Innovation, Art Practice and Japan–Australia Cultural Exchange during the 1970s and 1980s

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Abstract
Since 1973, the Biennale of Sydney has been a significant site for Australians to experience the latest developments in the visual arts. As a device of soft diplomacy, selected artists, including those from Japan, were considered ambassadors for their nations and cross-cultural dialogue was an integral component of the exhibition platform. A statistical analysis of key Japanese artists and new media collectives at the Biennale up until 1990 indicates a significant bi-cultural relationship that coincided with an increase in the experimental use of technology in visual and performance arts. This reflected Japan’s profile as a techno-savvy nation, and the presence of Sony in Australia as a global producer of entertainment goods. At the same time, influential bi-cultural exchanges were being initiated by a dedicated group of arts professional working out of the Gryphon Gallery, Melbourne.

Biography
Dr Allison Holland is an independent researcher and curator. Previously Allison worked as a curator at the National Gallery of Victoria and State Library of Victoria and as a lecturer at The University of Melbourne.
Introduction
In Australia, visual arts organisations, communities and individual artists have actively engaged in cultural exchanges with artists from Asian nations, the longest and the most influential being with Japan. This paper considers the interactions between Japan and Australia at two particular sites, the Biennale of Sydney and the Gryphon Gallery in Melbourne, where Japanese visual arts, performance and technology impacted on an Australian audience during the 1970s and 1980s.

The scope of this paper is not to consider the philosophical or aesthetic influences on the works of individual Australian artists. Instead it will make a statistical analysis of exhibiting Japanese artists in the Biennale of Sydney to assert the continuity and comparative strength of a bi-cultural dialogue, particularly during the first two decades of the event. Identifying the exhibiting artists and considering their artistic production makes apparent how their inclusion reflected political and trade relations occurring at the time. In contrast to this government-initiated model, the grassroots initiative based at the Gryphon Gallery, at the time one of Melbourne’s most vibrant arts venues, adds another layer of complexity to the flow of bi-cultural influences during the 1980s. The Japan–Australia Cultural & Art Exchange Committee, in association with the Gryphon Gallery, initiated a series of exhibitions and artist exchanges that offered unique opportunities for the arts communities of both Melbourne and Tokyo.

These two disparate models illustrate the breadth of connectivity from broader political stimuli to initiatives that emerge out of personal relationships and a passion for the arts. Both environments fostered the presence of Japanese artists in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s, at a time when Japan was a significant trading partner, and advocated for meaningful ongoing cultural exchange between countries. These connections encouraged in specific Australian and Japanese artists cross-media art practices that often integrated technology. More specifically, the Biennale offered a unique platform to profile the integration of new technologies into contemporary art practice and the role of arts sponsorship at this time, in particular the support of Sony Corporation, Japan.

Biennale of Sydney
On 23 November 1973 against the backdrop of the Sydney Opera House, Australia's recently completed iconic landmark, the newly incumbent Prime Minister Gough Whitlam opened the inaugural Biennale of Sydney. The launch was a significant demonstration of soft diplomacy by the Australian government. That is, it was motivated by a diplomatic prerogative to promote the social values and ideology of one culture to another (Nye, 1990). This said, the Biennale had evolved out of the Transfield Art Prize and was the initiative of Franco Belgiorno-Nettis, the co-director of the development company Transfield Group. Modelled on the Venice Biennale, the Biennale was intended to counter the nation's cultural isolation by promoting current artistic practices of the Pacific Basin in Australia, alongside trends of other world centres (Biennale of Sydney, 1973: 3). The Biennale was a gesture of cultural openness that offered a space for the exhibition of new genres of artistic practice and made accessible the work by artists from the Asia-Pacific region. What is significant is that the Biennale's rationale meshed effectively with the Japanese government's current pro-active global cultural policy.

