

E-diplomacy

Introduction

- 4.1 This Chapter discusses the effect of e-diplomacy and information and communication technology (ICT) on the activities of diplomatic posts.
- 4.2 In the first part of the Chapter, the Committee discusses the definition of e-diplomacy and the changing nature of diplomacy in the face of new communication technologies.
- 4.3 The Committee then outlines the current e-diplomacy regime in Australia and issues raised about its effectiveness.
- 4.4 The Chapter concludes with an examination of the opportunities, costs and challenges in improving Australia's engagement with e-diplomacy and how this might affect on-the-ground representation.

Defining 'e-diplomacy'

- 4.5 The Lowy Institute acknowledged that the term 'e-diplomacy' is still being defined, and adopted a broad working definition of e-diplomacy as 'the use of the web and ICT to help carry out diplomatic objectives'.¹

¹ Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 18.

- 4.6 A witness from the Lowy Institute told the Committee that he had undertaken extensive research into the emerging role of e-diplomacy at the US State Department.² He commented that e-diplomacy was more than the use of either social media or public diplomacy:

... e-diplomacy is not just about diplomats getting on Facebook and Twitter and promoting government messages; most of it is invisible to the public.³

A new technological environment for diplomacy

- 4.7 Submissions to the Inquiry emphasised the transformative effects that new communication technologies were having on traditional methods of diplomacy.
- 4.8 The Lowy Institute discussed the importance of new media in a changing international environment:

There are a lot of new actors out there that can affect our interests, whereas traditionally it was okay just to go in and hand over your third-person note to the desk officer in the foreign ministry. That is not good enough in a world where you have everything from global NGOs through to social movements and terrorist organisations, all of which can affect our interests. We have to be much more broad ranging and much more creative in reaching out and engaging those actors, so the internet and social media are very important components.⁴

Empowerment of non-state actors

- 4.9 The Lowy Institute advised the Committee that the spread of new communication technology, illustrated by the presence of around one billion web-enabled phones worldwide, was empowering non-state actors:

The Arab Spring clearly highlighted at least some of the implications of this new reality, particularly in developing countries: revolutions can now be dramatically accelerated (reducing diplomatic decision time frames) and largely leaderless.⁵

- 4.10 The Lowy Institute added that these trends were particularly significant for Australia considering that it is located in a region where 22 of 24

2 Lowy Institute, *Revolution @State: The Spread of Ediplomacy*, March 2012.

3 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 19.

4 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 11.

5 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 20.

neighbouring countries were developing or fragile states, the citizens of which were embracing communication technology.⁶

- 4.11 The Lowy Institute discussed how this new paradigm is impacting on the way that diplomats go about their business:

... online influencers, in key areas of interest to Australia, have become legitimate and important diplomatic contacts, because of the role they play in shaping and influencing debates.

Traditionally, identifying influencers has involved a degree of art and intuition, but the digital nature of the online space means diplomats should be using empirical data derived from analytic tools, not guesswork, to identify these influencers.⁷

Internet freedom and transparency

- 4.12 The Lowy Institute suggested that the spread of new technologies had opened up 'new pressing and potentially ideological debates', and that perhaps the biggest was the debate over internet freedom:

This debate has assumed a higher profile in the wake of the Arab Spring as governments across the world have come to appreciate the power of connective technologies in disrupting previous power structures and in dramatically accelerating social and political movements. This has led many states to seek to censor, control and monitor Internet traffic.⁸

- 4.13 The Lowy Institute outlined the US agenda of promoting internet freedom, and asserted that Australian policy was somewhat at odds with this agenda.⁹ The Lowy Institute continued:

Regardless of Australia's current policy position, if the US and UK analysis is correct, then as a democratic, Western country and US ally it is likely Australia will increasingly be called upon to actively engage on the issue of Internet freedom at a diplomatic level as part of its human rights, democracy, free trade and rule of law interests.¹⁰

6 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

7 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

8 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

9 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

10 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

4.14 The Lowy Institute told the Committee that DFAT was 'uncomfortably perched' between 'a world which was about controlling information' and 'a world which was about exchanging information':

... there needs to be a sort of recognition that it is totally appropriate that some information which is sensitive remains in channels which can manage it and make sure the people who need it see it, but not others. But the mindset should be that most information is open and frankly, not that sensitive, and we should exchange it more freely. It is a shift of the onus, if you like, towards sharing and opening up the information away from holding it tight.¹¹

Australia's current e-diplomacy regime

4.15 Australian Government agencies use ICT systems and web-based communication platforms for a number of activities comprising:

- online public diplomacy;
- knowledge management;
- internal communication and global connectivity;
- consular service delivery;
- overseas voting in Australian elections; and
- responding to disasters and international crises.

Online public diplomacy

4.16 The impact of e-diplomacy on the activities of posts is most visible in the area of public diplomacy. Evidence to the Inquiry focused on the opportunities and challenges created by technology on the conduct of public diplomacy, both in relation to traditional public websites and newer forms of social media.

4.17 In 2007 the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade produced a report into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy. The report defined public diplomacy as:

... work or activities undertaken to understand, inform and engage individuals and organisations in other countries in order to shape

11 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 11.

their perceptions in ways that will promote Australia and Australia's policy goals internationally.¹²

- 4.18 DFAT emphasised that its digital media presence was a tool for advancing the department's priorities in public diplomacy and that it was an important part of its business:

DFAT delivers innovative and strategic public diplomacy as a core component of its daily work. We invest considerable energy and resources in long-term public diplomacy activities to advocate Australia's interests internationally, manage adverse perceptions and build images of Australia as a dynamic and diverse nation. DFAT also communicates with Australian audiences about the delivery of consular and passport services to the travelling public and about DFAT's role in advancing Australia's national interests globally.¹³

- 4.19 The ANZ Bank made the point that as a small country Australia should be focused on public diplomacy and, in particular, e-diplomacy because 'in the absence of deep people-to-people links with many of our regional neighbours, it is one of the most important tools the Government can use to influence our external environment'.¹⁴

Public Websites

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade websites

- 4.20 DFAT's primary internet platform for public diplomacy is the department's public website. Ensuring its websites met the needs of clients and stakeholders is a key priority for DFAT.¹⁵
- 4.21 DFAT has over 100 websites comprising: the main departmental website, the *Smartraveller* website, and the individual websites of overseas posts. DFAT's main website attracted 5 million unique visitors per year while *Smartraveller* attracted over 30 million hits per year.¹⁶
- 4.22 DFAT improved the performance of its public websites, recently re-designing the *Smartraveller* website by making it more intuitive and incorporating social media and videos. The website was embedded with

12 Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, *Australia's public diplomacy: building our image*, August 2007, p. 12.

13 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 21.

14 ANZ Bank, *Submission No. 19*, p. 2.

15 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 21.

