



ARCADIA UNIVERSITY  
THE COLLEGE OF GLOBAL STUDIES

# The Shifting Relevance of Australia in U.S. Study Abroad

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# The Shifting Relevance of Australia in U.S. Study Abroad

For too long, among some educators in the U.S., Australia has been thought of as a safe country, perhaps with an interesting physical environment, but not a place to which serious students should go for a study abroad experience. I want to suggest in this colloquium that Australia's changed position in the world merits serious attention by educators. Far from being a place for party-going students – beer, beach and babes – Australia is a place of high educational standards whose universities expect students to work hard.

The basic facts about Australia suggest that it is now a significant economy able to participate in the fastest growing region in the world: Asia/Pacific. It is the sixth largest country in the world, with a highly urbanized population consisting of peoples from diverse backgrounds. It is the twelfth largest economy in the world and Australians are currently the third richest people with over 50% of their assets in property. Australia has experienced the longest period of economic growth of any economy, has a high level of average income and comparatively low government debt. It is still characterized by greater equality than most similar societies although as in other Western countries, the gap between the richest and the poorest is growing. For these reasons alone, it is worth U.S. students paying attention to Australia.

## THE U.S. AND AUSTRALIA

In a globalized world the differences between, in this case English-speaking societies, are not always obvious. The same brand names appear in the super-markets, the same fast-food outlets are on every street corner. And yet, look beneath the surface and there can be quite different motivations and ways of thinking.

An interesting challenge to U.S. students coming to study in Australia for the first time is to ask them at the start of the semester whether they think there are many differences between the two countries. They will, typically, talk about the environment and the distance of Australia from the northern hemisphere, but, naturally enough, they won't be able to think of many differences.

If you ask them the same question at the end of the semester, they will have encountered styles of living, attitudes to government and responses to societal

challenges that may be quite different. A small trading nation on the edge of Asia, isolated from the original well-springs of its culture, thinks differently about how to deal with the world than one which has a large population and a huge internal market and is, moreover, used to being the world's leading power.

The same language can breed complacency and the challenge for U.S. students is to use their time in Australia to think through the core elements of their own culture as they deal with another foreign but similar place.

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## HIGHER EDUCATION

There is a fundamentally different attitude in the two countries to government and how its role in society affects every aspect of life. The university system in Australia, for instance, has always been controlled and dominated by government investment. Each university has been funded to teach and undertake research and each is created by an act of parliament. The proportion of government funds in universities has been steadily dropping for some time, but

the current Australian government has embarked on an ambitious plan to move the balance of funding to the individual. This will, so the government hopes, create greater diversity and probably see the development of teaching-only institutions and much more private investment in teaching colleges.

Part of the motivation of these changes is to create more money for research but there are mixed signals coming out of Canberra on the government's commitment to research funding. The government has announced that a new charge on visits to a doctor – for many people these have been free up until now – will be put into a medical research fund which it hopes in time will reach a corpus of A\$20 billion.

If this is achieved it will be the largest such fund in the world and enable Australian medical researchers to build on their reputation for excellence in this field. But, at the same time, funding for other major research institutions in science and technology has been severely cut.

International students have had a huge impact on Australian education and, at university level, increase substantially Australia's graduation rates. On average 20% of the university population is international and Australia is the third-largest recipient of international students, after the U.S. and the U.K. The numbers of Australians studying overseas is increasing considerably. Full semesters abroad have increased but there has also been growth in the numbers of university students taking short courses overseas, whether it is in-country language learning, or a week-long course, on topics such as the Chinese stock market. One major university sends 3,000 of its students overseas every year and 50% of those go to Asia.

## RELATIONS WITH ASIA

Australia's trade is largely with the Asia-Pacific area. Twenty-six percent of two-way trade, for instance, is

with China, as against 4.9% with the U.S. Australia has always had to work hard to demonstrate its relevance to Asian concerns but the strong trading relationship now undergirds the mutual relationship and Australia has played a lead in developing some of the regional consultative architecture. Most Australians will have had holidays in Asia. The major cities have an obvious Asian influence.

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## INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

When I ask American students why they are interested in Australia they mention the natural environment. They are well aware of the Great Barrier Reef, Uluru, and the many unique features of the Australian biosphere. It's not surprising therefore that most of our students studying in Australia are STEM majors in their home schools.

But, many of them are also aware of the extraordinary longevity of Australia's indigenous peoples and they want to learn about them and from them. It is an amazing story: a culture which is at least 50,000 years old and survived the ice age, the end of the mega fauna and the invasion of the continent by white settlers.

Australia has some of the world's oldest rock art; it is certainly the oldest continuous artistic tradition in the world. Aboriginal culture embodies ancient traditions of learning about the night sky, about medicine, about the land itself, about human relationships, which can help students see themselves differently. Its story of adaptation to invasion and to genocide, and how it is now rebuilding itself, is challenging but also inspiring. Our students are changed by their contact with Aboriginal elders. The opportunity to learn from such a culture is worth the long journey to the southern continent.

## CONCLUSION

Australia is an interesting country that has quietly developed into a significant economic power in the southern hemisphere and one which is embracing the coming era where Asia-Pacific will be important in global counsels. It is no accident that most of the students who come on our program are not majors from the traditional study abroad field of liberal arts. These students can see in the environment, in our indigenous culture, in our approach to Asia, opportunities for engaging in study with a different and challenging angle. The issues we face as nations are broadly similar but, I suggest, how Australia has managed them helps students to see their own country in a different light.

Moreover, the country gives many opportunities for learning outside the classroom, whether it is camping in the bush and learning from local Aboriginal elders, visits to pristine wilderness, walking tours of areas in the big cities which have communities from many countries, or seeing the magnificent sites of Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef and even the Sydney Opera House. But, above all, I hope students coming to Australia learn from their interactions with the Australian people with their many living cultures, their openness to new ideas, and their genuine affection for the U.S. The informality and directness of life “down under” seem to provoke affection for Australia in return.



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Dr. Meadows is the Regional Director for Australian Operations. As such he is the chief academic and operations officer for The College's programs in Australia. He manages a team based in the Center in Melbourne and in regional offices in Sydney and Brisbane.

Eric began his professional career with the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and worked with the Australian High Commission in New Delhi and the Australian Embassy in Tel Aviv where he was deputy head of mission. Eric then moved from the diplomatic service into international education in the federal Department of Education in Canberra where he looked after social science programs in the UNESCO Secretariat before heading up the policy area introducing fee paying international students into the Australian higher education system.

Eric followed his time at the Department of Education with a succession of ever increasing senior administrative roles at a number of Australia's leading Universities. Following 10 years of service as Director of the International Office and Director of External Relations at the University of Wollongong, he moved to the University of Melbourne where he served as Deputy Principal (International Programs), running not only the University's international relations but also its overseas student recruitment. He became Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) at Deakin University in 2002. He left that role in 2006 to reinvent himself as an academic and became a Research Fellow, in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University.

Eric studied early modern history at the University of Sydney and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours). He has also studied at The Wharton School. More recently he defended his Ph.D. at Deakin University. His thesis title was “A Diplomatic History of Australia's Relations with India, 1944-1964”. He has published in the field of diplomatic history as well as international education, in particular, writing a history of Australia's educational relations overseas.