



ASIA RISING

STRENGTHENING ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIPS WITH ASIA

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Featuring the research of La Trobe University academics Premnadh Kurup, Karen Lee, Yen Dan Tong, Kiran Shinde, Huawei Tu, Julio Mancuso Tradenta, David Deane and Balawyn Jones.



Welcome to the tenth issue of Asia Rising, La Trobe Asia's showcase for the excellent and diverse Asia-related research undertaken across La Trobe University. This issue showcases the impressive and impactful research and collaborations conducted by La Trobe academics and partners.

As La Trobe Asia celebrates its tenth year, it's important to demonstrate the highlight the University's extensive focus on Asia, whether it be furthering our understanding of Asian states and societies, or significant collaborations and partnerships with institutions across the region. La Trobe Asia has prided itself as being an institutional resource of Asian productivity and knowledge, being able to facilitate, educate and promote the outstanding work of La Trobe's expert researchers.

We look forward to the next chapter of La Trobe Asia and to continuing our close work with colleagues in the region, developing deeper partnerships throughout Asia and continuing our program of activities with both students and researchers. We will maintain our strong presence in the national debate, and look forward to new initiatives and opportunities.

Thank you for your interest in the work of La Trobe Asia and do not hesitate to get in contact if there is anything we can help you with in relation to the University's engagement with Asia.

Professor Rebecca Strating
Director, La Trobe Asia

Message from the Director

ABOUT THE SERIES

Asia Rising is a publication from La Trobe Asia, based at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Australia on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri people. The stories in this series present research from La Trobe University academics in collaboration with Asian partner institutions or based on topics in the Asia region.

PHOTOS

Front cover: Protestors marching in Hong Kong against the extradition bill - July 7 2019 (Lo Kin-Hei)

Inside issue: Weststock Productions, Tee Jz, Martinez de la Varga, Gorodenkoff, Vietnam Stock Images, Prabhjit S. Kalsi and Fredo Pastrana.

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ASIA RISING #10

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THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE OF INDIAN SCHOOLS

Education in India is a vast undertaking, and the system is one of the largest in the world, responsible for teaching more than 250 million students. It favours a knowledge based approach, and students are schooled based on a strict syllabus guided by text books and regular exams.

"The Indian learning experience is completely different from that in Australia," says Dr Premnadh Kurup, a lecturer in STEM education at La Trobe University. "Australia has smaller, more personalised classes and the system is flexible. It's more focused on activities and scientific enquiry than India, and the assessments are outcome based."

Dr Kurup is the lead researcher in a global teaching practicum model titled 'Peer Alliance for Productive Professional Experience in Teaching' (PAPPET). Working in collaboration with Dr Rohan Nethisinghe of RMIT and Dr Jose Cherian of Christ University in Bangalore, India, the program ran from 2017-2019, during which students from the two Australian universities were paired with counterparts from India and immersed in Bangalore's education system.

The project was funded by the New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program provided by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

"The Australian students had much to learn from working within an education system so different to what they are familiar with," says Dr Kurup.

"They had to become familiar with India's curriculum very quickly and become competent in it. They had a unique opportunity to immerse themselves in a cultural experience and both cohorts benefitted."

"The Australian students taught in classrooms in India for three weeks, and the Australian students were able to teach school-aged children in Bangalore about their culture, customs and wildlife," says Dr Cherian. "Activities, music and dance were integrated into the lessons in a more dynamic way, and there were beneficial learning outcomes for all involved."

The data gathered from the three year program ultimately formed the basis for further research. Using statistical modelling developed by La Trobe University statistics consultant Dr Xia Li, the team compared education competencies between the two countries in a number of publications, including a book chapter in *Teacher Education: Analytical Approach to Internship Practices Around the World* published by Routledge.

"Our research has demonstrated a real need for globalisation in education in the 21st century, and the cultural exposure that student teachers are required to obtain," says Dr Kurup. "The program creates a better understanding of the curriculum framework in both countries, and can be used to create better collaborative projects for international teaching internships."



DIVERSITY ON THE QINGHAI-TIBET PLATEAU

The Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is a highly diverse environment. Towering over Southwestern China, it has an average elevation of 4000 metres, and surrounded by high mountain ranges it is often known as the 'third pole of the Earth'.

