



**NATIONAL REPORT**

# Australian Student Mobility to the Indo-Pacific Region through the New Colombo Plan

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# Executive Summary

## Australian student mobility to the Indo-Pacific

Around one in four ([23%](#)) of Australian undergraduate students participated in learning abroad in 2019, compared to [7.4% \(UK\)](#) and [16% \(US\)](#) in 2018-2019 and [11% \(Canada\)](#) in 2017. Of the more than 58,000 student international mobility experiences from across 34 Australian universities, [almost half \(49%\)](#) undertaken by domestic undergraduates were in the Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific's geographic proximity and geopolitical connectivity with Australia crucially defines our relationship with the region. Immigrants from this region account for 41% of all Australian citizens born overseas (ABS, 2016). Approximately 80% of Australia's trade and a majority of its largest services export, international education (\$40 billion in 2019; ABS, 2020), are within this region. With engagement across the Indo-Pacific being of strategic importance, the Australian government is committed to building knowledge of the Indo-Pacific for young Australians.

## The New Colombo Plan

Building on the Colombo Plan, an inbound mobility program sponsoring Asian scholars studying in Commonwealth countries between 1951 and 1985, the New Colombo Plan (NCP) was introduced in 2014 as the government's signature reciprocal student mobility initiative to enhance Australian students' Indo-Pacific literacy and enrich Australia's regional engagement. Through this initiative, outbound mobility as an

educational function has evolved to embrace public diplomacy, with the NCP re-framing learning abroad beyond the student experience alone to impact national capacity by building regional engagement.

The New Colombo Plan aims to enhance Indo-Pacific knowledge for young Australians through study and work experiences in the region. Administered jointly by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Education, the [NCP supported over 1,340](#) students in its pilot phase in 2014 and now in 2021 has mobilised an alumni community of more than 70,000.

## The research project

This Australian Research Council-funded research aims to analyse the nature, circumstances and impacts of Australian students' learning and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through the New Colombo Plan.

Data sources include:

- Policy documents
- In-country fieldwork and observations
- A national survey of 1,371 NCP students and alumni from 40 universities
- 298 interviews (as of 15/07/2021) with NCP students and alumni, academic program leaders, mobility practitioners, host communities, third party providers and government representatives in Australia and Indo-Pacific host countries.

## Summary of key findings

The key findings emerging from the national survey of 1,371 NCP students and alumni, in-country fieldwork and interviews with related stakeholders are summarised below:

### Motivations:

The primary motivations of students were to challenge themselves (96%), gain experience in the Indo-Pacific region and broaden their understanding about the region (96%), become familiar with another culture (96%), and travel to a new place (95%).

### Impacts:

The research found that the impact of short-term mobility on student learning outcomes and development is similar to that of long-term mobility, with mean scores of **4.25/5** and **4.3/5** respectively. However, **short-term mobility students are more satisfied** with their learning abroad experience than long-term ones, with mean scores of **8.81/10** and **8.49/10** on meeting expectations, respectively.

Empirical evidence from the interviews and survey shows short-term mobility is beneficial because:

- Students are exposed to collective learning with their cohort and host communities
- Academic program leaders actively enhance academic rigour
- Students have access to academic staff 24/7 who provide not only content knowledge expertise and academic learning support, but also cultural, social, wellbeing, medical and travel advice
- Learning is contextualised in an authentic environment by leveraging host community partnerships established by academics, universities and third-party providers
- It is flexible enough for students to accommodate academic study, part-time work commitments and home responsibilities
- There is evidence of the potential of short-term mobility to contribute to students' intercultural competence, knowledge about the region and development of attributes, soft skills, employability and curriculum-specific learning.

The research shows a desire for an increase in the minimum length of short-term programs (internship, summer school, short-term study programs) beyond the current requirement for a minimum period of 14 days from students, hosts and some academics, so that students can have time to settle in, access more in-depth experiences, and build connections with the host communities. In contrast, mobility practitioners are not in favour of this increase as it would involve more funding, and because they fear students might miss too much in terms of study, work or family commitments at home.

### Student development and learning

The research provides evidence that the NCP program has achieved its objective of increasing knowledge of the Indo-Pacific among young Australians. The key areas of student learning identified were developing an understanding of and confidence in engagement with the region, while also stimulating connections with Australians of Indo-Pacific background and developing an interest in learning an Asian/Indo-Pacific language. In particular, **up to 66%** of the students indicated the learning abroad experience made them interested in pursuing employment within the Indo-Pacific.

### Impact on employability and career outcomes

- Strong correlation between Indo-Pacific learning abroad experiences and region-related career outcomes: The **top eight host countries** (75% of study participants) **mirror the top eight countries NCP alumni in this**

**study are working in or with** (74% NCP alumni) (Japan, Indonesia, China, Vietnam, Republic of Korea, India, Singapore, Malaysia).

- NCP students accumulate personal, professional, intercultural and symbolic capital that provides them with a competitive edge in the graduate labour market. The learning experience also enhances their employment prospects beyond Australia. However, while **89% participating students** agreed that the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience was useful for their resume, **only 44% agreed that that it was valued by their current employer** and another 44% agreed that it actually promoted their position.
- Indo-Pacific learning abroad experiences have a significant impact on students' personal and professional development and their career aspirations (mean score of 4.25). However, the magnitude of these impacts is higher among NCP scholars <sup>i</sup>(mean score of 4.51) than mobility students (mean score of 4.21).

### Impacts on the community and society

There is evidence that NCP students not only experience personal, intercultural and professional development, but that they use their Indo-Pacific knowledge and experience to influence their family, friends and communities in both home and host countries. However, this impact is more organic and depends on individual students. Well-structured post-study programs could leverage NCP alumni to enhance Indo-Pacific knowledge in the wider community and use them as a catalyst to strengthen relationships between Australia and the region.

### Overall Impacts

The research shows the values of learning abroad in the Indo-Pacific through the NCP in terms of building multilateral relationships, establishing and reinforcing research and industry partnerships, strengthening the

internationalisation of HE and domestic and international recruitment for both home and host universities, and creating social impacts for Australian and Indo-Pacific communities.

### Challenges facing NCP students

Although 90% of survey students had previous overseas travel experience, they reported multiple challenges associated with learning abroad. The top three were: dealing with a new language (89%), dealing with the culture (84%), and adjusting to teaching and learning methods (79%).

### Pre-departure

While pre-departure orientation in general equips students with basic information and understanding of mobility experiences, the content is often generic. Students have suggested the need to include the host perspective in pre-departure content, country-specific information, and a suitable schedule. Mobility practitioners have suggested the need to avoid generalisations about the Indo-Pacific.

### Post study experiences

- The top three host groups with whom NCP students maintain connections were local students (26%), buddies (17%), and academics (14%). Social media is the main communication channel; the top three are Facebook (31%), Instagram (20%) and WhatsApp (12%).
- The three main NCP-related activities on return were joining the NCP Alumni LinkedIn group (27%), speaking about their NCP experience at an event by their department/University or others (10%), and attending network events with NCP alumni (10%).

## Challenges and tensions

Key challenges and tensions listed below are synthesised from the variety of stakeholder views contributing to the project.

### Hosts

**#1 Host needs and awareness of the NCP:** Hosts lack understanding of the NCP and many are not effectively engaged in designing mobility programs.

### Communication

**#2 Program information:** Evidence from stakeholders (students, alumni, academics, mobility practitioners, and hosts) shows that the program intent and values have not been adequately communicated and clearly understood.

**#3 Student interest:** Some universities and academics are struggling with generating student interest in the program.

**#4 Expectations and consultation:** DFAT and university expectations of each other differ, especially university staff perceptions of what they need, and the reality of what DFAT is tasked with.

### Academics

**#5 Lack of academic engagement:** Many academics are not adequately integrated into the program, are not aware of it, or do not sufficiently understand it.

**#6 Lack of systemic guidelines** for academic program leaders in the management of in-country critical incidents, and academics lack expertise in this area.

### Program development

**#7 Discrepancies** in student selection criteria for mobility programs across universities

**#8 Challenges associated with heavy workloads** for students in intensive short-term mobility

**#9 Challenges with credit recognition and transfer** reported by academics, mobility practitioners and students

**#10 Differences** between academic and mobility staff regarding key performance indicators, project application, program design, and reporting responsibilities but there has been increased understanding and empathy towards each other's responsibilities and workload.

### Post-study support and engagement

**#11 Post-study experience** is a critical area for development. Student feedback indicates many do not know how to leverage their experience, nor are they aware of any resources to act on this. This reflects key stakeholders' uncertainty about who is responsible for this element.

**#12 Both host communities and students expressed a strong desire** for post-study connections but reported a struggle with sustaining them.

### Evaluation

**#13 Hosts and academics are unclear** about whether there are mechanisms for evaluating the program and who is responsible for them.

### Workload and funding

**#14 Workload:** There is a consensus among academics, mobility practitioners and hosts that one of their biggest challenges is the heightened workload involved in developing and delivering short-term mobility programs.

**#15 Funding:** Students have mixed opinions about the amount of funding and are concerned about how to manage their own. Academics and mobility practitioners question the financial return on their time investment, and feel the funding allocation model does not recognise the workload invested in delivering a mobility



program. Universities feel that the heavy administrative burden delays funding, and are concerned about funding implications for the program's sustainability and for the partnership between Australian universities and host communities.

## Recommendations

Key recommendations below are generated from a variety of stakeholder views from the survey and interviews.

### Co-design

#### **#1 Enrich partnership engagement and co-design programs with hosts, including downstream**

**hosts:** It is crucial to understand host needs and engage them across the program cycle (design, pre-departure, delivery and post-study). Hosts should be positioned as equal partners and co-designers rather than as mere recipients of Australian students or program providers. Engaging hosts closely ensures programs are not developed solely through an Australian lens.

### Communications

**#2 More extensively and strategically communicate the intent and values of the NCP to hosts (current and prospective), academics and students,** especially underrepresented groups (regional and remote, low SES, first-in-family, Indigenous) and tap into the role of academics in promoting the program to their students.

**#3 Strengthen consultation and communications with the sector and enhance clarity of roles of stakeholders involved in the NCP,** including source of leadership, delineation of responsibilities, and who resources specific activities and responds to queries.

