

Senate Enquiry into Australian Expatriates

I take this opportunity to briefly provide my own perspective on the broad topics that relate to this senate inquiry, and to thank the Senate for the interest shown in this important area. We have had wonderful personal and professional experiences working overseas, although it is not an easy road. My comments will be brief to keep the readers workload down, but they come from very significant experience. They should be taken within a broad contextual theme of enthusiastic support for the benefits to Australia of actively fostered transnational interactions facilitated by appropriate members of the diaspora. I can provide further detail if that would be helpful in the future – only an email away.

Briefly, my own relevant background is as follows. I am an Australian citizen, with a strong record of public service, educated in South Australia with degrees in medicine (MBBS), pathology (PhD), Fellow of the Royal Australian College of Physicians (FRACP), recipient of the South Australian medal, and a Serving Brother of the Order of St John. Foundation Chairman of the Australian Lung Foundation. Initial overseas working experience in Vanuatu (a few months). Two overseas prolonged working experiences – the first as a relatively junior academic in the US (1977-1980), and the second as a very senior academic (Medicine and Biomedical Engineering) in the US (1994-2004), with continuing strong ties to South Australia. Between 1980 and 1994 enjoyed a very successful academic/teaching hospital position in Adelaide. Established, with my wife in 1993, the notion of the Transnational Academic Alliance to especially foster and broaden academic interactions.

(a) the extent of the Australian diaspora;

Seems large and varied, and there must be demographics available. Never yet found an Australian working overseas who doesn't think well of Australia.

(b) the variety of factors driving more Australians to live overseas;

In my case, the chance to contribute further to the Australian academic/health care environment was a major factor. The substantial relative lack of opportunity in Australia vs the presence of opportunity in the US, in the academic work place for qualified and innovative people means that, as much as possible, Australian-based activities need to be augmented by overseas experience, opportunities and resources – on a continual basis.

(c) the costs, benefits and opportunities presented by the phenomenon;

The research and development effort in the US is extraordinarily vibrant and supported by large amounts of capital (both from Government and Industry); Australia cannot compete with that. We have therefore developed other approaches. Our working in the US has provided significant advantages for Australia – we have established the Transnational Academic Alliance, to promote the safe and effective exchange of people, ideas and new developments and this is judged as a successful model for interaction. This was established by us after several years of looking at many

international interaction models, and tested with a variety of interaction types. Opportunities for further significant growth for this exist within the United States and Australia, as well as opportunities to problem solve etc., but these have not been fully taken advantage of, for very complex, but solvable, reasons. Through this venue though we have been able to provide much new technology, experiences and opportunities to Australia and Australians, as well as to those in the US. We have also provided advice to small businesses wishing to open in the US, especially those companies coming from university type incubators.

A common misconception I see is that people will visit the US for a few days and feel as though they know everything important about the US – the same is true of people who come and live/work here for 2-3 years. They remain superficially informed and think they know most of the things that they need to know about the US often with strong persuasive opinions – as I did (to some extent) when returning to Australia after my first 2 years of active work in the US academic environment. However, in my experience it takes many years to start to know the US system/work place – it is very different from that in Australia. This is one reason I think that the opinion of people with long histories of highly successful work experience in both Australia and in the US, in both junior and very senior levels, and with contact maintained, is an extremely important yet almost unused resource.

The Transnational Academic Alliance model for instance allows at both ends for the following:

A safe environment in which to function

Many and adaptable levels of functioning –

- one of, passive advice regarding new initiatives (such as grants or items such as large software contracts);
- common problem solving;
- active involvement in new initiative development;
- access to pre-release technology and information;
- short term or longer term student or faculty placements.

Accountability

Very low costs

Access to alternative/new funding sources

Academic centers are increasingly functioning in the wider community. There are of course active interactions between most academic centers in Australia and others throughout the world. Most of these are focused appropriately on the academic mission of student teaching. The notion of the Transnational Academic Alliance is that the boundaries are much broader and less well-defined, for instance extending relationships through the academic center gateway into the associated legislative and business areas, where appropriate, and taking full advantage of the information age to do so.

This type of concept was not considered by any when we commenced this project in 1993, but increasingly components of our model are being incorporated into interaction models. As pioneers we feel that it is important to appreciate the full extent of the model, and the associated opportunities.

(d) the needs and concerns of overseas Australians;

The dual citizenship notion is very good. We have no especial concerns, excepting the consistent sense from all parts of the community, apart from family and friends, that with leaving Australia we have effectively vanished from professional view and influence, in spite of visiting Australia from one to four times a year. This is very slowly changing over time, as technology catch-up in Australia allows for easier communications. However, a change in viewpoint about expatriates is long over due in Australia. People leave their homeland for a variety of reasons but are still able (and willing) to provide tremendous support through many avenues and this should be encouraged, contact maintained, and intellectual resources tapped. An Australian is still an Australian no matter where they are geographically.

(e) the measures taken by other comparable countries to respond to the needs of their expatriates; and

I cannot comment on this issue.

(f) ways in which Australia could better use its expatriates to promote our economic, social and cultural interests.

From my experience Australia does not relate to/use it's citizens who are serving overseas much, if at all. There are many ways better interaction could be achieved, but in my experience, like any important relationship, the interaction needs to be managed through people, otherwise there is no likelihood for things to happen on any sustainable and relevant scale. The reasons for lack of interaction in most areas (economic, (and its driver innovation and discovery), social and cultural) are very complex, much more complex than we realized when we initiated the notion of the Transnational Academic Alliance.

We have learned a lot about interactions between Australia and the US through the Transnational Academic Alliance, a relatively small scale yet effective interaction – we have encountered expected and unexpected barriers, most solved, others not. The model has been well tested, and revised using the balanced score card approach from day 1. Not all of the barriers need solutions, they need to be recognized, understood and worked around. We know what works, and what fails.

In my view, and from experience, a lot more could be done using this model, with extraordinary benefit for Australia, and I might suggest, for the US.

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