



**T**he provision of good financial advice in Asia has generally been a haphazard affair. Expatriate UK planners have dominated the expat market, while banks and insurance groups, such as HSBC,

Citigroup, DBS, Hang Seng and Standard Charter, have taken the lion's share of high net worth locals. In this environment, independent financial advice has been a close-to-foreign notion.

But due to increased consumer power, growing personal wealth and the development of financial advice infrastructure, this is changing. Governments across Asia are waking up to the possibilities of increased wealth among their constituents, and regulators are updating the laws to drive more professional advice.

Singapore has taken it to the next level, basing its regulatory system on Australia's Financial Services Reform Act and breaking down its tied agency model of financial 'advice'. Elsewhere, in Hong Kong and Malaysia, planning practices fuelled by foreign investment are springing up rapidly like steel factories in China.

While this points to a wealth of opportunity across the region, Russell head of Asian business Bruce Pflaum warns Asia is still a melting pot of cultures and economies that are not yet comparable - each sitting at a different point along the developmental cycle. This makes business difficult.

"There is a perception in the West that Asia is perhaps more developed than it actually is. You sit in New York, you sit in London and you look at the numbers that come out of say Taiwan, or Korea, or China and say 'that's a lot of money, a lot of people, a lot of distribution, and why don't I have a big piece of that'. And it's actually very difficult to succeed in these markets," Pflaum says.

"Not all countries have developed to the point of people saying they need some sort of financial plan. They don't recognise yet that in order for them to succeed they have to sit down with a professional and make a plan. And that's why there is so much money that just sits in banks or sits in real estate."

However, some foreign firms are taking a punt and there are several established Australian players among those leveraging