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NEW COLOMBO PLAN: A REVIEW OF RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

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The Australian government has prioritised students' engagement with, and learning in, Asia due to its importance to the nation's prosperity. The Rudd initiatives of National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) and Prime Minister's Australia Asia Awards, and the Gillard AsiaBound initiative explicitly aimed to support Australian students to learn targeted Asian languages and enrich Asian studies, gain work experience, study and build professional connections in Asia.

Notably, the *Bradley Review of Higher Education*, the *Australia 2020 Summit Report*, the *'White Paper' on Australia in the Asian Century*, the *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, and Universities Australia's *World Class Strategy* stress the importance of enhancing international experience, especially 'Asia'¹ experience, for Australian students. To realise this national priority, the Federal Government introduced the New Colombo Plan (NCP) in 2014 aiming to provide Australian students with opportunities to engage with the Indo-Pacific and enhance Asia capability, which is regarded as critical to Australia's social and economic development, soft diplomacy and connection with the region.

Julie Bishop, Australia's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2018), is considered the architect of this premier student mobility and public diplomacy program, which has built on the legacy of previous mobility initiatives with an emphasis on Asian engagement. Despite the challenge of achieving stability in student mobility policy in a politicised environment, it is worth noting that there seems to be a bipartisan agreement on the content of Asian engagement tools via student mobility over the past three decades. The review of the historical policy context, in which the New Colombo Plan was drafted, indicates that using student mobility as an instrument to strengthen Australia's engagement with Asia has been consistently emphasised by past governments. Despite unique elements of the NCP that have made it particularly effective in a policy context, it is worth noting that the NCP Mobility program and the NCP Scholarship program look similar to Gillard's AsiaBound and Rudd's Prime Minister's Asia Awards respectively.

This Research Digest provides a review of government policies and existing research on the NCP. It begins with an overview of the NCP and a discussion of the context for the Colombo Plan and New Colombo Plan. It provides comparisons with some international policy settings and trends on student mobility. It then discusses existing research on Australian students' learning abroad via the NCP. This will be followed by a summary of the surveys on the NCP commissioned by DFAT. The Digest concludes with implications for practice and further research.

Overview of New Colombo Plan

The ultimate goal of the NCP is to provide Australian undergraduate students with an opportunity to undertake study and internships in the Indo-Pacific region. Such exposure to the Indo-Pacific is seen as crucial to 'broaden and deepen' Australia's engagement in the region (Australian Government, 2016a; 2017; Byrne, 2016; Lowe, 2015). The Australian government positions the NCP supported programs as a 'rite of passage' for Australia's younger generations (Australian Government, 2017, p. 112). Importantly, as a form of outbound mobility and reciprocal international education, the NCP embraces the government's commitment for young Australians to be exposed to, enrich their understandings of, and learn from Indo-Pacific neighbours.

Since its launch in 2014, the NCP has significantly changed Australia's student mobility and internationalisation landscape, impacting not only students' education and experiences but also institutional partnerships, structures and operations, national and regional mobility trends, models and practices, and public diplomacy.

¹ The term 'Asia' is used in relation to policies that explicitly emphasise Australia's engagement with Asia while 'Indo-Pacific' is used to refer to policies on the New Colombo Plan, which focuses on the Indo-Pacific region, including Asia, the Pacific and the subcontinent.

