International Mobility for Undergraduate Students.

Lessons From Australia’s New Colombo Plan

At a Glance

● Australia’s New Colombo Plan will channel significant federal funding toward 7,000 undergraduate students for educational experiences in the Indo-Pacific by 2019.

● To date, the program’s scholarships and grants have supported Australian universities and more than 4,300 students for experiences abroad.

● The New Colombo Plan serves as a valuable example for Canadian policy-makers and post-secondary institutions interested in expanding education opportunities abroad for Canadian students.
Executive Summary

This briefing profiles an Australian initiative to encourage education abroad among undergraduate students. Australia is a leader in international education, and has recently adopted a national scholarship and mobility grants program aimed at increasing the number of its own students studying in Indo-Pacific countries.

Australia’s New Colombo Plan (NCP) is channelling significant federal funding (more than AU$100 million) toward educational experiences for over 7,000 undergraduate students by 2019. To date, the program’s scholarships and grants have supported universities and more than 4,300 students for educational experiences abroad. Innovations of this program include a streamlined approach to offering national education-abroad scholarships; flexible funding that can be applied to nearly all aspects of a recipient’s education-abroad costs; partnerships between government, educational institutions, and the private sector to provide education-abroad opportunities; and clear links to foreign policy objectives and departmental areas of expertise. Challenges of the program include managing its scope and scale; ensuring enough internships to meet demand; and establishing new partnerships. The New Colombo Plan offers many best practices and lessons for Canada that can inform policy-makers and institutions interested in developing a strategic national approach to encourage more education-abroad opportunities for Canadian students. For Canada, this example highlights the value of championing education abroad, providing a variety of education-abroad opportunities, offering significant financial assistance to students, supporting language training, focusing efforts on geographic areas of economic and cultural importance, seeking out partnerships, leveraging student ambassadors to raise awareness of the program, and providing a centralized strategy.
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Overview

Australia has a long and successful track record of innovation in international higher education. It has been able to attract large numbers of foreign students to its post-secondary institutions—today, international enrolment in Australia’s universities hovers around 19 per cent and is as much as one-third of total enrollment at some institutions.¹ This is a result of significant and sustained federal financial support for international marketing of Australia’s education sector through the 1990s and 2000s. Observers have credited Australia with taking a highly coordinated, centralized, and well-resourced approach to marketing its educational services as a tradable commodity.²

However, the global recession and slumping enrollments of international students in 2008–09 prompted reflection on what some described as Australia’s too-narrow approach to international education.³ Australia’s aggressive marketing of its post-secondary education sector to international students damaged the reputation of the sector, increased its vulnerability to market and economic fluctuations, and fuelled cultural clashes between domestic and foreign students.⁴

Due, in part, to this decades-long push for international students, the proportion of Australian students studying abroad relative to international students in Australia is low—current estimates put about 18 foreign students studying a full program in Australia for every national studying abroad.⁵ In actual numbers, more than 200,000 international students

¹ Department of Education and Training (Australia), Research Snapshot: Onshore Higher Education International Students.
² Trilokekar and Kizilbash, “IMAGiNE: Canada as a Leader in International Education,” 17.
³ Ibid., 6.
⁴ Ibid., 9.
⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Indicator C4”; Heckmann and Marin, Australia: Country Note.
were registered at Australian universities in 2013, compared with just over 29,000 Australian university students studying abroad that year.° Recognizing the disparity in its attention to inbound and outbound student mobility, and the benefits of developing students with international education experiences, the Australian government recently pledged to stimulate the flow of international students in both directions.° (See box “Education Abroad.”)

Australia’s New Colombo Plan (NCP) is one such initiative that marks a new, more balanced phase in Australia’s international education policy.° Announced in 2013, the NCP is a national scholarship and grants program that supports short-term study, internships, mentorships, practicums, and research opportunities for Australian undergraduate students at several dozen host locations in the Indo-Pacific region. A pilot of the program was undertaken in 2014, and a few months later a scaled-up version of the program was launched.

This briefing looks at the design of the New Colombo Plan and its immediate outcomes, and offers eight lessons that Canadian post-secondary institutions and policy-makers can apply to education-abroad initiatives for Canadian students.

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**Education Abroad: Building Skill Sets for Global Economies**

Education-abroad experiences enhance the development of individuals’ employability and job-specific skills. Individuals who study outside their country of residence have unique opportunities to develop leadership, self-reliance, languages, and intercultural understanding. Further, some education-abroad

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8 Adams and de Wit, “Global Competition in Higher Education.”
The New Colombo Plan represents a concerted effort to increase young Australians’ knowledge of and engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

experiences provide opportunities to work on issues addressing practical local and global needs, while field schools, co-op placements, internships, and practicums develop specialist skills in participants.

