

## Indonesia needs the tech training Australia and its Quad partners can provide

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Australia and the other Quad countries have committed to stepping up their engagement with Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It's clear that economic development assistance has to be at the forefront of this new engagement. However, large-scale investments and infrastructure projects—while necessary—are difficult.

The lowest hanging piece of collaborative fruit for Australia is to deliver short-term vocational digital training at scale in the region. We should start with the most consequential of our neighbours, Indonesia. Ideally, we would partner with other Quad nations.

As we argue in a [paper](#) for the Australian National University's National Security College, this is one of those rare opportunities where Australia's strategic imperatives align with both its capabilities and what its neighbours actually want.

The demand in Indonesia for digital education is enormous. We spent months interviewing Indonesian government officials, academics and businesspeople. They were extremely clear on what they wanted from Australia, the Quad and others—cyber skill capacity building. This isn't surprising. Indonesian leaders often quote [World Bank data](#) that the country needs nine million additional workers in the information and communications technology sector by 2030 to support the country's rapidly growing digital economy.

The interviewees were also very clear as to the nature of the training: short term, large scale and technical. They want to upskill their people quickly to contribute to Indonesia's digital revolution.

This is different to the capacity building Australia currently offers. Australia delivers a range of cyber-specific, policy-focused (not technically focused) capacity-building programs in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. It also provides longstanding degree scholarships across a range of disciplines, including a recently announced program of 10 scholarships for Indonesians to undertake a master's or doctoral degree program in Australia.

These initiatives are welcome in recipient states and do a lot of good. But as Australia plans to expand its cyber engagement, we need to spend the extra resources that are planned for the region on what the region wants.

The strategic rationale for this type of engagement with Indonesia is also clear. Our [recent paper](#) for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace shows that Huawei has become Indonesia's trusted cybersecurity partner. The Chinese company provides vast amounts of telecommunications hardware, including 5G equipment, for Indonesia. But beyond this, Huawei is providing training to thousands—perhaps tens of thousands—of Indonesians every year. The training is generally short term, technically focused and delivered to all levels of society, from government officials to rural students.

The Chinese government is now following its companies. Globally, China is in the early stages of establishing vocational colleges called Luban Workshops in dozens of countries to train students in subjects such as ICT. The first one was formed in Thailand in 2016. So far, it has [reportedly](#) trained more than 1,000 Thai students and 8,000 from elsewhere in Southeast Asia, likely including Indonesia. Indonesia's first Luban Workshop was established in December 2017.

China is [not popular](#) in Indonesia, or in most of the region for that matter. Indonesia wants alternatives. As one political staffer in Indonesia said to us: 'We are waiting for the Quad to step up.' But, as yet, no rich liberal democracy is providing consistent feasible technical training alternatives at the same scale.

It is in Australia's and the Quad's interests to provide alternatives. We do not want Indonesia to become solely reliant on one country for technology or its associated capacity building. We can do little to stop China's continued involvement, but we can ensure a more balanced reliance within Indonesia itself. There's so much demand on the Indonesian side that neither China, Australia nor the Quad will be able to meet all of it.

This plays to our strengths. Australia does vocational training well. And the establishment of vocational training centres in Indonesia would cost less than many big infrastructure projects. It is also simpler to deliver. Infrastructure projects run into a wide range of issues such as corruption, disgruntled local landholders and environmental issues, among many other problems.

It is also an opportunity to bring other Quad countries on board. The US and Japan would likely support short-term digital education in Indonesia. Both countries also have companies with capacity. The involvement of the private sector would further bolster such a program.

Vocational training at scale would demonstrate that Australia, and hopefully the other Quad members, are interested in practical cooperation based on what countries in our region need. Australia and its allies and partners shouldn't leave the task of plugging the region's skills shortages to China and its tech titans.

Not only is there a compelling development case for Australia and other Quad countries to offer technical training, but it will also serve the hard-headed strategic rationale of stopping one of our closest neighbours from being overwhelmingly reliant on Chinese technology and training.

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