

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Opportunities for Strengthening Australia's Relations with the Republic of France

Submitted by Alexis Bergantz and Elizabeth Rechniewski on behalf of the
Institute for the Study of French-Australian Relations

Summary

This submission addresses terms of reference c. and e. with a focus on enhancing Australia's engagement with French Universities in the Indo-Pacific region: in New Caledonia, French Polynesia and La Réunion. It outlines the limitations attached to the current schemes for student exchange and research collaboration between Australian Universities and those in the French territories and argues for funding overseen by DFAT to overcome them. A system of grants to promote extended undergraduate in-country study, and postgraduate and academic research collaboration, would provide the stability necessary for long term cooperation in priority areas such as the climatic, ecological, health and security challenges facing the region.

Authors

This submission has been drawn up by Dr Alexis Bergantz and Dr Elizabeth Rechniewski on behalf of The Institute for the Study of French-Australian Relations (ISFAR). ISFAR is a non-profit incorporated association that undertakes and disseminates academic research in all areas of French Australian relations through its peer-reviewed journal, colloquia and public events.

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Submission

The shared strategic alignments between Australia and France in the Indo-Pacific region have led to increased collaboration between French and Australian universities and industry. This has included cooperation in the naval industry, space research and climate science surrounding coral reefs and Antarctica. The 2017 'Joint Statement of Enhanced Strategic Partnership between France and Australia' lists amongst its priority areas 'Cooperation in the Indian and Pacific Oceans' and 'Cooperation in Education, Science, Technology and Culture'.¹ It recognises the importance of strengthening the contacts and links between Australia, New Caledonia, French Polynesia and La Réunion through the promotion of student mobility and scientific exchange and advocates student grants, undergraduate, master's, doctoral and postdoctoral programs, and support for early career researchers in order to establish networks, linkages and exchanges between academics from tertiary education institutions and research institutes.

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/france/Pages/vision-statement-on-the-australia-france-relationship>;
<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/france/Pages/joint-statement-of-enhanced-strategic-partnership-between-australia-and-france>

Aims in relation to the terms of reference

Our submission addresses terms of reference c. and e. of the inquiry and draws further on the government's stated aim of enhancing Australia's engagement with the Pacific and more broadly with the Indo-Pacific region. It aims to strengthen people-to-people ties and cultural and academic cooperation through creating opportunities for a more extensive exchange of tertiary staff and students between Australia and French territories in the Indo-Pacific, including New Caledonia, French Polynesia and Réunion. There is a clear national interest in strengthening ties between Australian Universities and the Universities of New Caledonia (UNC), French Polynesia (UPF), and La Réunion (UR) because of the potential for collaboration on the common issues specific to our region. France with its scientific, technical and intellectual strengths and its engagement with the Indo-Pacific region is our natural partner in tackling contemporary strategic and environmental challenges.

Existing arrangements

Undergraduate exchange

The New Colombo Plan, initiated by the Department of Foreign Affairs in 2014, has been successful in subsidising short-term study tours for undergraduate students, usually lasting two to three weeks, to New Caledonia and French Polynesia. The University of Melbourne (as a consortium with RMIT), UWA, James Cook, the University of Queensland and the University of Sydney are among those Australian universities that have taken advantage of this scheme and have reported on it positively.² On these trips the students follow specially designed language and culture classes and experience other forms of cultural engagement but do not attend the normal semester-long courses that enable deeper immersion in the life of the university and the territory.

Exchange agreements between the University of New Caledonia and Australian universities, that allow for a semester's or a year's study as a member of the student body, have been tried, but have generally had a low take up and have fallen into disuse (RMIT, The University of Sydney). The reasons for this include the cost of living in Australia for French students and a tendency for Australian students to prefer to undertake their language study in France, given that living costs there are not dissimilar to those in Noumea.

Our recommendations would enable undergraduate students to spend more extensive periods at the UNC, UPF and UR as members of the student body. Deep immersion in the life of the country would foster the people-to-people ties that have led to successful French-Australian research networks and associations such as the Australian French Association for Science and Technology (AFAS), founded by researchers who spent time studying in France (<https://afas.org.au/>).

Postgraduate and academic exchange

In the case of postgraduate and staff exchanges, the potential for collaborative research is of the utmost significance. Postgraduate scholarships for longer term exchanges between Australian universities and French Pacific universities are rare and at the initiative of specific

² Diane de Saint-Léger and Kerry Mullan, 2018. 'Short-Term Study Abroad Program. An Intensive Linguistic and Cultural Experience on a Neighbouring Pacific Island, in *The Routledge Handbook of Study Abroad Research and Practice*. Ed. Cristina Sanz and Alfonso Morales-Front.

universities. One example is the Professor Darrell Tryon Research Scholarship at ANU which offers 3 months stays and a monthly 1000€ living stipend to supplement students' postgraduate scholarships.³ PhD students from UNC, UPF and UR do not have access to the same level of funding as Australian students and this has been a deterrent. It is hard to obtain Erasmus Mundus funding between Australian universities and UNC.

In the case of academic exchanges, limited collaboration is already taking place in some fields; in Archaeology, for example, colleagues working in Australian universities (ANU and UWA) are involved with colleagues in Tahiti and with the *Maison des Sciences de l'Homme du Pacifique* which is based at the University of French Polynesia. Yet there are structural challenges that need to be addressed: collaborations of this kind remain relatively few and dependent on the goodwill and resourcefulness of individual academics to secure highly competitive funding such as that offered by the Australian Research Council. As a consequence, such initiatives may be abandoned once funding is over or researchers move on. More formal and long-lasting exchanges would overcome these limitations and provide stability in research, industry and commerce over the long-term. We believe that far more could be achieved, that would be of benefit to Australia, through targeted government backing for priority areas such as seeking solutions to the climatic, ecological and health challenges facing the region. Funding could be allocated either through DFAT or by establishing a 'Special Project' priority scheme, to be administered through the Australian Research Council's Discovery and Linkage grants programme. Australia has research centres focusing on the Asia-Pacific region (the Pacific Institute at the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific for example) that could be part of a network for the exchange of personnel and ideas, if they received funding that encouraged sustained engagement with UNC, UPF and UR.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Annual scholarships and living stipends, granted for one year, to enable five Undergraduate students from the French Pacific territories to study in Australia, and five Australian students to study in French Polynesia or New Caledonia. These scholarships would provide the financial incentive necessary to overcome any cost deterrent identified in our introduction.

Recommendation 2. Grants of up to two years' duration for projects with a regional focus and in the areas of focus identified above to enable two Australian Postgraduate students to carry out research at Universities in the French territories and two French Postgraduate students to carry out research at an Australian University.

Recommendation 3. Targeted funding for the exchange of academic staff working in the mutually agreed areas of enhanced partnership. This funding should facilitate the creation of formal partnerships between specific universities to ensure sustained research collaboration over time and provide the structure and impetus for the development of centres of excellence in those areas.

³ <http://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/students/scholarships/professor-darrell-tryon-research-scholarship>