



Submission to the Review of Export Policies and Programs

To: Review of Export Policies and Programs
c/- Trade Development Division
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
R.G. Casey Building
John McEwen Crescent,
BARTON ACT 0221

Author: Professor Andrea Hull AO, Director and Dean

Organisation: The Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts, the University of Melbourne

Type of organisation: Higher Education Institution

Address: 234 St Kilda Road, Southbank, Victoria 3006

State or Territory: Victoria

Email and phone contact: adhull@unimelb.edu.au, tel: 03 9685 9315

Date of submission: 27 June 2008

Declaration of Interest and Affiliations: The Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts is an affiliate member of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

Professor Andrea Hull is a former founding Board member of the Council for the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences.

A number of staff at the Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts hold or have held Australian Research Council grants.

Introduction

This submission addresses the role of culture in export policies and programs. It will argue that:

- a) culture and cultural values are central to the framework in which trade and exports can flourish;
- b) Australia is under performing in the international market on the matter of cultural identity and has not yet realised its potential in this field; and
- c) giving culture and cultural values greater importance will make a material contribution to the long-term success of Australia's export performance.

A) The central role of culture in trade and export success

A nation's culture plays a role in trade and export success that goes much further than sister city agreements, tours by performing arts groups and the exchange of films and television programs. The term used here refers as much to Australia's shared beliefs and worldview as to objects of cultural production. Over the last twenty years we have seen our interactions and relationship with geopolitical region go from one of proactive engagement and a spirit of collaborative mapping of a shared future to one characterised by insularity, aloofness and insensitivity. It is no coincidence that this development mirrors the drop in Australia's export performance. Culture will play an important part in redressing this imbalance.

Culture's role in trade and export success is subtle and requires a long-term commitment. International customers only rarely tell you that they have chosen a supplier from elsewhere because Australia lacks a coherent national image or because Australian business people and politicians are "uncultured". Culture

operates on a different, sometimes subliminal level. It is here that we run the risk of projecting our worldview on to others. It is risky to assume that the business people and consumers of other nations place little importance on the portrayal of cultural values simply because that is generally how we see things. What we do know though is that the current boom in resource exports is literally pulled from the ground –with little value added – before it is exported in a raw state. What does this signify to our trade partners?

B) Australian performance in the market of cultural identity

The emergence of today's global innovation economy has made it more important than ever for nations to have a clear international cultural identity. This is particularly so in industries with high levels of added value and if this international cultural identity has marketable qualities, so much the better. But Australia has not yet developed such a clear international identity or the readily invoked connotations that go with it. Mention Sweden and the world's consumers think of coolly refined and uncluttered design. Mention Italy and they think of sensual, sophisticated and distinctive design. Talk of Japan and they think of free-thinking innovation and very individual forms of youth culture. Turn to Germany and images of precision engineering, industrial know-how and sound quality come to mind. But, leaving aside the problems of objectively judging one's own image, how does the world see Australian cultural values? Perhaps as a slightly surreal transplanted western outpost in an Asian neighbourhood. Perhaps as an as yet unrealised attempt to form an amalgam of Indigenous and European culture. Maybe as one big beach with friendly lifesavers bizarrely yelling "where the bloody hell are you?". Or maybe as an enormous open-cut mine with a sheep station next door. Even if we could agree on which of these images we wanted to project, none of them have anything really very marketable about them.

By way of example, Australia's performers (our dancers, actors, musicians and physical and circus performers) are well regarded in Europe as highly technically accomplished, excellent and reliable team and ensemble members, lateral and creative thinkers who contribute to the creative process and as fresh and irreverent. Translated as connotations – they are well trained with a respect for the discipline's traditions, they are innovative and prepared to take risks, they have excellent interpersonal skills. These are desirable attributes not only for artists but for Australian professionals representing our nation's interests internationally.

