidates, all of whom participated in the SSEAC Fellowship Hothouse, were successful:

- **Associate Professor Holly High**, who secured an ARC Future Fellowship to expand her anthropological work looking at reproductive health in Lao PDR

- **Dr Rosemary Grey**, who was awarded a DECRA for her project on gender justice in Cambodia
- **Dr Josh Stenberg**, who secured a DECRA to investigate Sino-Southeast Asian self-representation in performance arts
- **Dr Sophie Webber**, who was awarded a DECRA for her work on urban resilience in the Asia-Pacific, with Indonesia as one of the case studies

A second Future Fellowship candidate, **Associate Professor Sonja van Wichelen**, also participated in the Hothouse. Although she was unsuccessful, she used the application she developed to secure a Visiting Scholar appointment at the Institute of Advanced Study in Princeton.

Another exciting project is one funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, aiming to lift people out of poverty through the development of digital finance schemes. Over the next three years, **Dr Russell Toth** will be working with Innovations for Poverty Action on interoperable digital financial systems in Myanmar.

Longstanding SSEAC member **Dr Aim Sinpeng** successfully secured funding from both Facebook and the Australian Department of Defence to support her work developing a better understanding of digital media's role in information warfare, notably through the spread of hate speech, misinformation and disinformation.

Details of these projects appear in the pages that follow. We hope you join us in congratulating these researchers, and the many other outstanding scholars in SSEAC, on their grant success in 2020–21.

The SSEAC Hothouse Trifecta: Triple DECRA success

Three emerging scholars have secured prestigious Discovery Early Career Research Awards (DECRA) after participating in SSEAC's Australian Research Council (ARC) Fellowship Hothouse in 2019-2020.

Dr Rosemary Grey, Sydney Law School

For the last decade, Dr Rosemary Grey has strived to make gender-based crimes more visible in international war crime trials. Her work has taken her around the world, collaborating with international organisations, law enforcement, advocacy groups and leading researchers to achieve long-overdue reform. In 2018-2019, she conducted the first comprehensive gender assessment of the United Nations-backed 'Khmer Rouge Tribunal', whose mandate is to prosecute genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and other offences committed in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979.

With this ARC funding, Dr Grey hopes to further her work on gender justice in Cambodia by critically examining the international community's response to forced pregnancy and other crimes that violate reproductive rights during the Khmer Rouge era. "The issue at the heart of this project – reproductive autonomy – is critically important in both times of war and times of peace", says Dr Grey.



Dr Josh Stenberg, School of Languages and Cultures

As a scholar of Southeast Asian performance arts and literature, Dr Josh Stenberg's work examines the intersection of ethnic and political identity through the cultural performance of minority ethnic communities. From glove puppets of Chinese origin and Hakka religious processions, to wartime political theatre and contemporary choirs and dance groups, the diverse performance practices of ethnic Chinese communities throughout Southeast Asia highlight the complex sense of identity of a group that is often considered solely in socioeconomic terms.

Dr Stenberg's DECRA will take a closer look at Sino-Southeast Asian self-representation in performance arts and China's soft power in the region. In showing the fluidity and adaptability of Sino-Southeast Asian identities as expressed in performance and public display, Dr Stenberg enriches our understanding of Southeast Asian cultures and art forms, Southeast Asian Chinese identities, and transnational cultural exchanges.



Dr Sophie Webber, School of Geosciences

In a world obsessed with economic growth but struggling with the impacts of climate change, Southeast Asia has fast become a microcosm of the many stresses and challenges associated with fast and uncontrolled infrastructure development. As a human geographer, Dr Sophie Webber has a particular interest in urban governance and the political economies of climate change.

Through her DECRA, Dr Webber will investigate the social, economic and environmental impacts of large-scale sand and water extraction to build protective infrastructure in vulnerable cities. Through a qualitative study of climate change hotspots in Indonesia and Fiji, this project will generate new knowledge about the potentials and limits of urban resilience infrastructure to protect cities against climate change.



If you'd like to find out more about these scholars' research, listen to our [SSEAC Stories](#) podcasts with each of them.

Combating gender-based violence in Cambodia

SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford and SSEAC Postdoctoral Research Associate Dr Kristy Ward have secured a prestigious ARC Linkage Project grant to address gender-based violence in the workplace in Cambodia.

SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford and SSEAC Postdoctoral Research Associate Dr Kristy Ward have been awarded \$239,777 by the Australian Research Council (ARC) for a project that aims to address gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace in Cambodia's construction sector.

Working in partnership with Union Aid Abroad – APHEDA, the Building and Wood Workers' International, and the Solidarity Center, the project aims to produce the first systematic assessment of gender-based violence in Cambodia's construction sector, which employs an unusually high percentage of women.

Using quantitative and qualitative methods, Professor Ford and Dr Ward will investigate the causes and manifestations of workplace GBV and analyse local and international labour movement actors' efforts to

combat it, with a focus on how Cambodia's cultural, political and economic context influences local actors' uptake of international norms. In addition to academic benefits, this analysis will assist partner organisations to strengthen their programs and better equip local unions to tackle workplace GBV.

