AAH Policy

ISSUES FACING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA
JULY 2020

The Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's *Inquiry into Issues Facing Diaspora Communities in Australia* (the Inquiry).

The Academy is the national body for the humanities in Australia, championing the contribution humanities, arts and culture make to national life. Our work aims to ensure ethical, historical and cultural perspectives inform discussions regarding Australia's future challenges and opportunities.

This brief submission focuses on the under-recognised role of diaspora communities, predominately Australia's Asian diasporas, in driving cultural diplomacy, research and education exchange, and business relations. It is based on the findings of three major research projects undertaken by our Academy for the Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA).

SUBMISSION SUMMARY

1. Australia is yet to fully recognise or harness the linguistic skills, cultural knowledge and global networks of Australia's diaspora communities.
2. Australia needs a strategic national approach to more effectively utilise the skills and knowledge of diasporic communities to assist Australia's global business, cultural and research engagements.
3. Given the importance of the Asia-Pacific region to Australia's future, the under-representation of these diasporas communities in public office, industry councils, business associations and in trade discussions and delegations must be addressed as a national priority.
4. The connectivity and mobility of diaspora students are vital to Australia's R&D effort. Current threats to Australia's international student market, and stalling researcher and student mobility, has the potential to impede the 'brain circulation' that underpins Australia's 'diaspora advantage'.
5. Australia's political and business leaders need to recognise, and help communicate the message, that the emotional and cultural links that Australia's diaspora communities may have with their country of origin do not negate their commitment and contribution to Australia.
6. In the context of COVID-19 recovery, diaspora communities are uniquely placed to deploy their capabilities to build cultural, social and economic connections and mitigate divisiveness in Australia.

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AUSTRALIA'S DIASPORA COMMUNITIES

The term 'diaspora' encompasses a significant and growing population of migrants, Australian-born descendants, those of mixed-parentage, and temporary residents in Australia for work or study. Around 17 percent of people living and working in Australia identify as being of Asian origin (Diversity Council of Australia). By the year 2031, Australia's China-born population is projected to increase to 1.3 million, and Australia's India-born population set to increase nearly four-fold to 1.4 million. Business diaspora are those involved in transnational business, trade and investment and include a greater proportion of educated and highly skilled individuals engaged in the new economy.

These communities are sizeable and uniquely placed to use language skills, cultural understanding and global networks to further Australia's cultural and economic links with the region and beyond.

Research reports led by our Academy for ACOLA found that Australian governments, business, universities and mainstream community organisations have yet to fully recognise or harness the linguistic skills, cultural knowledge and global networks of Australia's diaspora communities to assist Australia's global business, cultural and research engagements (see reference list).

The *Smart Engagement with Asia* project reported on the contribution of Asian-Australian researchers in 'wiring Australia into the region through global networking', establishing research linkages between key centres in Australia and Asia, and on the importance of reciprocity, collaboration, and diaspora linkages for promoting long-term people-to-people ties through research and cultural diplomacy (Ang, Tambiah and Mar, 2015).

There is an opportunity to build more strategic effort and leverage existing activities across the cultural sector and to 'close the distance' between Australia and the region through long-term and mutually beneficial collaborations and partnerships. Two specific domains of focus need to be part of the broader strategy: the first, harnessing the power of the galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) organisations to reflect and engage diaspora communities in telling the story of Australia, nationally and internationally; and the second, building on the innovative regional cultural networks and infrastructures, which have been established by independent cultural sector and civil society players, including Asian and Pacific diasporas.

In the research sector, there is strong evidence that diaspora networks are vital to the strength of Australia's research collaborations and outputs. The international strategies of our universities could be substantially strengthened by learning from the 'grassroots'. Australian research collaboration with China, for example, "is driven more by Chinese diasporic researchers than in other countries" (Ang, Tambiah and Mar, 2015, p.98).

BUSINESS DIASPORAS

The *Australia's Diaspora Advantage* report showed that Asian-Australian business diasporas (with a focus on Chinese and Indian diasporas) are an important source of innovation, enterprise and entrepreneurialism in bilateral and multilateral industry and commerce (Rizvi, Louie and Evans, 2016).

Australia's Asian business diasporas – those particularly involved in business, trade and investment – include a greater proportion of educated and highly skilled individuals who are well-represented in knowledge-intensive, service-orientated industries. According to the last census, Australia's Chinese and Indian diasporas owned over 45,000 businesses. From 2006 to 2011, the number of businesses

owned by Australia's China-born population grew by 40 per cent and India-born by 72 per cent (Liu, 2016).

