

Australian Institute of International Affairs Internship

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I was very apprehensive and full of nerves upon arriving at the AIIA National Office Headquarters Canberra to begin working as a research intern for the AIIA for three months. I had never undertaken an internship before and had no idea what to expect. Moreover, coming down from the Gold Coast to live in Canberra – what seemed like another country – was more daunting than I had anticipated: what was this weird, sprawled city of monuments and why, just south of ‘civic’? (the city centre) could I drive through paddocks with grazing horses? The whole city seemed foreign to me and the climate seemed very dry having come from humid South East Queensland.

None-the-less, I took a deep breath and boldly entered the AIIA National Office. I was soon greeted by John Robbins, the National Deputy Director and Melissa Conley Tyler, the National Executive Director. Both John and Melissa immediately put me at ease. John was warm, friendly, and approachable and Melissa equally so. John provided the new interns with a thorough introductory/housekeeping session and genuinely offered his assistance and support for anything that we may need during our stay in Canberra (which was, for all of us, a foreign city). Afterwards, Melissa brought us up to speed on what projects the AIIA was working on and discussed which events, publications and research each individual intern would be responsible for.

I was delighted that the AIIA was jointly hosting a ‘Global Korea, Global Australia’ roundtable event with the Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security (IFANS) of South Korea and that I would be given opportunity to assist in making this event run seamlessly. Over the course of my tertiary studies the Koreas had been my niche area of interest and this event would bring together the ‘who’s who’ of Korea experts.

After confirming our tasks for the next few weeks, I had a clear sense of what projects I would be involved in and greatly appreciated the flexibility of tasks that Melissa offered. Later that day, I attended an event held by the AIIA ACT Branch (a talk on Afghanistan) and was lucky enough to meet the Ambassador of Afghanistan. The following morning – only my second day at the AIIA – I went with Melissa to meet the Charge d’Affairs of the Netherlands at the Netherlands Embassy. So, only a day and a half in to my internship, I had met an Ambassador and a Charge d’Affairs. I felt that, after six years of tertiary study focused solely on international relations, the AIIA was going to be my gateway into a career in foreign affairs.

My daily activities included assisting with the delivery of National Office events, drafting research and book proposals, editing documents for publication, compiling papers for internal meetings, minute taking at meetings and updating the AIIA website. I was also given responsibility for contacting high ranking government officials and drafting formal letters. I had numerous opportunities to meet people in foreign affairs, government, business and academia, which gave me incredible exposure and fantastic networking opportunities. Melissa always tried to enhance my

networking opportunities, introducing me to as many people as possible and letting them know my individual strengths and interests.

In addition, I received formal training from Melissa in the form of editing, proposal and grant writing workshops. These workshops were a welcome surprise as they were not advertised on the AIIA website. This free training formed a valuable component of my experience. In particular, the proposal writing workshop helped me understand how to plan an event from conception to completion while the grant writing seminar has given me the confidence necessary to approach potential funders in future (such as if I ever decide to undertake a PhD).

While I was assigned some tasks that were unrelated to the international relations field (for example, calculating land rent repayments, liaising with real estate agents on leasing issues, fixing the telephone message service) I realised that everyone had to assist in some small way with maintaining the systems and procedures that contribute to the running of a national, non-profit organisation.

Overall, the work that I was given was very enjoyable and allowed me to use a range of my professional skills and knowledge. Moreover, the reward for the work that I did (in the form of dinners, invitations to special events and networking) was significant. Melissa made it very clear throughout the internship that I could go to her with any questions or concerns and I feel that she did everything possible to match interns with work that suited their own individual interests and strengths.

Looking back over my whole experience at the AIIA I can say with confidence and excitement that the internship allowed me to break into a very competitive field. The 'Global Korea, Global Australia' event gave me the opportunity to network with foreign affairs and academic elites and led to an invitation to attend a study tour of North Korea as well as dinner with the South Korean Ambassador at his private residence; my attendance at a Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific conference in Sydney led me to meet the Executive Director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, members of the US State Department and influential people from the Lowy Institute; and my general work for the AIIA led to a paid role working for a former highly distinguished Australian Ambassador. In short, the AIIA internship put me in contact with people whom I may never have met working in another setting such as a solely government, academic or business-oriented environment.

One final, but by no means trivial, comment I want to make relates to the camaraderie of the AIIA national office. The other interns that I worked with on a day-to-day basis were extremely enthusiastic and supportive. Everyone helped everyone else whenever the need arose. The friendships that I developed while working for the AIIA made the work more enjoyable and my experience better.

I feel that in years to come I will look back on my time in Canberra with fond memories and with the firm belief that it was the start of my career in foreign affairs.