Professor Ford is a labour sociologist who has worked on local labour movements and their relationships with the international labour movement in several Southeast Asian countries. Professor Ford has held several other ARC grants, including a 2018 Discovery Project grant for a study of garment worker responses to Myanmar's increasing integration into the global production networks of leisurewear and fast fashion brands like Adidas, H&M and Zara.

Dr Ward joined the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre as a Postdoctoral Research Associate in 2019. Her research interests include labour activism, gender and organised labour, and the politics of aid, with a particular focus on Cambodia. Dr Ward's current research on worker agency and representation examines why, how and to what effect Cambodian workers mobilise collectively under comparative regulatory regimes.

Prior to joining the University of Sydney, Dr Ward taught several subjects in Development Studies at UNSW Sydney, where she completed her PhD. She has also worked with various non-government organisations in evaluation, project development, and consultancy roles in both Australia and Southeast Asia.



A group of construction workers at a construction site in Takeo Province, Cambodia.
© ILO / Khem Sovannara

Charting the path to better health and agriculture

Dr Justin Beardsley is leading cutting-edge research at the crossroads of health and agricultural practices that aims to promote better human health and food security in Vietnam.



Fungal infections are amongst the deadliest infectious diseases in the world. They result in more deaths than malaria, and almost as many as tuberculosis. Yet they are often overlooked, receiving less research attention and funding than viral or bacterial infections. SSEAC member Dr Justin Beardsley is addressing that omission through his research on fungal infections.

In this work, Dr Beardsley draws on his experience as an infectious disease expert and a clinical researcher to better understand fungal infections and how they complicate other diseases. Dr Beardsley spent five years at the Oxford University Clinical Research Unit in Ho Chi Minh City, where he completed his PhD on fungal infections in Vietnam. Since joining the University of Sydney in 2018, he has benefited from multiple seed grants through SSEAC that allowed him to continue his work in Vietnam.

In 2020, Dr Beardsley took his research to the next level when he was awarded a prestigious National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) grant of \$750,000 to examine the disease burden of chronic pulmonary aspergillosis in tuberculosis survivors and advance diagnosis and treatment.

The same year, Dr Beardsley became the lead of a team of researchers and clinicians from the University of Sydney's [FungiSphere Node](#) and the [Australian & New Zealand Mycoses Interest Group \(ANZMIG\)](#) to develop a priority pathogen list for fungi for the World Health Organization.

Over the next five years he will continue to research the complex interactions between fungi, humans, animals, and the environment and how they impact human health, especially with relation to tuberculosis and anti-fungal resistance. Based primarily at the University of Sydney's Marie Bashir Institute, but spending extended periods in Vietnam, he will investigate this regional and global threat from a One Health perspective, working to understand the drivers of fungal infections and the best way to treat them.

Dr Beardsley has also received funding from the Marie Bashir Institute and the Sydney Institute of Agriculture to support his research into anti-fungal resistance in environmental samples of *Aspergillus* in Vietnam. Through this One Health project, Dr Beardsley works with a team of researchers from agricultural and veterinary backgrounds based both in Sydney and Vietnam. Together they are investigating the balance between food security and human health, and how agricultural practices are contributing to resistant fungal infections.

If you'd like to find out more about Dr Beardsley's work, listen to our SSEAC Stories podcast *Of Rice and Men: How Food Production is Driving Antimicrobial Resistance amongst Fungi in Vietnam* where he speaks about the problem of resistant fungal infections in Vietnam, describing how agricultural practices are contributing, and what can be done to mitigate the risks.

Leading animal health management in Timor-Leste

With funding from the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research, SSEAC academics are leading animal health management projects at the forefront of veterinary biosecurity and epidemiology research.

In February 2020, Associate Professor Paul Hick and Associate Professor Jenny-Ann Toribio from the Sydney School of Veterinary Science were awarded an Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) grant worth \$250,000 focusing on improving animal health surveillance in Timor-Leste. The one-year project originally focused on building capacity in the veterinary service on animal disease detection at the provincial level, with the goal of establishing practical recommendations to strengthen passive surveillance of animal disease. The project was forced to evolve as an outbreak of African Swine Fever emerged alongside the global COVID-19 pandemic.

In Timor-Leste, pigs are ubiquitous. Over seventy per cent of families own pigs. Valued at approximately US\$1000/ adult pig, these creatures are a living bank. They are culturally important, with their slaughter at ceremonies bringing together large groups of people. Their cultural role, alongside their function as social and economic assets to Timorese families, speaks to the critical role that good pig health has to Timorese society. But in late 2019, an outbreak of the highly virulent and deadly African Swine Fever emerged in Timor-Leste, killing large numbers of pigs and forcing Timorese smallholders to rapidly change their pig management practices. This virus, which kills 80–100 percent of infected animals, causes a high fever, skin lesions, and malaise, and leaves whole populations dead within days. The virus originated in Africa, and from 2018 began circulating around the Southeast Asia region.

As the African Swine Fever outbreak emerged, Associate Professors Hick and Toribio began working with para veterinarians and local farmers to identify best practice strategies for supporting response to illness in pigs in rural communities in the context of the two pandemics. Specifically, they are working with the Timorese Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) and Dr Joanne Millar (Charles Sturt University) to improve pig health by focusing on the roles of regional veterinary technicians who are key to improving livelihoods from regional small-scale agriculture.



