Research collaboration between Australia and Asia: what is currently happening, what are the opportunities, why do we need to collaborate?

Evidence, experience and anecdotes all point to the reality that higher education is now a global industry. Higher education institutions are engines of education and innovation in driving the economic and social progress not only in Australia but also for the Asia-Pacific region through international student mobility, research collaboration and partnerships. In this regard, universities are the vanguards of the Asian Century vision.

Asia’s unparalleled rise in terms of economic and political power in recent years has also transformed the landscape of international higher education. The region’s dynamic growth has without doubt become one of the key drivers for science and innovation. Institutions in Asian countries have made considerable investment in research-focused programs for international cooperation. Universities that have been playing a major role in educating Asian students have great potential to become partners in research and innovation.

This discussion paper focuses on the current state of play in research collaboration between Australia and major Asian countries such as China, India, Singapore and Japan. It examines the future challenges and opportunities, and envisions a future of strategic partnership in science and innovation for the benefit of societies in the region.

For the Australian higher education and research sector, Asia is home to hundreds of thousands of high quality students, but also home of excellent collaborators – the people who will help us imagine and invent the future. A number of countries in Asia will no doubt play a significant role in helping us transform the resources boom into an innovation-driven economy.

However, research collaboration requires good relationships built on genuine trust and friendship, which can stand the test of times, unafflicted by the trials and tribulations of political relations. We also need to address the difficulty in intellectual property issues and ethics, and financial management involved in setting up joint projects.
The key is to establish high-level goals and strategic principles that are far-reaching and beneficial to all parties, and to have sound governance and coordination with an effective management structure and teams, and good communication.

What support is available for different fields of research across the region?

Currently, there are several dedicated funds to support research collaboration with Asian countries, such as the Australia-India and Australia-China Strategic Research Collaboration Funds, with varying levels of funding and forms of collaborative arrangements. However, there is lack of consensus on priority for funding, and there are also issues related to interoperability of international research collaboration.

Governments across the Asia-Pacific region need to develop national and consistent policies, and adequate funding to enhance collaboration across the region. Using Australia as a case study, it makes sense strategically for it to develop funding priorities that align with our national research priorities recently set by the Australian Chief Scientist, and that align with the needs of our counterpart countries.

The ensuing paper will provide a survey of the current schemes and the key projects and their achievements between Australia and China, and India.

Ethics and compliance issues in research: who funds it, to what extent should the funding source be permitted to impact upon/influence the research endeavour?

Ethics in research is an important dimension of international research collaboration. The complexity involved in research projects across institutional and national boundaries inevitably requires higher level of skill and resources than normally required for handling research projects at a single institution. The practice for managing funding that impact upon research ethics and integrity issues falls back to the institutions involved, and certainly this is the expectation of any funding agency.

There is also another critical compliance issue in regard to international research collaboration. Again using Australia as a case study, the new Australian Defence Export Control Bill is in its draft form very restrictive and impeding of research collaboration. There is ongoing discussion and work to reduce the impact of DECB on the ability of institutions to collaborate with overseas partners. It is envisaged that the resource burden will be high even if this proposed legislation will be amended to minimise such impact. It is a good question to ask how much this sort of restriction will cost Australia as a whole due to reduced capacity to collaborate with Asia, or cost the institutions in terms of managing the compliance with such legislative restriction.

A key question to be pursued here is: to what extent do other countries in Asia have similar restrictions on research topics and partnerships?

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