

## Australian Expatriates: Who Are They?

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Australia is made up of 20 million people and, interestingly enough, over one million of the total population live overseas. Australians living abroad are known as 'expatriates' and they have a particular profile: highly educated and better skilled than their counterparts at home. Thus, on the one hand, a general division may be established between expatriates and Australians living at home; on the other, a particular division between expatriates themselves, which depends on the individual reasons that push them to leave Australia. At this point, it is important to outline the general reasons that lead expatriates to go overseas. To begin with, in terms of migration, Australia is both historically and contemporarily linked to other countries. Secondly, Australia is geographically isolated and, therefore, far away from the main global markets. Finally, it is quite right to conclude that although the logical assumption of expatriation is distance, expatriates are mentally, and often emotionally, linked to Australia and, therefore, the understanding of their situation is more positive than negative.

Keywords: expatriation, distance, history, culture, repatriation, collective consciousness.

Australia is well-known as a country made up of immigrants. Indeed, more and more new migrants arrive at those shores. However, a paradoxical and parallel phenomenon is taking place: while the immigrant population grows, a large number of Australian citizens are leaving the country. Those emigrants are called 'expatriates'. The reasons that push them to leave their country of birth to do so are specific: "[e]xpatriates choose to live in another country mostly for personal reasons, often for more or less defined periods of time" (Kokanovic, 2006: 353). Within Australia, expatriates represent the two sides of the same coin: they can be defined both in positive and negative terms. Certainly, expatriates are subjects of controversy in their homeland but they are also unknown people for most of the Australians living in the country. Thus,

the aim of this paper is to provide a sociological description of the so-called expatriates. In order to do so, the essay will be divided into three main parts. The first part will be a general study of some statistics, such as the number of expatriates and the places where they go, which will lead us to state where divisions take place. Secondly, and taking the statistics as a reference, the essay will provide the different reasons that explain why expatriates leave Australia and go to specific places. In this light, the paper will argue that there is a strong relationship between the places expatriates choose to go and the cultural background of Australia and it will emphasise, on the one hand, the historical facts that inexorably link Australia to Europe and, on the other; the geographical and the economic reasons. Thirdly, this paper will examine the *Australianness* of Australians.

Over one million Australians live overseas, that is, almost 5% of a total population of 20 million inhabitants (ACCI, 2004:1). Consequently, it is quite right to talk about two kinds of Australians: those living inside the country and those living overseas. The dichotomy between one and the other is evident. Indeed, “[t]he categories of class, race, and gender have been used as the primary indicators of social division” (Papastergiadis, 2006: 336) and, in general, expatriates have a particular profile that differentiates them from the rest of Australians. In this way, education becomes a key factor. As a matter of fact, the vast majority of expatriates tend to be highly educated and better skilled than their counterparts at home. Evidence of this is found in the data provided by a study of Australian emigration: while 42% of the Australian emigrants have a post-graduate degree, only 7% of the residents in Australia have one (ACCI, 2004: 1).

Another evident and powerful factor that divides Australians living in the country and expatriates is distance, which can be either physical or mental. The former means the actual distance, the geographical distance that separates the physical body from the place of birth, in this case Australia, and their

people. The latter is more complex: it is the feeling of not belonging to the place in which one lives and, therefore, it may lead to alienation. In both cases, the offshoot is their own perception as outsiders (Hage, 2006: 342-345). However, the division may not only be traced between those Australians in Australia and those overseas, but also between expatriates themselves. In this particular case, the difference depends basically on the place they choose to live. Therefore, at this stage, it is important to work out the destinations of choice for expatriates, which are: the United Kingdom (21%); New Zealand (17%); the United States (16%); and Hong Kong and Singapore (around 6%) (ACCI, 2004: 1). Demographically speaking, statistics show that there is a link between the country of destination and sex and age. Indeed, more females move to the UK, and more males to the US. Thus, those Australians going to the US tend to be older than those going to the UK:

the movement to the US is dominated by young adults, but not to the same extent as the movement to the UK where two-thirds of the migrants are aged between 20 and 29 years compared to less than a third of those going to the USA (Hugo, 2006: 359).

