

# Sydney Southeast Asia Centre



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

*2023 Yearbook*



We recognise and pay respect to the Elders and communities – past, present, and emerging – of the lands that the University of Sydney’s campuses stand on. For thousands of years they have shared and exchanged knowledges across innumerable generations for the benefit of all.

Cover image: Decoration at Patuxai, Vientiane, Laos

# Sydney Southeast Asia Centre

## 2023 Yearbook

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## A message from the Director



It is with pride and joy, but also some sadness, that I write my final Director's Message for a SSEAC yearbook. Building SSEAC has been a fantastic experience, but it is time for me to move on. I am a strong believer in institutional renewal, and I made it clear to Provost Stephen Garton when taking on my second term that there would not be a third. In that sense, my departure has certainly been long-anticipated. At the same time, I have lived and breathed SSEAC for the last 11.5 years and life without it will be very different.

December 2023 also constitutes a crossroads for SSEAC. In preparation for its next iteration, we have developed a plan to strengthen our partnerships in the region as well as introducing annual themes for our work. The suite of activities designed to promote these objectives constitute a significant sharpening of focus that is entirely appropriate for a multidisciplinary centre located in the Research Portfolio. Unfortunately, it has also forced us to let go of some of our most treasured forms of regional engagement, namely our field schools (mostly funded by the New Colombo Plan) and our training courses (funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) for women and disability activists.

We celebrated these longstanding elements of our programming in this last year of our current funding cycle (coincidentally, our first truly post-COVID year). This year's disability activist training course was particularly rewarding, knowing that it was our last. It was wonderful to be able to involve alumni from previous courses in its delivery, and to see how they have flourished. And then there was our field school bonanza: five field schools to five different countries involving undergraduate students from 16 disciplines across six faculties and schools. Especially poignant for me was the last of the five, our

field school on work and disability in Timor-Leste. A decade earlier I was in Timor-Leste leading SSEAC's first field school, on food security. I played a much lesser role in the 2023 one, which was led jointly by academics in Occupational Therapy and Social Work with support from our own wonderful Dr Natali Pearson. But I deeply valued the opportunity to contribute while also supporting two SSEAC-led multidisciplinary research projects in Dili.

The period covered in this yearbook is different from previous ones because we took time in 2022 to reflect on the first 10 years of SSEAC. Pulling together that retrospective (which you can find on our website) was a mammoth task. Life at SSEAC is incredibly busy and stepping back to take stock of our achievements was a humbling experience. I invite you to take time to celebrate our contribution to the University of Sydney – but also to studies of Southeast Asia nationally, regionally and globally – over this longer period.

I'm not sure what SSEAC's next chapter will bring, though of course I will watch with great interest as it unfolds. In the meantime, let me thank everyone who has worked to make SSEAC what it is. It's impossible to mention everyone, but special thanks are due to Michael Spence and Stephen Garton for their commitment to engagement with our region, to our grassroots membership, who give so freely of their time, energy and enthusiasm, and to our collaborators across Southeast Asia and around the world. Most of all, of course, my thanks go to my wonderful team who have always gone above and beyond to make SSEAC the best it could be.

**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 10,000 members, SSEAC's network continues to expand and embrace new collaborators across disciplines. Our community includes:

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

Engaging over 390 academics across all faculties and schools at the University of Sydney, 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 Southeast Asia countries (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam) 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 foster new approaches to the pressing issues affecting the region. This approach has proven to be 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 400 students since 2014 the opportunity to engage in real-world learning in Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Vietnam. SSEAC received the Vice-Chancellor's Award for Excellence in the category of Outstanding Education Engagement and Innovation for this initiative.

The field schools have drawn together students from disciplines including architecture, communications, economics, engineering, heritage conservation, international public health, occupational therapy 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.

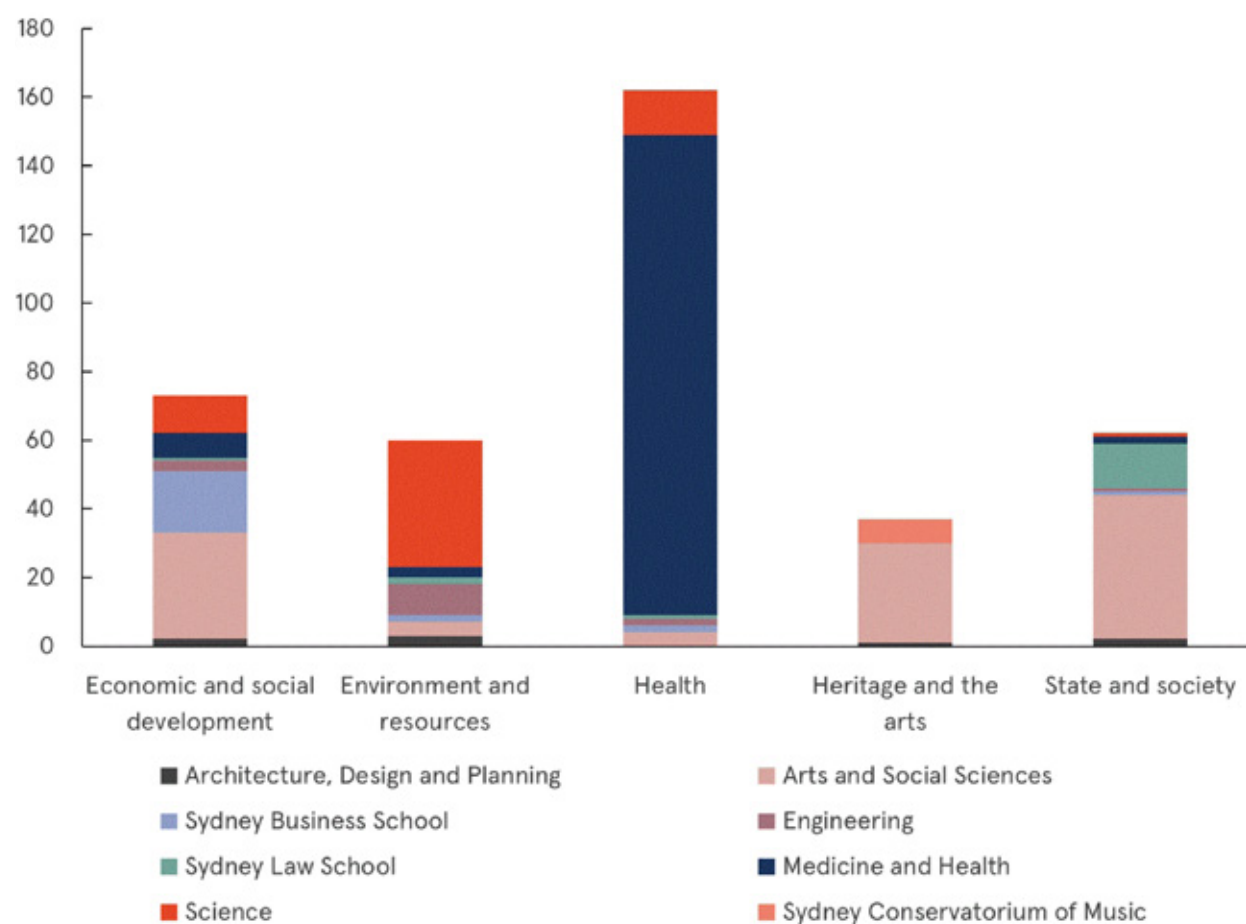
Each year, SSEAC hosts a number of events designed to stimulate public engagement with Southeast Asia.

- 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 in Focus forum – which targets policymakers, NGOs and academics – explores a different theme each year, from environmental sustainability, women in ASEAN and strengthening engagement with Southeast Asia, to the role of China in ASEAN, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the region and managing political crises.

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.

You can find out more at [sydney.edu.au/sseac](https://sydney.edu.au/sseac).

## Disciplinary spread of SSEAC academic 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 Cambodia's Angkor region.
- **The Sydney Infectious Diseases Institute**, 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 Centre for Asian and Pacific Law**, which has particular expertise in Indonesian and Malaysian legal systems and laws.
- **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 Discipline of Indonesian Studies**, one of the most respected in Australia, with a strong reputation for its research and policy work in Indonesia.
- **The Sydney Vietnam Institute**, a leading multidisciplinary network of researchers and educators, working together to improve the lives of people and communities in Vietnam.

# Governance

In 2023, SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford was supported by:

- Professor Sonja van Wichelen, Deputy Director
- Dr Natali Pearson, Curriculum Coordinator
- Ms Minh Le, Senior Administration Officer
- Ms Ariane Defreine (to February 2023) and Mr Simon Holding (from April 2023), Communications and Events Officer
- Mr Dave Hopkins (to August 2023) and Ms Lydia Papandrea (from October 2023), Knowledge Translation Officer

The SSEAC team is assisted by our Executive Committee and Country Coordinators, as well as our Postgraduate Representative, Emily Nabong. The Centre's operations are overseen by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research) and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Global and Research Engagement).

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

The team also collaborates with Southeast Asia-related initiatives such as the Sydney Vietnam Institute, other multidisciplinary research centres, the faculties and schools, and the Chau Chak Wing Museum.

SSEAC's Postdoctoral Researcher 2022 to 2023 was bioarchaeologist Dr Melandri Vlok. Her research focused on ancient health and disease in Asia with an emphasis on the evolutionary history of yaws and malaria and the human impact of these two tropical diseases in the prehistory of Southeast Asia.

## Executive Committee

Position	Name	School/Research Centre
Community Outreach Adviser	A/Prof Justin Beardsley	Sydney Infectious Diseases Institute
Community Outreach Adviser	Dr Sandra Seno-Alday	Sydney Business School
Curriculum Adviser	Dr Susan Banki	School of Social and Political Sciences
Curriculum Adviser	Dr Abdul Razeed	Sydney Business School
Regional & Policy Engagement Adviser	Prof Tihomir Ancev	School of Economics
Regional & Policy Engagement Adviser	Ms Danielle Somers	Office for Global Health
Research Adviser	Prof Sonja van Wichelen	School of Social and Political Sciences
Research Adviser	Dr Sabin Zahirovic	School of Geosciences
Research Training Adviser	Dr Sophie Chao	School of Social and Political Sciences
Research Training Adviser	A/Prof Petr Matous	School of Civil Engineering

## Country Coordinators

Position	Name	School/Faculty
Cambodia	Prof Daniel Tan	School of Life and Environmental Sciences
Indonesia	A/Prof Jeffrey Neilson	School of Geosciences
Laos	Prof Nick Enfield	School of Humanities
Malaysia and Brunei	A/Lecturer Jake Chen	Sydney Pharmacy School
Myanmar	Dr Louis Taborda	School of Project Management
The Philippines	Dr Aaron Opdyke	School of Civil Engineering
Singapore	Dr Yeow-Tong Chia	School of Education and Social Work
Thailand	Dr Aim Sinpeng	School of Social and Political Sciences
Timor-Leste	Dr Lynda-ann Blanchard	Arts and Social Sciences
Vietnam	Prof Tihomir Ancev	School of Economics



# Meet some of our people



## Lynda-ann Blanchard

Lynda has been a SSEAC member since 2014 and our Timor-Leste Country Coordinator since 2021. She is an Honorary Associate in Peace and Conflict Studies (PACS), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, and since 2009 has been a collaborative partner with the Peace Centre at Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL).

With a focus on cultural difference and social justice, she has initiated national and international research on topics of non-adversarial policy and practice, human security and global governance, tourism as corporate social responsibility, and issues of Indigenous self-determination.

As visiting scholar and international adviser for graduate research and teaching at UNTL, Lynda has assisted in establishing the masters' program in PACS.

Research projects in Timor-Leste this year include the DFAT-funded 'KAP assessment of youth volunteerism', and the IOM-UNICEF funded project 'Assessing resilience and vulnerabilities in border communities of Timor-Leste, post COVID-19, utilising human security methodology' – the largest research grant received to date by UNTL.



## Emily Nabong

Emily has been part of the SSEAC community since the start of her PhD in 2021. She began her current role as Postgraduate Representative in December 2022, where she acts as a liaison between postgraduates and the SSEAC executive team.

