

Forschungsbeitrag (nicht begutachtet)

Where and How Will the Southeast Asianists of Tomorrow Be Educated?¹

Antje Missbach and Jemma Purdey

Abstract

In Germany, the state of Southeast Asian Studies reflects a pattern of institutional decline, which is unfortunately not unlike current developments in the US, UK, Australia and other parts of Western Europe. As first- or second-generation scholars reach retirement age, some of whom were pioneers in the field in the two Germanies post-WWII, their positions are not being replaced, or where they are, it is not always by scholars with similar expertise. At the same time, interest by students in studying Southeast Asian Studies continues to decline and so too the interest of research funding agencies and policy makers. This article offers some explanations of why and how this has happened, referring to general structural problems in the German academic system but also to some missed opportunities to gain more intellectual attention within the broader social sciences community. After mapping the current state of affairs at several universities in Germany, this article raises crucial questions about where and by whom the next generation of Southeast Asianists will be trained, and whether the current approach can sustain the field in the German academy and ultimately for German and European strategic interests in this increasingly crucial region, for the long term?

Keywords: Area Studies, future, expert, early career researcher, Germany, academic development

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Es gibt also eine auffällige Differenz zwischen politischer Rhetorik über die Bedeutung Asiens und den Alltag an den deutschen Universitäten. Die Asienstudien und andere Regionalwissenschaften stehen dabei unter großem Druck und in manchen Fällen unmittelbar vor dem Zusammenbruch.²

(Houben 2004: 87)

Indonesia would like to see a partnership with Germany that is about more than just trade and would include promoting the Indonesian economy and achieving a better understanding of local needs.

(Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit, GiZ 2024)

Keep On Keeping On, Barely

More than twenty years ago, Vincent Houben sounded an alarm about the state of Southeast Asian Studies in the German academy (2004). This brief survey of the current situation reveals that his warnings went largely unheeded. Moreover, in the last five years, the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to Southeast Asian Studies teaching and research programs have been dramatic, and the field is yet to recover. Based on our findings, we warn that, without serious intervention, the current lack of interest in Southeast Asia – a linguistically, culturally and politically extremely heterogeneous area that currently consist of 11 states – within the academy will lead to drastic consequences for this field of study.

In Germany, the state of the field of Southeast Asian Studies reflects a pattern also seen elsewhere, whereby a significant generational shift is under way. As first- or second-generation scholars reach retirement age, some of whom were pioneers in the field in the two Germanies post-WWII their positions are not being replaced, or where they are, it is not always by scholars with similar expertise (see for comparisons elsewhere Aspinall and Crouch 2023; Carey 2023). In Europe, this is seen nowhere more starkly than in the discontinuation of the Nordic Institute for Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen at the end of 2023, and a general reduction in professorships/chairs, as well as missed opportunities for new appointments more broadly. This comes at a serious cost to the field as a whole and raises crucial questions about where and by whom the next generation of Southeast Asianists will be trained.

This assessment should not come as a surprise to those who research Southeast Asia themselves or supervise MA, PhD and postdoctoral research in Germany. When searching the databank of the German Research Association (DFG) in mid-2024, we found merely eleven projects currently funded by the DFG or completed in 2024 that

2 There is a striking difference between political rhetoric about the importance of Asia and everyday life at German universities. Asian Studies and other regional studies are under great pressure and in some cases on the verge of collapse.

were related to Southeast Asia in the social sciences and humanities category.³ There are other third-party funder bodies supporting research in and on Southeast Asia, including the German Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and the European Research Council (ERC), but most projects are temporary in nature, lasting between three and four years on average, sometimes less, and rarely allowing even the Principle Investigator to be dedicated full-time to the research project due to the ongoing and comparatively high teaching demands. There is a trend across the academy, not only within Southeast Asian studies, towards increasing “projectivisation” of knowledge production without any recognisable long-term planning or vision. This means that, where researchers undertake projects or set up groups and initiatives, these are limited in scope and unlikely to be sustainable over the longer term. Among other things, this has severe consequences for early career scholars and students who are considering a career in academia. The general epistemic flaws of the German Higher Education system are widely known but have seen little or no change in the last two decades. We also acknowledge the widespread and ongoing tensions across the Western academy between arguments for teaching “Area Studies” (i.e. a multi-disciplinary setting for the deep study of a particular country or region, encompassing both the Social Sciences and the Humanities) versus teaching content related to certain countries and cultures from within the disciplines (Aspinall 2012, Sutherland 2012). In Germany, these tensions are also apparent, and we would argue that with few exceptions, this approach has led to the isolation and near eradication of Southeast Asia specialisation in the social sciences and humanities (Schäfer 2020).

Our brief survey reveals that an even more acute crisis is currently underway with regards to the teaching of Southeast Asian studies in German universities. Whilst systematic training in Southeast Asian studies might still be possible in a limited number of places, the range and variety of subjects available today are fewer than they were 20 years ago and, as is the case elsewhere in the social sciences and humanities, student enrolments are declining.⁴

While Southeast Asian Studies in Germany cannot aspire to match the scale and scope of world-leading hubs for the study of the region, such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Australian National University (ANU), there needs to be an urgent conversation about the viability of Southeast Asian Studies in

3 DGF (2024),

https://gepris.dfg.de/gepris/OCTOPUS?task=doSearchExtended&context=projekt&keywords_criterion=Southeast+Asia&nurProjekteMitAB=false&findButton=Finden&person=&location=&fachlicheZuordnung=%23&pemu=%23&zk_transferprojekt=false&teilprojekte=false&teilprojekte=true&bewilligungsStatus=&beginOffFunding=&gefoerdertIn=2024&oldContinentId=%23&continentId=%23&oldSubContinentId=%23%23&subContinentId=%23%23&oldCountryId=%23%23%23&countryKey=%23%23%23&einrichtungsart=-1.

This compares to 10 DFG-funded projects (including humanities, human geography, politics, history) in 2010.

4 <https://www.destatis.de/DE/Themen/Gesellschaft-Umwelt/Bildung-Forschung-Kultur/Hochschulen/Tabellen/studierende-insgesamt-faechergruppe.html>

Germany in the medium to long term. Should Germany try to “stay in the game”, not least for the sake of national interests in the region, or is it content to relegate this “small subject” to tokenism, spread across various institutions without requisite depth in teaching and learning and the loss of an inherent characteristic of the field, its multi-disciplinarity?