The predominantly Asian-Pacific representation in the first Biennale was indicative of Australia's current political and economic stability, growth and openness with its Asian neighbours. More significantly, during the period leading up to and coinciding with the Biennale, diplomatic ties with Japan, then our biggest trade partner, were being affirmed. In 1972 the incumbent Labor government hosted the first meeting of the Japan–Australia Ministerial Committee in Canberra. An agreement was established for Co-operation in the Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy, reflecting the current strength in the trade of energy and mineral resources. In the same year the Japanese Government established the Japan Foundation to promote, in a positive and systematic manner, international cultural exchange initiatives. With a global reach and a budget of ¥15 billion in 1973, the Foundation primarily supported language-study exchanges and
international tours of cultural exhibitions. Further, in a gesture of goodwill between the nations, Their Imperial Highnesses the Crown Prince and Crown Princess of Japan visited Australia in May 1973.

In the months preceding this visit Whitlam was pursuing his idea for a more comprehensive and mutually beneficial treaty between the two nations, one that would consider trade, culture and immigration (Woodard et al, 2007: 13). Then in October, during the Australia–Japan Ministerial Meeting in Tokyo, Whitlam and Japanese Foreign Minister Ohira announced to the press a proposed treaty to promote trade alliances and cultural awareness. Initially known as the Nippon–Australia Relations Agreement, or NARA treaty, the agreement was acknowledged by Prime Minster Tanaka during his visit to Australia in 1974, and finally ratified in 1976 (Stockwin, 2004). In that same year cultural ties developed further with Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) establishing the Australia–Japan Foundation (AJF). Its mission was to expand and develop contact and exchange between the peoples of the two nations in an effort to ‘project positive images’ of each cultural identity (Australia–Japan Foundation, 2011). With similar intent, the Japan Foundation established its office in Australia in 1977. Over the next four decades the AJF, the Japanese Embassy and the Japan Foundation would be key supporters of Japanese artists participating in the Biennale.

Table 1: Number of artists from Asia-Pacific nations at the Biennale of Sydney

Since the Biennale's inception, Japan has been represented at all but one of the eighteen festivals, with the exception being the third Biennale in 1978, European Dialogue (see Table 1). The third Biennale moved away from the event’s initial rationale to favour Euro-centric, above Asian-Pacific, cultural ties. Up until the 1990s, when increasingly artists from the People’s Republic of China began to participate, Japan was represented by markedly higher numbers of artists than any other Asian nation. Aside from the works of art in the exhibition, the Biennale’s art forums and public programs facilitated important opportunities for critical dialogue to open up between artists and art professionals of participating nations and therefore encouraged the formation of personal connections. More generally, the Biennale offered local Australian audiences a unique and immediate engagement with global cultures, such as Japan, with potential to affect long-term and positive impressions of other national identities as well as affirming our own. In short the Biennale optimised the exposure to, and engagement with, Japanese art production by an Australian audience that included both arts professionals and the general public.
One way to gauge Japan’s profile at the Biennale, and therefore its potential to assert cultural influence, is to consider the number of artists representing the country. Drawing on the artist listings in the exhibition catalogues to compare ‘estimated’ numbers from Japan against those from Australia and select other Asian countries offers further context. The participant numbers are approximations due to the fluid and subjective nature of certain artists’ transcultural identities. In many cases the Biennale organisers designated the nationality of artists in the catalogue. Where they did not, I gave preference to their associations with Japan and Australia over other nations. The most significant Biennales in terms of the number of Japanese artists represented during the 1970s and 1980s were the second (1976) and fourth (1982). The first Biennale (1973), however, is also worth considering as it set important precedents. Anthony Wintherbotham, the Biennale coordinator, selected thirty-seven artists from fifteen countries to present new dimensions in sculpture and painting. One artist from each of the eight Asian-Pacific nations participating was exhibited alongside twenty-one Australians and two New Zealanders. The inclusion of Asian artists was negotiated through DFAT implying that, at least for this initial exhibition, government imperatives were a strong driver in the selection of the artists.

In hindsight the selection of sculptor and architectural designer Minami Tada to represent Japan at the first Biennale suggests greater bilateral political and economic connectivities. Tada’s minimalist Poles (c. 1972) emphasised pure geometry and materiality, an aesthetic in keeping with Western perceptions of Japanese architecture since the late nineteenth century. As a synthesis of Japanese-ness, the design simplicity and technical sophistication of her glass and plastic sculpture promoted the nation’s culture as well as its strength as an industrial producer.