### Program development and evaluation

**#4 Systemic framework to ensure quality and effective evaluation of short-term mobility programs:** Program quality varies significantly

across Australian universities. Further resources and investment will ensure consistent quality during and post-study experiences.

#### **#5 Pre-departure and in-country support:**

Systemic coordination of a range of pre-departure briefings delivered by multiple stakeholders, and provision of timely and coherent in-country support, especially for critical incidents and wellbeing.

#### **#6 Focus more on the impact of student mobility beyond the in-country experience:**

provide continuing funding for programs that demonstrate impact and engagement in terms of partnership development; leverage the benefits of mobility programs for research, teaching and learning, or service and industry collaborations.

**#7 Enhance the post-study experience** by developing a holistic and coherent mechanism, with concrete guidelines and clear communication regarding the stakeholders responsible for supporting students' post-study engagement and experiences. It is critical to create purposeful channels and activities for students to share their Indo-Pacific experiences, engage in ongoing reflection, and sustain collective post-mobility learning with peers and communities at home.

**#8 Leverage Indo-Pacific experiences to enhance career progression and employability:** Further support and explicit guidance for alumni to articulate their learning abroad experiences into employability.

**#9 Balance and align the values and impacts of NCP-funded programs on student experience,** national human capacity building, diplomatic relations, and regional engagement building.

### Best practice

**#10 Share good practice** in the design and implementation of mobility programs across the sector, specifically:

- building project applications

- constructing effective and impactful mobility programs
- credit transfer and recognition
- developing long-term and formative mobility program evaluation that engage key stakeholders: academics, mobility offices, hosts, third party providers, NCP students and alumni
- fulfilling reporting and acquittal requirements with DFAT and Scope Global as program contract administrator
- leveraging the potential of mobility programs for creating and strengthening research, teaching and learning, and service collaborations with hosts and business partners

**#11 Learn from good practices of mobility programs and initiatives regionally and globally** especially through Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) and digitally enhanced learning abroad, which supports students across all phases, leverages impact and engagement, builds partnerships among key stakeholders and strengthens alumni engagement.

## Engagement

**#12 Engage academics more effectively** through communication, incentives, recognition of workload and contributions and dedicated funding to ensure academic rigour in partnerships with hosts, planning and designing of mobility programs, supporting students' in-country experiences, and ongoing learning and engagement for students across the mobility cycle.

**#13 Formally invest in capacity building and targeted professional development** for mobility practitioners and academics as part of NCP funding. Current professional development programs for mobility practitioners are narrow and do not reflect their increasingly complex role.

**#14 Expand the programs reach** across the various functions of the university (e.g. careers and employment, alumni) so that administration, delivery and engagement with mobility programs are not the sole function of the international office.

**#15 Create an environment** where the government, Scope Global (as DFAT contractor), NCP research bodies, institutions' mobility offices, career services, alumni offices, academic program leaders, host communities, third party providers and business champions are able to collaborate seamlessly.



# Introduction

Outbound student mobility to the Indo-Pacific has been adopted by the Australian government as a strategic mechanism to engage with and maintain long-lasting ties with the region. Public diplomacy goals embedded in Australian students' learning abroad – particularly in the Indo-Pacific – have become priorities of the Australian Government. These are demonstrated in national documents such as the *Bradley Review of Higher Education*, the *Australia 2020 Summit Report*, the *Foreign Policy White Paper 2017*, the *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, the *Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy 2016–2020*, *Universities Australia's World Class Strategy* and the *New Colombo Plan*. Within this broad public diplomacy agenda, sending students to the Indo-Pacific is articulated as a tool to enrich their understandings of the region and related capabilities.

The uptake and perceived value of learning abroad are strongly influenced by previous global experiences across the school and tertiary education sectors. The initiatives in the lead up to the New Colombo Plan (NCP) include: AsiaBound and National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP); the Prime Minister's Asia Awards; and Asia Capable and Globally Competent Building programs (Asia Education Foundation). Against this backdrop, outbound student mobility is situated and facilitated by institutions' internationalisation agenda. Learning abroad is considered to be crucial to enhance students' global outlooks, intercultural understandings, experiential learning, soft skills and employability (Potts, 2015; Tran, Phan & Bellgrove, 2021; Tran, Stafford, Soejatminah & Gribble, 2021).

In total, 58,058 international study experiences were undertaken by students from 34 Australian universities in 2019 (AUIDF, 2021). This is an increase of more than threefold from 15,058 in 2009 (Australian Government, 2014). This fast-growing trend identifies Australia as one of the countries with the highest learning abroad participation rate in the world, with one in four Australian students learning abroad during their undergraduate study. Almost half of Australian undergraduate students' outbound mobility in 2019 was to the Indo-Pacific. Faculty-led study (22%) and internship and work-integrated learning (WIL) programs (20%) were the most popular types of Australian undergraduate students' learning abroad in 2019 (AUIDF, 2021).

This report summarises the key findings of a research project that analyses the experiences and impacts of Australian students' learning and engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through the New Colombo Plan. It highlights a range of learning and development aspects such as:

- curriculum-specific learning,
- intercultural competence,
- personal and professional growth,
- accumulation of Indo-Pacific knowledge and experiences,
- community and social impacts,
- aspirations and future plans.

The research also explores the nexus between Australian students' international experiences in the Indo-Pacific and their employability and career directions. It identifies motivations, good practice examples, needs and challenges of host

organisations in the region. The perspectives and experiences of mobility practitioners and academics from Australian universities who support these programs are also reported.

The report addresses the positioning of student mobility as one of Australia's public diplomacy and human capital building mechanisms in the Indo-Pacific. This discourse reflects Australia's position in the region and in the global economy, with aspirations to foster long-lasting connections and strengthen economic, social, cultural and political ties with Indo-Pacific countries. Through the New Colombo Plan, Australian students are repositioned in the Australian's government policy discourse as more than learners; they become international partners of mutual exchange, actors of public diplomacy and future regional leaders:

- First, Australian students are considered in the policy as learners who undertake mobility programs to enhance Indo-Pacific knowledge and gain regional experiences.
- Second, they are positioned as international partners in cultural and knowledge exchange with the host communities in the region.

- Third, the policy explicitly articulates the role of students as actors of public diplomacy, who can help strengthen human-to-human relationships and contribute to multilateral ties, institutional and business links between Australia and the region.
- Fourth, upon their return, NCP alumni are expected to be future influential leaders with direct cultural and professional experiences and networks in the Indo-Pacific, who can be 'a driving force in Australia's future prosperity' (Australian Government, 2021a).

The findings of this research identify how people-to-people experiences in the region can act as a catalyst for life-long relationships and regional connections. However, there are a range of challenges facing home universities, host organisations, students and stakeholders involved in the NCP landscape. These include a need to better understand each other's expectations, immediate and long-term goals, as well as to co-design and optimise learning abroad programs in the Indo-Pacific so that they can better meet home and host needs.

# Overview Of the New Colombo Plan

The New Colombo Plan (NCP) was launched in 2014 by the Australian Government. Julie Bishop, Australia's Minister of Foreign Affairs (2013-2018), is regarded as the architect of the NCP. The NCP is a reverse form of the original Colombo Plan, initiated by the Australian Government in 1951, which sponsored over 20,000 students and scholars from Asian countries to study in Commonwealth countries (Australian government, 2021b) to enhance their professional and cultural skills and understandings (Oakman, 2010; Rizvi, 2011). With the developmental aims at the core of the program, the Colombo Plan is one of the landmarks of the Global South to Global North learning abroad flow, and is often described as international education as aid.

Building on the original Colombo Plan, the New Colombo Plan marked the re-orientation of student mobility from aid to public diplomacy. The New Colombo Plan aims to lift the knowledge of the Indo-Pacific by providing Australian undergraduate students with opportunities to engage with the region through study and internship programs in 40 different locations <sup>[1]</sup> (Australian Government, 2021a). The NCP marked the shift in Australia's student mobility agenda from traditional Anglophone destinations to Indo-Pacific countries.

Considered as the Australian Government's signature student outbound mobility program, the NCP represents two government intentions:

- First, it aims to increase the number and diversity of Australian undergraduates that are exposed to the Indo-Pacific region, thereby providing them with a 'rite of passage' to their future work and life (Australian Government, 2021a).
- Second, through the program, the government wants to deepen people-to-people and institutional links between Australia and the Indo-Pacific region, and to connect students and alumni with local leaders in government, business and civil society (Australian Government, 2020a).

## Types of programs and funding

The NCP commits to supporting at least 10,000 students to study and undertake internships in the region each year (Australian Government, 2021a). During the 2014-2021 period, more than 70,000 students have been supported through scholarships and mobility grants (Australian Government, 2021c).

The NCP is well-funded by the government, with a consistent budget of \$50,933,000 p.a. from 2018-19 to 2023-24 (Australian Government, 2018; 2020b) – a considerable increase from \$5,372,000 in its first year.

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[1] 40 host locations include 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.

*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	2022-23	2023-24
\$5.372*	\$10.958	\$19.577	\$28.215	\$51.083	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933	\$50.933

\*million dollars

*Source: compiled from Tran and Rahimi (2018) and Australian Government (2020b).*

The NCP consists of a Scholarship Program and a Mobility Program. *The Scholarship Program* provides undergraduate students with financial support for up to 19 months of study, internships, mentorships and language training in the Indo-Pacific region. In the 2021 round, 125 scholarships have been awarded to students from 38 universities to 26 destinations; the top five are Singapore, Japan, Fiji, Republic of Korea, and China (Australian Government, 2021c). Society and Culture topped the list of education fields, accounting for 50% of students under the Scholarship Program.

*The Mobility Program* funds Australian universities and consortia to support their undergraduate students aged between 18 and 28 to participate in one semester-based or short-

term study, internship, mentorship, practicum and research in 40 host locations (Australian Government, 2020a). Three types of grants under this scheme include Mobility Grants (between \$1,000 and \$7,000 for each student), Language Training Grants (\$1,500), and Internship Grants (\$1,000).

Within this report, short-term mobility students refer to those who undertake short-term study, summer school, mentorship or/and an internship in the Indo-Pacific for less than a semester. Long-term mobility students refer to those who undertake semester-length study abroad. Scholars are recipients of funding under the New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program to undertake study, language learning and an internship in the Indo-Pacific for up to 19 months.