To sustain high-quality research about Southeast Asia in the German academy, we must ensure that there is systematic and consistent teaching of the languages, politics, history, economics and cultures of Southeast Asia at undergraduate and postgraduate level. There can be no harvest without planting. How can we expect high quality research outcomes that are internationally recognised and meet the expectations of policy makers in Germany/Europe, without investing in training the scholars and diplomats of the future? Bringing experts from elsewhere to bolster research profiles is possible and indeed, arguably, important and beneficial, but will this prove to be a solution for the long-term sustainability of the field in the German academy and ultimately for Germany and Europe’s strategic interests in this increasingly crucial region? In place of the current arrangement of a few programs struggling to survive, could a centralised system be imagined whereby such expertise is concentrated in one or two teaching and research institutions?

The debate around decolonising Area Studies and academia more broadly by overcoming our Eurocentric preoccupation is an ongoing and vital one and it must underline any discussions about the future directions of our teaching and researching. It is beyond the parameters of our essay to reflect with any rigour on the substance of “what is Southeast Asian studies?”, or to offer comment on important concerns related to the relationship between Area Studies and the disciplines and structural challenges within Germany’s higher education sector. These debates and reflexive discussions are long established among the European community of scholars in this field (Sutherland 2012; Houben 2013 and 2020; Derichs 2017; Baumann and Fleschenberg 2020). Whilst we would argue that research outcomes will be different when the researcher is trained in an inter-/multi-disciplinary way, we restrict our comments here to how Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies in particular could be (and in some cases *have* already become) a distinct site for these discussions, with resonances across the academy and beyond.

Alongside this debate, we believe there is an urgent need for a conversation that reaches beyond academia to articulate *the relevance of Southeast Asian Studies* in the European and especially the German context. This conversation needs to be both outward-focused and inward-looking in that it should have a coherent message about the importance of the field of study both within and beyond the academy, and also should look for ways to ensure the field can be sustained and developed. The field should seek to attract new students through innovative teaching and learning pedagogies and by offering a multi-disciplinary approach to the region, to help foster a more sincere interest in and engagement with Southeast Asia.

We base our appeal for a more intense focus on Southeast Asia, including by preserving the capacity to train future Southeast Asianists at German universities, on two core competencies within Southeast Asian Studies. The first is related to the political situation, specifically Germany's international relations that include both diplomatic priorities and trade interests. The second, is related to a broader need to recalibrate an overwhelmingly Eurocentric focus within our academy, and in turn participate in the ongoing process of decolonising knowledge production. In both these nationally critical endeavours, we believe Southeast Asian Studies has a vital role to play and there are indeed some research initiatives in German universities including professors of Southeast Asia studies that are attempting to contribute to this.

A National Imperative

In January 2024, on the back of a trip to the Middle East, Germany's Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, visited Malaysia and the Philippines. The visits to these Southeast Asian nations by a high-ranking German official were the first in close to, or over a decade.⁵ Media coverage of the trip pointed to Germany as trying to "make up for lost time" and salvage its image in the region. Indeed, within Germany's diplomatic corps, by observers and Southeast Asians alike, the relationship is openly described as neglected almost to the point of irrelevance (GiZ 2024; DW 16.1.24).⁶

Baerbock's visit was seen to serve an overarching purpose: to re-establish German-Southeast Asian relations at a time when Southeast Asian countries are, like Germany, seeking a strategy that offers them the opportunity to hedge against an overdependence on Chinese markets (Heiduk 2024; Suarsana 2024). In this context, developing more robust economic and strategic links with Southeast Asian economies could be mutually beneficial (DW 16.1.24).

Within the Foreign Office this need for greater emphasis on Asia, and the Indo-Pacific, is well understood. In 2018, the German Parliament (Bundestag) commissioned a study on Germany's relations with the states of Southeast Asia and published a major policy report entitled "Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific: Shaping the 21st Century Together" (Bundestag, 2018). This report details opportunities for German commerce, particularly in the energy sector, and the importance of cooperation related to climate change mitigation. The report's overall tone is optimistic and positive but presents only one side of the story.

In March 2024, in an effort to understand its bilateral and regional relationships from the perspectives of its partners, GiZ conducted a series of interviews with Indonesians as part of its "Germany in the Eyes of the World" series. The report, entitled *Germany in the Eyes of Indonesia – A strategic partnership under scrutiny*,

⁵ The FM also attended the G20 in Bali in 2022.

⁶ Germany is not alone in this (Fontaine and Blackwill 2024).

is the result of 40 interviews conducted with Indonesians over two weeks immediately following the 2024 presidential elections. Whilst presenting the viewpoint of Indonesians only (we would love to see conducted a similar study of Germans on how they see Indonesia), the report adopts a significantly different tone from that of the earlier policy papers. Instead, it presents a stark assessment of the poor state of German-Indonesian relations. Although viewpoints on issues would vary from country to country, with Indonesia as Southeast Asia's largest nation and leader of the ASEAN grouping, the general findings of this report may be extrapolated as indicative of a broader regional view. As the report's executive summary warns, the results make for highly uncomfortable reading. Germany is deemed to have diminished visibility, and its partnership model is regarded as old-fashioned, as well as somewhat neo-colonial and lacking in dynamism and local knowhow. Where Germany has existing partnerships in commerce and technology, they are seen as distant and aloof. This is all framed within a context in which Indonesia's other partners, especially China, are taking the exact opposite approach (Xue and Fu 2024). GiZ concluded,

Indonesia's recommendation is for Germany to cultivate a deeper and long-term commitment that goes beyond economic interests. The view of the interviewees is that only an integrated strategic approach can sustainably strengthen the partnership. To this end, they believe it also makes sense to step up cooperation in education and research because sharing knowledge and working on joint projects offers great potential. Last but not least, as they pointed out, the cultural exchange between Germany and Indonesia should be intensified to promote mutual understanding and cooperation. (GiZ 2024)

The GiZ-commissioned report may offer something of a wake-up call for German-Southeast Asian relations, but as mentioned above, the reality is that alarm bells have been ringing for some decades now (Houben 2004; 2019). This lack of attention and interest in this burgeoning region is reflected in Germany's investment in developing and maintaining educational centres for building knowledge about the peoples, cultures, economies, politics and languages of Southeast Asia. In the early 2000s, Houben pointed out the blatant contradiction between the overall inadequate representation of Southeast Asian Studies in the academic structures in Germany on the one hand, and the growing economic, political and strategic importance of Southeast Asia on the other (2004, 45). Since then, this "capacity gap" has only grown wider and the stakes, both politically and economically for Germany much higher if it misses out.