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“SSEAC provided a forum for sharing experiences and lessons with other colleagues working in Timor-Leste. These insights into the local situation with COVID-19 and its broad impact on government activities in Dili and throughout the municipalities were helpful to better understand the challenges faced by our colleagues in MAF.”

Associate Professor Jenny-Ann Toribio

Workshops to empower veterinary technicians have been informed by surveys to identify barriers to disease reporting by farmers. A knowledge sharing approach is being used to develop best practice preventative health and disease outbreak investigation approaches together with exercises in enhanced community engagement to build trust between farmers and the veterinary service.

For more details about this project, listen to our *SSEAC Stories* podcasts *Working with Government in Timor-Leste* featuring Associate Professor Jenny-Ann Toribio and *Combating African Swine Fever in Timor-Leste* featuring Associate Professor Paul Hick.

Reducing poverty in Myanmar

A project funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is helping lift people out of poverty through the development of digital finance schemes in Myanmar.



Dr Russell Toth, Senior Lecturer in Economics at the University of Sydney, is co-academic lead of a three-year project awarded US\$3.5 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The project, managed by Innovations for Poverty Action, is focused on interoperable digital financial systems in emerging markets such as Myanmar and Tanzania.

While financial inclusion has grown rapidly in emerging markets, users are typically divided between various mobile money providers and microfinance institutions. Interoperable payments systems make it possible to clear payments between users of different financial service providers, with the potential to improve consumer welfare and economic efficiency. Other than person-to-person payments, they make other types of financial transactions possible.

For example, they enable governments to deliver money digitally and reduce 'leakage' in social welfare programs, and to facilitate cash-like consumer-to-merchant payment systems using QR codes. They can increase competition between digital financial service providers, because innovative providers can offer services across an interoperable network rather than needing to build up their own retail infrastructure.

Dr Toth will work with researchers from the National University of Singapore and the College of William and Mary to examine the impact of such systems on emerging economies in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

In Myanmar, Dr Toth hopes to build on his previous work on digital finance, including studies on the impacts of digital microcredit loans on rural rice farmers, as well as the impacts of digital small and medium enterprise loans for mobile money agents.

This previous work has shown the unique ways that farmers and small business owners use digital finance products, and the way these products can improve business outcomes. Importantly, this work has also demonstrated how digital credit products can be more inclusive, for instance by allowing women and minority groups the ability to benefit from a more objective credit scoring process.

The February 2021 coup in Myanmar has delayed progress on a microfinance industry-focused interoperable payments network, though remarkably the project is still proceeding, now as an industry-driven effort. It is hoped that in spite of political unrest it will still be possible to carry out research on this important case enabling microfinance repayments and loan disbursements. The project team is also exploring an interoperability deployment in the Philippines focused on international remittances, which have heavily relied on digital finance systems during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For more details about Dr Toth's work, you can listen to the *SSEAC Stories* podcast with him titled *Reducing Poverty through Digital Finance Schemes in Myanmar*.

Exposing the dark side of social media

Dr Aim Sinpeng questions the impact of digital media use in Southeast Asia on prospects for democratisation and human rights in a region known for its authoritarian resilience.

The rise of digital communication has increased global connectivity and the ease of sharing information online. The latest news is just a click away for the billions of people with access to social and news media sites. But, as we well know, there are pros and cons to social media.

Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter can proliferate hate speech and help communities form around negative or hurtful ideas. Moreover, not all information on the internet is reliable and misinformation can spread like wildfire. This is where longstanding SSEAC member and Thailand Country Coordinator, Dr Aim Sinpeng, has recently been focusing her research efforts.

Dr Sinpeng has received funding grants to support her work developing a better understanding of how social media influences hate speech and misinformation. This includes a Facebook 2019 *Content Policy Research on Social Media Award* of over \$77,000 for the project *Facebook: Regulating Hate Speech in the Asia-Pacific*.

Working with Dr Fiona Martin (The University of Sydney), Professor Katharine Gelber and Dr Kirril Shields (both from the University of Queensland), Dr Sinpeng has conducted a thorough analysis of hate

speech against LGBTQ+ groups in several countries across the region including Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines.

As the first study of its kind, this project has provided insights that Facebook can use to refine its content moderation policies. Also considering the local contexts of various countries in the Asia-Pacific, the project offers targeted suggestions to help Facebook navigate hate speech moderation across different parts of the region. The project was also unique as one of the first non-computer science research projects to receive funding from Facebook.

Dr Sinpeng also received a grant from the Department of Defence in 2020, along with colleagues Professor Justin Hastings (The University of Sydney) and Professor Nitin Agarwal (University of Arkansas at Little Rock), to investigate misinformation and online foreign influence. This project aims to strengthen Australia's ability to identify and intercept information warfare through a better understanding of attack campaigns online. It uses the award-winning YouTube Tracker, a tool designed by Professor Agarwal and his team, to perform a 'cyber forensic analysis' of online content – exposing suspicious behaviours, key players, and otherwise hidden relationships between content across social media platforms.

The project has a particular focus on the Asia-Pacific region and has recently turned to the spread of misinformation related to COVID-19 and tensions in the South China Sea, with attack campaigns identified as heavily pro-China and anti-America.