# The New Colombo Plan Research Project

## Methodology

This research is funded by the Australian Research Council under the Future Fellowship scheme. This ongoing mixed methods project draws data from government policy, in-country fieldwork, a national survey of 1,371 NCP students and alumni, and 298 interviews (as of 15/07/2021) with students and alumni, academics, mobility practitioners, host communities, third party providers and government representatives in Australia and host countries. Data collection commenced through a pilot study in 2015-2016, on which the main project (2017-2022) was built. It is a multi-method study capturing broad patterns across a robust sample of informants to provide essential micro-level insights into individual students' learning and engagement.

The survey includes scaled and open-ended questions to explore the nature, circumstances and the effects of student mobility to the Indo-Pacific on their learning, regional engagement, employability, career directions, life and future. The survey was designed and managed using the Qualtrics secured online platform. The questions and items were developed based on a combination of initial interviews with NCP students, mobility practitioners, academics, hosts, and government representatives directly involved in the NCP programs, and on the adaptation of the ASR's NCP cumulative survey (2018). The survey was assessed multiple times by participants and stakeholders and was tested for readability, logic and accuracy through a pilot test.

Australian students and graduates who participated in learning abroad programs funded by the New Colombo Plan since its launch in 2014 were invited to complete the survey. The survey responses were confidential and anonymous.

Survey participants were recruited through a multiple communication strategy. This included an invitation via a newsletter delivered to NCP alumni by the NCP Secretariat from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), a survey invitation circulated through universities' Global Mobility/Learning Abroad Office and NCP academic program leaders, and posts to the NCP alumni LinkedIn Page via the project's LinkedIn account.

1,371 respondents commenced the survey. However, the number of responses to different questions varies in accordance with the survey flow, which specified different questions for different participant categories, and also with the number of participants in each category.

For the qualitative dimension, the student participants from both scholarship and mobility programs were recruited for the interviews through an invitation circulated during their pre-departure programs organised by AsiaLink, or sent to the Learning Abroad/Global Mobility Offices of their institutions and academic leaders of specific mobility programs. Those who agreed to participate were asked to attend four rounds of interviews over four critical stages of their learning abroad: pre-departure, in-country, re-entry and one-year post graduation. As of 15/07/2021, most mobility student participants

have been interviewed three times. The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

With consent from the NCP students and their academic leaders, the researchers joined their learning abroad programs, taking part in pre-departure briefings and various student activities in the host countries. Participation in, and observation of, these in-country activities enabled the researchers to have deeper insights into the multiple dimensions of students', academic program leaders' and hosts' experiences in the Indo-Pacific, some of which may otherwise be invisible through formal interviews.

In addition, interviews were conducted with stakeholders including academic leaders of NCP-funded short-term mobility programs, mobility practitioners who are managers or staff members of learning abroad/global mobility offices from Australian universities, staff in host organisations and buddies who are local students assigned with supporting NCP students in the host universities, directors/managers of host organisations in the Indo-Pacific, third party providers and representatives of government and professional agencies engaged with the NCP in Australia and host countries. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names, home and host institutions and organisations are kept anonymous.

## Demographics of survey respondents

The survey was commenced by 1,371 participants:

- 63% female and 36% male, 1% self-identified as 'other'.
- 77% aged between 18 and 25, 14% between 26 and 30.
- 33% graduates, 23% in year 4 and 24% in year 3.
- 90% were fulltime students.
- 90% had previous overseas travel experience.
- Of those with previous overseas travel experience, 17% had travelled to their host countries, 41% to (an)other Indo-Pacific country(ies) and 42% to another part of the world.
- 66.8% undertook short-term mobility (52.5% short-term study program, 10% short-term internship, 4.3% summer school), 15.7% long-term mobility (semester length study), 17 % NCP scholars and others (0.5%).
- Survey participants studied in 33 countries.
- 75% of students were hosted by the top eight countries: Japan (14%), Indonesia (13%), China (12%), Vietnam (9%) and Republic of Korea (8%), India (7%), Singapore (7%) and Malaysia (5%).



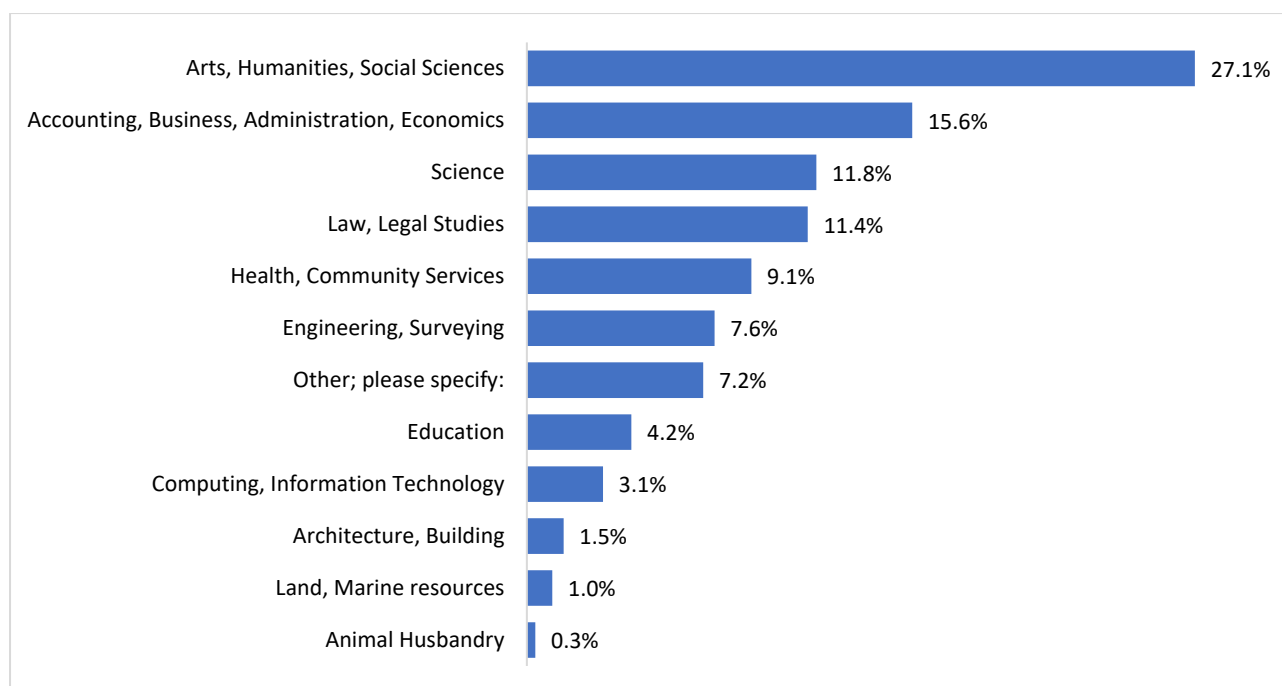


Figure 1: Survey participants' disciplines (n=1,745)

## NCP students' motivations to learn abroad in the Indo-Pacific

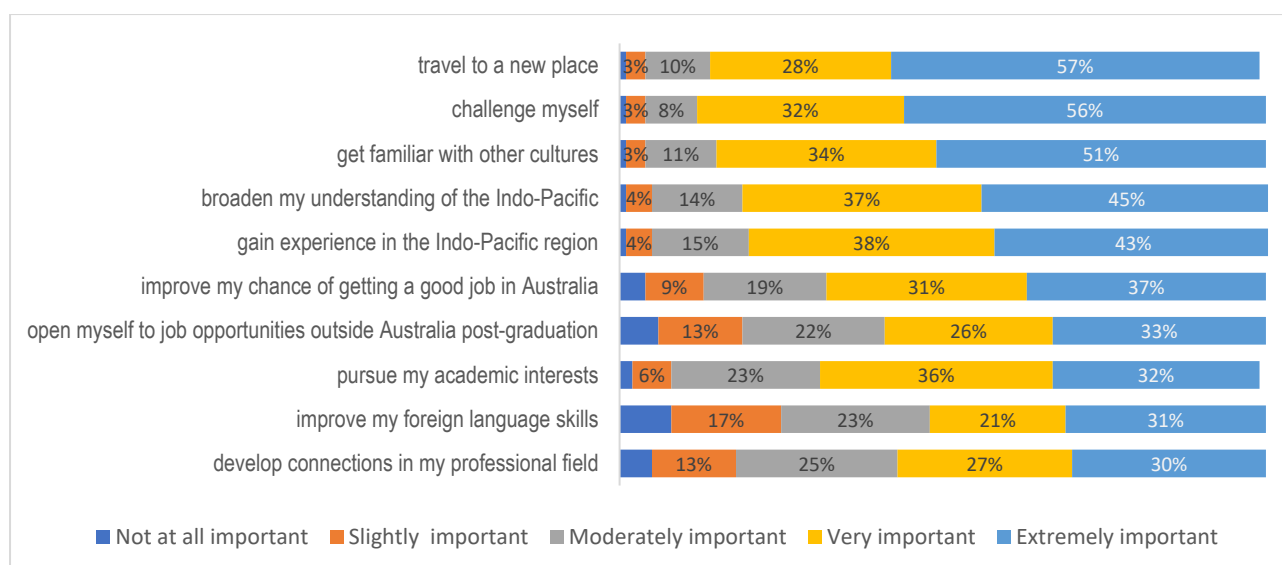


Figure 2: Students' motivations for NCP participation (n=1,130)

Students' main motivations (moderately to extremely important) to participate in the NCP program (Figure 2) were to:

- challenge myself (96%),
- gain experience in the Indo-Pacific region (96%)
- get familiar with other culture (96%)
- broaden my understanding of the Indo-Pacific (96%)
- travel to a new place (95%).

The mean score for scholars was 4.17 compared to 3.97 by mobility students (Figure 3), confirming that although respondents considered all motivations were important, the importance was greater among scholars than mobility students.