Another area of political interest relates to the migration of highly skilled migrants and students from Asia, including Southeast Asia, to Germany (BAMF 2014). In the competition to attract global talent, Germany is losing out.⁷ Whilst there has been a modest increase in the numbers of highly skilled migrant workers from Southeast

⁷ The latest bans on foreign students in the US under Trump, however, could potentially benefit Germany and other European countries.

Asia, the total numbers remain at low levels (Geis-Thöne 2023 and 2024). Nor has Germany been able to attract substantially more international students from Southeast Asia despite fee-free study opportunities (Geis-Thöne 2024). It seems clear that not only is Germany deemed unattractive as a partner or a destination country for workers and students, but also, to make things worse, it seems to matter less to Southeast Asians in other areas of potential exchange as well – areas that would have economic and political benefits for Germany.

The reasons for this lack of interest are, of course, manifold. As the GiZ report found, a lack of top-down government-to-government engagement with Germany's Southeast Asian partners and perhaps also a complacency in business exchange appear to be factors. It is very clear that while universities in countries like China, Australia and even the United Kingdom have been investing significantly in education-led opportunities in Southeast Asia, including establishing large campuses in the region,⁸ this is rarely the case for Germany.⁹ Whilst generally speaking German universities may not have the same ambitions, arguably there is an important role for Southeast Asian Studies academics in Germany to act as facilitators and help recruit students and engage with researchers from Southeast Asia. Ostensibly, as German universities move to internationalise and overcome their provincial mindset, networking activity is an important role that those area studies experts can play. During a recent conference visit in Bandung, Indonesia, we met a colleague from Korea who was sent by his department to recruit full fee-paying students from Indonesia to come and study at his university. He told us that if he found just two students this would justify the costs incurred for his trip.¹⁰ We do not know of any similar arrangements vis-à-vis international student recruitment activities in the German context. To make matters worse, over the past three years, efforts to attract higher degree students from the region to Germany's universities were dealt a direct blow. Government-issued scholarships from the German Academic Exchange

8 For more on China's interests in education in the regions see Xue and Fu (2024). Monash University has campuses in Malaysia, Indonesia, China, and India. Other Australian universities are establishing campuses in Indonesia (Western Sydney, Deakin and Central Queensland). RMIT has a university in Vietnam. Several UK universities have a long-established presence in Malaysia and are now beginning to replicate this in Indonesia (Lancaster).

See <https://leveragededu.com/blog/uk-universities-in-malaysia/>

9 The Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg has had a campus in Busan/South Korea since 2009. Other universities such as RWTH Aachen offer individual courses, for example in Bangkok/Thailand. Professors and lecturers from the participating faculties fly to the Asian partner universities for a few weeks a year and give their lectures in blocks.

(<https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/education-learning/german-higher-education-programmes-in-asia>)

10 In Australia and the US universities there is a similar level of integrated collaboration between academic staff from Area Studies working with their university's international office and alumni organisations in countries in the region. Together, they act as ambassadors for the university providing a profile that translates across academic and governmental networking and marketing programs to attract new students and to enhance the institutions' brand as a destination for undergraduate and higher research degrees. This is accompanied by large, targeted scholarships programs facilitated by the government and in some cases the universities themselves.

Service (DAAD) were cut by 6%, which translated into the cancellation of 6000 scholarships, including those for students from Southeast Asia.¹¹

There is no space here to illustrate the positive long-term consequences of training international students or the successful integration of skilled labour migrants into a German economy that is heavily lacking in young skilled employees. Suffice to say, by ignoring Southeast Asia for so long and failing to tap into the existing expertise within Southeast Asian Studies in the German academy, opportunities for engaging this cohort in the work of building bridges and creating and maintaining people-to-people and institutional relationships in the region, continue to be missed. Besides these unfulfilled political and economic interests, it might only be a slight exaggeration to say that a failure to grasp the importance of Southeast Asian Studies may have consequences for not only the national interest, but also for how we will conceptualise, understand and know the world in which we live into the future.

Decolonising Academia and the Role of Southeast Asian Studies Therein

With all its different meanings and enduring questions, decolonisation has become an important focus both within academic institutions and society at large. The need to be more critical and reflexive about work done in “the name of science” is reflected in university curricula and syllabi. Compared to disciplines such as Gender Studies, Development Studies, Literature Studies, Geography and Anthropology (Langdon 2013; Melber 2018; Clayton and Kumar 2019; Clapham 2020), for various reasons, Area Studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, have not been at the forefront of this discussion. However, almost thirty years ago, Kubitscheck observed that Area Studies had a particular role to help address parochialism and “the need to overcome the extraordinarily large deficit that exists in Germany with regard to non-European history, political science, social science and economics and the need to pursue the historical and social sciences in a much more universal manner in the future than has been the case so far” (1996, 46).

The methodological and theoretical innovation potential of regional studies, which challenges established disciplinary canons, is not yet fully recognised in the German higher education system (Houben 2019). Southeast Asian Studies scholars from both inside and outside the region are deeply engaged in debate about understanding “local knowledge” and the lived experiences, (self-) representations and (self-) understandings of Southeast Asians themselves and their attempts to decolonise knowledge (Heryanto 2002; Acharya and Buzan 2017; Curaming 2017; Chua et al.

11 <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/wissen/aussenministerium-begrundet-kurzungen-bei-austauschdienst-mit-haushaltseinsparungen-5151055.html>.

A number of postgraduate scholarships from the Catholic German Academic Exchange Service (KAAD, <https://www.kaad.de/stipendien/stipendienprogramm-1>) and the Gerda Henkel Foundation (<https://www.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/en/phd-scholarships>) are available each year, but the total number is very small and preferences particular countries or religions.

