

Awesome in Asia

The U.S.-based Awesome Foundation is perhaps the easiest model to replicate and therefore unsurprising that it has grown rapidly in the U.S. and internationally. An Awesome chapter is typically formed of 10 individuals, although it can be much smaller, but seldom bigger. The financial commitment of each member is relatively modest at US\$100 per month; supported projects do not need to be formally 'charitable' so there is no mechanism for tax deductibility; the group solicits applications online; and non-financial support is minimal. The chapters' minimal organisational requirements and use of Facebook and Twitter as communication media create a low barrier to formation and are appealing to people in their 20s and 30s.

Since 2011, The Awesome Foundation has grown chapters in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, India and Mongolia, although several appear to be short lived and fall into

inactivity. **Awesome Sydney** has 10 trustees, who each contributes AU\$100 (US\$90) per month, and two volunteer 'Deans' responsible for the group's administration. In the three years since the group has been active, high turnover on the trustee board means that only two of the founding members are trustees today. The mixed gender group comprises 'social entrepreneurs, CEOs and founding partners of advertising agencies, all in their 30s to 40s,' says Melina Garcia, one of the co-Deans. The chapter is small, informal and socially orientated. For Melinda, being involved with the other trustees and the grant applicants has been 'an opportunity to meet amazing, creative, ambitious and intelligent people I'd never have met socially.' Applications are made online and the trustees meet each month to select the grant recipient, an energetic and fast moving process which Melinda describes as 'loads of fun'. She admits that the process of discussing projects is an important component of donor education, saying, 'I often go into meetings convinced that I know which project will get the grant but I am usually convinced otherwise after some great debate'.

The chapter is looking for projects that ‘display creativity, benefits the community in Sydney, has the potential to grow, and demonstrates a clever use of AU\$1,000 (US\$900)’. In February 2014 Awesome Sydney funded the development of a roof garden for refugees who are waiting for their asylum applications to be processed, while they are unable to work or study. The garden gives an opportunity for asylum seekers to meet, interact with others in their community, and grow food used in the soup kitchen below. A project funded in October 2013 supported a free ‘geo-tagging’ mapping service for ‘foragers’ — people in the community who look for seasonal wild foods, such as dandelions, nettles, mulberries, pine mushrooms and bamboo shoots as well as safe traditional medicines.

Despite being a small group, Awesome Sydney multiples its impact through creative ‘pitch events’ in collaboration with like-minded organisations and groups. ‘Pitch the Future’ is an evening event jointly produced by organisations supporting social and creative entrepreneurs — Vivid Ideas Festival, Vibewire, The Awesome Foundation Sydney, StartSomeGood.com and

the Foundation for Young Australians — at which six young social entrepreneurs in Sydney pitch their projects for support. The audience chooses the winning project, which receives AU\$2,000 (US\$1,800) and office space at the Vibewire Innovation Lab to help them launch their project.

Partnerships are also a key element of the other two Australian chapters. In 2012 two board members of Maldon and District Community Bank set up **Awesome Foundation Maldon**, Victoria. The bank is part of Australia’s network of 300 community-based financial service providers, and the first to become, in effect, a chapter of The Awesome Foundation, providing the funds that dispersed as grants. Awesome Maldon has funded projects that include a storytelling and craft activity at Maldon’s junior library, and the launch of a new farmers’ market. One of **Awesome Melbourne** chapter ‘trustees’ is @Pozible, a local web based crowdfunding platform. The chapter also partners with TEDx Melbourne in an arrangement where an Awesome grant winner is given the opportunity to be coached on presenting his or her ideas at TEDx events.

Whangarei is the northernmost city in New Zealand with a population of 53,000; its natural harbour was visited by the explorer James Cook in 1769. Awesome Whangarei was launched in 2012 following a visit to the city by Peter Kagayamas, an internationally recognised champion of community development and grassroots engagement. The chapter follows standard practice with 10 individuals contributing NZ\$100 (US\$83) each month and a ‘Dean’ contributing her time to organise the group, promote its activities, and process applications. The group has made three funding rounds, limiting their scope to the Whangarei area. The chapter’s Dean, Andrea Beazley, says ‘we can help get ideas off the ground easily and quickly because there is no bureaucratic funding hassle; it’s a perfect example of the community supporting the community.’ Projects funded so far include community gardens, pop-up furniture in town and graffiti gardening (gardens randomly appearing around town). Andrea believes that such ‘community- minded, visible, fun projects do not fit the criteria of large funding bodies’, and fill a gap in the giving spectrum. Like other Awesome chapters, Whangarei communicates to the community through its own Facebook page. The page has 132 ‘friends’

and is an easy way to post photographs of funded projects, and call for applications.

Awesome chapters started up in the Mongolian cities of **Sükhbaatar** and **Ulaanbaatar** in 2012, following contact with Awesome’s founder by Peace Corps volunteers working in Mongolia. While being expatriate initiated, it appears that the chapters are a mix of Mongolian nationals and expatriates. Bonnie Nelson, one of the Peace Corps volunteers instrumental in setting up the Sükhbaatar chapter, explains that the core Awesome model needed adaptation for a local context where salaries are low. Members each commit 20,000 MNT (US\$11) monthly and grants of 200,000–400,000 MNT (US\$110–220) are dispersed every one to two months. Successfully funded projects in Mongolia, not surprisingly, have a strong social and environment bias health awareness, recycling bins, and repair of a library’s book stock. Both Mongolian chapters are currently inactive.

The Awesome chapter in **Delhi**, India started up in 2014 but has not yet posted any grant activity. The chapter in Thailand is already marked as inactive on the global website.

Maintaining chapter momentum is clearly a challenge for the global Awesome Foundation network. One chapter, named [Awesome Southeast Asia](#), is located in Australia and appears to fund projects regionally, but is marked as 'inactive' and did not respond to enquiries for information. Awesome chapters are encouraged to post details of the awards they make on their Facebook page and in the blog section of the main Awesome website.

At the time of writing, the website describes 18 of the 88 chapters as 'inactive' defined as a group not having made a donation for six months. Four of the chapters in Asia are currently marked as inactive. The downside of an informal structure with few members is the risk of reducing momentum and decline, which appears to be a significant problem for the Asia chapters. One factor of decline in Mongolia may attribute to the role of expatriates in setting up initiatives that are not sufficiently anchored in local people. Given the ease of setting up a chapter, the strengths of an increasingly recognised global brand, the connectedness of its dispersed chapters and the support from established U.S. chapters, it is surprising that

not more have sprung up in Asia. There is scope for growth in cities such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Taipei and Tokyo, but only if Awesome Foundation can manage the short-lived nature of its Asian chapters.