Since joining, Emily has engaged with SSEAC through residency workshops, [news article](#) and [podcast contributions](#) and a presentation at [SSEAC's Emerging Scholars Conference](#). She has participated in our writing retreats and postgraduate lunches, and in 2023 also helped to facilitate the SSEAC field school on disaster risk and resilience in the Philippines.

In Southeast Asia, Emily's work is predominantly focused in the Philippines where she began working in 2017. She is currently a co-project investigator for an Asia-Pacific Network for Global Change Research grant project, 'Advancing local flood decision-making for disaster risk reduction in the Philippines and Indonesia'. She is midway through her PhD in the School of Civil Engineering supervised by Dr Aaron Opdyke, SSEAC's Country Coordinator for the Philippines.



## Simon Holding

Simon joined SSEAC in April 2023 as Communications and Events Officer.

He has a background in Communications and is responsible for SSEAC's busy schedule of events with both local and international guests. From conferences, workshops and roundtable discussions to webinars, writing retreats and guest lectures, Simon not only coordinates the logistics to ensure our events run smoothly, he also promotes them to a broad audience.

Simon manages SSEAC's social channels, ensures our large membership is kept up to date on the Centre's latest offerings, engages with others working in the same space, and makes our presence known to interested individuals to help grow our audience. He also provides editing and production resources for the [SSEAC Stories](#) podcast.

A lot of what SSEAC seeks to achieve is collaboration with both individuals (such as researchers and government representatives) and institutions in Southeast Asia and beyond. Simon contributes to this goal through both events and communications.

# ASEAN in Focus 2023

Back in person in 2023, this year's forum addressed key questions under the broad theme of managing political crisis in ASEAN.



SSEAC's annual ASEAN in Focus forum explored a range of issues anticipated to dominate the 2023 ASEAN Summit held in Jakarta including the situation in Myanmar, democracy and what role ASEAN can play in US-China relations.

The forum's distinguished panel comprised Indonesian Ambassador to Australia H.E. Dr Siswo Pramono, Monash University academic Dr Avery Poole and Executive Director of the Asia Society in Australia, Thomas Soem.

Panellists agreed that the question of how to navigate political crisis was not a straightforward one for ASEAN. It was the second consecutive year that Myanmar was not welcome at the ASEAN Summit and, in an exceptional move, Malaysia clarified its stance that stronger measures were needed to address the junta's failure in implementing the five-point consensus previously agreed to by ASEAN members.

Dr Poole noted it was still too early to declare whether the five-point consensus had failed to live up to its promise and argued that to achieve progress in Myanmar it was important for ASEAN members to take steps independently of ASEAN. However, Ambassador Pramono cautioned against "slicing" ASEAN apart. As he observed, progress takes time, and it is important for ASEAN to maintain dialogue with a range of powers in Myanmar. Mr Soem emphasised that Myanmar is not just an ASEAN problem but an international one, and that the five-point consensus is a mechanism for dialogue that should continue to be pushed internationally.

Democracy is high on ASEAN's agenda, as is the non-alignment principle. Ambassador Pramono emphasised that democratic development can only progress in the region if it is not imposed from the outside but is instead homegrown and with due respect for regional culture.

On geopolitical tensions between China and the US, the panel again emphasised the importance of the non-alignment principle for ASEAN. The Ambassador noted that what brought the ASEAN countries together as a regional grouping in the first place is a shared history of colonisation and a common goal to lift their economies out of poverty. Partnership in this context is more important than alliance. Mr Soem noted that to sustain trade growth and business investments in the region, partnership is key. Australia, for instance, is showing increased regional engagement as demonstrated by the appointment of a Special Envoy for Southeast Asia and the launch of the Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040, signalling a serious commitment that requires regional integration and ongoing democratic reforms to keep markets open and free. ASEAN is a key institution to facilitate these developments.

Panel members were hopeful for the future of ASEAN and excited about economic prospects in the region, especially around digital transformation and the energy transition. While serious concerns over conflict remained, there was a shared understanding that support for ASEAN is the way forward.

Catch up on this event on our [YouTube channel](#).

# Politics in Action 2023

Our annual Politics in Action forum was packed with timely analysis of political affairs in six Southeast Asian countries, presented by researchers on the ground.



Delivered online and held over two days, this year's Politics in Action forum covered six Southeast Asian countries, featuring a talented group of researchers based across the region. Each presentation was rich with insights and analysis, and followed by lively Q&A sessions.

**SINGAPORE: Walid Jumblatt Abdullah** (Nanyang Technological University) discussed the designation of Lawrence Wong as Singapore's prime minister in waiting and the implications for the policymaking approach of the ruling People's Action Party. He also cast ahead to the presidential election in September and discussed what issues may be at play.

**CAMBODIA: Sovinda Po** (Royal University of Phnom Penh) covered the significance of the sentencing of opposition figure Kem Sokha to almost three decades of house arrest. He also discussed the election in July 2023, power transfers within the long-ruling Cambodian People's Party and the political standing of Hun Manet, the son of Prime Minister Hun Sen.

**INDONESIA: Bivitri Susanti** (Indonesia Jentera School of Law) discussed the declining rule of law in the country, including issues of 'court capture' and corruption, the judicial harassment of human rights defenders and the controversial new Criminal Code. She also covered key political issues leading up to the 2024 election, including ongoing speculation about postponement.

**THAILAND: Surachanee "Hammerli" Sriyai** (Chiang Mai University) focused on the Thai election, which subsequently saw opposition parties Move Forward and Pheu Thai win the largest share of votes. Hammerli provided key context for the election, including the youth-led protest movement that called for reform to the monarchy and other demands.

**TIMOR-LESTE: João da Cruz Cardoso** (independent Dili-based researcher) began with an overview of Timor-Leste's recent political history, the independence movement, and the 'old' and 'young' generations of leaders. He discussed the country's impending parliamentary elections, focusing on five key political parties and the different scenarios that may play out.

**PHILIPPINES: Aries Arugay** (University of the Philippines Diliman) spoke about the aftermath of the 2022 presidential election, which featured personality politics, disinformation narratives, the phenomenon of 'authoritarian nostalgia' and the emergence of what he calls a 'dynasty cartel' between the Marcos and Duterte families. He also offered a snapshot of the rule of Ferdinand Marcos Jr, one year on from his election victory.

If you missed the event, you can catch up on the speakers' presentations on the [SSEAC website](#), our [YouTube channel](#) or [Facebook page](#).



## Indonesia Council Open Conference 2023

Hosted by SSEAC in collaboration with Western Sydney University, the two-day conference featured over 320 papers across diverse themes and disciplines.

The Indonesia Council Open Conference (ICOC) 2023 brought together hundreds of academics and postgraduate researchers from across disciplines with an interest in Indonesia.

Convened by SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford, Western Sydney University academic Associate Professor Zulfan Tadjoeidin and Indonesia Council President Dr Natali Pearson, this year's theme was 'Indonesia 25 Years On'.

In 2023, Indonesia marked a quarter-century since the resignation of President Suharto in May 1998 and the start of the reform era. But what does it mean to be Indonesian today? To answer this question and share their reflections, the conference opened with a plenary featuring three emerging scholars: Dr Annisa Beta (University of Melbourne), Ms Kestity Pringgoharjono (University of Technology Sydney) and Dr Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan (École française d'Extrême-Orient).

Conference disciplinary champions from Australian and international universities were integral to taking ICOC 2023 beyond traditional area studies, putting together many of the excellent open discussion panels that followed, held in person and online.

More than 300 speakers shared their research on Indonesia spanning topics as diverse as agrarian change, health and wellbeing, cities and urban living,

identity, pedagogy and education, social movements, gender and sexuality, and arts and culture.

Three roundtables elicited engaging discussions including on kwir (queer) theory in Indonesia, the 2024 elections and Indonesia's democratic trajectory, and a session chaired by KONESKI on Australia-Indonesia research partnerships and the role of policy entrepreneurs in Indonesian think tanks.

PhD candidates Yunie Rahmat (University of Sydney) and Umi Pujiyanti (Western Sydney University), together with Dr Pearson, facilitated a popular postgraduate workshop on networking for academia. The workshop explored the benefits of participating in networking events and provided participants with practical skills on how to plan, create and maintain their academic networks.

Other highlights included a food and cultural tour of western Sydney, an on-campus screening of the film *Autobiography* and seven book launches.

"The ICOC is proudly free and open to scholars, students and community members," Dr Pearson said. "It's particularly gratifying to hear of the positive experience of early-career researchers presenting papers for the first time, a testament to the ICOC's spirit of inclusion for anyone interested in engaging with cutting-edge research on Indonesia."

# Indonesia Social Science Seminar Series (IS4)

Launched by SSEAC in collaboration with partners, the IS4 webinar series brings the latest research on Indonesia to a global audience.

Since 2021, the Indonesia Social Science Seminar Series (IS4) has brought together social science experts from across the globe and from varied disciplinary backgrounds to showcase new research, issues and ideas on Indonesia.

While hugely popular, the IS4 webinar series has now concluded. In wrapping up the series, the IS4 Organising Committee thanked all of the speakers, discussants and participants for their thoughtful and enthusiastic engagement throughout the series.

“We very much enjoyed learning alongside this vibrant community and look forward to connecting at in-person events at SSEAC, the Cornell Southeast Asia Program (SEAP), the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) and beyond,” the Committee said.

All previous IS4 talks will remain [online](#), including the four webinars held over the past year:

- **“I have a right to a better imam”: Women, divorce and Islam in Indonesia:** Associate Professor Rachel Rinaldo (Center for Asian Studies, University of Colorado Boulder) discusses her research on divorced Indonesian Muslim women. While the institutionalisation of Islamic courts in Indonesia has enabled women to get out of marriages with clear legal status and rights, this does not necessarily promote more egalitarian understandings of gender. However, by facilitating women’s exit from unhappy marriages, Islamic courts may be contributing to longer-term shifts in gender practices and relations.
- **The solidarity economy experiments of Indonesia’s peasant and fisher movements:** Studies on Indonesian rural social movements and communities often focus on rural dispossession, contentious politics and everyday forms of (non)resistance. What this overlooks is economic forms of rural resistance such as worker cooperatives and community-run institutions that prioritise democratic participation, community interests and equality over profit. Dr Iqra Anugrah (Kyoto University) explores several solidarity economy projects that offer alternative democratic and sustainable arrangements to improve the livelihoods of farming and fishing communities in Indonesia.

- **Displacement and dispossession in carbon sink governance in Indonesia:** Peatland conversion for agriculture is the leading cause of Indonesia’s carbon emissions that contribute substantially to global warming. Dr Michelle Miller (National University of Singapore) examines the politics of partnerships aimed at retaining soil-based carbon in Indonesia’s province of Riau, where over half the surface area is composed of agriculturally productive peatlands. She discusses how transboundary governance arrangements shape place-based value perspectives, land use practices and resource tensions in peatland partnerships.
- **Does performance pay enhance social accountability? Evidence from remote schools in Indonesia:** Social accountability is one alternative to top-down supervision of service delivery in remote schools where supervisor visits can be costly. But how effective is this bottom-up approach when the community (principal) has weak authority relative to the service provider (teachers)? Associate Professor Arya Gaduh (University of Arkansas) examines whether giving communities authority over teacher performance pay improves the effectiveness of social accountability in Indonesia’s remote schools.

Catch up on these talks, and more, on our [YouTube channel](#).





## Philippines Social Science Seminar Series (PhilS4)

Politics, history and society in the Philippines were explored from all angles in our PhilS4 webinar series in 2023.

The Philippines Social Science Seminar Series (PhilS4) brings together academics from around the world to share new research on Filipino politics, history and society. It is sponsored by SSEAC, alongside the University of the Philippines Diliman, Humboldt University of Berlin and SOAS University of London.