2019; Goh 2020; Amoah and Quame 2021; Lee 2023). Learning *about* Southeast Asia will thus also strengthen efforts to learn *from* Southeast Asia, a humbling and yet extremely mind-opening exercise, especially in the light of the persistence of scholarly and political Eurocentrism.

We recently attended the biennial conference of the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) held in Manila in July 2024.¹² Established in 2013 by Area Studies institutes from Southeast and Northeast Asia, the consortium offers opportunities for networking and collaboration with scholars from across the region and Asia more broadly.¹³ The theme of this conference, “De/centering Southeast Asia” demonstrated its position not only as a site for deep critique of the field itself, but also for innovation and its sense of the potential for the future of the field. Far from sounding the death knell of Southeast Asian studies, the conference’s agenda was one of renewal:

The conference is intended to be platform for *centering* Southeast Asian scholarship within Asia, by shifting one’s analytical position away from a dominant center towards the periphery to strengthen expertise, amplify voices, and resist subordination in these peripheries. De/Centering challenges dominant narratives and perspectives historically centered in the “West” and its gaze on Southeast Asia, and highlights the diverse and complex experiences, histories and cultures of the region as told by Southeast Asians themselves. (SEASIA 2024)

Across the days of the conference, it became clear to us that unless the diminishing centres of Southeast Asian Studies based in the West, including Germany, find meaningful ways to participate in and collaborate with our colleagues in the region, then the gap between the “traditional/Western” academy and Southeast Asia will only continue to widen, and Germany’s contributions (small in number though they already are) will become less and less relevant.

A Brief History of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany

To understand the current crisis in Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, we will start by offering some historical context for what has been a steady decline over the past few decades. What did Germany’s research and teaching on Southeast Asia look like in the past, and what has emerged more recently?

This includes acknowledging the origins of Southeast Asian Studies as a colonial discipline, together with its political instrumentalisation during the Cold War, before

¹² <https://seasia2024.upd.edu.ph/>

¹³ When first established in 2013 inaugural members were Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, Academia Sinica; the Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University; the Indonesian Institute of Sciences; the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies; the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University; the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore; the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University; the Taiwan Association of Southeast Asian Studies; the Institute of Asian Studies, Universiti Brunei Darussalam; the Asian Center, University of the Philippines. Its membership has since expanded to include more institutions from the China, Korea and elsewhere in Southeast Asia. (<https://seasia-consortium.org/>)

being reimagined in a post-colonial framework in a newly united Germany. This history reveals an evolutionary story about networks, patterns and centres of knowledge production, which may inform decisions and pathways for the future.

In the development of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, two streams can be traced from the beginning. On the one hand is the purely academic stream, with a focus on philological and ancient scientific or historical studies; and on the other is a deliberate orientation towards contemporary issues, combined with questions of practical and political relevance (Kubitscheck 1996). Arguably, this tension within the field and the institutions supporting it remains, with stakeholders – institutions and individual scholars alike – engaging in a difficult balancing act between being reduced to performing the role of a service provider for commercial and diplomatic interests and becoming so niche in orientation as to be rendered obsolete.

Whilst the field of Southeast Asian Studies was relatively late to institutionalise, programs dedicated to the languages and cultures of Southeast Asia have a longer history. For many years, the Southeast Asia Institute of the Humboldt University was the largest scientific institution of its kind in Germany. Its beginnings and scientific traditions in this field date back to the founding years of the University of Berlin under the Prussian king. With Wilhelm von Humboldt and Aldolf Bastian as intellectual forefathers, Southeast Asian Studies *avant la lettre* separated from other Oriental Studies and to avoid clashes of interests a new institution was set up outside the university: the Seminar for Oriental Languages (1887). Undeniably overshadowed by colonial interests and rivalries, Southeast Asia was not necessarily a priority to German governments. After WWI, as “colonial wishful thinking” about regaining its lost colonies surfaced, so too did academic interest in Southeast Asia (Kubitscheck 1996, 17). During this period the Seminar for Oriental Languages added Malay and Javanese (1926) and Thai (1928) to its syllabus. The Hamburg Colonial Institute, established in 1908, included Austronesian studies, then called “Indonesian and Oceanic Studies”, as an independent field in 1931. One can only speculate, however, on the progressive impact the teaching of these languages may have had. The Third Reich’s total politicisation of universities and other institutions of tertiary education with its racial fanaticism and fascist indoctrination offset any cosmopolitan orientations (Kubitscheck 1996).

In light of the destruction the Nazi regime and WWII brought upon German academia, it took almost a decade for academic institutions to be reinstated. The political and ideological reorientation also offered room for new disciplines and approaches inspired by new social demands on science. In the context of the GDR, the inclination was mostly towards country studies (Länderstudien), such as Vietnamese studies and Indonesian studies, which began to play an important role in the political and developmental agendas of that period. In the 1950s, Humboldt University established relations with universities in Indonesia and Burma/Myanmar. In 1962, Usman Effendi was appointed its inaugural professor of Indonesian language and literature. Just three years later, however, close relations with

Indonesia quickly soured after the so-called attempted communist coup on 30 September 1965, which served as a pretext to a military-led crackdown on communists and their sympathisers resulting in the murders of up to 500,000 people (Roosa 2006). The disciplinarian approach to academia, and the attempt to create Marxist-Leninist Asian Studies from the 1960s onwards, came at a high cost for many researchers. Freedom in research and teaching dwindled and many were forced to leave academia. Research was difficult because permits for travel overseas were hard to come by and material resources were scarce in the words of Kubitscheck, the “library contained more gaps than books” (1996, 36).

From the 1980s onwards, Humboldt’s Southeast Asia Institute was largely focused on training politically loyal country experts (caderisation). Only a small number of students enrolled in the program. Between 1983 and 1989 only 63 graduated from what by then had become Southeast Asian Studies (Kubitscheck 1996). This number of graduates is remarkably small considering that the program boasted five professors, six foreign language tutors and 18 lecturers. After the reunification, economic pressure in the early 1990s meant that almost half of the existing staff lost their jobs, and those who remained had to reconceptualise Southeast Asian Studies and create new academic offerings. Nevertheless, Southeast Asian Studies at Humboldt University remained multi-disciplinary, and the regional emphasis continued to be on Vietnam and Indonesia. The transition from a one-subject diploma to a two-subject diploma meant a decrease in language tuition but also more flexibility for students to design curricula according to their specific interests and career pathways. With three professors, the Berlin Department for Southeast Asian Studies would remain the largest in Germany for another two decades.