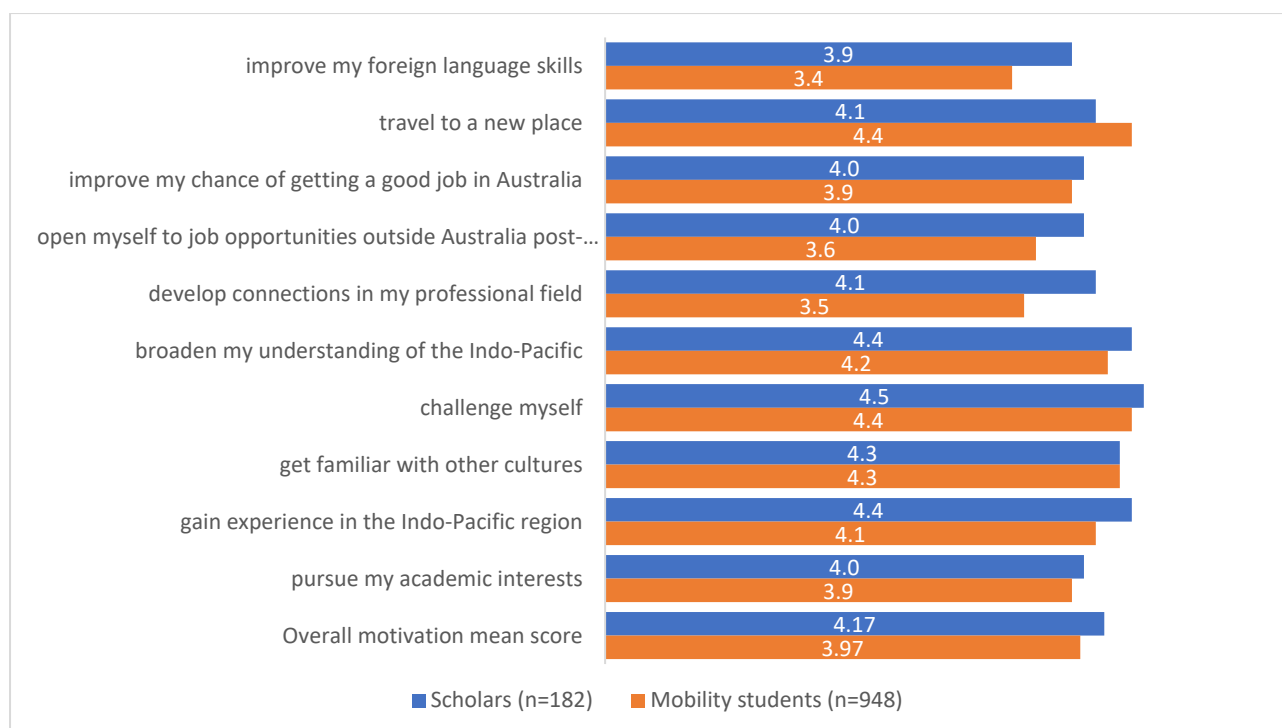


Figure 3: Motivation mean score for Indo-Pacific learning abroad between NCP scholars and mobility students

## Challenges in the selection process

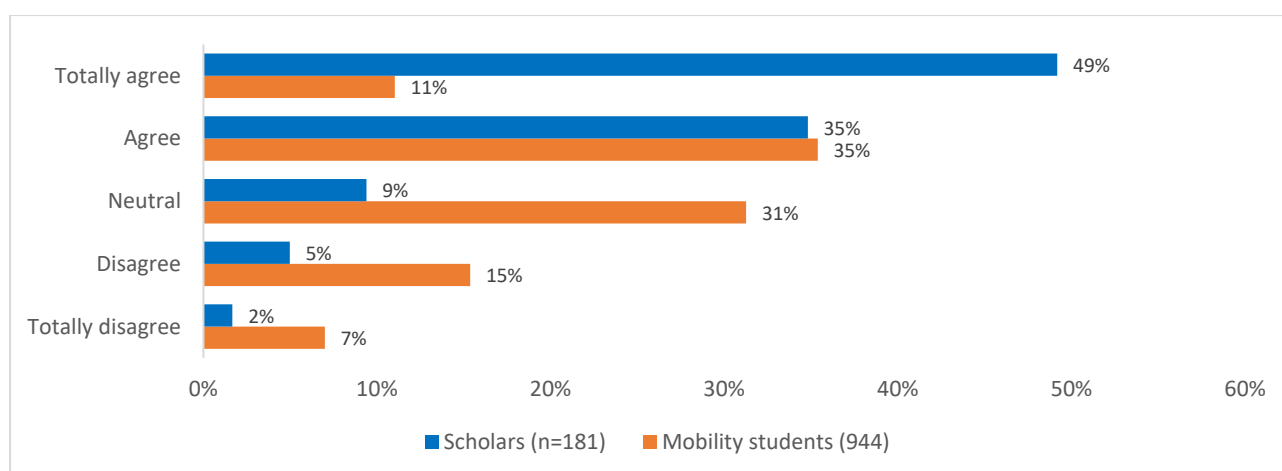


Figure 4: Perception of selection process as competitive (NCP scholars vs mobility students) (n=1,125)

Respondents deemed the NCP selection process inclusive (82%), equitable (77%) and transparent (69%), competitive (52%), and based solely on merit (43%).

Figure 4 shows that scholars perceived the selection process as more demanding, as 84 percent of scholars versus only 46 percent of mobility students totally agreed or agreed that the selection process was competitive. The

differences in the selection process were reflected in the data from open-ended questions and interviews with students:

*At the start when I first applied, I didn't think I would actually get the scholarship because, you know, it's the whole country applying for it and it seems really hard to get it. But as you progress through the rounds, you start to realize that it's actually possible and then you start to put more time and effort into your application. (NCP scholar, Japan, interview)*

To most students, the process was transparent and straightforward, and the questions were fairly simple, easy to understand and pretty relevant to the program. The difficulties they faced appeared to be more on the administrative side:

*The administration from (name of the home university) has been quite difficult and a bit messy. So it was difficult to get the application form. I had to email the coordinator directly and not all of the costs were fully disclosed. So it's been a bit of a mess trying to get all of the information. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview)*

*I think opening applications to put some weight on passion/interest/individual motivation is important. This could include things putting more weight on extra-curricular, especially community involvement... I got the New Colombo Mobility Grant because every participant in the (name of university) Southeast Asian Spotlight course in 2016 got one. (Short-term mobility student, Korea, survey)*

*Also more oversight of the university participation/selection process. Many students that attended used this trip as a holiday rather than an educational, networking and growth trip. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, survey)*

Further recommendations included selection criteria modifications and stricter requirements for mobility students:

## Pre-departure activities

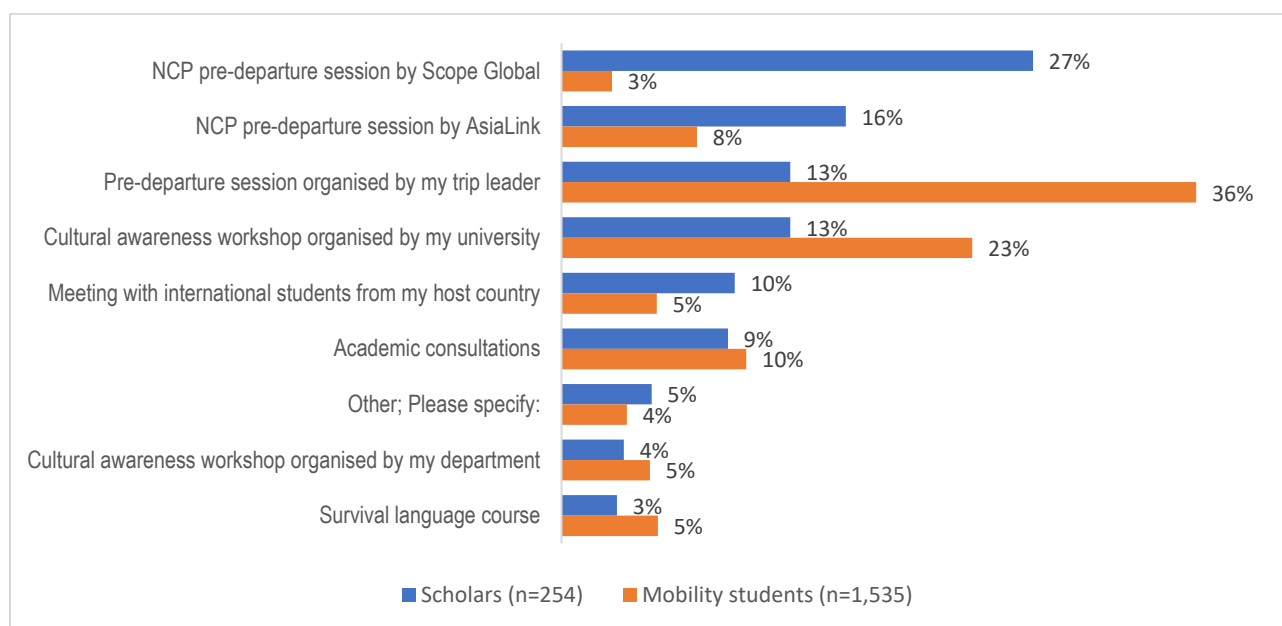


Figure 5: Pre-departure briefings

Apart from pre-departure briefings provided by DFAT contractors, students also participated in pre-departure activities delivered by their home universities through specific Faculties/Departments or academic leaders. The pre-departure program for scholars is designed by DFAT but delivered by Scope Global and Asialink. The distinction of this program is that it is

compulsory and embedded into the scholars' program rather than being discretionary.

As shown in Figure 5, there is a significant discrepancy in pre-departure training participation between scholars and mobility students. Pre-departure preparation sessions organised by academic leaders of mobility programs were the most popular among mobility

students, attracting 36 percent, followed by those provided by their home university (23%); conversely, only 13% of scholars attended the sessions conducted by their university and by academic leaders. This is because the scholars' study program of 12 to 19 months is not overseen by an academic leader (like many short-term mobility programs), but some scholars might have participated in a short-term mobility program before they were awarded an NCP scholarship. The highest proportion of scholars attended pre-departure training provided by Scope Global (27%) and Asia Link (16%).

Data from open-ended questions reported other pre-departure activities students participated in, including International SOS briefing; coffee with fellow outbound ACICIS <sup>[2]</sup> students; casual meetings held by students who had previously completed the program; and casual events and networking organised by their host countries' embassy in Australia.