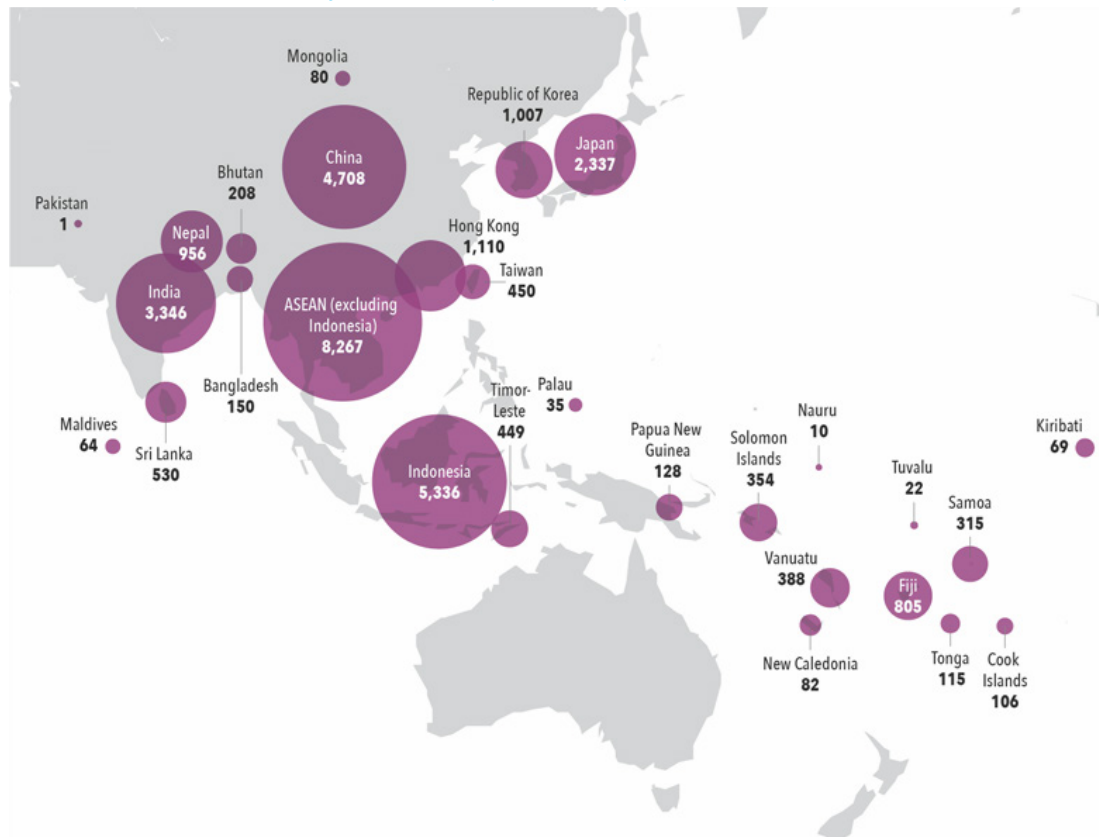
The impact of the NCP can potentially be seen at the individual, institutional, national and regional levels.

Various national policies have positioned NCP outbound mobility as the key to student mobility, international partnerships and public diplomacy. In particular, the NCP is a core foreign policy element identified in the *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* (Australian Government, 2017). The NCP initiative is regarded as providing strategic support for strengthening relationships with the Indo-Pacific region through building “a generation of Australians with greater understanding of our region” (p. 8). The NCP closely aligns with goal five in the *National Strategy for International Education 2025* of strengthening partnerships abroad, and goal six of enhancing mobility (Australian Government, 2016a). NCP students are positioned as key stakeholders within the *Australian Global Alumni Strategy 2016-2020*, supporting the themes of connect, mobilise and celebrate (Australian Government, 2016b).

Colombo Plan and New Colombo Plan

Scholars in the field such as Oakman (2002), Rizvi (2005, 2011), Byrne and Hall (2013), Byrne (2016) and Lowe and Kent (2017) have underscored the interconnections of student mobility, international education, education aid and public diplomacy. The NCP can be conceptualised as the reverse form of the Colombo Plan, which was initiated in 1951 as a prominent inbound mobility program of the Australian government. The overarching goal of the original Colombo Plan was to provide students and scholars from developing countries the opportunities to study in Australia and acquire advanced technological, scientific and administrative knowledge and skills (Oakman, 2002; Rizvi, 2005). Similar to America’s Fulbright program, the Colombo Plan is a powerful symbol of education as aid principles. It was driven by the ideologies of nation building and developmentalism (Rizvi, 2005; 2011).

FIGURE 1 NCP students by destination (2014-2018)



Source: Australian Government (2017, p. 113)

The Colombo Plan is regarded as a significant initiative that “brought Australia and Asia closer” (Lowe, 2011, p. 1). By 1987, the Colombo Plan had supported about 20,000 Asian students and scholars to study in Australia (Lowe, 2015; Oakman, 2002).

