

## **Public Affairs Internship – Reflective Essay**

### **Australian Institute of International Affairs – National Research Intern**

I was a summer intern at the National Office of the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) from December 2011 to February 2012. The Institute is best characterised as an independent, non-profit organisation that promotes interest in and understanding of international affairs in Australia and is currently ranked in the top ten think-tanks in Asia. It achieves its mission by organising events and education programs across the country. It also publishes the Australian Journal of International Affairs, amongst other books and commentaries.

#### ***Major Tasks and Activities***

During my internship, I undertook a wide range of tasks and activities. My principal task at the Institute was to write its submission to the Commonwealth Government's White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century. This paper was aimed at making policy recommendations to the government to improve Australia's engagement with Asia. This involved receiving ideas and feedback from the AIIA's various branches and its board members as well as research into policy areas that were relevant to the White Paper where the Institute felt it had enough expertise or valuable input to make a contribution. The research involved examining existing policies in these areas and statistics that pointed to a need for policy change. The paper I produced was subsequently edited by the AIIA's National Executive Director, Ms Melissa Conley Tyler, who was my supervisor throughout the internship.

As part of the submission process, the Institute was invited to a consultation meeting with the head of the White Paper Special Advisory Panel, Dr Ken Henry AC. I attended the consultation along with Melissa and several of the Institute's board members and Councillors. Following from this consultation, the Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce invited the AIIA to partner it in furthering its community engagement efforts. This gave rise to another one of my major tasks - the development of an online media strategy, to be approved and funded by the

government and implemented by the AIIA. This task was especially challenging and fulfilling as there was no framework for me to follow and apart from a consideration of available resources, I was given very few boundaries within which I needed to work. The project involved creating a proposal of relevant ideas and marketing options and researching media platforms. This task allowed me to approach the project from a non-traditional dimension and integrate my real-world knowledge of new media with the public policy agenda of both the AIIA and the Taskforce.

Another major project I undertook was the planning of the AIIA's inaugural Town Hall Meeting. This event was to be held in a regional centre outside of Australia's major cities and was aimed at including a wider public audience in the discussion about Australia's international affairs. This task involved writing an event proposal, planning a budget and working timeline and researching potential locations, speakers and partner organisations. Some research was also necessary to determine how Australia's foreign policy affects people living in particular regional areas. In addition, I drafted letters to the Mayor of the town, the Vice-Chancellor of the local university as well as a prominent industrialist, seeking their assistance with the event.

Another valuable experience I had was liaising with the office of the AIIA's Honorary Patron, Governor-General Quentin Bryce AC. I worked on this project with another intern, writing a proposal outlining Her Excellency's involvement in the AIIA's future events. Like the previous task, this provided valuable real-world experience of formal communications with external organisations or individuals.

I was also assigned the role of webmaster during my time at the organisation. This was a task that I initially did not expect to encounter when applying for the internship but one that I am grateful for as it boosted my skills in an area in which I am unlikely to gain much practical experience otherwise. I was also tasked with writing various media releases for the AIIA. These included announcements about the organisation's various events, activities and publications. This gave me an opportunity to develop skills related to the Media

and Communications aspect of my degree. Another activity which allowed me to integrate both of my majors was the task of editing some of the contributions to the one of the AIIA's publications. This particular task involved copy editing two academic articles on Taiwan's general elections.

### ***Supervision***

Ms Conley Tyler supervised me throughout my internship. She is based in Melbourne and travels to Canberra three days per week fortnightly. As a result, some of the supervision took place over the phone or on Skype. This did not adversely affect the adequacy or quality of the instruction, guidance and feedback I received from Melissa. I found her very approachable and encouraging throughout my time with the AIIA.

The work process usually involved Melissa sending me an email or speaking to me about the general objective of a particular task. If applicable, she would point out whether I could refer to an earlier event, publication or document that the organisation had produced for guidance. I was allowed to do the vast majority of the research, planning and writing for each of the submissions, proposals and media releases I produced. I would then email Melissa a draft copy of the document I had prepared and she would edit it, returning it to me to make the necessary changes. In the case of media releases, I was allowed to publish them on the website without her checking them.

In addition to the individual mentoring provided, Melissa provided a series of group training workshops for all the interns in the office. The first was a training course on editing which included practices on copy-editing, information about house styles and other general rules to be followed when coordinating one of the organisation's publications. Skills from the workshop were put to use when editing academics' submissions to the AIIA's Policy Commentary on the 2012 Taiwan elections.