16 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 21.

an e-learning tool intended to improve DFAT's engagement with the travel industry by better explaining its products and services.¹⁷

- 4.23 DFAT also introduced a mobile version of *Smartraveller* to target the increasing use of smart phones by the Australian public, enabling travellers to register their itinerary with DFAT and more conveniently access information that could affect their safety and security.¹⁸
- 4.24 DFAT noted that the *Smartraveller* enhancements have been the most significant recent development in new digital media platforms for the department.¹⁹

Other Australian Government agency websites

- 4.25 The Committee received input from other Government agencies on the importance of their websites in communicating to the wider public both in Australia and overseas.
- 4.26 AusAID advised the Committee of the importance of its public websites in directly connecting with individuals and organisations domestically and internationally. AusAID made particular reference to the use of its website to implement its Transparency Charter, which committed the agency to deliver clear, accessible and timely reporting on its aid activities. This was done via the publication of regularly updated information and data about its country program activities, including expenditure, results and annual performance reports.²⁰
- 4.27 DAFF also commented on the usefulness of its departmental website as a tool for public diplomacy:
- ... we publish profiles of our overseas staff and their contact details. We also provide updates on Free Trade Agreement negotiations and market access issues and successes. We have pages dedicated to quarantine where we provide e-brochures in support of biosecurity and protecting Australia's agriculture.²¹
- 4.28 DIAC told the Committee that the web was the principal tool for conveying information to people who were in locations where DIAC did not have an office.²² For example, DIAC's website provided easily accessible information on how to apply for Australian citizenship and a broad range of Australian visas, including a tool enabling clients to

17 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

18 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

19 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 23.

20 AusAID, *Submission No. 24*, p 15.

21 DAFF, *Submission No. 12*, p. 4.

22 Mr Peter Vardos, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 16.

identify which visa category was appropriate for their specific circumstances.

- 4.29 The DIAC website also facilitated the electronic lodgement of a broad range of visas. This will be discussed later in this Chapter under Consular Service Delivery.

Social media

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

- 4.30 DFAT outlined its approach to the increasing prominence of social media:

This shift towards social networking technologies has been most apparent in the area of e-diplomacy. DFAT recognises new digital media platforms present bold opportunities to broaden and deepen our digital reach. At the same time DFAT maintains a measured approach to adopting social media formats.²³

- 4.31 DFAT headquarters' engagement with social media consisted of a departmental Twitter account and YouTube channels.
- 4.32 DFAT established a generic Twitter account in April 2011 with the stated aim of 'reach[ing] a wider and increasingly mobile audience, including people with limited internet access and travellers who may rely on Twitter for information'.²⁴ DFAT's Twitter account had 7859 followers as at 31 May 2012.
- 4.33 Four YouTube channels have been established by DFAT since December 2010 and consisted of a generic departmental channel and Ministerial channels.²⁵
- 4.34 DFAT advised the Committee that it planned to increase the department's use of new media platforms in the near future, including:
- the launch of a DFAT *Smarttraveller* app for iPhones,²⁶ and
 - the development of in-house production capabilities to increase the volume of material on DFAT and Ministerial YouTube accounts.²⁷

23 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

24 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/public-diplomacy-handbook/part_five.html#onlineadvoc> Accessed May 2012.

25 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/public-diplomacy-handbook/part_five.html#onlineadvoc> Accessed May 2012.

26 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

27 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 23.

- 4.35 Engagement with social media in DFAT is also undertaken by posts, which included a Facebook page for the Australian embassy in Jakarta.²⁸
- 4.36 DFAT provided examples of posts successfully using social media:
- The Australian Embassy in Beijing, in January 2011, set up three Chinese language social media sites, similar to Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, to support Imagine Australia: Year of Australian Culture in China (www.imagineaustralia.net). Of the three, the Sina microblog has attracted most attention, exceeding 88,000 subscribers by July 2011. The three sites will ... build its existing follower base as a means of promoting both the Global China Dialogue and the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2012.
 - The Australian Embassy in Seoul has been using YouTube and a Korean language i-Phone application since January 2011 to promote events associated with Australia-Korea Year of Friendship 2011 - the bilateral 'Year of Friendship' program marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations (www.australiakorea50.com)
 - ... Our posts in New Delhi and Pretoria established Facebook and Twitter accounts for the 2010 FIFA World Cup and 2010 Commonwealth Games respectively, while the Embassy in the Holy See established a Twitter account for the canonisation of St Mary MacKillop.²⁹

Other Australian Government agencies

- 4.37 AusAID,³⁰ Austrade³¹ and DIAC³² also advised the Committee about their engagement with social media platforms including YouTube, Twitter, Flickr and LinkedIn as tools for enhancing awareness, promoting events and programs and providing information to the public.
- 4.38 AusAID also told the Committee that it was using social media tools to increase the transparency of Australia's aid program:

In response to the need to communicate to a wide audience and the demand for more frequent communication of the aid program's outcomes, AusAID is investing in public diplomacy and communications tools, such as the 'Engage' blog and AusAID's twitter feed, which aim to reach a wider audience. In

28 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 3.

29 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, pp. 22-3.

30 AusAID. *Submission No. 23*, p. 15.

31 Austrade, *Submission No. 26*, p. 11.

32 Mr Peter Vardos, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 16.

doing this, AusAID is making itself more accountable for its work.³³

- 4.39 Austrade provided the Committee with a case study on how it used social media to deliver key marketing and promotional messages on trade, investment and education in Australia:

... Austrade established a Study in Australia Facebook page in 2009 to help promote an education exhibition in Indonesia. Using Facebook's internal advertising tool, an advertisement for the exhibition was created to promote it directly to Indonesian Facebook users. Approximately 200 users confirmed their attendance through the page and 1,500 Facebook users declared themselves as fans of the Study in Australia Indonesia page. The number of fans to this Facebook page has since risen to over 10,000. The page was used to promote another education event in early 2011, following which surveys revealed that 10 per cent of attendees reported the Facebook page as the reason for their attendance.³⁴

- 4.40 DIISRTE's education counsellors used new media to advance their role of supporting the growth of Australia's international education links by 'confidence building cooperation strategies with government representatives and other major stakeholders':

In both China and India we have established blog services and we are monitoring carefully how they develop. A Twitter service for students in Chinese was established by AEI China Sina Weibo in May 2011, and it has over 10,000 subscribers. The service was recently ... honoured with an award at the annual sina.com education gala.³⁵

- 4.41 Customs also used social media as a tool for public diplomacy to 'engage in strategic communications and market research in relation to maritime people smuggling'.³⁶ Customs had undertaken research into the attitudes of people regarding such travel to Australia, and whether they were aware of the dangers. 'Overt and sanctioned communications campaigns' were also conducted to provide factual information to communities where people smuggling crews were being recruited.

33 AusAID, *Submission No. 24*, pp. 15-16.

34 Austrade, *Submission No. 26*, p. 11.

35 Mr Colin Walters, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 37.

36 Mr Michael Pezzullo, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 27.

4.42 Customs added it was constantly looking at how to reach people through the Internet and through the 'apps they have on their smart phones and the like'.³⁷

Criticisms of DFAT's online public diplomacy

4.43 Criticisms of the use of the internet for public diplomacy focussed on DFAT's:

- Australian embassy websites;
- risk aversion to social media;
- vulnerability to 'nation brand damaging incidents'³⁸;
- failure to keep up with the leaders in e-diplomacy; and
- lack of engagement with the Australian community.