In July 1988, the Commonwealth government released *‘Higher Education: A Policy Statement 1988’*, often referred to as the Dawkins reforms. These reforms introduced the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) for domestic students and allowed institutions to charge international students tuition fees (Rizvi, 2011). The introduction of Dawkins reforms reshaped university operations. This major policy change marked the decrease in direct funding from the Commonwealth government for higher education and coupled with increased globalisation, unleashed a shift from ‘education as aid’ to ‘education as trade’. The growing popularity of Australia as a favourable study destination, and the development of the relationships between Australia and Asian nations initiated and reinforced through the Colombo Plan, have set a strong foundation for the commercialisation of higher education in Australia with the positioning of education as an export industry. While the Colombo Plan has a prominent place in the nexus of inbound student mobility and public diplomacy, “as a reverse form of the Colombo Plan and reciprocal form of international education, the New Colombo Plan contributes to formalising the link between outbound mobility and public diplomacy” (Tran and Vu, 2018, p. 197).

From the Colombo Plan introduced in 1951 to other inbound scholarship schemes, including the AusAid scholarship program, Endeavour program, and today’s Australia Awards, Australia has supported more than 80,000 Asian students and scholars to undertake study and professional development in Australia (Australian Government, 2017). Those inbound mobility programs cast Asian scholarship recipients as emerging leaders and key actors in strengthening the relationships between Australia and the region.

Tran and Vu (2018) argue that the NCP in turn construes Australian outbound student mobility explicitly as a vehicle of public diplomacy, with the aspiration of NCP students creating people-to-people links with the Indo-Pacific and therefore being regarded as actors or potential actors of public diplomacy.

Well-funded and prestigious, the NCP is now “the subject of discussion of Foreign Ministers, Prime Ministers and Presidents all across the region” (Malicki, 2016, p. 16). The government committed initial funding of \$100 million for the NCP, scaling up to a budget of over \$51 million for 2017-18 and almost \$51 million for 2018-19 (Australian Government, 2016b). In 2014, around 1300 mobility program students and 40 scholarship holders studied in Indonesia, Japan, Singapore and Hong Kong under the NCP’s pilot phase. The program expanded so that by 2018 it covered 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific (see Figure 1).

By 2016, the number of Australian students funded by the NCP to undertake study in the Indo-Pacific reached more than 10,000 (Australian Government, 2016a). By 2018 and 2020, the number of Australian students to benefit from the NCP to study and undertake internships will have reached over 31,000 and 40,000 respectively (Australian Government, 2017a; 2018b). The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper highlighted the goal of the NCP to support at least 10,000 Australian students a year to undertake study or work experience in the Indo-Pacific (Australian Government, 2017). Funding for the annual New Colombo Plan budget for 2013-2022 is summarised in Table 1 (see page 5).

The NCP involves two distinctive programs: the Scholarships program supporting students to undertake study of up to one year, which may include an additional internship or mentorship, and the Mobility program for both short-term and longer-term study and various forms of work-based experiences. Applications for NCP funding can come from individual universities or consortia. All of the NCP-funded programs must receive academic credit towards an Australian undergraduate degree (Australian Government, 2018c).

TABLE 1 Total funding for NCP programs

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Budget [†]	\$5.372	\$10.958	\$19.577	\$28.215	\$51.083	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933
Scholarships (students)	na	40	69	100	105	120-150*	na	na	na
Mobility grants (students)	na	1,300	3,100	5,450	7,400	7,400*	11,817**	na	na
Australian undergraduates abroad (incl NCP)	17,812	19,700	24,715	27,320	na	na	na	na	na

[†]Million

*Estimate figures

**Estimate figures for 2019 published at https://foreignminister.gov.au/releases/Pages/2018/jb_mr_180706a.aspx

Source: Ilieva (2018), compiled from Australian Government (2014a&b; 2018d, p.5), AUIDF (2013-14) and Acil Allen Consulting (2017a)



Australia's student mobility and New Combo Plan

The number of Australian students participating in learning abroad has increased sevenfold over the last 12 years, from 6000 in 2005 to 44,045 in 2016 (AUIDF, 2016; Australian Government, 2018a). The NCP plays an important role in contributing to the growth of outbound mobility.