The benefits of an international education are not lost on employers. Recent research shows that eight in ten small and medium-sized employers who hired recruits with international experience felt these employees enhanced the competitiveness of their business. They credited these employees with bringing “cross-cultural knowledge and understanding of the global marketplace” to their work. A majority of employers also believed that such employees are better performers in their jobs than those without international experience.

Objectives

The NCP represents a concerted effort to increase young Australians’ knowledge of and engagement in the Indo-Pacific—a historically important trade region for Australia that is poised to grow in importance. The plan reflects and builds on the educational and diplomatic value of the original Colombo Plan of the post-Second World War era, an initiative that supported thousands of students to attend universities in Australia and other Commonwealth countries, including Canada.

The intended outcomes are ambitious and driven not only by educational goals, but also foreign policy ones. The program intends to enhance Australian undergraduates’ knowledge of the Indo-Pacific region and deepen interpersonal and inter-institutional connections there. A further expected outcome of the program is an increase in the number of Australian graduates who have regional experience in the Indo-Pacific. The government places great importance on these outcomes, intending that study in the Indo-Pacific will become

9 Universities Canada, Employers Say Graduates With Global Experience Make Companies More Competitive.

10 Ibid.
customary for all undergraduate students, and that the country’s future leaders will be equipped with a deep understanding of this important geopolitical region.  

**Processes**

Two federal ministries jointly oversee the NCP, with responsibilities laid out in a memorandum of understanding. Each of these ministries lends its own expertise to the program—Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) is the strategic and policy lead on the program, while the Department of Education and Training (DET) administers scholarships and grants.

The NCP has two award components:

- A scholarships program, which awards funding directly to student applicants. Funding is awarded to undertake an individual study term, internship, mentorship, or practicum at a host location.
- A flexible mobility grants program, which awards funding to Australian universities. Funding is awarded for initiating cohort-based, faculty-led study-abroad projects for students.

The NCP accepts nominations for scholarship recipients from Australian universities. In their applications, potential scholars must demonstrate strong academic achievement in undergraduate courses, leadership capabilities, and willingness and ability to be an ambassador of the program. Students in any field of study are eligible to become an NCP scholar. The only stipulation is that they must undertake full-time study at the host location, for which they will receive full credit toward their undergraduate degree from their home university.  

11 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Private-Sector Support for New Colombo Plan.*

12 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), *Frequently Asked Questions—2015 Scholarship Round.*
cultural background of applicants, and strives to ensure that scholarships are awarded to applicants representing rural, remote, low-income, and Indigenous students.\textsuperscript{13}

In the 2014 pilot year of the NCP, up to AU$67,000 was available per individual scholarship. A funded scholarship period can include financial support for up to one academic year (two semesters) of study, up to six months in a full-time internship following academic study, and up to one month of intensive language training in a language applicable to the study location.\textsuperscript{14} Scholars are strongly encouraged to undertake internships or mentorships during their scholarship period, and to seek recognition from their academic institution for participation in one, as a component of their overseas program.

The mobility grants component of the NCP delivers funding directly to Australian institutions and is focused on developing inter-institutional relationships between universities and private sector organizations. These relationships and collaborations are expected to enhance the opportunities for students to participate in short- or long-term study, internships, mentorships, practicums, and research. In allocating grants, priority is given to projects that can be sustained over the long-term and scaled up to accommodate increasing numbers of participants. Priority is also given to mobility projects that support internships, focus on language training, and attract private sector in-kind support or financial assistance.\textsuperscript{15}

Student engagement, alumni advocacy, and knowledge sharing are also important components. After completion of the program, scholars are encouraged to share their NCP experiences with other students and their community through activities organized by the NCP Secretariat. The NCP Secretariat mobilizes knowledge sharing by arranging outreach

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with The Conference Board of Canada; Menzies Research Centre, \textit{New Colombo Plan: A Report of the Steering Group}.

\textsuperscript{14} Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), \textit{New Colombo Plan: Scholarship Program Guidelines 2014}.

\textsuperscript{15} Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), \textit{New Colombo Plan Mobility Program Guidelines 2016}. 

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sessions for universities, and by providing updates on the program’s progress and best practices at conventions arranged by student-mobility umbrella groups.

