

70 Years of Australian-American Educational Relations¹

By Pablo Cristóbal Jiménez Lobeira PhD FIML²

The focus of Australia-US relations is most often on mutual security and economic ties. But it is also important to acknowledge the significant role that educational linkages and exchanges have played in furthering the bond between the two countries.

In any analysis of Australian foreign policy the United States occupies a prominent place. Be it on occasion of the upcoming [elections in Australia](#) or the role of Australia [in Asia-Pacific geopolitics](#), and regardless of the [differences or similarities in attitudes about key issues](#) between Australians and Americans, Australia and the United States [greatly matter to each other](#) in several ways.

In defence, record of Australian and American troops fighting together goes as far back as the [Battle of Hamel](#) in France (1918), decades before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries took place in 1940 and the Australia, New Zealand & United States ([ANZUS](#)) [Security Treaty](#) was signed in 1951. According to the [DFAT U.S. brief](#) the ANZUS Treaty is “Australia’s pre-eminent security treaty alliance and enjoys broad bipartisan support”.

As for the economy, the [Australia-United States Free Trade Agreement](#) that came into effect in 2005 served to enhance an already robust binational economic relationship. The United States is [Australia’s largest investor](#) (ten times bigger than China) and its second largest trading partner. At the same time, the U.S. is the [single largest destination of outbound Australian investment](#), with over a quarter of all Australian overseas investment going to the United States (more than seven times the amount going to China).

However [the first treaty signed between the two countries](#) was an “Agreement between the Government of Australia and the Government of the United States of America for the Use of Funds made available in accordance with the Agreement on Settlement of Lend-Lease, Reciprocal Aid, Surplus War Property and Claims of 7 June 1946,” (aka the “[Fulbright Agreement](#)”) which entered into force on the 26th of November 1949. Thanks to this agreement, since 1950 over 5,100 Australians and Americans have received scholarships to undertake academic degrees or research visits in the U.S. and Australia respectively. [According to DFAT](#), around 11,000 Americans were studying at Australian education institutions in 2017, with 2,500 Australians pursuing full-time academic studies in the U.S. at approximately the same time. [Data from the Institute of international Education](#) indicate that the number of Americans studying in Australia in 2018 was 9,112, while that of Australians studying in the U.S. in 2016 was 5,061.

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² Alumni Relations Manager, Australian-American Fulbright Commission and Adjunct Lecturer in Philosophy, The University of Notre Dame Australia.

Among other icons of the educational partnership between the U.S. and Australia are: the [Australian-American Fulbright Commission](#) (formerly the "[Australian-American Educational Foundation](#)" and originally the "[United States Educational Foundation in Australia](#)"); the [United States Study Centre](#), opened in 2007 at the University of Sydney with a \$25 million endowment and the [Perth USAsia Centre](#), opened at the University of Western Australia in 2012, with the Australian Government announcing an additional \$12 million for these centres in 2018; the [American Australian Association](#), the [Australian American Association](#); and the [Australian American Leadership Dialogue](#).

Numbers are important, but the quality of the educational exchanges is highly relevant too, in terms of the transformational impact these exchanges have not only on the individuals undertaking them but also for their countries of origin and adoption. Among many other possible examples, two can illustrate this point.

Jill Ker Conway was born in New South Wales in 1934 and completed a history degree at the University of Sydney in 1958. [A Fulbright Scholarship allowed her to move to the U.S. in 1960, where she earned a PhD at Harvard in 1969](#). After her marriage to John Conway they both accepted teaching positions in Canada. Jill eventually became a dean (1970) and then the first female [vice president of the University of Toronto \(1973\)](#), and [president of Smith College in Massachusetts \(1975\)](#). She authored [bestselling memoir books](#) *The Road from Coorain*, *True North* and *A Woman's Education*. In 2013 she was both awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama, and appointed an Honorary Companion of the Order of Australia by the Australian Government for "eminent service to the community, particularly women, as an author, academic and through leadership roles with corporations, foundations, universities and philanthropic groups". Conway died in Boston last year.

Brian Schmidt was born in Montana in 1967. He received undergraduate degrees in Astronomy and Physics from the University of Arizona in 1989, and earned an Astronomy Master's degree (1992) and a PhD (1993) from Harvard University. [A Fellow of the Australian Academy of Science, The United States Academy of Science, and the Royal Society](#), he was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 2013. In 2011 he was awarded (together with three other researchers) the [Nobel Prize in Physics](#) "for the discovery of the accelerating expansion of the Universe through observations of distant supernovae." Schmidt is currently the Vice-Chancellor, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Australian National University, and [continues his academic activity there](#) as a Distinguished Professor of Astronomy.

Australian-American defence and economic relations are evidently significant in the life of both countries, today as it was in the twentieth century. But the importance of their academic, research and cultural exchanges, as attested in the stories of thousands of Australians and Americans on both sides of the Pacific [to this day](#), should not be overlooked. It is these interactions that provide the best hope for a constructive and fruitful relation between our two countries into the twentieth-first century.