There were also students who did not attend any pre-departure session, citing that they were not aware of them or their university did not organise it:

*If I had access to the pre-departure and post-departure activities, I wasn't aware of it, thought many might have been added after my trip? (Short-term mobility student, Japan, survey)*

*The only factor I would recommend is the communication prior to the programs' commencement. I would have valued joining more pre-departure activities if they were available to me and I was aware of them. (Long-term mobility student, Japan, survey)*

While general feedback about pre-departure training and activities was positive, there were areas for improvement such as:

- including country-specific information in pre-departure briefings that allows students to engage in a positive and open-minded way
- better communication to promote these training sessions and generate students' participation
- better communication and coordination between DFAT, third parties providing pre-departure briefings, and university (Learning abroad office, Faculty and academic program leaders)
- timing and pre-departure contents were also recommended for improvement as reflected: by one participant:

*Perhaps have the pre-departure talks and assignments earlier in the year so that they do not clash with our university exam period. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, survey)*

- Students in particular expressed their desire to have input from their prospective host organisations in their pre-departure training:

*I'd love to have more lessons in culture from locals (hosts) throughout the experience not just from Australian lecturers pre-departure. (Long-term mobility student, Vietnam, survey)*

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[2] The Australian Consortium for 'In-Country' Indonesian Studies

## Impacts of Indo-Pacific learning abroad programs

### Impact on the self

#### Student learning and development

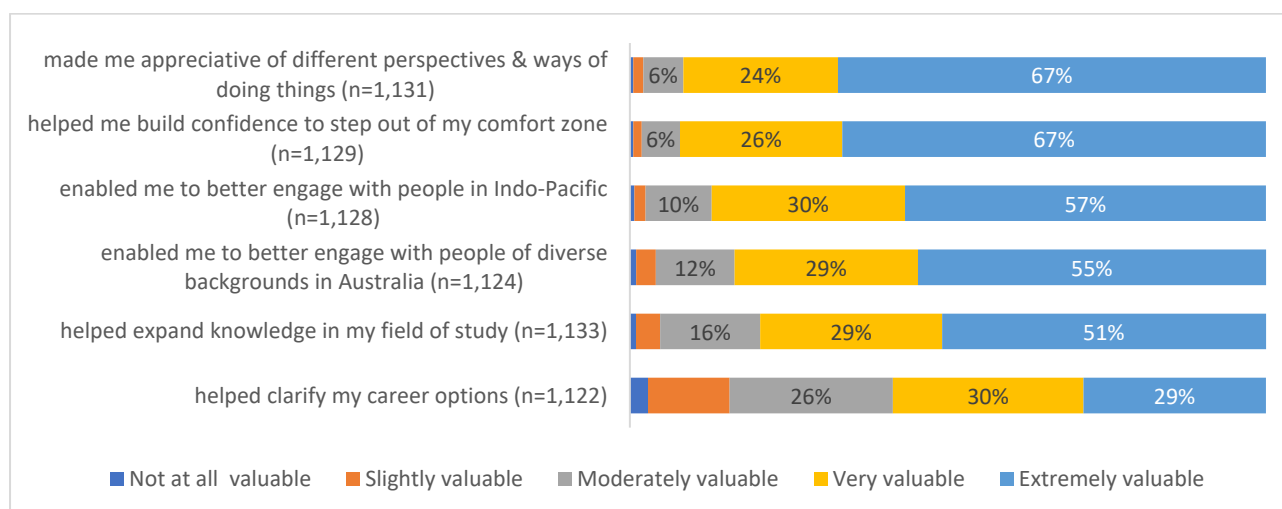


Figure 6: Effects of Indo-Pacific experiences on students

The Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience had significant positive impacts on student learning and development (Figure 6). The program was considered very valuable or extremely valuable in:

- helping them build confidence to step out of their comfort zone (93%)
- making them appreciate different perspectives and ways of doing things (91%).
- students' academic and intercultural development (80% and above).

While the role of the experience in helping clarify the students' career options was the lowest-ranked item in terms of impact, with 59 percent considering it very valuable or extremely valuable, it was clearly important as shown through the open-ended survey and interview data:

*My NCP experience opened so many doors, but it also helped me close the doors I wasn't interested in and given career options I never thought I had before. This has allowed me to focus on my passions and strive to enter a career I know I am passionate about and keen to make a difference in. I have been offered several positions since returning to Australia, all because of my*

*experiences abroad. (NCP scholar, Japan, survey)*

*I now have international goals in my career planning. I would especially like to return to Bhutan to develop inter-agency work around domestic violence. (Short-term mobility student, Bhutan, survey)*

Further analysis was conducted to investigate if the impact of the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience was different between short-term and long-term mobility students. Since sample sizes were not equal (158 versus 722), an independent samples *t*-test for unequal variances known as Welch's *t*-test was performed to elaborate group differences. The results show that there was no statistically significant difference in the Indo-Pacific learning abroad impact on student learning and development between short-term mobility students ( $M=4.25$ ,  $SD=0.65$ ) and long-term ones ( $M= 4.30$ ,  $SD=0.63$ ),  $t(236)=-0.81$ ,  $p=0.42$ .

Data from open-ended questions and interviews reveal how students acquired various personal attributes and professional skills through the program, which provides students with a unique learning environment constructed by the interplay of host countries' distinctive societal system,

diverse culture, traditions and languages with multiple players involved in co-creating knowledge and meanings:

*My experiences with studying in Hong Kong opened my eyes to an Eastern approach to Psychology. A lot of what we learnt was relevant to individuals from collectivist countries, and could be easily be applied in Australia due to our diverse population whereas studying in Australia has really only ever taught me about the Western perspective. (Long-term mobility student, Hong Kong, interview)*

*The NCP experience I had in Taiwan provided me with a unique opportunity to learn about social work in a different political and cultural context. It allowed me to move outside of my comfort zone and engage with people from different cultures and expand my understanding. (Short-term mobility student, Taiwan, interview)*

These reflections demonstrate a comprehensive and structured learning process where students combined theoretical knowledge acquired from

university study and practical experience gained through internship, developed professional networks, and fostered personal and professional development. The accumulation of these personal, social, cultural and language capitals increases students' employability skills and contribute to enhancing their employment prospects in Australia and Indo-Pacific countries post-study:

*My NCP experience allowed me to gain employment straight out of university in a business that operates in Papua New Guinea. I was able to utilise my cross-cultural communication skills in my role marketing services in PNG and across the broader Pacific region. (Long-term mobility student, Papua New Guinea, interview).*

*Cultural diversity and understanding helped me with my employment in the Australian Army and when I was deployed to Iraq. (Short-term mobility student, Cambodia, survey)*

## Becoming interested in the Indo-Pacific

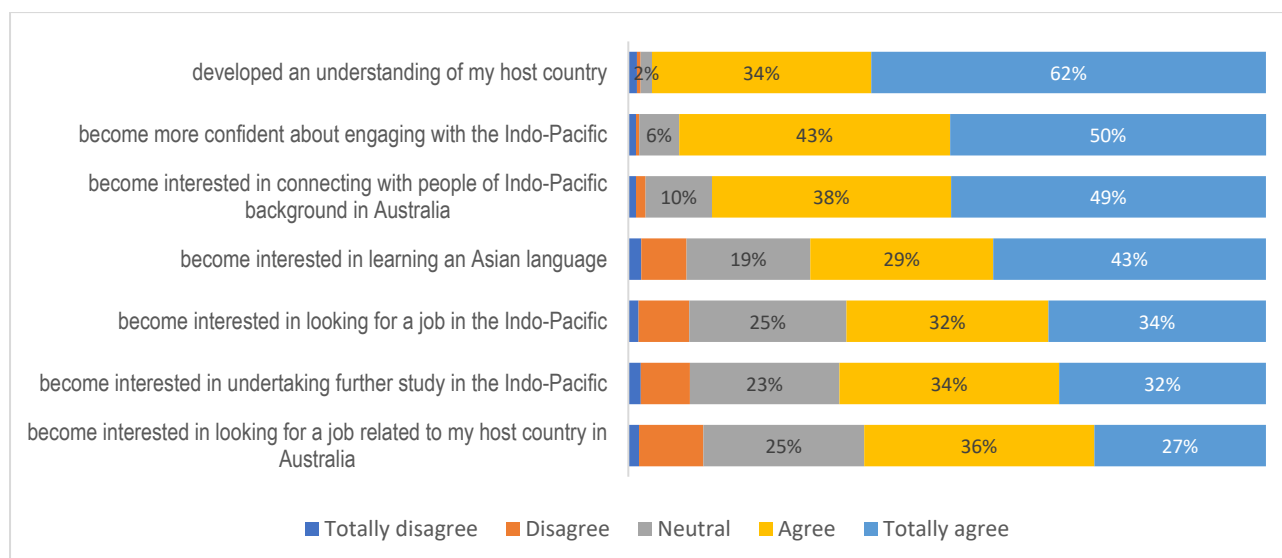


Figure 7: Increase of participating students' interest in the Indo-Pacific (n=1,181)

As shown in Figure 7, the top five areas of student development include:

- Development of an understanding of host country: 96%
- Increased confidence about engaging with the Indo-Pacific: 93%
- Increased interest in connecting with people of Indo-Pacific background in Australia: 87%



- Increased interest in learning an Asian language: 72%
- Increased interest in a job in the Indo-Pacific: 66%

### Developing empathy

Social empathy is the ability to understand different people, cultures and communities by perceiving or experiencing real life situations and gain insights into structural inequalities and disparities (Segal, 2011). Students developed social empathy by being exposed to different social contexts and interactions with different groups of people as a result of their learning abroad experience. They also learned to appreciate the resilience of local people who went through disastrous events, such as the Japan's 2011 Tsunami:

*So it was really eye opening for me to see how resilient people [suffered from Tsunami earthquake] can be in situations of, of really extreme challenges...with all the, the adversity that they were faced with in relation to their losses and the devastation of their livelihoods and their home, to be able to come back and actually be a higher order representation on the global scale is extraordinary and really eye opening (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview).*

Situational factors play an important role in student experiential learning as most of the students when talking about their personal development often juxtapose the host countries and Australia to highlight what they have learnt and how they have changed as a result of the Indo-Pacific experience. For example, mobility students to Cambodia felt empathy with local people's poor living standard and reflected on becoming less materialistic and taking a community approach to life. Students developed a sense of morality and sympathy with the Vietnamese who live in difficult circumstances but are still happy, positive and generous:

*Yes so as ignorant as it may sound I sort of believe that being a developing country like Vietnam it would be hard to find happiness and stability but I've come across so many people who are so happy, friendly, and just like generous, and I think in Australia if I'm to live the same life as them in Australia I'd find it unbearable but here they're just so happy it's changed my perspectives a lot. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview).*

An understanding of challenges and experience of difficulties associated with living, studying and working in a foreign country resulted in students' development of empathy with international students and migrants back in Australia, as empathy may lead to a desire to take action for positive change and improve societal well-being (Segal, 2011):

*Yeah, it has changed my perspective, like because now I really, I know what it's like to be a foreign student. (NCP scholar, Papua New Guinea, interview).*

*Yes. I do really like working with kids from other nationalities and other cultures now ... I think definitely in confidence, because it was a great experience (in Malaysia)... So, that was good to sort of do low SES schools with quite a few refugee kids, so it's nice to be able to relate to them a little bit more. (Short-term mobility student, Malaysia, interview).*

NCP host Indo-Pacific nations have substantially diverse historical, cultural, and ethnic profiles and represent various stages of political evolution and economic development. Most countries in the region are developing countries, dealing with a variety of complexities such as environmental problems, gender inequality and low living standards. This richness and diversity provide NCP students with unique learning opportunities to develop different intercultural skills, including empathy. Students who choose to study in a less popular or culturally dissimilar location are more likely to articulate a clear impact on skills development (Farrugia and Sanger, 2017).

## Impact on family, community and society

Students have not only changed themselves but also shared their experience with friends and family as the retrospective meaning-making goes beyond self-reflection. The experience sharing included what to expect and cultural differences in the Pacific heritage and how resilient local people were living in difficult conditions. Another student showed photos of their experience and inspired their father:

*So, um, I told my family about that and they're [aquaculture farms in Japan], they're really, my dad was really interested in like all the aquaculture farms around there. They've got, they've got like some shellfish farms, seaweed farms down there too... That was like a big eye opener for both of us. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview).*

Students demonstrated how the changes made as a result of the mobility program have helped strengthen their family bond and increase family support for each other:

*You know, there's so much more support I feel now. ...So they [student's family] support me, I support them. The more I develop, the more happy I am with myself, the more I'm willing to support others. So it's socio-mutual (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview).*

There was also a desire to share what they have experienced and encourage others to experience and learn from these experiences as a spill-over effect. This reflects the students' ability to perceive the meanings of the experience and empathise with others, as well as to communicate those feelings and encourage others to act:

*I was speaking with a Japanese man at breakfast this morning telling him about Minamisanriku. He is from Osaka and had very little knowledge of the way the town is still recovering! I told him when he next returns home to Japan he should visit Minamisanriku because it is a beautiful place with beautiful people. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview).*

In addition, students have made multiple societal impacts during their study. Through their connections and networks, students enacted agency and advocated for social justice as well as other global issues, including climate change and environment protection, by actively participating in different conferences, forums and conversations. In Cambodia, students advocated for human rights through an array of activities including attending a conference on women's empowerment in Cambodia, and undertaking research on human trafficking and LGBTQ youth. In Japan, students voluntarily assisted refugees to improve their language capacity and well-being, as reflected in the following excerpt:

*Quite a few actually. I was quite involved when I was at uni...I was quite involved in some volunteering to do with refugees. So no one really thinks there's refugees in Japan, but there's lots of them. So I taught both Japanese and English to the refugees and we've visited them every week in the detention centre and supported them a lot (NCP scholar, Japan, interview).*

Some students also attended international conferences that strengthen the relationships between Australia and the region. In Malaysia, they attended an ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Dialogue on various topics to contribute to fostering Australia-ASEAN relationships. Similarly, another student was going to attend a young leaders forum in Indonesia:

*I'm participating in the ASEAN Australian Southeast Asian Nations Young Leaders forum which is Jakarta. So I'll be going to that and that's a great opportunity to sort of build those networks and address some of the issues in ASEAN region which I'm really looking forward to (NCP scholar, Indonesia, interview).*

The students' learning is passed on to people in the host countries to activate a multiplier effect (Antônio, 2007). Student reflection on their experience resulted in self-transformation and them becoming a catalyst for change in their family members, community, and society at different stages of the learning cycle.

## Curriculum-specific learning

Interview data with students showed that the program has contributed significantly to students' curriculum-specific learning. Students reported that they were provided with unique opportunities to learn disciplinary knowledge in the Indo-Pacific countries in a number of ways.

### Comparative perspectives of disciplinary knowledge

Through the learning abroad program, students and interns gained knowledge about the subject matter from comparative perspectives in transnational contexts. By attaining new insights into the systems, approaches and procedures in Indo-Pacific countries that are usually different from those in Australia, students' views on disciplinary knowledge could be deepened, diversified, and conceptualised. As some students indicated:

*I definitely have a deeper understanding of the health issues faced in other countries and the comparison to an Australian setting. (Short-term mobility student, India, interview)*

*In Vietnam...getting a perspective on a developing nation. How their problems are completely separate from the ones that ... Australia is currently facing. So getting like a very varied view and just getting more exposure into how different countries operate at different stages in their development. That would be really interesting, I guess, because that's not something that you get to see in Australia because we've already developed past that point. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview)*

### Access to valuable learning resources and conditions

As part of the mobility and scholarship programs, students had access to learning resources and conditions which would otherwise be inaccessible to them in Australia. Specifically, students benefitted from extensive support from academics, researchers, professionals, peers and local people. This created a stimulating learning

environment wherein students could learn from different people and learning activities. Apart from that, students have the chance to visit or work in laboratories and specialist centres that they were not exposed to in their home country, which was considered a valuable channel for learning:

*And particularly with some of the places we visited ..., I've never had the opportunity to see something like that, even in Australia. So it really broadened my understanding of what are the procedures and what takes place...in that setting. (Short-term mobility student, China, interview)*

### Real-life learning experience

Such field experiences, especially under internship programs, enabled first-hand, real-life and experiential learning that was highly relevant and complementary to the theoretical knowledge gained in Australia. Immersion into the realities of their disciplinary field enables students to confirm, change and reflect on their prior knowledge and assumptions drawn from the literature or during their formal learning. One student remarked:

*Obviously, there's not a lot of research currently about Vietnam or it's difficult to find. So the best way to do that is being able to go over there and see firsthand whether some of our assumptions being made are correct or if they're wrong. And then we can modify our research based on those results. So in terms of the class itself, it's very relevant. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview)*

Exposure to experiential learning conditions was, most of the time, eye-opening to students and therefore enabled them to internalise the acquired knowledge. For example, one student reported:

*Tackling that project [at a Japan's research centre] which was probably the first open-ended lab experiment I've done, which didn't have a definitive answer. Like we didn't know what was going to happen. So that was a turning point of, that was an eye-opener of what real science will be like. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview)*

Practical and authentic experiences were beneficial for students writing their research papers and reports. As they could see things in their own eyes and documented their observations during the field trips in the host countries, they were able to collect factual information and empirical knowledge, and therefore added depth and richness to their research, as indicated in the excerpt below:

*The topic that we were doing about municipal waste management and that as the system, I mean, they just opened your eyes to a whole new chapters that we hadn't even studied before...And I'd say without going there, the report is just another, you know, theoretical piece of paper. But because we went there, everything in the report is, you know, it's factual and it's firsthand documented. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview)*

### Application of theory to practice

Indo-Pacific learning abroad programs create an inspiring learning environment that bridges theory and practice through knowledge application process. Along with seeing global workplaces with their own eyes while in the host countries, students were provided with opportunities to apply disciplinary theoretical knowledge into practice. As one student acknowledged:

*So it's something you can apply what you've been learning, your skills, your knowledge [...] you've learned at university. You can really apply it whilst you're here. So you can apply that and practice that the actual skills you got rather than just learning about it. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview)*

By applying theoretical knowledge and learned skills, students were able to develop comprehensive theoretical and empirical understandings of their discipline. Simultaneously, through learning by doing (Bruce and Bloch, 2012), students became key actors in their learning process, instead of being passive recipients of knowledge. As such, the mobility programs acted as a complement to and an enhancer of formal learning experienced by

Australian students in their home country. Interview data indicates that learning not only happens within their direct field of expertise but also in related ones, broadening students' knowledge horizons:

*It wasn't my area of work because as I said, we are software engineering students and we got to work with a lot of electronics... But I think once we got to know about it, it was a really good experience and we did have a lot of programming knowledge in it as well, so in that way it ended up being a good experience for us and we ended up learning way more than what we thought we would. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, interview)*

### Intensive learning period through short-term mobility

Short-term mobility and internship programs offered students an intensive learning period that significantly expedited students' learning. This is echoed by a recent study conducted by Universities UK International on the effects of short-term mobility (2021). Students acknowledged that their short-mobility programs proved to be even more productive than semester-long formal study at home universities, although the full schedule caused them high pressure. This is because students could create a collective community of learning through cohort mobility, has access to their academic program leader 24/7, and became engaged in meetings, observations, and involvement in real work:

*I feel like that [during the] two and a half week course I learned more than what I did during the whole semester of uni. So I just feel like it was condensed, like you know, it was quite intense, we were like travelling and doing lots of work. But I just feel like the, basically, you know, meeting other Japanese students, seeing what they're up to, and formulating work within a few days like it was really like high pressure but very productive and just like a great learning experience. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, interview)*

Students' accounts of learning through short-term mobility challenged the assumption that these programs are similar to a tourist experience:

*You know, in the enormity of it is really, I guess, I could probably best illustrate that what I've learned in this time here [Japan], might've taken me 10 years back in my own country [Australia]. (Short-term mobility, Japan, interview)*

Academically rigorous short-term mobility programs provided students with valuable conditions and opportunities for content

knowledge learning. Well-designed programs exposed Australian students to unfamiliar Indo-Pacific contexts, thereby generating an exciting, authentic and effective learning environment wherein students developed a more holistic understanding of the subject matter in both theoretical and practical aspects. Academics play a crucial role in ensuring this.