The plateau harbours the highest alpine and endemic plant diversity in the world. With more than 12,000 seed plant species and more than 5000 of them endemic to the area, the diversity has been influenced by climatic changes and terrain uplift.

"We're talking about an alpine chunk of the Asian continent that covers roughly the same area as Western Australia, but with about 20% more plant species and five times more of those found nowhere else in the world," says Dr David Deane, a researcher and DECRA Fellow from the Centre for Future Landscapes at La Trobe University.

"The vast alpine grasslands also support a variety of endemic animal species, like Tibetan Gazelles and the Wild Yak. This high endemism is why understanding the distribution and origin of plant species diversity is crucial to the proper management of the environment."

Dr Deane has been working with a team led by Dr Haibin Yu, a researcher at the School of Life Sciences of Guangzhou University, across a number of projects to understand the origins of the diversity and endemism of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau plant species and how best to preserve it.

"Most of our understanding of these environments is reliant upon information about species richness," says Dr Yu. "While this is an important indicator we know a lot less about the correlation with other measures of biodiversity, nor how these diversity patterns arise from the unique climate, topography and historical factors found on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau."

"The vast alpine grasslands also support a variety of endemic animal species, like Tibetan Gazelles and the Wild Yak. This high endemism is why understanding the distribution and origin of plant species diversity is crucial to the proper management of the environment."

Dr Yu has compiled an extensive dataset of seed plant species of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region covering a wide range of frequency and distribution characteristics, along with topographic, climatic and other environmental variables. By analysing these using a 50km x 50km grid system his team can highlight trends such as genetic hotspots and gaps in conservation management strategy.

The research has identified species-rich areas of the plateau which were previously unrecognised, nine of which were not adequately covered or protected by nature reserves.

"Our research is the first to compare the diversity of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau across taxonomic, endemic and phylogenetic factors," says Dr Yu. "This is important, as we have been able to identify clear gaps in the regional conservation strategy."

"There's an incredible amount of diversity on the plateau, and a lot we still need to find out," says Dr Deane. "It also doesn't respect national or administrative boundaries. The more information we have on the plant diversity of this environment the better equipped countries will be to manage and preserve these ecosystems, which are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of global change."



REDUCING VIETNAM'S GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS

Air pollution is an ongoing issue in Vietnam, with two of the nation's major cities landing in the top 15 most polluted metropolitan areas in Southeast Asia.

Most of the air pollution is caused by an increased demand in transport, growth in construction and industrial activities, and poor waste management. The Vietnamese government has made commitments to reduce traffic congestion and carbon emissions by introducing motorcycle bans by 2030 in four of the major cities including Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh, Da Nang and Can Tho.

This proposal has been controversial – motorcycles are the primary mode of transport in Vietnam and there is a lack of evidence to show how effective the ban would be in reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) pollutants in cities.

However, research conducted at La Trobe University suggests that substituting motorcycle trips may be effective in reducing pollution, especially when replaced with active travels.

"Active travel could substitute 62 percent of short motorcycle trips in Da Nang. This can save up to 18 percent of GHG emissions from motorcycles," says Dr Yen Dan Tong from the La Trobe Business School at La Trobe University.

65 percent of motorcycle usage in Da Nang is for travel of less than 5 kilometres.

Dr Tong collaborated in this project with Dr Julio Mancuso Tradenta, a lecturer in economics and course coordinator for international business, also from the La Trobe Business School. The project collaborated with colleagues from Can Tho University in Vietnam and University of Southern Queensland.

In this project, the authors took advantage of a unique dataset produced in Vietnam during the Covid-19 pandemic to quantify the potential reduction in GHG emissions that would be achieved from the substitution of motorised transportation with walking or cycling.

"Our study used a dataset available from NCOVI – an app that was used for contact tracing during the COVID-19 pandemic," says Dr Tong. "It included activity-based travel diaries that showed each respondent's total distance travelled and their trip purpose."

This is the first research conducted with such in-depth information in a developing country, that demonstrates how much GHG emissions are produced in relation to an individual's travel behaviour, and it could help develop improved transport policies in developing nations for a better environmental future.