Between 1965 and 1981, Tada had been selected for the prestigious annual Contemporary Japanese Sculpture Award. Her national profile was elevated when in 1971, just prior to her selection for the Biennale, Tada won the Grand Prize at the 4th UBE Biennale International Open Sculpture Competition (UBE Tokiwa Museum, 2012). The award was established in 1961 by the Ube City Council in Yamaguchi Prefecture and sponsored by UBE Industries. Indicating an ongoing artist–industrial patron relationship, UBE Industries gifted Tada’s Space=Time II (1981) to the City of Newcastle, New South Wales in a city-to-city cultural initiative (Hedger, 1995: 119). This sister-city affiliation, like many established between Australia and Japan after 1971, was a gesture intended to encourage cultural appreciation beyond commerce. In the case of the cities of Ube and Newcastle it emerged from the trade negotiations between Coal & Allied (Australia) and UBE Industries (Japan) during the late 1970s (Hedger, 1995: 119).

Thomas McCullough, the director of the second Biennale, Recent International Forms in Art, was against any government imperatives influencing the selection process, stating ‘Ultimately it is in the best interests of everyone if art is allowed every freedom to be as undiplomatic as it likes’ (Biennale, 1976). In keeping with Belgiorno-Nettis’ initial vision, McCullough selected sculpture by artists from the Pacific Rim while also affirming strategic connections between Australia and Japan. Grouped in ‘family relationships’ based on their formal and conceptual qualities, installations by artists from the West Coast of the USA were placed beside those of seventeen Japanese, two Japanese-Korean and two Korean artists (Paroissien, 2004: 60). Aside from Japan and Korea no other Asian countries were represented. Amongst the seventeen Australians and two New Zealanders, Stelarc was listed as belonging to both nations (Biennale of Sydney, 1976: 12). Stelarc had been living in Japan since 1970 developing his knowledge and expertise in bio-feedback mechanisms and robotics. Although not performing for the Biennale, photo-documentation and video of his Stretched skin performance were exhibited.

The works of Kishio Suga and Korean born Lee U Fan were amongst the group of avant-garde Mono-ha artists selected for the Biennale. Mono-ha, literally translated as the ‘school of things’, was a group of sculptural artists who during the late 1960s and
1970s had an affinity with natural materials including earth, stone and wood, as well as manufactured iron and glass. The intent of Mono-ha was to actively engage the viewer in a relationship with an arrangement of interrelated objects and the particular space in which they are set. For the second Biennale, Fujiko Nakaya’s Fog sculpture (1976) was integrated into the gardens of Sydney's Domain where it delighted children with its veils of fine mist (Adams, 1977: 542). Subsequently acquired by the National Gallery of Australia, Nakaya’s Fog sculpture, set by the Marsh Pond, still enchants visitors to the Sculpture Garden today.

Nakaya had close ties with another Japanese artist featured in this Biennale, Tsuneo Nakai of the informal collective Video Hiroba (Public Square Video). Nakaya was also a noted video artist and founding member of Video Hiroba. This collective of fifteen artists, from such diverse backgrounds as printmaking, experimental film, music and computer graphics, were motivated to document and disseminate images of the contemporary human condition. Realising the potential of new technologies to go beyond traditional visual media and reach the masses, Video Hiroba were intent on revitalising the cultural periphery. With access to video technology initially limited and expensive, the group came together in February 1972 to share equipment and participate in Video Communication: Do it Yourself Kit at the Sony Building on Tokyo’s Ginza (Vital Signs, 2010: 78). Despite the collective’s disbanding in the mid-1970s, Nakaya maintained connections with individual artists through her Tokyo Gallery SCAN, which opened in Harajuku in the 1980s. Nakaya also played a fundamental role in nurturing the next generation of Japanese video artists (Vital Signs, 2010: 34).

Another video artist, Tsuneo Nakai, exhibited his installation Horizontal line (1976). Suspended centrally from the ceiling of the art space, a weighted plumbline was filmed with a video camera and the image fed to a nearby monitor. An additional five monitors, set in a circle around the plumb line, displayed a horizontal line on their screens. Nakai’s work was notable in that it highlighted the Sony Corporation’s role as a sponsor of the Biennale (Sydney Biennale, 1976: 2). In broad terms this fusing of the work of the Japanese artist with innovative technologies alluded to the nation’s profile as Australia’s key trade partner, especially in the area of electronics and entertainment technologies. It asserted Sony’s position as a world leader in innovative technologies, from transistor radios to colour televisions and, since the mid 1960s, video cameras. It also creatively promoted the portability and immediacy of Sony’s latest audio-visual equipment to both an artistic and domestic entertainment market. Finally, it preempted Sony Australia Ltd opening its national headquarters in Sydney in 1977, the year following the Biennale.

