

Asialink: building cultural bridges between Australia and Asia

Highlights

- The imperative for innovation in the not-for-profit sector is at least the equal of the commercial sector, because of scarce resources.
- Asialink aims to help overcome cultural, political and institutional divides between Asia and Australia.
- Strategic alliances with Government academia and businesses active in Asia provided the means to create programs.
- Creative and innovative individuals could be attracted by an environment that allowed them to pursue their own ideas and create a stepping stone to careers in other organisations.

As Asia's economic growth gathered pace throughout the 1980s, it became something of a catch-cry that Australia 'must become part of Asia.' Diplomatically and commercially, there was a clear need for us to integrate more closely with our region.

Few people questioned the desirability of this. Alas, even fewer had practical suggestions as to how it might be achieved.

The task was daunting. Not only was the overwhelming majority of the Australian population had European origins; the cultural, political and education systems were all built on Western models. School curricula had an overwhelming Western focus as did our arts. While trade with Asia was growing, the business involvement tended to be very industry-specific and even project-specific.

There appeared to be no organisation with the focus and resources to significantly shift the balance.

Enter Asialink. The organisation was created in 1990 by a task force that comprised Professor Stephen Fitzgerald, Australia's first ambassador to China, Carrillo Gantner of the Myer Foundation, Peter Ellyard of the Commission for the Future, and Jenny McGregor, who had likewise identified the growing importance of Asia while at the Commission for the Future. In due course, McGregor became Director. At that time, she was also the sole employee.

Initial funding came from the Federal Government and the Myer Foundation, which remains a strong contributor of both resources and ideas. The Myer family interest in Asian art had begun some 65 years earlier and had been revitalised and expanded by the late Kenneth Myer.

Like many successful innovators, this group did not need to invent the idea of changing Australia's cultural focus. Every second commentator in Australia was paying lip service to the idea. The group's talent was in identifying a strategy by which this massive task could be begun.

Part of that strategy was to enlist suitable partners, and to align with a major University. After discussions with several, a proposal from the University of Melbourne was accepted and this has proved an enduring and strengthening link.

Development of Asialink programs

Jenny McGregor says the Asialink Board realised early on that any long-term change would need to begin with education. So although education was a tight focus of Asialink's early activities, these now extend into arts, business and public affairs programs. The Board also realised that with their very limited resources, they could not tackle everything at once; they would need to look for areas where they could build a critical mass and momentum.

They thus began with a strong focus on creating student and teacher resources that could bring an Asian focus to existing school curricula.

They also recognised that it was not enough to simply supply materials to bring about a change of interest and emphasis. They needed to change the focus of teachers. Teacher programs were set up, including study tours to eight Asian countries. They offered low-cost packages that encouraged teachers to visit Asia and to meet and mingle with their Asian peers.

In 1992 Asialink, in partnership with the National Curriculum Corporation, won a bid with the Federal Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs to establish a new body, the Asia Education Foundation (AEF). The AEF works in partnership with all State and Territory education departments, and the Catholic and independent schools systems to introduce studies of Asia into all areas of the curriculum.

As Asialink broadened its focus to include an arts and a public affairs program, so it has been able to enlist wider external support, including the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australia Council, the Mazda Foundation, the law firm Freehill Hollingdale and Page, accountants PriceWaterhouseCoopers, the National Australia Bank, AXA and Bonlac Foods.

While this group of core supporters has fallen very strongly behind Asialink, Jenny McGregor is often puzzled at the failure of the wider business community to appreciate the potential value of being associated with Asialink's arts programs in Asia.

“In Asian countries, an association with the arts is widely seen as the mark of a cultured individual, and high level arts events thus tend to attract senior figures from both business and government. Yet some Australian companies with interests in Asia seem hesitant

about associating themselves with international arts programs, even when the cost is so nominal as to be almost irrelevant.

Notwithstanding that, Asialink, with help from its core supporters, has run an extensive series of arts programs, the most visible being a series of 'artist in residence' programs in which Australian artists are offered travel and studio space to work in Asia for periods of four to six months. This is often followed by exhibitions of the resultant work. A recent 'artists' return' exhibition in Malaysia was highly successful and another is planned for Thailand in 2000.

