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YOUNG AUSTRALIANS ARE CHOOSING TO REMAIN IN ASIA, WHERE THEY SAY THEIR SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE ARE MORE APPRECIATED, AS CUTS IN ASIAN STUDIES START TO HIT HOME. **REPORT: WARREN REED**

● Australians have always been bold in seeking business opportunities in the world around them. Take Captain Bourn Russell, of Sydney, for example. In 1831, he was whaling off the coast of Japan in his vessel, the *Lady Rowena*, when it was damaged in a storm. He took shelter in a small port on the coast of Hokkaido, Japan's then undeveloped northern island.

Russell began bartering with the native inhabitants, the Ainu, for water and firewood, but was blocked by the Japanese garrison in the town. So he burnt down the Japanese buildings, took a samurai prisoner, then later dispatched him to the Imperial Court (not knowing that Japan was ruled by a shogun) with an exquisitely crafted letter.

It was addressed to His Most Celestial Highness, the Emperor of Japan, and recommended that hospitality be extended to foreign vessels in distress, even if Japan were closed away from the outside world. Russell suggested that the Japanese may also find trade with foreigners beneficial, and he knew what he was talking about. He had already noted in his logbook that Japan seemed to have no wool and would undoubtedly make a good market for the Australian product. How right he was.

Fast-forward to the 1970s and the first wave of young Australians shunned the usual option of gaining experience in the United Kingdom and started heading to Japan and the rest of Asia to study and work. The Japanese economy had taken off and trade with Australia was burgeoning.

Asian studies found its feet in Australian schools and universities at the time. One of the nation's finest achievements since then has been the creation of a sizeable body of talented people who work throughout the Asian region. They are in demand because of their professional and language skills, common sense and ability to get on with people of other cultures.

This success has been the result of forward-looking Asian studies programs in schools and universities. But in 2002, the federal government chopped funding for Asian

languages and, unsurprisingly, interest among young people has waned. Educational institutions were forced to reduce their courses. Now, even if the money were available, there would not even be enough teachers.

Kallun Willock is one young Australian who believes Australian business has a problem allowing Asian-experienced people into its senior management ranks and boardrooms. Willock, 27, is a graduate in arts from the University of Western Sydney and law from the University of Sydney. Fluent in Japanese, he is researching for a master's degree in the law faculty of Tokyo University – the same position I occupied nearly 35 years ago. He works part-time for a UK law firm in Japan.

"At this stage in my life, I'm not keen to return to Australia to live for two reasons," he says. "First, the ambivalence towards people with my skill set and experience living in Asia is palpable. Second, even if there is some degree of interest shown, it tends to be merely superficial, and skills are underutilised, if at all.

"Ultimately, despite Australia's proximity to Asia and our strong trade ties, there seems to be only a limited number of avenues available for young Australians to apply their skills, experience and abilities in a professional context. In Japan, by contrast, the range and number of opportunities are near endless.

"Although I would like to use my skills to help the relationship between Australia and Japan, the general apathy of both the public and private sectors in Australia is only too apparent."

Young Australians such as Willock are part of an Australian diaspora that reflects the shift in geography and mobility of labour markets and the rise of the service economy. This diaspora has been the subject of three insightful reports by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Lowy Institute and the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA).

"Australia has been slow to respond to the emergence of its diaspora," the Lowy report says. "There is limited public discourse concerning our expatriates, and what does

occur is often negative in tone. Few initiatives exist to involve this significant group in the life of the nation. Indeed, surprisingly little is known about who is overseas, where they are, and what they are doing. As a result, this national asset remains underutilised."

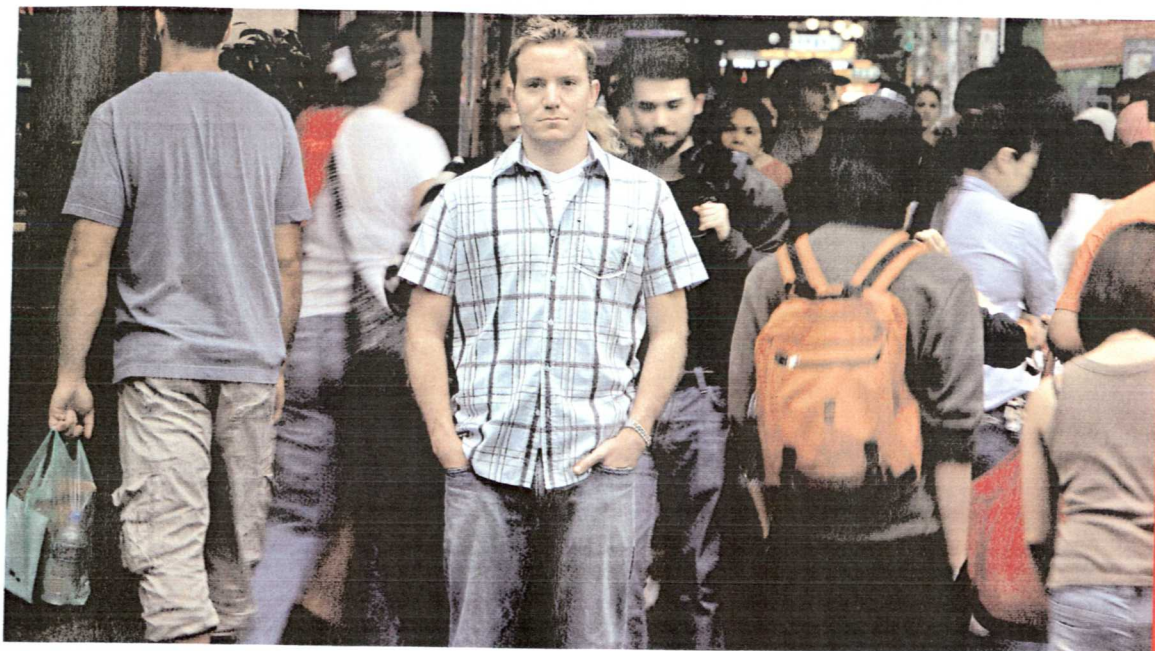
At least a million Australians are overseas at any time, of which at least three-quarters reside on a permanent or long-term basis. Some represent Australian interests, but most don't. Only 10-15 per cent have local language skills. But whatever they do, many help boost bilateral trade and investment and provide an invaluable network of contacts. Some Australians have lived in Asia for decades, have more than one Asian language and have "grown up" alongside some of Asia's leading decision-makers.

