

## Appendix 3. Smart Engagement with Asia: Leveraging Language, Research and Culture

### Introduction

The rise of the countries of Asia requires vision and action in Australia. In future, the Asia-Pacific region will present us with major challenges and opportunities economically, socially and culturally. Our geography opens opportunities for business and research, but what we make of them will be determined by Australia's strategy and commitment to our future in the region.

In a timely reminder of the barriers that remain to cultural understanding and economic exchange, the report by the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA), SAF03 *Smart Engagement with Asia: Leveraging Language, Research and Culture* (<http://acola.org.au/wp/project-3/>) provides new insights into the complexities of our relationships in the region, and lays out a blueprint for the bridges Australia can build to improve connections between people, businesses and institutions. The report draws on the authors' expertise in social science, cultural studies and education, and an interdisciplinary panel of scientists, engineers and social scientists.

The depth of Australia's linguistic and intercultural competence will be a determining factor in the future success of developments in innovation, science and technology, research capacity, international mobility, trade relations and economic competitiveness.

### Interactions with a growing Asia

The rise of Asia is dominated by the influence of the giant regional powers of China and India. China is now Australia's largest trading partner, taking almost a quarter of Australia's total exports and imports in 2013.

Australian businesses need to be ready to make the most of the economic opportunities the rise of Asia presents. However, only 9 per cent of Australian businesses operate in Asia, with 12 per cent having business experience in Asia, and around 65 per cent having no intention of doing business there in the near future.

International education is one of Australia's largest export industries, contributing \$16.3 billion to the economy in 2013–14. In 2013 there were 410 925 international students studying in Australia, with China contributing 29 per cent, India 8.8 per cent, South Korea 4.9 per cent, and Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Nepal in the top 10.

Much of Australia's relationship with the diverse countries of Asia has been filtered through this rapidly growing international education industry, as well as other businesses such as tourism. In the next few decades, these areas will continue to be of enormous importance to Australia's economic development, but we need to progress from opportunism to smart engagement.

Smart engagement with Asia involves more than pursuing short-term economic benefit, and works towards nurturing wide-ranging, long-term, mutually beneficial relations. It

promotes active interactions between Australians and Asians; it involves businesses, community groups and others; it recognises that building sustained relationships requires long-term investment and commitment; it embraces mutuality and collaboration as key principles; and it builds on the resources and connections already represented by Asian communities in Australia and Australian communities in Asia.

## Learning the language

Eighty-one per cent of Australians speak only in English at home, and interest in foreign languages remains low. Just 13 per cent of Australian year 12 students study a language other than English.

Multilingual people have an advantage in increasingly international companies and organisations. In addition, foreign language learning has a significant positive effect on knowledge and perception of another country. Knowledge of Asian languages is also critical for deep, mutual and long-term engagement with Asia.

Therefore, continued support, incentives and fresh approaches for learning languages and intercultural skills are essential at school, university and the workplace if Australia's Asia capabilities are to grow.

Meanwhile, the capacity to speak more than one language is widespread in the Asian region with many Asians learning English. It is spoken by nearly 800 million people in Asia, but the level of proficiency varies across countries.

Commentators have put it this way: while not knowing English is a disadvantage, knowing only English is a disadvantage too.

## Collaboration in research

The ambition of our Asian neighbours is reflected in their strategies to grow their economies through innovation. Science and research are central to their national plans. Asia is the most dynamic region in the world for research investment and output: the Asia-Pacific region had the most rapid rise in share of global publications in the past 15 years. China is now the third largest producer of research articles, on course to overtake the top-ranked United States before the end of the decade.

The humanities, arts and social sciences do not seem to be a major focus of national policies in the region. Many Asian countries are focused instead on science and technology. Nevertheless, research publications in the arts and humanities are the fastest growing across the region (albeit from a low base) as these societies become more developed.

