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GARY RAMAGE

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono addressing the Australian parliament last year

Indonesian studies slide

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JAZZING up subject titles may help revive interest in Indonesian studies, according to an otherwise sombre paper on the decline of the discipline.

"Units on Terrorism and Peacekeeping in Indonesia or Sorcerers and Dictators in Indonesia might appeal more to students than generic ones on Indonesian politics or Indonesian history," the paper says.

The paper, written by Murdoch University Indonesianist David Hill, brings together 21 further ideas, including a new body to promote the language and a national provider of Indonesian education for off-campus students.

The paper is intended to trigger debate at a three-day national colloquium on the subject starting next Wednesday at Murdoch.

A peak of 28 universities with Indonesian programs in 2001 had disguised a steady decline since 1997, with only 15 institutions now having their own stand-alone programs, the paper says.

The 1997 Asian economic crisis, followed by terrorist attacks in Bali and Ja-

karta, affected Australian perceptions of Indonesia.

"There is a negative image of Indonesia which is draining [student] demand away," Professor Hill said.

With retiring staff and less specialisation, Australia was losing the kind of expertise that the US used to defer to, he said.

Defence and other government departments reliant on Indonesian studies graduates will be represented at the Perth colloquium, as well as academics and Indonesia's ambassador to Australia, Primo Alui Joelianito.

The Hill paper quotes with irony Indonesia's President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who said last year he knew "no other Western country with more Indonesianists in your governments, universities and think tanks".

If his positive view was dated, so too were negative perceptions in Australia of Indonesia as an economic backwater.

"Indonesia survived the global financial crisis with a rate of growth greater than Australia's whereas our trading partners in the European Union are struggling to pull their way out of the financial crisis," Professor Hill said.