At this point, the question that arises from all the data provided above is why do Australians decide to leave their own country?

The reasons why they decide to leave and become expatriates are various and can be explained at different levels. Culturally, it is factual to state that Australia has an affinity with countries such as the UK and the US. The relationship with the former is quite clear: Australia is a very British country and there are “dense networks of close attachment and inter-familial connections between the imperial ‘core’ (Britain) and an Australia that, certainly in the 1940s, could still be characterised as an example of a ‘colonial fragment’ society” (Goldlust, 2006: 350). Today, the UK is the favourite place to move for Australian expatriates, as Graeme Hugo points out: “estimates of the number of Australians in the UK are as high as 300,000 and partly reflect strong

links forged during colonial times” (Hugo, 2006: 359). Besides, history connects Australia to the motherland and, indeed, Australia’s cultural roots are to be found in England:

from 1788 until the beginning of World War I in 1914, Australia attracted around 2 million settlers from the United Kingdom. If you include those who were transported as convicts, most came from England but there were substantial minorities from Scotland and Ireland (Goldlust, 2006: 349).

The latter suggests that many of those expatriates are the grandchildren of those English immigrants. Thus, from this data it may be asserted that there is a process of “repatriation” through which Australians go back to their “home” country or rather to their roots. The Australian writer Tara Brabazon explains, theoretically, “Britain is not our home. We can not return there as citizens. We are foreigners to the country represented in our national flag” (Brabazon, 2006: 147). However and ironically enough, even today, as Brabazon points out, Britain is too present in Australia’s daily life: “our coinage still has the Queen’s profile on one side. The Australian flag displays the Union Jack in the corner” (Brabazon, 2006: 146). Thus, Britain becomes a myth, a mirror in which Australia can look at itself. In other words, metaphorically speaking, those Australian expatriates in England are meeting the country which “invented” them as a way to see themselves. Indeed, in most cases human beings need to know the place where their roots come from in order to trace their identity.

Apart from the above-mentioned reasons, Australia, the UK and the US share a language: English. This represents a powerful tool that not only facilitates their communicative relationships, but also encourages Australians to move to other English speaking countries. The impact of media may also explain and reinforce the cultural connections between the UK, the US and Australia. Popular series and shows arrive from both sides of the Atlantic, the UK and the US, and trans-Pacifically from the US to Australia. This media

impact can be seen as an over-simplification, but on closer examination, evidence suggests that these programs create models and some Australians project their dreams on the places where those shows are set. In this way, the US becomes, after the UK, one of the most popular destinations for Australian expatriates. On the other hand, the identification of Australia with the US may be found in historical facts: Australia was an ally against Japan in World War Two, and the US was seen from then on as: “a powerful protector” (Kirkby, 2006: 181). However, the phenomenon of expatriation is today much more complex and can be studied as the consequence of the status of Australia as a country made up of immigrants. Indeed, there is a logical relationship between immigration and expatriation: expatriates to Europe and South-East Asia may be the children of immigrants, now Australian citizens, but whose roots lay in their parents’ countries.

Alternatively, the countries and continents outlined above offer the possibility to move around with more or less difficulty but, certainly, in an easier way than in Australia. In Europe, for instance, distances are not as big as in Australia, and from London it is easy and cheap to fly around the European continent. As Hugo explains: “[a] large number of young Australians who are on working holidays use the UK as a base for travelling in Europe” (Hugo, 2006: 359). In geographical terms, Australia is separated from the rest of the world, and especially, from its mother continent: Europe. As a consequence, Australia presents a contradiction: physically the country is close to Asia and, therefore, may be seen as an eastern country but, psychologically, the general conception is that Australia belongs culturally to Europe and, as such, it is classified as a western country. The isolation in which Australia is geographically located embraces significantly the economic arena. Indeed, Australia is far away from the main global marketplaces. In this way, economic reasons may be the most powerful forces that push those Australians to leave the country. Many expatriates look for new opportunities in bigger and leading