## Impacts on employability and career orientations

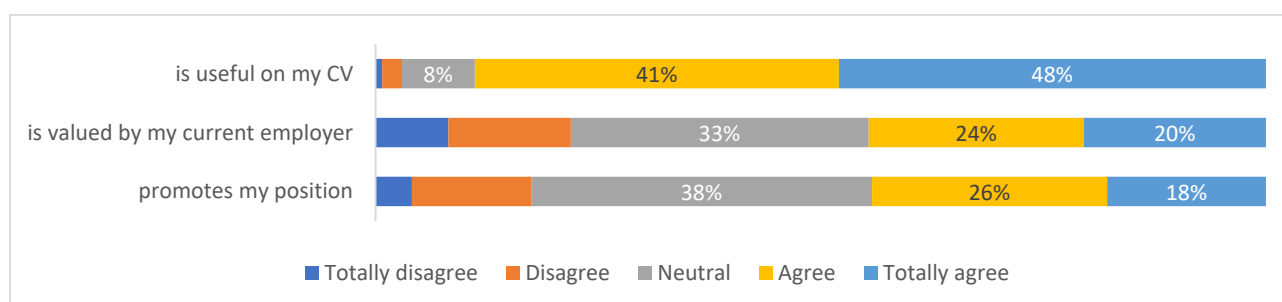


Figure 8: Effects of Indo-Pacific experiences on employability (n=269)

For almost 90 percent of survey respondents (n=269), the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience was useful on their curriculum vitae. The NCP experience provided students with an edge to navigate the labour market and secure an employment, as shown in Figure 8.

Data from open-ended questions provided further insights into how students reflected on the learning abroad experience when navigating the labour market. By including their Indo-Pacific experience in their portfolio, students demonstrated their ability to transfer knowledge and skills in the workplace and engage with different cultures, showing potential employers that they were well-rounded students with a range of soft and hard skills:

*I participated in 2 NCP study programs which coupled with overseas volunteer work in Zambia and short summer study in Belfast enabled me to get to the interview stage of all the positions I applied. Using overseas experiences as examples to answer interview questions landed me both jobs. These overseas experiences are highly respected by future employees, it expresses your adaptability skills, and eagerness to*

*learn and much more. (Short-term mobility student, Nepal, survey)*

These findings are consistent with Lukas et al.'s (2014) study on Erasmus programs. For students pursuing study in the Indo-Pacific, the program provides them with a contextual experience to develop connections with the host communities and increase knowledge about the region, shaping their employability and career orientation (Tran, Do & Bui, 2021). However, less than 50 percent of students reported the international experience was valued by their current employer or helped their career promotion (Figure 8):

*I think once you explain what the NCP is and the significance people are more interested in you. I was hired at a Big 4 because of my NCP Scholarship while being able to by-pass the usual steps (I was still overseas during this process). As great as that was, I don't think the firm suited me and I left within 6 months of starting. I don't think they appreciated my skills gained overseas. (NCP scholar, Papua New Guinea, survey)*

## Post-study

Survey respondents were asked whom they maintained connections with and through which means of communication. They maintained connections with various groups they interacted with during their study, including local students (26%), buddies (18%), academics (14%) and local residents (12%). The most popular means of communication to maintain these connections was social media, namely Facebook (31%), Instagram (20%), and WhatsApp (13%).

Students shared their learning abroad experience on return through multiple channels. They were asked to select all applicable activities, resulting in 2,343 responses to this survey question. Most experience sharing on return took place when NCP students talked to other students at university events (28%), during class discussion (20%) and presenting to class (13%) (Figure 9).

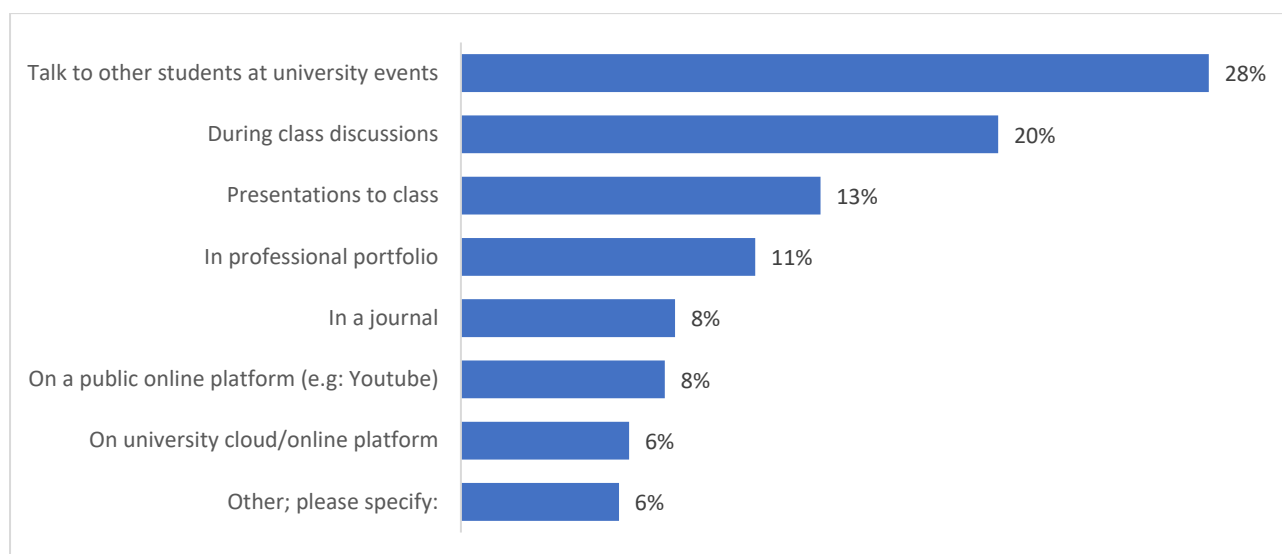


Figure 9: Experience sharing on return (n=2,343)

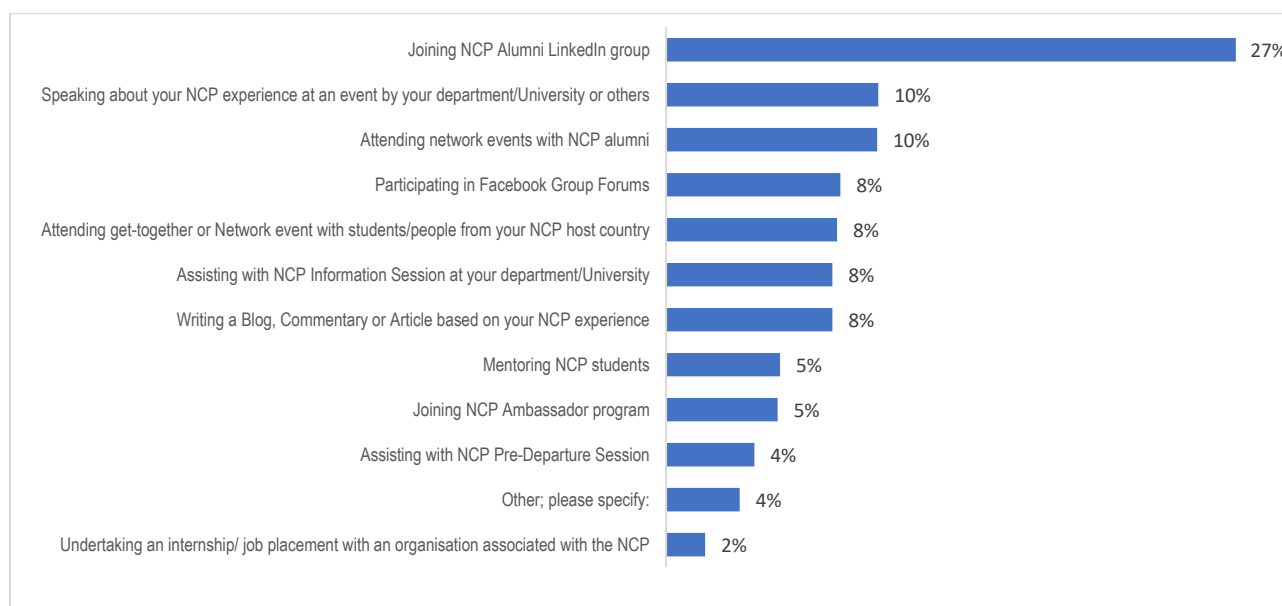


Figure 10: NCP related activities taken on return (n=1,878)



As shown in Figure 10, the three main NCP-related activities on return were:

- Joining NCP Alumni LinkedIn group (27%)
- Speaking about their NCP experience at an event by their department/University or others (10%),
- Attending network events with NCP alumni (10%).

Data from open-ended questions strongly emphasised post-study activities for the benefit of both alumni and the NCP. Despite the existence of DFAT- and stakeholders-organised alumni engagement activities, many alumni were unaware of them. They commented that they would like to make contributions and create impacts after completing their Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience, but did not know how because of the scarcity of post-event communications and activities:

*I only received emails/ newsletters from NCP more than 12 months after I completed my short course) (Short-term mobility student, Philippines, survey)*

*Investigate further opportunities for NCP Alumni to give-back and talk about their experiences to Australian students - potentially yearly NCP information events across Australia where all NCP Alumni can assist. (NCP scholar, Japan, survey)*

They also insisted in diversifying NCP alumni involvement in post-study activities:

*Give every scholar an opportunity to at least put their hand up to assist with pre-departure session/gala. I always see the same students attending which is a little disappointing. It would be good to have reunions with NCP scholars but I think that can be organised at a state-level. I organised a get together dinner & drinks catch up but only a handful came. (NCP scholar, Papua New Guinea, survey)*

Post-study programs and activities should also generate more sustainable and long-term impact on NCP alumni including career opportunities and experience sharing:

*I'd wished there were pathway opportunities to continue those engagements once we return to Australia (for e.g. more networking with the cohort, opportunities to work in collaborative projects, job opportunities). It would also be great (and if possible) for there to be NCP initiatives for NCP recipients who are no longer studying and are working. Perhaps secondments or short-term assignments to relevant organisations. (Short-term mobility student, Indonesia, survey)*

Students shared their knowledge and experience of the Indo-Pacific region gained from their learning abroad with their family, friends and other students when they returned to Australia. However, this multiplier effect currently sits with the individual students and depends on their goodwill and motivation. The research indicates the need for a well-structured and long-term post-study program that could leverage NCP alumni's knowledge of the Indo-Pacific for the benefit of the wider community and use them as a catalyst to strengthen the relationships between Australia and Indo-Pacific countries.