A number of fascinating PhilS4 webinars were held in 2023:

- **Surviving typhoons with disaster media infrastructures in Tacloban, Philippines:** Drawing on fieldwork conducted post-Typhoon Yolanda, Dr Shelley Tuazon Guyton (National University of Singapore) examines low-income coastal residents' experiences navigating disaster information. She shows that disaster communication technology and infrastructure can impede peoples' ability to survive.
- **Saving our sisters: The politics of anti-trafficking and sex work in the Philippines:** Dr Sharmila Parmanand (London School of Economics) examines how the dominant understanding of sex

work as “uniquely victimising” emerged and how this compares with Filipino sex workers' own reflections of lived experience.

- **Rumors of dismemberment: The Philippine geobody and Moro unrest (1923–1926):** Professor Jorge Bayona (El Colegio de Mexico) discusses religious and political discord in Mindanao in the 1920s and how it appeared to be weaponised for imperial territorial partition.
- **Social cognitive and psychological dimensions of the Philippine education crisis:** Professor Allan Bernardo (De La Salle University) draws on his research on the social and psychological variables that identify the poorest performing Filipino students to argue that reform efforts need to move beyond a focus on curriculum, instruction and resources to help low-achieving students experiencing negative social processes in schools.
- **The ethos of obedience among the members of the Philippine Marines:** Dr Leslie Advincula-Lopez (Ateneo de Manila University) discusses the social

and political factors behind the evolution of the ethos of obedience among members of the Philippine Marines, starting in the 1950s. She finds that the boundaries between military institutions and broader civil society are not fixed, but move with fluctuations in the broader socio-political environment.

- **Queer encounters with “colonial mentality”:** Dr Martin Manalansan (University of Minnesota) traces “colonial mentality” as used to describe Filipinos and Filipino Americans in the decolonising social science literature. He uses a queer analysis lens to explore the concept's persistence and pitfalls.
- **The partisan trap: In-group bias and tolerance for democratic backsliding:** Drawing on his research, PhD candidate Bermond Scoggins (Australian National University) shows that strong partisan loyalty in the Philippines best explains voter passivity during periods of backsliding, despite voters disliking illiberal, undemocratic positions.

Watch on our [YouTube channel](#).



## Thailand Social Science Seminar Series (TS4)

New research, insights and expertise on Thailand were showcased through our popular TS4 webinar series in 2023.

Sponsored by SSEAC, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and the New York Southeast Asia Network, our social science seminar series on Thailand (or TS4) has showcased a diversity of research expertise since launching in 2021.

Interest in Thai politics was high in 2023, with all eyes on the results and repercussions of the country's national election held in May. Several TS4 webinars explored different aspects of the Thai political landscape before and after the poll, which was convincingly won by opposition parties. Highlights from the TS4 webinar series in 2023 include:

- **Digital repression and its impact on protests in Thailand:** Assistant Professor Janjira Sombatpoonsiri

(Chulalongkorn University) examines the aftermath of the 2020 anti-establishment protests in Thailand and how the interplay between targeted legal repression and digital surveillance curtailed the movement that once defied the monarchy-military-backed regime.

- **Patronage politics in Thailand:** Despite drastic changes in Thailand's political landscape in the past two decades, many Thai political parties and candidates have returned to patronage politics in their attempt to win elections. Drawing on fieldwork with politicians and vote canvassers, Dr Napon Jatusripitak (ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute) highlights the surprising adaptability of patronage politics

as an instrument for building and maintaining support.

- **2023 election posters in Chiang Mai and beyond:** Election campaign posters in Thailand's 2023 general election utilised technologies ranging from QR codes to augmented reality. New poster strategies, including poster placement and audience targets, were also evident. Assistant Professor Chanintorn Pensute (Chiang Mai University) explores what these campaign posters were trying to convey to voters and how they differed in the north of Thailand from those in Bangkok.

- **New political landscape, shifting alliance and political cleavage in Thailand:** Prajak Kongkirati (Thammasat University) a leading expert on Thai politics, discusses the political landscape post the May 2023 election including the new multi-party system, the decline of military-backed parties and shifting alliances, and what the winning progressive Move Forward Party represents in the Thai polity. He also explores whether the election result will overcome the yellow and red shirt conflict.

- **Women's political leadership in the ASEAN region:** Dr Aim Sinpeng (University of Sydney) and Associate Professor Saowanee Alexander (Ubon Ratchathani University) discuss their research on women political leaders in the ASEAN region, in particular Thailand. They explore the barriers to women's political leadership, how these differ between female politicians and women leaders of civil society organisations, and the role of social media in pathways to political success.

For these and more Thailand-focused talks, visit our [YouTube channel](#).



## Making sense of Thailand's 2023 election

SSEAC convened an in-person roundtable with a panel of experts to dissect the results and repercussions of Thailand's general election.

Thailand held a general election on 14 May 2023, its second national poll since a military coup in 2014. Former coup leader Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha had led Thailand for nine consecutive years and was aiming to extend that tenure beyond 2023. Changes to electoral rules and an exploding number of political parties heightened uncertainty as to which party would come out on top.

Ultimately, the result was decisive: the progressive Move Forward party won the largest share of votes, followed by the Pheu Thai party, backed by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who continues to live in exile. The military-backed conservative parties performed poorly. But while the results were clear, in the weeks following the election, negotiations and intrigue continued to build over the makeup of Thailand's next government.

To make sense of the results, and shed some light on what may happen next, SSEAC helped convene a panel of experts for an in-person event, held on campus in June.

Moderated by Michael Ruffles of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, the panel discussed the likelihood of Move Forward being able to form a coalition government, and the spectre of the army and the courts, which have a record of consistent intervention in Thai politics.

Among the many issues covered, SSEAC's Thailand Country Coordinator Dr Aim Sinpeng (University of Sydney) spoke about the differences in policy and identity between Move Forward and Pheu Thai. Associate Professor Pavin Chachavalpongun (Kyoto University) expanded on the Move Forward party leadership and potential responses from the conservative establishment.

Dr Greg Raymond (Australian National University) delved into the performance of the military-backed parties and the split between Prime Minister Chan-o-cha and his deputy. Kanyanatt Kalfagiannis, co-founder of the Australian Alliance for Thai Democracy, discussed the role of young people in the election and the movement for change that transcends past political formations.

The panel spoke in front of a packed audience and fielded a range of perceptive questions during an engaging Q&A session. Topics included the role of the unelected members of the Senate; the values and social and political ideas of young Thai people; Thailand's relations with China; and the country's history of military coups.

It was fantastic to see so many interested and attentive audience members, including many from the Thai community living in Sydney and beyond.

You can watch a recording on our [YouTube channel](#).



## 6th Conference on Human Rights

The conference provides a platform for academics, activists and practitioners to explore human rights issues in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Jointly hosted by SSEAC, Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM) and Universitas Jember, with support from many partner institutions, the theme for this year's human rights conference was 'Indigeneity and Human Rights in Asia and the Pacific Towards a Just Society: Challenges and Opportunities'.

The relationship between indigeneity and human rights has long posed various challenges for democracy and human rights promotion in Asia and Pacific regions. In some cases the basic rights of indigenous people have been strengthened through political and legal movements, while elsewhere indigenous groups have been marginalised and even harmed in the pursuit of democracy.

The challenges are reflected in ongoing scholarly debates about the concept of indigeneity. The term indigeneity (and indigenous) has been used to give legitimacy to specific treatment applied to certain groups within a society. It has also been used to reject human rights norms that are deemed inconsistent with locality and national interests.

To respond to these challenges, the conference showcased papers by scholars from Southeast Asia, as well as the broader region and further afield, who shared their ideas, experiences and perspectives across a range of human rights topics.

"The Conference on Human Rights is a unique forum in that it brings together not only scholars working on human rights topics but also leverages important political and activist actors to bridge some of the important translational work between research and policymaking," said Professor Sonja van Wichelen, SSEAC Deputy Director.

Professor van Wichelen gave a plenary presentation on global bioethics in the pursuit of open science, providing insights into inequalities in bioscientific exchange and how these impact health and human rights. Other plenaries included a session on the need to advocate for climate constitutionalism in Indonesia's legal framework.

An expanding topic of interest is that of human rights and ecological justice. Many sessions detailed the myriad ways climate change is affecting the human right to health, housing, water, food and livelihoods.

There were several livestreamed sessions across a broad range of themes including:

- [religion and human rights](#)
- [indigeneity, democracy and human rights](#)
- [social inclusion and human rights](#)
- [authoritarianism, human rights and technology](#)
- [human rights and education](#).

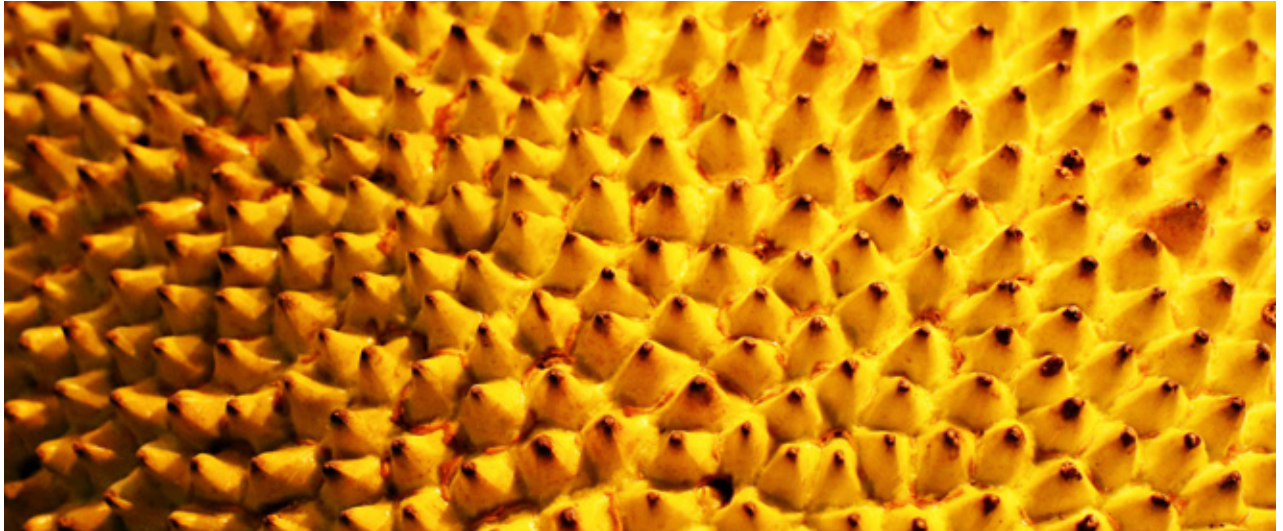
The [Indonesian translation](#) of SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford's first book, *Workers and Intellectuals: NGOs, Trade Unions and the Indonesian Labour Movement*, was launched to a full auditorium at the conference. This important study was translated by Muliawarman Ford together with Achmad Choirudin of InsistPress.

"There was also a stream dedicated to presentations conducted in Indonesian," Professor Van Wichelen said. "Many participants appreciated the variety of formats, commenting on the sense of inclusiveness without losing international reach."



# 18th Asia Pacific Sociological Association Conference

The APSA conference brought together scholars from around the world to share cutting-edge research on the region.



The 18th Asia Pacific Sociological Association (APSA) Conference was held in Sydney in July, bringing together scholars from around the world to share research and ideas on social and environmental advancement and the sustainable development goals in the Asia-Pacific region.

SSEAC supported the conference alongside the International Sociological Association, of which APSA is a member; Ateneo de Manila University; Visayas State University; Chulalongkorn University; and Japan's SEISA Group, among others.

Taking place over three days in person at the University of Sydney and online, the conference involved some 15 panels, over 60 papers and several plenary sessions. The huge diversity of papers covered issues including gender inequality, climate change, health and wellbeing, environmental sustainability, COVID-19, family and relationships, and governance. These themes were explored in country contexts throughout the region, from China, India and Japan, to the Philippines, Indonesia and Bangladesh.

The opening day included keynote addresses from Surichai Wun'Gaeo, Director of the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies at Chulalongkorn University in Thailand, as well as from Associate Professor Christine Inglis and Dr Fiona Gill, both of the Department of Sociology and Criminology at the University of Sydney.

On the second day, SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford delivered a keynote address, 'Collective agency under authoritarianism', which looked at trade unions in Southeast Asia. She was preceded by Professor Dia-Yuen Jeong of Jeju National University in South Korea, who explored the limitations inherent in sustainable development and ways to overcome them.

