

Impact Case Study

Australian Sister Cities and Local Government Collaboration

Introduction



Sister-city programs are an important way for Australian cities to connect with other countries to share ideas of mutual interest and benefit.

Sister city relationships are a valuable mechanism for connections, building friendships and resource networks, and providing cultural, educational and economic benefits for both parties.

Although Sister Cities Australia was not formally formed until 1979, Australia had been connecting with sister cities in the UK as early as 1939 and with the USA's program in 1956, when Bega, New South Wales, connected with Lyttleton, Colorado.

Background



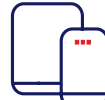
Members from the Centre for Organisations and Social Change (COSC) including Professor Timothy Bartram and Dr Matthew Walker, have explored Australian sister cities

and their counterparts to improve and enhance their strengths, goals, and activities. They aim to develop diverse international partnerships and communicate their benefits.

Ways to manage the challenges – including limited council resources, concerns about expenditure, difficulty in obtaining consistent leadership support, and cultural gaps that need to be bridged for effective collaboration – are also examined.

Since 2018, this research team has conducted two projects to explore these aspects of sister cities: *Australia-China Sister Cities: Seizing Opportunities Together (2018-19)* and *Australia-Japan Local Government Collaboration: Enriching communities through international engagement (2022-23)*.

The Research



1. Australia-China Sister Cities: Seizing Opportunities Together (2018-19)

Using surveys and existing case studies, the researchers examined the management structure, key activities, best practices, and the benefits and challenges for local communities in 29 of 70 sister city relationships between Australia and China.

The survey showed that councils had limited resources to work on the relationship, including personnel and budget. Motivations for entering the program included tourism, cultural and educational exchange, investment/trade, and creating international goodwill. Activities included visits from key council personnel, community-based groups, citizens, and industry delegations, as well as student and cultural exchanges and specially organised events.

The study found four key benefits to the sister city relationships:

- promoting communication between communities, regardless of what's happening in national politics
- establishing long-term friendships, trust and goodwill between individuals and communities
- giving member cities access to global networks of knowledge, resources and opportunities
- developing strong cultural, educational and economic benefits for both countries.

The main challenges for the relationships included: understanding the strengths that each council brought to the relationship; developing clear strategic goals; creating a strong communications strategy of the benefits and to ensure a shared vision; diversifying partnership models to include more flexible short-term projects; and managing inactive sister city partnerships.

2. Australia-Japan Local Government Collaboration: Enriching communities through international engagement (2022-23).

A similar research project which again included COSC members Professor Bartram and Dr Walker, together with collaborators Professor Hiroaki Mori (Senshu University) and Tse Leng Tham (ESCP Germany), explored the 60 years of relationships in Australian-Japanese sister cities. Of over 100 relationships, 43 local councils responded to a survey on their views and experiences and the achievements of their collaborations. Interviews were conducted in Australia and Japan for further insight.

The study found that goodwill and trust provided strong foundations for these sister city relationships, with cultural and educational exchanges helping participants to develop greater cultural understanding and linguistic proficiency. Collaborative environmental protection programs reflected shared interests.

Challenges arose in bridging the differences in traditions, landscapes and cultures, though these also presented opportunities for knowledge sharing and development of tourism. Business exchange was limited, in part through barriers in local government organisation: the differences in local council structure need consideration to facilitate collaboration and efficient outcomes.

Relationships remained robust even with the impact of Covid-19, partly through the use of technology. Further opportunities exist to strengthen and resource these relationships, which could bring innovative solutions to complex community challenges within a framework of sustainability and resilience.

Funding support and/or institutional support



The *Australia-China Sister Cities: Seizing Opportunities Together* report was funded by the Australia-China Council.

The *Australia-Japan Local Government Collaboration: Enriching communities through international engagement* report was funded by the Australia-Japan Foundation.

Project outcomes



1. Australia-China Sister Cities: Seizing Opportunities Together

Download the report:

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336716646_Australia-China_Sister_Cities_Seizing_Opportunities_Together

Media

The role of Australian local government in economic development: Building international engagement capacity, by Walker, M., Fan, X., Huang, X., Bartram, T. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 1 – 21, 2022

- <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-8500.12562>

After 40 years of Australian-Chinese sister cities, how are they faring?, *The Conversation*, 30 January 2020

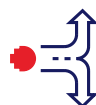
- <https://theconversation.com/after-40-years-of-australian-chinese-sister-cities-how-are-they-faring-128549>

2. Australia-Japan Local Government Collaboration: Enriching communities through international engagement

Download the report:

- https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373041344_Australia-Japan_Local_Government_Collaboration_Enriching_Communities_through_International_Engagement

Next Steps



The Australia-Japan Local Government Collaboration project concluded at the end of 2023. The project team is considering a number of papers addressing its conclusions.

COSC Research Theme

- Multicultural inclusion and organisations

This theme explores issues of inclusion and exclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse people, migrants, refugees and indigenous communities in workplaces and for organisations.