The Commercial Education Society of Australia

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"The journal rests on the assumption that there is a real sense in which every field of education depends on commercial influences in order to flourish."

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Australia's First Society of Tertiary Education

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Editorial Comments – February 2026 Edition

Journal of Commercial Education

Kathleen McKenzie, Managing Editor (JCE) and President (CESA)

It is with great pride that I welcome readers to the second edition of the *Journal of Commercial Education*, the peer-reviewed publication of the Commercial Education Society of Australia (CESA). Building upon the excellent foundation laid by Emeritus Professor A. G. Shannon AM in our inaugural issue, this edition reaffirms the Journal's mission: to provide a scholarly forum for the exploration and advancement of commercial education in all its forms, both as a field of study and as a lived professional reality.

A New Chapter for the Journal

We are pleased to announce that **Dr Helen Goritsas** has been appointed as the new **Editor-in-Chief** of the *Journal of Commercial Education*. Dr Goritsas brings a wealth of academic and institutional experience to the role. She is the Academic Dean of the Australian Institute of Technology and Commerce (AITC) and Elite Education Institute (EEI), holds a PhD from the University of Sydney, and currently serves as an academic at the University of New South Wales. Her appointment signals a dynamic new phase for the Journal, one that will be marked by academic rigour, international engagement, and editorial excellence.

At the same time, we extend our sincere thanks to **Emeritus Professor Tony Shannon AM**, who served as our founding Editor-in-Chief and whose longstanding commitment to CESA continues in his new capacity as the Society's **Professional Development Expert**. Professor Shannon recently relocated to Brisbane to be closer to family, after a distinguished career spanning senior leadership roles including Deputy Chancellor, Provost, Academic Dean, CEO, and researcher. His most substantial contributions include serving as Foundation Dean of the UTS Graduate Research School and as Master of Warrane College, UNSW. He was also instrumental in founding Campion College Australia and continues to serve as Chair of GCA Colleges, which operates Universal Business School Sydney.

Acknowledgement of Foundational Support

We also wish to formally recognise the contributions of **Dr Chun (Peter) Jiang**, who served alongside Emeritus Professor Shannon in the early co-editorial discussions that led to the formation of this Journal. His collegial advice during the initial planning stages was invaluable. The use of his meeting rooms at 8 Quay Street, Haymarket, provided a welcoming space where foundational decisions were made regarding the structure, scope, and vision of the Journal. The Society is grateful for his ongoing support and encouragement as we continue to grow and strengthen this publication.

A Century of International Engagement

As Emeritus Professor Shannon noted in his foreword to the first edition, the Society has long held international engagement at its core. The **Commercial Education Society of Australia** has maintained educational links with scholars and institutions across the Pacific, Melanesia, Asia and the Middle East for more than a century. These ties, developed through formal courses, public examinations, and Society membership, continue to grow.

What Is Commercial Education Today?

Commercial education, as defined and promoted by CESA, is not confined to a single discipline. It is associated with the training of individuals for employment, entrepreneurial activity, and the generation of profit. These objectives remain as relevant today as they were at the Society's founding in 1910.

This includes formal disciplines such as business, accounting, commerce, entrepreneurship, and IT, but also touches the independent tertiary education sector, the arts, and the social sciences. These are fields where managerial and economic sensibilities are increasingly important. As CESA continues to grow, the Journal reflects this breadth by welcoming research, case studies, and professional reflections that connect theory to real-world commercial practice.

Acknowledging Our Contributors

We would like to warmly acknowledge all those who have contributed to this second edition of the *Journal of Commercial Education*.

Special thanks go to **Dr Nathan Polley (Cambodia)**, Vice-President of the Society, for his ongoing support and valued contributions to this issue. We also extend our appreciation to **Ms Qingyuan Yang (China)**, whose engagement reflects the international spirit and reach of the Journal, and to Emoni Tesese **(Samoa)** for her continued commitment to the CESA.

To all authors and reviewers who have shared their work and insight, thank you. Whether you are an early-career researcher or a seasoned academic, your contributions continue to enrich the growing field of commercial education and support the professional community we serve.

Looking Forward

We invite readers, scholars, and educators to join us in shaping future editions of the *Journal of Commercial Education*. Under the leadership of Dr Helen Goritsas, and with the continued involvement of our senior advisers and contributors, we look forward to growing this publication into a major forum for the exchange of knowledge across disciplines, borders, and industries.

On behalf of the Editorial Board and the CESA Council, I thank all our contributors and supporters for helping us deliver this second edition. We look forward to your continued engagement as we advance the mission of the Society into 2026 and beyond.

Kathleen McKenzie
Managing Editor
Journal of Commercial Education
February 2026

Screening Australia: Intercultural competence in language and film studies education

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Abstract

In contemporary language education, intercultural competence (IC) has become a central aim, reflecting the reality that language is never acquired or used in isolation from culture. In recent decades, theorists have argued that developing IC is as vital as teaching grammar, vocabulary, and other skills, because it enables learners to interact appropriately and effectively across cultural boundaries (Nemouchi & Byram**,** 2019, p. 175). Reading has often been promoted as a promising way to develop learners' IC, since texts can immerse readers in cultural perspectives and invite critical reflection. Yet reading alone is not always sufficient. Cultural meaning is not only encountered through words on the page, but also through gesture, space, tone, image, and sound. For this reason, film and audiovisual texts have increasingly been used in language and communication classrooms as complementary resources, broadening how cultural meaning is understood. However, as a practical classroom goal, developing IC through reading and viewing remains challenging. Teachers frequently face issues of text and film selection, cultural unfamiliarity, learner resistance, superficial treatment of culture, and their own preparedness to guide intercultural dialogue. This paper critically discusses these challenges, drawing on four main readings, textual and film case study analysis, and our combined professional experience as two educators: one teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) in Australia and English as a foreign language (EFL) in China, and one teaching Film Studies and Screen Production in higher education. This paper also considers strategies to overcome such obstacles, emphasising the role of scaffolding, critical reflection, and sensitive pedagogy.

Keywords: Intercultural competence; language education; film studies; Australian cinema; ESL/EFL teaching; critical cultural awareness

Defining intercultural competence

Intercultural competence has been defined in various ways, but most models emphasise the ability to engage with difference in reflective and adaptive ways. Byram's (1997) influential framework, discussed in Nemouchi and Byram (2019), highlights attitudes (curiosity, openness), knowledge (of social practices and products), skills (interpreting, relating, discovering, interacting), and critical cultural awareness (p**.** 180**).** In this sense, IC moves beyond merely functional communication, positioning the learner as an intercultural mediator rather than a simple transmitter of information. Heggernes (2021) further argues that texts in the classroom are not just sources of language input but sites where learners can explore otherness and develop intercultural awareness (p. 3). Reading, therefore, has a dual role: it develops linguistic competence while providing opportunities for learners to encounter new perspectives. Yet the act of reading is not neutral; comprehension depends heavily on cultural familiarity, and the attitudes and expectations learners bring to the text shape their engagement. As Erten and Razi (2009) show, cultural familiarity strongly influences reading comprehension, since unfamiliar references increase cognitive demands and reduce understanding (p. 60). Similarly, Tevdovska (2016) finds that learners' attitudes toward literature vary widely, with some students valuing the intercultural insights texts provide while others find them difficult or irrelevant (pp. 162–163). This theoretical framing highlights why IC through reading is valuable but also why it is difficult to achieve in practice.

Challenges in developing intercultural competence through reading

Text selection and accessibility

One of the central challenges is selecting texts that are both linguistically accessible and culturally rich. Literary texts can be valuable tools for IC development, but they may contain complex language, cultural references, or historical contexts that overwhelm learners (Tevdovska, 2016, p. 163). Teachers often struggle to strike a balance: overly simplified texts risk presenting culture in stereotypical or shallow ways, while authentic literature may

alienate learners through difficulty. In our experience working with international students, even short excerpts from novels can spark frustration when unfamiliar idioms or references make comprehension too difficult. Students would often focus narrowly on decoding vocabulary rather than reflecting on cultural meanings.

Cultural unfamiliarity and cognitive load

Cultural unfamiliarity can present a major barrier to developing intercultural competence through reading. Erten and Razi (2009) demonstrate that learners comprehend texts more easily when they share cultural familiarity with the content, whereas unfamiliar cultural references increase cognitive load and can lead to disengagement (pp. 60–61**).** In ESL teaching contexts in Sydney ELICOS programs, it was observed that South American students frequently encountered these difficulties when exposed to Australian English. To introduce colloquial expressions in a motivating way, humorous and upbeat Australian films set in familiar urban contexts were used, such as *Muriel's Wedding* (Hogan, 1994). By pausing scenes and explicitly teaching slang as it arose, students experienced a sense of achievement in successfully following an entire film. Building on this, accessible ESL readers with clear Australian settings and intercultural themes were subsequently introduced, such as *Waratah Romance: The Beach Street Reader* (Molino, 1999). The story of Teresa, an Australian Bondi local, and Eduardo, a migrant, allowed students to see their own experiences reflected in the text while also reinforcing slang and cultural norms. This progression provided learners with the achievement of reading an entire book in English before moving to more systematic exercises in reading, writing, speaking, and listening through *Understanding Everyday Australian: Book 1* (Boyer, 2017).

These texts were supplemented with examples of everyday slang and cultural norms drawn from multicultural Western Sydney. This staged approach to teaching Australian English mirrors Erten and Razi's (2009, p. 63) suggestion that scaffolding cultural familiarity helps reduce cognitive load and fosters deeper intercultural engagement.

Superficial treatment of culture

A further challenge in developing intercultural competence through reading is the tendency for cultural content to be treated superficially. Heggernes (2021) observes that many of the studies she reviewed justified the inclusion of nonfiction texts on the basis of their cultural content, while fiction was more often accompanied by theoretically grounded rationales, such as the potential to foster intercultural competence or critical literacy (p. 6). This tendency suggests that cultural material in ELT can sometimes be selected for surface features alone, which risks encouraging a more superficial treatment of culture unless it is supported by critical discussion.

In 2023**,** a professional development session was delivered by one of the authors at an ELICOS college on teaching Australian English and culture, addressing strategies for avoiding tokenistic approaches to slang and cultural instruction, where the theme was how to present slang and culture "without the cringe." The focus was on showing teachers how to move beyond tokenistic "slang lessons" by using films, literature, and authentic resources in ways that encouraged natural integration into reading lessons.

Similarly, in a study tour program for students from Shanghai, the provided resources were found to rely on tourist-oriented and stereotypical representations. The materials were therefore contextualised through observation-based examples drawn from one of the authors' experiences, highlighting not only cultural differences but also shared cultural experiences between Australian and Chinese participants, which helped learners to engage more meaningfully with the texts.

In classroom practice, a 'teachable moments' approach can be used to integrate Australian English and cultural references as they arise naturally rather than treating them as stand-alone "tick-the-box" items. This approach mirrors Heggernes' (2021, pp. 9–10) argument that teachers should mediate intercultural encounters by embedding culture and reflection across the curriculum rather than reducing it to disconnected or stereotypical content.

Learner resistance and attitudes

Learner resistance presents another challenge for teachers aiming to foster intercultural competence through reading. Tevdovska (2016) found that while some learners value literature for its cultural insights, others perceive it as irrelevant to their language goals, particularly when their primary focus is exam preparation such as the IELTS test (pp. 163–165). Similarly, Nemouchi and Byram (2019) observed that students may hesitate to engage in deeper reflection on cultural content, either due to concerns about relevance or reluctance to move beyond established norms (p. 178). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching contexts in China, this form of resistance was observed by one of the authors when literature-based readings were introduced. Students often questioned the usefulness of novels or stories for their IELTS preparation, expressing a preference for test-style materials.

To address this resistance, accessible excerpts from young adult fiction and bildungsroman were selected, including *Looking for Alibrandi* (Marchetta, 1993) and *Life* (Liu Yao, 2019/English translation). Students were reminded of a widely cited pedagogical principle linking extensive reading to improvements in writing and speaking: 'the more you read, the better you read; the better you read, the better you write; the better you write, the better you speak'. This emphasis on immersion helped reframe reading as the foundation of broader language competence. Intercultural discussion followed naturally. While exam-oriented learning styles common in Chinese classrooms were acknowledged and respected, the role of foreign educators was framed as sharing pedagogical practices informed by Australian educational contexts. This combination of respect and encouragement helped students to see reading as more than a peripheral activity, aligning with Nemouchi and Byram's (2019, pp. 178–179) argument that intercultural competence requires careful consideration.

Teacher preparedness and classroom environment

Teacher preparedness is another crucial factor in successfully developing intercultural competence through reading. Heggernes (2021) concludes that an awareness of the affordances of different text types, along with clear rationales for their selection, can help teachers design activities that genuinely foster intercultural learning (pp. 9–10). She also emphasises that using a variety of multimodal and experiential approaches allows learners to

encounter multiple voices and perspectives, which is central to the emotional and cognitive transformations required for intercultural competence (p. 10). In practice, however, teachers often feel unprepared or hesitant to guide students through sensitive cultural discussions.

This was particularly evident in EFL teaching contexts in China, where students were sometimes reluctant to engage with intercultural themes when such discussion was perceived to risk conflict with peer views or broader cultural norms. To address this challenge, questions were framed to encourage personal reflection rather than direct critique of cultural values, contributing to a safer and more dialogic classroom environment. This approach echoes Heggernes' (2021, p. 10) point that careful text selection, combined with reflective and student-centred activities, is essential for fostering meaningful intercultural engagement rather than surface-level exchanges.

Overcoming the challenges

Scaffolding cultural schema

One effective way of addressing the challenges of cultural unfamiliarity in reading is through scaffolding. Erten and Razi (2009) argue that learners benefit when teachers reduce cultural distance, either through adaptation or by building supporting schema in advance (pp. 63–64). This was evident when one of the authors worked with a cohort of Vietnamese students in a Sydney-based ELICOS program. To enhance student engagement, the film *Footy Legends* (Do, 2006), featuring Australian–Vietnamese actor Anh Do, was used.

The inclusion of Vietnamese dialogue alongside English, as well as familiar suburban settings such as Yagoona, Bankstown, and Cabramatta where Sydney's Vietnamese community is concentrated, allowed students to identify strongly with the material. At the same time, the film highlighted friendships across different heritages and a shared passion for sport, opening discussion of both cultural commonalities and differences.

A similar approach proved effective in a university preparation program with Chinese students. Banjo Paterson's poem *The Man from Snowy River* (Paterson, 1895) was taught

alongside its 1982 film adaptation, *The Man from Snowy River* (Miller, 1982). Here, the shared cultural value of horses and horsemanship in both Australian colonial folklore and Chinese imperial tradition provided a meaningful point of connection. These examples illustrate how careful scaffolding using films and literature can reduce cognitive load, build cultural bridges, and create space for intercultural reflection in line with Erten and Razi's (2009, pp. 63) recommendations.

Integrating Empathy, Critical Reflection, and Mediation in Literature-Based Learning

Using literature to foster intercultural competence requires balancing empathy, critical reflection, teacher mediation, and text accessibility. Tevdovska (2016) highlights that literature can act as a powerful medium for empathy, as it places learners inside the experiences of characters from different cultural contexts (p. 162).

Building on this, teachers can design activities that encourage perspective-taking, such as diary writing from a character's point of view, which has been found to support deeper student engagement with cultural dilemmas.

At the same time, Byram's model reminds us that critical cultural awareness is essential: learners should not only encounter cultural practices but also analyse and question them, including their own (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 180). In practice, comparative discussion questions, such as how hospitality is shown in one's own culture compared to the text, move students beyond passive reading into active intercultural mediation. This process relies heavily on teachers' preparedness, as Heggernes (2021) stresses that teachers must go beyond transmitting linguistic knowledge and take an active role in mediating intercultural differences to help learners engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives (p. 9). Professional development and explicit classroom strategies, such as setting rules for respectful dialogue, can help create the safe environment necessary for students to share perspectives openly.

From the authors' experience, explicitly stating that 'different perspectives are valuable' has encouraged learners to contribute more freely during sensitive discussions. Finally, the challenge of text selection must be carefully managed: as Tevdovska (2016) also notes, short

stories, adapted novels, or culturally accessible excerpts provide a useful balance between authenticity and challenge (p. 164). Further, pairing short but culturally rich texts with structured support activities has been shown to help maintain learner engagement while avoiding cognitive overload.