Rounding out the keynote presentations were Professor Janeen Baxter (University of Queensland), who focused on gender equality in Australia; Professor Sadeka Halim (Dhaka University), who spoke about diversity and the rights of Indigenous people in Bangladesh; and Professor Alex Broom, Director of the Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies (University of Sydney), who spoke about resistant bugs, structural violence and multispecies care in India.

Alongside the array of panels and plenary sessions, the conference allowed presenters and audience members to connect with like-minded colleagues from around the region. There were also sessions that featured presentations from early-career researchers and postgraduate students.

After three days of stimulating research presentations and discussion, the program concluded with an eye to the next APSA conference, due to convene in Indonesia.

## A wrap of other events

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

Each year, SSEAC hosts a wide variety of events, workshops and initiatives, reflecting the diverse interests and expertise of our members, and the partnerships we foster across the University of Sydney and beyond. Some of the highlights of 2022-23 follow.

In **July 2022**, SSEAC was pleased to be a sponsor at the 24th Biennial Asian Studies Association of Australia Conference, 'Social Justice in Pandemic Times', held at Monash University. The packed program included SSEAC-led postgraduate and early-career researcher workshops on building an academic community (Professor Michele Ford), applying for jobs in academia (Dr Natali Pearson) and researching Asia in the time of COVID-19 (Dr Elisabeth Kramer).

SSEAC Communications and Events Officer Ariane Defreine chaired a roundtable on podcasting in academia. Discussion centred on the growing potential of podcasts in disseminating research and bridging the gap between academia and the general public. The hosts and former guests of the [SSEAC Stories](#) and [New Books in Southeast Asian Studies](#) podcasts also shared their podcasting tips, tricks and lessons learned.

Also in **July**, SSEAC convened a stellar line-up of experts from diverse disciplinary perspectives to examine what's next for the Philippines post the May 2022 presidential election and landslide victory for Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr, the son of the late Philippine president, Ferdinand Marcos. While his promise of unity brought hope to millions of his supporters, critics worry the country could descend into autocracy if Bongbong follows in his father's footsteps and brings the Philippines under martial law.



The distinguished panel discussed the election results and the implications for the Philippines going forward. The webinar was chaired by Dr Aim Sinpeng and is available on our [YouTube channel](#).

In **September**, we co-hosted a webinar with the Sydney Centre for International Law (SCIL) chaired by Dr Rosemary Grey on the research project 'Locating human dignity in Cambodia'. The panel – which included Dr Rachel Killean and two visiting scholars from the Center for the Study of Humanitarian Law at the Royal University of Law and Economics in Cambodia – explored some of the project's key findings and discussed the ways 'human dignity' resonates and conflicts with legal, social and cultural norms in Cambodia. There was also a discussion on gender, human dignity and women's rights, followed by a thought-provoking Q&A session. Watch the webinar on [YouTube](#).

In **November**, SSEAC convened two panel events to explore the evolving economic and human rights dimensions to the post-coup crisis in Myanmar. The first event, held on campus and online, focused on human rights and included guest speakers Manny Maung from Human Rights Watch, Tun Aung Shwe, the National Unity Government of Myanmar representative in Australia, and Chris Sidoti, member of the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar. The wide-ranging discussion was moderated by Associate Professor Htwe Htwe Thein of Curtin University.

The second event focused on the role of international business in Myanmar following the coup, and the situation facing workers and labour movements in the

country. Held online, the panel included Khaing Zar Aung, president of the Industrial Workers Federation of Myanmar, Ben Hardman of EarthRights International and Clancy Moore of Transparency International Australia. The session was moderated by Michael Gillan, Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia.

Across both events, advocates, academics, legal and policy professionals shared important insights on a country that is facing a human rights and humanitarian crisis under junta rule. [Read a write-up of these discussions](#) on our website or watch them on [YouTube here](#) and [here](#).

In **March 2023**, SSEAC convened an online panel discussion, in collaboration with the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia, assessing the record of Malaysia's 'unity' government after more than 100 days in office.

The panel featured academics Dr Helena Varkkey, Dr Muhamad Nadzri Mohamed Noor, Dr Lily Rahim and Dr Walid Jumblatt Abdullah. They spoke about the various challenges facing the new government, covering the economy, politics and the environment, and its prospects in the context of decades of sectarian and authoritarian governance. Watch it on [YouTube](#).

In **May 2023**, SSEAC hosted H.E. Dr Siswo Pramono, Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to Australia, for a public lecture, in partnership with the Office of Global and Research Engagement. The Ambassador spoke about the prospects for continued growth and economic resilience in the region, Indonesia's goals as chair of ASEAN in 2023, and possible avenues for Australian engagement. The event was chaired by Deputy Director Professor Sonja van Wichelen and attended by many familiar faces and members of the Indonesian community.

Aung Myo Min, the Minister for Human Rights in Myanmar's National Unity Government, received the Sydney Peace Foundation's Gold Medal for Human Rights at an event on campus in **early June**. Chaired by SSEAC Executive Committee member Dr Susan Banki, the event included a moving keynote address by Aung Myo Min, followed by a Q&A. The minister spoke about the repressive environment in Myanmar under military rule, the role of his ministry and opening new avenues for international support.

In **September**, we held an on-campus screening of *Autobiography* as part of the Indonesia Council Open Conference 2023 (see page 10). Written and directed by Indonesian filmmaker Makbul Mubarak, the feature-

length film explores the effects of dictatorship on Indonesia and its people, the desire to conform and what it means to be loyal.

In **October**, SSEAC staff and members briefed a delegation of Australian trade ministers on the university's engagement and research initiatives in Southeast Asia. Following an introduction by Vice-Chancellor Professor Mark Scott AO, Dr Natali Pearson presented on SSEAC's work and the university's research and presence related to Southeast Asia. Professor Greg Fox outlined the work of the Sydney Vietnam Academic Network and Professor Adrian Vickers briefed delegates on the value of Asian language capability. Professor Daniel Tan led a full PPE laboratory demonstration on microbes such as *E. coli*, the use of plasma activated water for sterilising wash water and possible applications in detecting and mitigating microbial contamination in food in countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines.

Also in **October**, Professor Sonja van Wichelen chaired a roundtable discussion with Professor David Cohen – a leading expert in the fields of human rights, international law and transitional justice from Stanford University – on the intersection of human rights, security, economic development and sustainability in ASEAN. A range of cross-border issues were explored, from peatland fires in Indonesia and transboundary haze, to the destruction of reefs and overfishing in the South China Sea and the impact of hydropower dams on the health of the Mekong River system.

In **November**, Malaysia Country Coordinator Associate Lecturer Jake Chen chaired a distinguished panel on the state of the nation a year on from Malaysia's 15th general elections. Professor James Chin (University of Tasmania), Dr Tricia Yeoh (Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs) and Professor Greg Barton (Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation) explored many key issues facing the government including on the economy, anti-corruption, and social and cultural polarisation. This lively discussion was moderated by Assistant Professor Walid Jumblatt Abdullah (Nanyang Technological University). Watch it on our [YouTube channel](#).

Our quarterly social lunches were as popular as ever. These community-building events are an opportunity for members to come together to connect with researchers working on Southeast Asia, share their research and hear about opportunities for research partnerships. Over the years, SSEAC's social lunches have fostered research collaborations, forged academic connections and led to long-held ideas for new research becoming a reality.



University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor Professor Mark Scott AO (centre) addressing a delegation of Australian trade ministers on the university's engagement with Southeast Asia during a visit co-hosted by the Hon Anoulack Chanthivong (far left) and Senator the Hon Don Farrell (at right); the visit also included presentations by Dr Natali Pearson (far right) and SSEAC members



From left: Mr Sanjaya M Waani; Professor M Suyanto; Professor Adrian Vickers; Dr Marsia Pramono; H.E. Dr Siswo Pramono, Indonesian Ambassador to Australia; H.E. Mr Vedi Kurnia Buana, Indonesian Consul General for Sydney; Professor Sonja van Wichelen; Professor Mukhamad Najib; Consul, Mr Abdul Nazar; and Ms Ariane Defreine



Defending human rights in Myanmar panellists, from left: Htwe Htwe Thein (Chair, Curtin University), Manny Maung (Human Rights Watch), Chris Sidoti (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar) and Tun Aung Shwe (National Unity Government of Myanmar representative in Australia)



## Fostering high-impact research

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

Several SSEAC members secured funding in 2022–23 in the national competitive grant schemes run by the Australian Research Council (ARC) and the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), including in areas where they had previously been supported by a SSEAC grant.

Congratulations to the following researchers:

- **Dr Elisabeth Kramer**, who secured an ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) for her project exploring the politics of tobacco policy in Indonesia (see page 21).
- **Dr Natali Pearson**, who is part of a team of researchers awarded an ARC Linkage Project grant to examine the cultural value of Southeast Asian ceramic collections in Indonesia and Australia connected to the Maritime Silk Route.
- **Professor Greg Fox**, who was awarded a NHMRC Clinical Trials and Cohort Studies Grant for a study on the effectiveness of a fluoroquinolone-based regimen to treat the most common form of drug-resistant tuberculosis, including in Vietnam.
- **Associate Professor David Ubilava** and **Professor Justin Hastings**, who were awarded ARC Discovery Project funding, which builds on a 2021 SSEAC Collaborative Research Grant on the effect of political conflict on food markets in low- and middle-income countries across Africa and Southeast Asia.

SSEAC members have also been recognised in major grant schemes, including:

- **Dr Aim Sinpeng**, who is leading a team of researchers awarded funding through the International SDG Collaboration Program at the University of Sydney for a project examining algorithmic bias in STEM opportunities for women in Asia. The project 'Cracking the code: AI gender bias in the Asia Pacific' is in partnership with Google, UNESCO and three Asia-based universities.
- **Dr Rosemary Grey** and **Dr Rachel Killean**, whose research examining issues of translation and interpretation in Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Tribunal is supported by a SSEAC grant (see page 27).
- **Associate Professor Justin Beardsley**, who is leading a multidisciplinary team that received an Australian-ASEAN Council Grant to establish a network of One Health laboratories and researchers in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam to address the significant issue of antimicrobial resistance.

Associate Professor Beardsley is also part of a team of researchers from the University of Sydney, Hanoi Medical University and Duke University that secured an education grant from pharmaceutical giant Pfizer to improve the diagnosis and management of fungal infections in Vietnam.

# The politics of tobacco in Indonesia

Dr Elisabeth Kramer secured an Australian Research Council DECRA to examine the politics of tobacco policy in Indonesia.



Rates of smoking in Indonesia remain stubbornly high, with the country home to over 60 million adult smokers, according to the World Health Organization. The health impacts are profound, with tobacco use, including cigarettes as well as smokeless products such as betel quid and tobacco leaf, estimated to kill more than 225,000 people in Indonesia per year.

The tobacco industry remains a significant player in the country, and policy reforms have proven slow and contentious. Indonesia is among the top five producers of tobacco in the world.

Dr Elisabeth Kramer was awarded an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) in late 2022 to explore the politics of tobacco policy in Indonesia. Securing \$403,553 in funding, the project aims to investigate the difficulty of regulating tobacco products in Indonesia by interrogating the influence of domestic politics, the global tobacco industry and the role of interest-based lobbying.

Dr Kramer served as SSEAC's Deputy Director from 2015 to 2022, and took up a permanent position as a Senior Lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of New South Wales in 2023.

Expected outcomes of the DECRA project include a detailed political history of tobacco-related policy, mapping of stakeholder influence on policy, and a conceptual model explaining connections between policy creation and stakeholder networks.

The project expects to develop a tested analytical approach that can be used to explore policy environments for the regulation of harmful, but licit, industries in a range of other contexts.

Dr Kramer previously took part in SSEAC's Fellowship Hothouse, a mentoring initiative to support the university's future leaders in their efforts to secure competitive funding offered by the ARC. The Fellowship Hothouse is led by SSEAC Director Michele Ford, who served on the ARC's College of Experts from 2015 to 2017.

