

Standing committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade: Inquiry into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy.

1. Introduction: what is public diplomacy?

RMIT University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy encompasses a variety of means whereby a nation's influence, objectives and standing throughout the world are promoted and enhanced. It is also useful to understand public diplomacy in terms of what distinguishes it from official diplomacy (Wolf and Rosen (2004)). Public diplomacy relates to the attitudes and behaviours of publics, whereas official diplomacy relates to the attitudes and policies of governments. It follows that public diplomacy is more transparent and disseminated to wider 'publics' (and sometimes selected groupings within them) than is official diplomacy, which is aimed at other governments.¹

The more diffuse nature of public diplomacy suggests that it is difficult for government or government departments working alone to achieve its goals. The impact of globalisation and democratisation on international relations means that they are increasingly influenced by non-government interaction and are accountable to demanding electorates.² Therefore, effective public diplomacy requires significant investment by government of ideas and resources, but it also requires creative partnerships and engagement with agencies and individuals who can assist in achieving these goals.

Effective public diplomacy also requires strong engagement with domestic populations about its intent and conduct. Indeed, its benefits flow in both directions: a citizenry with a strong understanding of Australia's standing in the world and its engagement with regions and partners is less insular in outlook, better equipped to respond to the pressures and challenges of globalisation, and more likely to successfully promote Australia's public diplomacy goals in their own professional and personal lives.

Finally, because public diplomacy is about transmitting values and ideas by influencing the way individuals think and feel, it cannot be done 'remotely': it requires person-to-person interaction through a variety of media and fora to support not only the messages Government wishes to convey but the dialogue which must surround them. These ideas about the nature of public diplomacy, and the strategies required to enact them, inform the recommendations made in this submission.

2. The role of Australian universities in public diplomacy

Australian universities can contribute to public diplomacy in several significant ways. As leading teaching and research institutions, they are global players in knowledge networks, bringing together creators and disseminators of knowledge and ideas in Australia and internationally. Apart from scholarly networks, all are actively involved in partnerships with government agencies, community organisations, business and industry groups which have some bearing on public diplomacy objectives: through the provision of cross-cultural education and training in service industries, for example, and in large research partnerships with global companies based on Australian ideas, innovation, graduates and products. Therefore, they provide space and opportunities where public diplomacy goals, strategies and outcomes can be developed, discussed, evaluated and promoted, in Australia as well as overseas.

Universities are also leaders in education export, one of Australia's largest service industries. For example, RMIT enrolls approximately 58,000 students across its higher education and vocational education and training programs, of whom almost 30% have their home base in countries other than

¹ Charles Wolf Jnr and Brian Rosen, *Public Diplomacy: How to Think About and Improve It*, RAND Corporation Santa Monica, 2004

² This point is strongly made by Professor Tony Milner (Dean, Asian Studies, ANU) in his introduction to the Task Force report on 'Positioning Australia in the Region and on the Global Map', Presentation to the Future Summit, Australian Davos Connection, 7 May 2004.

Australia. Of these, approximately 8,000 are studying at one of RMIT's Australian campuses. Approximately 10,000 are studying offshore, including 3,000 at RMIT International University Vietnam.

This places RMIT among the largest exporters of Australian education and indeed among the largest global education exporters. Early and continuing success in education export rested to some extent on a positive image on Australia abroad – surveys showed students came partly because of lifestyle, welcoming values, and safety. Universities and TAFE providers are the institutions through which much of their experiences of Australian life and values are enacted and mediated, providing educational services but also housing, pastoral care, recreational facilities and opportunities for social interaction.

In this sense, Australian universities enjoy a symbiotic relationship with other participants in public diplomacy as both beneficiaries and partners. Paul Kelly, former editor-in-chief of the *Australian*, described the provision of places for South-East Asian students in Australian universities as 'perhaps Australia's single greatest soft power dividend.' Universities are a *positive* force for the promotion of Australian influence and standing, not so much because they are concerned with redressing 'anti-Australian' feeling or advancing specific policy goals as because they have a strong stake in selling Australia as a study destination to the world, and selling the quality of Australian education. Wolf and Rosen argue the strong correlation between positive messages and effective public diplomacy, and this underpins the real and potential effectiveness of universities in this arena. Such linkages have been recognised by the US, where The Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs is engaged in high profile dialogue with the higher education sector. While DFAT undertakes much useful work with Australian universities, there is little coordinated recognition of the role they might play in this regard.

In Australia, the role and significance of universities in the conduct of Australia's public diplomacy is poorly articulated and relatively unexplored, and hence is not well supported. Ways in which universities and post compulsory education and research providers more generally might support effective public diplomacy are explored in this submission.

Discussion of Terms of Reference (a) and (b)

(a) The extent and effectiveness of current public diplomacy programs and activities in achieving the objectives of the Australian Government

RMIT is not aware of any systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of current public diplomacy programs and activities in achieving the objectives of government. DFAT's Annual Report describes annual activities undertaken to this end and outcomes achieved, but this is a 'snapshot' with little discussion of overarching objectives, no review of progress over time and no comprehensive description of the range of activities which might make up Australia's public diplomacy.

However, it is obvious that Australia faces significant challenges in developing effective public diplomacy programs, not least because of its relative economic and political importance: it may be viewed as an 'outpost' of US or European values and aspirations, with little to distinguish it from its powerful allies. When he visited Australia in 1897, Samuel Clemens – better known as Mark Twain – noted that Australians did not 'differ noticeably' from Americans', although there were 'fleeting and subtle suggestions of their English origin'. For much of the world, England and the US remain their reference points for understanding Australia, rendering more complex the task of transmitting distinctly Australian goals, values and ideas.³ Australia also carries some potent baggage. For example, Australians may view the 'White Australia' policy as a thing of the past, but in much of Europe and Asia its legacy persists and works against views of Australia as an inclusive, tolerant society. Such perceptions may be reinforced by widespread international interest in such events as the Cronulla riots and (less recently) the statements of former politician Pauline Hanson.

