



**Queensland University of Technology  
Submission to the  
New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group**

QUT welcomes the opportunity to respond to the New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group request for feedback on how the initiative can be used to develop and enhance future effective engagement in the Indo-Pacific region.

We support the broad purpose of the New Colombo Plan (NCP) to enhance understanding of the Indo-Pacific region among Australian undergraduates by providing opportunities to study in situ, learn languages and participate in internships. The initiative performs an important role in strengthening the regional relationships of Australia at both individual and institutional levels, while also creating a network of alumni who have valuable experiences and connections across the region.

Our submission concerns two issues: underrepresentation of certain cohorts of students in the NCP; and our national failure to maintain civil linguistic capability in Australia for our current and future regional strategic needs.

**Underrepresented Cohorts**

To maximise the benefit of providing opportunities for Australian undergraduate students to experience, and benefit from, exchange programs across the Indo-Pacific region, it is critical that the full diversity of student cohorts have access to, and engage with, the NCP. The present review of the initiative provides an opportunity to recognise and address the significant difficulties experienced by disadvantaged and underrepresented undergraduate students that may make them hesitate to participate in the NCP and other study abroad and overseas mobility programs.

We are concerned with the structural exclusion of certain cohorts: while we are thinking here especially of students from low socio-economic and working-class backgrounds, Indigenous Australians, students living with (or caring for someone living with) disability, and students from culturally diverse backgrounds, we are talking about any group whose members are under-represented in the NCP alumni figures relative to their proportion of the Australian undergraduate population.

Participation in study abroad programs is virtually always unequal, with less well-off and otherwise challenged students experiencing substantial barriers. Many people select themselves out of initiatives like this at first glance, with a wistful sigh about the opportunity forsaken in deference to adverse conditions or resource constraints. Others explore the opportunity but then hesitate to apply, or apply and later pull out. There are many reasons why students may feel that they cannot participate.

For some, it's about their capacity to meet additional costs associated with international programs like studying abroad – or even the confidence that such costs could be met, should they arise unexpectedly. Students from low-income and/or working class

backgrounds usually lack the financial flexibility and – just as importantly – the financial confidence to take a punt on an extension experience involving international travel and extended time away from home.

For many, it's about the need to make a living while studying. While completing undergraduate programs, many students undertake paid employment to support ongoing living expenses, such as rent and utility payments, which would still need to be paid while overseas on an exchange program. Some have precarious, casual jobs from which they cannot take leave, but would have to quit and reapply for after returning from their experience abroad.

For others, it's about caregiving or their own care needs. Less wealthy students are more likely to have personal caregiving responsibilities and lack the financial flexibility needed to make temporary substitute arrangements while they're away. Some students have care requirements of their own, which produce personal challenges perhaps not considered by those designing and operating the program.

For some, it's about community and family obligations. Some students have obligations to Country and Mob that are poorly accommodated by western bureaucratic paradigms that shape program guidelines and funding parameters. For others, religious and cultural observances can impede their participation in a program that assumes a degree of individual autonomy they do not share.

Of course for most, it's about more than one of these things. Many students who are counted within one of these categories fall into other categories as well – the high cost of living with disability, for example, propels many individuals and families with these burdens towards and into poverty.

For all of these students, it's also about the impediment these challenges pose to their own understanding of themselves as people who are capable and deserving of the opportunity. While some of these practical challenges and impediments are beyond the scope of the NCP to resolve, all of them can contribute to the self-perception of students from less well-off, working-class and otherwise less privileged backgrounds and circumstances that opportunities like the NCP are not for 'people like them'. Cultural marginalisation holds people back by making it difficult for them to envision themselves as equally entitled to and capable of successful participation in study abroad opportunities as their more fortunate peers. Even those students who confront and transcend these doubts never stop fighting them off. If students from particular backgrounds are more prone to doubt that they are capable of participating in an international mobility experience, they are less likely to apply and (therefore) participate, further compounding any apprehension harboured by these cohorts about adapting to different cultural environments. These factors collectively create barriers that prevent the full range of students from engaging in beneficial international mobility programs.