The two most popular types of learning abroad for Australian undergraduate students in 2016 were student exchange programs (26%) and faculty-led study tours (24%) (Australian Government, 2018a). In 2016, the top five destinations for Australian outbound students were USA, China, UK, Italy and Japan, which accounted for almost 40 per cent of all learning abroad activities (Table 2, Australian Government, 2018a).

TABLE 2 Australian university students abroad by country (all levels)

Top 5 destination countries (2016)	2015		2016	
	# of experiences	% of all experiences	# of experiences	% of all experiences
USA	4,769	12.5	5,061	11.5
China	3,524	9.2	4,542	10.3
UK	3,304	8.7	3,486	7.9
Italy*	1,266	3.3	1,874	4.3
Japan*	1,427	3.7	1,748	4.0
All others	23,854	62.5	27,334	62.1
Grand Total	38,144	100.0	44,045	100.0

*2015 Italy ranked ninth and Japan sixth

Source: Australian Government (2018a)

Table 1 shows that NCP students were the main growth driver in 2016-17 while there was very little growth in non-NCP students. The participation rate in learning abroad for Australian undergraduate students in 2016 was 20.9 per cent, compared to 15.5 per cent of US and 7.2 per cent of UK undergraduate students in 2015-2016 (Australian Government, 2018a; Go International, 2018; Open Doors, 2017). About one in five Australian students undertakes some learning abroad during their undergraduate study. Full-degree student mobility may not be popular for Australian students, with the latest data from UNESCO (2018) indicating 12,330 Australian enrolled in tertiary education in other countries, an increase of 3 per cent since 2013. However, intra-degree student mobility², often in the form of learning abroad, is on the rise for Australian students, experiencing an increase of 15.5 per cent from 2015 to 2016 (Australian Government, 2018a).

STEM disciplines topped the list of the field of learning abroad for Australian students (Australian Government, 2018a). However, within the NCP program, the top field of education is Society and Culture, which is followed by Health, Management and Commerce, Engineering and Education (Australian Government, 2018b). According to DFAT, more than 300 organisations have registered as potential hosts for Australian students undertaking internships in the Indo-Pacific region (Australian Government, 2018b).

Destinations

Previous literature indicates that the traditional destinations for learning abroad students were mainly Anglophone countries (Go International, 2016; King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010; Olsen, 2012; Open Doors, 2015; UNESCO, 2013). Historically, Australia's outbound students tended to prefer English-speaking countries due to their lack of foreign language competence. (Baldauf Jr & White, 2010)

² where students undertake an international learning experience as part of their domestically delivered degree.
Source: Anderson, K. (2014). Student Mobility for the 21st Century. IEAA: Melbourne.

Destinations for NCP students

Altogether, in 2018 there are 40 eligible host locations in the Indo-Pacific for NCP students: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, French Polynesia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nauru, Nepal, New Caledonia, Niue, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu and Vietnam (Australian Government, 2018c).

TABLE 3a Top five destinations for NCP Scholarships programs in 2018

Country	# of students
Hong Kong	17
Singapore	17
Japan	16
China	15
Indonesia	14

Source: Australian Government (2018b)

Pre-departure

The introduction of a nation-wide pre-departure cross-cultural program for NCP students is the fruit of a partnership that involves the Australian Government, the Bennelong Foundation, the Myer Foundation and Asialink Business (Harrison & Potts, 2016, p.10). The cross-cultural training aims to provide students with cross-cultural awareness and skills. Asialink Business was commissioned to design and run the pre-departure training program in both face-to-face and online formats. The pilot program was delivered in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales in 2015 with the participation of 117 NCP students and has been implemented on a national scale since 2016 (Asialink Business, 2015). To date, a total of 4452 NCP students have participated in the pre-departure training program delivered by Asialink Business, including 1622 and 2830 students attending face to face and online training respectively (Asialink Business, 2018). In addition to this cross-cultural training run by Asialink Business,

many universities also run complementary pre-departure sessions for their NCP students at the departmental, faculty or institutional level but the scale, nature and approach varies across institutions.

Alumni Program

Support for NCP students on their return to Australia is available through the NCP Alumni Program, a partnership between DFAT and Asialink Business to deliver professional development and engagement activities available to all NCP alumni.