Australian embassy websites

4.44 The Lowy Institute criticised the public websites of Australian embassies overseas as being:

... among the worst websites hosted by any arm of the Federal government and do nothing to capitalise on the main reason people visit the websites (for visa and immigration purposes). There is no serious effort, for example, to promote major Australian exports like education and tourism or to attract quality skilled migrants.³⁹

4.45 Others expressed a similar sentiment. ACT Labor FADTC characterised Australia's embassy websites as 'quite old and tired'.⁴⁰ UMD told the Committee that the 'problem with the [Australian embassy in Belgrade's] website is that it is very basic and has no imagination'.⁴¹

4.46 DFAT agreed that some of the Lowy Institutes criticisms of their websites were justified:

I would let their criticism stand. I do not think we are in the business of defending everything we do as being the best. I think some of their criticisms of our website are probably justified.⁴²

37 Mr Michael Pezzullo, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, pp. 27–8.

38 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

39 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 23.

40 Mr Andrew Carr, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 53.

41 Mr Ordan Andreevski, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 21.

42 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 9.

Risk aversion to social media

4.47 A number of organisations also identified excessive risk aversion as a contributing factor to DFAT's perceived failure to harness social media as a tool for public diplomacy.

4.48 The Lowy Institute commented that DFAT's risk aversion in relation to social media engagement needed to be rethought:

DFAT needs to increase its risk appetite and be ready to back its staff when controversies surrounding new media arise. To use ediplomacy effectively requires acceptance of higher risk, for example, a small controversy erupted over a British Ambassador's blog post commenting on Ayatollah Fadlallah. This needs to be put in context: the [UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office] has posted over 4,000 blogs over three years and estimates these have resulted in just three controversies.⁴³

4.49 The Lowy Institute expanded on this point:

At the moment DFAT has one Twitter feed. They have trialled in a few ad hoc social media sites in China and Korea. ... I would recommend that every ambassador is essentially, if not made to, then strongly encouraged to get on social media. ... If there are middle ranking officers that want to try to use social media in their work they should be encouraged to do that. The fear in a lot of foreign ministries is that this creates some sort of enormous sense of risk and I think that is just not the case ...⁴⁴

4.50 The ACT Labor FADTC also told the Committee that in order to effectively communicate Australia's message via new media, 'DFAT staff need to know that they will be backed if they do make a mistake occasionally'.⁴⁵

4.51 DFAT advised the Committee that it was 'giving the opportunity and discretion for heads of mission in large posts to pursue e-diplomacy initiatives where they think it is worthwhile in their own setting':

Our embassy in Jakarta is going down the path of Facebook and the like. Our embassy in Beijing established the equivalent thereof for the Year of Australian Culture in China; however, the embassy

43 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 24.

44 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 22.

45 Mr Andrew Carr, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 53.

there has just been given the tick to go down that path more extensively.⁴⁶

- 4.52 The Committee sought comments on the potential risks of social media as a tool for public diplomacy in countries where relations are strained, such as Iran. In response, DFAT also qualified its movement towards giving ambassadors greater autonomy in their use social media as a tool of diplomacy:

I would not do it in respect of Iran ... because we have diplomatic personnel in Iran and their safety on the ground is more important to me than an e-diplomacy effort into Iran. If we were to ... seek to foster what we think might be particular directions or particular policies in respect of Iran, we would need to do that very carefully ... What you do in different countries will depend very much on the circumstances of those countries.⁴⁷

Vulnerability to 'nation brand damaging incidents'

- 4.53 The Lowy Institute commented on the need for DFAT to play a role in using social media to respond quickly to incidents that damage Australia's reputation:

It is unrealistic to have a traditional, old-school approach to this where you write to the newspaper editor or have a press statement or a media conference a couple of days later after you have had a chance to think about it. People demand that it is instantaneous.⁴⁸

- 4.54 As an example, the Lowy Institute identified DFAT's lack of engagement with social media as limiting Australia's ability to defend itself against 'nation brand damaging incidents' such as the 2009 attacks on Indian students in Australia:

Events such as the Indian student crisis have the potential to do far more damage to Australia's reputation and commercial interests, because damaging information can be spread so rapidly and so extensively online. Online forums are critical in many of these instances, but DFAT's knowledge of online influencers is limited, its presence in online forums is non-existent or minimal and it has no digital knowledge centre to draw upon in preparing a rapid response. The rules of the game have changed, but so far diplomatic processes are yet to adapt.⁴⁹

46 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 3.

47 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 3.

48 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 22.

49 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

- 4.55 DIISRTE commented that the Indian student crisis had contributed to a recent decline in student numbers and noted that international education was Australia's third largest overseas earnings sector.⁵⁰ It described how the issue quickly developed even though India had no permanent reporters in Australia:

[It] started as a result of social media interactions between students in Australia and people in India, be they media people or others. All of the images transmitted 24 hours across the many TV stations in India actually came largely from people who had taken those photographs and media clips on their mobile phones and sent them across. It just illustrates the power of the new media.⁵¹

- 4.56 The Lowy Institute provided the Committee with a examples of how e-diplomacy, and in particular social media, could be used to further Australia's diplomatic objectives in the context of the Indian student crisis:

First of all, it is very difficult to engage in these conversations from a standing start. You have to have some kind of presence in these social media forums if you want to have your voice heard ...

The second part is in the same way that a good diplomat will go out, meet with and form relationships with the key opinion shapers in traditional media, politics and business, now it is incumbent on a good diplomat to go out and meet the key opinion shapers in the online space and form relationships with them so that when a crisis breaks or when they need to try to exert influence in a particular area, they can try and make the best case to these powerful influences in the online world ...

The third element is that you need to have a team ready for exactly these types of incidents where they can respond rapidly and develop a communication strategy that brings in the key decision makers, that makes sure that the statements that they are making are consistent with the government line and that they craft a strategy that they think is going to play well in that local audience.⁵²

- 4.57 DIISRTE added that it was important to engage in dialogue on the Internet rather than simply transmit government messages:

50 Mr Colin Walters, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 36.

51 Mr Colin Walters, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 38.

52 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, pp. 21-2.

... if you have a blog you cannot just use it as a propaganda channel. It does not work that way, because if you want people to interact then you have to have a real dialogue. That has a multiplier effect, because for every tweet subscriber you get ... they will tweet the thing on to another five subscribers ... and you will have this kind of dialogue going and it is better to do that than just to try and run something as a propaganda channel.⁵³

Failure to keep up with the leaders in e-diplomacy

4.58 A number of submissions suggested that Australia was not keeping up with best practice in e-diplomacy.

4.59 The Lowy Institute told the Committee that Australia is 'underdone compared with the UK, certainly, and the US, which is moving very fast' on e-diplomacy.⁵⁴ UMD also endorsed the US State Department's use of social media and recommended that DFAT should do the same.⁵⁵

4.60 The Lowy Institute added that the US State Department ran:

... about 600 social media platforms just on Facebook. That is not even counting the Chinese platforms or individual country platforms; it is just the major ones. They reach an audience, directly, of 8 million people a day.⁵⁶

4.61 The ACT Labor FADTC noted that as of November 2011 the US State Department's Facebook page in Jakarta had 450,000 followers, and that given Indonesian internet users are overwhelmingly in the 15-19 age bracket, this allowed US diplomacy to reach, influence and engage more effectively with Indonesian youth.⁵⁷

4.62 DFAT acknowledged the success of the UK and the US in the area of e-diplomacy, describing them as 'vanguards in the field',⁵⁸ but added that its engagement with e-diplomacy was constrained by limited funding:

We are not at the forefront of [e-diplomacy] and we do not apologise for that. We do not have the resources to do it.⁵⁹

4.63 DFAT also sought to place comparisons between it and the US State Department in the context of their relative size:

53 Mr Colin Walters, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 39.

54 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 11.