In West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), the founding fathers of modern Southeast Asian Studies in Germany – Bernd Nothofer, Hans-Dieter Evers and Bernhard Dahm – transferred their experiences gleaned at Yale University in the late-1960s and early-1970s, to their respective institutions in the 1980s. The linguist, Bernd Nothofer, was appointed Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Frankfurt am Main in 1981. His primary research interests included Austronesian historical linguistics, Malayic dialectology, and the languages of Indonesia. After his retirement in 2006, he stayed on as a professor emeritus. Hans-Dieter Evers did not receive a chair in Southeast Asian Studies, but rather served as Professor for Developmental Studies at Bielefeld University (1974–2001). During his tenure, he spent six years as guest professor at different universities across Southeast Asia and conducted extensive research in Indonesia, Malaysia and Sri Lanka. In addition to his academic duties, he worked as a consultant for German and international think tanks and funding organisations. The first Chair of Southeast Asian Studies was not established in West Germany until 1984. Historian Bernhard Dahm was appointed the inaugural Chair at the University of Passau and remained in the role until his retirement in 1997.

After WWII, in addition to the teaching of Austronesian languages, Thai and Vietnamese were introduced at the University of Hamburg in 1958 and 1972 respectively. In 2005, these three language and area studies teaching programs were brought together under the Southeast Asia Department at the Asia-Africa Institute. Elsewhere at the university, the German Overseas Institute was established in 1964 as an umbrella organisation for various Area Studies groupings, including the Institute for Asian Studies. In 2007, these were all brought under the newly named German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA). Today GIGA is a major research institute for Southeast Asian Studies research in Germany and publishes the *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* (JCSAA) (Weiss 2009).

At the University of Bonn, the aforementioned “Seminar for Oriental Language” was re-established and incorporated into the Faculty of Philosophy in 1959. In 2005, during the reorganisation of the teaching and research facilities of that faculty, a relatively loose research association in the form of an “Asia Center” was created. Subsequently, the Institute for Oriental and Asian Studies (IOA) was established, which now hosts the Department for Southeast Asian Studies. In 2012 the Institute for South Asia and Southeast Asian Studies was established at the University of Cologne. This followed an amalgamation of the Institute for Indology and the Malay Institute, “allowing a broader perspective on the cultural dynamics between South India and Southeast Asia, e.g. Cambodia and Bali”¹⁴, although elsewhere on the same website it is claimed that the regional foci were “Indonesia and Cambodia”¹⁵ or “Cambodia and Singapore”.¹⁶

Beyond universities, associations have sought to strengthen Germany’s focus on Asia. The German Society for Asian Studies (DGA) was founded in Bonn in 1961 as an initiative of the Volkswagen Foundation. While initially focused only on East Asia, in 1977 the DGA opened its programs to the countries of Southeast Asia and South Asia. The DGA has published the quarterly publication *Asien: German Journal for Politics, Economics and Culture* since 1981. In 2015, the Southeast Asia Working Group (AK-SOA) was set up under the DGA, which aims to bring together academics who study Southeast Asia from a social science perspective. The group’s activities, including a biennial conference, aim to increase trans-disciplinary exchange and foster collaboration between Southeast Asia scholars in Europe, as well as with institutions in Southeast Asia.

Such a *longue durée* view – albeit it very brief – may indeed give the impression that the level of activity within the so-called “small field” of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany’s academy is not insignificant. Indeed, the pace and range of institution building since the 1970s and 1980s, though later to emerge than seen elsewhere in the Western academy, was ambitious and included some internationally leading scholars in the field. However, the critical question for our study is to ask what

14 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam/institute/about-the-iits>

15 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam>

16 <https://indologie.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/indtam/institute/profile>

remains of this legacy in the academy today and what it might tell us about what the future holds. To this end, the next part of our survey now turns its specific focus to teaching activity in Southeast Asian Studies currently underway in Germany's universities.

Current State of the Field

We began our survey of the current state of the field, with the website *Kleine Fächer* (minor disciplines), funded by the BMBF, the Association of Universities and other Higher Education Institutions in Germany (*Hochschulrektorenkonferenz*) and a number of individual universities, to map and highlight the outputs of so-called “small subjects/disciplines” across the academy. In 2017, a joint statement issued by the presidiums of the German Rectors' Conference and the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany explained that these “so-called minor subjects”:

are an essential part of the diverse German academic landscape. They are essential for maintaining relevant subject-specific skills, contribute to the preservation of our cultural heritage and also promote the international profile and networking of German universities – in many cases they enjoy a global reputation.¹⁷

Indeed, the premise of the website (and apparent support for small subjects) is encouraging, but in what way might the site be useful as a tool for policy makers and university leaders in assessing and planning for the future of small subjects like Southeast Asian Studies? Our investigation found that whilst the website was helpful for identifying key institutions with active programs in Southeast Asian studies, the data was limited to a broad overview and was not always accurate or up-to-date. To augment this, we reached out directly to colleagues teaching in Southeast Asian Studies and combed the webpages of their institutions to understand the range of subjects currently on offer for students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and the particular research focus of staff.

Comprehensive data detailing exactly where and by whom Southeast Asian Studies (Südostasienstudien/-kunde/-wissenschaften) is currently *taught* in Germany's public universities is decidedly lacking.¹⁸ As mentioned, an attempt is being made to collate some of this information on the website *Kleine Fächer*¹⁹, which purports to provide a map of centres of Southeast Asian Studies across the country. Each “small subject” area lists the institutions, courses and personnel for the period 1997–

¹⁷ <https://www.kleinefaecher.de/>

¹⁸ This contrasts with the situation in Australia (where we have both worked). A strong and active association for Asian Studies (ASAA) and smaller country-based organisations of scholars exist, enabling the collection of data alongside a regular method of surveys to track the state of the field. For some decades now, it has been understood that providing data-based and driven evidence is imperative to fight off headwinds associated with government funding pressures on university budgets.

¹⁹ According to the website authors, small subjects are those with now more than three professorships attached at any one centre.