TABLE 3b Top five destinations for NCP Mobility projects in 2018

Country	# of students
Indonesia	2131
China	2055
India	1543
Malaysia	835
Japan	812

Source: Australian Government (2018b)

The NCP Alumni Program was launched in April 2016 and compliments alumni activities managed by the universities. The Alumni program supports alumni to “maintain a connection to each other, the New Colombo Plan and the Indo-Pacific region as they progress in their lives and careers” (Australian Government, 2018e, p. 1). In this regard, NCP alumni are expected to be key actors in Australia’s relationship with the Indo-Pacific region and thus a driving force for the national future, thanks to their direct experience, professional networks and connections with the Indo-Pacific region. A new alumni ambassadors program is supporting one alumnus from each Australian university to promote the New Colombo Plan (Australian Government, 2018b). The NCP Alumni Program supports ongoing connection between NCP alumni and strengthening engagement with the Indo-Pacific region through professional development and networking events for alumni. An important area for further research is how the objectives and activities of alumni engagement would be measured and how the impact would be evaluated.

Existing research on New Colombo Plan

There has been an emerging trend of research on the NCP that explores key aspects, including NCP students' motivations, experiences, barriers to participation and their roles as potential actors of public diplomacy (Bretag & Van Der Veen, 2017; Lowe, 2018; Lawrence, 2016; Scharoun, 2015; Tran, 2018a; 2018b; Tran & Vu, 2018; Tran & Vu, 2017; Tran, Gribble and Stafford, 2016a, 2016b).

A recent study on Australia-India student mobility funded by the Australia India Council and led by Lowe (2018) explored the experiences of Indian students in Australia and Australian students in India, including NCP students. Based on this research and an analysis of the background policies, the author emphasised the importance to:

“bring a qualitative lens to NCP outcomes, which are at their most impressive when measured quantitatively. This represents a policy and research challenge: it is much easier to fund and then point to increasing numbers than it is to demonstrate the impact of people-to-people connections, especially as the benefits of this form of public diplomacy are generally seen over the medium to long term” (Lowe, 2018, p.1)

Clearly, after five years of implementation, there is a critical need to analyse the nature and forms of impact of the NCP program not only on individual students, mobility staff and academics involved, but also on institutions' teaching and learning, curriculum, and mobility landscapes, and on education as well as on public diplomacy aspects.

Research by Tran and Vu (2017) indicated that increased awareness of Asia and the Pacific through short-term NCP mobility enables students to see themselves as potential actors of people-to-people connections and collective learning rather than mere visitors or tourists. The study underscored the importance of sustaining students' reflections post-return, enabling them to extend their learning and actions.

This also assists students to develop understanding of their responsibility as Australian citizens in both interacting and maintaining the connections with individuals and communities in the Indo-Pacific. Tran and Vu (2017) see the need for a plan to develop students into independent, active and sustainable actors of connection with the Indo-Pacific region post-return. The authors argue that sharing models of productive and sustainable connections among the stakeholders, including students, alumni, home and host universities/organisations, and government agencies, should be on the agenda.

Other small-scale studies on NCP students' experiences include the work of Bretag and van der Veen (2017) and Scharoun (2015). Scharoun (2015) investigated the cultural interactions and the structure underpinning the attainment of cultural competencies of 20 students in Graphic and Industrial Design at the University of Canberra who travelled to Singapore for 16 days in 2014. The short-term program aimed to facilitate students' understandings of cross-cultural design, interdisciplinary skills and entrepreneurship in design. The study suggested that the study-tour program provided students with contextual experience and cross-cultural skills, including “a different set of cultural norms and ways of thinking” (p. 88).

In addition, this study reinforced the findings of previous research on the causal link between learning abroad and employability. As Scharoun (2015, p. 89) argues, the mobility program to Singapore enabled students to enhance employability through fostering “global work-ready skill sets”. However, Potts (2018) stressed the need to take into account key factors including broader social, cultural and academic backgrounds to have more nuanced understanding of the causality between learning abroad and graduate outcomes (p. 19).

Similarly, a study by Bretag and van der Veen (2017) investigated the motivations and perceived benefits of a group of students participating in a NCP short-term study tour to Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia.