Six categories were used to define the purpose of travel from 100 respondents, including working or studying, shopping and buying groceries, social activities and leisure, personal business, eating out and visiting relatives.

They found that 65 percent of individuals used their motorcycles to travel less than 5 kilometres. If most of these trips are replaced by active travel, including shopping trips, a further 22 percent of GHG emissions can be reduced.

"We calculated that the weekly GHG emissions in the transport sector is 9.19kg CO₂e per capita in Vietnam where motorcycles contribute to a large part of carbon pollution," says Dr Tong.

"I was really happy to find something positive we could take away from the COVID-19 pandemic," says Dr Mancuso Tradenta. "The project offered hope in moments of deep sadness and provided an academic opportunity to contribute to the reduction of global warming."

"Researchers and policy makers can use our data to calculate the benefits of a motorcycle ban. This could also contribute to more informative cost-benefit analyses of solutions to reduce GHG emissions that are based on changes in transport behaviour."

Dr Tong and Dr Mancuso Tradenta believe there is great potential environmental benefits in adopting innovative transport and infrastructure policies that incentivise active travel more effectively. This can lead to improving traffic congestion, air pollution, and community health and well-being in Da Nang as well as other cities in developing nations.

SPIRITUALITY, HISTORY AND URBAN PLANNING AT SARNATH

In the heart of the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh lies Sarnath, a site of profound historical and religious significance. It is the sacred ground where the Buddha Siddhartha Gautama delivered his first sermon, setting in motion the spiritual path of Buddhism. Today the site is an archaeological park and a tourist destination, receiving more than 750,000 visitors a year in pre-covid times.

“Sarnath is a quiet site, a spiritually aligned place of peace and of cultural and historical interest,” says Dr Kiran Shinde, convenor of the Planning Program at La Trobe University. “While it’s currently maintained for its archaeological significance it is underdeveloped as a spiritual site, and the infrastructure is not adequate for the tourist demands that are placed on it.”

Dr Shinde has spent years studying religious and historical sites and cultural landscapes and is an expert on how these are used for tourism purposes. For him, Sarnath is a perfect example of a convergence between tourism and spirituality.

Sarnath is one of the four main sites on the Buddhism pilgrimage route. To the north in present day Nepal is Lumbini, where Siddhartha Gautama was born, and Bodh Gaya in the nearby state of Bihar, where he meditated under the Bodhi tree and achieved enlightenment. The fourth site – Kushinagar – where the Buddha attained Parinirvana (passed away) is also in Uttar Pradesh.

“Sarnath is a well visited site, and there is some variety in the visitors that find their way there,” says Dr Shinde. “One of the main groups of visitors is the Buddhist pilgrims, the monks, making their rounds of the different pilgrimage sites that are important to the foundation of Buddhism. Then you have the curiosity-driven international tourists who are looking at the site from the archaeological standpoint.”

“Most significantly are the domestic tourists, which make up around 85 to 90 percent of the visitors to Sarnath. A good proportion of these come from nearby towns and visit for half a day, often as a part of their recreational tour in a private car while many also visit the site as a part of package tour alongside Varanasi and other nearby places. The tourism activity of such tourists, however, brings with it profane impacts that are at odds with the spiritual nature of the site.”

While the site holds immense importance for followers of Buddhism, the local Hindu population views it differently, and the challenge arises in balancing the spiritual sanctity with the urban challenges that surround it.

“Other sites on the Buddhist pilgrimage trail, such as Lumbini and Bodh Gaya, are well developed religious tourism sites,” says Shinde. “For example, in Bodhgaya, there are facilities and services provided in numerous international monasteries, you can eat some Thai food, meditate and then may have a possibility of a massage as well. You can learn Japanese and Korean in a place where people are still struggling for primary education in Hindi language. So, there’s this dichotomy for such sites and it has become almost like what some scholars call the Disneyland of Buddhism.”

Sarnath has none of this development, and to Shinde the reason for this lies in the lack of attention given to the site – Sarnath is less than 10km north of Varanasi, a major site for the traditions of pilgrimage, death, and mourning in the Hindu world, and as a result, a place far more significant to the Hindu majority of India.

