

Indo-Pacific capability and literacy

The NCP has been a game-changer, creating significant goodwill and awareness of the Indo-Pacific, and has enabled diverse students from diverse disciplines to gain practical experience and build connections in the region. The program has been successful for the past decade due to its initial co-design with universities. We strongly encourage DFAT to continue to work with universities to ensure broad-based, equitable participation.

Suggestion 1. Consult with Practitioners.

- The program cannot function without the goodwill and administrative support of university learning abroad offices. Continuous Consultation via the NCP External Advisory Group must explicitly engage practitioners in learning abroad to ensure future programs success.
- It would be beneficial for the NCP Secretariat to share annual draft guidelines with a stakeholder group of learning abroad practitioners to 'test' if updates and changes work well when implemented. This includes the setting of crucial dates, to maximise student availability and home/host university academic calendars.
- We recommend to remove barriers and layers of bureaucracy that make the effective administration and award of grants challenging for small and busy offices. Sector/practitioner consultation processes can assist with identifying these barriers.

Suggestion 2. Fund Practitioners.

- Allow 10% program administration funding to be used for administrative salaries (currently not permitted) to boost the quality of program administration.
- Introduce administration funding to enable delivery of NCP Scholar support (currently not funded).

Suggestion 3. Support Academic Champions.

- The program also needs to encourage and reward the academic champions who have gone above and beyond normal workloads to envision and lead NCP programming, often without recognition.
- An annual award ceremony and work to create a best practice and benchmarking community of NCP academic champions would be a great way to re-establish goodwill with the academic community.
- Considering new 4-week program duration, allow an allocation of program funding toward teaching salaries (currently not funded) to enable faculty to participate.

Suggestion 4. Engage and consult Host Communities.

Community ability to support four-week programming has not been considered in the recent decisions. Host communities consulted have expressed concerns about hosting for a longer duration and may be unwilling or unable to accommodate students for extended periods, especially in less financially resourced rural and regional locations.

- NCP and DFAT to socialise changes in host countries through diplomatic posts, to allow community awareness of the re-aligned goals, especially language learning options, and to allow them the ability to consider options and the advantages to hosting Australian students can bring to them.
- We recommend a framework to provide additional funds within grants to support Pacific and other less resourced host communities in receiving student cohorts.

1. Asian (Indo-Pacific?) language learning

We commend a renewed focus on engaging students with language learning, though structural issues involving a lack of primary and secondary school Indo-Pacific language programs in Australia and limited appreciation of regional language skills by Australian business are unlikely to be addressed by offering NCP funding for language study. Additionally:

- There is limited pedagogical or practical return for students to take a four-week program for a ‘different’ regional language not already taught at university level (e.g. Thai, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Fijian).
- Institutions often don’t have capacity to teach languages as funding models, degree structures, accreditation requirements etc. do not encourage faculty to start offering them.
- Universities may have no degree-embedded elective subjects to offer ‘for credit’ to enable regional language studies.
- Partners in host locations do not offer 4-week language program options in Summer/Winter School.
- Students considering longer-term language focussed programs will need NCP funding ‘guaranteed’ up front to be encouraged to consider longer-term experiences. Annual funding rounds are not a good way to operate in this space.

Suggestion 5. Block fund University Language teaching.

Raise the economic return to faculties to teach regional languages. NCP should support additional Language teaching ‘block funds’ as incentives to universities, to attract the interest of Deans and planners and enable them to create degrees with language study options that over time may lead to increased diversity.

Suggestion 6. Non-credit Language options.

Many students may be interested in language learning but are unable take for-credit courses, NCP could consider removing the compulsory credit requirement for supported language programs to enable more flexible, shorter-term language immersion programs.

Suggestion 7. Simple, Assured Language study funding.

Develop streamline process for semester or longer exchange experiences in language and culture. Institutions to simply estimate longer-term grants required by country, and commit to NCP compliance, guidelines and goals.

2. Long-term benefits

Suggestion 8. Commission academic research.

There are range of expert faculty and research groups in Australia who conduct longitudinal research into the impact of Learning Abroad programs.

NCP could announce a call, and commission a project to examine outcomes. NCP can readily provide data, completion reports, and connections to alumni, host communities, other inputs and propose research questions.

3. Alumni Network

While supportive, university learning abroad offices as key contacts for NCP Secretariat are not well resourced to support NCP Alumni program activities. Similarly, university alumni teams are not resourced to engage with NCP. To meet objectives, we recommend for NCP to engage better with all NCP students, Mobility Grant recipients and Scholars alike.

Suggestion 9. Leverage DFAT links at home.

DFAT create 'Country Pages' that collate together all the varied engagement opportunities for that location in Australia that returnees can engage with. (events, networking, business councils, festivals, language programs etc). This should be shared with recently returned students welcoming them to the Alumni to keep them linked to the region. This needs to happen shortly after return.

Suggestion 10. Annual Competition 'Back to NCP'

NCP host a 10-year anniversary competition with significant prize (e.g. a free in country Language or other development program/experience) in the region. Alumni called to re-engage with the region by writing a reflection/submission for the competition. This competition could exclude NCP Scholars who already have these opportunities.

Suggestion 11. Re-excite Host Locations.

NCP has relied on the goodwill and support of Host location communities across the region. Reward host organisations and community through some form of reverse of the above. A trip to Australia or similar.

4. Diverse backgrounds

As suggested by practitioners since the release of the 2025 guidelines, to foster diversity NCP needs to consider exemptions for specific cohorts. 72% (AUIDF Learning Abroad benchmarking survey 2023) of students participating in an overseas experience take a program less than 4 weeks. Students from Low SES, Rural and Regional, Indigenous and First in Family backgrounds all face significant barriers to participating in Learning Abroad for longer time periods. Additionally, Faculty in areas like STEM, Design and Health are discouraged to submit longer term applications, so reducing diversity in terms of study areas on the program.

The new guidelines will likely redirect funding to wealthy, aspirational students who were already planning on going on a semester or longer exchange to the region (e.g. Language, Social Sciences, Business, Law programs) away from more diverse faculty cohorts.

Suggestion 12. Ensuring access by diverse cohorts

Ensure continued access for diversity cohorts allow some flexibility in program duration, specifically a limited exemption for transformative 2-to-3-week programs that have high participation rates by the following target groups:

- Indigenous students
- Low-SES students
- Rural and regional students etc.
- Traditionally non-participating groups

We look forward to continued engagement with the NCP Secretariat and the External Advisory Group.

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