Conclusion

Developing intercultural competence through reading is both essential and challenging. Reading offers learners the opportunity to encounter new perspectives, question assumptions, and cultivate empathy. At the same time, teachers face difficulties related to text selection, cultural unfamiliarity, superficial treatment of culture, learner resistance, and their own preparedness. The four required readings demonstrate that these barriers can be addressed through scaffolding, the strategic use of literature, structured opportunities for critical reflection, and the development of teacher confidence.

Although the process is demanding, it is often highly rewarding: students often emerge not only with improved language skills but also with fresh insights into themselves and others. Ultimately, intercultural competence should remain a central aim of language and film studies teaching, with reading approached not as a mechanical task but as a transformative intercultural encounter.

Part B: Case Studies
Australian Film and Literary Adaptation
Teaching – Case Study 1: *They're a Weird Mob* (1957)

Introduction

John O'Grady's *They're a Weird Mob* (1957), written under the pen name "Nino Culotta," is a rich text for developing intercultural competence among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The novel follows the humorous and challenging journey of an Italian journalist in 1950s Sydney as he encounters slang, workplace culture, prejudice, and social expectations. Because the novel itself provides a complete and layered account of intercultural adaptation, it is sufficient as a stand-alone classroom text. However, three short clips from Michael Powell's (1966) film adaptation, freely available through the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), can be offered as optional reinforcement after the related passages are studied. At

the conclusion of the unit, watching the entire film (Powell, 1966) on ABC iview may provide learners with a strong sense of closure, allowing them to join what they have read and discussed.

What learners should learn from this text in terms of intercultural competence

The teaching of *They're a Weird Mob* aims to foster several intercultural learning outcomes. First, the novel enables learners to decode humour and idiom. Nino's confusion at expressions such as "Whaddya do for a crust?" (O'Grady, 1957, p. 27) and "not right in the scone" (p. 27) demonstrates how colloquial English can both exclude and include newcomers, depending on whether the speaker grasps the intended meaning. Second, the text helps students recognise cultural customs and assimilation pressures. The Marble Bar episode (pp. 26–27) illustrates the strong expectation of reciprocity through the practice of "shouting" drinks, a rule that Nino must quickly learn to follow in order to belong. Third, the novel provides opportunities to identify prejudice and exclusion. The ferry scene (pp. 116–117) depicts racism directed at migrants, exposing assimilationist attitudes that required conformity to dominant cultural norms. Fourth, the text demonstrates negotiation and eventual acceptance. In his exchange with Harry Kelly, Nino cleverly counters the insult of being called a "dago" by pointing out that if he is a dago, then so is the Pope (pp. 183–185). This moment demonstrates humour and shared values as strategies of intercultural negotiation. Finally, the advice Nino provides later in the novel illustrates pragmatic cultural rules. His guidance to return shouts, avoid being a "crawler," and resist the temptation to be a "bludger" (pp. 202–203) offers students practical insights into the unspoken rules of social conduct. When these lessons are combined, learners are encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of interacting with Australian English and to consider how humour, exclusion, negotiation, and pragmatic adaptation play a role in intercultural competence.

Assumptions about learners' prior knowledge

The target group for this teaching sequence consists of international students in a university preparation program in Australia. It is assumed that these learners already have some familiarity with modern Australian culture in general terms, such as through food, sport, and casual greetings, but they are unlikely to know much about the 1950s context of post-war migration or the assimilation policies of the time. Their level of English is expected to be intermediate to advanced, but they may lack familiarity with colloquial expressions like "bludger" or "brickie." It is also reasonable to assume that they will have encountered moments of confusion when interacting with Australian English but may not yet have reflected critically on these in intercultural terms. Finally, learners are not expected to have prior knowledge of the patriarchal family dynamics of the 1950s, as represented by Kay's absence from decisions about her own marriage in the exchange with Harry Kelly (pp. 183–185).

How to deal with unfamiliar aspects of content and language

Unfamiliar aspects of both content and language can be addressed through a staged approach of pre-reading, reading, and post-reading tasks. In the arrival and dedication passages (pp. 3, 5, 26–27), the teacher introduces the historical context of post-war migration and explicitly teaches idioms such as "crust" and "scone." Learners then read the text and identify expressions that may confuse them, discussing how they would misinterpret them literally. After reading, the dedication "to all Australians who work with their hands" (p. 5) can be linked to present-day migrant labour contributions, encouraging learners to connect the past with the present.

The Marble Bar scene (pp. 26–27) benefits from similar scaffolding. Before reading, the teacher clarifies terms such as "schooner," "middy," and "shout." During reading, students role-play the dialogue, allowing them to experience the humour and misunderstanding embedded in the scene. After reading, they discuss whether similar unspoken customs exist in their own cultures. At this point, NFSA Clip 1 can be shown as an optional reinforcement, helping learners see how gesture and tone contribute to meaning.

The ferry episode (pp. 116–117) requires careful preparation. Before reading, learners are told about the use of "dago" as a historical slur and are introduced to the assimilationist

policies of the 1950s. During reading, students identify how prejudice is expressed and how Nino attempts to defuse the situation. After reading, they engage in a reflective writing task where they imagine being the Italian family and consider how they would feel in such a scenario. NFSA Clip 2 can optionally be shown afterwards, reinforcing the emotional impact of the scene.

The exchange with Harry Kelly (pp. 183–185) highlights both cultural negotiation and patriarchal dynamics. Before reading, terms such as "brickie" and "mug's game" are explained, along with the social expectations of men and women at the time. During reading, learners analyse how Nino manages to use humour and religion to negotiate respect with Harry. After reading, the class discusses whether Harry's acceptance is genuine or conditional, and they examine Kay's absence from the decision-making process. NFSA Clip 3 can be shown as optional reinforcement, giving students a clearer view of the tone and body language in the encounter.

Finally, the advice passages (pp. 202–203) provide learners with explicit cultural rules. Before reading, the teacher explains terms like "crawler" and "bludger." During reading, students analyse Nino's description of Australians as "economical with words" (p. 202) and his survival rules (p. 203). After reading, they create their own "Survival Guide to Australian Culture," comparing Nino's advice with their own experiences of learning Australian English and adjusting to life in Australia.

Conclusion

Close study of *They're a Weird Mob* enables learners to develop intercultural competence by engaging with humour, exclusion, negotiation, and practical advice, all from the perspective of a newly arrived migrant. The novel alone provides sufficient material for this work, but optional reinforcement can be offered through the three short NFSA clips, which help learners connect written language with gesture, accent, and tone. To give learners a final sense of closure, the entire 1966 film adaptation may be screened at the conclusion of the module. Watching the full film on ABC iview allows students to experience the story in its entirety, revisit the key moments they studied in the text, and share in a collective cultural event. Serving traditional Australian cakes and biscuits such as lamingtons, Tim Tams, and Anzac

biscuits during the screening can further enhance this cultural experience, reinforcing belonging and cultural understanding in an accessible and memorable way.

Part B: Case Studies

Australian Film and Stage Play Adaptation

Teaching – Case Study 2: *Strictly Ballroom* (1992)

Introduction

Strictly Ballroom (1992), directed by Baz Luhrmann, begins with a simple provocation. Scott Hastings, a young competitive ballroom dancer, decides to dance his own steps in a world that has very clear ideas about how things are meant to be done. Set inside the tightly regulated circuit of amateur ballroom competitions, the film follows Scott as he moves between obedience and risk, between dancing to win and dancing because it means something to him. His journey is shaped by his partnership with Fran, a shy beginner and the daughter of Spanish immigrants, whose way of watching, listening, and feeling her way into dance offers an alternative model of belonging, one grounded less in rules than in attention.

The film's origins are inseparable from Luhrmann's own experience of this world. Before it became a feature film, *Strictly Ballroom* existed as a stage play and theatre production developed while Luhrmann was a student at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney. He grew up in competitive ballroom dancing, his mother taught it, and he himself danced from a young age. This authenticity gives the film its particular texture. Its exaggeration is affectionate, its theatricality intimate rather than ironic. The rituals, anxieties, power struggles, and emotional stakes of competitive dance are not inventions designed for satire; they are recognitions drawn from within. Even at its most flamboyant, the film feels lived in.

When *Strictly Ballroom* was released in August 1992, it appeared modest in scale and ambition: a quirky, low-budget Australian film centred on a very specific subculture. Its success, both domestically and internationally, was swift and largely unexpected. The film reached wide global audiences, achieving significant critical and commercial success and helping to launch Baz Luhrmann and his long-standing creative collaborator Catherine Martin

onto the international stage. It has remained consistently ranked among Australia's most successful and enduring films. Yet reception figures and accolades alone do not explain its longevity. What continues to give the film its staying power is the way it allows culture to be felt rather than explained: how rules are absorbed without instruction, how expectations settle into the body, and how fear and belonging are rehearsed long before they are named.

Cultural Norms, Rules, and Embodied Practice

The opening sequence introduces the ballroom world to the audience. Polished timber gleams under harsh white lighting. Sequins glitter under scrutiny. Spray tans shine. Smiles are fixed into place and held. Bodies move in tight synchrony, framed front-on, symmetrical, correct. Judges sit elevated, clipboards poised. Parents hover at the edge of the floor, whispering encouragement and warning in the same breath: "Smile, darling," "Point your toes," "Remember the rules." No one explains what is expected; expectation is already embodied.

When Scott launches into his "own steps" at the Pan-Pacific Grand Prix, the rupture is immediate. Judges freeze mid-note. The music falters. The crowd murmurs. Liz Holt's calm authority cuts across the floor. Shirley leans in urgently, whispering, "Just dance normally, Scott." The word *normally* carries enormous weight. Something has gone wrong even before it is named. The rule, "There are no new steps," arrives later as dialogue, but the reprimand has already been enacted through posture, silence, and the tightening of faces.

The scene shows culture operating at its most habitual. Rules remain implicit, authority goes unquestioned, and difference is contained the moment it becomes visible. Barry Fife later gives this authority a voice when he declares, without hesitation, "I am the Federation." This line of dialogue is excessive, almost comical, yet deeply revealing. Power, here does not justify itself; it assumes recognition. To belong is to comply. For students, this moment offers a clear entry point into how institutions regulate behaviour and how legitimacy is constructed and maintained. These are central concerns in intercultural competence, particularly critical cultural awareness and the ethical evaluation of cultural practices (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 187).

Institutional Authority and Cultural Conformity

The Australia imagined in *Strictly Ballroom* reflects the early 1980s, shaped by post-war migration and the everyday presence of cultural difference. The Anglo ballroom world is populated by small business owners, dance teachers, and aspirational lower-middle-class families for whom competition offers visibility and legitimacy. Championships matter because they promise recognition otherwise unavailable in ordinary life. This is why breaking the rules feels so threatening rather than merely technical. Conformity is tied to survival, reputation, and belonging.

Marginality, Fear, and Cultural Belonging

Fran exists at the margins of this world from the outset. She is overlooked, spoken over, repeatedly framed at the edge of the image. In the dance studio, she practises alone while others rehearse in pairs. At competitions, she stands slightly apart, clutching her bag. When Scott first notices her, she says quietly, “You can dance with me if you want,” a line delivered with careful politeness, as though already expecting refusal. Later, she adds, “I’m not very good,” a statement that functions less as self-assessment than as cultural positioning. The ballroom, for all its spectacle, is not a generous space.

Shirley Hastings carries much of the emotional weight that keeps this system intact. Her fixed smile never quite relaxes. She rehearses reassurance as though it were choreography. “Put on a happy face,” “Don’t draw attention to yourself,” “You’ve got to dance by the rules.” When Scott persists, her fear collapses inward. “I failed him as a mother,” she cries, hearing his refusal to conform as a failure of her own. Later, she insists, “I just want him to be happy,” even as she works tirelessly to suppress the very thing that brings him alive. Fear here is not abstract or ideological. It is intimate. It lives in the body. Shirley’s character offers students a way to recognise how cultural systems are internalised and reproduced, even by those they constrain.

Fran articulates what Shirley cannot. “To live with fear is a life half lived,” she tells Scott quietly as they rehearse. The line does not arrive as inspiration or romance. It offers recognition, expressing what the ballroom culture refuses to name: that obedience carries an emotional

cost, and that silence is learned. This moment foregrounds the affective dimension of intercultural learning, reminding students that intercultural competence involves attitudes as much as knowledge or skill (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 179).

Cultural Difference and Intercultural Encounter

Fran's family home introduces a different cultural rhythm, reflecting another strand of 1980s Australia. Her migrant family run an ordinary suburban milk bar, where cultural difference is woven into the rhythms of daily routine rather than put on display. The lighting softens. The space fills with voices, food, and music. Children move freely through the kitchen. Dance appears not as performance but as part of daily life, woven into memory and conversation.

When Scott insists that he knows the Paso Doble, Fran's father responds with gentle amusement. "You don't dance Paso Doble. You live Paso Doble." Later, as music fills the room, he explains, "Paso Doble is a dance of passion, danced from the heart." These lines do not teach steps. They reposition what counts as knowledge. Dance here is not about trophies or approval, but about expression, heritage, and feeling. The scene offers a clear illustration of intercultural knowledge as lived and embodied rather than institutional or technical (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 179).

Fran's grandmother extends this lesson without words. When she dances, the film slows. Her steps are grounded, deliberate, weighted with history. There is no spectacle, no competition, no audience beyond the family. Scott watches, uncertain, his technical confidence dissolving. "I thought I knew Latin," he admits later, quietly. The line marks a shift from mastery to humility. Learning now involves watching, listening, and allowing oneself to hesitate. This moment exemplifies intercultural skills developed through encounter rather than instruction, skills of interpretation and discovery central to intercultural competence (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 179).

Crucially, Fran's family are not framed as exotic outsiders. They are ordinary Australians whose cultural practices have been marginalised rather than erased. Their presence exposes the ballroom's version of Latin dance as second-hand and decorative, quietly reshaping what legitimacy might look like in a multicultural nation still learning how to listen.

Much of this work unfolds through bodies rather than words. Early competition scenes are rigidly framed and repetitively edited. Bodies are displayed rather than felt. Smiles are compulsory. Mirrors multiply pressure. Dancers practise facial expressions as carefully as footwork. As Scott and Fran begin to dance together, the camera loosens, follows their movement, and allows them space. Costumes release their grip. Weight, strain, and breath become visible. Cultural change is registered sensorially rather than verbally, making the film especially effective for intercultural teaching across diverse student cohorts.

Dialogue, Reflection, and Intercultural Learning

When Scott finally tells Fran to "just dance your steps," the line carries accumulated meaning. Earlier in the film, steps were something to be copied, judged, and approved. Here, they become personal and shared. The invitation is mutual rather than controlling, marking a shift from instruction to exchange. It models an intercultural interaction grounded in reciprocity, where learning unfolds through dialogue, attentiveness, and shared risk rather than authority or correction (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 179).

Doug Hastings' confession, "We had the chance but we were scared. We walked away. We lived our lives in fear," reframes conformity not as personal failure, but as inheritance. Fear becomes something passed down, normalised, even disguised as responsibility. The camera does not rush this moment. It allows the admission to settle, letting recognition sit with both the characters and the audience. In Nemouchi and Byram's terms, this is a moment of critical cultural awareness: an ethical pause in which cultural practices are not simply accepted or rejected but reflected upon and held up to question without the comfort of easy resolution (Nemouchi & Byram, 2019, p. 187).

The final Paso Doble does not dismantle the ballroom system. It takes place within it, under the same lights, before the same judges. Barry Fife still sits elevated. Liz Holt still observes. Shirley watches, trembling. And yet the dance no longer performs obedience. Fran's movement is grounded and forceful. Scott's is no longer showy, but committed. When the crowd begins to clap, hesitantly at first, the sound feels earned rather than triumphant. No rules are rewritten. Still, something has shifted. The floor no longer holds in quite the same way.