2024, but this data is not comprehensive and is often outdated. The information provided is limited to the former and current number of professorships and names of staff, plus study programs offered as undergraduate and postgraduate majors. No distinction is made between active (i.e. teaching) professors and those who are retired or hold adjunct appointments. The key institutions listed as *currently teaching* Southeast Asian Studies are: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main, Universität Hamburg, Universität zu Köln, Universität Passau, and Hochschule Konstanz. A closer look at the syllabi/courses on offer (if freely available in the first place) indicates a shift to a more varied and variable offering for students and away from the “classical” multi-disciplinary Southeast Asian teachings,²⁰ which in addition to language, includes studies of the politics, cultures and societies of the countries of the region.

When we looked closely at the Southeast Asian Studies courses at each of these institutions, including the subjects available, number of staff and the expertise of key personnel within the program, it was apparent that whilst in some cases the programs are strong, in others the use of the term “Southeast Asian studies” to describe what is offered, is barely (or no longer) applicable.

As suspected, we found that these programs are not particularly well-resourced. On average, there are one to two professorships attached to these programs, although given the casualisation of teaching staff, especially in language studies, it is difficult to ascertain numbers of full-time tenured staff across these programs. In fact, additional courses are often taught as one-off subjects by poorly paid guest researchers or PhD students (Lehraufträge; Projektseminare) who tend to teach their specialist knowledge, rather than provide a broader understanding of the subject matter.

In all cases, courses aspire to offer basic introductions and language training, and sometimes require study overseas as a compulsory part of the program. We discovered that whilst the subjects offered to undergraduates in particular are interesting and exciting, they are often not multi-disciplinary but tend to be skewed to one specific discipline – anthropology/sociology; media and communications; linguistics; global studies; Islamic studies; economics and two specific countries, thereby echoing a prevailing methodological nationalism and falling short in regard to intra/trans-regional comparative perspectives. Largely missing is a focus on political science, IR and more specialised histories. In what follows we offer a selective overview of publicly available information on syllabi and teaching foci in

20 We reference Aspinall and Crouch’s definition: “By Asian Studies, we mean the in-depth study of Asia using language skills, in-country expertise, and interdisciplinary knowledge of the broad social, economic, and political contexts of particular Asian countries and/ or regions. Undergraduate students often undertake Asian Studies as a program or major as part of an Arts degree, which usually includes subjects such as political science, history, cultural studies, and anthropology, as well as language study, and may require or provide an opportunity for students to study for a semester or even a year in Asia.” (Aspinall and Crouch, 2023)

key German institutions currently offering Southeast Asian Studies programs.²¹ We do not claim that this survey is exhaustive.

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

The Institute of Asian and African Studies at the pioneering institution for Southeast Asian Studies ceased to offer a dedicated program in Southeast Asian Studies in 2005, which it replaced with a BA in “Area Studies Asia/Africa” and the MA program in “South and Southeast Asian Studies”, and more recently “Asian/African Studies”. Significant changes in staff around this time precipitated a change. These new programs favour a trans-regional perspective for Area Studies. The university’s website explains how over six semesters, the BA students will receive a “broad introduction with the opportunity to specialize in the area of regional studies of Asia and Africa”.²² For the required language component they can choose from several Southeast Asian languages, including Bahasa Indonesia, Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese and at various times also Tagalog. The focus is threefold: language/communication; culture/identity, which focusses on literary, religious and cultural studies; and society/transformation, which offers historical, social science and ethnological perspectives.

Subjects currently offered include requisite broad overviews (“Introduction to the history and politics of Southeast Asia”; “Identity foundations of civil society movements in Southeast Asia”); and comparative studies (“Malaysia and Indonesia: Politics and Religion”); and limited country specialisation (“Malaysia: language, history, politics, religion and society”); and a more global approach (“Global peace movements”). There is also an emphasis on research methods, with two subjects offered, although it is not clear what percentage of undergraduates move on to higher research degrees. BA students are encouraged to spend at least one semester in Southeast Asia, ideally in their third semester. There does not appear to be a university-led exchange program, rather students must make their own arrangements.

Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn

The BA program in Southeast Asian Studies is a two-programme model, it must be taken in combination with a second major in either Geography, Sociology or Political Sciences. The Southeast Asian Studies component consists of a social science/anthropology regional studies focus and a Southeast Asian language focus. Basic language skills are offered in either Indonesian or Vietnamese and recently Thai has been added. The program is application-oriented, meaning that in addition to language training, students are familiarised with social developments in Southeast Asia. Subjects include broad introductory units: “SEA in context”; “Society and

21 The research was conducted in August-September 2024

22 <https://www.iaaw.hu-berlin.de/de/studium/ba/ba>

culture”; “Politics, economics and environment in Southeast Asia”. BA students are required to spend a semester overseas. The university maintains several partnerships in Singapore, Indonesia and Vietnam, and students are required to organise the exchange semesters themselves via Erasmus or Global Exchange. The university also offers an MA in Asian Studies where students can specialise in Southeast Asia, which is one of fifteen areas of focus. The MA program is conceptualised as an advanced study, with emphasis on dealing with vernacular sources.

Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt am Main

The university offers a BA in Languages and Cultures in Southeast Asia and an MA in Southeast Asian Studies. The BA can be studied as a major or minor, with the major requiring one semester to be spent in the region. In addition to language, the BA program offers subjects in literature and media, politics, economics, religion, and art in Southeast Asia. The focus of the course is on insular Southeast Asia, especially on the countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. Languages offered are Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) and Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), Vietnamese and Thai. Next to language learning, the teaching offerings are quite broad, including general courses (“History of Southeast Asia”, “Introduction to Southeast Asian Studies”, “Economics and economic policy in Southeast Asia since 1945”), as well as more specialist courses with an emphasis on media and communication (“Social media in Southeast Asia”, “Indonesian short films”).²³ The MA program focuses on the modern languages and cultures of Southeast Asia and current issues, as well as media, politics and economy in modern Southeast Asia. Like other postgraduate programs we surveyed, the MA attracts students from Southeast Asia, especially from Indonesia and Malaysia, but also from other Asian and East European countries.