The findings show that students were motivated by various issues, including eagerness to face challenges, complete their study quickly, experience cultural immersion, build networks and enhance work readiness. Students also reported the benefits included increased confidence, intercultural understanding and interpersonal skills. In particular, Bretag and Van der Veen (2017) noted that students developed deeper awareness of other cultures.

Students perceived that their level of intercultural sensitivity increased, since they were more aware of the gaps in their intercultural competence and gained knowledge of the host culture.

Students also regarded the importance of a buddy from the local culture as a distinct feature of the program and saw this role as facilitating the development of their initial self-awareness and forming the foundation for intercultural learning.

Universities Australia commissioned Prospect Research and Marketing to conduct a study into students' levels of awareness of mobility programs, including the NCP. The 2016 study involved an online survey of 8,663 respondents and focus groups undertaken in Melbourne, Canberra, Sydney and Brisbane (Lawrence, 2016).

The final report, published on the Universities Australia website, provided an overview of outbound mobility including destinations, types of programs, motivations, perception of benefits, and awareness of programs' values, accessibility and barriers (Lawrence, 2016). The report also included a section on the NCP programs, outlining students' awareness and understanding of the program, its benefits and barriers.

The most important benefits of the NCP as perceived by the 1,803 respondents in Lawrence's study with either some awareness of the NCP, involvement in the application or participation include: Federal Government support (44%), better employment outcomes overall (26%), exciting countries in which to study (26%), opportunity to study in Asia (25%), future employment opportunities in Asia (24%), opportunities to build Asian networks (24%) and genuine opportunity to understand Asian society (24%) (Lawrence, 2016).

Notably, the study found that very few participants were aware of the grants and opportunities provided by the NCP. Similarly, a pilot qualitative study conducted by Tran, Gribble and Stafford (2016b), which involved in-depth interviews with NCP students, found that while many students can articulate their specific motives to apply for NCP-supported study or internships, others admit they were initially unaware of, or had no intention to apply for, an NCP grant but were driven to internships or study tours accidentally.

DFAT-commissioned surveys on New Colombo Plan

Since 2014, DFAT has commissioned two agencies, Acil Allen Consulting and Australian Survey Research Group (ASR), to conduct multiple evaluations on the NCP.

Acil Allen Consulting conducted a multi-year evaluation (2014-17) on the efficiency, effectiveness and appropriateness of NCP programs. The agency, using qualitative methods and a quantitative survey approach, evaluated the programs at three stages: application, in-country experience and post-placement engagement. In the qualitative sections, Acil Allen Consulting conducted consultations with NCP Contact Officers at sending universities and host institutions, as well as analysis of student completion reports and program guidelines during the three years of evaluations.

The results indicated very positive short-term outcomes of the programs for various stakeholders, including the Australian Government, Australian universities, students and host institutions. Students' surveys showed that a vast majority of the students participating in mobility and scholarship programs "had gained a cultural and professional appreciation of the Indo-Pacific region" through participation in the NCP programs (Acil Allen Consulting, 2017a, p. i).

The agency's evaluations also concluded that the NCP had established a solid foundation for more expansive collaboration between institutional stakeholders in Australia and the region, and that Australian universities are supportive of the programs (Table 4, Acil Allen Consulting, 2017a&b).

In 2016, ASR evaluated the NCP programs by collecting data from recently returned participants and past alumni. According to the cumulative survey findings from 3,667 mobility participants, a vast majority of the students agreed that NCP programs were "a life changing experience" that improved their knowledge of the host location and increased their capabilities for engagement with people in the Indo-Pacific region (ASR, 2017, p. 2; 2018, p. 2). Among the returnees, 39 per cent undertook some form of work-based experience. Ninety-one per cent of these participants indicated that "their work-based experiences helped them develop their professional skills and knowledge" to a great or moderate extent, and 81 per cent indicated that their participation in mobility programs "helped them make professional connections with people or organisations in their host location" to a great or moderate extent (ASR, 2018, p. 35).

The top three activities found to be extremely or very valuable by the majority of the students included working in small groups, field or site visits, and cultural events (ASR, 2016; 2017; 2018).