Conclusion

Strictly Ballroom endures because it understands hesitation. It does not promise transformation without cost, nor does it dismiss the comfort of tradition. Instead, it lingers with the question of what happens when fear becomes the price of belonging, and how difficult it is to imagine another way of moving. As a film used to teach intercultural competence, it offers recognition rather than instruction. It shows culture operating before it is named, rules enforcing themselves through habit rather than formal instruction. It invites students to notice how bodies are trained, how difference is contained, and how courage often arrives quietly, through watching, waiting, and choosing otherwise. Perhaps this is why the film continues to matter. It teaches us to notice the steps we were never explicitly taught, and to consider, with care rather than certainty, what that might mean in our own lives.

AI Use Statement:

We acknowledge the use of ChatGPT (GPT-5, OpenAI, chat.openai.com) to refine the flow, cohesion, and clarity of the draft. The ideas, analysis, and interpretations in this paper are our own, drawn from our notes and readings. ChatGPT was used only to suggest ways of improving expression, structure, and referencing, consistent with the *Journal of Commercial Education* guidance that AI may support, but not replace, scholarly learning.

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Improving the Course Design of the Building Construction Module in Chinese Higher Vocational Colleges: A Lecturer-Focused Case Study

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Abstract

This qualitative case study explores how the Building Construction module in Chinese higher vocational colleges can be improved to better support student learning and lecturer effectiveness. Guided by cognitive apprenticeship theory, the research investigates two lecturers 'experiences at a vocational college in southern China. The findings indicate that clearer visualisation, structured practice, authentic assessment, and realistic collaboration can enhance learning outcomes. The study contributes to vocational curriculum development by linking practical teaching challenges with established learning theories, providing evidence-based recommendations for curriculum reform in China's evolving vocational education landscape.

Keywords: vocational education, construction education, curriculum design, lecturer perspective

Introduction

Over the last decade, China's building and infrastructure sectors have faced a paradox of rapid expansion alongside acute skill shortages. According to the China Construction Industry Association (under supervision of MOHURD Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development of the People's Republic of China) on the Development of China's Construction Industry (2024), the sector continues to face a shortage of skilled construction technicians estimated at around one million. The reasons include the widening gap between what colleges teach and what modern enterprises require, as well as the speed with which new technologies, such as Building Information Modeling (BIM) coordination, prefabrication and smart-site monitoring, reshape workplace competence. Employers widely note that graduates can interpret drawings yet often lack the agility to make context-sensitive, on-site decisions (Abdirad and Dossick, 2016).

The Ministry of Education's Implementation Plan for National Vocational Education Reform (2019) codified a comprehensive strategy to confront these tensions. It mandated closer integration between industry and schooling, up-to-date digital infrastructure, experiential learning and performance-based assessment. The Double-High Plan (The Plan for Building High-Level Higher Vocational Colleges and Specialty Programmes, launched jointly by China's Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Finance in 2019 further identified teaching innovation as the key criterion for institutional excellence.

Within this context, the Building Construction module assumes emblematic significance. It is the course where theoretical understanding meets project reality: where structural design, material performance, construction sequencing and safety converge. Traditionally, many vocational colleges adopted an expository style—lecturers lecturing through PowerPoint slides, students memorising diagrams, and assessment relying on written recall. Such teaching mode privileged "knowing that" over "knowing how," disconnecting classroom knowledge from site practice. The result was that students could describe a structural joint but were usually unable to judge how it could be executed under given conditions. The redesign of the Building Construction module is not merely a matter of replacing content but of re-conceptualising how knowledge is demonstrated, scaffolded and internalised.

Cognitive apprenticeship provides a coherent theoretical path for this re-conceptualisation. Unlike a traditional apprenticeship, which relies on prolonged close contact between master and apprentice, cognitive apprenticeship abstracts the process into pedagogical phases that can operate within the constraints of formal education. It emphasises that experts must make invisible reasoning processes explicit, gradually release responsibility to learners, and provide structured opportunities for reflection (Collins, Brown and Holum, 1991). This framework resonates strongly with the aims of Chinese vocational reform, which seeks to cultivate independent, reflective technicians rather than mechanical task executors.

Therefore, the present research investigates how lecturers in a higher vocational college interpret and apply cognitive-apprenticeship principles within the Building Construction module. It considers their strategies, the challenges they face, and the institutional environment that shapes their agency. In doing so, it contributes to understanding how pedagogical theory translates into the lived practice of national education reform.

Literature Review

Cognitive apprenticeship was systematically proposed by Collins, Brown, and Newman in the late 1980s. The model highlights instructional strategies such as modeling, coaching, and scaffolding with gradual fading, enabling learners to acquire expert skills and ways of thinking within authentic or simulated contexts (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1989). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) further articulated the concept from the perspective of situated cognition, emphasising that knowledge gains meaning through participation in real practices. Together, these works established cognitive apprenticeship as a foundational approach in applied and practice-oriented education.

Since the early 2000s, cognitive apprenticeship has been widely adopted in fields such as medicine, engineering, computer science, and technical training. Research in these domains has focused on making expert reasoning visible, designing task-driven learning sequences, and supporting students' gradual progression toward independent performance in authentic task environments. With ongoing teaching reforms in China's vocational education system, scholars have increasingly introduced cognitive apprenticeship to address persistent

challenges, most notably the gap between classroom instruction and workplace practice, and students 'insufficient practical competence.' Existing studies in the Chinese context typically examine instructional models, project-based learning, and school-enterprise collaboration, exploring how demonstration, structured scaffolding, and reflective activities can be effectively integrated into higher vocational teaching (Nie and Wang, 2010).

Regarding its application across professional domains, cognitive apprenticeship has been gradually implemented in highly practice-intensive vocational majors, including engineering construction, mechanical manufacturing, and information technology. Within the civil engineering and construction cluster, such as Construction Engineering Technology, Cost Engineering, and Building Construction. Some studies have attempted to embed cognitive apprenticeship principles into courses like construction drawing interpretation, construction organization, and engineering surveying. These studies highlight the value of teacher demonstrations of key procedures, guided participation in project-based tasks, and scaffolding that helps students progressively undertake engineering analysis and construction decision-making (Shao and Sun, 2016). However, current research remains largely conceptual or based on small-scale teaching cases. There is a lack of systematic empirical evidence, particularly studies drawing on lecturer interviews, classroom observations, and student learning experiences.

Therefore, further investigation into how cognitive apprenticeship is enacted in practice within civil-engineering-related courses in Chinese higher vocational colleges is needed. Understanding how teachers model expert thinking, design and withdraw scaffolding, and support students 'development of professional judgement in authentic or simulated project contexts will contribute to strengthening the theoretical and empirical foundations of this field and provide practical insights for teaching reform.

Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the question, this study adopted a qualitative single-case methodology designed to yield depth rather than breadth. The selected site was a public

higher vocational college located in an eastern coastal province where the construction industry thrives under strong local government support. The college offers multiple majors in architecture, construction, and project management and represents a typical institutional environment.

The sample comprises two lecturers who currently teach the Building Construction course at a vocational college in southern China. They were selected because of their central roles in planning learning outcomes, designing assessments, delivering instruction, and conducting marking and feedback. Both hold substantial professional experience in construction education, providing a dual vantage point that spans industry-aligned competencies and institutional teaching requirements. As course insiders, they are well placed to elaborate the rationales behind design choices, to identify points of friction, and to propose feasible improvements grounded in practice. Their involvement across the full cycle of course delivery renders them information-rich cases for examining how intentions, constraints, and routines interact in this setting.

The reliance on two interviews introduces clear limitations. The small number of participants narrows the range of perspectives and precludes claims to representativeness across programmes or institutions (Hossan et al., 2023). Moreover, the absence of additional methods (e.g., observation, document analysis) limits opportunities for triangulation. These constraints are addressed through the analytic depth of the interviews themselves. Each interview is designed to be in-depth and semi-structured, enabling probing of course aims, task design, assessment criteria, feedback practices, and perceived trade-offs. Follow-up prompts and clarification checks are used to surface concrete examples and reasoned justifications, thereby enhancing credibility despite the limited sample.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English with careful attention to construction terminology. The translation process was iterative, ambiguous phrases were revisited jointly with participants to maintain conceptual accuracy. Data analysis drew upon the six dimensions of cognitive apprenticeship as an organising frame while allowing new categories to surface inductively. The researcher examined transcripts repeatedly, assigning codes to meaningful actions or reflections, and then grouped

them into broader patterns such as modelling, scaffolding, assessment, and professional development.

Ethical approval was secured from the relevant institutional review board before any data collection commenced. In line with established qualitative research ethics, particular care was taken to protect the two lecturer participants who contributed interviews to this study.

Findings and Analysis

Both lecturers depicted their teaching environments as simultaneously rich in opportunity and constrained by institutional pressures. They found the policy climate encouraging but daily practice exhausting. Their reflections illuminate five interrelated dimensions through which cognitive apprenticeship could practically reshape the Building Construction module: visibility of expert reasoning, structured scaffolding (Collins, Brown and Newman, 2018), purposeful integration of digital tools, authentic and reflective assessment, and sustained lecturer development.

Visibility of Expert Reasoning. Both lecturers considered the invisibility of professional thinking as a root cause of superficial learning. They observed that students often memorise construction sequences without grasping the logic underlying those steps. One lecturer described how she "purposely performs" her thinking when sketching a section: rather than silently drawing, she speaks each decision aloud, where to place reinforcement, how to control deflection, why temporary supports are needed, so that students hear the reasoning chain. This think-aloud strategy converts tacit problem solving into an accessible narrative. The second lecturer preferred situational simulation: she stages a mini-project meeting on site drawings, plays the role of site engineer, and asks students to pose as subcontractors proposing solutions. Through dialogue she externalises her judgement process, for example evaluating whether a column detail meets tolerance limits. Such explicit modelling aligns precisely with cognitive apprenticeship's core stage of making expertise visible (Oktaviyanthi and Lestari, 2023).

Structured Scaffolding of Learning. The lecturer's descriptions highlight how guided participation gradually transitions toward independence. In the early weeks of the semester, tasks are heavily structured - students replicate standard sequences and submit annotated drawings based on teacher demonstration. Mid-semester, these supports are eased; small work groups design sub-components of a building system and must justify design choices in peer presentations. Toward the end of the term, each group proposes a partial construction

plan integrating scheduling, materials, and safety considerations under minimal guidance. Lecturers intervene primarily through coaching questions rather than direct instruction. One commented that “letting them experience small mistakes” produces stronger learning than constant correction. This deliberate reduction of support reflects the theoretical principle of fading scaffolding (Gao, 2024).

Integration of Digital Tools. Both lecturers embraced digitalisation cautiously, emphasising conceptual understanding over software proficiency. They perceived a risk that early introduction of BIM might divert attention to interface operations instead of underlying construction logic. Their approach therefore follows a progressive sequence: start from physical or hand-drawn models, move to simplified digital visualisations, and only then proceed to full 3D BIM (Building Information Modelling) coordination exercises. During joint sessions, lecturers project models onto a large screen and invite students to locate potential conflicts, such as construction sequencing errors. The process becomes a collaborative cognitive apprenticeship: the expert coaches collective decision making in real time (Sweet and Michaelsen, 2023). To address hardware limitations, since computer labs cannot always accommodate large classes, they sometimes use recorded screen demonstrations accompanied by commentary, ensuring that digital representation remains a pedagogical aid, not a barrier.

Authentic and Reflective Assessment. Traditional evaluation relied almost entirely on final written exams assessing declarative knowledge. Both lecturers argued that such tests neglected procedural understanding. They experimented with continuous assessment forms combining short theoretical quizzes, project portfolios, and reflective journals. Each week, students document what aspects of a construction process puzzled them and how they resolved these issues. At mid-term, groups conduct peer-review sessions analysing site photographs or videos, write short reports identifying defects and proposing solutions. The act of verbalising and documenting reasoning becomes itself a learning mechanism, resonating with the articulation and reflection stages of cognitive apprenticeship. Although grading these materials increases workload, lecturers reported richer feedback on student progress and higher engagement.

Lecturer Development as Ongoing Apprenticeship. The final dimension concerns teachers ' own learning'. Both participants admitted that making their thinking explicit felt awkward at first: "Speaking aloud what you usually do intuitively exposes gaps in your logic," one confessed. Through repetition, they grew comfortable turning spontaneity into structure. They argued that this process requires supportive peer communities rather than one-off workshops. Ideally, colleagues observe each other's micro-teaching sessions, provide formative comments and share successful classroom artefacts. The lecturers envisioned creating a departmental "teaching studio" where lesson design, material production and peer reflection are continuous. This image mirrors cognitive apprenticeship applied to educators themselves: novices learn from masters through modelling, coaching and critical dialogue.

Synthesising these findings suggests that the redesign of the Building Construction module is less about adding technology or changing textbooks than about transforming discourse in the classroom. By narrating, questioning and reflecting in a structured manner, lecturers convert a content-heavy subject into an apprenticeship of reasoning. These changes, though seemingly modest, directly respond to national reform calls to enhance "teaching innovation and quality evaluation."

The lecturers practices also reveal several systemic tensions. Time constraints, class size and performance evaluation criteria limited experimentation; yet both educators persisted because students 'curiosity visibly increased when lessons resembled professional reasoning rather than lecture recitation. They felt that student language changed phrases like "because the code says so" gradually gave way to "because this affects construction management." Such shifts may signal the emergence of disciplinary thinking, which cognitive apprenticeship seeks to foster.

Through their narratives, the study uncovers a crucial dynamic: effective vocational pedagogy arises when teachers internalise pedagogical theory as a lens for reflexive self-development. Rather than treating cognitive apprenticeship as a checklist, these lecturers embody its spirit of guided participation and reflective inquiry in their everyday routines.

Discussion

The preceding findings demonstrate how lecturers translate cognitive apprenticeship principles into practical strategies that both accommodate and extend the structural realities of Chinese higher vocational education. This section situates those practices within wider policy and theoretical contexts and discusses their implications for curriculum design, institutional culture and national reform objectives.

At the policy level, the Implementation Plan for National Vocational Education Reform (2019) envisions a modernised vocational system grounded in innovation, collaboration and social recognition. The studied lecturers ’efforts exemplify how such mandates can materialise in day-to-day teaching. When they model reasoning, scaffold progressively and nurture reflection, they operationalise the reform’s injunction to “deepen the integration of production and education” in pedagogical rather than merely organisational terms. By designing classroom projects that simulate authentic tasks, they transform policy categories into cognitive experiences. Consequently, the Building Construction module becomes a micro-arena where macro policy and micro pedagogy coalesce.

The lecturer’s use of reflection and articulation additionally connects pedagogy to the Double-High Plan, which evaluates institutional excellence partly through evidence of teaching innovation and quality assurance. Reflective portfolios and peer evaluation generate precisely the documentation such frameworks require. Thus, cognitive apprenticeship not only enhances learning but also provides a quality-management language intelligible to both educators and administrators.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results corroborate and extend cognitive-apprenticeship scholarship. The lecturers“ ’think-aloud sketching” and staged digital integration reaffirm that modelling and scaffolding remain powerful even when reshaped for large classrooms. Yet the Chinese context reveals two notable adaptations. First, collective coaching sessions, where the teacher guides an entire cohort through joint analysis, constitute a pragmatic innovation responding to high student–teacher ratios. Unlike traditional one-on-one apprenticeship, this collective variant transforms the class into a studio-style learning community while preserving personal accountability. Second, authentic assessment here functions not merely as evaluation but as ongoing apprenticeship dialogue. Reflection journals and peer review

replicate the professional practice of site meetings where engineers justify decisions and evaluate each other's judgements. These contextual adaptations illustrate the versatility of cognitive apprenticeship as a guiding theory across educational systems.

The study also reveals several systemic tensions that echo throughout Chinese vocational reform. Despite policy encouragement, performance indicators in many colleges still privilege examination results and employment statistics over teaching quality. Consequently, teachers often experience dissonance between innovation ideals and institutional reward systems. For cognitive apprenticeship approaches to flourish, evaluation frameworks must acknowledge process-based learning outcomes. Administrators could, for instance, include criteria such as "student analytical reasoning" or "teaching reflection reports" in lecturer assessments. Integrating such indicators would legitimise the sophisticated, process-oriented work demonstrated by the participants.