New and responsive pathways for greater engagement of Australia's business diasporas could include increasing representation and mobilisation in trade policy formation and missions; improving mechanisms for greater engagement in business and investment programs; and connecting business diasporas with research collaborations.

The strength of successful diaspora business enterprise in the services sector is a particular opportunity for Australia – this is an under-developed area of Australia-Asia trade which is traditionally focussed on mining and agricultural exports.

DIASPORA CREATIVES AS CULTURAL AMBASSADORS

In another report for ACOLA, *International Cultural Engagements,* John Fitzgerald and Wesa Chau surveyed Australians of Pacific Islander and Asian Descent Chinese (APIAD) artists and cultural workers for their insights and perspectives on how Australian governments could help them to realise their potential as cultural ambassadors for Australia (Fitzgerald and Chau, 2015).

> *Among diaspora cultural actors consulted, artistic learning, creativity and performance were said to be vehicles for maintaining inter-generational coherence, building trust between people and communities at home and abroad, and pushing accepted boundaries of social and political practice. Long-term reciprocal relations are said to be pursued partly for the sake of artistic engagement and livelihood but also for the health of relationships themselves.*

Given the diverse nature of diaspora communities, Fitzgerald and Chau found that these artists are "attuned to opportunities for interethnic and multi-national cultural engagements. They readily innovate in creating new regional arts networks linking Australia, the homeland and other countries in the region."

Their research found that APIAD artists and communities "need little advocacy, training, or encouragement" to become cultural ambassadors for Australia, but they do need "recognition for their efforts, acceptance as 'mainstream' artists and cultural workers, and assistance in building a culture of giving, or philanthropy, in Australian business and cultural circles to support new initiatives and expansion of current efforts."

NEED FOR A STRATEGIC NATIONAL APPROACH

Australia has made some progress on diaspora engagement through DFAT's public diplomacy agenda but there is a much broader agenda which could bring together arts and culture, health higher education, research and innovation.

A significant opportunity exists for Australia to coordinate both *diaspora policy* and *capability development* across relevant portfolios and agencies, to facilitate regional engagement and better position Australia to anticipate, and swiftly respond to, global challenges and opportunities in a highly nuanced way.

One of the key findings of the *Australia's Diaspora Advantage* report is the need for a strategic national approach to recognise and better utilise the resources of Australia's diaspora communities.

A diaspora diplomacy program was also recommended by Fitzgerald and Chau, one that engages the diaspora 'at home' "not as a passive target audience of Australian public diplomacy but as citizens contributing to the design and implementation of cultural relations."

COVID-19 IMPACTS ON DIASPORA STRENGTHS

In the current environment, some of Australia's diaspora strengths are at risk. This is particularly the case in higher education and research, where threats to Australia's international student market have consequences for the whole ecosystem. The connectivity and mobility of diaspora students are vital to Australia's R&D effort. A recent research paper shows that "domestic and international post-graduate students comprise 57% of the university R&D workforce" and that "research interruptions and travel and visa restrictions suggest that more than 9000 international research students will not resume their research in 2020" (Rapid Research Information Forum, 2020). Stalling researcher and student mobility has the potential to impede the 'brain circulation' that underpins Australia's 'diaspora advantage'.

The role of diaspora in building intercultural understanding and specifically the ability of diaspora communities to maintain deep and effective connections with 'host' and 'home' countries strengthens Australia's position on the global stage. This is especially the case in the current geopolitical environment where building trusted and durable relationships will be vital to Australia's prosperity. Assertive forms of nationalism pose a risk to cross-border cooperation needed to address shared challenges, including infectious diseases, climate change, and the spread of mis and dis-information.

Within Australia, the role and potential of diaspora in contributing to social cohesion is also under-recognised. In a recent Senate Inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy, humanities experts gave evidence about the role of diaspora, who "almost by definition, have much more of a world view than the nationalistic, narrow citizenship kind of idea' (p.15). In the context of COVID-19 recovery, diaspora communities are uniquely placed to deploy their capabilities to build cultural, social and economic connections and mitigate divisiveness in Australia.

ACCESS TO RESEARCH EXPERTISE

We would be happy to elaborate on this submission and convene relevant expert input to Committee hearings, including Fellows of the Academy who led the ACOLA reports.

References

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