

# Universities Australia's submission to the New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group

1 November 2024



Universities Australia (UA) recognises that the New Colombo Plan (NCP) has been pivotal in deepening knowledge and networks in the Indo-Pacific. Since the NCP's establishment, universities have expanded partnerships and developed relationships within the region to support over 50,000 Australian university students to build capability and networks, in support of Australia's foreign policy priorities.

UA acknowledges and is supportive of the need to align the NCP with current foreign policy needs and suggests this can be achieved through targeted adjustments. To ensure the success of future implementation, we have highlighted current challenges our members are grappling with in administering the recent changes to the program.

## Recommendations

- 1 **Expand the NCP** to include opportunities for postgraduate students.
- 2 **Include an NCP mobility stream** dedicated to building the Indo-Pacific capability of equity students.
- 3 **Include an entrepreneurship and industry partnership stream** with a focus on skills needs.
- 4 **Provide greater support** for language skills development prior to commencement.
- 5 **Expand the program** to leverage TNE partnerships.
- 6 **Consult with universities** before making changes to the NCP.

## Building capability through the NCP

The NCP has facilitated substantial capability-building in the Indo-Pacific, drawing on the success of student mobility programs including AsiaBound and the Endeavour Leadership Program (ELP). Revitalising the successful elements of these programs presents a significant opportunity to increase the impact of the NCP and meet whole-of-government priorities across education, skills, and research.

Uplifting regional capability should not be limited to undergraduate students. UA recommends expanding NCP eligibility to include postgraduate students, consistent with efforts to expand postgraduate access through the Australian Universities Accord. Since the cessation of AsiaBound and ELP, government funding for postgraduate coursework and research mobility in the Indo-Pacific has been insufficient. Students who wish to undertake learning, research and collaboration in the Indo-Pacific beyond an undergraduate degree should be supported through the NCP given the capability shortages identified by the Minister for Foreign Affairs.<sup>1</sup>

Regional capability building should be readily accessible to all student cohorts, including First Nations, low socioeconomic and first-in-family, through the NCP. The inclusion of a dedicated equity student stream will ensure that the NCP is a standard-bearer for equitability, focused on building knowledge and expertise while acknowledging and accommodating disadvantage. An equity stream will also counteract access issues introduced through recent reforms to minimum study duration, ensuring that the Government continues to meet its diversity targets for student mobility programs.

Consideration should be given to enhancing industry engagement in the NCP. This could be facilitated through an additional NCP mobility or scholarship stream targeting skills needs, entrepreneurship and bolstering industry engagement in the program. A clearly delineated category with additional assistance would allow universities to develop greater opportunities with the private sector in the Indo-Pacific.

<sup>1</sup> Senator the Hon Penny Wong, Centre For Asian-Australian Leadership inaugural annual lecture, 19 August 2024



Australian universities have successfully developed work-integrated learning and industry partnerships domestically, which could be extended into the region. Increased industry engagement through the NCP requires government support to leverage regional relationships and networks to build on current industry partnerships.

Further consideration should be given to facilitating entrepreneurialism and allowing students to explore innovation and capability-building opportunities across the region, consistent with the Australian Universities Accord recommendations.

## Current challenges with the NCP

Universities are committed to the continued success of NCP however, the recent changes outlined in the 2025 Guidelines are proving difficult to implement.