Another implication arises regarding digitalisation. Many reform documents equate teaching modernisation with technological adoption. However, the lecturers 'cautious sequencing, starting from tangible representations before moving to BIM (Building Information Modeling), underscores that technology becomes effective only when embedded in conceptual clarity. This insight is crucial for policymakers often tempted to measure progress through hardware investment alone. True digital transformation in education requires pedagogical alignment and teacher agency. Therefore, national projects distributing digital teaching resources should pair them with intensive continuing professional development programmes emphasising strategies for using those tools.

Finally, these findings contribute to broader debates about the nature of expertise in vocational domains. Expertise in construction is not merely procedural knowledge but an interweaving of perceptual acuity, situational awareness and ethics of safety and responsibility (Ramadhan, Handoyo and Cahyati, 2021). Cognitive apprenticeship addresses precisely this synthesis by foregrounding the thinking process behind action. Embedding it systematically across the curriculum could nurture professionals who possess both craftsmanship and reflective intellect qualities increasingly vital to sustainable development and international competitiveness.

Limitations and Future Research

While providing valuable insights, this study's scope imposes several limitations. Its reliance on two lecturers means the perspectives captured, though rich, cannot represent the full diversity of Chinese vocational education settings. Different regions, institutional hierarchies, or programme specialisations may face variant constraints and opportunities. Future work should therefore broaden sampling to include multiple colleges and comparative cross-regional analysis.

Moreover, data were based entirely on self-report through interviews, without classroom observation or analysis of student work. Although participants supplied detailed descriptions, observational data would strengthen validity by revealing spontaneous interactions and non-verbal elements of teaching, which are central to apprenticeship processes. A mixed-method design incorporating video analysis, observational field notes, and learner outcome tracking could yield a more comprehensive picture (Lichtman, 2023).

Another limitation concerns potential positive bias stemming from participants 'known enthusiasm for teaching innovation. As reform advocates, they may over-state feasibility or under-report institutional resistance. Additional studies should include less proactive teachers to capture barriers more fully. Longitudinal research following the same lecturers and cohorts over multiple semesters could examine how sustained implementation impacts both teaching behaviour and student competencies.

Lastly, translation between Mandarin and English introduces subtle shifts in tone and meaning. Technical nuances or idiomatic expressions might not transfer perfectly. Future research could further refine interpretation accuracy.

Conclusion

With the rapid modernisation of China's construction industry and ongoing vocational reforms, educators face renewed challenges. The Building Construction module exemplifies the difficulty of aligning teaching with contemporary professional practice. This study,

drawing on two lecturers ’reflections, shows that course improvement hinges not on extra equipment or syllabus changes, but on pedagogical redesign grounded in cognitive apprenticeship. By externalising professional reasoning, providing progressive scaffolding, embedding authentic assessment, and engaging in ongoing reflection, teachers create learning environments that mirror real professional growth, translating policy goals such as production–education integration into classroom practice and fostering analytical and reflective capacities of students.

Cognitive apprenticeship offers a possible framework linking curriculum design, teaching evaluation, and lecturer development, to cultivate technicians who understand the rationale behind management, meeting the evolving needs of smart, sustainable, and globally connected construction sectors. More broadly, vocational education emerges as a vital component of the knowledge economy, where cognition and craft converge.

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Cultivating entrepreneurial capital: Building on Bourdieu as a basis for entrepreneur development in Cambodian higher education

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of Cambodia's economy and its higher education sector has unlocked new opportunities for many Cambodians, yet stark inequalities persist for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. While entrepreneurship is promoted as a vehicle for social mobility, current Cambodian university programs often focus too narrowly on technical business skills and fail to equip students with the necessary capital needed for success. This paper addresses this gap by proposing a more holistic framework in the form of entrepreneurial capital. Drawing on Bourdieu's capital theory and Becker's human capital, entrepreneurial capital is framed as a field-specific composite of human, economic, social, and cultural capital. Based on a multi-stage Delphi study with 12 actors in Cambodia's entrepreneurial ecosystem, this study identifies a holistic set of entrepreneurial competencies and attributes in a Cambodian context that offers holistic learning while fostering more equitable outcomes. While integrating a capital-based approach requires a pedagogical shift, it also presents a pathway for Cambodian HEIs to create sustainable economic and social value in their programs.

Keywords

Cultural capital; social capital; higher education; Cambodia; entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

The Cambodian economy and higher education sector have developed rapidly in the past 30 years since being decimated by the Khmer Rouge genocide and subsequent Vietnamese

occupation. While high GDP growth from 1995 to 2021 has enabled many urban Cambodians to graduate from extreme poverty, this was harder in provincial and rural centres (Hunt, 2018; Keo, 2021; Sok & Chhinh, 2018) where there were fewer economic and education opportunities (Engvall et al., 2008; Hansen & Gjonbalaj, 2019; UNICEF, 2018). A driver of this growth was the expansion of Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), which educated a small but growing number of Cambodian youth that supplied a skilled workforce to fuel these emerging businesses (World Bank, 2023). Business programs have been particularly popular among the many emerging HEIs as they are seen to help aspiring entrepreneurs and business professional access educational, financial, and practical support to launch and grow their businesses (S. K. You, 2023). While this improved Cambodian access to higher education, it disproportionately benefited urban students who are often located closer to higher-quality education facilities and support structures (Chea, 2019). To encourage ongoing, sustainable, and inclusive growth, Cambodian HEIs need to consider how they can strategically redesign programs to extend opportunities and support beyond the relatively small, urban, and educated elite to include young and aspiring provincial students.

Building on this need for inclusive growth, this article employs Bourdieu's capital theory and Becker's Human Capital (HC) to frame a comprehensive strategy for a Cambodian HEI within Cambodia's nascent business entrepreneurial ecosystem. Through a multi-stage Delphi study with 12 ecosystem actors, various forms of capital are identified from financial literacy (human capital) to English proficiency and a 'global mindset' (cultural capital). The driving research question in this study is:

What practical solutions may support capital development in aspiring lower-socioeconomic Cambodian entrepreneurs through Cambodian higher education institutes?

By proposing a holistic approach to cultivate entrepreneurial capital, it is hoped that Cambodian HEIs can better equip aspiring entrepreneurs from all backgrounds to navigate the entrepreneurial field, overcome structural disadvantages, and translate their education into sustainable ventures.

2. Capital theory as an agent for social mobility in Cambodian HEIs

Bourdieu's capital theory suggests inequality hinders social mobility through three interconnected forms of capital: cultural, social, and economic capital. Bourdieu defined cultural capital as the "tastes and preferences of socially privileged groups" (DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985), encompassing knowledge, skills, tastes (Bourdieu, 1973; DiMaggio, 1982), signals (Lareau & Weininger, 2003), dispositions and preferences (Sablan & Tierney, 2014) and habits (Davies & Rizk, 2018). Bourdieu further defined cultural capital into the three dimensions of embodied (non-transferable skills/habits) (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010), objectified (artefacts and understanding) (Bourdieu, 2021; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010), and institutionalised (formal qualifications) states (Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Individuals developing cultural, economic (money, assets, or property), and social (actual or potential resources accessible through personal relationships) capital can advance or reinforce their social status (and often that of their family) (Bourdieu, 2021). While these types of capital can be 'traded' in the job market and converted into a form of economic capital, inequality makes this harder for poorer or provincial Cambodian students who are unlikely to access equivalent pre-university education or resources like tutoring and test preparation or have financial support for tuition and living expenses (Sok, 2013). Furthermore, these students are also unlikely to have equivalent social networks to provide informational and emotional support (Sok, 2013). These differences may be longitudinal and extend beyond the complexities of university life to their career, impacting both academic performance and long-term well-being (Lareau, 2011). Despite new dimensions of cultural capital being proposed such as digital cultural capital (Pitzalis & Porcu, 2024; Rodríguez-Camacho et al., 2024; Wong, 2025), these original dimensions proposed by Bourdieu remain popular as a basis for defining and exploring cultural capital.

Bourdieu recognised how the application of cultural capital is underpinned by habitus and field. Habitus is a system of durable, transposable dispositions that provide a "feel for the game" based on personal background and position in the field and through repeated and reinforced interplay between the individual and society (Bourdieu, 2021). Over time these become lasting dispositions that become a 'doxa' or guide on how to think, feel, and act in determinant and unconscious ways (Bourdieu, 2021). This plays out within a 'field' or social arena of intellectual, religious, educational and cultural networks, structures, or relationships where individuals express and reproduce their dispositions and compete for the distribution

of different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1973). As personal tastes in art develop from early social development, experiences will differ between lower, middle, and upper classes (Webb et al., 2002) based on their respective opportunities to indulge in forms of 'culture' such as art or music. While poorer families may invest in higher education for their children, Webb et al. (2002) ominously predicted that:

> *"the habitus of the[se] children will, in advance, disqualify them from success, both in the sense that the children will signal, in everything they do and say, their unsuitability for higher education, and as a corollary, the children will themselves recognize this, and more or less expect failure".*

The implications for HEI education are that cultural capital impacts short-term outcomes and long-term success (Lareau & Weininger, 2003; Sullivan, 2001). To counter this habitus-field dissonance, curricula must consider learner context (Clegg, 2011) and build the specific cultural capital required for the entrepreneurial field.

Recent studies have largely confirmed the presence and impact of cultural capital in society. While certain aspects of Bourdieu's concept have drawn criticism - such as being too narrowly focused on 'highbrow' culture (Peterson & Simkus, 1992) or being overly rigid in defining habitus (Daenekindt & Roose, 2013)—the core premise that tertiary education can be transformational in developing capital for disadvantaged students remains strongly supported (Assulaimani & Althubaiti, 2021; Eryilmaz & Sandoval-Hernández, 2021; Herbaut & Geven, 2019; Sablan & Tierney, 2014). This has been further supported by meta-analyses that found academic achievement is connected with forms of cultural capital (Jæger, 2011) while others suggest the effect of cultural capital varies depending on its type, source, form, function and context (Tan, 2017) and that home educational resources, parental expectations, cultural participation, and reading habits have stronger effects than parental education or occupation (Tan et al., 2019). For example, Egerton (1997) found that children of professional fathers are more likely to develop cultural capital to facilitate their entry into professional occupations than other children. The impact of cultural capital was particularly evident in language learning (Assulaimani & Althubaiti, 2021), and in improving learning outcomes in ethnic minorities (Kalmijn & Kraaykamp, 1996) despite exacerbating gender differences (Savage & Egerton, 1997). Although some studies on cultural capital within education are inconsistent or even contradictory (Katsillis & Rubinson, 1990; Kingston, 2001),

research suggests that developing cultural capital through tertiary education can improve learning outcomes in lower socio-economic Cambodians aspiring to be entrepreneurs.

2.1 Capital theory and human capital within the context of Cambodian higher education

While the expansion of HEIs in Cambodia has helped address barriers, studies show scholarship recipients worldwide still face high dropout rates and limited transition assistance (Herbaut & Geven, 2019; Mowafy, 2022). This highlights that a holistic approach is required beyond economic support as lower socio-economic learners often have deficient social and cultural capital rooted in historical and infrastructural gaps (Dorn, 2023; Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018). This deficiency is often reinforced in classrooms where 'rote' learning prevails (Phat, 2024), especially in provincial Cambodia (Engvall et al., 2008; Hansen & Gjonbalaj, 2019) where learners are often a year behind comparable students in urban or private schools (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018); often because of insufficient teacher training (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018). These factors underscore how HEI students are not on an equal footing and a need for Cambodian HEIs to consider approaches to addressing learning gaps in their cohorts.

In addition to capital theory, universities must also foster HC in learners by developing knowledge, skills, and competencies to directly enhance their future productivity and earning potential (Becker, 1994). By acquiring advanced skills, graduates can more effectively participate in the labour market, translating their education into higher economic capital and driving both personal and national economic growth. In contrast to Bourdieu's focus on social mechanisms of inequality (see *Table One: Comparison of types of capital*), HC measures economic value individuals create in the labour market and how technical skills and certifications (e.g. financial literacy, digital competence, and English proficiency) foster success in the entrepreneurial ecosystem. By integrating marketable and market-relevant human capital with the sociological perspective of capita theory, a Cambodian HEI program can provide a holistic pathway for aspiring entrepreneurs to convert their educational investment into tangible social mobility and economic well-being.

Table One: Comparison of types of capital

Capital	Core definition	Cambodian entrepreneurial ecosystem	Mechanism of conversion to economic capital
Human capital	Skills and knowledge that increase economic productivity and value	Business disciplines (i.e. accounting, finance, or marketing)	Technical competencies (e.g. business model development)
Social capital	Actual and potential resources accessed through networks of institutionalised relationships	Connections to mentors, investors, industry experts	Participation in networking events, conferences, alumni networks
Cultural capital	Social assets (dispositions, tastes, qualifications) that promote social mobility and confer legitimacy	Institutionalised: University degrees and certifications Embodied: Language proficiency, public speaking skills, cross-cultural understanding, "global mindset" Objectified: Access to industry resources (journals, blogs)	Institutionalised: Signals competence and reduces perceived risk for investors and partners. Embodied: Enables effective communication with international partners/investors; builds trust and signals one "belongs" in the professional entrepreneurial field.

2.2 Capital theory within Cambodian entrepreneurship and the entrepreneur ecosystem

The success of MSMEs is essential to Cambodia's national development, accounting for approximately 99.8% of all businesses, 58% of GDP (Seng, 2021), and 66% of employment (OECD, 2017). Despite this economic importance, MSMEs struggle with the 'missing middle' financial gap and lack of human capital (Hrivnák & Moritz, 2021). Overcoming these entrepreneurial barriers requires a well-functioning Entrepreneur Ecosystem (EE) (Stam & Spigel, 2016) that builds social capital through bonding (support within groups), bridging (accessing new opportunities), and linking (navigating power structures) relationships

(Anderson et al., 2007; Claridge, 2018) among government bodies, incubators, investors, and HEIs (X. Chen et al., 2009; Portes, 1998). However, the Cambodian EE lags other nations as universities are relatively insignificant (Sothy et al., 2019) in the 'Triple Helix' model of development (Etzkowitz, 2003; Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995; Klein & Pereira, 2020; Malecki, 2018; Spigel, 2017), reinforcing the deficit faced by provincial students who lack necessary social and cultural capital. To address this, the university must coordinate within the EE to facilitate the development of human, economic, social, and cultural capital within their classrooms.

3. Research design

3.1 Building capital within aspiring Cambodian entrepreneurs

To address the study's research question, the Delphi survey instrument was framed by the emerging concept of entrepreneurial capital - a synthesis of Bourdieu's core capital forms with human capital (Becker, 1994). This framework operationalised the practical skills and resources required to overcome structural disadvantage within the Cambodian entrepreneurial field. As detailed in *Table Two: Entrepreneurial capital*, this framework served as the conceptual blueprint for the survey, segmenting curriculum interventions into four thematic categories for expert review.

Table Two: Entrepreneurial capital

	Curriculum focus	**Supporting factors**
Human capital	Cognitive skills	
	Business disciplines	
	Entrepreneur competencies	
Social capital	Interpersonal skills	Ecosystem support and networks
Cultural capital	Liberal arts domains	Field trips and events
		Qualifications/certifications
Economic capital		Financial support
		Industry/academic resources

The four thematic categories (human, social, cultural, and economic Capital) were operationalised by mapping the University curriculum with capital theory, human capital, and

field-specific needs. This included institutionalised capital (qualifications/certifications), objectified capital (industry/academic resources), and embodied capital (essential cultural knowledge and skills). The latter two were extended to include assets in the form of access to technology which may be prohibitively expensive (Emmison & Frow, 1998; Knoema, 2019), and liberal arts which may be necessary in fostering a cosmopolitan global mindset but prevented by economic barriers to international travel. Finally, the study treated entrepreneurship as a distinct 'field' (Bourdieu, 1973), exploring specific entrepreneur competencies and EE support - a methodology that aligns with previous field-specific frameworks like 'Science Capital' (Archer et al., 2015).