A striking example is Murray Smith, an Australian who has called sumo competitions for Japan's national broadcaster, NHK, since 1996. Imagine a Japanese resident calling the AFL grand final.

Numerous expatriate groups have been established across the region, including an advocacy organisation, the Southern Cross Group. But it is goodwill that can't be taken for granted. "A diaspora that feels it is included in the national enterprise is more likely to contribute to it," the Lowy report says.

The reality is that the most qualified Australians in the region are those who closely monitor the slippage in Asian studies program back home. They are often the product of such programs themselves, and argue they know more than most planners in Canberra how important such skills are for Australia.

A director of the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, Judith Wheeldon, believes the root of the antipathy towards Asian studies goes back decades. She arrived in Australia in the late 1960s to live and teach. An American, she was surprised at the high degree of homogeneity in the local population. Long before multiculturalism emerged, this was reflected in a distinct non-appreciation of foreign cultures.



MAIN COUNTRIES WHERE AUSTRALIANS RESIDE IN ASIA

Hong Kong	53,000
Japan	13,000
Singapore	12,000
Indonesia	12,000
China	10,000
Philippines	9000
Thailand	7000
Malaysia	5000

"Multiculturalism came to Australia too fast and the complexities involved weren't properly understood," she says. "Many of the newcomers went straight into silos, with their values ignored by the host society. Australians found themselves largely unable to communicate with significant parts of their community. On the language front, many said it didn't matter anyway because everyone had to speak English.

"It was that sort of attitude that produced the general inability today to appreciate not only the languages and thought patterns of newcomers, but also the superb job that many young Australians have done in recent years in mastering those very same things."

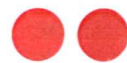
Wheeldon, a former head of two leading girls' schools, Sydney's Queenwood and Abbotsleigh, believes Australia can no longer pay lip service to Asian studies. A corpus of qualified teachers is needed and substantial daily language lessons must start in early primary school years.

The booming economies of China and India and surging economic growth across Asia are soaking up talented, well-educated people no matter where they come from. China has invested \$US200 billion in the new China Investment Corp, which could become the biggest vacuum cleaner of them all. And Indian technology giant Satyam aims to recruit 100 postgraduate students in Australia this year to join its scholarship program in India.

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report in September showed that Australian school students spent 50 per cent less time than their counterparts in other industrialised nations studying reading, writing, science and mathematics.

A potential brain drain could manifest in a field in which Australia prides itself on its

Alienation: Kallun Willock, above, and Michael Hirshorn and Judith Wheeldon, below. Funding cuts for Asian studies has seen interest among the young wane



A diaspora that feels it is included in the national enterprise is more likely to contribute to it

expertise. A co-founder of Australia's world-renowned Cochlear, which commercially developed the bionic ear implant, and now a director of Kestrel Capital, Dr Michael Hirshorn, knows Asia well. After introducing Cochlear's product into the United States and Europe, he tackled Japan and encountered a reluctance to approve an implant from anywhere.

Hirshorn used opinion leaders from the US, Australia and Europe who had credibility in Japan to win over the Japanese medical profession. Eventually, approval came through.

He sees China at the forefront of any brain drain. "China will inevitably become another significant force in research and development in all areas of technology. Because of China's mixture of education, research, drive and markets, things will drift in that direction. Australians will go to China to work, just like they do these days to the US and Singapore."

ABC broadcaster Robyn Williams agrees. "Look at the number of engineers, scientists and mathematicians graduating annually in China and India and you'll understand the scale on which this is happening," he says. "One million science graduates last year in China, plus 400,000 engineers. In India, 2.5 million. We are 200,000 short of present needs here.

"In many ways, what Asia is doing is exciting, but it will also create a vortex that will draw in many of Australia's best minds unless we can hold our own. The writing's on the wall, and we have to start by overhauling our education system." **BRW**

Warren Reed was chief operating officer at CEDA for three years. He is an adjunct professor in the School of Justice Studies at Queensland University of Technology.

EXPAT STATS

- The number of Australians emigrating to Asia has increased by 50 per cent in recent years.
- Nearly 80 per cent of respondents to CEDA's survey believe their overseas residency has benefits for Australia.
- The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade online registration service covers only about 10 per cent of expatriates.
- The number of Australians moving to China on a permanent or long-term basis is increasing rapidly.
- Young adults are predominant among those leaving for Asia, especially among long-term departees.
- Asia is the second-most popular region for the diaspora after Europe.
- Expatriates appear to be better educated than the general population.

Source: DFAT, CEDA, Lowy Institute