“Sarnath holds a very different priority in its surrounding landscape than Lumbini in Nepal, or Bodh Gaya in the neighbouring state of Bihar,” says Shinde. “Both of those sites have UNESCO World Heritage status, while Sarnath has been on UNESCO’s ‘tentative list’ for close to 25 years.”

While UNESCO status would be unlikely to change the situation for Sarnath, Shinde believes it’s a strong indication of where the state’s priorities lie.

“UNESCO status might make a site more attractive to an international tourist, but it would do little to change it for the locals,” he says. “It’s a bureaucratic process that requires local initiative, and even nearby Varanasi isn’t yet listed by UNESCO. Unfortunately, Sarnath lacks the dedicated organisational structure needed for such a nomination.”

Sarnath has existed for decades as an excavated archaeological site. Lacking major amenities or even a Buddha statue, it nonetheless attracts tourists and pilgrims to the area, offering them a different experience to other sites significant to Buddhism.

“When I visited the archaeological park, I had a sense of peace, absolute serenity,” says Shinde. “It is a quiet space, largely free of consumerism and marketing, much of which can be found in the nearby Varanasi, which is called ‘the living city’ for a reason.”

“While Sarnath could use enhanced spiritual engagement to deliver a more immersive and meaningful visitor experience it might come at the cost of this serenity. This is the challenge that comes with managing a multi-use tourism site.”



HONG KONG'S CHANGING JUDICIAL SYSTEM

When authority over Hong Kong was transferred from Britain to China in 1997 many wondered how life on the island would change, and if its laws and procedures would be altered to align more with that of the mainland. Protests became common in the years that followed, and the simple yellow umbrella became synonymous with the fight for democracy after a namesake movement in 2014.

For Dr Karen Lee, a senior lecturer in the Law School of La Trobe University, it was the introduction of the National Security Law in 2020 that finally brought an end to the protests of the previous decade. Legislation has allowed for a harsher crackdown on subversion and dissent, increasing penalties and modifying the judicial system in a number of ways.

"The changes brought in by the National Security Law have been subtle and not tangible for most people, but they've been groundbreaking in how they have modified the Hong Kong criminal justice system," says Dr Lee.

"For the most part the justice system still has all the trappings of a common law system. There are wigs and gowns, and judges from overseas still sit in the Court of Final Appeal – there's four retired Australian judges there. But the treatment of those arrested, and certain rulings made by courts, have gone a long way to eroding public trust."

In September 2022 five speech therapists in Hong Kong were sentenced to 19 months in prison under charges of sedition for publishing a children's book which could be interpreted as critical of the Chinese government. Amongst the many red flags raised by human rights advocates about this case is that the defendants were held for nearly a year without trial.

"It has become commonplace for Hong Kong citizens to be held for long amounts of time without trial, particularly if they are suspected or accused of seditious crimes," says Dr Lee. "It serves as a warning to the public that such actions won't be tolerated."

In what many critics have now dubbed 'the end of Hong Kong', the National Security Law has meant there is no safe way to protest, and limited free speech.

"The National Security Law was imposed on Hong Kong without a local legislative process, and its effect has been chilling," says Dr Lee. "Before, it would have been unprecedented to regard publishing a children's book as a seditious act intent on inciting violence and hatred against the government. But it defines seditious activity so broadly that now this is expected."

While Hong Kong has a long tradition of jury verdicts in its courtroom, that can no longer be taken for granted. The National Security Law swept this aside with its first trial in 2021, when Tong Ying-kit was sentenced to nine years prison by a panel of judges, on the charges of incitement to secession and terrorist activities.

"Jury trial used to be the norm for more serious cases, and a right of the people of Hong Kong, but in cases involving the security law this becomes dispensable," says Dr Lee. "Guilt is decided and sentences handed out by a panel of judges appointed by the Chief Executive, Hong Kong's leader. While many of these judges are respectable, there are concerns of bias in the system that the government would only appoint judges whose views and actions they accept."

Sentencing now puts judges in a precarious position, with an increased chance that their judgements will be criticised at higher levels if their rulings are deemed unacceptable.