### Changes to the minimum duration of a NCP experience

- The increased minimum duration for NCP Mobility Programs from two weeks to four weeks has impacted many valuable programs and experiences offered by Australian universities. According to Studymove, 74 per cent of NCP experiences in 2024 were less than four weeks in duration. These programs are now ineligible for funding in 2025 without significant changes.
- Finding staff to support the programs is now an issue. Academic staff availability for longer programs is limited, as current NCP experiences are often undertaken during semester breaks to account for teaching or research schedules. Universities are financially and operationally constrained and may be unable to resource teaching vacancies created by academics supporting NCP programs for a minimum of four weeks.
- Overseas hosts may face similar resourcing challenges in supporting NCP students for longer durations. This will further impact program offerings, limiting the NCP's capacity to increase Indo-Pacific capability and literacy to desired levels.
- Additionally, the changes could weaken Australia's relationships with Indo-Pacific partners if they result in fewer students participating in the NCP. International education is a key source of soft power. Having fewer students studying in the Indo-Pacific at a time we need to be building stronger regional relationships is not consistent with Australia's foreign policy needs, particularly when the Government is seeking to reduce the number of foreign students studying in Australia under Ministerial Direction 107 and international student caps.

- Equity cohorts have been disproportionately impacted by these changes due to financial limitations and family/cultural commitments that make a longer program unfeasible.
- Research has found that short-term student mobility programs substantially reduce barriers to entry for equity students.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, learning and employability outcomes for short term experiences are generally assessed as comparable or better than long-term experiences.
- An increased minimum duration will reduce NCP access for equity cohorts and will substantially impact on the DFAT's performance measures of increasing the 'number and diversity of Australian university undergraduates with Indo-Pacific capability' and 'diversity measures for First Nations, disability and regional/remote students are equal to or greater than the broader Australian university undergraduate cohort'.<sup>3</sup>

### Impact of the changes to the NCP requirements:

- One university has had a decline from 18 to eight academics able to support an NCP Mobility Program due to the increased minimum duration.
- Another institution reduced its applications for NCP funding due to the short notice on changes and had to rapidly adjust other programs to meet new requirements.
- One program targeted at Bachelor of Nursing students (at a university with a high proportion of equity students), who are constrained by placement requirements, has not been submitted for funding as it would not be eligible under current arrangements.
- Another program that involved securing MOUs with foreign government organisations has had to be cancelled due to the change in minimum duration.
- One university reported the need to cancel a program that supported 29 Indigenous students, as they were unable to commit to an extended program.

<sup>2</sup> Career Outcomes of Learning Abroad study.

<sup>3</sup> Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Portfolio Budget Statements 2024–25 and DFAT Corporate Plan 2024–25.



### **A comprehensive strategy to language skills development**

The catalyst of increased Asian language learning starts well before university. Australia requires a comprehensive strategy encompassing all facets of education to improve participation rates. Since 2004, there has been a 75 per cent decline in Southeast Asian language studies at university, severely limiting potential applicants for a language stream. The NCP is a valuable program for Indo-Pacific literacy but should not be positioned as a solution to underinvestment in the languages pipeline.

Small cohorts and a lack of sufficient government funding constrain universities' capacity to offer language courses, which often run at a loss. The introduction of a new language stream is welcomed, but it should be preceded by greater support for language skills development.

### **Transnational education (TNE)**

Currently, NCP Mobility Program funded experiences cannot be undertaken through TNE partners. This contradicts the strategic objective of the NCP of increasing capability and literacy in the Indo-Pacific, where TNE partners offer courses tailored to local students.

Allowing Australian students the opportunity to learn and engage with local students should be encouraged. We acknowledge that offshore campuses of Australian universities are excluded, but the exclusion of TNE partners is needlessly prohibitive.

### **Consultation with universities**

UA recommends more timely and fulsome consultation on changes to the NCP, particularly where rapid changes to existing programs are required. The establishment of the External Advisory Group is a positive step, but further consideration is required on how to best socialise changes with universities to ensure continued support in meeting strategic objectives.



**For further information:**

Jaclyn Lane  
Policy Director, Global Engagement  
**E** [j.lane@uniaux.edu.au](mailto:j.lane@uniaux.edu.au)

Universities Australia  
1 Geils Court, Deakin ACT 2600

**P** +61 2 6285 8100  
**E** [contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au](mailto:contact@universitiesaustralia.edu.au)  
[universitiesaustralia.edu.au](http://universitiesaustralia.edu.au)