3.2 Research methodology

Given the context of curriculum development, the study sought active practitioners in the Cambodian EE who were preferably educators. Participants were identified using a snowball technique and by advertising in a social media group hosted by Khmer Enterprise, a unit within the Cambodian Government that seeks to implement support programs within the EE. An equal number of male and female participants responded (n=12) with an average experience of over five years. They came from a variety of backgrounds including universities (Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia, National University of Malaysia, KITA, BELTI International University, LSi Business School, National University of Management, Digital University of Cambodia and Samdach Presangkareach Bour Kry University), NGOs (Intentum AS, Swisscontact Cambodia, Mission Alliance, and Gender and Green Investment), and an international high school teaching university-level courses in entrepreneurship and business. While other Cambodian universities were invited to participate in the study and did not respond, this still represents a diverse representation of experience from the Cambodian HEI sector and EE. A summary of participants, their background, and experience is shown in *Table Three: Study participants*.

Table Three: Study participants

Variable	Male	Female
Number of participants	*6*	*6*
Nationality of participants		
Australia	*1*	*1*
Cambodia	*3*	*3*
Malaysia	-	*1*
Nepal	*1*	-
United Kingdom	*1*	-
United States	-	*1*
Years of experience		
<5	*4*	*1*
5-10	*2*	*3*
11-15	-	*1*
>15	-	*1*
Experience (note that some categories overlap)		
Entrepreneurship	*2*	*2*
Education and/or training	*2*	*5*
Curriculum development	*1*	*1*
Mentoring	*3*	*3*
Research	*2*	-

The project applied a three-round Delphi study designed to develop consensus in actors from the Cambodian EE. Originally conceived by the RAND Corporation as a technique to address complex issues without requiring participants to meet in person (Varndell et al., 2021), Delphi studies are characterised by their anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback, and statistical aggregation of group responses. Consistent with this, participants were kept anonymous with any of their feedback consolidated, and any related statistical data aggregated. While there are at least 20 variations of the classic Delphi approach, this Delphi study is best described as a modified Delphi method as it leveraging pre-generated items from a literature review in the initial exploratory round (Varndell et al., 2021) while allowing participants to input additional responses. Like many contemporary Delphi studies, online technology was used to facilitate data collection through an online form, with the results of each round being shared by email.

Each round collected quantitative and qualitative results and presented the results for the successive round using simple statistical analysis and a thematic summary. The first round one had 12 responses, the second round had 8 responses, and the third round had 6 responses, totalling 26 responses from 12 participants over three rounds. To simplify interpretation for participants, each round of results included colour-coded charts to summarise statistical responses with strong support for the group being coded in green (eight+ responses), moderate support being coded in yellow (five to seven responses), and weak support being coded in red (up to four responses). The analysis was supported by a Qualitative Data Analysis tool so the evidence could be more easily analysed and there was adequate security protection and back up. These results were presented with the quantitative results and a discussion on the implications for Cambodian HEIs. At the end of round one and two, participants reviewed their previous responses and commented on the emerging picture. While participants could change their quantitative selection in rounds two and three, participants could also provide dialogue on the commentary without making quantitative changes. While this iteration encouraged discourse towards a participant consensus, the relatively low participant numbers (n=6) made statistical analysis problematic. Consequently, the findings presented are based on qualitative data and emergent thematic analysis across the three rounds.

4. Thematic analysis of findings

The Delphi study identified a holistic set of practical solutions required to cultivate Entrepreneurial Capital among aspiring lower-socioeconomic Cambodian entrepreneurs. The results emphasised the need to move beyond traditional curricula to integrate hard skills, soft skills, and ecosystem engagement. The findings are grouped into four themes corresponding to the types of capital they primarily aim to develop.

4.1 Cultivating cultural capital

Experts emphasised how educational interventions must build formal qualifications and transferable cultural knowledge essential for legitimacy and global engagement. While most experts believed undergraduate and postgraduate business programs were a strong business foundation, they also emphasised the value of short courses, workshops, and bootcamps

offering practical, hands-on training in areas such as financial literacy, digital marketing, and business planning and how this should be accessible to students from diverse academic backgrounds. As Kylie shared:

> *Entrepreneurship is about risk-taking, and much of this is driven by guts and gut-feeling... Short courses, learner-driven programmes and bootcamps are more practical and relevant.*

Additionally, experts highlighted how short courses can encourage a culture of innovation and creativity within universities so students learn to think critically, take risks, and pursue entrepreneurial ventures.

Experts further stressed that aspiring entrepreneurs need both technical skills and soft skills to succeed, highlighting the need for strong English language communication skills, cross-cultural understanding, and ethics to facilitate business and business development. Phally shared how:

> *English [literacy and] language… skills are essential for Cambodian entrepreneurs to interact with global partners, investors, and customers… and facilitates international business transactions, networking, and collaboration. [This can be strengthened by] public speaking and rhetoric so entrepreneurs effectively communicate their ideas, vision, and value proposition to diverse audiences, including investors, customers, and stakeholders [by… pitching ideas, building relationships, and inspiring others. Ethics and social responsibility encourage ethical decision-making and responsible business practices among entrepreneurs, so entrepreneurs build trust, credibility, and long-term relationships with stakeholders.*

This was supported by the perceived value of subjects like psychology, sociology, ethics, and history that help develop a broader global perspective and enhance creativity and innovation.

Experiential learning supported by field trips and other events was also seen as critical for developing cultural capital. Experts emphasised practical exposure to the entrepreneurial ecosystem through participating in startup competitions, visiting local businesses, and engaging in field trips. Genevive shared how:

> *Visit[ing] local startups and seeing others succeed is inspiring [while] field trips [were learners] get out there and see it happening is important as entrepreneurs are typically people of action. Business plan competitions [can] help [learners] hone skills for pitches and [improve their] quality of planning as they are challenged and asked questions for their business that they may not think of themselves.*

These findings highlighted the importance of a holistic curriculum in shaping aspiring entrepreneurs and integrating this with experienced entrepreneurs and industry professionals within the local EE.

4.2 Building human capital

Experts emphasised that a blend of foundational and specialised technical skills is necessary to create market value. While there was some diversity in what business disciplines are necessary, experts emphasised the need for a strong foundation in business fundamentals such as entrepreneurship, accounting, finance, marketing, and management. There was also strong support for specialised courses in digital marketing, e-commerce, and business analytics. Nick shared how:

> *I chose [Introduction to Business, Accounting, Principles of Management, and Marketing] because I feel they are the broadest options. [I also chose] Operations and Project Management… because it provides an overview of how to manage work within a business… [and] International business gives a perspective of global economics and can include aspects around global supply chains. Leadership is [also] important in understanding how to lead others.*

This points to the importance of practical, hands-on learning experiences, such as internships, case studies, and simulations, to complement theoretical knowledge. In addition to this, experts emphasised the importance of fundamental business skills, including business model development, financial literacy, marketing, and sales. The study also found that technical success is underpinned by crucial cognitive 'soft skills'. Genevive shared how:

> *Business model development and validation [is] core to making it all work and be sustainable [while skills like]… sales and marketing are essential for entrepreneurs to sell their business and make… customers, staff, investors, government believe in the*

> *idea; growth strategies and scaling [is important as] growing too fast is typically a recipe for business failure. [Lastly] accounting and finance [is important] as cashflow makes the business grow and keep going. Understanding cash flow is essential; many [seemingly successful] businesses suffer cash flow issues and fail.*

The findings also highlighted how 'soft skills' such as communication, creativity, and critical thinking are a necessary basis for business leadership and problem-solving and how aspiring entrepreneurs need a blend of essential technical and interpersonal skills and knowledge to launch and grow businesses that can contribute to Cambodia's economic development. However, the findings also reflect that these technical skills cannot be activated or converted without the relational and dispositional capital discussed in the following section.

4.3 Leveraging embodied and social capital

The findings highlight the critical role of the EE and HEIs in actively facilitating network access and developing the interpersonal *habitus* required for collaboration. Experts emphasised a holistic approach to developing entrepreneurial leadership through strong interpersonal skills such as active listening, empathy, negotiation, leadership, and teamwork. Matthew shared how:

> *…I see none of the [technical skills] mentioned developing unless you have an emotionally intelligent and empathetic persona. You have to have good communications with all stakeholders in your business from members of your team, employees at every level, [and be] able to listen, coach and persuade… the local community about your business and be responsive to their concerns as to those of your employees… Without these you do not have a business!*

The study also underscored the value of a global mindset, including cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity, to navigate diverse business environments. This requires a range of services and events to better support aspiring entrepreneurs supported by mentorship, specialised training, and access to shared resources (like co-working spaces). Nick stated that long-term support, such as improved alumni networks, is vital:

> *I feel that alumni services for most universities are weak. Improvements in this area would be advantageous for most universities, particularly those in Cambodia. Working*

> *to improve this space will help create better outcomes for students and strengthen the overall entrepreneur ecosystem. It will also help create better market presence and marketing opportunities for universities with alumni programs.*

Experts agreed that networking and experiential learning opportunities through in-person events (conferences, workshops, hackathons), online platforms, and social media to foster collaboration and relationship building. Sally shared how:

> *Networking events and social media events [help] create sustainable connections while trade shows [help] prompt creative thinking. Pitch competitions and toastmasters [can help] improve presentation skills and build confidence [while] investor events [help learners] understand start-up finance opportunities.*

By providing short and long-term support through the Cambodian EE and their alumni networks, Cambodian HEIs can help strengthen and students as they turn their ideas into successful ventures.

4.4 Addressing economic capital barriers

The analysis highlights the persistent financial constraints faced by early-stage Cambodian entrepreneurs and the need for HEIs to connect students with actionable resources. While personal savings and family/friends contributions were recognised as common initial sources of funding, experts highlighted how limiting microfinance loans could be. Experts recognised that entrepreneurs could leverage government grants, impact investment opportunities, and angel investors but noted these may not be accessible to early-stage ventures as they seek more mature businesses with significant growth potential. As Matthew said:

> *…Nurturing family and friends [are] such important potential contributors [to early-stage businesses]. I always say to students: "Don't under any circumstances forget to include a huge bunch of flowers for Mum's birthdays in your business planning". Family relationships have to be considered, evaluated, nurtured so they will continue for many years when the business is a successful Asian family business.*

A blend of resources was recommended for entrepreneurship education that included traditional resources like business books and academic journals, while recognising the value

of contemporary tools such as crowdfunding platforms and digital marketing tools. Matthew shared how:

> *My view is that a student's first read of the day needs to be the Phnom Penh Post. That's how I get most of my information about Cambodia, and its business and politics… Business blogs can be chosen to develop specific areas of knowledge [such as] entrepreneurship. Crowdfunding platforms are [also] really important to discover what is on-trend in developing business… [and] how start-ups and new businesses present their business plans and pitch...*

Collectively, these point to the need for real-time, practical, and relevant resources, supported by access to early financing options suitable for early-stage entrepreneurship.

5. Discussion and recommendations

The results emphasise how Cambodian universities need a holistic approach to building capital within their programs. This can be achieved through various methods including funding tuition and seed capital, building relevant relationships within and across the EE, developing entrepreneur competencies, and enabling social mobility by developing English-language proficiency, critical thinking, and global perspectives. The following sections explore each form of capital and ways these can develop within the university.

5.1 Encouraging entrepreneurial capital

Instead of stretching Bourdieu's capital theory to fit contemporary skills, applying a field-specific application of the Bourdieu capital theory with human capital as "entrepreneurial capital" offers a better approach to navigating the nuances of the Cambodian EE. Inspired by frameworks like "science capital" (Archer et al., 2015) that aggregated cultural, social, and human resources required for success within a particular "field", entrepreneurial capital allows for new insights on factors contributing to student success and broader discussions on HEI curriculums. By explicitly focusing on this aggregated concept, the study makes a novel theoretical contribution that avoids diluting the original meaning of cultural capital while effectively structuring the holistic interventions needed for aspiring Cambodian entrepreneurs.

5.2 Developing human capital and institutional cultural capital

The findings emphasise how the cultivation of HC must include a blend of foundational disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, and management) and field-specific specialised skills (e.g. digital marketing and e-commerce). This holistic requirement aligns with Becker's (1994) focus on skills that enhance future productivity and market value and ties in with a need for short courses, workshops, and bootcamps alongside traditional undergraduate programs so the curricula integrates theoretical knowledge with practical and hands-on learning experiences (e.g. internships or case studies) so technical skills translate directly into marketable competencies. This broadened menu addresses three critical needs by providing formal, legitimacy-conferring qualifications that signal competence to investors and partners (institutional capital), offering lower-commitment entry points for non-traditional students seeking flexible and relevant skills development, and reducing otherwise insurmountable barriers for disadvantaged students in the form of tuition costs and education prerequisites - all crucial for building Objectified Cultural Capital - can pose. While supplemental learning options can help ensure HC and ICC are accessible to more Cambodians, this requires some initial economic capital; a situation that encourages further cooperation within the Cambodian EE so learners can gain experiential and social resources from the EE that may substitute for private economic resources.

5.3 Cultivating embodied and cosmopolitan cultural capital

Evidence from this study strongly suggests that Cambodian university students struggle because of a habitus-field dissonance. As provincial Cambodian students often enter university with a habitus shaped by 'rote' memorisation (Phat, 2024), limited English language proficiency (Boy, 2023), and a reliance on traditional patron-client networks (Vuković & Babović, 2018), there can be an underlying dissonance with the habitus required for success in higher education (which values critical thinking) and entrepreneurship (which values innovation, risk-taking, and proactive problem-solving). While the perceived value of university qualifications is unsurprising, there is a need for further short courses within university programs to target these deficiencies. These could integrate liberal arts subjects to build moral and intellectual habitus so entrepreneurs are not just technically skilled but also ethically grounded and globally aware. Another solution may be to adapt the 'foundation year' to include a broader selection of courses like psychology, sociology, and history – to name a few, and to transition from rote learning to critical thinking. While the Cambodian

government has encourage liberal arts, social sciences, foreign language(s), and various science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) courses in the 'foundation year' (Accreditation of Higher Education, 2003), insufficient government oversight and limited evidence make it hard to judge its effectiveness (Heng & Sol, 2022). While encouraging business disciplines are important, this study highlights how Cambodian universities must consider disciplines and delivery options relevant in the 21st century tailored to Cambodian social needs.

Another area for development is in lifting English proficiency by incorporating speaking, reading, writing, and listening skills with business/entrepreneurial theories and the Cambodian context. While approximately 3.5 million Cambodians have some English proficiency (Phorn, 2016), lower socio-economic Cambodians are disadvantaged (Moore & Bounchan, 2010) as their schools have fewer scheduled English lessons (Boy, 2023) and fewer opportunities to practice English. This in turn impacts their careers and businesses as global trade, the Internet, and different sectors like tourism increasingly rely on English (Suzuki, 2017). Evidence also shows that English-speaking professionals earn up to 30% more than non-English speakers (Azam et al., 2013; L. Chen & Wanli, 2022) and double the salary of garment workers (Morrow, 2017), suggesting English proficiency is not just a language skill but a mechanism for converting knowledge into economic capital. A need to develop English language proficiency reflects how English is the international business lingua franca in Southeast Asia and Cambodia (Boy, 2023) and how Cambodian universities must ensure graduates are bi-lingual to engage in international business.

While Bourdieu's capital theory ambiguously frames culture as singular, later studies argued that the cultural elite does not adopt exclusive or singular tastes, but as 'cultural omnivores' (Sablan & Tierney, 2014) indulge in both highbrow and lowbrow cultures (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992), or globalised 'cosmopolitan' cultures (Lindell & Danielsson, 2017). Exposure to cultural diversity is limited for lower socio-economic Cambodians given wealth inequality (Sok & Chhinh, 2018), the geographic concentration of international tourism (Open Development Cambodia, 2023), and the limited access by these Cambodians to international travel with less than 2 million out of over 16 million Cambodians having travelled internationally and with almost 75% of these vacations being to neighbouring Thailand or Vietnam (Open Development Cambodia, 2023). As a result, the university

curricula must prepare students to engage in an increasingly multicultural society (Kozymka, 2014) and global marketplace by cultivating global, highbrow and lowbrow cultural tastes. This may require partnerships outside the classroom with groups or NGOs who may provide practical and 'lowbrow' support in the form of accommodation (Pagalan, 2019), counselling, or support networks for learners experiencing challenges on entering university (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2018; Sol, 2021) and opportunities for booster classes, open days, short courses, or 'market days' to engage applicants, students, alumni, and family in the learning journey. By creating stronger and more diverse support mechanisms that encourage global perspectives and interactions, the University can encourage the formation of a "cultural omnivore" habitus necessary for aspiring lower-socioeconomic entrepreneurs to navigate Cambodia's complex and increasingly interconnected entrepreneurial field despite their limited international travel.