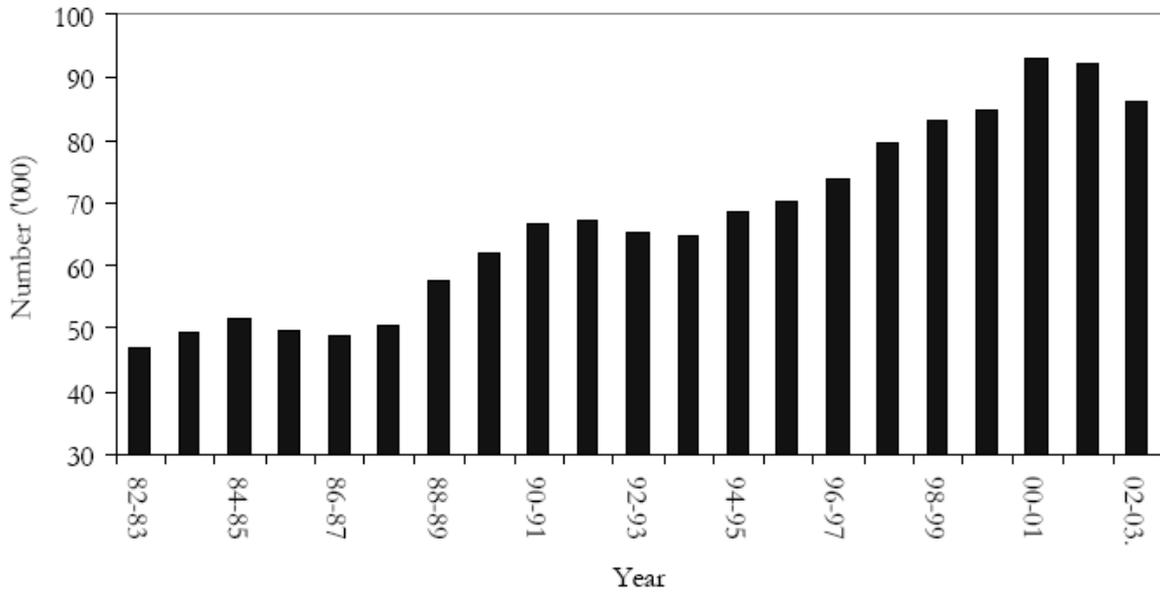
markets. In addition, the new technologies such as internet play an important role. In spite of Australia's physical isolation, the country is, technologically speaking, one of the most advanced in the world. As a result, some Australians may have moved to another country because they have met their partner via the internet. However, whether they leave because of cultural, historical, geographical or economic reasons, they are known and unified as one within Australia: Expatriates. The understanding of their situation within Australia is quite positive and can be illustrated through Durkheim's social theory: the collective consciousness.

The collective consciousness claims that "[w]ithout social obligations backed by moral force, the cooperation and reciprocity which social life requires would be absent" (Haralambos, Heald & Holborn, 2000: 635). At first glance, expatriates may be negatively depicted, since they leave the country. Besides, many are young, well educated and highly skilled and, consequently, many fear that Australia is experiencing a "brain drain" of its best workers that can negatively affect both the economy and society. However, many others see "brain drain" expatriates positively because they are part of the collective consciousness. Indeed, the vast majority are strongly linked to Australia and consider the country as their homeland. In this light, it is quite right to assert that expatriates contribute to the Australian nation and society in general and, therefore, they must be included as part of the national definition. In fact, Australia is disadvantaged by its geographic remoteness and small population and expatriates become ambassadors (Legal and Constitutional References Committee, 2005: 121). Expatriates are engaged with Australia because they have a self-understanding that relates them to their homeland: "[t]he collective conscience constrains individuals to act in terms of requirements of society" (Haralambos, Heald & Holborn, 2000: 635). And though physically absent, expatriates promote Australia overseas at all levels: socially, economically and culturally. Furthermore, when they return, "[t]hey have extended their