“Hate speech and misinformation evolve so fast that algorithms struggle to keep up. Our research offers new and innovative ways to understand how foreign interferences work and impact Australia's national security.”

Dr Aim Sinpeng



Tackling the dangers of unregulated biotechnology

With recent breakthroughs bringing scientists closer than ever to engineering human genes, Associate Professor Sonja van Wichelen shines a light on the legal and ethical implications of biotechnology.

In 2020, SSEAC member Associate Professor Sonja van Wichelen was invited to join the prestigious Institute of Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton, United States of America. Appointment to the IAS is highly competitive and awarded only to the most exceptional researchers. Associate Professor van Wichelen was selected from more than 1,500 applications for membership worldwide. Past members include scientist Albert Einstein and anthropologist Clifford Geertz.

Associate Professor van Wichelen works at the intersection of legal anthropology, medical sociology and the social study of science. In her profoundly interdisciplinary research, she explores how new biomedical technologies are redefining society, law and politics in a globalising world. “From gene therapies to curing diseases to organ transplant aided by cryopreservation, revolutionary biotechnologies have attracted significant hype for their potential to improve the human condition – but their growing application raises legal and ethical questions that can only be answered with the help of humanities and social sciences research,” says Professor van Wichelen.

Associate Professor van Wichelen is based at the IAS until December 2021. Her focus while at the IAS is on the transfer of human biological material and the tensions between national and global medico-legal regulatory regimes in Indonesia. By developing an

anthropological understanding of regulatory cultures, she hopes to advance scholarship in the social study of law and biotechnology, and to provide a new conceptual account of how global regulatory orders translate outside the Global North. The research aligns with the IAS’s theme for 2020–2021 of ‘Science and the State’, in which the IAS will explore how states support, use, and regulate sciences, and how the sciences support the structure, function, and legitimacy of states. While at the IAS, Associate Professor van Wichelen is also collaborating with other visiting scholars from a diverse range of disciplines, including political science, philosophy, history, law, and economics.

Associate Professor van Wichelen’s appointment to the IAS followed her participation in the SSEAC Future Fellowship Hothouse Program in 2020. During her participation in the Hothouse program, Professor van Wichelen developed her Future Fellowship application on bioscience governance. This positioned her as highly competitive for IAS selection.

In addition to being an active member of SSEAC, Associate Professor van Wichelen is the director of the Biopolitics of Science Research Network and research leader of the BioHumanity Theme. She is co-editor of the *Palgrave Macmillan Biolegalities Book Series*, on the editorial board of *The Sociological Review*, and the book review editor of *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience*.

“The SSEAC Hothouse led by Professor Michele Ford was pivotal in helping me shape my research project with IAS Princeton.”

Associate Professor Sonja van Wichelen



Supporting research excellence

A hallmark of the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre is its support for academic and research excellence.

In the second half of 2020, SSEAC launched a targeted round of grants to support our researchers in light of the ongoing pandemic. The grants aimed to provide pathways for academics to reorient their research focus, allow their published papers on Southeast Asia in Q1 journals to be more accessible, and to improve language skills for academics and HDR students in a Southeast Asian language.

Grants awarded in the second half of 2020

Category	No. awarded	Countries
Pivot	2	Cambodia, Myanmar
Language	12	Indonesia, Myanmar, Vietnam
Open Access	3	Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Vietnam

Overcoming language barriers for better research

"After two decades of fieldwork in Indonesia, where language skills were invaluable for my ability to understand Indonesian society and culture, I found myself disadvantaged when I started a new project in rural Vietnam. I couldn't communicate directly with many of the households involved in my research and was continually missing the nuances of so many conversations.

"Through the SSEAC language grant, I have enrolled in online Vietnamese language lessons and am making (slow) progress. Language learning is a long-term commitment, but it is a journey along which cultural insights slowly unfold as you progress along. And of course, it's good fun. It has also helped build rapport with my Vietnamese colleagues, even though many of them are already fluent in English.

"It's never too late (or too early) in your career to learn a language, and it doesn't matter what discipline you're from, it adds so much more depth to your research."

Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson



Associate Professor Jeffrey Neilson recently completed an introductory Vietnamese language course thanks to a SSEAC Language Training Initiative grant.

Shining the spotlight on future research leaders

In 2021, the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre launched the SSEAC Writing Fellowship, designed to support outstanding early career academics to write an article related to Southeast Asia based on their PhD work.

The SSEAC Writing Fellowship is designed to support outstanding early career academics to write an article related to Southeast Asia based on their PhD work. Successful applicants receive mentoring opportunities and access to University of Sydney Library resources, and a grant of \$5,000 to assist them to carve out the time necessary to engage in this writing work. In 2021, our inaugural Writing Fellowship was awarded to Dr Jamie Wang (Gender and Cultural Studies) and Dr Paul-David Lutz (Anthropology).

Reimagining a City of Many Worlds

Dr Jamie Wang is a Research Affiliate in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. Her current research is at the intersection of environmental humanities, urban imaginaries, more-than-human studies, and sustainable development in the context of planetary urbanism, climate change and environmental injustice. Her work focuses on some of the many cultural, political, ethical and philosophical issues that arise in the pursuit of an ecological modernised urban future.