The second workshop taught skills on proposal writing for grants. This was a particularly useful workshop as some of the skills taught were unfamiliar to me

before I started the internship. I developed these skills throughout the internship as most of my major tasks involved writing proposals for events. Although these particular proposals were not intended for grant applications, I found that many of the skills from this workshop were applicable to all types of proposals.

The AIIA's Deputy Director John Robbins provided administrative support and guidance. Although John works part-time, he was always contactable by mobile phone. It was very helpful to receive secondary supervision from a staff member who was based in Canberra. John was familiar with the logistical aspects of the AIIA's operations and his support was vital to completing everyday tasks like filing documents, securing logistical needs for events and meetings as well as general enquiries that required urgent attention. I appreciated that John took the time, at the commencement of my internship, to explain how his and Melissa's roles and duties were divided as this made it clear which supervisor I should approach for different types of needs.

### ***Expectations and Key Learning Opportunities***

The internship provided me with ample opportunity to learn new skills and develop existing ones. At a fundamental level, I believe my writing skills have improved tremendously. I feel confident that I am now better able to write clearly and succinctly, without the convoluted language commonly found in academic writing.

Another important skill I developed was the ability to think strategically about the progress of my work. This meant being able to anticipate the steps following the completion of one stage of a task. I became more adept at foreseeing what Melissa, or others to whom I was submitting work, may require next at this allowed me to complete tasks thoroughly and in a time-efficient manner. In my opinion, this is the most useful skill I developed during the internship.

I also gained knowledge of the key influencers in Australia's international affairs, information that will be useful not only for the rest of my degree but for a future career in this sector. The events, meetings and public hearings that I attended as

part of the internship exposed to some of the biggest players in the Australia's international affairs sector. As part of the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century submission process, I attended a meeting with not only Dr Ken Henry, but senior members of the Australia in the Asian Century Taskforce, with whom I would later communicate with in order to create a media plan to increase the Taskforce's engagement with youth and the general public. At an AIIA seminar on the topic of Smart Power, I was exposed to networking opportunities with Australia's leading officials in the Department of Defence and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Many of the events also allowed me to meet and interact with current and former diplomats, government officials and eminent academics in the area of international affairs.

My expectations of the organisation's reach and influence was significantly altered during this internship. To this date, I had been somewhat unaware of the major role that a non-profit organisation could play in the discussion of public policy in Australia. I did appreciate that non-profit organisations and think tanks often make recommendations and submissions to government departments. However, the AIIA dealt with high level leadership both within Australia and globally, garnering respect and recognition for their contribution to international affairs debate and decision-making. The organisation runs more than 200 events per year and creates several publications, all of which are well regarded in the international affairs community.

I was also surprised at how the AIIA managed to achieve the above on very limited resources and very few paid staff. I believe this made the internship that much more valuable, given that interns were responsible for a bulk of the fundamental processes that went into the planning of events and preparation of publications. I was given a wider range of responsibilities than I had anticipated and I believe that this exponentially increased the skills I developed and the rate at which I developed them.

### ***Public Policy***

The AIIA provides a forum for discussion of international affairs in Australia and the factors that affect them. It characterises itself as a “knowledge-broker” in the area, disseminating ideas without promoting its own institutional views, educating the community, especially youth and collaborating with sister institutes from all over the world as well as government departments in Australia. Although the organisation does not directly formulate or implement policy, it makes submissions and recommendations to the government. A good example of this is the AIIA’s submission to the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century, which was my major project during the internship. This document made policy recommendations to the government that would boost meaningful engagement between Australia and Asia in a way that would ensure Australia’s prosperity in the future.

My academic study of public policy was useful to the extent that it gave me background knowledge to some of the concepts expounded on in the AIIA’s seminars and publications. This facilitated the ease with which I was able to research topics for events or submissions. However, as expected, policy making in the reality is a long-term process which depends less on theory than it does on political, social and economic factors. One important lesson I learnt is that there is always a need to couch arguments for a policy recommendation in the potential economic and political benefits that it may bring. Arguably a cynical view, these are often the deciding factor for implementing a policy in the international affairs sector.

### ***Performance Review***

The internship helped me to identify which of my skills require further development. First, I believe that although I am good at propagating ideas and formulating policy considerations, my work would have benefited from in-depth statistical analysis. This is a research skill that I should develop further. Second, I need to further develop my awareness of the economic and political influencers and consequences of a particular policy, especially in the context of making policy recommendations. In my opinion, practical work experience reinforces

this aspect of consideration, which is often not examined in-depth in the academic study of public policy theory.

The internship overall was a very positive learning experience for me and helped to reinforced my career choice. The AIIA rewards its interns with ample opportunities to develop their skills and learn new ones, making it a valuable experience for any young person interested in international affairs.