5.4 Fostering social capital and habitus

While developing HC is necessary, Cambodian universities must also develop social capital by cultivating bonding, bridging, and linking opportunities across their programs in the classroom, across the EE, and with NGOs. By strengthening this process, the university can strengthen their role within the Triple Helix and help students and graduates navigate long-term career challenges beyond just startup funding. Efforts to build bonding social capital should begin by building a trust-based learning community (Arriaza & Rocha, 2016) based on shared interests and attractions (X. Chen et al., 2009), stories and discussions, team-building, and co-construction of shared language (Arriaza & Rocha, 2016) and can be further supported through student counselling, pastoral care, and support services (Pedditzi & Marcello, 2018). Fostering such a community within and around the class can help facilitate an environment where all students regardless of class can flourish.

Universities can also develop important bridging social capital by building internal coaching and mentoring support networks and engaging the EE. This is important as higher levels of social capital improve opportunity recognition (Y. You et al., 2020), access to finance (Shao & Sun, 2021), and social networks (Crowley & Barlow, 2022) – to name a few benefits. Bridging social capital can be developed through networking (Crowley & Barlow, 2022) which may

include field trips, site visits, and entrepreneur events like hackathons, pitch presentations, product launches, and other events in the EE. Linking capital can develop by facilitating referral groups that help connect students to key decision-makers, investors (Shao & Sun, 2021), and mentors (Lockett et al., 2015) so students have influential networks with key stakeholders in government, business, and society. Cultivating such strategic networks with industry also enhances the University reputation and its graduates.

Another important avenue to develop social capital is to build relationships with local social enterprises and NGOs. As entrepreneurs often face considerable stress (Cardon & Patel, 2015; White & Gupta, 2020), having startup or marketplace coaches, short courses on stress management (Palacios, 2020), and business coaching and mentoring (Busch et al., 2021; Schermuly et al., 2021) can develop this important bonding social capital. NGOs offer a range of services appropriate for entrepreneurs like startup coaching, counselling, and entrepreneur financing and facilitate networking groups that build bridging social capital (Swisscontact & Impact Hub Phnom Penh, 2021). By drawing on the broader Cambodian EE, universities can leverage these services to develop social capital in its students.

5.5 Addressing economic and objectified capital barriers

While scholarships are a popular approach to reducing the 'barriers to entry' for students from lower socio-economic households, this approach must be a part of a broader and more holistic strategy. Studies in sub-Saharan Africa (Education Sub Saharan Africa, 2020; Heady et al., 2021) and Egypt (Mowafy, 2022) found while scholarship programmes can improve access to higher education (Herbaut & Geven, 2019), many disadvantaged Cambodian students are from households with significant personal debt and financial obligations (Bliss, 2022; Licadho & Equitable Cambodia, 2023) that makes study or bootstrapping difficult. This is further compounded by potentially less internet/tech access that may restrict the development of HC in the form of digital marketing or social capital through online networking. The study points to a need for social mobility and equity to begin by addressing the material conditions that limit the development and conversion of all other forms of Entrepreneurial Capital.

This reliance on informal and often non-institutionalised economic capital reflects the vulnerability of lower-socioeconomic students and the need for universities to holistically consider social factors and expectations.

By building stronger relationships between universities and businesses for financial support and seed funding, corporate sponsorships could be used to help support tuition or fund early-stage investments, subsidised business loans, or business guarantors. In the later example, universities could create a managed fund where benefactor donations could be used to create or replenish an entrepreneur fund, much like Woori Bank through RUPP (Woori, 2024). While this mimics an MFI, and could be subject to extensive regulation (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2019), it may help reduce high interest rates. An alternate arrangement is Islamic-style financing that builds fees into the loan (*Qard ul-Hasan*) or a pre-arranged profit share agreement (*musharaka*) through funders like CIMB (2024). Lastly, a fund could be created based on university collateral so entrepreneurs have a line of credit they can access funds for seed capital (with an agreed ceiling) at commercial rates and repay this through regular loan repayments. This could then allow for a transition to a regular business account as students graduate based on their credit history and with commercial rates. As funds in this arrangement are only assigned to failed or failing loans (averting students from 'debt traps'), it allows significantly higher leverage on the capital in the fund so the university can maintain a larger portfolio. This balanced approach lowers the risk to banks, provides a fair interest rate to students, and provides greater opportunity for impact to benefactors. However, as research has found that guaranteed loans can encourage or result in defaults (Nathan, 2020), the policies for loan forgiveness must balance the benefit of practical lessons in financial stewardship with the financial risks. Donating wealth to support entrepreneurship, enabling fair interest, and protecting students from debt traps together can be effective tools to help address funding gaps.

6. Further development and research

This research utilises Bourdieu's capital theory to broaden the conversation on the purpose of higher education beyond mere technical or vocational training. It is important to acknowledge that the field of educational theory is diverse with many contrasting theories and that this study does not assume that cultivating capital is the only purpose of higher education. While this framework offers some strategies for achieving more equitable social mobility in the entrepreneurial field, it is limited in that cultural capital is first developed in the home (i.e. primary socialisation), and this influence remains potent throughout a learner's development. While this study recognises the need for Cambodian HEIs to contribute to this

development, any HEI educational model is inherently limited by the established habitus, the home environment, and the challenge of addressing structural inequalities rooted in primary socialisation.

While the modified Delphi technique encouraged consensus among experts, it also introduced several methodological limitations. The first is the declining response rate across the three rounds as the responses moved from 12, to 8, and finally 6. This attrition is a common challenge in longitudinal studies, but the reduced final sample size may have influenced results by encouraging a "consensus" of a smaller, more committed or like-minded subgroup, and not the opinions of the initial and broader expert panel. Furthermore, the low and declining participant numbers makes the statistical aggregation of quantitative values problematic by limiting the ability to state firm numerical conclusions. Lastly, the use of online forms not designed for a Delphi study introduced technical limitations to facilitating robust statistical aggregation and feedback mechanisms. As a result, findings in this study are presented with an emphasis on emergent themes and expert qualitative commentary over definitive quantitative values.

7. Conclusion

Reducing barriers that limit access to learning in higher education is challenging. This article analysed factors shaping the development of entrepreneurs in Cambodia by drawing from capital theory and human capital. It identified how entrepreneurial MSMEs and social enterprises within Cambodia are limited by factors such as poor access to financing, limited human capital, and restrictive cultural norms. This impacts learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds more as they face greater challenges in accessing capital for tuition and seed funding, possess lower levels of English proficiency, and are often unable to access key relationships. The University – and other Cambodian HEIs, have opportunities to develop human, social, and cultural capital by working closely with EE partners, the benefactor, and the community to incorporate innovative funding approaches, revise curriculum, and strengthen social connections so students can access funding at competitive rates and engage more broadly with the EE through field trips, guest presentations, and support services. HEIs can also improve their curriculum by working with EE and community partners to integrate English language learning, incorporate critical thinking, and encourage global business

perspectives. By adapting its business model to address these capital deficiencies, Cambodian HEIs can empower a new generation of Cambodian entrepreneurs to thrive in the global marketplace.

8. Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethics requirements of the Kingdom of Cambodia and the participating University. Information in this study remained confidential and was restricted to researchers. To protect the participants identity, names in this article are pseudonyms. All researchers in this study were volunteers and did not receive payments or benefits beyond their salary for their contribution to this research.

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Peace-centred learning: Building in, for, and on peace using the Quadriga framework in Cambodian higher education

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Abstract

The 2025 Cambodian-Thai border dispute underscores how ethnonationalist narratives can be shaped by social media to incite and perpetuate conflict. Addressing this recurrent cycle requires a systematic, pedagogical approach to deconstruct national "mythistory"—narratives fusing history with cultural myth—and cultivate critical media literacy among emerging leaders. This article proposes adapting the Quadriga framework, a technique for biblical interpretation informed by Christian theologians and commonly used until the Reformation, to foster a peace-centred, secular curriculum for Cambodian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The adapted Quadriga offers a structured four-step methodology for students to move beyond a passive recitation of history to establish historical truth, critique ontological claims, foster ethical action, and build a reconciled future vision. Integrated as a praxeological pedagogy, this framework empowers learners to challenge dominant narratives, develop relational maturity, and apply critical foresight that can construct the necessary social and ethical infrastructure for lasting regional peace.

Keywords: Cambodia; Thailand; Quadriga; peace-centred learning; higher education

Introduction

The 2025 Cambodian-Thai border dispute highlights how destructive nationalist narratives can undermine peace and security in Southeast Asia. The dispute centres on the culturally significant Preah Vihear temple and dates to the Franco-Siamese treaties of 1904 and 1907 which defined territorial boundaries between Siam and French Indochina (Strate, 2015). While the dispute was decided in favour of Cambodia in 1962 by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) (1962) and again in 2013 (United Nations News, 2013), refusal by the Thai to recognise these verdicts triggered small-scale conflicts between 2008-2011 (Schearf, 2011)

and again in 2025. Despite its historic and geo-political dimensions, the conflict was exacerbated by misinformation and disinformation amplified by social media (Associated Free Press, 2025), encouraging truce violations (Horng, 2025a; The Nation, 2025b), economic boycotts (Khmer Times, 2025), and threats from leaders on both sides (Roth, 2025b; Thai PBS World, 2025). While an expanded ceasefire was signed (Davidson, 2025), unless efforts are taken to address both the territorial disputes and the underpinning nationalist narratives in emerging leaders, further conflict is likely.

Since social media platforms like Facebook restrict access to users under 13 years of age and over half of Cambodia are aged between 14 and 44 (Data Reportal, 2025), the best institution to develop these essential critical media literacy skills is higher education. This article explores the concept of the Quadriga framework with literal/historical, allegorical, moral, and apocalyptic/futurological lens and how Cambodian educators can build for, in, and on peace using in the context of the Cambodian-Thai border dispute to systematically deconstruct and reframe nationalist mythistory in higher education. The question addressed is:

How can peacebuilding be facilitated in a Cambodian secular undergraduate curriculum by drawing from the Quadriga to deconstruct nationalist narratives and develop critical media literacy?

Cambodian-Thai mythistory and conflict

The need for media literacy stems from the human propensity to structure reality through storytelling. According to Walter Fisher's Narrative Paradigm (1984), humans are fundamentally *homo narrans* – creatures who communicate through narratives to develop a sense of beliefs, history, and identity. This reliance on narratives allows for political actors to weaponise narratives by creating compelling and consistent storylines that construct a 'social identity' that encourages conflict (Graef et al., 2020). This is particularly problematic for Thailand and Cambodia who share deep yet contentious cultural, religious, and historic roots stretching back to the Angkor Empire. By selectively framing events between 'in-groups' and 'out-groups', nefarious actors create a mythistory—a narrative form that fuses history with cultural myth to solidify social identities and justify political claims (McNeill, 1986) and sets a stage for conflict (Anderson, 2006). Developing critical media literacy to counter or correct

mythistory is essential for peacebuilding and in resolving the long-standing Cambodia-Thai conflict.

The challenges of deconstructing mythistory are made more difficult in the media landscape of both nations. As the Thai military (Reporters Without Borders, 2016; Sirikupt, 2024) and Cambodian government (Putra, 2025; United Nations Human Rights, 2022) actively suppress independent journalism, state-aligned media outlets can frame narrow and nationalistic narratives. This was evident in the underlying political drama where Cambodian Senate leader Hun Sen leaked a phone call that led to the ousting of Thai Prime Minister (PM), Paetongtarn Shinawatra (The Nation, 2025a). While the Thai narrative emphasised how efforts by their PM towards reconciliation were disparaging and an affront to national dignity (The Nation, 2025a), the Cambodian narrative emphasised the Thai disrespect of Hun Sen (Horng, 2025b) and a belief the Thai started the war (Buth, 2025). While a narrative can help leaders communicate purpose, vision, and strategy (Ready, 2019), these narrow political narratives without nuance encourage a pathos open to bias, distortions, or inaccuracies that rally followers to nationalist yet destructive causes.

The contrasting Thai and Cambodian mythistory present various challenges to peacebuilding by encouraging ethnonationalism (Anderson, 2006). In promoting a narrow and singular historical, each mythistory emphasises the glories of their respective culture and civilisation while ignoring exploitative or alternate perspectives on contested events like the sack of Angkor. This further embeds power distinctions and harmful stereotypes that separates each culture from the ‘other’ and prevents the formation of a holistic, joint, and inclusive narrative or mutual dialogue (Bar-Tal, 2007). For instance, a historic Thai mythistory tells of their ingenious soldiers throwing coins into an otherwise impenetrable bamboo palisade at Longvek so greedy and gullible Khmer soldiers and villagers destroyed their defences to harvest the coins (Kent & Chandler, 2008). In contrast, Khmer mythistory emphasises how Khmer are the ongoing victims of Thai greed and aggression (Roth, 2025a). Building on these stereotypes, social media characterise the other nation as "liars" and/or "war mongers" (Rojanaphruk, 2025); a process that normalises antagonism without remedying the underlying issues. In this context, escalation and conflict are all but inevitable given the cocktail of greed, grievances, loss aversion, political framing (von Feigenblatt & Lateranense, 2012) and sensationalised disinformation and misinformation on social media (Rojanaphruk,

2025). This dangerous game can only be broken when both sides deconstruct and reframe mythistory to challenge nationalist narratives (von Feigenblatt & Lateranense, 2012) through a pedagogical strategy that cultivates peacebuilding by presenting learners with new possibilities and sense of reality.

Critiquing mythistory as the basis for peacebuilding

The development of mythistory creates a 'grand' or 'metanarrative' that underpin the social storyline or worldview in a community and provides it with a holistic context, meaning, and purpose (Wolters, 2005). A mythistory forms over time through a process called mythopoesis as old stories are strategically and communally adapted to new audiences or in new contexts to preserve core themes and values (Hutcheon, 2013). Storytellers are often intellectuals, artists, and politicians using mythistory to create a cohesive society, national identity, and sense of belonging (Hutcheon, 2013) or to exaggerate threats from other nations (i.e. nationalism), minimise costs of war (i.e. patriotism), or mobilise groups against 'outsiders' (i.e. discrimination) (Crawford & Lipschutz, 1998). Through telling and retelling stories, these storytellers create narratives that form the basis of a worldview and will likely include or express an etiology, explanation of the world, futurology, ethic, praxeology, and epistemology (Apostel & van der Veken, 1994). As mythistory is central and assimilated in a worldview, it is more than passive storytelling and an expression of identity and understanding within a community or society.

While mythopoesis can preserve or retell history, it can also be a mechanism for learners to determine which narratives govern their life and craft narratives to align with their reality and values. Paulo Freire (1970) recognised how poor and marginalised learners have education chosen for them by their oppressors, and how the classroom can be an incubator for meaning making and freedom by critiquing dominant narratives to build a different reality. In post-colonial Cambodia, this process of mythopoesis can subvert earlier and dominant histories by the French, Thai, and Vietnamese oppressors to emphasise Khmer cultural perspectives, history, and language. When used positively, this may encourage a stronger or different Khmer identity through new or reformed narratives articulated in schools, museums, national monuments, and the media. Conversely, contemporary storytellers may negatively use the mythopoesis process to fuel tensions with Thailand through nationalist rhetoric. Facilitating the emergence of new and critically aware

storytellers in higher education enables the Cambodian community to transform its logic towards facilitating peacebuilding. For this to happen, there must be a structured, holistic, and interpretive tool able to dissect narratives on multiple levels to assess their factual claims and utility and help guide a response.