Drawing on her extensive fieldwork in Singapore, Dr Wang's article will explore the consequences, dangers and ethical implications of pursuing a singular narrative in Singapore's state-sponsored eco-modernised urban model – ultimately challenging the human-centred, high-tech, capitalist mode of urban development, and reimagining a more diverse and inclusive future.



'We Used to Have Lice' – Ethnicity and Internal Orientalism in Upland Laos

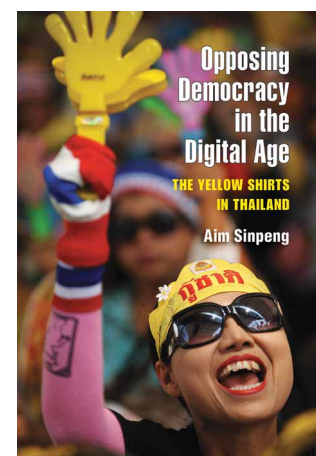
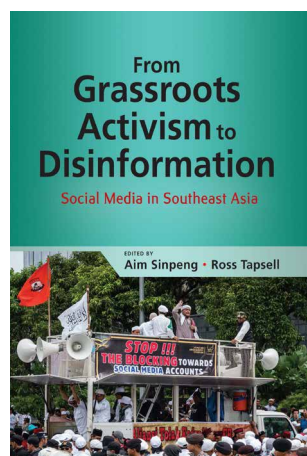
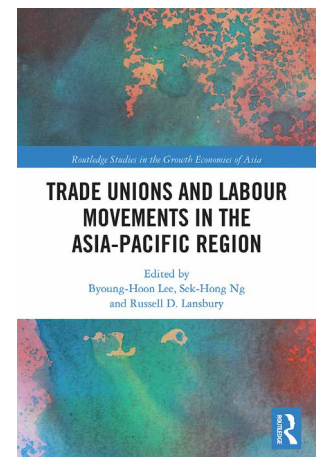
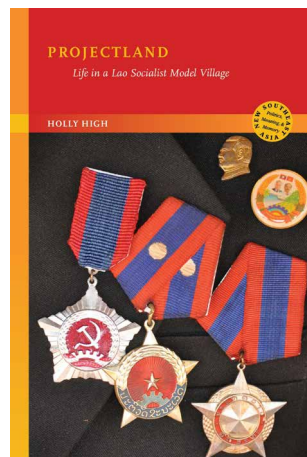
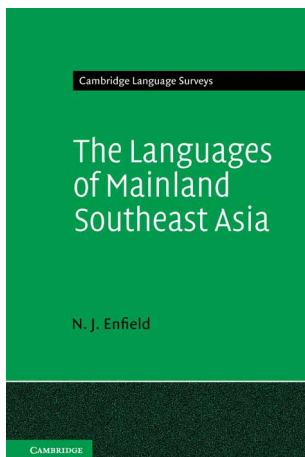
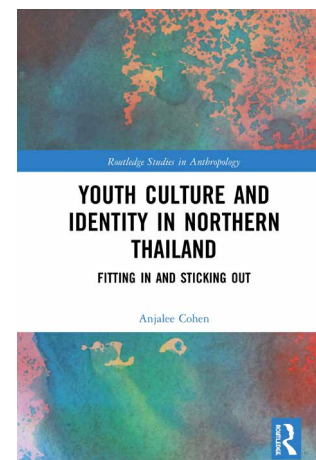
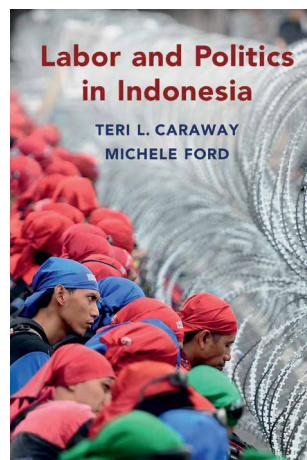
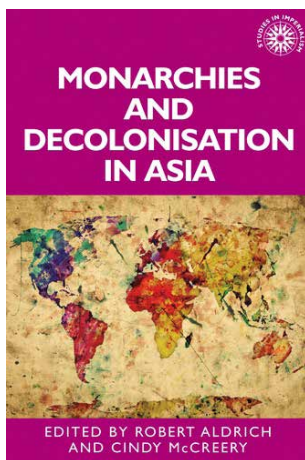
Dr Paul-David Lutz is an Honorary Associate at the University of Sydney's School of Social and Political Sciences. He received his PhD from the University of Sydney's Department of Anthropology. His thesis *Sert Has Gone* gives a 'once-removed' ethnographic history of the ethnic Khmu and Akha village of 'Sanjing' in Phongsali, northernmost Laos.

Dr Lutz's research provides an intimate ethnographic history of the multifaceted ways in which Laos' fast-paced modernisation has shaped the lives of upland Khmu peasants. Drawing on long-term fieldwork in the Khmu-Akha hamlet of Sanjing, Dr Lutz's article explores the historical, socio-economic and cultural factors shaping interethnic relations within contemporary upland Laos. This article adds critical nuance to a recent description of Laos as a country where intercultural competence is limited. It also makes empirical and conceptual contributions to wider scholarly themes, including ethnicity, 'modernity', identity, nationhood and multiculturalism – in Laos, Southeast Asia, and beyond.