Resources

The Australian Government has committed AU$100 million over five years, between 2013 and 2018, toward the nCP. An additional AU$51.1 million has been committed for 2018–19. This funding represents new money only; it does not include existing funds that were tied to other programs now housed under the NCP. About 17 full-time equivalent staff are dedicated to the program, the majority within DFAT.16

At the program level, one private sector partnership helps to prepare students for their international programs. The Bennelong Foundation, The Myer Foundation, and AsiaLink Business have an agreement in place with the NCP to deliver cultural-intelligence training to students before they commence their education abroad. This five-year investment is valued at AU$500,000.17

Host countries often provide in-kind support to the program in a number of ways, though they are not expected to make either in-kind or financial commitments to the program. Some have made internship opportunities with government agencies available, hosted events, provided the use of facilities, and offered cultural briefings. The contribution of each host country is negotiated by the home and host institutions.

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16 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
17 Bennelong Foundation, AsiaLink Business to Provide Cultural Intelligence Training; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), Private-Sector Support for New Colombo Plan.
Innovations

A Streamlined National Scholarships Program
Australia offers many scholarships for study abroad, and previously offered funding for study in the Indo-Pacific under a variety of programs. In order to alleviate some confusion about the award opportunities available, all of Australia’s national scholarship opportunities for undergraduate study in the Indo-Pacific have been redirected to the NCP. Post-secondary education (PSE) institutions have found this “one-stop” approach a welcome improvement.

Flexible Scholarship Funding
Australia’s other scholarship initiatives have been criticized for being inflexible in terms of which students and types of international experiences could be funded. NCP scholarships provide significant and flexible funding that can be applied to nearly all aspects of a recipient’s costs. This includes costs for tuition, accommodations, and undertaking intensive language training applicable to the student’s host country. Further, a variety of learning experiences beyond classroom study are eligible—including internships, mentorships, and practicums.

A Focus on Partnerships and Collaboration
Unlike other education-abroad initiatives in Australia, the NCP encourages PSE institutions to develop stable, long-term, inter-institutional programs for education abroad. The mobility grants program explicitly encourages Australian universities to develop their own study-abroad agreements and programs in Indo-Pacific countries, and program

18 Commonwealth of Australia, Australia—Educating Globally, 4.
19 Department of Education and Training (Australia), About Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships.
20 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
21 Commonwealth of Australia, Australia—Educating Globally, 4.
22 Ibid.
staff are regularly pursuing partnerships and collaboration at the program level to expand the NCP.\textsuperscript{23} Ultimately, the mobility grants program seeks to invest in initiatives that are sustainable and relevant.

**Clear Links to Departmental Expertise and Objectives**

The foreign policy objectives and the cooperation of the two federal departments further distinguishes this program from Australia’s other national education-abroad opportunities. The horizontal, coordinated approach of DFAT and DET has allowed the program to capitalize on each department’s expertise for efficient and effective program delivery. The program also looks for ways its participants can be involved in Australia’s offshore diplomatic and trade networks by extending invitations for students to participate in missions and events, such as with local chambers of commerce.\textsuperscript{24}

**Challenges and Solutions/Keys to Success**

**Managing Program Scale**

A chief challenge has been managing the scale of this national program, which involves 38 participating countries. For each participating country, the NCP program has worked to ensure common understanding of roles and expectations, including the provision of local support for Australian students undertaking study in each location. Having centralized resources and dedicated staff in Australia, and acknowledging the importance of this activity, has kept the program operating smoothly.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{23} Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
Ensuring Enough Internships to Meet Demand

Nearly all NCP scholarship applicants have plans to undertake an internship as part of their scholarship term abroad. However, the number who actually complete an internship is lower. This is due, in part, to a shortage of available internships, and students not knowing where to find them.26 In response to this challenge, recent additions to the NCP include the creation of a business champions initiative. This will promote the value of study abroad and encourage private sector participation by providing workplace learning experiences and an online internship and mentorship portal linking students with the private sector to identify workplace learning opportunities.27

Establishing Partnerships and Collaborations

Establishing inter-institutional partnerships and private sector collaboration takes time. Following the pilot year, the NCP introduced some multi-year funding for mobility projects so Australian institutions could dedicate the time needed to build long-term, sustainable relationships with Indo-Pacific partners. The NCP also recently announced a mobility partners initiative that will support universities to develop partnerships with the private sector for their mobility programs, such as matching government funding for student participation.28 The response to the challenge of establishing partnerships and collaborations is helping the program remain relevant to Australian universities, whose participation is critical for success.

26 Ibid.

27 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), New Colombo Plan Gets Down to Business.