The Quadriga in Christian tradition and secular higher education context

Mythistory has been critiqued across history and within a Christian tradition to explore alternate meanings or introduce new perspectives. Greek philosophers like Plato used allegories (Kutash, 2020) to communicate ideas through a narrative structure, while thinkers like Philo of Alexandria connected Judaism and Greek philosophy through allegory (Williamson, 1989). Similarly, Christ used or critiqued mythistory by reinterpreting Old Testament narratives to reveal new ethical or spiritual truth about Himself or the plans of God. For instance, Jesus critiqued the patriarchal role of Abraham to define spiritual lineage by obedience rather than descent (John 8:39–40, 56) and reinterpreted the Manna in the wilderness to define himself as the true source of life (John 6:31–49). Furthermore, Jesus challenged literal interpretations of the Torah (Matt. 5:21–48) by encouraging listeners to move beyond legalism and examine their ethics and motives. Stephen, the first martyr, used mythistory to argue God always was resisted by His people (Acts 7). In each case, mythistory was strategically critiqued to address new questions by reinterpreting historic narratives from different perspectives.

The intentional process of interpreting Scripture from alternate perspectives was encouraged through the development of the Quadriga. The Quadriga has its roots in Origen of Alexandria who believed literal interpretations of Scripture presented God as morally primitive, absurd, or inconsistent with the Christian revelation of a perfect God (Klein et al., 2017). For example, Old Testament passages describe God with human-like body parts (Exo. 3:10, 33:11, Psa. 34:15, Isa. 66:1), issuing explicit laws (Lev. 11, Deut. 14), and ordering violent genocides (Gen. 6:17, Deut. 20:16–17, 1 Sam. 15:3) were seemingly incoherent with the message of the New Testament and open to attack by Gnostics. In seeking a literal, allegorical, and moral interpretation, Origen presented a philosophical, spiritual, and apologetical response to Alexandrian society familiar with the earlier allegorical styles of Philo and Plato. Augustine later added to this in his Four Senses of Scripture, which over time was formulated as the

Quadriga (Barcellos, 2011). This can be summarised as "the literal teaches history, the allegorical, what you should believe, the moral, what you should do, the anagogical, where you are going" (Stephaney, 2010). While not all historical events or Scripture has multiple or layered meanings, this four-fold interpretative approach offered a robust method to move from historical interpretation to moral action and a future destiny.

Despite its Christian origins, the Quadriga's underlying structural logic can function as a universal hermeneutical framework that transcends religious and national boundaries. Just as biblical interpretive methods like form and redaction criticism and are often in secular linguistics, sociology, and literary theory (Floss, 2009), the Quadriga can encourage holistic, diverse, and multi-layered interpretation of events so learners can navigate competing historical claims and mythopoesis, account for the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, and focus on systemic failures rather than individual or ethnic faults. This approach encourages an integrated history that strengthens the intellectual landscape of both Buddhist societies by encouraging holistic and critical thinking, peacebuilding, and deliberative democracy.

As Cambodian higher education serves as a key institution for imparting shared civic values, the use of an adapted Quadriga in higher education classrooms offers the best opportunity for critical media literacy. Although there is widespread use and engagement with social media in both Thailand and Cambodia (Ewe, 2025; Sriyai, 2025), the nature of social media as an 'echo chamber' to consolidate personal and group bias (Terren & Borge, 2021), an emphasis on social harmony and patriotism by Thai and Cambodia social hierarchies, and a political climate discouraging dissent (Chai, 2025) means another forum for critique is necessary. In this context, an adapted Quadriga is not designed as a tool for social revolution but an avenue to encourage broader and more holistic perspectives so aspiring leaders can better understand and navigate current and future social complexities consistent with their respective worldviews and cultural context. This positions the classroom as a moderated community for inquiry, where interrogating ontological claims of nationalist mythistory helps build the social and ethical infrastructure required for regional stability.

Analysing the Cambodian Thai conflict using the Quadriga

This section analyses related narratives underpinning the Cambodian-Thai border dispute to facilitate peacebuilding by applying the four Quadriga lenses to move systematically from

history to meaning, meaning to action, and action to destiny. Related questions for educators in applying these lenses are listed in Appendix 1: Questions to support the Quadriga in the classroom.

Literal/historical critique

The literal/historical lens explores the foundational and grammatical-historical meaning of history by asking "what happened?" to identify verifiable historic events and cultural interpretations. In the context of Cambodian-Thai relations, this recognises the grievances of the once dominant Khmers who had their empire and capital sacked in 1431 and later in 1591-1594 by the Siamese and then faced centuries of military and government interference and oppression in the 17th to 19th centuries (Chandler, 2018). However, this also recognise Thai grievances from having territory annexed by the French in the 19th century when they acted in the interests of the Khmer (Chandler, 2018). By moving beyond a singular towards an integrated narrative, learners can better understand how both Thai and Khmer people have historic justifiable grievances, experienced marginalisation, and contributed to oppressing each other.

A wider historic reading must actively critique the source material, biases, and strategic omissions embedded within each national narrative and mythistory. This requires critiquing sources (i.e. textbooks, media archives, state documents, etc.) used to validate historic 'facts' and their inherent biases. For example, a Cambodian narrative typically presents the Angkor Empire as a monolithic 'Golden Age' of divine god-kings with magnificent temple-mountains like Angkor Wat who had their empire destroyed by the Siamese. Yet, by casting Khmer monarchs as near-perfect and divinely ordained, the narrative overlooks the human cost of forced labour in building the temples, the internal political strife, and the environmental factors like drought that contributed to Angkor's decline. This mythistory also dangerously distorts the Siamese as villains ending a perfect era of a perfect Khmer people without critically analysing the flaws and failures of the Khmer leadership. Deconstructing this mythistory to evaluate competing claims is vital to navigating social media and AI-generated content where history is selectively framed or simplified to maximise engagement or outrage and escalate conflict. Without truth-seeking, the collective memory of Khmer society can

experience a mythopoesis that forges an ethnocentric Khmer identity suspicious and distrustful of Thai intentions and culture and one primed for war.

Allegorical critique

The allegorical lens is critical in moving beyond historical 'facts' to deconstruct the ontological claim made by nationalist narratives in defining the 'in-group' and their unassailable right to territory or privileges. The adapted Quadriga framework uses the allegorical lens to critique overarching political or religious themes or context to ask, “what is the central idea or foundational narrative defining identity?”. By comparing Thai and Khmer news sources and social media, learners can recognise how their shared history and roots in Theravada Buddhism encourage cultural similarities and how nationalist construction of an "enemy image" (Bar-Tal, 2007) justifies hostility by recasting the antagonist in the national story. Learners can also challenge the narrative ‘fidelity’ (Fisher, 1984) with cultural values by questioning whose values are affirmed and whose voices are silenced. By deconstructing these ontological claims, learners can start to identify nationalist rhetoric, highlight the internal contradictions, and lay the groundwork for non-partisan peacebuilding.

The process of evaluating alternate narratives can be a challenge for learners at a personal and social level. Thai narratives and mythistory tend to frame the fall of Angkor as the Thai absorption, adaptation, and improvement of Khmer court rituals, arts, and administrative knowledge by the Thai people rather than a destructive act against a "mother culture". This framing of the narrative justifies Thai identity, dominance, and destructive acts by defining the 'in-group' (the superior Thai) against an implied 'out-group' (the fading Khmer). In contrast, Khmer argue that Thai treachery caused the decline of their empire and that many contemporary aspects of Thai culture, art, and knowledge is derived from Khmer culture (Rojanaphruk, 2025). Because of these contrasting narratives, Thai social media frames Khmer as “untrustworthy, ungrateful, and imitator” (Rojanaphruk, 2025) while Cambodian social media presents Cambodia as a victim of Thai aggression because of their heavy weapons, cluster munitions, and stronger media presences (Buth, 2025; Roth, 2025a). Online narratives can obstruct peacebuilding while fostering identity, making their analysis crucial to peacebuilding. As learners must consider perspectives from the ‘other’ that may conflict

their own identity and community, educators may need to facilitate a supportive and secure learning environment so they can navigate these cognitive and emotional challenges.

Moral critique

The moral lens questions "what does this teach us about how to live?" to guide how a community or individual should act. A moral critique is necessary as it reveals the ethical justification and behavioural mandate embedded in the conflict narrative and provides ethical guardrails for intentional action. This is important within the Cambodian-Thai conflict because it challenges assumptions that military action is the only virtuous or necessary response by promoting critical self-reflection and questioning the ethical consistency of each nationalist narrative.

This critique requires learners to assess moral lessons by reflecting on the causes and subsequent consequences of historical actions. For instance, French colonialism was triggered by a moral calculation by the Khmer monarch that a French protectorate of Cambodia would prevent Thai encroachment (Chandler, 2018). Yet, French colonialism is seen by Thai as 'theft' of regions like Battambang and Siem Reap and a symbol of Thai humiliation (Strate, 2015). The subsequent French *mission civilisatrice* (i.e. civilising mission) that 'discovered' and 'restored' Angkor Wat was anchored in an ethnocentric belief that Angkor was glorious civilisation neglected by the Khmer (Chen, 2021). Yet, this ignored how Angkor remained an inhabited and important Buddhist religious centre with ongoing construction and innovation and how its transformation into an archaeological site sidelined Khmer history (Chen, 2021). These complex moral layers reveal how all major stakeholders justified and used morally ambiguous actions and how learners must critique history to understand how past military or diplomatic actions influence contemporary events.

Encouraging moral critique drawing from ethics and post-colonialism is important in promoting a praxeology towards peacebuilding. By identifying the moral duty or obligation demanded by their cultural narrative, learners identify where immoral or violent actions are framed as necessary or virtuous and how peacebuilding initiatives, nonviolent alternatives, or if compromises are dismissed as weakness or dishonour. By also asking how other stakeholders' historic injury or moral claims challenge their own identity, learners can build more nuanced perspectives of their identity and moral codes (Bar-Tal, 2013). This process

helps learners identify moral inconsistencies such as condemning Thai aggression while ignoring autocratic violence perpetrated by the Cambodian Government (Hinton, 2006) that undermine nationalist claims. By anchoring critique in a universal ethic of non-harm and reciprocal respect, a moral lens shifts the focus from justified grievances to shared moral and mutual accountability.

Apocalyptic/futurological critique

While the apocalyptic/futurological lens traditionally refers to a final or prophetic spiritual destiny, this framework adapts this lens to embrace Freire's concept of 'revolutionary futurity' (Freire, 1970, p. 84) by examining the past to provide prophetic hope and change within a community. A thorough and apocalyptic critique of narratives can expose hidden agendas, call out injustice, or identify triggers or threats for future conflict to encourage change in praxeology that changes current and future outcomes. This approach is reflected in Old Testament prophecies which often reviewed social issues and immorality to call for repentance and foretell outcomes for Israel and Judah so there would be change. While many prophecies contain dire warnings of destruction (Jer. 7:32; Amos 8:9–10), their ultimate purpose was to offer prophetic hope in a return from Exile (Jer. 29:10–14; Isa. 43:5–7), the restoration of Israel (Eze. 36:24–28), the coming of the Messiah who will establish peace (Isa. 9:6–7). Where a moral lens adds a necessary ethical perspective, the apocalyptic lens strengthens and contextualises this perspective so there can be a vision and hope for a reconciled future.

While apocalyptic literature may be foreign to most Khmer, there is a poignant example Khmer can draw from within living memory. At the height of the Cambodian genocide in 1979, the Khmer Rouge foolishly initiated the Cambodian-Vietnamese War against superior and battle-hardened Vietnamese forces multiple times their size. Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge, argued this was necessary as the Vietnamese Communist Party presented an existential threat to the Khmer people and the Khmer Rouge and stated in his *Black Paper* (his later justification for the war) that Cambodian forces were “small in number but great in heroism, defeating the enemy through revolutionary consciousness and the unity of the people” (Morris, 1999). Pol Pot went so far to state that as “one Khmer soldier was equal to 30 Vietnamese soldiers… [Cambodia] could raise two million soldiers from a population of

eight million… wipe out Vietnam's population of 50 million and still have six million people left" (Morris, 1999, p. 104). This mythic delusion of final victory based on Khmer invincibility was quickly and openly dispelled in 1979 when the Vietnamese army decimated half the Cambodian army and took Phnom Penh in two weeks (Chandler, 2018). This example demonstrates how mythistory can promote a zero-sum future requiring the subjugation of the educated, elite, and the Vietnamese, and resulting in the catastrophic defeat and deaths of millions of Khmer. To avoid similar outcomes in the Cambodian-Thai dispute, learners must deconstruct this logic that demands zero-sum outcomes through territorial restoration or cultural dominance to deescalate or end conflict by creating an achievable, mutually beneficial vision that translates into a strategic peace praxeology for Cambodia's leaders today.

Integrating the Quadriga as praxeological pedagogy

Integrating peacebuilding in a Cambodian curriculum requires extending the Quadriga beyond teaching *on* peace to a praxeological pedagogy teaching *for* peace and teaching *in* peace. This aligns with Freire's belief that education is an "act of love" (1970, p. 89) that necessitates mutual respect, dialogue, and deconstruction of power imbalance between teacher and student (1970, p. 72). By embracing these pedagogical dimensions, higher education classrooms can model peacebuilding and nonviolent civic engagement as learners engage in critical analysis of history and digital media using the Quadriga and apply a praxeology of ethical duty (i.e. right action) and futurity (i.e. right effort and mindfulness). This shifts the educator from depositor of knowledge in Freire's banking method to a facilitator of liberation from cultural and political mythistory. An overview of the aims and peace-centred framework within the classroom is shown in Appendix 2: Towards a peace-centred learning framework.

Truth-seeking, holistic integration, and meaning making

A peace-centred curriculum requires learners to learn *on* peace by engaging with the Quadriga framework deconstructing single, linear views of history from multiple perspectives and lenses. This can be facilitated through enquiry-based learning where the class mutually agrees on topics and expectations and then uses the Quadriga framework in their research to establish truth by evaluating sources and psychological beliefs and biases and interrogating

diverse perspectives of minority groups including indigenous groups, slaves, and women – to name a few. By seeking to synthesise contrasting narratives, remove the hero/villain dichotomy, and build shared values that seek to understand historic injustice, learners can cultivate a nuanced and empathetic understanding of historic events, analyse their epistemology, and develop a worldview that embraces nonviolent resistance.

Relational maturity, respectful dialogue, and futurity

Having undertaken research, learners must learn *in* peace as they present their findings to peers with an artefact showcasing and exploring their learning. In recognising how Generative AI is increasingly used for content generation within and beyond the classroom (Klimova & Pikhart, 2025), class critiques ensure there is robust learning by having learners debate subtle biases, factual inaccuracies, logical fallacies, and rhetorical weaknesses in the artefacts and develop critical thinking, research, and media/AI literacy. As maturity is inherently communal, respectful dialogue helps develop relational maturity to transform the classroom into a space where students deliver constructive criticism respectfully and receive feedback without defensiveness. By having learners better understand historic and current issues while following academic policies and processes, learners can demonstrate 'right action' that helps address the systemic roots of conflict so there can be vision of a reconciled community that equips learners to move beyond inherited nationalist grievances toward a different vision of a reconciled community

Conclusion

The Cambodian-Thai conflict of 2025 demonstrates the urgent need for a pedagogical approach that equips learners to navigate a world where myth, history, and technology collide. This essay proposes that by adopting the Quadriga framework and seeking to build peace within the classroom with teaching and learning processes, Cambodian HEIs can incorporate a robust peacebuilding curriculum that moves beyond passively receiving or reciting history to reclaiming history. This methodology answers the call by Freire for true learning to be an act of creation that forces learners to abandon the banking model of received history by moving from literal critique to a four-step analysis that also critiques allegorical narratives, moral praxeology, and futurological vision. It is postulated that this process can encourage reconciliation and foster critical media literacy necessary to counter

online disinformation and misinformation. By doing so, educators facilitate the development of future Cambodian leaders who use moral and mutual foresight beyond inherited nationalist grievances and can create an architecture framework for Southeast Asian stability.

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Appendix 1: Questions to support the Quadriga in the classroom

Literal/historical lens (i.e. the events)

- What are the core historical claims and specific events (e.g. dates, treaties, battles) claimed by each stakeholder?
- Which sources (textbooks, media archives, state documents) are used to validate each side's historical 'facts', and what biases are inherent in those sources?
- What are the key omissions or silences in each perspective? This includes ignoring internal faults or flaws, shared or converging history, or embellishing key events.
- How do modern perspectives expressed in social media and AI-generated content selectively frame or simplify these historical events to maximise engagement or outrage?