As a sponsor for the fourth Biennale, Vision in Disbelief (1982), Sony had unprecedented opportunities to showcase its latest products to an Australian audience. Sydney-trained artist William Wright returned from New York to take up the position as artistic director, electing to focus on performance, video and sound over more traditional media. Japan was the only Asian nation exhibiting, with twenty-three artists participating out of a total of 219 (Sydney Biennale, 1982: 224). The rationale of the exhibition thus overtly asserted Japan as a technologically progressive nation and more broadly promoted cultural innovation with cross-media arts practice.

Fujiko Nakaya was asked to return to the Biennale with an entourage of Video Hiroba members, including Katsuhiko Yamaguchi, Keigo Yamamoto, Toshio Matsumoto, Sakumi Hagiwara, Kobayashi Hakudo and Mako Idemitsu. These artists had international profiles, having all been selected for the 1978 Japan Video Art Festival in Buenos Aires. Two other video artists from the Festival had also been invited – Norio Imai from Art & Video Group and Ko Nakajima, the founder of the collective Video Earth Tokyo. In 1986, Nakajima was invited back to Sydney for the first Australian Video Festival to lead a workshop where he presented his Aniputer video computer (Australian, 1986). Kishio Suga, the Mono-ha artist from the second Biennale, and who was also at the Japan Video Art Festival, was selected again for the fourth Biennale. Also participating in the Biennale was Nam June Paik, representing the USA, who was acclaimed for his avant-garde use of technology in his installations and performances.
Korean born Paik had strong affiliations with art communities in several countries including Japan, Germany, Korea and USA. Aside from the experimental nature of many artists’ works, especially those using technology, the Biennale was now affirming its profile in the global network of art festivals; and began to move away from being a device of economic diplomacy towards one of cultural tourism.

Cross-cultural Reverberations in Melbourne

The Japan–Australia connectivities were gaining momentum in Australia and in particular Melbourne. In 1981, the year before the fourth Biennale, Melbourne hosted Yoin: Ideas from Japan Made in Australia (Yoin, 1981). This initiative relied heavily on the friendship of Stelarc, then living in Yokohama, Fujiko Nakaya from SCAN Gallery, Goji Hamada and Ken Scarlett, the Director of Gryphon Gallery. In the late 1970s Stelarc proposed to Scarlett a concept that culminated in this large-scale project that situated twenty-seven works across seven city sites. Acting as the host institution, Gryphon Gallery had an established reputation for presenting experimental art practices alongside traditional media. Situated in the Melbourne State College, the gallery offered a dense schedule of more than seventy exhibitions during the 1980s. Scarlett organised an ambitious program that included immersive environments, performance art and technologically integrated practices to a diverse audience of students, academics, artists and the general public.

The complexity and scale of Yoin made it a significant cross-cultural initiative that brought students from the key art colleges of Victoria into the sphere of established Japanese artists. Having modest financial support from the Australia–Japan Foundation of $7000, the project committee needed to minimise on the freight and insurance costs of bringing works from Japan. Under the supervision of lecturers in fine art such as Paula Dawson and Clive Murray-White, students from various art colleges were co-opted to undertake some of the sculptural work. Following a traditional Japanese teaching method, the students would learn through the process of production (Hamada, 2011). The construction process, along with the exhibition and associated events, offered unique opportunities for students from the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) and the Victorian College of the Arts to work alongside peers from Ballarat College of Advanced Education and Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education among others.