Universität Hamburg, Africa-Asia Institute

With four professors, this program has the most senior academic staff of those included in this study. Unlike most universities that offer a three-year BA, the Africa-Asia Institute has a four-year BA with a compulsory overseas study semester to be spent in Southeast Asia. The BA program combines intensive language training, introductory courses on the historical, political, and cultural issues of select Southeast Asian states and courses on contemporary issues. Languages offered include Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese and Khmer and students are expected to obtain at least basic knowledge in a second Southeast Asian language.²⁴ There are some general introductory courses (“Culture and Society in Modern Southeast Asia”) and a few specialist courses (“Gender, resistance and land: Gender relations in Asia-

23 https://www.uni-frankfurt.de/157134310/WiSe24_25_LV_Semsterplan_Stand_27_08_24_PK.pdf and <https://www.buecher.de/artikel/buch/towards-the-next-40-years-of-southeast-asian-studies-in-frankfurt/71164774/>.

24 <https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/soa/studium/vorlesungsverzeichnis/vv-2024-2025-wise.pdf>

Pacific and their impact on women's living and working conditions"). The MA program offers more specialist courses ("Classical Thai Literature" and "Thai short stories: reading and translating", "Chinese in Southeast Asian Literature and Media", "Indonesian modern art and visual culture: Multiple Modernities and Modern Art in Southeast Asia"). There is also an option to do internships in Germany or in Southeast Asia.

Universität Passau

Home to Germany's first chair for Southeast Studies, since Bernhard Dahm's retirement in 1997 the University of Passau has seen a rapid succession of professors, replacements and reorientations due to frequent competing offers.²⁵ In 2024, the senior staff currently includes a professorship of Developmental Politics and a professorship of Critical Developmental Studies for Southeast Asia, both based at the Faculty for Social Sciences and Educational Sciences. Both appointments teach in the BA and MA programs of "International Cultural and Business Studies with Focus on Southeast Asia", as well as in the MA program of "Development Studies" (which replaced the Master of Southeast Asian Studies in 2015). The BA has a social sciences and cultural studies orientation and aims to provide students with an appreciation of current social, political and cultural dynamics in the region and the relevant historical background as well as to enable them to analyse and interpret current affairs. The Southeast Asian languages taught in the program are Bahasa Indonesia and Thai. Subjects include general introductory courses ("Southeast Asian Studies: an introduction", "Colonial history of Southeast Asia: power, modernity and mobility"), as well as more specialised subjects ("Soft Power: Indonesia in the world", "Migration, flight and nutrition: food and mobility in transnational living environments", "Role of UNESCO in Urban Heritage Management (cases from Southeast Asia)").

Universität zu Köln

The Institute for Languages and Cultures of the Islamic World offers BA and MA programs for "Languages and Cultures of the Islamic World", with the option to study Bahasa Indonesia and specialise in "Insular Southeast Asia: Malaysia and Indonesia".²⁶ Students are encouraged to undertake a period of study overseas. Courses taught include "Contemporary Muslim Societies – Indonesia: Of Generals and Oligarchs", "Religion, politics and society in insular Indonesia: Indonesian comics [books]" and "Indonesian language variant: Javanese". What was once the

25 <https://www.sobi.uni-passau.de/en/southeast-asian-studies/southeast-asia/history-of-the-chairs-in-southeast-asian-studies>

26 <https://iskiw.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de/en/alte-seiten/content>

Detailed information about the courses offered at Cologne is difficult to obtain via open sources.

Institute for South Asian and Southeast Asian Studies appears now to be largely defunct²⁷, with the last known professors attached to the institute no longer in place.

HTWG Konstanz

A university of applied science, HTWG Konstanz offers a 3.5-year BA program in “Asian Studies and Management: Southeast Asia and South Asia”. It promotes the program to prospective students with the promise, “get a degree in only three-and-a-half years from one of Germany’s most unique academic programs and get your passport to the business world of the 21st century.”²⁸ The focus is on business administration, (macro-)economics and business law, which makes up 40% of coursework, with language (Indonesian or Chinese) around 20–30%, and the remainder spent on inter-disciplinary subjects related to politics, culture and cross-cultural management. Two-thirds of the BA is taught in English, while its MA offering is 100% in English, with an eye to attracting international students to the program. The BA students are required to spend one semester in the region as part of an organised exchange. Formerly, there was a requirement for two semesters – one focused on language study and a second as an intern with a company in the region. Students’ reluctance to live abroad for a full year forced this change in the program.

It is not insignificant that “Southeast Asian Studies” is still being offered to both undergraduates and postgraduates in some form in seven institutions in Germany. We want to acknowledge the hard work of academic and professional staff alike at these universities to ensure that programs continue, in the face of numerous structural and systemic challenges within the higher education system and in society at large. In a nutshell, however, our survey reveals that, in the German academy, a student wishing to undertake an undergraduate degree aimed at obtaining a deep knowledge of the language, history, politics and society of a country or countries in the region is finding it increasingly difficult to do so. While obtaining language skills is still possible, social sciences and other disciplines have suffered substantially within what used to be a multi-disciplinary approach to getting to know a region. In an environment in which universities try to carve out niches in order to preserve or pursue particular research foci that can sustain or open up funding streams and establish new chairs, it would appear that “broad and deep” multi-disciplinary Area Studies programs have suffered. Lacking in many cases is an overall program design to deliver a well-rounded and comprehensive BA in Southeast Asian Studies, with the resources and personnel required to teach it. In particular, the institutions that only have one permanent professorship might find it difficult to offer a truly multi-disciplinary or perhaps even inter-disciplinary approach for all of Southeast Asia, as

27 We could only find recent advertisements for summer schools to India. The professors listed are now emeritus or have died.

28 <https://www.htwg-konstanz.de/en/bachelor/asian-studies-and-management-southeast-and-south-asia/at-a-glance>

only very rarely can such an approach be pursued by one professor supported by temporary staff alone. Given that multi-/inter-disciplinary approaches used to be the flagship of Southeast Asian Studies (and other Area Studies), this is a sad loss and, in a way, also stands in deep contradiction to the omnipresent demands for more inter-disciplinarity, if not even trans-regionality, from the key academic funding bodies in Germany.