The skew of NCP travelling participants towards wealthier, less encumbered, more culturally confident Australian students produces two regrettable effects. Domestically, this structural feature provides the NCP growth opportunity disproportionately to those who are arguably already better equipped to move through an increasingly globalised world, tending to leave behind those Australians who would potentially benefit most from the experience. Internationally, it risks restricting the intimate exposure to Australians of people in the target country to a misleadingly narrow cohort of students who are wealthier and more culturally confident than the actual cross-section of the Australian undergraduate population.

QUT therefore recommends that the NCP should be redesigned to explicitly and structurally address disadvantaged and under-represented cohorts of undergraduate students. A refreshed NCP that explicitly welcomes and sustains the participation of all students will broaden the applicant pool, providing conditions to diversify the cohort of students accessing the initiative.

We strongly emphasise the need to adequately address the economic barriers to those students who might have apprehension or uncertainty surrounding their ability to participate in the NCP. To this end, QUT recommends that the new Commonwealth Prac Payment, which provides means-tested support to teaching, nursing and midwifery, and social work students to help cover living costs while undertaking mandatory placements, should be extended to include the NCP.

To further ensure diversity and equity in the number of undergraduate students accessing the initiative, we recommend that a quota be introduced to reserve places for groups with historically low participation rates in the NCP. A fixed share of places could be determined based on the existing proportion of these undergraduate student groups relative to the entire higher education sector. With the use of existing data, this could be applied immediately to students from a low socioeconomic background, as well as other identified groups such as students from regional, rural and remote communities, Indigenous Australian students and students living with a disability. Work could be done in future to help include other marginalised students whose challenges are not yet captured in higher education student statistics (such as students with significant carer responsibilities).

We also recommend that NCP promotion should actively target and encourage students from historically underrepresented cohorts to consider participation in the initiative. This may include, for example, deploying NCP alumni from these groups as ambassadors to foster a sense of belonging and relevance of the initiative to underrepresented groups. Indeed, showcasing diverse student experiences in promotional materials to reflect the inclusivity of the initiative, combined with targeted outreach and financial support, could assist historically excluded students to navigate the process and address key barriers.

### **Regional Strategic Language Capability**

Finally, we also highlight that the future effectiveness of the NCP will be dependent on the existence of a coordinated and adequately funded national languages program in Australia. Indeed, a sufficiently mature program of onshore language instruction is essential for supporting the linguistic requirements of the initiative.

There is a crucial role for government intervention in language instruction in Australia. There is a significant national and regional public good that is derived from fostering and sustaining a standing civil capability in diverse linguistic competence. At present, Australia relies on a combination of community speakers and the market forces of student uptake to sustain this precious national resource. We should not stand by and allow our capacity to communicate with our neighbours to thrive or wither based solely on the combination of market forces and their diasporas' numbers inside Australia. Within the universities, language education is often challenged by high costs and low enrolment – most individual institutions try to keep courses open through cross-subsidy, but that can only be sustained up to a point.

Coordinated Government intervention is required to assist a diversity of individual institutions to sustain strategic language programs on behalf of the nation. We recommend the establishment of a Commonwealth-funded institutional subsidy program to maintain a critical mass of civil strategic language instruction in Australia, ensuring that students have access to a variety of language options for credit across institutions, including by virtual remote

means. Within this program, one university could shoulder the responsibility for a particular otherwise financially unviable but strategically important language (for example, Tetum, Tok Pisin, Acehnese or Bislama), with the course being made available to all students, regardless of their institution of enrolment, for academic credit. By investing in language education, the Australian Government would adopt the proactive stance that is essential for fostering a linguistically diverse society that can navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific region.

## **Recommendations**

QUT recommends that:

1. The NCP be redesigned to explicitly and structurally address disadvantaged and under-represented cohorts of undergraduate students.
2. The new Commonwealth Prac Payment, which provides means-tested support to teaching, nursing and midwifery, and social work students to help cover living costs while undertaking mandatory placements, be extended to include the NCP.
3. The NCP selection process introduces a quota to reserve places for members of groups with historically low participation rates in the NCP relative to their proportions across the higher education sector.
4. NCP promotion actively and explicitly targets and encourages students from historically underrepresented cohorts to consider participation in the initiative.
5. The Commonwealth establishes an institutional subsidy program to maintain a critical mass of civil strategic language instruction in Australia, ensuring that students have access to a variety of language options for credit across institutions.

We hope this feedback is helpful to External Advisory Group and would be happy to expand on any of these points should that be of assistance.

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