Working from sketches and photographs by established members of the Mono-ha and Koto-ha collectives, the students used local materials to recreate in situ sculptural installations. One artist, Morihiro Wada of Video Hiroba, was among the Koto-ha artists experimenting with integrated technology to produce a time-space encounter. Goji Hamada performed Soft Language – Shark at the National Gallery of Victoria and drew media attention when a protestor disrupted the event objecting to the artist’s use of a decaying shark (Hamada, 2011). His performance also depended on extensive video documentation. The inclusion of works by Kishio Suga, Noboru Takayama and Kenji Togami, all of whom had exhibited in the second Biennale in 1976, affirmed that ongoing connections with the Japanese artists were occurring in Australian art circles. Suga, Hamada and Keisuki Oki were invited to return to Australia the following year for the fourth Biennale in 1982, where they exhibited alongside their Australian colleagues Kevin Mortenson, John Lethbridge, John Davis and Clive Murray-White.

Australian Art in Tokyo

The kanji 余韻 (yo in) translate as ‘reverberation’, as in the sound of a bell after it has been struck. Vlasta Cihakova-Noshiro says yo in also implies ‘an experience which stimulates the imagination, evoking a lingering memory individual to each person’ (Continuum ’83, 1983: 2). The reverberations of the exhibition Yoin were two-fold: the exhibitions Continuum ’83 and Continuum ’85. Both were initiatives of the Japan–Australia Cultural & Art Exchange Committee, which included Ken Scarlett and artists John Davis, Peter Callas, Stelarc, Akio Makigawa and Goji Hamada (Continuum ’83, 1983: 1). Both Continuum exhibitions were curated by Emiko Namikawa, the
Director of Gallery Lunami, and presented works across the media of video, installation and performance.

Continuum ‘83 toured twenty-seven Australian artists to fifteen commercial galleries and studios across Tokyo, including seven video artists to the SCAN Gallery. This was an exceptional art experience for Tokyo’s local audience and for the Australian artists who visited during the exhibition period, which included Rosalie Gascoigne, Mike Parr and Lyndal Jones. Paula Dawson, Ken Unsworth, and John Letherbridge displaying the media works at galleries in the Ginza where there was a concentration of exhibitions. The chairman of the organising committee and Melbourne resident, Akio Makigawa, exhibited concurrently at Ina Gallery.

Strategically marketed by DFAT to raise national awareness, this Australia Week event Continuum ‘83 attracted a young audience. One gallery noted more than 3000 visitors over the two-week exhibition period and a newspaper review claimed it as the ‘unforgettable [art] event of the year’ (Akatsu, 1984: 43). Art critic Tadashi Akatsu saw Continuum ‘83 as acknowledging Australia as a member of the Asian-Pacific cultural group (Akatsu, 1984: 45). Peter Callas saw the shift away from a centralised museum exhibition to a multi-venue approach as a welcome move for an international exchange (Arts, 1983: 4). More subjectively, he considered the event an unprecedented gesture of support for a group of contemporary Australian artists struggling for recognition in their own country. The selected works also reflected the cultural difference between the two nations in the face of globalisation. According to Ken Scarlett, ‘Australia’s problem is to develop and express its own identity. Japan’s problem is to preserves its identity’ (Arts, 1983: 4). Seeing the event as a significant advancement toward bi-cultural awareness, he continued. ‘It is not just Australian coal to Japan and Japanese cars to Australia, but a two-way trade in people and ideas’ (Anon, 1983: 4).

The response exhibition, Continuum ‘85, exhibited thirty-three Japanese artists across nine Melbourne venues, including the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art; Christine Abrahams Gallery; George Paton Gallery; Gerstman Abdallah Fine Arts International; Pinoftheca Gallery; Open Stage, Melbourne CAE; Glasshouse Theatre, RMIT, RMIT Gallery and the Gryphon Gallery (Continuum ‘85, 1985: 7). Goji Hamada returned to Australia to curate a program of video and film artists, including Mako Idemitsu of Video Hiroba and Yasuo Shinohara, Katsushi Tsumura, Keigo Yamamoto and Hiroya Sakurai, all of whom had previously participated in the fourth Biennale in 1982.

Following Continuum ‘85, the members of the organising committee found that their professional commitments and personal differences made further projects unsustainable (Scarlett, 2011). Akio Makigawa and John Davis continued to exhibit in Japan, and the Gryphon Gallery included in its program the Japanese artists Yohji Haijima and Koryaburo Taniguchi, and the Japanese-Australian artists Mitzu Shoji and Akira Takizawa. Goji Hamada performed many times in Australia over the next decade, at Gryphon Gallery, as well as the Performance Space Sydney, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne and Praxis in Perth (Hamada, 2011).