55 UMD, *Submission No. 7*, p. 9.

56 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 20.

57 ACT Labor FADTC, *Submission No. 18*, p 7.

58 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

59 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 3.

... the Department of State have 40 people working on Facebook. That is 40 in 30,000 people. Forty is to 30,000 as 5.33 recurring is to 4,000. We have about six or seven people, including in the consular area, working on e-diplomacy.⁶⁰

Lack of engagement with the Australian Community

4.64 The Lowy Institute commented that DFAT had failed to engage successfully with the Australian community:

Part of the problem for DFAT is, for example, if you take a trade liberalisation negotiation, which benefits Australians, but explaining exactly how that works to a family that is struggling to make the budget balance, how that trade negotiation can help them, seems to me something DFAT needs to get much better at.⁶¹

4.65 The Lowy Institute advised the Committee that an Office of E-Diplomacy would be one way for DFAT to engage the Australian community more broadly than it does now.⁶²

4.66 The Lowy Institute added that risk aversion was also an impediment to DFAT properly selling its message to the Australian community, and that this related to social media:

What if one of our people says the wrong thing, gets the message wrong and so on? My answer to that is that if you are trusting them to be out there representing the country overseas then surely you can trust them to turn up and talk to Australians.⁶³

4.67 AusAID emphasised the importance of communicating with the Australian community about AusAID's work, and the focus on online communication in achieving that aim:

If you think about it, not many Australians ever see anything we do. On your visits you have seen our work. Technology provides us with the opportunity to bring the aid program to Australians.⁶⁴

4.68 AusAID compared its use of ICT to communicate and promote its work to DFAT's ability to do the same:

We are fortunate in that most of our work is unclassified and it is reasonable for Australians and the recipients of our assistance to

60 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 5.

61 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 12.

62 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 12.

63 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 12.

64 Mr Peter Baxter, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 36.

understand how much we are spending, what we are achieving and all the accountability requirements. It is harder for DFAT to do that about the intimacies of bilateral relationships or whatever. ... The community engagement in the aid program is much different from the level of community engagement in foreign policy.⁶⁵

- 4.69 DIAC also advised the Committee about their use of social media to reach out to a domestic audience:

I even did a YouTube clip, a stand-up to camera, explaining visa changes that occurred 18 months to two years ago. ... When I did the YouTube clip it was mainly for the domestic market to explain visa changes that were going to impact the international student caseload in this country at that time.⁶⁶

- 4.70 The Committee has discussed the need for DFAT to engage with the boardrooms of Australian companies in Chapter Three.

Knowledge management

- 4.71 The Lowy Institute described the impact of poor knowledge management on activities at posts:

DFAT's most valuable asset is its knowledge, but ediplomacy tools to capitalise on and retain this have not been adopted. For example, at posts for sometime there have been no official handovers between departing and arriving officers and the transfer of experience between individual officers (eg of contacts) is ad hoc.

... Another related opportunity cost for DFAT is efficiently identifying its resources and then marshalling them. If you are in the Jakarta embassy, for example, and need to find a translator for X language the only option now is to ask around.

- 4.72 The Lowy Institute told the Committee that knowledge management was successfully facilitated by e-diplomacy tools at the US State Department:

Digital tools such as a modified Deskipedia (a US State Department tool) would allow every officer to detail all their contacts for specific issues on a centralised digital system... When officers finish a tour or are reassigned another problem is retaining that more senior and experienced officer's knowledge... Digital

65 Mr Peter Baxter, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 37.

66 Mr Peter Vardos, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 16.

tools such as virtual communities help facilitate knowledge transfer...⁶⁷

- 4.73 Austrade advised the Committee that their integrated communications network connects staff domestically and overseas to Austrade's business database and document management and collaboration system. Austrade advised the Committee that a key outcome of their integrated communications network has been enhanced knowledge sharing and retention.⁶⁸

Internal communication and global connectivity

DFAT's international ICT network

- 4.74 DFAT advised the Committee about the importance of an effective, secure communications network with posts:

The timely and efficient dissemination of information among agencies with overseas representation is fundamental to ensuring effective whole-of-government approaches to the Government's international agenda. A robust and secure information and communication technology network is therefore critical to the [Head of Mission/Head of Post's] ability to function as the senior Australian Government representative in the host or accredited country.⁶⁹

- 4.75 DFAT's core ICT system for posts is the Secure Australian Telecommunication and Information Network (SATIN). SATIN was developed to 'provide a secure, standards-based, whole-of-government approach for the provision of ICT services overseas.'⁷⁰ It features two specific operating environments, SATIN High and SATIN Low. SATIN High is the National Security classified system while SATIN Low is the unclassified system.⁷¹
- 4.76 SATIN links over 140 sites in Australia and overseas including 95 diplomatic posts, Ministerial offices, State offices, and over 40 Government agencies. The system supports a range of critical government business operations at posts, including:

67 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 22.

68 Austrade, *Submission No. 26*, p. 9.

69 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 7.

70 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 7.

71 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

- diplomatic cables;
 - consular services;
 - passport services; and
 - visa services.⁷²
- 4.77 SATIN also provides essential ICT capabilities both domestically and at posts, including email, telephony, internet and general policy, service delivery and administrative computing applications.⁷³
- 4.78 SATIN has over 10 000 user accounts. 35 per cent of SATIN accounts are provided for staff in other Government agencies. DFAT noted that the 'ongoing growth in client agency user numbers reflects the department's evolving role as a whole-of-government coordinator and service provider on the international stage'.⁷⁴
- 4.79 ICT support, monitoring and maintenance are provided centrally from Canberra to domestic sites and overseas missions by the Global Support Centre (GSC). The GSC delivers 'helpdesk and problem resolution on a 3-tiered model covering basic enquiries to complex technical issues based on priority and risk'.⁷⁵
- 4.80 DFAT also provided ICT and security services 'off-post' to support Prime Ministerial, Ministerial and VIP delegations attending overseas forums such as the G20 in collaboration with posts.⁷⁶
- 4.81 AusAID told the Committee that Australia's Whole-of-Government secure communications network 'works pretty well compared with what most other countries have', and commented on its value to government:

If you have a system where whole-of-government can be kept informed about what agencies and departments are doing in particular countries, that is pretty good. Every system can be made better and more effective, but I think it works pretty well.⁷⁷

International ICT networks at other Australian Government agencies

- 4.82 A number of Government agencies advised the Committee about their ICT networks which connected them internationally. All Government agencies

72 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

73 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

74 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

75 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

76 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 24.

77 Mr Peter Baxter, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, pp. 36–7.

with independent international ICT networks rely in some way on DFAT's ICT network.