According to ASR (2018), 96 per cent of 126 participating scholars embarked on "some form of internship, practicum, mentorship, clinical placement or other work-based experience" during their scholarship program (p.13), and nearly 56 per cent of scholars had more than one.

The most useful elements of these experiences were "cross-cultural communication skills" and "professional and personal networks" for 77 per cent of participants (ibid., p. 16). The findings of a smaller number of completed surveys showed that the majority of the 73 scholars who responded to the question stated that they either "exceeded their academic goals" or "achieved their goals to a great extent" (ibid., p. 9).

An earlier survey of NCP Alumni revealed that 59 per cent of a total of 188 respondents anticipated to "undertake further study" and 41 per cent intended to "seek work overseas in the Indo-Pacific region" (ASR, 2016, p. 1).

TABLE 4 Survey evaluations by Acil Allen Consulting (2014 - 2017)

Participant	Completed surveys
Scholarship students, including pilot group (2014 - 16)	59
Mobility students (2016)	375
Alumni on return to Australia (2017)	197
NCP Contact Officers in universities (2014)	69
Staff in host locations organisations (2016)	68

Source: Acil Allen Consulting (2017a, p. 3)

While various surveys commissioned by DFAT shed light on some important aspects of the NCP, these are commissioned program evaluations rather than independent research. More independent studies and assessment of the NCP program should be encouraged to provide nuanced insights and multiple perspectives on the program. Also, due to their timing and methods, existing research on the NCP and evaluations commissioned by DFAT have not been able to examine long-term impacts of the programs on alumni or in relation to participant institutions.

Implications for Practice

Building on the legacy of the original Colombo Plan, the NCP has the potential to offer enormous benefits to Australian students, universities and communities. The NCP is a prominent symbol of the combination of student mobility and public diplomacy. Firstly, the NCP has significantly diversified student mobility options for Australian universities, including exchange, internships, mentorships, practicums, clinical placements and research. Secondly, it has broadened destination options for Australian students to the Indo-Pacific, a region critical to Australia's economic and political development. This mobility scheme plays a crucial role in strengthening Australia's position in the region through people-to-people, university-to-university, university-to-enterprise and government-to-government connections. It has contributed to diversifying, enriching and reinforcing Australian universities' partnerships with universities and organisations in the Indo-Pacific that can potentially lead to strengthened research, teaching and learning collaborations.

The NCP is seen to widen the participation and access to learning abroad for Australian students, which otherwise remains a mere aspiration for a number of students who would have been unable to afford learning abroad opportunities. However, how to ensure more equitable access, especially for those who can benefit most from NCP mobility, remains a critical question that needs to be addressed.

Additionally, there is a need for an assessment of the degree to which NCP has widened access to disadvantaged students in learning abroad. Despite some capacity to include students over 28, the standard age limit for NCP students from 18 to 28 still represents a significant equity barrier. Also, how to encourage a greater uptake of the NCP opportunity deserves more attention and investment as research indicates that a proportion of students were unaware of the NCP opportunity and the availability of NCP grants within their course (Tran, Gribble & Stafford, 2016b). In other cases, there is simply not enough interest from students in some NCP supported programs despite various institutional efforts to promote them.

Like many other past mobility schemes, however, the NCP is also subject to political changes and the risk of policy shift with a new government. At the last election, the Labour party proposed that if elected, it would cut the NCP by half. With the Australian government's leadership change in August 2018 and Julie Bishop departure as Minister of Foreign Affairs, concerns have been raised by universities and professional organisations about the future of the program. The NCP's sustainability and possible changes with regards to its funding, scale, priorities and nature, as a result of the recent political changes, are critical questions that have emerged. Nevertheless, a review of the historical policy setting clearly shows a continuity in policy and programs that use outbound student mobility as a vehicle for strengthening Australia's engagement with Asia across different Labour and Liberal governments over the past decades. The review indicates how past Labour governments have promoted similar programs, including Gillard's AsiaBound and Rudd's Prime Minister's Asia Awards, on which Liberal Foreign Minister Julie Bishop (2013-2018) built the New Colombo Plan.

To date, the majority of university resources for outward mobility have been dedicated to the preparation of mobility grant applications and increasing the number of outbound students, but it seems that much fewer resources are available to ensure quality during and after the mobility experience.