Eleven Fellowship Hothouse participants, including Dr Kramer, have successfully secured ARC grants as at the end of 2022 (worth a combined \$5.04 million), based across the Schools of Geosciences, Humanities, Languages and Cultures, Law, and Social and Political Sciences.



## Timor-Leste projects on health and disability

Two research projects in Timor-Leste took shape in 2023, aiming to influence policy and positively impact lives.

Two important research projects in Timor-Leste have progressed over the past year, with SSEAC support.

The first project is focused on improving oral health care in Timor-Leste, where the burden of oral diseases remains unacceptably high. Dr Brad Christian (Sydney Dental School) is co-leading the project with Professor Alex Broom (Sydney Centre for Healthy Societies), alongside a broader team of scholars with expertise in dentistry, nutrition, sociology and anthropology, and in close collaboration with Timorese partners. The study, which includes a Tetum-language survey, will explore the choices and beliefs that inform oral health practices. The findings will inform policy to integrate oral health care into Timor-Leste's primary healthcare system.

In 2023, members of the oral health project team travelled to Dili to meet with key partners, collect documentary evidence, conduct interviews with government and industry, and begin design of the survey. The project has received seed funding from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, alongside SSEAC's own contribution.

The research includes a survey that aims to explore the beliefs about oral health that underpin the choices that individuals, families and communities make about consumption patterns and oral health practices. It will be used to collect information on demographics, oral health related knowledge and beliefs, oral hygiene behaviours, behaviours related to accessing dental care, and dietary practices.

After a piloting phase, the Tetum-language survey will be administered to 1,000 adult cohorts in different age brackets in five districts in Dili with different socio-economic characteristics.

A previous preliminary trip to Dili was undertaken by SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford, SSEAC's Curriculum Coordinator Dr Natali Pearson, Dr Margaret Spencer (School of Education and Social Work) and Professor Woosung Sohn (School of Dentistry), representing each of the research teams.

The team had fruitful discussions with Australian Embassy staff, including the Australian Ambassador to Timor-Leste, H.E. William Costello, government officials across health, education and social inclusion, and researchers at the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL). They also met with several NGOs, Disabled People's Organisations and service providers. SSEAC Country Coordinator for Timor-Leste, Dr Lynda-ann Blanchard, played a vital role in facilitating a number of these meetings.

The second project will identify barriers to decent work for people with disability in the country. Led by Professor Ford, the multidisciplinary research team includes academics with expertise in disability, social work, policy, law, labour studies and occupational therapy. Project partners include researchers from UNTL, as well as Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA. The project aims to produce the first comprehensive analysis of how people with disability experience seeking employment in Timor-Leste and will identify potential interventions in policy and practice.



# Supporting women entrepreneurs in Vietnam

Dr Russell Toth is exploring how women-led SMEs can better access finance in Vietnam.



With support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), Dr Russell Toth (School of Economics) is leading a research team that partners with Vietnam Prosperity Joint Stock Commercial Bank (VPB) to develop, test and evaluate interventions that could help the bank to increase its lending to women-led small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and improve financial inclusion in Vietnam.

The project is linked to a \$500 million loan package signed in 2022 between ADB and VPB, including funding dedicated to women-led SME financing. In Vietnam, as of 2017, only 37% of women-led SMEs had received bank loans in the previous two years, as opposed to 47% of male-owned businesses, according to the International Finance Corporation (IFC). When women do receive loans, they tend to receive less than what they asked for and lower amounts than men, the IFC found.

To address this financing gap, Dr Toth's project is largely focused on the 'back end' of bank operations and internal lending incentives targeting women-led SMEs. VPB is Vietnam's third-largest commercial bank, with over 200 branches, including 73 that focus on SME lending. In 2022 and 2023, the project team have been working closely with VPB staff who specialise in SME lending to understand their existing practices, goals and interests.

The project involves testing the impact of incentivising existing borrowers to recommend new women-led

SMEs as clients, as well as the design of a scheme in which loan officers receive bonus payments if they meet certain performance metrics related to lending to women-led SMEs.

"It is exciting to be part of such an ambitious partnership between an international development organisation, a private sector organisation and a team of researchers," Dr Toth said. "A partnership which can deliver outputs that are valuable for each party – policy-relevant findings that can guide efforts to support women entrepreneurs in Vietnam and beyond, research and development support to improve the bank's lending operations, and cutting-edge academic research."

Producing impactful policy is not new to Dr Toth. His comprehensive 2020 [policy note](#) addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on the microfinance and rural sectors in Myanmar was cited in a high-level discourse between the Myanmar government and international donors and financiers. These policy discussions led to the release of over \$150 million in support to multifinance institutions, with large MFIs (serving 80–90% of clients) staying operational.

Dr Toth is a microeconomist whose research is focused on private sector development. In 2020 he was awarded US\$3.5 million by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to co-lead a three-year research project on the impact of interoperable digital finance schemes in emerging economies, including Myanmar and the Philippines.

# Testimonials from our researchers

In 2023, SSEAC asked its academic members what they valued most about the Centre. Here's a sample of their responses.

"SSEAC provides an intellectual home for engaging in research and teaching about our region. Through their workshops, events, funding schemes and mentoring programs, SSEAC has helped me build a multidisciplinary network and community at the University of Sydney, helped me navigate the complexities of early-career research, and sustained my engagement with Indonesia despite the current complexities of international research."

- **Dr Sophie Webber, School of Geosciences**

"As a researcher focused on the Asia-Pacific, SSEAC makes the University of Sydney special. It's a hub of activity and connections that has benefitted me and my students in terms of networking, funding, training, and improving and gaining attention for our research and policy engagement on the region."

- **Dr Russell Toth, School of Economics**

"SSEAC has been pivotal to advancing my career, expanding my intellectual and creative horizons and an anchor to my life in Sydney. The Centre, especially its Director, Professor Michele Ford, have taught me what it means to be a well-rounded and impactful scholar. SSEAC leads by example and through its many activities the Centre has become an invaluable part of my career at the University of Sydney."

- **Dr Aim Sinpeng, School of Social and Political Sciences**

"SSEAC provides a unique support system for research students, emerging researchers and established scholars alike. The Centre proactively brings people together and provides meaningful opportunities for professional development. The communities fostered by SSEAC have been the richest and most productive of my academic life by far. I know of no initiative or institution at the University of Sydney that makes such a major contribution, relative to its size, to the intellectual and academic life of its university and of the various publics that it serves."

- **Dr Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan, École française d'Extrême-Orient**

"SSEAC facilitates connections with colleagues across the university that are important for supporting research and teaching initiatives in the region. The country-specific gatherings are particularly valuable to learn from the experience of others about the country context and implications for approaching partnerships with government and non-government agencies."

- **Associate Professor Jenny-Ann Toribio, School of Veterinary Science**

"SSEAC has connected me with a unique multidisciplinary network of scholars working on pressing issues in our region. The Centre has afforded me unparalleled mentorship to develop my research ideas, enabled the translation of my work to influence practice, and fostered engagement with policymakers in Australia and across Southeast Asia."

- **Dr Aaron Opdyke, School of Civil Engineering**

"I was a Chief Investigator on a small SSEAC research grant that included support for a PhD student from Indonesia to complete a chapter of his thesis. The student has graduated and secured a high-quality post doc in the US for the past two years. The SSEAC grant allowed him to use a cutting-edge technique (which was expensive because it was new) for his methodology — this gave him the edge for getting a post doc."

- **Associate Professor Joy Becker, School of Life and Environmental Sciences**

"With its extensive mentoring programs, international research networks and breadth of scope, SSEAC is a gem for researchers, students and visitors to the University of Sydney. My work on Southeast Asia has been greatly enriched by SSEAC's grants and programs to conduct fieldwork, archival work, study language, and organise workshops with colleagues in the region and globally."

- **Dr Josh Stenberg, School of Languages and Cultures**





## Supporting research excellence

SSEAC supports members from across the university to initiate, refine or expand their high-quality research on Southeast Asia.

In November 2023, SSEAC awarded 16 grants to University of Sydney academics and their collaborators across four programs and a range of research areas for use in 2023–2025.

Grants are provided to encourage academic collaboration with researchers in the region, to seed projects in the Centre’s five areas of research and to support workshops aimed at developing academic publications from applied research.

Two writing fellowships are also awarded to early-career academics to write an article related to Southeast Asia based on their PhD work.

Successful collaborative projects include examining mathematical modelling for predicting high-risk periods of Japanese encephalitis in the Philippines, an analysis of humanitarian and development work in education in the Thai/Myanmar border communities and a pilot study of smartphone-based mobile health technologies to improve tuberculosis prevention strategies in Vietnam.

Seed grant projects include the uneven impacts of the nickel boom in Indonesia against emerging electric vehicle global production networks, waste management policies and practices in Timor-Leste and the social impacts of transforming empty multipurpose ground floors in Singapore’s high-density housing projects to shared spaces.

Workshop grants were awarded across three areas: feminist writings in Southeast Asian art; nano-catalysis for pioneering sustainability in energy and environment; and perspectives and experiences from Malaysia and Australia on collaborations in education.

### Grants awarded in 2023

Category	No. awarded	Countries
Collaborative Research Grants	5	Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam
EMCR Seed Grants	6	Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Vietnam
Workshop Grants	3	Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam
Writing Fellowships	2	Indonesia, Thailand

# Research spotlight: Issues of translation in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal

With SSEAC funding, Sydney Law School academics are exploring issues of translation and interpretation in Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

After 16 years in operation, the United Nations-backed Khmer Rouge Tribunal handed down its final verdict in September 2022. Formally known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, the tribunal’s remit was to prosecute Khmer Rouge senior leaders and those “most responsible” for serious crimes, including war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide, committed in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge’s brutal reign from 1975 to 1979.

But while the tribunal’s hearings have now concluded, its complex legacy will be a source of inquiry and debate for decades to come.

Sydney Law School academics Dr Rosemary Grey and Dr Rachel Kilean have each pursued varied research into the tribunal’s work and impact on Cambodian politics and society. In 2023, with SSEAC seed funding, they launched a new research project that focuses on challenges of interpretation and translation arising in the tribunal, which works across the Khmer, English and French languages.

The project will identify Khmer terms that have been difficult to translate into English and French and vice-versa, examine how translation challenges have been addressed, and assess how translators and interpreters have affected the tribunal’s capacity to assess evidence and communicate effectively with the public.

It will draw on interviews with translators and interpreters who worked at the court, and seek to establish what lessons around translation and

interpretation may be learned, with potential value for the functioning of other international tribunals.

“In a multi-lingual courtroom, there is so much to be lost (and gained) in translation,” said Dr Grey. “The closure of Cambodia’s war crimes tribunal – which managed the dizzying feat of working across three languages – offers an opportunity to examine how these translation issues play out in large and complex trials for war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.”

Alongside the use of interviews, the project will involve analysis of witness testimonies to understand how particular terms or concepts were translated, and which concepts, phrases, metaphors or idioms posed particular translation challenges. It will begin with a relatively small data set, with a view to seeking funding for an expanded project in future.

The project will contribute to an otherwise limited body of scholarship examining the role of translation and interpretation in international criminal justice, none of which have focused on the Cambodian tribunal to date. Having completed its trials, the court now has three years to wind down its residual activities, including disseminating information to the public on its work.

“Working with Khmer-speakers and tribunal translators on this project will deepen current understandings of how meaning is shared in Cambodia’s history-making genocide trials,” Dr Grey said.