Besides the chairs and professorships mentioned in the *Kleine Fächer*, content relevant to Southeast Asia is taught in social science and humanities disciplines, for example in Anthropology (Freiburg, Heidelberg, Berlin, Münster and Erlangen-Nürnberg), or Sociology (Bielefeld), and Political Science (Heidelberg, Erlangen-Nürnberg). While we are unable in this brief survey, to establish whether or not those universities see an increase in interest in the region and therefore offer more courses that partially cover Southeast Asia, it is safe to assume that the range of subjects available and specialisations related to a particular country or region remains limited and that little to no associated language training is offered. More importantly, an increase in subjects taught in a single department is far from the ideal of multi-disciplinary embodied by the pioneering centres of Southeast Asian Studies. Once again, Germany is not a unique case in this regard. In their report on the state of Asian Studies in the Australian academy Aspinall and Crouch found,

At universities, there has been an accelerated shift away from a traditional area studies model of teaching Asian Studies that emphasised language acquisition and comprehensive study of a particular Asian country or region, to a post-area studies model where the study of Asia is dispersed within faculties or schools organised on a disciplinary basis. This shift presents a challenge for government and universities to ensure graduates acquire deep intellectual engagement with Asia, while providing opportunities to mainstream the study of Asia throughout the curriculum and across faculties. (Aspinall and Crouch 2023, 2)

We would similarly argue that Southeast Asian studies in Germany is at a point where neither the traditional Area Studies model nor the post-Area Studies model (where Southeast Asia subjects are embedded in the disciplines) is particularly successful. For Germany, where there is already a far smaller level of interest and engagement in Asia, let alone Southeast Asia, the consequences are likewise far more pronounced.

What Can Be Done?

Letting go of Area Studies and Southeast Asian Studies would not only further decrease Germany's standing in the region, but it would support the populist political forces that favour isolationist eurocentrism and right-wing anti-globalism. (Houben 2019)

The days of area studies programs, including those on Indonesia, may seem numbered. But government policies and intellectual fashion are cyclical, and it could well be that the current obsessions with cultural difference, religion, local identities and globalisation will lead to a reinvention of area studies. If so, we should be there. (Sutherland 2012, 118)

We started this essay by asking where and by whom Germany's future Southeast Asia experts will be trained. The relevance of this question is based on our contention that there is a clear national imperative to produce and invest in homegrown Southeast Asian expertise, not only for language competency, but also in the pursuit of knowledge about the history, politics, cultures and economies of the countries within this growing and strategically vital region. Our survey reveals that despite concerns being raised about the decline of the field for some decades now, and an increased awareness within political circles of the need to improve relations with the region, there has been little investment. As described, Vincent Houben was foremost among those highlighting this disconnect between government policy and praxis in Germany. In 2019, in an interview he gave as a part of the *Kleine Fächer* initiative, he reprised his 2004 assessment and noted that further cuts to Berlin's Asian and Africa Institute had resulted in even more tasks needing to be completed by fewer teaching staff. Houben retired from his position as Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Berlin in 2022. As of October 2024, this vacancy had not been filled.

We took a close look at the institutions currently teaching Southeast Asian Studies and their offerings. Positive findings include that the range of Southeast Asian languages being taught is relatively good. Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese and Burmese (at one institution only), are available. In most cases, students are also encouraged to undertake a semester of coursework in-country, to deepen their language and cross-cultural knowledge. However, this semester abroad is in almost all cases voluntary, and students are provided with minimal assistance to facilitate such an exchange. Beyond anecdotal evidence to suggest they are not substantial, we do not have an account of the numbers enrolled in these courses. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see that at least for now these three core languages remain in syllabi, noting that whilst Indonesian is offered at Australia's larger universities, majors in Thai, Vietnamese or Burmese languages are now only offered at a single university, the ANU.

It is also a good sign that recently other public voices (politicians, diplomats) have been speaking out about and lamenting the "lost decades" of interaction with Asia and pointing to Germany's declining relevance in the region. The *Kleine Fächer* initiative also purports to offer a glimmer of hope. So far, however, these words have not led to concrete action. When it comes to university funding, Area Studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, remain marginal and under threat. In 2024, a report from the federal auditing court has led to demands to shut down smaller disciplines in order to save costs, growing louder. Subjects that attract only a few

students are deemed uneconomic.²⁹ Such challenges for fields like Southeast Asian Studies are not new, and this logic sees the field caught in a catch-22. If small disciplines are not funded and resourced adequately, fewer students will be attracted to enrol in them. Low enrolments lead to a further decline in funding and so on.

In order to save Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, more is needed than short-term funding initiatives or university-level programs to attract overseas students, in order to bolster enrolments. Such initiatives have been tried and are unsustainable in the mid- to longer term. In 2004, Houben suggested we should stop thinking only in terms of chairs and individual professorships, but rather in terms of university and cross-institutional competence centres for Asian studies. With decisions about university funding made at the provincial, rather than the federal level, and cross-border coordination almost unheard of, such an approach would require an intervention akin to a national initiative. We believe that given the clear national interest in protecting and growing Germany's knowledge of and engagement with Southeast Asian countries and regional institutions, the time for such an intervention is rapidly approaching.

In July 2024, Germany's Ministry of Education and Research announced a short-term funding program for projects generating new knowledge about relevant research, innovation, social or geopolitical developments in "Modern Asian Studies" and to place the developments in the Asia-Pacific region in the German or European context. The program's aim is to consider overarching developments in the region, including within partnerships between several countries. As is normal for government-sponsored funding programs such as this, the relevance of the developments for Germany and Europe must always be assessed and a link to German science and industry must be established.³⁰ Due to budget limitations, cooperation with international colleagues and engagement in the region are only permissible on a miniscule scale. It is open to question whether this kind of limited and geographically curtailed seed funding can provide the stimulus for real action and coordinated planning, which is direly needed to boost the discipline of Southeast Asian Studies in Germany, or whether the short-lived attention to Southeast Asian Studies is nothing more than palliative care. Without a strong political commitment to the study of the region accompanied by a sustained boost of the remaining academic infrastructure, the German academy is likely to fall short of ensuring Southeast Asian Studies has a future here.

29 <https://www.staatsanzeiger.de/nachrichten/politik-und-verwaltung/sind-orchideenfaecher-ein-ueberfluessiger-luxus/>

30 <https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/bekanntmachungen/de/2024/07/2024-07-31-Bekanntmachung-Asienforschung.html>

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