- 4.83 As at 4 January 2012, 83 per cent of AusAID staff in 36 offices overseas were connected to AusAID's independent ICT network, with plans to connect its entire staff globally. AusAID told the Committee that they would continue to rely on DFAT for certain ICT services including SATIN High, satellite and cable communications links to posts and SATIN low for AusAID staff in 20 countries. These services were provided under a Service Level Agreement with DFAT.⁷⁸
- 4.84 Defence staff at posts were generally reliant on SATIN. DFAT ICT services were provided to Defence under a Memorandum of Understanding. Staff in London and Washington also have fixed connectivity to the Defence Restricted and Secret networks. Defence commented that the existing SATIN networks provided good connectivity for its representational staff.⁷⁹
- 4.85 The AFP have their own secure international ICT system providing real-time connectivity to systems in Australia which 'leverages off' DFAT's ICT network. The AFP labelled their ICT system as 'absolutely crucial' and of 'huge benefit' in terms of working overseas. The AFP also stated that its ICT stood up well when compared to some of their international counterparts such as the US Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.⁸⁰
- 4.86 The AEC told the Committee that they used SATIN, and in particular the cable system, to task posts during Federal election delivery periods:
- The tasking directives for staff at diplomatic posts sent through the cable system covered election related tasks, such as performing stocktakes of election materials at their posts and receiving and checking election material despatch consignments.⁸¹
- 4.87 The AEC commented on the slowness of the cable system and advised the Committee that, because a high level of security was not generally necessary for its work, it was in the process of developing an alternative method of communication with posts:
- The cable system is slow, it is bureaucratic and it is layered, so one of the innovations that we want to employ for, I assume, 2013 is

78 AusAID, *Submission No. 23*, p. 14.

79 Defence, *Submission No. 27*, p. 4.

80 Mr Ian McCartney, A/g Manager, International Network, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 49.

81 AEC, *Submission No. 22*, p. 7.

that DFAT posts – Austrade posts – will be given direct access to an AEC portal. They will be able to use that portal, not only to get tasking instructions but training materials, forms and those sorts of things, rather than going through the layered process of the cable system. Obviously, the cable system has a range of security issues which are important, but we do not think that level of security is necessary for our current services ...⁸²

4.88 The AEC outlined the benefits of its planned internet communications portal to officers at posts by providing:

- appropriate electronic election material;
- online training;
- easy and timely access to AEC materials and communications;
- minimised problems related to email congestion; and
- media release shells and templates for promotional activities which allowed posts to insert relevant local information.⁸³

4.89 Austrade outlined the functionality of its independent global ICT network:

Austrade maintains a broad, independent electronic communications network which provides national and international end points with data, voice and video services. The network provides reliable, low-cost connectivity between Austrade's international posts and its office structure throughout the Australian states and territories.⁸⁴

4.90 Austrade also highlighted the cost saving benefits on telephone costs and travel arising from its ICT network:

With the fixed infrastructure in place, telephone call costs via the network are negligible and the recent roll-out to all Austrade users of the internal network has seen mobile costs trend markedly lower ...

Austrade's use of videoconferencing increased by around 12 per cent in 2010-11 over the previous year to a total of almost 49,000 hours. In the same period, Austrade's total travel expenditure decreased by 28 per cent, to which videoconferencing has contributed.⁸⁵

82 Mr Ed Killesteyn, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 7.

83 AEC, *Submission No. 22*, p. 7.

84 Austrade, *Submission No. 25*, p. 9.

85 Austrade, *Submission No. 25*, p. 10.

4.91 Cisco Systems Australia Pty Ltd proposed that the Australian government extend its highly successful deployment of its high definition video conferencing technologies for public administration activities. Cisco told the Committee that Australia's overseas representation could be an area where this technology could create greater efficiencies in a resource constrained environment.⁸⁶

ICT reform at DFAT

4.92 DFAT advised the Committee that it was facing increasing demands on its ICT systems as Australia's operational and strategic objectives continue to evolve.⁸⁷

4.93 DFAT identified various challenges that are unique to a secure ICT network providing global connectivity, including:

- providing ICT support to different time zones;
- maintaining appropriate levels of resourcing in critical ICT disciplines to balance maintenance and project work in the context of the ICT employment market;
- logistics for securely transporting, installing and maintaining ICT assets at posts; and
- the security of staff, systems and information, which remains a paramount concern.⁸⁸

4.94 DFAT added that while posts were electronically well-connected with the Government, Australia did not have the best available ICT network.⁸⁹

4.95 DFAT commenced a major three year reform of ICT strategy and operations in July 2011, with a particular emphasis on performance at posts. This reform encompassed the following short to medium term projects:

- post infrastructure upgrades;
- mobility pilot project;
- Electronic Document and Records Management System;
- bandwidth upgrades; and

86 Cisco Systems Australia, *Submission No. 52*, p. 1.

87 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 1.

88 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 25.

89 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 17.

- resourcing for ICT sustainability.⁹⁰
- 4.96 DFAT is also planning two key long term ICT reform projects – replacing SATIN, and replacing the passport issuing system.
- 4.97 DFAT advised that the demand on SATIN, which was introduced in 2007, was exceeding its capacity and ‘nearing the end of its viable operating life’. This led to system instability and use of increasing resources to manage risk. As such, the replacement of SATIN was ‘a critical strategic goal’ for DFAT.⁹¹
- 4.98 DFAT advised the Committee about plans for the International Communications Network (ICN) as a replacement of SATIN. DFAT was taking forward the ICN’s business case through the Department of Finance and Deregulation’s Two-Pass process:
- ... the ICN will revitalise the department’s global ICT capability – providing standardised, modern, flexible, and sustainable ICT infrastructure for government out to 2023.⁹²
- 4.99 DFAT added that the ICN proposal focussed on making it easier for users of the system, including those at overseas posts, to do their job and that ‘improved collaboration, interaction, information sharing, service provision and mobility’ were all key goals of the new system.⁹³
- 4.100 A three year roll-out for the ICN was scheduled to commence in mid-2014.⁹⁴ The cost of replacing SATIN would be ‘up to \$250 million’.⁹⁵
- 4.101 DFAT advised that a new passport issuing system would also be introduced by 2016 and would ‘provide a more secure, efficient and responsive passport service for Australia.’ The cost would be \$100.8 million.⁹⁶

Consular service delivery

- 4.102 Consular service delivery evoked a significant amount of discussion about the current uses and potential benefits of e-diplomacy.

90 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 7.

91 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 27.

92 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 2.

93 DFAT, *Submission No. 39*, p. 10.

94 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 27.

95 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 7.

96 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 27.