**“Working with Khmer-speakers and tribunal translators on this project will deepen current understandings of how meaning is shared in Cambodia’s history-making genocide trials.”**

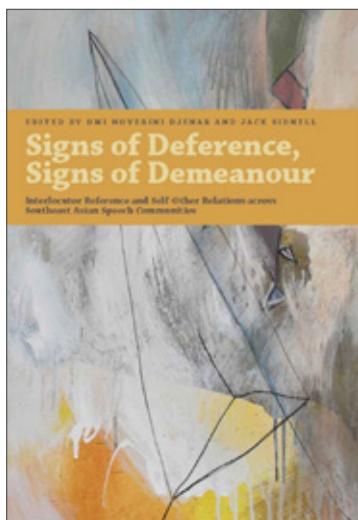
**Dr Rosemary Grey**



## Publishing highlights

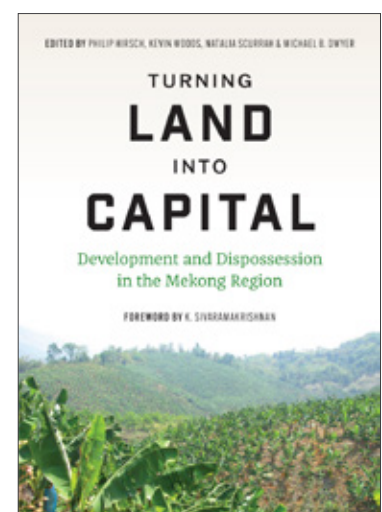
From language use to land rights, queer culture and underwater heritage, these new books by SSEAC members showcase a diversity of interests and insight on all things Southeast Asia.

Several SSEAC members have seen the fruits of their research published in book form in 2022–23. Ranging across subjects, disciplines and countries, these new publications – some of which were directly enabled by SSEAC funding and support – showcase the breadth of expertise and insight among our academic members working across Southeast Asia.



Co-edited by **Associate Professor Dwi Noverini Djenaar** (School of Languages and Cultures), *Signs of Deference, Signs of Demeanour* (NUS Press, 2022) examines interlocutor reference based analysis of Southeast Asian languages. Acts of interlocutor reference do more than simply identify the speaker and addressee; they also convey information about the proposed relation between interlocutors. Bringing together studies from both small-scale and large urbanised communities across mainland and insular Southeast Asia, the book makes an important contribution to the regional linguistic and anthropological literature. This book arises from a SSEAC-funded workshop convened by Associate Professor Djenaar in June 2019 on address and self-reference in Southeast Asia. Held in Sydney, the workshop included scholars based at universities across Australia, Canada and Germany.

In Southeast Asia, reversals of earlier agrarian reforms have rolled back “land-to-the-tiller” policies created in the wake of Cold War-era revolutions. This trend, marked by increased land concentration and the promotion of export-oriented agribusiness at the expense of smallholder farmers, exposes the convergence of capitalist relations and state agendas that expand territorial control within and across national borders. *Turning Land into Capital: Development and Dispossession in the Mekong Region* (University of Washington Press, 2022) examines the contradictions produced by superimposing 21st century neoliberal projects onto diverse landscapes etched by decades of war and state socialism. Co-edited by **Philip Hirsch, Emeritus Professor** at the University of Sydney, the book explores geopolitics, legacies of colonialism, ideologies of development, and strategies to achieve land justice in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam.





In 1998, a ninth-century vessel was discovered in Indonesian waters, with a full cargo of over 60,000 Chinese Tang-dynasty ceramics, gold and other precious objects, likely intended for the Middle East. The *Belitung* is one of the most significant shipwreck discoveries of recent times, revealing the global scale of ancient commercial endeavours and the centrality of the ocean within the Silk Road story. In *Belitung: The Afterlives of a Shipwreck* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022), **Dr Natali Pearson** (SSEAC Curriculum Coordinator) traces the lives and afterlives of the *Belitung* and reflects on underwater cultural heritage management. This thought-provoking book shifts our thinking about shipwrecks beyond popular tropes and towards an understanding of how the relationships between sites, objects and people shape the stories we tell of the past in the present.

A range of emerging and established scholarly voices, including activists in Southeast Asia, are featured in *Queer Southeast Asia* (Routledge, 2022). Co-edited by **Dr Shawna Tang** (School of Humanities), it covers a broad scope of topics, from the impact of Japanese queer popular culture on queer Filipinos, to the politics of public toilets in Singapore and the impact of digital governance on queer communities across ASEAN. Taken in combination, these investigations not only highlight the operations of queer politics in Southeast Asia, but also present a concrete basis to reflect on queer knowledge production in the region. The book is a vital resource for students and scholars of gender and sexuality in Southeast Asia, or any Queer or LGBTQ+ studies looking beyond the West.



In Cambodia, the increasing scarcity of rural labour is pushing farmers to find ways to manage large rice fields with meagre resources and continuously emerging crop management constraints, especially for weed control. Out-migration of rural labour has resulted in a shift from manual transplanting to direct-seeded rice, and this has changed the spectrum of weed species and made weed management more difficult. Co-edited by **Professor Daniel Tan** (School of Life and Environmental Sciences), *Weed Management in Direct-Seeded Rice Under Cambodian Conditions* (Eliva Press, 2023) describes important weeds of rice in Cambodia, weed seed contamination in rice seed for sowing, weedy rice contamination in paddy and options for Integrated Weed Management.





# Sharing our members' stories

Now in its fifth year, our SSEAC Stories podcast hosted by Dr Natali Pearson continues to showcase the diverse research of our academic members.

In 2023, we released 16 new episodes of [SSEAC Stories](#) and registered over 54,000 downloads. The podcast is hosted as a special series on the US-based [New Books Network](#), and can also be found on the main podcasting apps, including [Apple](#), [Spotify](#) and [Castbox](#). SSEAC Director Michele Ford is also a co-host of the [New Books in Southeast Asian Studies](#) program on the New Books Network, which features in-depth interviews with scholars of Southeast Asia and has a global audience. Here are some highlights from 2023.



## **A new hope? Japanese retirement migration to Malaysia**

Previous studies on Asian migration have mostly considered the movement of people from Asia to Europe and North America. Yet in recent years, countries in Asia have emerged as major receiving sites of intra-regional migration. Dr Shiori Shakuto takes a closer look at Japanese retirement migration to Malaysia, revealing some of the motivations for inter-Asian migration, and what that might tell us about their hopes and dreams for a different kind of life.



## **Social media influencers and digital media regulation in Vietnam**

In 2021, a famous Vietnamese businesswoman hosted a three-hour long Facebook livestream, in which she named and shamed celebrities for their controversial public behaviours. The case marked a turning point in Vietnam, forcing the government to contend with growing political activity in the online environment. Dr Jonathon Hutchinson discusses this and other examples of online activism in Vietnam, reflecting on the tension between social media influencing and digital media regulation.



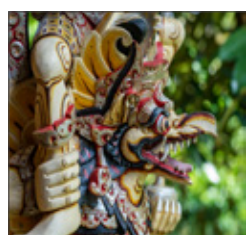
## **Locating human dignity in Cambodia: Prospects for human rights education**

The concept of human dignity is a foundational one in human rights and development discourses. But the meaning of 'human dignity', and its role, have seldom been rigorously interrogated. Instead, there exists a widespread presumption of universality, despite growing evidence that the concept can be understood in profoundly different ways in different socio-cultural and political settings. Dr Rachel Killean discusses human dignity in Cambodia, and the prospects for human rights education.



## **Agricultural shocks and social conflict in Southeast Asia**

In lower-income economies, a small change in people's wellbeing may trigger a suite of behavioural responses, some of which may be unlawful as well as violent. In regions with high agricultural dependence, conflict can be linked with harvest-time windfalls. Agriculture is a crucial sector for employment in Southeast Asia, where poverty is relatively high and civil conflict and social unrest have been present. Associate Professor David Ubilava discusses harvest time violence and why it occurs.



## **Kawi Culture: Exploring Indonesia's classical civilisation**

Much of what is considered 'classical' in Indonesian history, such as the Borobudur temple complex or the kingdom of Majapahit, is a product of Kawi Culture. In fact, Indonesian society emerged from the ancient traditions of Kawi Culture, which stretch back over a thousand years. The symbols and ideas of Kawi Culture continue to define Indonesian identity, such as in Javanese wayang and Balinese temples. So what is Kawi, and why is it the classical civilisation no one has heard of? Dr Wayan Jarrah Sastrawan explains.

# Supporting Indonesian disability advocates for a more inclusive future

## SSEAC's fourth leadership training course for disability advocates from Indonesia built skills and enriched perspectives.

Over two weeks in January, SSEAC ran its fourth leadership training course for disability advocates and policymakers from across Indonesia. Delivered in collaboration with the Centre for Disability Research and Policy (CDRP) and the Centre for Disability Studies (CDS), the course offered participants the opportunity to travel to Sydney to undertake training with experts from academia, government and the community.

Funded through the Australia Awards in Indonesia program, the short course aimed to strengthen the leadership and management of Organisations for People with Disabilities (OPDs) in Indonesia and build the capacity of government officials to implement inclusive policies. A key goal of the course was to strengthen collaboration between civil society and government to advance disability inclusion.

In total, 22 participants took part, including a mix of civil society and government employees. More than half the group identified as having a disability.

It was an action-packed and productive two weeks. During their time in Australia, the group engaged in a range of activities, workshops, site visits and coursework. Sessions covered a variety of themes, from advocacy and campaigning, to engaging with policymakers, harnessing quality evidence and using research tools.

"This was a really comprehensive and intensive course," said one participant. "I learnt a lot about theory, policy and lived experience, as well as how different actors work to implement measures related to disability rights. The course gave me a very rich perspective from which to continue the struggle for the rights of people with disability and other marginalised groups."

The course was led by SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford and Deputy Director Dr Elisabeth Kramer, with Professor Jen Smith-Merry (CDRP) and Associate Professor Mary-Ann O'Donovan (CDS) contributing as course co-designers and subject matter experts.

Guest sessions were run by experienced advocates and professionals from organisations including the

Australian Human Rights Commission, Council for Intellectual Disability, People with Disability Australia, Plumtree and Resilience to Recovery, as well as core SSEAC staff and Sydney academics.

The fostering of connections between activists and advocates in Indonesia and Australia was an important feature of the program. Participants were able to share goals, ideas and experiences, and spoke constantly of finding ways to keep in touch with each other and collaborate after returning to Indonesia, including with their Australian counterparts.

Participants from government commented that the course had changed their outlook on the work and role of OPDs back home.

"Before doing [the course], I kept my distance from OPDs," one participant observed. "This has changed. I enjoyed working with them and I now feel like I can support what they do, including by putting them in touch with people in my networks within government to make their work easier."

The course also included site visits to the National Disability Insurance Agency and the Disability Council of NSW, among others, which helped participants build a nuanced understanding of the disability policy context in Australia.

On 26 January, the group attended the early-morning smoking ceremony at Barangaroo Reserve. Then, having observed the annual wheelchair road race at The Rocks, they travelled on to the Yabun Festival in Victoria Park, an annual celebration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture. These events gave participants a deeper understanding of Australia's history and Indigenous culture and prompted many insightful discussions.

Throughout the program, participants were supported to apply their newly acquired skills and knowledge to map out projects that they would implement when they returned to work at their respective organisations.





Clockwise from top: address by Professor Greg Fox, Director of the Sydney Vietnam Academic Network; keynote address by Mr Bui Thanh Son, Vietnam Minister of Foreign Affairs (Photo courtesy Ms Xing Jin, Sydney Vietnam Academic Network); Professor Fox (centre) with the Hon Anoulack Chanthivong, NSW Minister for Industry and Trade (left), who also gave a keynote address, and H.E. Mr Thang Nguyen-Dang, Consul General of Vietnam for NSW (right; Photo courtesy Ms Xing Jin); Professor Sonja van Wichelen chairing a panel discussion (Photo courtesy of panellist Ms Lam Tuong Vi Tran); closing remarks by H.E. Mr Nguyen Tat Thanh, Ambassador of Vietnam to Australia.

# Australia Vietnam Innovation Symposium

The Symposium was held to coincide with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Australia and Vietnam in 2023.

More than 160 people joined the Australia Vietnam Innovation Symposium on 29 August to celebrate the history of research, innovation and educational engagement between Australia and Vietnam.

Co-hosted by the University of Sydney and the Consulate General of Vietnam, the Symposium was chaired by Professor Greg Fox, Director of the Sydney Vietnam Academic Network, and featured a series of high-level keynote speeches and engaging discussions and presentations aimed at bolstering ties between Australian and Vietnamese industries.

Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Sydney, Professor Mark Scott AO, opened proceedings with an address that highlighted the friendships forged between Australia and Vietnam and the contributions of Vietnamese students to society, both the many alumni who have gone back to Vietnam and worked significantly with government and industry, and the many who have remained in Australia.

In a recorded message, Vietnam's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Bui Thanh Son, emphasised the role of scientific and technological innovation in the bilateral strategic partnership. "One of the priorities in Vietnam's development strategy is to build an economy based on science, technology, innovation, digital transformation and green growth. With Australia being a leading partner, as countries are facing challenges in implementing the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2030, it is even more necessary for Vietnam and Australia to boost bilateral [cooperation] in these areas to realise our common goals and aspirations."

NSW Minister for Industry and Trade and Minister for Innovation, Science and Technology, the Hon Anouack Chanthivong, an alumnus of the University of Sydney, noted the government's commitment to supporting innovation to develop a more sustainable future and strengthen both economies.

Vice President (External Engagement), Kirsten Andrews, spoke of the university's long history of engagement with Vietnam. "In 1974, just a year after establishing diplomatic recognition, Australia awarded its first educational scholarship to a Vietnamese student. Since then, more than 80,000 Vietnamese students

have pursued education in Australia with ongoing engagement in various educational pursuits.

"Our partnerships in Vietnam are diverse and active. They support learning and research exchange in infectious diseases, agriculture, business and innovation, maternal and child health, and arts and social sciences."

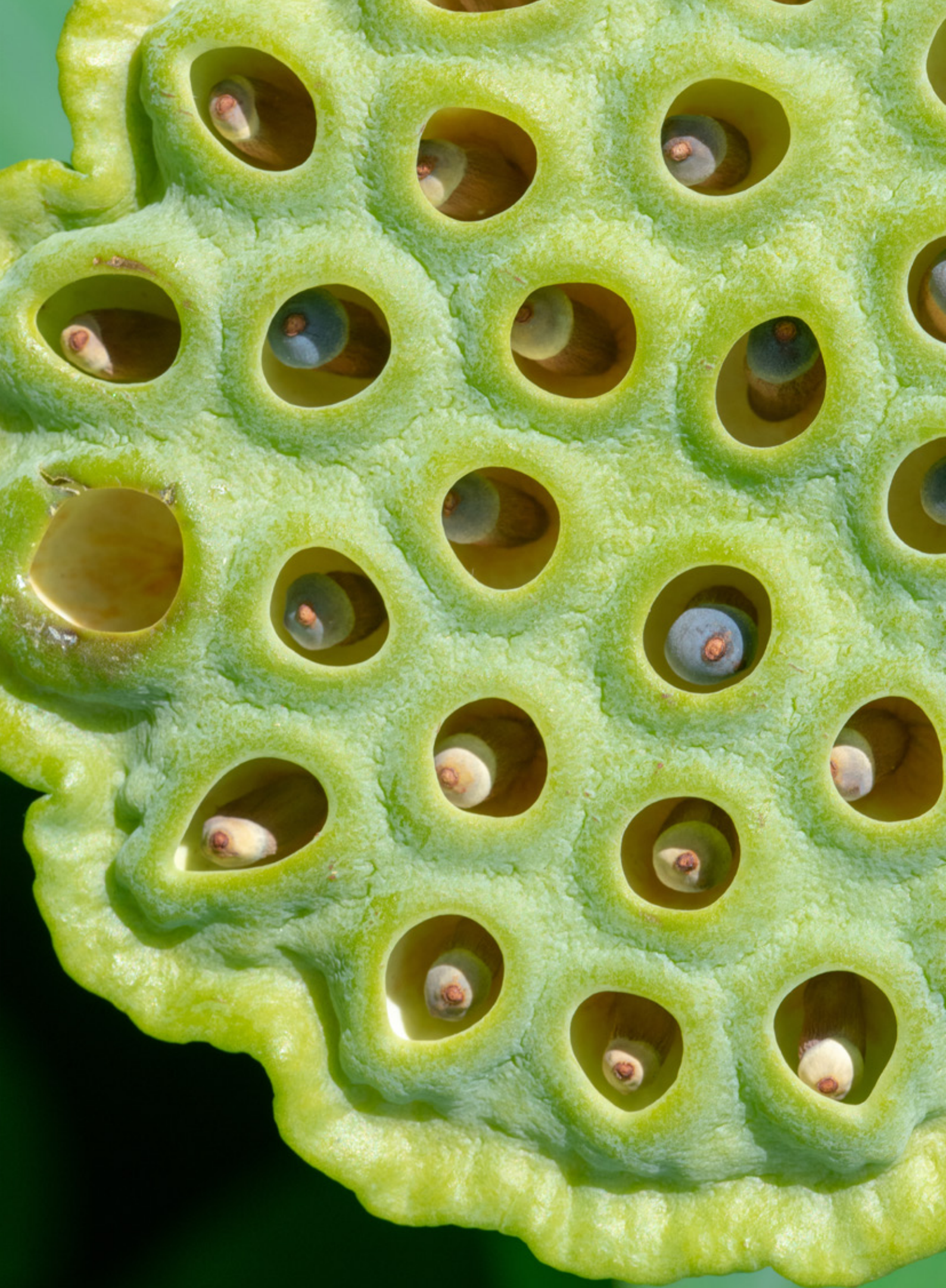
The Symposium also brought together experts from government, industry and academia to address shared challenges and opportunities for partnership. Roundtable discussions explored collaboration in research, science and technology and ways to enhance economic partnership and trade between the two countries.

Dr Quang Nguyen Ngo, Vietnam Ministry of Health, spoke on strengthening healthcare in Vietnam through clinical trials. Professor Robyn Ward, Pro Vice-Chancellor Medicine and Health, explored health research impact assessments and a growing emphasis on developing new models that consider the research environment, collaboration, and the broader social, economic and public health outcomes for the state and local communities.

SSEAC Deputy Director Professor Sonja van Wichelen chaired a panel on impact through research and innovation, featuring a broad range of topics including disease prevention in Pangasius farming, the dynamics of Vietnamese digital media, HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccination, and audience engagement strategies in Vietnamese museums.

Ambassador of Vietnam to Australia, H.E. Mr Nguyen Tat Thanh, closed the day with remarks on the importance of Vietnam's partnership with Australia in science and technology, alongside economic, health and security collaborations. "Australia is our partner of choice, and with particular regard to science and technology Australia has always been the first choice for Vietnam. Outcomes of events like this will contribute to better cooperation between the two countries in the next 50 years and beyond."

The Symposium was supported by the Sydney Southeast Asia Centre, the Sydney Vietnam Academic Network and the Office of Global and Research Engagement.



# The next generation of research excellence

SSEAC is committed to supporting emerging scholars of Southeast Asia. The Centre's professional development programs offer opportunities for students and academics at the University of Sydney and beyond to make inroads on their research, sharpen their skills and connect with peers.

## Academic Pathways: Why the first five years post-PhD are so critical

For postgraduates and early-career researchers (ECRs) wanting to be academics, being awarded a PhD is only the beginning of the journey. Our [academic pathways workshop](#), delivered online, provided 100 ECRs with interests in Southeast Asia valuable insights into making the most of the critical first five years post-PhD.

Three SSEAC members from a range of disciplines – Dr Yvonne Low (Art History), Dr Sabin Zahirovic (Geosciences) and Dr Aaron Opdyke (Humanitarian Engineering) – together with SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford shared their experiences and learnings in response to curated questions from SSEAC Curriculum Coordinator, Dr Natali Pearson.

From strategic publishing and shoring up research affiliations, to understanding the 'Discovery Early Career Researcher Award (DECRA) clock', looking for opportunities to collaborate and developing a grant track record, the workshop covered a range of areas to help ECRs stand out.

## Demystifying Spatial Data

Dr Sabin Zahirovic, School of Geosciences and SSEAC Executive Committee Research Adviser, led this excellent hands-on workshop aimed at interdisciplinary researchers in the humanities and social sciences who want to engage with the natural sciences.

As the digitalisation of information has led to expanding sets of data, so too has it become more and more important for researchers to develop the skills to analyse and interpret data including visual data.

Using data sets from Southeast Asia, the workshop provided an introduction to understanding, interpreting and presenting spatial data. It covered the basics of the Geographic Information System (GIS) and the open-source platform QGIS, defined vector and raster data, showed how to import data from different contexts, and explained how to apply distance analysis and make risk observations.

The workshop also showed how to use spatial data to tell a compelling story, one that gives evidence of a pattern, trend or argument. Watch it on our [YouTube channel](#).

## Academics Anonymous

Embarking on a PhD can be both exciting and nerve-wracking. As well as the work that goes into submitting a thesis, there are also all the academic activities that go on during – and after – a PhD: mentoring, outreach, impact, grant writing, among others.

At this SSEAC skills workshop, higher degree by research students and early-career researchers focusing on Southeast Asia had the opportunity to submit questions anonymously and to hear them discussed in a supportive and collegial environment.

As well as some perennial questions, such as how to manage when to read and when to write, a number of questions were canvassed by SSEAC Director Professor Michele Ford and the SSEAC team.

Questions covered included: How do PhD candidates decide whether to send an article to a top-ranking journal or a widely read one? What is the best way to leverage a PhD after a long career break due to caring responsibilities? And are we any closer to no paywall journal access?

# Writing retreats

SSEAC’s annual writing retreats supported dozens of researchers to achieve their writing goals in 2023.

SSEAC holds regular writing retreats for postgraduate and early- and mid-career researchers (EMCRs) working on Southeast Asia, supporting them to make meaningful progress on their academic writing. Since 2020, our retreats have supported more than 250 researchers based at universities across the country.

In 2023, these initiatives were as productive – and popular – as ever. In February, over 60 postgraduates and academics joined us on campus for three days of focused writing time. Alongside dedicated writing blocs, the retreat included work-in-progress discussions, opportunities to discuss goals and challenges, and a workshop on writing articles for the media. It was fascinating to hear about all the diverse Southeast Asia-related academic work that participants were focused on.

As a result of the retreats, participants successfully published a number of academic and outreach articles covering various subject matter including traditional Balinese drumming, the plight of small-scale producers in Indonesia’s fisheries sector, the under-representation of Southeast Asian voices in feminist research, and art and politics in the historical narrative of modern Vietnam.

In early December, 40 students and 20 scholars gathered in the beautiful surrounds of Kirribilli. Inspired by views of Sydney Harbour and flowering jacarandas, participants wrapped up the year by refocusing on their research and reflecting on how they could sustain productive writing habits in the year to come. Optional

yoga and meditation sessions set the scene each morning, followed by quiet writing time and daily work-in-progress discussions. A dedicated mentoring lunch on the final day provided postgraduate students with the opportunity to meet with established researchers, seek guidance on their writing and career goals, and develop their networks across academia.

Participants reported significant progress against the writing goals they had set, as well as a greater sense of community and belonging.

“It’s been very useful in terms of helping me to focus on my writing,” one participant said. “But importantly, I also felt replenished by seeing and interacting with fellow PhD students.”

For another participant, “It was great to have a different way to approach my writing and such a good opportunity to engage with researchers outside my faculty about their work.”



Dr Natali Pearson, SSEAC Curriculum Coordinator (front, far left) with EMCR and postgraduate participants at the December 2023 writing retreat at Kirribilli





## Creative minds tackle Southeast Asia challenges

Students showcased their innovative solutions to real-world issues in Southeast Asia as part of the 'Make a Real Difference' initiative.

Postgraduate students in the University of Sydney Business School put their creative, analytical and problem-solving skills to the test in June and December 2023 as part of the 'Make a Real Difference' (MARD) initiative. Run by the Business School and supported by SSEAC, the initiative tasks students with devising innovative solutions to real-world challenges in Southeast Asia.

Students work in small groups to produce a detailed business case, timeline, budget and presentation outlining their proposed solution to a challenge. In setting up the inaugural program in 2022, SSEAC's academic members provided students with detailed guidance on topic areas and produced 10 stand-alone videos that gave students an overview of each country in Southeast Asia, including cultural, political and business considerations.