These factors suggest the importance of public diplomacy, and that its scope and effectiveness needs to be strengthened. DFAT's report on public diplomacy activity in 2005-2006 notes a number of successful initiatives, but confines itself almost entirely to the activities undertaken by DFAT and through Australian government posts abroad. This suggests a relatively narrow approach to public diplomacy, with little

³ Joseph M Siracusa and David G Coleman, *Australia Looks to America*, Regina Books, Claremont, CA, 2006.

inter-agency activity or partnership. There is little discussion of what the goals of public diplomacy might be, outside reference to supporting the specific policy goals of government; thereby reducing it to a relatively minor subset of official diplomacy. Finally, there is a real absence of discourse about public diplomacy in Australia outside Government circles. In recent years there has been discussion in the media and in business and academic circles of the importance of 'soft power' in global relations, but little public profile afforded to Government or other agencies' activities in this regard and little discussion about how Australians might contribute to these goals.⁴

This suggests that opportunities for strengthening and broadening understanding of public diplomacy, and for engaging individuals and organisations in its pursuit, are not being fully exploited.

(b)The opportunities for enhancing public diplomacy both in Australia and overseas

1. *Government should make better use of the network of Australians living and working overseas.* A recent report published by the Lowy Institute notes that approximately one million Australians live overseas, approximately 75% of who have relocated on a long-term basis. The Report also found that many of these Australians enjoy positions of influence and authority in academia, business, communications and the arts; and are favourably disposed to promoting Australia's influence through public diplomacy channels.⁵ The Report makes a number of recommendations regarding ways in which Government might network and engage with Australian overseas in the pursuit of public diplomacy objectives which deserve consideration by this Inquiry. These include allocation of staff and creation of a designated unit this end, and development of an interactive web-based 'one stop shop' for expatriates which promotes and provides opportunities for engagement. Support for country-based professional networks – in the form of resources for partnered activity with Government – would sustain and give focus to this work. This is another area in which universities, with their international staff and alumni linkages, could be engaged.

2. *Government should ensure that the goals of public diplomacy, and the avenues whereby they are pursued, are better understood generally within Australia.* A public communication strategy should be considered, targeting selected publics in Australia and overseas.

Partnership with teaching and research institutions should be part of this strategy, particularly given the participation of such institutions in global knowledge networks. An example of such an initiative might be a conference jointly organised with a university around the theme of 'Australia's world, the world's Australia'. Such a conference could bring together international and local scholars, elected representatives and public servants at both state and national levels, global industry and employer representatives and community leaders with an explicit agenda to explore ways in which Australia's public diplomacy efforts might be enhanced.

Government should work to ensure that the goals of public diplomacy, and the means whereby they can be achieved, are shared across Government departments.

3. *Government should recognise and support the education industry's capacity to support public diplomacy by establishing an explicit strategic dialogue with institutions; perhaps through Australian Education International.* RMIT recommends that the following initiatives be considered in this context:

- In the short term, the number of opportunities for Australian students to study abroad and for international students to study in Australia should be increased, and with it financial support for them to take up these opportunities. This need not simply be a matter of more funded scholarships, although they would be welcome: such a strategy might also involve tax incentives for individuals or employers sponsoring staff studying overseas or international students studying in Australia; remission of HECS debt for existing Australians studying overseas, and government to government arrangements regarding student exchange and scholarship programs.

⁴ *DFAT Annual Report 2005-2006: Performance – Outcome 3 – 3.1.2 'Projecting a positive image of Australia internationally'.*

⁵ Michael Fullilove and Chloe Flutter, *Diaspora: the World Wide Web of Australians*, Lowy Institute Paper 04, December 2006.

- Government needs to recognise not only the immediate economic importance of international students to Australia, but also the longer-term opportunities they offer for the exercise of 'soft power' throughout our region as they assume positions of influence in their home nations. Therefore, ESOS legislation and the accountability requirements which flow from it should be reviewed with the specific intent of removing unnecessary impediments to Australia's recruitment and support for international students. In particular, Australian government preferred arrangements regarding use of education recruitment agents, visa requirements and institutional and student reporting requirements need to be examined in this light.
- The international education industry is subject to increasing competition, particularly as demand for 'in country' provision increases, and Australia is beginning to lose market share. In this environment, government needs to play a more proactive role in marketing and supporting international education. Such support should take the form of targeted activity to support 'Brand Australia' (such as undertaken by the British Council recently in support of UK education export)
- Government support for universities in their relationships with governments of the countries with which they engage is very important. Individual institutions enjoy very productive relationships with many Australian posts abroad. However, when, as sometimes occurs, universities become the target of criticism or even boycott on the basis of a perceived slight to the policies of another nation, scant support has been forthcoming from Government. In these instances universities are treated not as participants in a vitally important Australian industry, but as individual enterprises. This not only places a huge drain on universities' resources, it may also send a message that the Australian Government is not concerned with the reputation of our education industry or indeed our values as an inclusive and tolerant society. Such a change requires an attitudinal shift on the part of governments, but in the short term a specialised advice service located in DFAT to universities and other education and training institutions dealing directly with representatives of a foreign government around sensitive diplomatic issues would be helpful.