Publishing in an extraordinary time: 2020–21 highlights

Despite the countless challenges we all faced in this tumultuous year, our members proved as resilient as ever, shifting the focus from fieldwork to the dissemination of their research findings through scholarly publications. Let's take a moment to look back on some of the publishing highlights of 2020–21.





Sharing our members' stories

In the continued context of the global pandemic, the Centre has continued to expand its *SSEAC Stories* podcast program and partnered with the US-based [New Books Network](#) to become [a special series](#).

From July 2020 until June 2021, we released a total of 49 new *SSEAC Stories* podcasts across our five thematic clusters, reaching over 60,000 downloads. You can find plenty more online – *SSEAC Stories* is available on all the main podcasting apps, including [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), [Google Podcasts](#), and more!



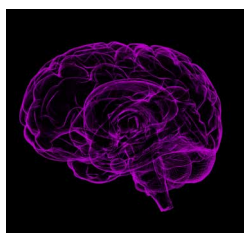
Addressing Environmental and Social Harm through Global Governance

As instruments of global governance, Multilateral Development Banks were created to lend developing states capital for economic growth and development that they could not access from private capital markets. Despite their positive aims, these international organisations have often come under fire and received harsh criticism for their lending practices on economic, political, environmental, and human rights grounds. Professor Susan Park talks about global governance and Multilateral Development Banks, with a specific focus on accountability mechanisms in the Asian Development Bank.



Beating Plastic Pollution in Timor-Leste

As environmental emergencies go, the explosion of plastic waste is right up there. With global plastic production exceeding 300 million tonnes each year, the world has generally looked at it as an unsightly menace to be removed, but Professor Thomas Maschmeyer has gone beyond that idea. He talks about his ground-breaking work developing catalytic technology that can recycle any kind of plastic and turn it into a valuable resource, and how he is helping Timor-Leste become the world's first plastics-neutral country.



Overcoming Motor Neuron Disease in Malaysia

Motor neuron disease (MND) is a devastating disease with no effective cure where the dying-off of motor nerves results in muscle weakness affecting an individual's ability to move, speak, swallow, perform daily activities and breathe. Professor Marina Kennerson and Professor Nortina Shahrizaila talk about their efforts to develop a research program for MND screening in Malaysia, which will pave the way for obtaining invaluable information of this lethal disease across Southeast Asia.



Lost Temples of the Jungle: A History of Mrauk-U

Deep in the jungles of Myanmar lie the remains of an ancient kingdom, the 15th-century royal city of Mrauk-U. Mrauk-U Township boasts a stunning rural landscape dotted with the hundreds of spires of stone temples, remnants of the former glories of the Arakan Kingdom. Dr Bob Hudson explores the turbulent history of the remote archaeological site of Mrauk-U, and explains how attempts to have it recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site are contributing to peacebuilding efforts in a region torn by civil conflict.



Death and Taxes: Indonesia's Smoking Problem

Indonesia has one of the highest smoking rates in the world and a poor record for implementing the public health measures needed to see these rates fall. Smoking is estimated to kill more than 225,000 Indonesians per year and contributes to many more deaths. Yet tobacco regulation has been highly contested in recent years. Dr Elisabeth Kramer delves into the myriad of challenges to tobacco control in Indonesia, from cultural to economic factors, and short-term political agendas.



Expanding international collaboration

A key function of SSEAC is to foster international networks of academic expertise on Southeast Asia.

While the pandemic prevented official visits and international delegations to partner institutions, in 2020-2021, SSEAC continued to develop close ties with key stakeholders in the study of Southeast Asia.

One of the outstanding successes of SSEAC's pandemic pivot was the [Indonesia Social Science Seminar Series \(IS4\)](#). Co-sponsored by SSEAC, the Cornell Southeast Asia Program (SEAP) and the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV), IS4 is a monthly virtual seminar series bringing together social science experts from across the globe to discuss pressing issues facing Indonesia. Launched in April 2021, the series was an instant success and has contributed to increasing the Centre's visibility in Europe, North America, and Asia.

The series' inaugural seminar on 30 April focused on the political language of Islamic populism, and featured Professor Vedi Hadiz (University of Melbourne), Dr Inaya Rakhmani (Universitas Indonesia), and Professor Nancy Smith-Hefner (Boston University). By combining political economy analysis with cultural political economy, Professor Hadiz and Dr Rakhmani argued that the political language of Islamic populism in Indonesia is shaped, mediated, and mobilised in intra-elite competition. While on the surface the deployment of religious symbols may indicate ideological contestations that signal a thriving democracy, it hints at competition over power and resources within established social alliances. The webinar attracted close to 400 registrations, while the video recordings have been watched over 1,000 times to date.

For the second IS4 webinar, Associate Professor Dinna Prapto Raharja (Binus University), Assistant Professor Diego Fossati (City University of Hong Kong) and Assistant Professor Amelia Liwe (Universitas Pelita Harapan) discussed the efficacy and popularity of initiatives aiming to keep Indonesia's National Health Insurance program (*Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional*, or JKN) accountable. Established in 2014 to unite a fragmented healthcare system, the JKN was initially hailed as a milestone policy towards the provision of more equitable care for all Indonesian citizens. Yet its administration fast became the focus of intense criticism, with government-issued accountability initiatives often denounced as ineffective.