The 10 leading proposals from each cohort in 2023 were presented by students to a panel of academics, business and industry leaders, including from L'Oréal, NEC, Ramsey Health Care, Nestle, KPMG, Maven Data and SSEAC. Students presented for 15 minutes, followed by a Q&A session with the panel that explored their plans in more detail.

This year's solutions were as thoughtful and creative as ever. Among them were proposals to promote cultural heritage in the Philippines through a mobile phone game; utilise virtual reality technology to reduce mental health stigma in Singapore; introduce transparent rubbish bins to influence waste disposal patterns in Malaysia; and establish black soldier fly composting farms in rural Cambodia to reduce landfill food waste.

The winning proposals chosen from each cohort as judged by the panel were: an app-based platform for on-demand waste collection in Vietnam's capital Hanoi, combined with the engagement and empowerment of informal waste collectors; and innovative software that leverages AI capabilities to monitor the online marketing and sale of e-cigarettes in Thailand to ensure compliance with bans on their import and promotion, particularly to Thai youth.

"This is an excellent opportunity to bring together industry partners and students to share innovative, well-thought-through solutions to real-world social and environmental concerns in Southeast Asia," said Dr Abdul Razeed, Sydney Business School, who developed and coordinates the initiative together with Master of Commerce Head Tutor, Angela Baxter. "The MARD initiative provides students with a unique opportunity to enhance their learning experience through direct engagement with industry leaders," she said.

Now in its second year, the initiative is offered as part of the Creative and Analytic Mindset (BUSS5221) unit, which aims to equip students with the capacity and confidence to apply analytical methods, think creatively and devise novel approaches to practical problems. It is one of the university's largest units of study, with over 2,000 student enrolments in the first semester of 2023.

"The interactions I had with the industry professionals forced me to rethink approaches to solutions with a renewed creative paradigm but also with a grounded sense of pragmatism," said one student participant.



## **Field schools in 2023**

SSEAC ran five field schools to the Southeast Asia region in 2023, enabling 85 students to gain invaluable on-the-ground experience in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Timor-Leste.

# Five field schools to five countries in 2023

SSEAC's field schools across the region offered students an unforgettable learning experience far beyond the classroom walls.

SSEAC's multidisciplinary field schools offer students a transformational, on-the-ground learning experience that is profoundly rewarding. Funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's New Colombo Plan, for over a decade, our field schools to the region have positively influenced students' research and career trajectories, broadened perspectives and enabled lasting connections.

In 2023, we ran five field schools to the region, bringing students together from across disciplines to explore research themes in depth. The field schools supported students to study antimicrobial resistance in Cambodia, disaster risk and resilience in the Philippines, the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out in Singapore, social justice in Indonesia, and disability and work in Timor-Leste.

Each field school included experiential learning activities, intensive language training, workshops and community site visits. Students also worked in small interdisciplinary groups to design a research project, with their findings to be presented in the final week. This well-established model allowed students to bring their own perspectives to a research problem and collaborate across cultures and disciplines while still in-country.

In total, some 85 students took part across all five field schools. Students were drawn from a broad range of disciplinary backgrounds including pharmacy, media, medical science, psychology, social work, anthropology and architecture. This disciplinary diversity helped generate rounded discussion and engagement with research themes and encouraged connections that greatly broadened students' networks at the university.

From site visits to field research, there were countless highlights across the five field schools. In **Cambodia**, students were able to engage with farmers on their land, visit a children's surgical centre in Phnom Penh, and attend the World Health Organization offices to learn more about antimicrobial resistance and One Health approaches.

In the **Philippines**, alongside visits to the Asian Development Bank offices and the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation, students conducted fieldwork

with Habitat for Humanity Philippines, a non-profit focused on housing, and explored ways of building resilient communities in Negros Occidental and Leyte.

In **Singapore**, students visited Singapore's Ministry of Health to learn how they managed data during the pandemic, took part in a pandemic ethics case study at the National University Hospital, and heard from an expert at the Singapore Centre for Environmental Life Sciences Engineering on the bio-surveillance of waste and important questions about ethics, human rights, data and disease.

In Yogyakarta, **Indonesia**, students gained invaluable insights into social justice from a grassroots perspective, learning from scholars at local universities, such as Universitas Gadjah Mada, and various NGOs about how Indonesians are challenging anti-democratic actions and asserting their rights. Inspired by site visits, field research and even incidental conversations, students' perspectives on issues of law, language, religion, disability and social life in Indonesia were greatly enriched.

Finally, in **Timor-Leste**, students explored issues of disability and work from a structural perspective, engaging with employers, health and disability services, as well as working with students from Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e. They also had the extraordinary opportunity to meet with President José Ramos-Horta, gaining invaluable insights from the head of state.

Students commented on how this unique educational experience had challenged and deepened their perspectives in unexpected ways, taught them new skills and connected them with like-minded peers. "This field school has been a truly unforgettable experience that has taught me not only academic but personal lessons," a student on the Singapore field school said. "It has tested my resilience but provided me with so many lessons I could not have learned in a lecture theatre or tutorial room."

In November, we released a special five-part podcast series on [SSEAC Stories](#), featuring field-school students and staff sharing their transformational experiences.



# Testimonials from our field school students

SSEAC asked students what they learned during their field school experience. Here's a sample of their responses.

"The richness of connections and the camaraderie that formed was profound. It made me realise that branching out from my usual circles and getting out of my comfort zone is so valuable. Most importantly, it's shown me the value of embracing new environments and experiences."

- **Philippines field school student**

"The field school was truly an opportunity of a lifetime. There are too many impactful components to possibly list, but the most essential component in my opinion was its multidisciplinary. On the final day of the field school while I listened to my peers present their research, I realised what a genuine privilege it was to work with each and every one of them."

- **Singapore field school student**

"Meeting with the President [José Ramos-Horta] was certainly overwhelming. I enjoyed his reflections on the romanticised 'promise of youth' concept and its irrelevance to global change. This hopeful rhetoric is frequently offered to young Westerners, who are assured of their power to transform the world and resolve complex conflicts. He noted his persistent refusal to engage with these platitudes, reminding us that change is not an inevitable process, but a slow and consistent march, where one must choose to engage in the struggle each day ... I appreciated his humbling advice and reminded myself of our positionality as visitors and learners in beautiful Timor-Leste."

- **Timor-Leste field school student**

"I can't speak highly enough of the group I was in. Our progress from idea design to research question, to carrying out our research, and then presenting our intervention was the most genuine collaboration I've had during my time at university ... there was a great balance between different opinions and approaches ... I can safely look back on our project and say that we created something where everyone's disciplines shined through and were indispensable to the final product."

- **Cambodia field school student**

"This field school has been the most incredible opportunity and enriching learning experience. The halls that I've been in and people that have taken the time to connect with our group have given me such a gift of knowledge. Yet, some of the most eye-opening moments have been the time walking in between alleyways, or chatting on a balcony, or in the posters up on a wall that meets the wandering eye. Being here physically as a part of the life in Yogyakarta is where so much of this knowledge stems from."

- **Indonesia field school student**

"Despite only having completed one week, I feel like I already have a semester's worth of knowledge and on top of that, new flavours of culture, travel and perspective. Looking back to my mindset pre-departure, I knew then that the experience would be fruitful. While this idea has not changed, I have been surprised by [how many] of my preconceptions have been debunked by being in-country."

- **Cambodia field school student**

"I have learned that it is vital to understand and respect cultural practices and to recognise my role in this context is to not impose my perspective but to provide support and work 'with' as opposed to work 'on'. I hope to be able to share these perspectives and advocate for change within my future professional career."

- **Philippines field school student**

"One of the biggest lessons I learned during this field school was the significance of effective communication, especially when faced with barriers like remote collaboration or ideological differences ... The constant debates and disagreements challenged our assumptions, forced us to re-evaluate our approach, and ultimately led to a more comprehensive and well-rounded outcome. It highlighted the importance of embracing diversity in research and valuing different perspectives, even when they initially seem incongruent."

- **Singapore field school student**

# Surfing with purpose after a transformational trip

Field school alumni Rob O’Hara reflects on how exploring mental health issues in Indonesia shaped his study and career path.

In mid-2019, SSEAC led an interdisciplinary field school to Indonesia on disability and social inclusion. Over two weeks, undergraduate students from across the University of Sydney spent time in Jakarta and Yogyakarta to learn about issues of stigma, access, services and advocacy, in collaboration with local students, academics, activists and NGOs.

Among the participants was Rob O’Hara, then a Bachelor of Psychology student, who was keen to explore his passion for mental health through a different lens. He credits the field school experience as integral to shaping his study and career path.

“In Yogyakarta, we met with NGOs and local organisations and heard about their advocacy on disability, including mental health. Coming from a psych background, mental health was really my core interest and we ended up focusing our research project on the nature of stigma surrounding mental illness in Indonesia,” Rob says.

“In terms of reducing that stigma, particularly among men accessing mental health support, it was so interesting to look at it from that different cultural standpoint and perspective, including how mental illness was viewed and what people knew about it,” Rob continues. “Learning more about what informs good

advocacy on how we can decrease that stigma really informed my work back in Australia.”

Following his studies, Rob landed a dream job teaching people to surf through a program that also offers mental health support.

“It’s been amazing to be a part of. We go down to the beach, set up the boards in a circle and that’s where we chat about a different mental health topic each week,” Rob says. “We try and promote the idea that physical health and mental health are on the same spectrum. The programs are run in a really relaxed way so it doesn’t feel like people are necessarily getting therapy, but are provided with the safe and comfortable space to engage in meaningful conversations around mental health.”

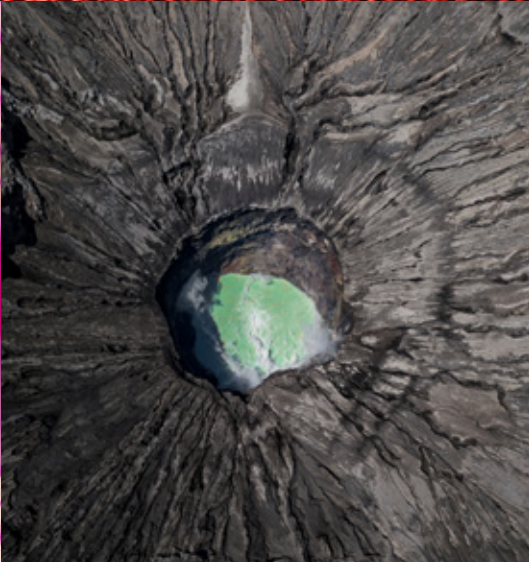
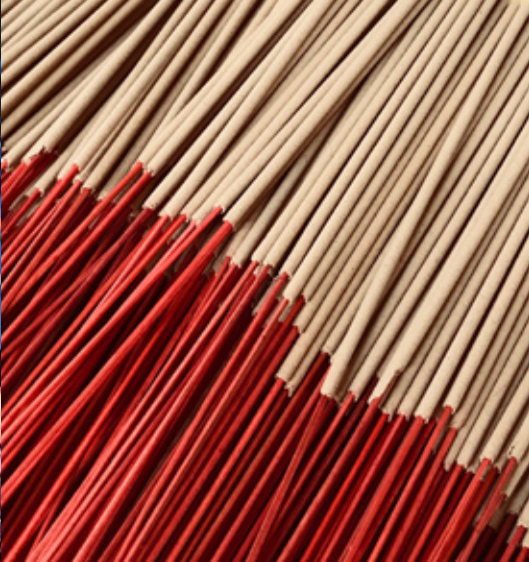
The program, Waves of Wellness, caters to general groups, as well as specific cohorts such as veterans, people from a refugee background, and women who have experienced domestic violence.

As for the surfing, few things beat the joy of seeing people stand up for the first time. “It’s the best,” says Rob. “It’s the only sport I know where you can be as genuinely stoked for your mate or another participant getting a wave as catching it yourself.”



**“It was so interesting to look at [reducing stigma] from that different cultural standpoint and perspective ... Learning more about what informs good advocacy on how we can decrease that stigma really informed my work back in Australia”**

**Rob O’Hara, student participant in the 2019 SSEAC field school on disability and social inclusion in Indonesia**



With more than 390 academics working 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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