It is important to move beyond the ideological frame and normative assumption that increased understanding of the Indo-Pacific, learning and engagement with it will automatically happen simply by providing students with exposure to the region. In some cases, bias and prejudices may be reinforced through the international experience, instead of students either being transformed, or having a positive engagement with the Indo-Pacific. Accordingly, careful planning, critical reflection and guided continuing learning at all stages of the mobility experience, from pre-departure, in-country to re-entry, are crucial to optimise the potential benefits and educational outcomes of outbound mobility. There is a need to develop a more structured and coherent approach to learning abroad that involves not only students but also mobility offices and academics from both the home and host universities/organisations to support deep and continuing engagement, learning, and capacity building during and after international mobility experiences.

Another crucial area that needs attention and investment is how to activate and integrate the learning into the curriculum at home to optimise the potential and ongoing benefits of learning abroad. The funding, design and implementation of outbound mobility programs should recognize that similar resources are needed with regards to capitalising on students' learning abroad to enhance internationalisation and enrich the learning community at home (Tran, 2018b). Re-entry programs and the integration of learning abroad into the curriculum need to focus on the learning community, with which returnees engage, rather than returnees only, to enrich the learning for all, including those who stay at home and who constitute almost 80 per cent of the Australian undergraduate student body (Tran, 2018b). A more structured, sustainable and holistic approach and scale with the support and engagement of various stakeholders is needed.

There are various examples of good practice across universities in Australia and worldwide on administering mobility programs; establishing and maintaining partnerships with host organisations and related stakeholders; maximising learning, engagement and capacity building for

students (and staff) through learning abroad; capitalising on learning abroad to enrich continuous collective learning at re-entry, and internationalisation at home; and enhancing impact on the host communities. It is important that these good practices are recognised and shared for collective learning and improvement.

The NCP has changed and influenced not only the broader mobility landscape and educational experiences but also university mobility office practice and practitioners. The increased scale of outbound mobility is having an impact in systematising and professionalising the offices charged with delivering these programs. Therefore, situated professional development for mobility staff and academics to enhance their capacity to engage in and support learning abroad needs to be prioritised in universities' internationalisation agendas.

For example, targeted areas of professional development to equip mobility officers to work with third party providers, government and professional stakeholders and other universities and to negotiate with academics in putting together a mobility program appear to be of growing importance and urgently needed. For academics, some important areas of professional development seem to be around enhancing capabilities as trip leaders in mobility programs and to continually embed learning abroad into the curriculum. Ongoing capacity building for both mobility staff and academics engaged in learning abroad to ensure more sustainable and effective mobility administration requires adequate investment and resources. Traditional professional development programmes for mobility officers appear to be quite narrow and no longer adequate given the increasingly diversified and expanded responsibilities they have to take on in their professional landscape, characterised by the NCP and other complex, diverse and emergent mobility models, partnerships and trends. At the moment, many mobility staff and academics appear to learn 'on the job' and in a rather ad-hoc and fragmented manner amid their busy schedules and competing responsibilities.

Implications for further research

The paucity of large-scale empirical qualitative research on Australian students' learning through the NCP program means that Australia needs to develop a body of evidence (Ciccarelli, 2015; Potts, 2016). This will help inform appropriate policies and practices that can maximise its students' learning in and about the Indo-Pacific, and enrich its cultural, social, economic and intellectual capital related to the region.

There are some important fields identified for further research on the NCP:

- The longer-term impact of the NCP on student employability, learning and engagement with the Indo-Pacific
- Student mobility and public diplomacy - roles of NCP students as actors of public diplomacy
- NCP impact on institution-to-institution relationship and country-to-country relationship
- Impact of NCP-supported study programs on the host communities in the Indo-Pacific
- The effects of the NCP initiative on Australian universities, including internationalisation policies and practices, structures and operations, mobility offices, and mobility administrative and academic staff.
- NCP students' curriculum-specific learning. While previous research has focused on students' language, social and cultural learning and development of global outlook through outbound mobility, researchers highlight a dearth in theory and empirical research on the academic and disciplinary learning associated with mobility programs (Dall'Alba & Sidhu, 2015; Nerlich, 2013), including the NCP.



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