"The history of the Hong Kong Court of Final Appeal tells us that judgments that are deemed "incorrect" in their interpretation of Hong Kong's Basic Law could be overturned by China's top political organ," says Dr Lee. "The Chinese government has seemed to be quite determined in setting the record straight."

The effect of the National Security Law in Hong Kong has been profound. Most citizens now shun protests or open speeches, and for many the only way to freely express their views is to leave the island.

"It's sad to see the changes in Hong Kong, but ironically it's offered a chance for many to emigrate, and the pathway is much easier," says Dr Lee. "For those that stay they must live within this new system and adapt. They must carve out a space for themselves and express themselves not politically, but perhaps culturally."





IMPROVING THE VIRTUAL REALITY EXPERIENCE FOR THE FUTURE

Virtual Reality (VR) is redefining the way industries operate within the fast-paced world of modern technology. In 2021, the annual sales of VR headsets reached 6.1 million units and is forecasted to exceed 14.3 million across the world by 2024.

Industries have found new and effective applications for VR such as in architecture, where building designs can be showcased to clients in fully detailed and immersive environments with the ability to make real-time changes to model structures. Some companies have developed complete training modules to practice high risk procedures in a virtual environment reducing health and safety risks for workers.

“VR is being implemented at an increasing pace across a wide range of industries, and the need for improved accuracy and reliability is crucial,” says Dr Huawei Tu Lecturer in Computer Sciences and Information Technology at La Trobe University. “Refining these parameters is the goal of our research.”

Dr Tu and his team are collaborating with Jinan University in China to examine how walking in VR affects the user’s ability to accurately select targets in the virtual environment and have produced design guidelines to improve the immersive experience in VR.

“Our team had experience studying Virtual Reality Locomotion and wanted to investigate the effects of walking and target selection in the virtual environment,” says Dr Tu.

“Our research has provided theoretical and empirical evidence to support various designs for different applications of VR across many industries.”

Participants were directed to walk on a treadmill and select targets fixed to the virtual environment in one experiment while a second experiment asked participants to select targets which were fixed relative to the user’s virtual body. This was completed using an Oculus Quest 2 VR headset coupled with a controller.

“We considered many factors such as walking speed, target size and distance to determine the accuracy of target selection while walking,” says Dr Tu.

The research team developed three constant walking speeds (0.8 m/s, 1.1 m/s 1.4 m/s), three different target sizes (20 cm, 25 cm and 30 cm) and three varying target depths (0.8m, 2.5m and 3.5m) to test the participants’ accuracy and determine the length of time to select all the required targets.

The study revealed that a slower walking speed resulted in a higher accuracy but longer completion time when participants selected targets fixed to the virtual environment. However, when the targets are fixed relative to the user’s body, walking faster led to reduced selection accuracy and longer completion time because targets would oscillate with each step of the participant.

“Based on our results, we offer a set of design guidelines that can specify user interface elements in VR according to users’ motor activities. These can significantly improve user experience when interacting with VR applications,” says Associate Professor Dr BoYu Gao from Guangdong Institute of Smart Education at Jinan University.

The study resulted in several design guidelines including increasing target sizes if users are moving quickly in the VR environment, moving targets closer to the user for greater accuracy regardless of walking speed, or display a warning if a user is moving too fast to maintain a higher level of accuracy and account for varying selection performance based on where targets are placed.

“Our future research will focus in two areas – one is to further understand the theoretical fundamentals of target selection performance in VR in the context of various motor activities,” says Dr Gao. “The second focus is to extend our results to more VR interaction scenarios with different devices. For example, we are currently conducting studies to explore user performance of target selection enduring walking with AR glasses.”

“Our hope is that we can better refine these devices, increasing accuracy and furthering their application possibilities in a wide array of professional fields.”

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN INDONESIA AND THE LAW

In 2004 Indonesia enacted the Anti-Domestic Violence Law in what has been widely acknowledged as a progressive move, and a major achievement for the women's rights groups who advocated for it.

Despite the law being in effect for 20 years, domestic violence in Indonesia remains a persistent issue. According to data from the Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection, there were approximately 18,000 reports of violence in Indonesia in the first nine months of 2023. Women were the victims in 16,000 of these cases, with 11,000 related to domestic violence.