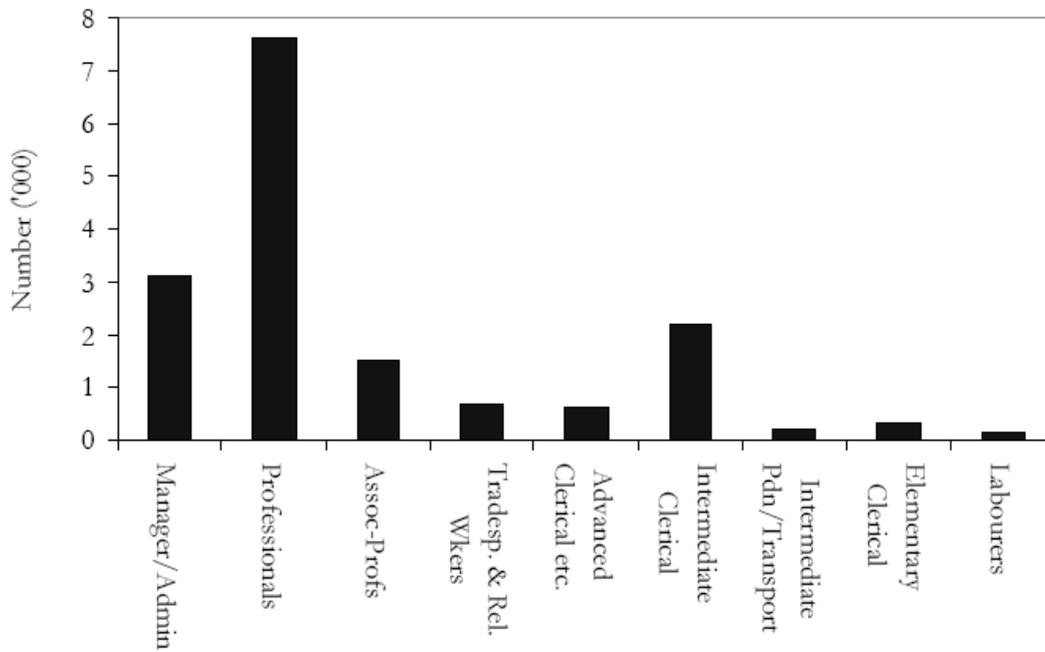
knowledge and experience while overseas and return with a network of overseas contacts that can benefit their work at home” (Hugo, 2006: 360).

Thus, expatriates assume an important role in Australia. They can be differentiated from the rest of Australians in various aspects. To begin with, their profile is quite clear: well-educated and highly skilled people. Indeed, it is precisely their “high” status that makes Australian expatriation relevant and controversial: would it bother anyone if the emigrants were unskilled Australian citizens? The answer is quite clear: NO, in capital letters. Consequently, it can be stated that there is an advantage for well-educated people since they can decide whether to stay at home or go overseas. If they choose the second option, that is, going overseas, the question that arises is why being skilled do they leave the “lucky country”? There is a wide range of answers to such a question. Roughly speaking, it may be due to cultural, geographical or economic reasons, however all of them interact. In the same way, expatriates are supposed to interact with Australia as they are part of the collective consciousness and contribute to the welfare of the Australian society. Yet, is it factual that they can positively contribute to Australia from afar, or is it an illusion and an idealisation? The answer is a question mark.

**Figure 1**  
**Long-Term Departures from Australia:**  
**Australian Residents, 1982-2003**



**Figure 2**  
**Australian-Born Permanent Departures by Occupation**  
**2002/03**



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