Biennale of Sydney During the 1980s
Returning to the Biennale of Sydney as a site of cultural engagement, the representation of Japanese artists markedly diminished for the fifth Biennale in 1984. The selection of three artists from Hong Kong and Japan was a scant representation of contemporary Asian art. Private Symbol: Social Metaphor was concerned with Western art’s ability to reflect contemporary society, in particular the effects of European colonisation. The artistic director Leon Paroissien qualified his selection by stating: ‘The Biennale of non-Western art, however, must remain a challenge for a future curator’ (Biennale of Sydney, 1984: 6). In actuality this challenge was not realised until the Queensland Art Gallery initiated its Asia-Pacific Triennial in 1993. At the subsequent Biennale in 1986, Origins, Originality + Beyond, the Artistic Director Nick Waterlow explored artists as transgressors and the post-modernist sublime (Biennale of Sydney, 1986: 71). Complementing the media of painting and sculpture were a series
of sound works, none by Japanese artists. In this Biennale, and the following, Japan’s profile shifted from avant-garde artists using new technologies to the promotion of Japanese performance and fashion. The ten artists representing Japan included the Bunraku performer Hiroshi Hori and fashion designers Issey Miyake, Yoshiki Hishinuma and Commes des Garçon’s Rei Kawakubo.

In 1988, the seventh Biennale, From the Southern Cross: A View of World Art c. 1940–1988, toured Australia to commemorate the bicentennial year (Biennale of Sydney, 1988: 57). Again, Japan was the only Asian nation represented. Butoh dancer Natsu Nakajima and an additional four visual artists signified the continuation of the two countries’ cultural connections. The eighth Biennale, The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art (1990), marked the beginning of new decade. Cultural connections with Asia were tenuously represented by eight of 148 artists from Japan, Korea and Thailand (Biennale of Sydney, 1990: 472–481). USA-based media artists Shigeko Kubota and Nam Jun Paik were among several other international members of Fluxus, including Joseph Beuys and John Cage. Tatsuo Miyajima and On Kawara presented immersive LED works and text-based displays respectively. The presence of these artists within the Biennale exemplified the increasing complexities of global cultural influence and ongoing experimentation with cross-media art.

Conclusion
Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Biennale of Sydney made accessible the works of emerging artists from the Asia-Pacific region. It offered a space for the exhibition of new genres of artistic practice, most importantly those of Japanese artists using performance and technology at the core of their work. Supported by the cultural policies of Japan and Australia, the Biennale stimulated ongoing connections between select experimental artists from both nations. In contrast to the cultural infrastructure supporting arts festivals such as the Biennale of Sydney, the grassroots initiatives of the Japan–Australia Cultural & Art Exchange Committee were also nurturing influential cultural relations, both between established artists as well as an emerging generation of students. During this period, the Director of the Gryphon Gallery in Melbourne, Ken Scarlett, was a central figure among a group of artists raising the awareness of both Australian and Japanese creativity. It was the initiatives of key individuals, both artists and art directors, which resulted in the successful bilateral connectivities so present throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The decline of Japanese artists participating in the subsequent Biennales may reflect the ever-broadening rationale of the event in response to a globalised art market and the promotion of cultural tourism. In contrast, the Japan–Australia grassroots relationships continued to be strong and benefit from the support of a number of government funding bodies, including from the Australia–Japan Foundation and Asialink.

This paper is an initial exploration of Japan–Australia cultural connections and has identified relationships between specific avant-garde artists. It is a starting point from where the ever broadening, complex and continuous interactions between artists from both nations can be considered. Further research might consider the aesthetic and philosophical cross-pollination and its impact on the individual art practices of Stelarc, John Davis and Peter Callas. As this paper has demonstrated, Japanese culture has had a continuous presence in Australian art history since the post-war period. Acknowledging this connection helps to reposition European and American influences and deepens our understanding of the impact of cultural relations with Japan on this nation’s visual arts industry. The success of these bilateral relationships, at least over two decades, suggests that an effective cultural engagement with another country requires a variety of initiatives, including large-scale, high-profile events along with repeated opportunities for individual arts professionals to maintain and establish connections.
References