



Asia Education Foundation



An Australian Government Initiative



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For immediate release

Aussie and Indonesian schools open their doors

BEGINNING this week, 60 school teachers from two very different worlds will embark on a groundbreaking intercultural understanding project aimed at building a permanent bridge between their two cultures.

The large-scale BRIDGE project - **B**uilding **R**elationships through **I**ntercultural **D**ialogue and **G**rowing **E**ngagement - will ultimately involve 180 teachers and 80 schools, forging ongoing school-to-school relationships between Australia and Indonesia.

The project starts today (March 9) with the first group of 30 Indonesian teachers leaving Jakarta for Australia. They will join their sister school partners from rural and city schools across Australia for a three-week intensive training course in developing virtual and real connections within their schools.

Initiated by the Australia-Indonesia Institute (AII), the schools partnership project is funded by The Myer Foundation and the Australian Government, through AusAID. The Asia Education Foundation at University of Melbourne is delivering the program with Australian Education International and KangGURU Indonesia.

The BRIDGE teachers represent a broad range of communities including remote and disadvantaged schools in Indonesia, and religious schools in both countries. Ten of the Indonesian schools are part of the Australian Government's Basic Education Program (BEP). Through this program, Australia is providing AUD\$355 million to build 2000 schools and basic education services in Indonesia, especially in disadvantaged areas.

Executive Director of the Asia Education Foundation, Ms Kathe Kirby, says the BRIDGE project will build permanent networks, supported by IT training and hardware provision, and opens the door to two neighbours getting to know one another.

“School education needs to equip our young people to resolve global issues like climate change. To do this we need to work with our closest neighbours, speak each other’s languages, understand our similarities and differences. BRIDGE aims to go beyond the classroom into communities and families, developing long-lasting connections.”

The project also hopes to address a crisis in Australian schools and universities where foreign language studies, and particularly studies of Indonesian, are in steep decline. Only 5.8 per cent of students at Year 12 study an Asian language, while students enrolled in Indonesian account for less than one per cent. And enrolments in Indonesian studies at Australian universities have fallen by almost 25 per cent since 2001. The Government aims by 2020 to have at least 12 per cent of students exit year 12 with fluency in one of the target Asian languages, which include Indonesian.

“We need to encourage a new generation of students proficient in the languages and culture of our nearest neighbours,” says Chairman of the Australia-Indonesia Institute, Professor Tim Lindsey. “At universities, there’s been a generational change among our Indonesian experts: the pioneers are now retired or gone, and not enough young people are filling their places.”

He says the current Australian-Indonesian relationship at a government to government level is the best it has ever been. “We are emerging as key diplomatic partners; Indonesia is fast becoming the most vibrant democracy in the South East Asian region.

“Yet, at a people to people level, we still have real misunderstandings about each other. Education is the key to directly tackling that gulf in understanding.”

An Asialink-commissioned survey of opinions in Australia and Indonesia found many similarities between the cultures. However, the poll also found wide divergence in foreign security perceptions. The country causing Australians the most anxiety was Indonesia.

“There is absolutely no basis for that belief,” says Professor Lindsey. “The history of our relations since the tsunami, started under the Howard Government and continued under the Rudd Government, is one of extremely warm cooperation.”

Indonesia's President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has appealed for Indonesians and Australians to look beyond the "tyranny of stereotypes" and make full use of the opportunities in each others' countries. This project is an important step towards doing that.

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