Travel advice

4.103 The Lowy Institute highlighted the ability for technology to create direct, personal communications channels with citizens travelling overseas, including in crisis situations:

With some six billion mobile phone subscriptions, an increasing proportion of which are smart phones able to access the web, it is now technically viable for foreign ministries to easily reach an increasingly large proportion of their citizens travelling or living overseas in crisis situations.⁹⁷

4.104 The Lowy Institute criticised DFAT's engagement with new media to facilitate consular service delivery as an opportunity cost. The Lowy Institute made the point that the less than 70,000 people who subscribed to DFAT's travel advice in the year ending 30 June 2010 constituted a small fraction of the seven million overseas trips Australians take each year.⁹⁸

4.105 The Lowy Institute suggested three digital solutions for improving the uptake of DFAT's travel advice subscriber service and the quality of its consular services and reducing the response burden:

- a smart phone travel app designed for the largest smart phone platforms beamed to all Australians at points of departure;
- online competitions to derive crowd sourced promotional material for the apps; and
- arranging the option to register with DFAT on online travel booking sites.⁹⁹

4.106 As previously mentioned, DFAT advised the Committee of its plan to launch a *Smartraveller* app for iPhones.¹⁰⁰

4.107 DFAT also drew attention to its *Smartraveller* website and advised that it played a critical role in enabling DFAT to advance its consular responsibilities.¹⁰¹ DFAT launched an updated *Smartraveller* website in November 2011 'making the site more intuitive and easier to read as well as incorporating videos and social media tools'.¹⁰²

97 Lowy Institute, *Revolution @State: The Spread of Ediplomacy*, March 2012, p. 22.

98 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 22.

99 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 22.

100 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

101 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

102 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

Visas

- 4.108 DIAC advised that the internet was the primary means by which the department engaged with clients that were located in areas abroad that do not have Australian representation. DIAC labelled its website as the 'core and principal source of detailed information about the multiple pathways for migration to Australia'.¹⁰³
- 4.109 DIAC told the Committee that it was 'committed to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the way it does business through innovative service delivery on and offshore', and described the digitisation of their visa process:
- DIAC has progressively moved more visa categories to electronic lodgement in recent years, particularly to client groups that demonstrate compliance with visa conditions and where safeguards can be put in place to ensure the integrity of the Australian visa program. Clients from a broad range of countries can now apply for a range of visas, particularly temporary entry visas, online. To date in 2011 DIAC has expanded the availability of the Electronic Tourist Visa (e676) to nationals of the Maldives, Chile, Croatia and Turkish officials and special passport holders. DIAC is aiming to further expand e-Visa access to clients over the next three years.¹⁰⁴
- 4.110 DIAC provided the Committee with data indicating that a significant proportion of visitor visas are now lodged online. According to this data 83 per cent of temporary visas applications and 81% of permanent visa applications were lodged online in the 2010-11 financial year.¹⁰⁵
- 4.111 DIAC also noted that the movement towards an online visa application model alleviated the need for a distribution network tasked with collecting visa applications.¹⁰⁶
- 4.112 UMD agreed that 'e-consular' services alleviated the demands on consular staff on the ground. It added that 'most people prefer to engage online until such time as they get into trouble, then they need someone to help them out'.¹⁰⁷
- 4.113 The Committee sought comment on the risks in conducting consular activities online in place of face-to-face contact, including the risk of fraudulent documentation.
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103 Mr Peter Vardos, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 15.

104 DIAC, *Submission No. 21*, p. 5.

105 DIAC, *Submission No. 46*, pp. 16-17.

106 Mr Jim Williams, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 12.

107 Mr Ordan Andreevski, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 22.

4.114 UMD acknowledged that there were risks in processing visa applications without face-to-face contact and responded that there was an enhanced role for consular and diplomatic staff:

There has to be scrutiny. We have to be street smart as well; we cannot just say that everything will be online and we accept everything on face value – it does not work that way. Of course, there needs to be an assessable approach.¹⁰⁸

4.115 The MIA also commented on the advantageous effect ICT had on consular service delivery, but emphasised that such technology ‘will never be a substitute for the need for direct face-to-face services or contact as sources of information’.¹⁰⁹

Overseas voting in Australian elections

4.116 The AEC works with posts to facilitate Australians voting in Australian general elections from overseas. This activity was discussed in Chapter Three.

4.117 The AEC commented that there was an increasing expectation by Australian electors travelling or residing overseas to be able to interact with the Australian Government through electronic means.¹¹⁰

4.118 The Committee explored the various ways in which overseas voting in Australian elections could be made more efficient by digitising whole or part of the process. The options discussed with the AEC included allowing overseas voters to:

- lodge postal voting applications online;
- cast votes on the internet; and
- cast votes electronically on specialised equipment at posts.

4.119 The AEC commented on the possibility of allowing overseas voters to lodge postal voting applications online in order to speed up the overseas postal voting process:

It is one of the complaints that we receive, that people do not have enough time to get their ballot papers back. That is one of the reasons that we are moving to online applications and we hope

108 Mr Ordan Andreevksi, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 22.

109 Ms Maurene Horder, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 57.

110 AEC, *Submission No. 22*, p. 4

that will make a big difference, because it, essentially, cuts out one-third of the time.¹¹¹

- 4.120 Building on this point, the AEC told the Committee that it had implemented an online enrolment update system and that it planned to implement an online postal vote application (online PVA) which would lighten the workload at posts:

The online PVA facility should significantly reduce the manual postal vote processing workload at diplomatic posts. This will mean that the processing workload is diverted away from diplomatic posts, back to the AEC for the central automated production of postal voting material. This should also result in a more timely outcome for electors.¹¹²

- 4.121 The AEC noted that legislation currently limits electronic voting to sight-impaired people.¹¹³ It discussed, nevertheless, the possibility of allowing Australians overseas to cast their votes online:

... while it is an attractive proposition at a superficial level, it certainly does have some questions about its reliability. If you are extending it across the globe you can never be totally confident whether the systems are going to be available to everybody all the time.¹¹⁴

- 4.122 The AEC commented on the possibility installing equipment at posts that would allow overseas voters to lodge their vote electronically when attending posts on polling day:

First, we do not have the legislation for it but it would certainly be a mechanism that would overcome some of the issues in relation to handling of materials. If it is conducted at a consulate or a commission then you can be reasonably confident about the reliability of the systems.

... If you go to electronic, then the whole nature of the polling place changes and it is then a question of the sort of equipment that you have, the computers and so forth. That is extra work on DFAT's part and it is extra work on our part.¹¹⁵

111 Mr Ed Killesteyn, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 6.

112 AEC, *Submission No. 22*, p. 4.

113 Mr Ed Killesteyn, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 3; Part XVB of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*.

114 Mr Ed Killesteyn, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 5.

115 Mr Ed Killesteyn, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, pp. 5–6.

Disaster response

- 4.123 The Lowy Institute commented on the potential role for social media in disaster response abroad:

E diplomacy and ICT tools played important roles in the Japan and New Zealand earthquakes. But the experience in Haiti where social media and SMS were used to raise funds for relief efforts, find missing persons, direct relief efforts and crowd source unmapped areas of the country perhaps offer the most important lessons for Australian posts in the Asia Pacific, but especially in Indonesia. These were pioneering (and not always successful) efforts, but there is clearly enormous potential to harness these tools in future disasters.¹¹⁶

- 4.124 The Lowy Institute added that effectively using social media tools in future emergencies required 'groundwork to be laid beforehand and disaster response plans worked through'. The Lowy Institute made the point that, with the exception of a Twitter feed, new digital tools are 'completely underutilised' in the disaster response toolkit at DFAT.¹¹⁷
- 4.125 Referring to its Twitter account, adopted in April 2011, DFAT advised that Twitter was 'immensely valuable in enhancing dissemination of key messages across the spectrum of DFAT's activities, most importantly in the context of consular crises'.¹¹⁸
- 4.126 DFAT also drew attention to its Australians Helping Japan portal which provided information about Australia's post Japanese tsunami assistance and links to 'accredited nongovernmental and community-based relief and reconstruction efforts'.¹¹⁹
- 4.127 Defence emphasised that secure and reliable ICT was particularly important regarding the role that Defence representational staff have in coordinating an ADF response to any crisis in a host country:

This has been demonstrated most recently through Operation PADANG ASSIST, following the earthquake in Padang, Indonesia (2009); Operation PAKISTAN ASSIST II, in response to the floods in Pakistan (2010), and most recently Operation PACIFIC ASSIST, following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan.¹²⁰

116 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

117 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 21.