Continuing the focus on state institutions, the third webinar in the series reflected on the impact of Indonesia's democratisation since 1999 on the civil service. Together, Associate Professor Jan Pierskalla (Ohio State University), Professor Tom Pepinsky (Cornell University) and Assistant Professor Jessica Soedirgo (University of Amsterdam) questioned whether electoral accountability increases the value of competence over personal loyalty, and whether that emphasis on meritocracy systematically translates to a reduction in patronage politics.

Preparations are currently underway to launch similar initiatives with a focus on the Philippines and Thailand, with a network of other centres of excellence in Southeast Asian studies.

Recordings of the IS4 webinars are available on [Facebook](#) and can also be accessed on [YouTube](#).

Building bridges across the seas

As maritime neighbours with a shared history, protecting and preserving Indonesia's wealth of maritime heritage is an important element of the Australia-Indonesia relationship. Thanks to a new capacity-building course, SSEAC is creating sustainable pathways for collaboration and engagement between the two countries.

Banten Bay is the final resting place for HMAS *Perth* (I), an Australian warship destroyed during the Battle of the Sunda Strait in 1942. In recent years, this wreck has become the focus of maritime heritage cooperation between Australia and Indonesia.

In 2020-2021, SSEAC built on these bilateral engagement activities by designing and delivering a short online course for 16 Indonesian undergraduate students on *Collaborative Approaches to Maritime Capacity-Building in Indonesia*. The course sought to identify and build capacity amongst the next generation of maritime archaeology and underwater cultural heritage scholars and practitioners in Indonesia.

Participants were recruited from the history and archaeology programs at four Indonesian Universities: Universitas Sultan Ageng Tirtayasa (Serang), Universitas Indonesia (Jakarta), Universitas Hasanuddin (Makassar) and Universitas Gadjah Mada (Yogyakarta).

Through a series of online modules, presentations, roundtables and tutorials, these students were able to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of managing and interpreting underwater cultural heritage in an Indonesian context.

Under the guidance of co-tutors Dr Natali Pearson (SSEAC) and Ms Zainab Tahir (Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries) and featuring expert speakers from both Indonesia and Australia, students were introduced

to key ideas and concepts in maritime archaeology and underwater cultural heritage, including the methods used by archaeologists to investigate shipwrecks and other underwater cultural heritage, and the archaeological principles underpinning these approaches.

The students also examined international and domestic regulatory frameworks, including a presentation by the UNESCO Jakarta Office on the 2001 Convention on the protection of the underwater cultural heritage. The example of HMAS *Perth* (I) was used throughout the course as a real-world case study on the complexities of managing sunken vessels.

An all-female panel led the discussion on mentoring and identifying career opportunities in underwater cultural heritage management. Students also had the opportunity to work with each other in small groups on a research topic of their choice, creating opportunities to explore an area of interest while also opening up new peer networks across Indonesia. At the conclusion of the course, in-country facilitators led site visits to a government warehouse of shipwreck artefacts in Jakarta, a 16th century Gowa fort in Makassar, and the Fort Vredenburg Museum in Yogyakarta.

The course was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade through the Australia-Indonesia Institute, with in-kind support from the Indonesian Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries and the Australian National Maritime Museum.



“The most valuable thing was the growth of new relationships between universities throughout Indonesia.”

Student participant



Archives of Sydney

James Cook (East Asia Centre)

James Cook (East Asia Centre)

The next generation of research excellence

The Sydney Southeast Asia Centre is committed to supporting emerging scholars of Southeast Asia. The Centre's professional development programs are creative and practical, and offer opportunities for higher degree by research students to develop their skills and broaden their networks.

Postgraduate Retreat

After a year of isolation and distance, the 2020 postgraduate retreat was more important than ever, providing a valuable opportunity for SSEAC's community of higher degree by research students to disconnect from the world around them and reconnect with each other.

The three-day program included structured writing time, facilitated workshops, and informal discussions and debriefing sessions. Professor Simon Butt (Sydney Law School) spoke to the students about writing and publishing strategies, and Dr Natali Pearson (SSEAC) led a session on giving and receiving feedback.

Students met each day in their work-in-progress groups to share and seek advice on specific writing challenges, and could also opt in to morning yoga and meditation sessions. Having made significant progress on their writing goal for the retreat, students were encouraged to set ambitious targets for the year ahead.

"The opportunity to have 'protected writing time' at this point in the year was so valuable and has helped me get back on track with my PhD timeline."

Student participant

Object-Based Workshops

In Semester One 2021, SSEAC ran an exciting object-based learning program with the University of Sydney's new Chau Chak Wing Museum that attracted undergraduate students from across the University. Over five weeks, students worked in small interdisciplinary groups to identify Southeast Asian objects from the museum's collection and curate a small exhibition.

Guest speakers provided additional insights, with Professor Michele Ford (SSEAC) introducing students to the region, and Professor Mark Ledbury (Power Institute) sharing his expertise on visual and material culture. Dr Beth Yahp (School of Literature, Art and Media) led students through a creative visualisation exercise designed to facilitate closer engagement with the objects.