Asialink also arranges art exchanges and exhibitions, with a focus on contemporary work.

Asialink's Public Affairs program has been the most popular with business, largely because it includes short-courses, briefings and in-house seminars that are succinct and specifically designed for busy business executives.

It also runs about 80 public seminars a year. These frequently include a post-seminar dinner where those with interests in Asia can network and compare experiences and opportunities.

Asialink has instituted a fellowship program (named in honor of Edward 'Weary' Dunlop) to train young Australian leaders and give them exposure to Asia. A group of 15 promising Australians, drawn from backgrounds that range from the armed forces and police, through community and aid organisations, the arts and public administration, spend a year looking at Asian-related issues, analysing everything from economics and social issues to cross-cultural ethical considerations.

Another recent focus has been on IT, which is booming in Asia as in the US and Europe.

Sources of innovation

Many of Asialink's activities have been, and are, pioneering in Australia and Jenny McGregor says the organisation's ability to be 'fleet of foot' in quickly turning ideas into action, often with very limited resources, leads many people to bring them proposals.

"Although we cannot afford high salaries, we appear to attract very creative and motivated people," says McGregor. "Many of them are later pirated by other organisations, sometimes by our sponsors and supporters, which is good for their careers since these companies can usually pay substantially higher salaries. Nonetheless, each time a good staff member leaves, you wonder how you can replace them."

Given that some of her staff come from backgrounds that carry higher remuneration – she cites a lawyer and a journalist for example – and always have good tertiary qualifications, it seems probable that the reputation of Asialink as an innovative organisation may be one of its strengths when recruiting.

McGregor believes that an innovative culture in an organisation starts from the top – from a board and CEO that recognise other people’s abilities and the give them the power and support that encourages them to be innovative and to bring forward creative ideas.

She believes her own Board, in particular the Chairman Carrillo Gantner, epitomises this. “Sure they discharge their responsibilities in keeping a close watch on our financial position, the strategic plan and the value of various schemes, but they are never negative.

“Our Board is a fountain of ideas. Sometimes busy staff must even wish it was less so, since our program seems to be ever-expanding. But that is far more stimulating than having a negative group at the top. It is good to work with a Board that is vibrant and generous with ideas and supportive of new initiatives.

“That attitude tends to flow down. We give our staff lots of free rein and the responsibility to get on with their projects, and that encourages them to think for themselves and bring fresh approaches.

“You have to keep a balance. There are obviously decisions where the potential impact needs to be considered more widely by senior management.

“Sometimes, delegating responsibility can backfire. People will make mistakes and if you have delegated the responsibility, you have to live with those. But if you pick the right people, the mistakes are minimised and are more than offset by the gains.

“A you-can-do-it atmosphere can be very liberating.”

Jenny McGregor thinks that this balance between accountability and personal responsibility often needs to be considered in the structure of administration. “You need reporting to ensure accountability, but you also need to ensure that the frequency and scale of these reports do not start to subsume the primary objective.

“In our case we try to provide regular reports to sponsors on the progress of the projects they are supporting, and on their eventual success. We also try however, to stop this reporting being so onerous that it chews up resources needed to ensure the project is a success. That’s the balance.”

Jenny Mcgregor thinks the innovation of the group is also assisted by its close links with the University of Melbourne.

“That’s not just a matter of physical resources. The University also provides our accommodation, as well as some of our intellectual resources.

“It is wonderful that when you are working with an idea that has business implications, to be able to bounce it off someone like John Rose, the Director of the Melbourne Business School, who is also on the Asialink Council. That happens across a range of areas. Our links with the University give us access to some of the best brains in the country and that is a huge asset. The heads of several University Faculties and Departments are on our various advisory boards.

Asialink now operates programs nationally and internationally and has links with organisations in other states. It has made a significant impact on our education curriculum, helped include a more Asian focus in our arts world, particularly with young and emerging artists, and created programs and resources for businesses dealing with Asia.

The concept of that original task force has come remarkably close to meeting the goals it forged less than 10 years ago, to provide a catalyst for changing Australia's attitudes. Perhaps as interesting from an innovation standpoint is the creation of a nursery of innovative talent, a grooming-ground which develops creative people for further careers elsewhere.