



Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

Promoting the Social Sciences

Submission No: 38

A submission to the House of Representatives Inquiry into International Research Collaboration by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

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The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into international research collaboration being conducted by the Australian House of Representatives' Industry Science and Innovation Committee

Importance of this Inquiry

In its constitution, a foundation element of ASSA's mission is "*to promote international scholarly cooperation and to act as an Australian national member of international organizations concerned with the social sciences*". That charge, and ASSA's commitment to assisting government in its efforts to improve national prosperity, equity and well-being places this inquiry as a very high priority for this Academy. We address each of the terms of reference in turn, allowing that ASSA will be happy to follow-up with the committee promptly on any matter for which additional information is desired.

1. The nature and extent of existing international research collaborations

Australia enjoys a significant degree of research collaboration through its universities, national research institutions such as CSIRO, AIMS, ANSTO, NHMRC, and to a lesser degree with R&D wings of industry and the business community. The rapidly increasing interconnectedness of the Australian innovation economy with those of Europe, Asia and the Americas is both a product of past collaborations and a compelling argument for pursuing stronger international partnerships. Arguably, Australian research is of high quality but, with some exceptions eg astronomy, biomedical science and economics is of limited impact in the wider world where large institutions in populous nations have committed considerably larger amounts of research dollars (in numbers and % of GDP) to research in the science, technology, social science and humanities sectors. Nevertheless, Australia has made significant recent strides through the coordinated efforts of major research university groupings, and the learned Academies are providing additional opportunities.

ASSA's place in the international research collaboration environment.

As one of the four Australian Learned Academies, ASSA began its international collaborations nearly forty years ago with a few modest international initiatives. The collaborations were unfunded and relied entirely on the volunteer contributions of Academy Fellows. In the period 1995-2000 ASSA occasionally supported international scholarly exchanges (China and the Netherlands), and this to the total sum of c. \$26,000. Volunteer self-funded activities continued. The period 2000-2005 saw significant improvement where ASSA developed strong ties to the French research community, the British Academy, and the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences and developed projects such as (with France) "An Approach to the Sustainable Development of New Caledonia", "The Benefits of Market Based Instruments for Allocating Water Scarcity", and "Social and Spatial Variations of Racism in Paris and Sydney, a comparative analysis". In this period ASSA extended its contacts to India and Vietnam and funded productive research through formal research exchange agreements. It should be noted that some of our institutional collaborators generously provided more



funding for collaborations than did ASSA, recognizing their greater levels of government support. During this period ASSA contributed to regional social science activities through its membership in the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils AASSREC and provided that organization with its first female president, ASSA's Professor Fay Gale.

On the 3rd of September 2008 SDIISR Minister Senator Kim Carr provided the opportunity for a transformation in ASSA international programs when he announced the inclusion of the Humanities and Social Science Academies in the government's International Science Linkages program. That most welcome step has given ASSA the capacity to act swiftly on one of its ambitions, to provide "seed" funding for self-identifying pairs of researchers—one Senior researcher and one early career (post-PhD) researcher or two early career researchers, one from Australia and one from a partner country—to apply for competitive funding to start a piece of research of interest to both countries and which is likely to lead to a major research grant from some other agency. The likelihood of securing major funding will we believe be enhanced in part by the preliminary results of the collaboration supported by ASSA. ASSA is now reviewing about sixty application from its first round of funding that pairs Australian scholars with counterparts from Canada, India, China, the Netherlands, France, Sweden, Finland, Japan, and Taiwan. Importantly, the fourteen or fifteen grants we will be awarding from this first round will contribute directly and virtually immediately to research findings that will enhance Australia in some meaningful ways, will provide competitive strength for major funding to our grant winners, and will set a new standard and tone for how to maximize the return on research investment for early career researchers in international collaboration. Thus we are very pleased to engage with this Inquiry and your Committee.

2. The benefits to Australia from engaging in international research collaborations

For a country of the size and resource base of Australia, international research collaboration is essential. The benefits to Australia are very substantial, numerous and varied, and most of which fall entirely within the subject matter and expertise of the social sciences and ASSA. These include;

- Economic. International research collaborations produce considered results and as such lead to investment,, development and innovative methods of doing things better (e.g. taxation systems), financial reforms and social benefit improvements.
- Political. New forms of international cooperation stem from research initiatives in regional security, international law, concepts of good governance, maritime conventions, climate change agreements and even scientific discovery projects (e.g. the SKA), along with many other bi-national and multinational collaborations which have direct consequences and important implications for the Australian people.
- Social and cultural. Knowledge of patterns of migration, accommodation of refugee needs, emerging notions of public health care systems, educational structures and care for the aged and children are all concerns of the international community and comparative research is the primary vehicle for Australia's pace of improvement in these areas.
- Collateral recompense. Every research project produces uncounted spin-off opportunities, some obvious, some surprising and some only to be determined later. Importantly, these are the offspring, the next generation of discovery and innovation and without the initial collaborations opportunities are lost. In this regard, ASSA considers its international seed funding program to be a high-return venture, with the rewards to accrue for many years to come.



