

Asia in focus

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The “bamboo ceiling” is bad business given that seven out of Australia’s top 10 export markets are in Asia



Glen Norris

Senior business reporter

glen.norris@news.com.au

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It is not only women who are badly under-represented in the nation’s boardrooms.

The dire lack of Asian faces at top corporate and political levels in Australia is a problem that must be addressed if we are to make the most of our place in the Asian century.

The so-called “bamboo ceiling”, which blocks the promotion of people of Asian descent, is hindering our integration with Asia. The Diversity Council of Australia warns that the under-representation of Asians at senior levels is an enormous waste of talent.

While almost 10 per cent of the Australian workforce is Asian born, only 4.9 per cent make it to senior executive level. In ASX 200 companies, only 1.9 per cent of Australian executives have Asian cultural origins compared with 9.6 per cent of the Australian community.

Australian of the Year David Morrison, who heads the Diversity Council, says the “bamboo ceiling” is bad business given that seven out of Australia’s top 10 export markets are in Asia.

When I lived in Asia, Australian companies would send a steady procession of white faces up to Hong Kong, Singapore or Thailand to broker deals or meet potential investors. The Australian politicians who visited Asian capitals were invariably of the Anglo Saxon persuasion. It undercut the whole pretence that Australia was moving closer to its region.

The excitement in Hong Kong when Labor’s Penny Wong reached the front benches was palpable because it was so rare for someone with a Cantonese surname to

be among the power elite in Australia. The Diversity Council has pointed to several factors preventing Asian talent from climbing the Australian corporate ladder.

Firstly, Asian Australians regularly experience cultural bias. One common belief is that Asian people are only good at following orders and not at providing creative leadership.

Secondly, the western leadership model with its emphasis on self-promotion and assertiveness still holds sway in Australia. This undervalues many of the Asian values of quiet reserve, deference and respect for seniority.

Thirdly, there is a lack of inclusion in the Australian corporate world with only one in four Asian employees having access to mentors or professional networks.

Brant Lowe, who runs local consulting firm Plan B Career Consulting, says the lack of integration with the community and unfamiliarity with Australian business culture can be a big barrier for Asian graduates of local universities trying to find work here.

As a career services manager at the University of Queensland, Lowe saw firsthand how Asian students can find it hard to network and ultimately develop opportunities for themselves.

“Their English language skills can actually deteriorate when they are here as a result of being more insular and staying within their comfort zone,” Lowe says.

Brisbane can be parochial and cliquey, making it even more difficult to get out and make friends and contacts.

“There needs to be an attitude change – how many Asians at the high corporate



Penny Wong’s rise to the top of Australian politics as a Labor senator has had a positive effect in Asian markets.

level or in parliament do you know?” Lowe asks.

Asialink Business director of research Megan Mulia said Australian companies needed to become Asia-capable, including hiring more people with an Asian language proficiency, cultural knowledge and ability to deal with Asian governments.

“There is a natural tendency for people from an Asian background to have that understanding but in some sense we have gone beyond that and now it is about having an Asian-capable workforce,” Mulia says.

It is clear to everyone that the bamboo ceiling needs to be dismantled. For Australia to reach its potential in Asia, we must be seen as more than a place where boardrooms and parliamentary benches are stacked with white, middle-aged men.