During the Cold War the role of international culture and cultural values was clear. Faced with a clear challenge, we championed our culture as a way of reassuring the rest of the world (and ourselves) that we were better, more cultured, morally superior to the opposing ideological block. But that has all gone and today we are self-conscious about portraying ourselves as a cultured nation. At the same time, to do so has come to be seen as a luxury add-on that we cannot really afford and do not really need. One of the reasons that Australia does not have an "integrated approach to trade policy" is because one of the integral parts of a sophisticated and comprehensive policy – culture – has been cut out of it.

Such an image must emerge organically and in a nation such as Australia with its patchwork of cultural traditions and heritages it may be illusory to think that we will ever have a single, neatly packaged and coherent "national identity". But this cannot mean that we give up and settle for a role as cultural featherweight amongst our trading partners and the wider international community, certainly not if we are serious about maximising our export performance.

Design is a cultural carrier

Most international trade delegations would be accompanied by distinctly recognisable cultural elements. A Japanese delegation would, for example, host functions reflecting Japanese food, sake, cloth, tableware and floral arrangements. These might also be traditional music, dance and kimono wearing – reflecting a respect for tradition. The guest is firmly reminded that they are entering a differentiated zone, with different cultural values and different protocols. All of this is important in signalling how discussions and negotiations might precede.

How do we reflect Australian cultural values? We have excellent wines, food and wildflowers and they are frequently utilised. But do we also use Australian textiles, tableware and fashion designers? Do we sensitively include artists/performers as an integral part of the function? Too often they are plonked – playing ambient music as background (which is insulting to artists) or a "popular" artist flown in for an

interval gig. We often profile our capabilities in highly segmented ways – an education expo; a meat expo etc. without imagining how synergies might be developed and a more realistic and holistic profile projected.

Contributing to the value-add supply chain

We have a primary and raw produce mentality in the way we present to the world. Yes, we are regarded as a quarry by many countries. We should think of promoting our capacity to value add. We have, for example, silicone-rich sands that are excellent for glassmaking. Do we use our glassware in promotions? We have gold, diamonds and other precious gems, do we use our jewellery designers to promote them? We have high quality fine merino wool. Do we use our textile designers and fashion designers to promote it?

C) How can we help culture help boost export performance?

1) A gifts commissioning project

Gifts are an important element in creating relationships. They are imbued with deep meaning by recipients in some countries. Australia has a wealth of natural timbers, minerals and gemstones and talented artists, designers and craftspeople. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a national project for creative people to submit concepts for distinctly Australian gifts (according to specific and perhaps graded criteria); for a long short-list to be allocated the funds to develop a marquette from which a final selection would be made. The selected gift concepts would be manufactured, and made available for government delegations and perhaps for purchase by others.

2) A coherent design concept

A coherent approach to the design of all events, symbols and presentations around trade promotions and negotiations would help communicate a clearly identifiable and recognisable identity for Australia as a trading partner.

3) Integration of an artistic presence

Australia has a lively, innovative and dynamic arts industry of which we can be proud. Many of our artists and arts companies enjoy high profiles on the international stage. Consideration should be given to developing ways of integrating this international arts success with the drive to improve our export performance. Our trade delegations and negotiations, particularly with the countries of our geopolitical region, should include a greater artistic presence.

4) Culture should be excluded from any further free trade agreements.

Consideration should be given to negotiating exclusions for cultural products from future free trade agreements. The impact of, in particular, the USA/Australia Free Trade Agreement on the Australian audio-visual sector has been detrimental. Australian films now account for around just five percent of cinema box office in Australia. The music industry is facing similar challenges. There are internationally recognised precedents for such an exclusion.

5) A dedicated advocacy body

For culture to play its role in boosting our export performance we need a coordinated approach. Funding cuts and indecision have meant that Australia has no clearly defined and dedicated international cultural advocacy body akin to the British Council. DFAT's Australia International Cultural Council (AICC) has been mothballed. The Images of Australia Branch and the Australia Council have both undertaken relevant activities but neither of them have the critical mass, funding or organisational focus to fill the role of a high-profile international advocacy body. Perhaps consideration should be given to the creation of a single, Commonwealth-funded statutory body along the lines of the British Council to undertake cultural diplomacy, the international promotion of Australian arts and cultural activity and to assist in the international representation of Australia's cultural interests.