"When it comes to domestic violence in Indonesia there is a stark difference between what is written in the law and how it is enforced," says Dr Balawyn Jones, a lecturer in law and the Bendigo Law Convenor at the Law School of La Trobe University. "In Indonesia, violence within the domestic setting is regarded as a private matter, and the vast majority of cases are resolved via informal mediation at the village level, with very few reported to the authorities."

Dr Jones' research focuses on the resolution of domestic violence cases in Aceh, a semi-autonomous province of Indonesia on the northernmost tip of the island of Sumatra, where 98 percent of the population identify as Muslim.

She spoke to victims of domestic violence, village leaders, religious leaders, and staff at women's NGOs and government departments to explore how local communities understand and respond to domestic violence.

"Research in the area of domestic violence often solely regards women as passive victims as opposed to agents who make decisions in response to the violence perpetrated against them," says Dr Jones. "In particular we know very little from the perspective of Muslim women, who are often viewed through the lens of both sexism and racism when speaking out against violence."

She believes that religious beliefs are a key component to effectively addressing domestic violence.

"People in the community interpret and give meaning to law based on their values and beliefs. So, when working with Muslim communities, we need to have a deep understanding faith-based values and beliefs in order to combat violence. In this way, Islam is part of the solution to ending gender-based violence."

Dr Jones' research has shown that it has been the women's NGOs in Indonesia that have stepped up to overcome the shortfalls in the implementation of the Anti-Domestic Violence Law, providing crisis accommodation, mediation and counselling where government services fall short.

"Making promises in the law is one thing, implementing these promises in practice is another. While there has been progress over the last 20 years in terms of awareness around domestic violence, there remains a lack of political will to adequately fund essential services for victims of domestic violence despite such services being promised in the 2004 Anti-Domestic Violence Law."



Featured academics



Premnadh Kurup

Dr Premnadh M Kurup is a STEM academic in the School of Education at La Trobe University with collaborations with UCL, London, Beijing Normal University and IIT Kanpur, India. His research is focused with innovative, interdisciplinary, and integrated approaches in STEM education and his publications are connected to coherent and collaborative team of interdisciplinary researchers.



Karen Lee

Karen Lee is Senior Lecturer at La Trobe Law School. She researches legal culture and consciousness, the legal profession, and more generally the interactions between law, politics, and society, with a focus on Hong Kong, Greater China, and East Asia.



Yen Dan Tong

Yen Dan Tong is a sessional lecturer in the La Trobe Business School at La Trobe University. Her research interests are in agricultural and resource economics and policy and she was principal leader on a project examining bus use and air pollution in Vietnam, funded by Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED).



Kiran Shinde

Kiran Shinde is the head of the Planning Program at La Trobe University, and has researched extensively on topics related to cultural heritage and tourism, urban planning, and destination management. He has authored over sixty articles and five books, and is considered as a leading scholar in research on religious, cultural, and heritage tourism and their intersections with urban planning and management.



Huawei Tu

Huawei Tu is a lecturer in the Department of Computer Science and Information Technology. He has over 14 years of research experience in the fields of Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) and Virtual Reality (VR). He conducts both fundamental and applied research, combining theory and experimentation to explore how to enhance user experience in VR with HCI technologies.



Julio Mancuso Tradenta

Julio Mancuso Tradenta is Lecturer in Economics in the La Trobe Business School. He coordinates subjects in International Economics and International Business for undergraduate and postgraduate students. His research interests are in the areas of international economics, Food and Agricultural Economics and in behavioural and experimental economics.



David Deane

David Deane is an environmental researcher in the Department of Environment and Genetics at La Trobe University. His research focusses on the origins of landscape patterns of diversity in patchy habitats and has a distinct macroecological twist. He is motivated by a desire to understand how best to maintain taxonomic and functional diversity in human-dominated landscapes.



Balawyn Jones

Balawyn Jones is a lecturer and Bendigo Law Convenor in the La Trobe Law School at La Trobe University. She researches across the fields of domestic and family violence, Muslim women's agency, Indonesian law and society, and the implementation of women's rights at the intersection of gender, religion and law.

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