



Mr Andrew Dawson
Inquiry Secretary – Trade
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

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Submission to the Australian parliamentary inquiry into trade with the Middle East

Dear Mr Andrew Dawson,

I welcome the opportunity to comment on Australia's trade and commerce links with the Middle East.

Higher education has represented an important component of trade between Australia and the Middle East. The number of students from the Middle East attending Australian universities has risen significantly in the last decade. This is a great testimony to the world-class education offered at Australian universities. Enrolments from the Middle East, more specifically from the wealthy Gulf Sheikdoms, contribute to the income generated through international enrolments at Australian universities. However, the benefits of providing education to students from the Middle East are not confined to their monetary value and their role in the solvency of Australian universities. Australian-educated graduates act as ambassadors for Australia in their home countries and have proven to be irreplaceable assets for Australian companies that operate in the region.

While Australia's record of attracting students from the Gulf region has been a success story, it is important to not rest on our laurels and ensure that Australia remains a competitive choice in a busy global education market. One important aspect, pertinent to enhancing Australia's competitiveness, is to acknowledge that engagement with the Middle East is a two-way process. Just as it is important to offer world-class education to students from the Middle East and build a reputation for Australia as a welcoming and safe destination for the generation of future leaders, it is important to enhance knowledge and familiarity with the diversity of the Middle East, especially the Gulf countries of origin for a large number of students. A broader understanding of the dynamics, history and risk factors in the Gulf region is particularly important when we note that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states represent Australia's most popular export destinations in the Middle East – four out of the top five according to a DAFT report.¹



More than 2,000 Australian companies are estimated to be working in the Gulf - including many Small-Medium Enterprises (SMEs).² While Australia's large firms are likely to have the resources to provide some in-house training on culture, history and language, the SME sector appears reliant on the broad knowledge that may exist in the community. Needless to say, an enhanced level of awareness and knowledge of the Middle East and particularly the Gulf region would provide significant resources to the SME sector and relevant government departments.

At the present time, Australia has only one comprehensive Middle East studies program, offered at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra. The program, which is run by the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (CAIS), incorporates Bachelors, Masters and PhD programs, and operates in conjunction with language training in Arabic, Persian and Turkish. The Centre is made up of ten academic staff who research and teach a range of topics related to the region, as well as two-dozen postgraduate research students working on the Middle East. The important point to note here is that the success of the CAIS hinges on external endowments, which include a significant donation from the United Arab Emirates. The university has matched many of these external endowments dollar-for-dollar, and has facilitated the growth of the CAIS, which has now become financially self-reliant through student enrolment.

The CAIS program at ANU, valuable and strategic as it may be for Australia's national interests, has a limited reach. Interest in Middle East studies has been on the rise among Australia's student population, most notably in Melbourne and Sydney. But the universities' response to this growing demand has often been piece-meal and disjointed, lacking an overall plan and objective. The CAIS model offers a prototype that could easily be reproduced in Melbourne and Sydney. An injection of funds targeted at establishing a centre of excellence for the study of the Gulf, matched by the host university, will go a long way in addressing this gap.

Deakin University is a strong candidate for such a Gulf study centre. Deakin University has a strong Middle East studies program that combines area studies, international relations and Arabic language teaching. Deakin University has an established track record of teaching Arabic and Middle East studies, including an innovative on-line program for language teaching and extensive partnerships in the region, among them a very successful partnership with the Sultan Qaboos College in Oman for Deakin's Arabic in-country language program. Deakin University is also home to leading scholars with direct interest and expertise in the field. Among them is Professor Fethi Mansouri, UNESCO Chair for Cultural Diversity and Social Justice, who has produced a pioneering publication on *Australia and the Middle East* (IB Tauris, 2006); Dr Benjamin Isakhan, ARC DECRA, has produced a world-class data base on heritage destruction in Iraq; and this author, holding an ARC Future Fellowship, has recently produced a report on *Australia's Relations with Iran* (2013), available online. In short, outside ANU, Deakin University boasts the largest



concentration of research and teaching expertise on the Middle East anywhere in Australia and the University would be open to building on strength by formalizing this cohort into a centre of excellence with Federal support.

In sum, it is crucial that we recognise the key role that the higher education sector plays, not only in attracting international students and revenue, but also in training Australian students to engage more effectively in the world. As it stands, Australia is neglecting a key economic opportunity by failing to use the existing university sector to support the development of Australia's future export markets. Establishing a centre of excellence for the study of the Gulf at Deakin University will go a long way in addressing this gap.

I thank you for the opportunity to comment on this topic.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh
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Centre for Citizenship and Globalisation

¹ *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade* (2011) 'Australia's trade with Africa and the Middle East' [Online]. Available: <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/stats-pubs/Trade-Africa-Middle-East.pdf> p. 12.

² Tom Gara, (7 March 2012) 'Australian companies reap Gulf rewards [Online],' *Financial Times*. Available: <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d46e0e42-685d-11e1-a8cc-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2z7eUmVYx>