28 Ibid.
Benefits, Outcomes, and Impacts

Thousands of Students Studying Across the Indo-Pacific

To date, the NCP has already committed funding to support approximately 4,300 Australian students to undertake a learning experience in the Indo-Pacific. This includes the 40 inaugural scholarship recipients and 1,300 students supported through institutional mobility projects who participated in the program’s pilot year. This number is expected to increase to 10,000 by 2016, surpassing the initial goal of 7,000 participants by 2019. In 2015, the number of scholarships available was increased to 100, and placements for students in mobility programs grew as the program was expanded to include a total of 38 eligible study destinations in Indo-Pacific countries. Scholarship recipients have included a range of students from different demographics (including rural and remote areas, cultural and ethnic backgrounds [including Aboriginal Australians], and socio-economic levels). To ensure variety in the locations where individual scholars choose to study, the program caps the number of scholarships that are awarded for any single host location. The number of places available for students will continue to expand as mobility projects mature and increase their capacity.

29 Ibid.
30 Keen, “Business Backs Julie Bishop’s Indo-Pacific Study Plan.”
31 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), Private-Sector Support for New Colombo Plan.
32 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), Scholarship Program FAQs: Key Changes in the 2016 Round.
33 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
34 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia), Scholarship Program FAQs: Key Changes in the 2016 Round.
Increased Foreign-Language Training and Study in Non-English-Speaking Countries

According to the NCP’s own interim survey of pilot-phase participants, more than half of scholarship recipients and participants in the mobility program have taken part in language training as part of their term abroad. With most of the eligible study destinations being non-English-speaking countries, it appears that the NCP is on track to increase the proportion of Australian students who undertake education in countries where knowledge of other languages is required. Although language acquisition is not an explicit goal of the program, the NCP Secretariat recognizes that proficiency in Indo-Pacific languages will be important for students to build deeper cultural connections.

Private Sector Collaborations

Institutions funded by the NCP mobility grants have undertaken a number of private sector collaborations and partnerships. One example is the University of Technology, Sydney’s (UTS) partnership with Japan’s Mitsui & Co., which, in 2015, will offer internships to twelve UTS students. The internships will introduce the students to Mitsui & Co.’s trading, investment, and services operations, and to Japanese culture, society, and history. Private sector collaboration is well-suited to this program, given its imperative to develop future leaders with competence in all areas where Australia may have connections to the Indo-Pacific, including business and industry. These collaborations can also help extend the reach, impact, and sustainability of the program. The NCP will be tracking the number and nature of private sector collaborations and partnerships as a measure of the program’s long-term impact.

35 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
36 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
37 University of Technology, Sydney, “New Colombo Plan Takes UTS Students to Japan.”
38 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.
Canada encounters challenges similar to Australia’s when it comes to mobilizing our students to study abroad.

Strengthened Diplomatic Relations in the Indo-Pacific

Although it is still early in the program’s implementation, program staff have noted that the NCP is being positively received around the Indo-Pacific region. In the longer term, evidence of increased trade or new relationships may indicate further success of the program strengthening diplomatic ties.39

Lessons for Canada

Canada encounters challenges similar to Australia’s when it comes to mobilizing our students to study abroad. Our many cultural, historical, and political similarities to Australia also make its experiences with the internationalization of education relevant to our own. Although increasing opportunities for education abroad was identified as a priority in Canada’s 2014 International Education Strategy, targets for domestic student mobilization have been less clearly articulated than for other international education efforts. This may be due, in part, to the combination of a lack of data on Canadian participation in education abroad, and the lack of a clear agency with the mandate and authority to centralize education-abroad initiatives. Since education falls largely under provincial/territorial jurisdiction in Canada, efforts to support education abroad have historically been splintered between various provincial/territorial, institutional, and federal programs and initiatives. As a result, Canadian education-abroad activities tend to be piecemeal rather than cohesive and strategic. The following are eight key lessons for Canada from the New Colombo Plan that can inform future policy directions.

39 Interview with The Conference Board of Canada.

Canada has been noted for lacking any specific national focus for sending students outward.\(^{40}\) Recent data estimate that just 3 per cent of Canadian students participate in a study-abroad program each year—a much lower rate than most comparable nations.\(^{41}\) Further, OECD data show that foreign students pursuing full-length programs in Canada outnumber our own domestic students abroad four to one.\(^{42}\) Sending students outbound has rewards for individual participants, their principal institutions, and their host locations,\(^{43}\) and also encourages greater acceptance of efforts to attract foreign students to Canada.\(^{44}\) In addition, students returning from abroad offer Canadian businesses seeking to enter or grow their activities in international markets a potent combination of strong skills, understanding of international market conditions, and personal and professional contacts.