118 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, p. 22.

119 DFAT, *Submission No. 28*, pp. 22-23.

120 Defence, *Submission No. 27*, p. 4.

4.128 Austrade agreed that a stable, reliable and broad communications network was important in responding to disasters abroad:

The 2011 Japan tsunami crisis, for example, represented a high, instantaneous peak of consular activity followed by continuing elevated levels of response. Communications support at such times is critical to operational effectiveness and Austrade's network remained stable and functional through this peak level of activity.¹²¹

Future directions in e-diplomacy

An office of e-diplomacy

4.129 In response to the perceived shortfalls in e-diplomacy, the Lowy Institute recommended the establishment of a single area within DFAT with responsibility for e-diplomacy along the lines of the US State Department's 'Office of eDiplomacy'. This recommendation was echoed by a number of organisations throughout the course of the Inquiry.

4.130 In the Lowy Institute report *Revolution @State: The Spread of Ediplomacy*, Fergus Hanson described the role of the Office of eDiplomacy at the US State Department as:

... the central ediplomacy hub at State, driving internal innovation, responding to requests for ediplomacy fixes and managing new internal ediplomacy communications platforms.¹²²

4.131 The original, tripartite mandate of the Office of eDiplomacy, stemming from perceived internal failures, was:

- To promote end-user involvement in decision-making on information technology;
- To improve the way the State Department connects to and works with its [United States Government] foreign affairs partner agencies, with other nations' diplomatic institutions, and with other entities involved in international affairs;
- To foster knowledge management at State.¹²³

4.132 The Lowy Institute described the structure of the e-diplomacy unit in the US State Department:

121 Austrade, Submission No. 26, p. 10.

122 Lowy Institute, *Revolution @State: The Spread of Ediplomacy*, March 2012, pp. 8–9.

123 Lowy Institute, *Revolution @State: The Spread of Ediplomacy*, March 2012, pp. 8–9.

The Office of E-Diplomacy at the US State Department was set up 10 years ago now. At the moment it has 80 staff members, about half of whom are exclusively focused on e-diplomacy work. However, there are another 24 separate e-diplomacy nodes at the State Department in DC. All of these different nodes employ collectively about 150 people in e-diplomacy and, if you include posts abroad, about another 900 people are working on e-diplomacy to some extent.¹²⁴

4.133 DFAT does not have an office of e-diplomacy. Responsibility for social media in DFAT is held by the Website Management Section.¹²⁵ As mentioned above, DFAT has six or seven people working on e-diplomacy.¹²⁶

4.134 The Lowy Institute saw the lack of a single area within DFAT that deals with e-diplomacy as a stumbling block:

This makes the successful adoption of the next wave of ediplomacy and ICT tools particularly difficult, as ediplomacy is a crosscutting issue. The utility of ediplomacy tools are not limited to a single area of DFAT and in many cases the same tools will serve multiple functions.¹²⁷

4.135 The Lowy Institute suggested how a centralised e-diplomacy branch within DFAT could be established:

This should be staffed by a mix of policy and technical experts and have a mandate to take a reasonable level of risk with the platforms it develops and with which it experiments. This will likely require recruiting people with specialist journalistic, social media and programming expertise. Other related areas should be brought under its leadership (communications, website and technical).¹²⁸

4.136 The Lowy Institute's submission proceeded to detail specific tasks for its proposed DFAT e-diplomacy office. These included:

- Developing and rolling out all e-diplomacy platforms. ...

124 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 19.

125 <http://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/public-diplomacy-handbook/part_five.html#onlineadvoc> Accessed May 2012.

126 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 19 March 2012*, p. 5.

127 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 18.

128 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 24.

- Developing ediplomacy guidelines for staff that encourage innovation and provide significant latitude for experimentation. ...
- Training staff, especially Heads of Mission, in the use and utility of e-diplomacy tools. ...
- Progressively consolidating e-diplomacy platforms as new ones are rolled out and old ones superseded.
- Taking the lead on e-diplomacy campaigns – that is, promulgating priority departmental messages using ediplomacy tools – and assisting with e-diplomacy strategies for regular departmental communications. ...
- Establish[ing] digital coordination mechanisms across relevant government agencies and departments as well as with external stakeholders.¹²⁹

4.137 The establishment an office of e-diplomacy at DFAT was also supported by ACT Labor FADTC,¹³⁰ the ANZ Bank¹³¹ and UMD¹³².

4.138 UMD added that an office of e-diplomacy could be used by Diasporas to enhance relationships without having extra posts and extra consuls.¹³³

The cost of e-diplomacy

4.139 DFAT advised the Committee that the opening of an office of e-diplomacy was not a high priority in the current budgetary environment:

We do not have the resources to do it. If I had additional resources now that is not where I would allocate those additional resources. I would put people into Western China before I established an office of e-diplomacy. It is not to say an office of e-diplomacy is not important, but you have to make choices when you are running an organisation. ...

I would love the resources to open an office of e-diplomacy, but if I got 10 additional people tomorrow I would be allocating them elsewhere before opening such an office.¹³⁴

4.140 AAMIG expressed a similar sentiment to DFAT on the impact that funding constraints had on an increased engagement with e-diplomacy:

Certainly, [public diplomacy] is always the area that gets the squeeze when there is any budget tightening because it is a bit

129 Lowy Institute, *Submission No. 15*, p. 24.

130 Mr Andrew Carr, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 53.

131 ANZ, *Submission No. 19*, p. 3.

132 Mr Ordan Andreevski, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 22.

133 Mr Ordan Andreevski, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 22.

134 Mr Dennis Richardson, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 3.

fluffy. You will see in some of the submissions – I also read the submission of the Lowy Institute – how some of these areas, particularly when it is linked into social networking and so on, are major new directions in diplomacy. I would have said that for a long time our foreign ministry kept up, was able to keep up and, in many cases, was a leader. I do not for a moment decry the talent, ability and commitment of these people, but it is not possible for them to keep up in all areas now because there is just not enough money to do it – in my judgement, anyway.¹³⁵

4.141 ANZ also supported DFAT's approach to placing additional resources in increasing Australia's diplomatic footprint ahead of increasing efforts in e-diplomacy.¹³⁶

4.142 The Lowy Institute responded that although lack of funding was an impediment to increased engagement with social media, cultural change was also needed:

DFAT is a traditional foreign ministry, and foreign ministries are used to going overseas and talking to other diplomats. The whole history of the profession, if you like, is a slightly secretive state-to-state transaction, so it takes time to break that down.¹³⁷

4.143 The Lowy Institute added that better use of e-diplomacy does not necessarily come at a high cost:

Part of what the adoption of e-diplomacy at State has involved is senior management encouraging staff to innovate and look for new solutions to the problems they face in their daily work.

