

Sojourn or Stay: International Academics and Researchers in Australia

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Increased international mobility, both of students and staff, is widespread, if uneven. Countries of migration and the Anglosphere still serve as major destinations, but a more multipolar knowledge world means mobility is more diverse. Traditionally, Hong Kong has hosted many international academic staff, but recently this began to change. At least until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, China's major universities and leading research laboratories attracted many scholars from around the world, often via numerous foreign talent schemes. Likewise, Germany's Max Planck Institutes, some of which work in English, have attracted leading international researchers, and Singapore has attracted leading scholars, and even teams, to its universities.

Australia, long a country of migration, has a particularly diverse academic and research staff cohort; some 45 percent of academic staff were born overseas. Internationally competitive salaries and working conditions, as well as an open migration scheme prioritizing high skill levels, attract highly qualified staff from around the world to both research bodies and universities. Skilled migrants form over two-thirds of the country's total migration. Some years ago, OECD research listed Australia as having the highest net brain gain among its member countries.

The Rise of Asia

The rise of Asian knowledge systems and Australia's location as the only substantial English language higher education system in the South Pacific have ensured that more and more academic staff and scientists at its universities and research institutes now stem from Asia. In many cases, researchers take their PhD in Australia, then move to universities or research institutes. Paralleling the increase in the overall population, the proportion of Australian academics born in Asia grew by over 50 percent during the decade from 2005 to 2015, from 10 percent to 15.4 percent. Almost a third came from mainland China and a further 5 percent from Hong Kong. Academic staff from India now account for 16 percent of Australia's total international staff. But the proportion of Asia-born staff varies significantly by discipline, with the social sciences having the lowest, and areas such as IT and engineering having over 30 percent. Findings by the author show that more than 75 percent of Asia-born academic staff collaborated with scholars from Asia, two-thirds on joint research projects. National origin was particularly important: Over a third had helped to develop exchange programs with their country of origin. The high proportion of China-born international staff has led to a boost in bilateral research collaboration. China, now an international knowledge powerhouse, is one of Australia's key partners, with active research collaborations across a range of fields, in the natural and applied sciences as well as in social sciences and humanities. That China is also a major knowledge partner to other countries in the region offers potential to grow regional knowledge partnerships, including China-born researcher networks.

Representation, But Limited Recognition

Yet, the substantial number of Asia-born staff is not always matched by outcomes or institutional recognition, for example in promotions processes. Some lamented that, while their disciplinary knowledge was valued, the additional work to build and sustain international collaborations was often not recognized. Some also complained that, when visiting potential international collaborators, initial enthusiasm was not followed up.

Abstract

Australian higher education is highly diverse, with numbers of researchers and academics from Asia rising the most, especially in recent decades. The knowledge diasporas of China and India, two major sources, contribute to teaching and research but also help to build bridges with their homelands and international scientific networks—contributions that are not always fully valued. US–China tensions and COVID-induced travel restrictions have interfered with the contributions of many international staff.

The expectations of Chinese institutions with regard to foreign academics are closely connected to the effort of building world-class universities.

Language was often reported to be a problem, while some reported that their cultural background constituted a disadvantage.

Asia-born academics were also underrepresented at more senior academic levels. A recent survey showed that one in four of the lowest staff tier were Asia-born, but only one in 10 at the most senior level (professor), and less than one in 30 at deputy vice-chancellor (vice-president) level. As in North America, female Asia-born academics often faced additional gender discrimination. Asia-born female academics held 4.8 percent of engineering posts, for example, whereas their male peers held 28.5 percent. In IT, disparities were also large: Female Asia-born academics represented 9.4 percent of total staff in the field, relative to their male peers at 25.1 percent. Nonetheless, the rise and growth of significant knowledge diasporas, particularly from the two Asian giants, China and India, but also including Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam, is a substantial resource, constituting an important bridge between the Australian research system and Asian systems.

COVID Barriers to Mobility and Networks

From early 2020, the COVID pandemic severely disrupted international mobility, including of academic staff. When Australia abruptly shut its borders, tens of thousands of international students were marooned abroad and unable to return to Australia to study. Thousands of Australian citizens were also stranded abroad, including numerous international academics. Indian-Australian citizens were threatened with substantial fines if they attempted to return to Australia. Only recently have international borders reopened. The fact that international travel remains somewhat restricted, including to China, forms an ongoing limit to international academic staff activities, particularly those who need to conduct fieldwork abroad.

US–China Relations

But the increasingly rancorous and rivalrous US–China relations form a further barrier to the activities of some Asia-born staff at Australia's universities and research institutes. The so-called US–China trade war is now increasingly recognized as a technology war and even a culture war. This poses particular problems for international researchers in high-tech fields with potential security implications such as quantum computing, AI, new materials, and robotics, but even China-focused social science colleagues, numbers of whom are of Chinese origin, are affected. The introduction of far-reaching foreign interference legislation and the overall securitization of policy burden universities and research institutes with the obligation to check thousands of international agreements. A recent federal ministerial decision to reject several research grants already awarded by the national research agency—two of which involving China, spurred allegations of political interference. As in the United States and the United Kingdom, the increasingly febrile atmosphere resulting from tensions with China has led to a higher incidence of anti-Chinese and even anti-Asian harassment and abuse. Numbers of China-born colleagues report feelings of anxiety, or a perceived need to keep their head down, until relations improve.

The Australian higher education and research system remains vibrant and diverse, with international academic staff making major contributions. Some have left; some will continue to join. The next few years will determine to what extent the activities of international staff at Australia's universities and research institutes have been constrained by COVID-19 and the ongoing US–China culture war and resulting securitization of policy. ▲

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