2. Provide and Resource a Variety of Structured Educational Experiences.

The realm of possible educational experiences abroad encompasses more than study terms and exchanges.\(^{45}\) Australia’s NCP scholarships support students to take on other educational opportunities, such as practicums, internships, and mentorships, in addition to participating in a for-credit educational exchange. Additionally, the mobility grants program allows institutions to establish a wide range of educational opportunities for students that go beyond the traditional study term. However, some of the most valuable educational experiences, such as internships, are not always abundant or obvious to students. As the NCP is realizing,

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\(^{41}\) Universities Canada, *Canada’s Universities in the World*.


targeted, deliberate support is necessary to create links between internship providers and students. Collaboration among government, industry, and universities may also help to create further learning opportunities for students.


For Canadian students, cost is among the top reasons they choose not to go abroad for any part of their post-secondary training. Australia has recognized this as a significant barrier for its own students. In response, NCP scholarships support the full cost of tuition while abroad, and students from all socio-economic backgrounds are encouraged to apply.

4. Align Education-Abroad Programs With Strategic Foreign Policy Goals.

The new Colombo Plan is focused on delivering Australian students to a region that is deemed to have historical, current, and future economic and cultural significance to Australia. Canada, similarly, has its own reasons to be economically connected to particular regions and may benefit from education activities in countries poised to be major economic players, such as Brazil, India, and China. Canada has also been criticized for lacking competence and experience in Asian countries, a shortcoming that could be remedied in part, by increased attention to reciprocal student exchanges.

46 Universities Canada, *Canada's Universities in the World*; Lambert and Usher, *The Pros and Cons of Internationalization*.

47 Crawford, McDine, and Paterson, “The Economic Dimension of Study Abroad.”

48 Mulroney and De Silva, *Canada's Asia Challenge*. 
5. **Offer Funding for Language Training.**

Lacking language skills appears to be a barrier to studying in countries where a student’s mother tongue is not predominant. 49 This manifests in students’ choice of study destination: 75 per cent of Canadian students who study abroad do so in a country where English is the main language of instruction (including 53 per cent who study in the U.S., 15 per cent in the U.K., and 8 per cent in Australia). 50 Australia’s NCP is addressing this challenge head-on by offering financial support for intensive language training and increasing the number of opportunities available in non-English speaking countries. These efforts appear poised to increase the number and proportion of Australians undertaking study in non-English speaking countries.

6. **Seek Out Collaborations and Partnerships.**

Collaborations with the private sector are contributing to the NCP by providing students with cultural training and opportunities to develop their skills in the workplace. Establishing these relationships ensures a more engaging educational experience for students. A Canadian program would also do well to engage the private sector, community agencies, and universities. Some Canadian universities have a wealth of internal expertise, particularly in the areas of cultural training and community development, that could be leveraged as part of a national program.

7. **Encourage Student Participants to Serve as Ambassadors.**

The NCP’s alumni engagement activities are still nascent; nevertheless, this has been identified as an important element to help market the program for years to come. Canadian programs could support networks of scholarship alumni to remain involved by contributing recruitment

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50 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Indicator C4.”
support, advice, and mentorship. Notable alumni and the outcomes of their terms abroad can also be leveraged to raise the prestige of the program.


The NCP operates with the commitment of two federal departments, each of which contributes its expertise to the program. In Canada’s situation, the absence of a centralized federal body responsible for education requires that multiple bodies collaborate in education-abroad initiatives—particularly provincial/territorial ministries for education and the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development—to achieve a centralized strategy. Not only can a collaborative approach reach further, but it can also ensure that cohesive data are produced to demonstrate the extent of that reach.

Conclusion

Australia’s New Colombo Plan is an international education initiative that is delivering significant financial resources for scholarships and sustainable international mobility projects in the Indo-Pacific region. The NCP holds significant lessons for Canadian post-secondary institutions and policy-makers interested in the internationalization of education. First and foremost, Canadian post-secondary institutions and policy-makers need to prioritize education-abroad initiatives for domestic students. These initiatives can develop globally aware, skilled workers who will contribute to the innovation and growth of Canadian trade in international markets through the skills “know-how” and connections “know-who” they gain from their experiences abroad.

The NCP example shows that education-abroad initiatives can achieve the most from their investment when they include the following elements: support for non-study experiences such as internships, mentorships, and practicums; direct, significant, and flexible financial support for students; specific support for language training; a strategic international focus;
partnerships and collaborations between post-secondary institutions and the private sector; promotion through alumni networks; and collaboration between levels of government and departments to create a highly coordinated approach to international programming.

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