The program provided a unique behind-the-scenes look at the museum world and a valuable opportunity to engage with Southeast Asia's complexity and diversity through material culture.

"As a fan of museums, I particularly enjoyed handling the objects and learning from the curators - a peek behind the curtain so to speak."

Student participant

Postgraduate Workshop

In 2021, the Politics in Action postgraduate workshop was, for the first time, an online affair. Partnering with the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS), we welcomed students from across Australia, Asia and Europe for a week-long workshop.

Focused on the theme of 'your research in context', postgraduate research students were guided through discussions on decolonising research, research in political context, and researcher positionality. These discussions were an excellent springboard for discussion and allowed research students to meet and learn how experienced academics navigate these challenges in their own projects.

Offering a space to discuss some thorny academic issues, the sessions included insights from a range of academics as well as group exercises and peer discussions. It was an excellent opportunity for emerging researchers to connect and build networks across continents, in spite of existing travel constraints.

"You absolutely nailed the workshop! I took so much from it and there was lots of great feedback in the breakout sessions."

Student participant

International cooperation on mental health issues

For some students, participating in a SSEAC multidisciplinary field school can be a profoundly transformative experience. Such was the case for Matilde Breth Petersen, who was among the first cohort of undergraduates to participate in SSEAC's mobility program on Disability and Social Inclusion in Indonesia, which ran from 2017 to 2019.

Funded by the New Colombo Plan, the program introduced students from the University of Sydney to issues relating to access and inclusion in Jakarta and Yogyakarta. For Matilde, who was enrolled in a Bachelor of Health Sciences (Psychology) degree at the time, the field school presented a unique opportunity to learn more about the need for international cooperation on mental health issues and about the role she could play in paving the way for such cooperation. Having previously visited Bali and Lombok, she was keen to learn more about Indonesia and to apply knowledge gained through her health sciences and psychology studies to gain insights into mental health and the psychological impact of discrimination.

During the field school, Matilde worked closely with other University of Sydney students from Arts and Engineering, as well as Indonesian students from Gadjah Mada University. A significant turning point was meeting Benny Prawira, who established the suicide prevention organisation Into the Light Indonesia (*Yayasan Insan Teman Langit*). As Benny explained, up to 80 per cent of Indonesian university students are believed to experience mental illness during their studies. Matilde describes being in awe of Benny's passion for reducing youth suicide and mental health stigma, which led her to join a mental health working group at a Planetary Health Conference in Kuala Lumpur the next year.

Following her participation in the SSEAC field school, Matilde returned to Southeast Asia to undertake a one-month placement to Cambodia, where she worked as a carer for children with disabilities. She has subsequently completed a Master of International Public Health and a Master of Philosophy in Medicine, both at the University of Sydney, which enabled her to pursue her interests in climate change and improving health and wellbeing outcomes for disadvantaged communities. As part of her postgraduate studies, she undertook a two-month placement in Sri Lanka through the School of Public Health, where she applied the research skills she developed on the SSEAC field school to conduct quantitative research on obesity reduction strategies in a small community.

In 2021, four years after first meeting in Indonesia, Matilde and Benny co-authored a paper on mental health stigma together, as part of a broader team of academics and practitioners in the field of mental health. The paper is a systematic review looking at the cultural factors relating to high rates of mental health stigma across the Asia-Pacific.

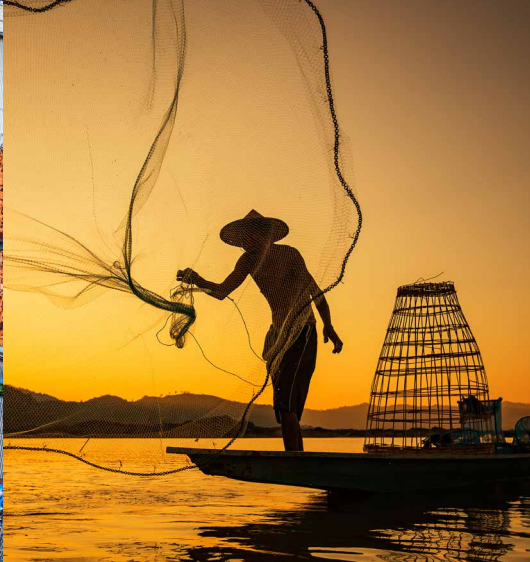
Matilde remains passionate about the nexus between wellbeing and climate change, with an interest in mental health outcomes that stems back to her experiences on the SSEAC field school.



“Thank you SSEAC! I am forever grateful for the wonderful experiences I had during the interdisciplinary field trip to Indonesia and for all the opportunities that arose out of it.

It has fundamentally shaped my approach to health research, allowing me to adopt a more holistic view of mental health issues.”

Matilde Breth Petersen, student participant in the 2017 SSEAC field school Disability and Social Inclusion in Indonesia




With more than 400 academics across all 11 Southeast Asian countries, the University of Sydney has one of the highest concentrations of regional expertise in the world.

From its central position within the University, the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre offers an innovative and engaged approach that reflects the region's complexity and recognises its importance to Australia's future.

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