3. The key drivers of international research collaboration at the government, institutional and researcher levels.

It could be said that government is at its best when it inspires its institutions and citizens to do their best for their country. This government, through its investment in a knowledgeable and innovative society is clearly engaged in seeking to enhance Australia's position. The Australian government will do well to indicate to other governments that it is prepared to collaborate at many levels and to share knowledge to create more knowledge for the benefit of the collaborating parties.

Research relies on communication and collaboration that cross national boundaries. International discipline-based communities of scholars and researchers are well-established and constitute the primary mechanism for advancements in knowledge.

Institutions need to establish their international reputations, credibility, competitive strength and longevity by becoming linked in strategic partnerships to strengthen their research in their chosen key areas. The biomathematical principle that complexity=stability has merit in considering the importance of collaborations between institutions.

Researchers, like institutions, also do well to have their credibility in the international arena. Having developed research partnerships with current or future leading scholars establishes individual credibility that finds its rewards in employment and grant getting. Those are necessary, but international collaboration does something better. It puts the scholar in conversation with similarly rich minds that when engaged jointly can and often do produce startling results, and in quick time.

4. The impediments faced by Australian researchers when initiating and participating in international research collaborations and practical measures for addressing these

This academy understands that most of the recent advances in collaboration are supported by tremendous good will and the commitment of individuals, all of whom continue to suffer from tenuous funding, although we give credit to government in improving this in most recent times. Overall levels of funding for research affect the amount of research conducted and in turn the capacity for international research collaborations.

The highly competitive research funding situation not surprisingly results in greater access to funds for the most established researchers and the next generation of researchers find themselves excluded. Particular barriers are faced by early and mid career researchers in gaining funding in this environment. There, younger researchers with little or no serious grant-winning history are typically out competed by research stars with long track records and established research programs, labs, students and so forth. In this regard, ASSA's ISL supported joint-action seed funding program for early career researchers addresses this problem in a direct and very practical manner. Winners of our modest awards will go on to be more competitive quickly, and sometimes in partnership with a senior international star research as a mentor.

Other impediments include language barriers. While English is established as the language of science and commerce, in the social sciences knowledge of the languages and cultures of the countries with which the research is concerned significantly enhances the quality of the research and the likelihood of its having a useful outcome. With many -languages in use, and the "top ten" being wildly different in many ways, arguments for the need for Australians (including researchers) to be conversant in other languages as a practical matter are not particularly strong, but the establishment of intellectual credibility is sufficient reason to move schools and universities to not just offer, but require foreign language learning of their students, regardless their field of study.



A less tractable impediment is that Australia still suffers from Blainey's Tyranny of Distance. Travelling to or from Australia to collaborate is expensive and this should be recognized in any consideration of the full "cost of research." Dismissing travel costs by dismissing travel itself as something that can be accomplished over the internet or by similar means is specious. There is simply no more efficient way to engage in serious collaborative thinking that is such a critical part of the social sciences than face-to-face.

5. Principles and strategies for supporting international researcher engagement

- I. ASSA recommends government policies for fostering international researcher collaboration employ a 'whole-of-government' approach that ensures optimization of policy settings in all portfolios which affect the capacity of researchers to travel and work internationally.**
- II. ASSA advocates recognition that 'the full cost of research' necessarily include the realistic cost of international collaboration**
- III. ASSA recommends establishing sufficiently resourced pathways at the level of the institution (e.g. the University) which allow for the adequate financing of the contributions of international researchers to Australian research projects—and vice versa**
- IV. ASSA advocates establishing sufficiently resourced pathways at the level of the research centre (i.e. sub-University) which allow for the placement of Doctoral students and ECRs in leading international research centres for a substantive period (e.g., 3 years) and in turn allow Australian research centres to secure high quality Doctoral students and ECRs from overseas for a similar period. ASSA strongly recommends funding enhancements for early career (post-PhD) scholars and suggests that its Joint-Action Bilateral program for the seed funding of early career scholars is an innovative and very cost effective way to encourage strong and long term international collaboration.**

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia

The Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, one of Australia's four Learned Academies, is an autonomous, non-governmental organisation devoted to the advancement of knowledge and research in the various social sciences, and to the representation of Australian social sciences and social scientists. The Academy is comprised of an elected Fellowship of around 500 of Australia's preeminent social sciences researchers. In both its undertakings and aspirations ASSA strongly supports efforts to encourage and facilitate research collaboration between Australian and overseas researchers.