Research collaboration between countries in the region has increased strongly in the past decade. International research collaboration represents a significant mode of institutional and people-to-people connectivity between countries. When aligned with wider foreign policy goals, international research collaboration can contribute to coalition building, conflict resolution, and building trust and understanding between countries. Science diplomacy can advance our broader interests in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, internationally co-authored publications in science, technology, engineering and mathematics achieve higher citation rates than average.

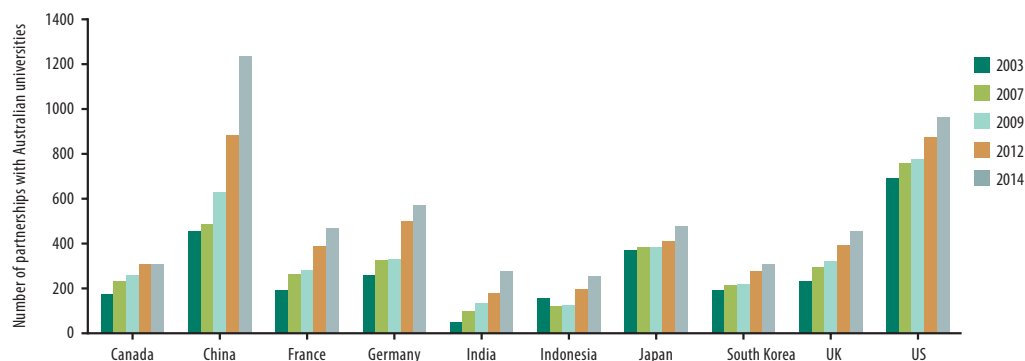
However, while collaboration between Asian researchers has risen steeply, Australian researchers collaborate less with colleagues in Asia than in Western countries. The exception is collaboration with China, which has risen exponentially. Australia depends to a larger degree than other developed nations (including the United States and the United

Kingdom) on the work of Chinese diaspora researchers in Australian research institutions for its research collaboration with China. Government support for collaboration with Asia has been lacking, and the strategic significance of international research collaboration receives little attention in Australian foreign policy.

## Culture and community

Historically, Australia's cultural relationship with Asia has not been close because of major differences in history, politics and culture. Cultural diplomacy is an important tool to influence international attitudes and perceptions. However, Australian activity has not kept up with the rapid increase in cultural diplomacy activity in Asian countries over the past decade. Only long-term investment in cultural engagement may alleviate the profound sense of distance and barriers to close cultural relations.

About 8 per cent of Australia's population was born in Asia, a much higher percentage than the United States (4 per cent) or United Kingdom (2 per cent). Communities of people of Asian descent (Asian diasporas) have a role in establishing and facilitating trade, investment and commercial opportunities between Australia and their home countries, and in strengthening bilateral relationships through their informal networks. Asian diasporas also are a resource for linguistic skills, cultural knowledge and social networks, which can help connect Australia and various parts of Asia. Asian diasporas should be involved regularly as informal ambassadors focusing on entrepreneurship, innovation, philanthropy and volunteerism. These relationships exist informally but if Australia were to scale them up, all Australians would reap the benefits.



The top 10 countries for formal agreements between Australian and international universities (2014), which account for 62 per cent of total agreements. Five of the top 10 are in Asia: China, Japan, South Korea, India and Indonesia. (Source: Universities Australia (2014) *International links of Australian Universities: Formal Agreements between Australian Universities and Overseas Higher Education Institutions*. Universities Australia, Canberra, accessed 19 February 2015, from <<https://www.universitiesaustralia.edu.au/ArticleDocuments/188/International%20Links%20of%20Australian%20Universities%20-%20October%202014.pdf.aspx>>)

## Conclusion

Australia will be left behind if it does not step up its transnational connectivity in the region. Smart engagement with Asia is a national necessity for Australia, and needs to be focused on the development of a range of sustained connections and relationships.

Priority actions include:

- encouraging greater interest and proficiency in Asian languages and cultures;
- investing strategically in science and cultural diplomacy through a national framework;
- using Asian communities in Australia and Australian communities in Asia to play a bridging role; and
- recognising and nurturing grassroot community initiatives as an essential complement to short-term missions and delegations.

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