In several cases this has allowed them to dramatically cut costs because using technology has allowed State to do the same job much more efficiently ...¹³⁸

4.144 Customs had a different approach to DFAT regarding the allocation of limited resources to ICT versus on-the-ground representation:

Frankly, you will get a bigger bang for your buck improving that intelligence back end than having a formal diplomatic style representation overseas. If someone was to offer me an extra dollar... it would frankly not go to permanent presence overseas. Would it go to high-level exchanges, temporary missions, ICT

135 Mr Jeff Hart, *Transcript 27 February 2012*, p. 3.

136 Mr Alex Thursby, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 8.

137 Mr Andrew Shearer, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 11.

138 Mr Fergus Hanson, *Transcript 17 February 2012*, p. 19.

connectivity with foreign intelligence and law enforcement agencies? Probably, but not to permanently assigned representatives.¹³⁹

- 4.145 Customs also made the point that the choice between having people on the ground and ICT connectivity did not directly relate to Australia's diplomatic representation due to the nature of their operationally focused work. For Customs, the answer to that question was 'really a matter of judgement in each case'.¹⁴⁰

E-diplomacy versus on-the-ground representation

- 4.146 A number of organisations commented on the relationship between e-diplomacy and on-the-ground representation

- 4.147 DAFF advised that it did not consider e-diplomacy as a substitute for face-to-face communication, particularly in the context of emerging markets:

The importance of communicating in person is relevant in countries where there may be cultural sensitivities and language barriers. In some countries it can be seen as insensitive to engage someone through non visual communications, where body language is integral to building rapport. In many developing countries the use of internet communications is far more limited and we are unable to rely on information and communications technology.¹⁴¹

- 4.148 DIISRTE told the Committee that in doing business around Asia 'personal contact still means a lot'.¹⁴²

- 4.149 DRET made the point that e-diplomacy should be used to support rather than to supplant Australia's overseas representation and that people-to-people links were vital to their mission.¹⁴³

- 4.150 AAMIG advised the Committee that e-diplomacy increased the volume of communication rather than minimising in-country workloads:

People seem to think [e-diplomacy] is a panacea. But if you get 50 emails in your box from 50 Australian companies interested in something, and you are the people on the ground having to deal with that, it does not necessarily make it a panacea. The ease of communications means there are more of them coming in, but

139 Mr Michael Pezzullo, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 24.

140 Mr Michael Pezzullo, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 24.

141 DAFF, *Submission No. 12*, p. 4.

142 Mr Colin Walters, *Transcript 10 February 2012*, p. 42.

143 DRET, *Submission No. 4*, p. 3.

someone still has to deal with all that. So I do not really see e-diplomacy as a magical thing where you press the button and it means you do not need people.¹⁴⁴

- 4.151 Similarly, the ANZ Bank told the Committee that building influence occurred through people-to-people contact rather than ‘over a telephone line or videoconferencing’, and that these tools helped to enhance already built relationships and ‘quicken the pace’.¹⁴⁵

Committee Comment

- 4.152 E-diplomacy is commonly perceived as the use of social media to promote government messages overseas. The Committee, however, agrees with the Lowy Institute that e-diplomacy encompasses a far broader range of activities and raises the issue of the balance between DFAT controlling information as opposed to exchanging information. The Committee considers the Government White Paper it has recommended should review this balance.
- 4.153 E-diplomacy comprises many different ICT systems and online communication platforms that are subject to rapid change and patterns of usage. It holds great potential to manage information and facilitate communication within DFAT and the whole of Government, to improve consular service delivery and disaster response, and to understand, inform and engage audiences both in Australia and overseas.
- 4.154 The Committee considers that the internet and particularly social media platforms are underutilised by DFAT as tools for public diplomacy.
- 4.155 Australian embassy websites are often the first port-of-call for foreigners seeking to visit, migrate or do business with Australia. The Committee has reviewed various Australian embassy websites and considers that they should be more informative, attractive and user-friendly.
- 4.156 The Committee notes DFAT’s advice that in the current budgetary situation improving its websites was less of a priority than increasing on-the-ground diplomatic representation. The Committee responds that it is not a competition between e-diplomacy and increasing on-the-ground representation.

144 Mr Jeff Hart, *Transcript 27 February 2012*, pp. 4–6.

145 Mr Alex Thursby, *Transcript 23 February 2012*, p. 7.

Recommendation 15

- 4.157 **The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade immediately refurbish Australian embassy websites to make them more informative, attractive and user-friendly.**
- 4.158 DFAT's international ICT network is vital to the functioning of Australia's overseas representation, as well as being of great value in connecting and informing the whole of Government. The Committee highlights the importance of obtaining the appropriate technology in the planned replacement of SATIN.
- 4.159 The progressive digitisation of the visa application process undertaken by DIAC has created a more accessible and efficient system, alleviating the demands on the activities of posts. The Committee encourages further progress in this direction.
- 4.160 The Committee believes there is merit in establishing an office of e-diplomacy within DFAT as the best way to harness the potential and deal with the challenges of e-diplomacy, particularly in light of the constantly evolving nature of ICT. The US State Department's Office of eDiplomacy is considered to be a best practice model.
- 4.161 During the course of the inquiry it became clear that a significant amount of e-diplomacy is successfully carried out by Australian government agencies other than DFAT. The Committee sees potential for an office of e-diplomacy to foster a more coordinated, whole-of-Government approach to these activities.
- 4.162 The Committee is sympathetic with DFAT's view that it would put any additional funding into increasing Australia's diplomatic footprint rather than into an office of e-diplomacy. The Committee considers, however, that better engagement with e-diplomacy requires cultural change and is not necessarily resource intensive. It should not be a choice between extending Australia's diplomatic network and an office of e-diplomacy.
- 4.163 E-diplomacy should be seen as an enhancement of Australia's on-the-ground representation, not a replacement of it.
- 4.164 The Committee concludes that the external review of DFAT which it has proposed should include a consideration of the merits and feasibility of establishing an office of e-diplomacy within DFAT.

Recommendation 16

- 4.165 **The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade establish an Office of e-Diplomacy, subject to the external review, the Government White Paper and any increase in resources.**
- 4.166 It appears to the Committee that DFAT, and foreign policy in general, does not have a broad basis of support – people and organisations who see the value of DFAT’s overseas network and the work it does, and who are prepared to advocate on its behalf.
- 4.167 The Committee believes that the use of social media platforms is an ideal mechanism for DFAT to promote to a wider audience, knowledge and appreciation of Australia’s foreign policy, trade opportunities, and DFAT’s role. The aim should be to create a more dynamic public profile with a key focus on the wider Australian public and key audiences in Asia and the Pacific.

Recommendation 17

- 4.168 **The Committee recommends that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should make better use of social media platforms to promote Australia’s foreign policy, trade opportunities, and the Department’s role to the wider Australian public and key audiences in Asia and the Pacific.**
- 4.169 The Committee has not commented on electronic voting as it considers this to be a matter for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters.

Mr Nick Champion MP
Chair
Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee
October 2012

Mr Michael Danby MP
Chair
Joint Standing Committee on
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
October 2012