Allegorical lens (i.e. the purpose)

- What are the central allegories or narratives (i.e. foundational stories, myths, or political narratives) associated with each perspective?
- How do ancient narratives contrast contemporary narratives offered by modern leaders and media?
- How does each narrative define the 'in-group' (who are 'we'?) and the 'out-group' (who are 'they' and why are they a threat?)?

- What is the utility of such a polarising narrative within the context of peacebuilding, and how does it support or prevent the emergence of a shared history or identity?

Moral lens (i.e. the duty)

- What are the moral lessons we can learn from history by reflecting on the cause of previous actions and their subsequent consequences?
- What moral duty or ethical obligation does each narrative demand of its followers?
- How does each narrative ethically justify military action, conflict, or economic sanctions and frame these actions as virtuous or necessary?
- What nonviolent alternatives or compromises are dismissed or morally condemned by the dominant narrative?
- How would acknowledging the opponent's historical injury or moral claim challenge the ethical foundation of one's own identity?

Apocalyptic/futurological lens (i.e. the destiny)

- What is the ultimate, final destiny promised by the narrative (e.g. final victory, full territorial restoration, cultural dominance)? Does this promote a zero-sum future by requiring the failure, subjugation, or disappearance of the opponent?
- What would a positive and shared futurology promoting peace, security, and prosperity of all parties look like?
- What concrete steps or actions can be taken today to move toward this mutually beneficial vision, as opposed to the predicted apocalyptic conflict?

Appendix 2: Towards a peace-centred learning framework

Learning dimension and Quadriga lens	Definition	Student competencies	Staff actions
Truth-seeking with integrity *Literal / historical*	Creating a historic foundation by evaluating a diversity of sources and perspectives to encourage nuance and identify bias and factual or logical errors.	Critically evaluate the provenance and authority of sources and digital content to verify the accuracy of information. Cross-reference specific historical claims with authenticated, diverse, and archival sources.	Offer diversity and differentiated learning so learners develop digital forensics skills. Explicitly teach and model rigorous digital fact-checking and documentation processes.

Holistic integration and meaning making *Allegorical*	Analysing how facts are framed and organised to construct better narratives that define identity, purpose, and threats.	Identify narrative structure, emotional appeal, and recurring motifs used in mythistory and disinformation. Recognise bias, misinformation, and disinformation in primary and AI generated content and the impact on national mythistory and 'in-group' biases.	Provide structured reflection and support as learners analyse alternate perspectives. Encourage narratives resisting hate and challenging systemic inequality and conflict.
Relational maturity and respectful dialogue *Moral*	Engaging in respectful dialogue with peers and staff, demonstrating ethical learning and online conduct and navigating conflict with non-violent communication.	Listen deeply to other perspectives before graciously responding. Deliver constructive criticism respectfully and receive feedback without defensiveness. Openly and ethically use AI within agreed limits to enhance learning. Demonstrate maturity by following learning and academic protocols such as attendance, participation, and submission. Understand the rationale for policies and the constructive consequences.	Listen actively and respond appropriately to student feedback. Demonstrate transparency by providing clear academic policies and processes. Encourage dialogue as a micro-society for praxis with continuous reflection on ethics and real-world actions. Encourage avenues for restorative justice where necessary.
Self-determination with integrated destiny *Apocalyptical / futurological*	Defining a shared destiny that counters zero-sum narratives and translates ethical duty into tangible, positive peacebuilding actions.	Propose concrete peacebuilding strategies with measurable and sustainable action plans prioritising communal good. Apply media skills to actively build new and inclusive narratives promoting reconciliation and broader and more wholesome online engagement on divisive issues.	Demonstrate how the course connects to real-world and community needs to advance peacebuilding. Create a teacher/student partnership of equals in the classroom.

From Examination to Opportunity: The Continuing Impact of the CESA in Samoa

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For more than a century, the Commercial Education Society of Australia (CESA) has played a distinctive and influential role in advancing standards of commercial and professional education across Australia and the wider region. Established in 1910, the Society emerged in response to a clear structural disadvantage faced by Australian students, who were previously required to sit commercial examinations set and marked in Great Britain, with papers and results transported by sea. This system affected students in both private business colleges and the public education sector. The formation of CESA provided, for the first time, a locally administered, independent examining authority dedicated to commercial education.

Throughout much of the twentieth century, CESA operated at the centre of business and office education in Australia. As the examining authority across a wide range of commercial subjects taught in schools and business colleges, the Society examined hundreds of thousands of students in Australia, Asia, and the South Pacific. By 1970, at the height of its examining activity, more than 15,000 candidates successfully completed CESA examinations in a single year, with increasing numbers of students travelling from neighbouring countries specifically to pursue the Society's awards. This period marked CESA's emergence as a widely respected benchmark of professional competence, recognised by educators, employers, and government as having raised the standard of commercial education to nationally and regionally significant levels.

In Australia, shifts in educational structures and regulation over subsequent decades have seen the Society's domestic focus evolve. Today, CESA places strong emphasis on professional development programs, scholarly activity, and the promotion of professional standards

through discussion, research, and fraternity. This evolution reflects broader changes in the Australian education landscape and mirrors the pathways taken by many long-established professional societies whose influence extends beyond formal examining alone.

Importantly, the Society's historic examining mission has not disappeared. Rather, it continues in meaningful and regionally significant ways beyond Australia, most notably through its enduring relationship with the Tesese Institute in Samoa. For many decades, students of the Tesese Institute have participated in CESA examinations across a range of business disciplines, from introductory through to advanced levels. These examinations provide an independent point of reference and professional standing that complements local study and supports graduates as they enter employment within Samoa, across the Pacific Islands, and internationally.

This long-standing partnership has enabled generations of Tesese Institute students to enhance their professional standing and confidence, supporting pathways into public and private sector roles and creating opportunities well beyond national borders. Graduation ceremonies at the Institute continue to reflect the pride and significance attached to these achievements, with students, families, and the wider community recognising the value of both local study and externally benchmarked performance. Local media coverage in Samoa has further reinforced the visibility and esteem associated with this partnership year after year.

CESA remains deeply committed to its relationship with the Tesese Institute and to supporting the professional prestige of its students. This commitment reflects not only the Society's origins as an independent examining body, but also its enduring mission to encourage high standards, dignity, and opportunity in professional practice. The Samoa partnership stands as a living continuation of CESA's original purpose, demonstrating how a Society founded in 1910 continues to serve contemporary communities across the Pacific with integrity, relevance, and respect.

For this section, photographs from the 2025 Graduation are presented first, followed by student testimonies. Students who study at the Institute benefit from two complementary pathways of recognition and achievement:

(a) The Tesese Institute

Courses delivered by the Tesese Institute are accredited by the Samoa Qualifications Authority and are designed to develop practical skills, confidence, and capability for employment and leadership within Samoa and the wider Pacific region.

(b) The Commercial Education Society of Australia

Students are also given the opportunity to sit internationally benchmarked examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia, leading to respected certifications in business and office-based subjects that support employment opportunities both locally and internationally.

The photographs and student reflections that follow illustrate the impact of this dual pathway and the opportunities it continues to create for Tesese Institute students and graduates.

L-R: Fesola'i Kolone Maisa, Head of Institute; Pr/Dr Paul Matamua, Church Minister; Tupe L Isara, ACEO Qualifications Division, Samoa Qualifications Authority; A'eau Christopher Hazelman, CEO, Ministry of Education and Culture; Lefaufili Leata Alaimoana-Roberts, Queensland Senior Trade & Investment Commissioner – Pacific; Emoni Tesese, Managing Director, Tesese Institute, watching the 2025 graduands march into the graduation hall on Thursday, 27 November 2025.

Faumuina Ivan Afamasaga, a Senior Lecturer at the Tesese Institute, leading the graduands into the hall.

Diploma Class of 2025, led by Paratisa Vili Gaup and Solomona Ah Chong



Some of the first-year students at the Tesese Institute in 2025 who sat and passed their first CESA exams. They have been inspired to study and sit further CESA exams in the new year.



Receiving CESA certificates, these three students are now working in offices in the public and private sectors. Trophies were presented by the CEO of the Ministry of Education and Culture in Samoa while the **certificates from the Commercial Education Society of Australia were presented by the Queensland Senior Trade & Investment Commissioner – Pacific.**






Proud students receiving their CESA certificates—motivated, confident, and ready to aim higher. With their local qualifications strengthened by internationally recognised certificates from CESA, they are well prepared to pursue advanced exams and unlock employment opportunities both locally and abroad.






Tesese Institute graduates, received their certificates from the Commercial Education Society of Australia on 27 November 2025, prepare to step confidently into office-based employment with strong local and international credentials.

Nathaniel Reupena, is pictured with his proud parents after receiving the trophy for Top Student in CESA Examinations—a remarkable achievement that reflects dedication, excellence, and strong family support. *"A wise son makes a glad father…"* — *Nathaniel sat and passed six CESA examinations exams in Level 2, Level 3 and a Level 4 subject.*

Paratisa Vili Gaupule, a delighted Diploma student, receives the Top Award as **Dux of the Institute** from Samoa's CEO of the Ministry of Education and Culture, with the Tesese Institute's Director proudly standing alongside—celebrating outstanding academic excellence and achievement.

Some of the Tesese Institute's busy team, posing for a photo amidst the rush of the Graduation Day on Thursday, 27 November 2025

(Graduates, supported by first-year Tesese Institute students, present a heartfelt *Thank You* and *Merry Christmas* performance—delighting parents, relatives, and well-wishers who watched with great joy and interest as the graduation celebration concluded on a festive note.

"In 2008, a rugby injury left me paralysed. I spent a year relearning how to walk and write. In 2011, I was given a second chance through the Tesese Institute, despite having no formal certification. After attending classes for several years, I eventually completed a Diploma in Office Administration and Computing Skills. Through the Tesese Institute's partnership with the Commercial Education Society of Australia, I also sat and passed Australian examinations in several business subjects.

"Following this, I became a full-time teacher at the Tesese Institute. After our Principal passed away suddenly in 2021, I was appointed Deputy Principal in 2022, a role I accepted with humility and hope. At the end of that year, I moved to Australia, proposed to my now wife, and began a new chapter. I am grateful that I was able to find work as a result of my studies at the Tesese Institute and the valued international certifications gained through the Commercial Education Society of Australia."

Fereisa Taulealo

"While attending the Tesese Institute, I was given the opportunity to sit international examinations through the Commercial Education Society of Australia, allowing me to earn Australian certifications to complement my local certificates and opening doors to improved career opportunities.

"Today, I am honoured to serve as a member of the Tesese Institute staff in the Administration Section, and it fills me with joy to watch new students grow and succeed." ***Faith Etuale Liu***

"I completed my Diploma studies at the Tesese Institute in November 2024. I also passed all examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia, for which I received Australian certifications.

"After graduating in 2024, an organisation contacted the Institute seeking students to work in their office, and I was fortunate to secure immediate employment as a result of my certifications from the Tesese Institute and the international certifications gained through the Commercial Education Society of Australia."
Mariana Salu Pene

"In 2021, I began my education journey at the Tesese Institute. The international certifications gained through examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia have opened many doors for me and my fellow students, giving us the confidence to pursue global office employment opportunities. I am deeply thankful for the guidance, encouragement, and unwavering support of both the Tesese Institute and the Commercial Education Society of Australia."

Cecilia Leatuao

"Almost ten years ago, I attended the Tesese Institute, and it was one of the best decisions I ever made. In addition to studying at the Institute, we were given the opportunity to sit international examinations through the Commercial Education Society of Australia. Receiving Australian certifications helped us find better jobs. I am happy to recommend both the Tesese Institute and CESA to my relatives."
Salafai Vaai

"Tesese Institute stands out for its commitment to excellence and student growth. One of the most remarkable opportunities I had was sitting examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia. Preparing for and completing the CESA examinations was challenging, but the support I received from my teachers made all the difference. Their dedication and encouragement helped me push through and succeed. Thank you to the Tesese Institute, and thank you to CESA."
Ninagagainuuese Taylor

"When I walked into the Tesese Institute in 2023, I had no idea how much my life would change. Through God's grace and the support of dedicated teachers, I earned top placements in Administration and Computing subjects, along with certificates from the Commercial Education Society of Australia. These achievements opened doors I never imagined – including my employment at the Ministry of Finance." **Hereine Tana** - 2025 Graduate.

"This year, we proudly acknowledge the outstanding performance of our students in examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia, with results surpassing those of previous years. These achievements reflect dedication and resilience, and they open doors to careers and further education." ***Doreen, Karoline and Jackie***

"Tesese gave me more than an education; it gave me confidence and skills. The certifications I gained through examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia were also a great benefit, as they are highly recognised by local companies and government ministries alike.

"I am now happily employed in a legal office and am glad to be helping repay my parents for the sacrifices they made for me." ***John Paul – 2025 Graduate***

"What truly sets the Tesese Institute apart is its access to internationally recognised certifications gained through examinations administered by the Commercial Education Society of Australia. These certifications are readily recognised by local employers and open doors to global employment opportunities. By combining essential skill development with respected international certifications, the Tesese Institute ensures graduates are not only job-ready but well positioned for long-term career growth." **Melinda Upumoni – 2025 Graduate**

The Tesese Institute wishes to express its sincere gratitude to the Lord for His enduring love, guidance, and blessings upon the Institute, staff, and students. We recognise that the growth, achievements, and strength of our community are ultimately made possible through His grace, and we offer thanks for the continuous protection and provision that have sustained us through the years. The Institute extends its heartfelt appreciation to Kathleen McKenzie, President, and the Commercial Education Society of Australia for its sustained dedication and the life-changing opportunities they continue to provide. We look forward to the continuation of this valued partnership and to its ongoing contribution to educational excellence and student success. ***Emoni Tesese - Director, Tesese Institute***

Letters to the Managing Editor

Dear Kathleen,

… The Journal of Commercial Education will no doubt provide a platform for many academics in the research and being published arena, and the development of CESA's role as a think tank opens up yet more opportunities for the future. The future is looking increasingly interesting.

I would like to wish you all the very best for a very happy Christmas Season followed by a bright and fulfilling new year.

With best wishes,

Carolyn Helyard MCES

Dear Kathleen,

Congratulations on producing our first journal that I have no doubt will be valuable addition to my reference library.

Michael J. Evans MCES

Dear Kathleen,

Thank you very much for your kind invitation and for the opportunity to contribute to the February 2026 edition of the *Journal of Commercial Education*. I'm honoured by your recognition and delighted to support the Journal's mission of fostering academic and professional engagement across Australia and beyond.
I will be pleased to encourage colleagues at the University of Newcastle to submit a range of contributions, and I look forward to sharing some work myself. The inclusive scope of the Call for Papers is especially appreciated, and I'm confident it will resonate with both emerging and established scholars in our network.
I'm also deeply grateful for the proposal to base the Journal's NSW North Coast home in Newcastle. It would be a privilege to help strengthen its regional presence and academic reach, and I warmly accept this role.
Thank you again for your support and trust. I look forward to working together to advance the Journal and CESA's broader mission.

Warm regards,

David Xuefeng Shao, PhD, FRSA, FCES
University of Newcastle Business School
College of Human and Social Futures

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Journal: The journal aims to disseminate original ideas related to Commercial Education and cognate fields, including the educational aspects of commerce. It is also interested in publishing abstracts of recently approved research degree dissertations, reports and theses.

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The Commercial Education Society of Australia

FOUNDED 1910

The mission of the Commercial Education Society of Australia is to provide students of commercial education with the opportunity to raise their standards of education so that they can take advantage of the opportunities for further education through the grades of membership.

This is reflected in the Society's motto on its coat-of-arms *'Digne Ambulate'* – *'walk worthily'* which was granted by the College of Heralds in the United Kingdom.

The Commercial Education Society of Australia was founded in 1910 and incorporated in 1911 as a non-profit company limited by guarantee. In its more than a century of existence it has never been in receipt of any government grants, subsidies, or funding. The Society has a tradition of providing low-cost educational opportunities without discrimination of any kind. Membership is made up of men and women of all nationalities and backgrounds who support its objectives.