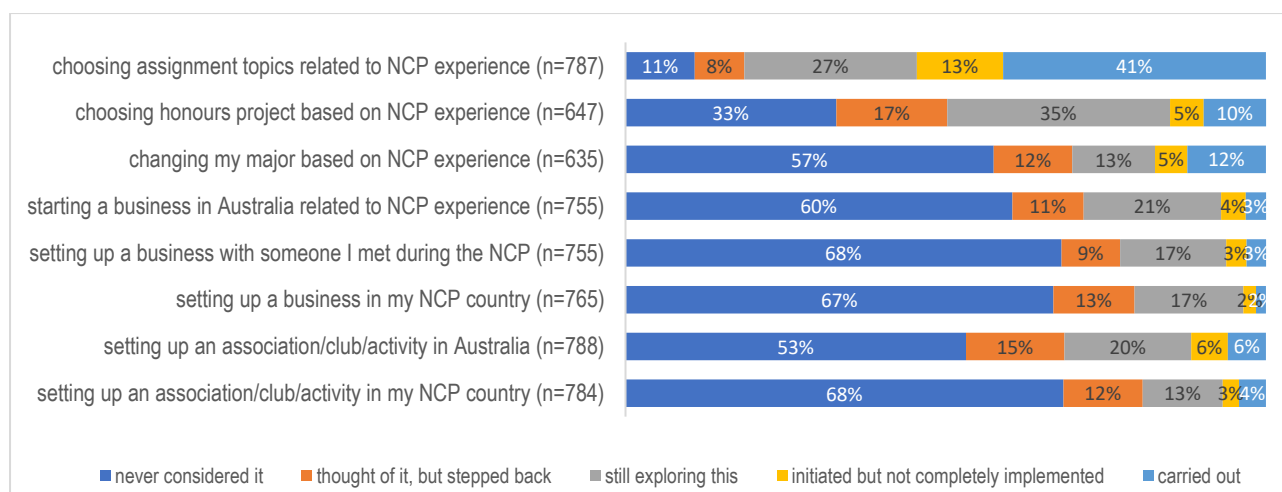


Figure 11: Translation of the Indo-Pacific experience into actions

While the learning abroad experiences had an immense impact on the students' personal and professional development as well as career prospects, there were still a limited number of immediate initiatives carried out or changes related to students' disciplinary learning and development driven by the Indo-Pacific experience. As shown in Figure 11, among the eight measuring items, only "choosing assignment topic related to the NCP experience" was carried out by survey students (41%) as a result of their mobility experience, the other seven initiatives and changes related to the NCP experience were limited. These insignificant actions taken by the respondents could be explained by their study and work status as at the time of the survey the majority of them were still studying with only 26 percent working fulltime, and 3.2 percent self-employed. Therefore, their capacity to set up a business or an association relating to their Indo-Pacific experiences is limited.

## Student satisfaction

Students were asked to rate the extent to which the NCP program met their expectations on a 10-point rating scale (1=not at all, 10=completely). 97% of short-term mobility students scored 6-10 as compared to 93% of long-term mobility students (Figure 12)

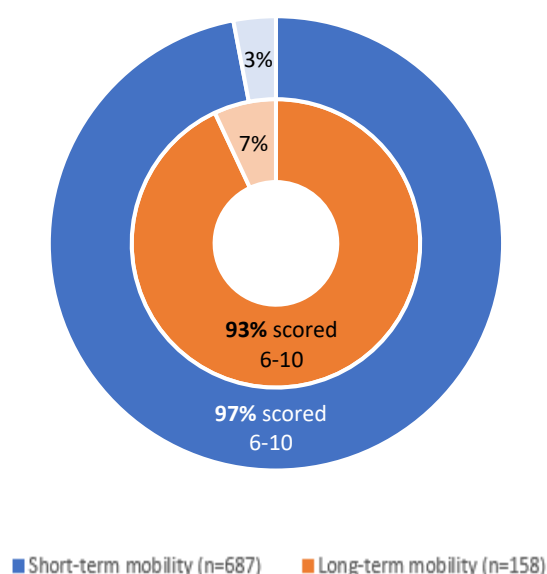


Figure 12: Short-term vs long-term mobility on meeting expectations

Group difference analysis reported that while the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience is considered equally important by short-term and long-term mobility students, there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups with regard to the extent to which the program meets their expectations ( $p=0.03$ ). Short-term mobility students are more satisfied with their learning abroad experience than long-term ones, with mean scores of 8.81 and 8.49 out of 10, respectively.

## Students' perspectives on challenges

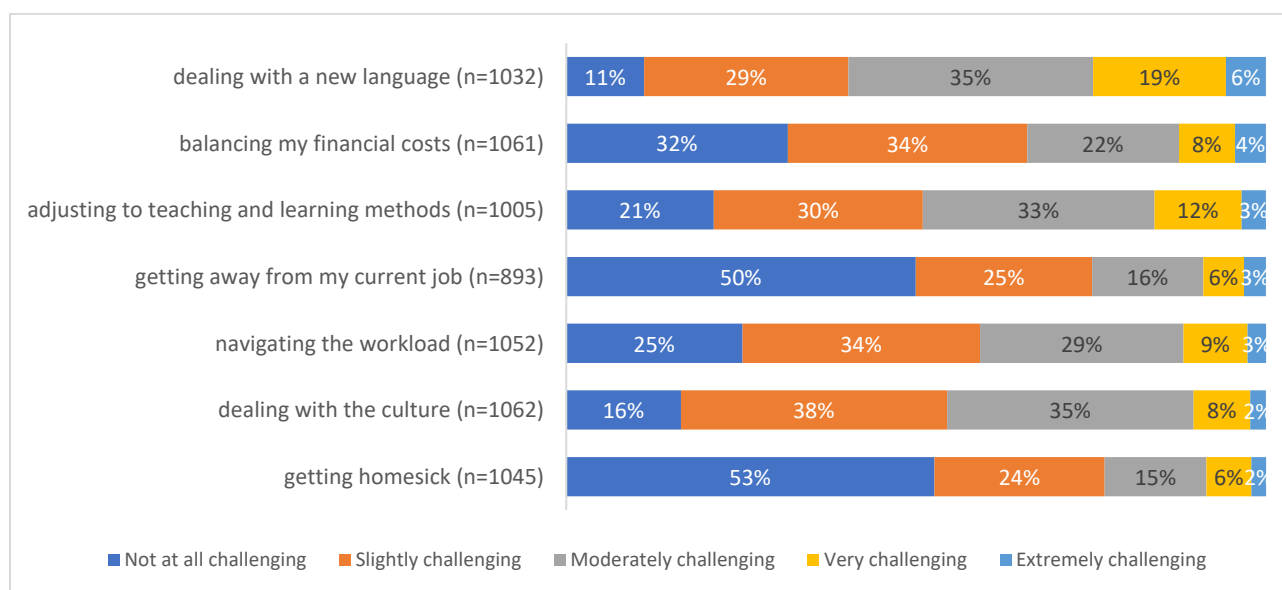


Figure 13: Challenges associated with the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experience

NCP students encountered different challenges associated with their overseas study in the Indo-Pacific to a various extent from slightly to extremely challenging. As shown in Figure 13, the top three challenges included:

- Dealing with a new language (89%)
- dealing with the culture (84%)
- adjusting to teaching and learning methods (79%)

The key challenges identified by students are reported below.

### Category 1 (elaborated on items in Figure 13 above)

#### Challenge #1: dealing with a new language

Without knowing the local language, NCP student respondents reported having difficulties in understanding local people and navigating in-country services such as opening bank accounts or getting a local SIM card, especially in cities where locals spoke limited English. This led to feelings of vulnerability, stress, or lack of confidence among students.

#### Challenge #2: dealing with the culture

Survey respondents indicated that NCP experiences presented challenges related to dealing with different cultural expectations, norms, customs, and ways of life. These differences led to culture shock, arguments, or cultural conflicts in the host organisations. Respondents reported cultural differences were usually related to punctuality, religious beliefs, attitudes towards sexual orientation, showing personal feelings in public, walking pace, behaviour towards animals, text message language, and behaviour in public places such as restaurants.

#### Challenge #3: adjusting to teaching and learning approaches

Differences in teaching style and expectations between Australian academics and those in the host countries made it difficult for NCP students to adapt to the new learning environment. Some students experienced a breakdown in relationship with host academics due to disagreements in allocating work and study tasks. Communicating with academics could also be a challenge. For

example, in some countries, communication via email was considered to be impolite, causing confusion to students.

#### **Challenge #4: getting homesick**

Homesickness was common to many students when being away from family and not being able to maintain the connection with people back home, which affected students' well-being during the program.

#### **Challenge #5: balancing financial costs**

Without pre-departure coaching about financial management, some NCP scholarship students indicated that they did not use their stipend effectively. In addition, in some host countries like Singapore where university fees were higher than NCP funding, students had to use their own savings to pay for the difference.

#### **Challenge #6: navigating the workload**

Navigating the workload while in the host country was challenging. For many short-term students, it was overwhelming to balance academic work and social life, as there were many activities available for them. Being a short-term mobility student, they still had to meet the requirements of their course in Australia, and encountered difficulties in time management. Plus, some had no access to computer or smart phones to submit assignments back home. For semester-long students, the challenge lied in finding a balance between university, community engagement, and work placement search/applications.

#### **Challenge #7: getting away from existing job**

This was identified to be a challenge for students who needed to get time off work in Australia in order to participate in the NCP program overseas. Some students had to quit their existing jobs because it was impossible to obtain leave.

### **Category 2: Challenges in living, studying and working in the host countries**

Apart from the above challenges, survey respondents identified further in-country challenges related to the weather, environment, population density, food, travelling, logistical issues, safety, negative attitude, time pressure, health, support and new perspectives when adapting to the new environment in the host country.

#### **Challenge #8: getting used to weather, environment and population density**

Australian students might be unfamiliar with the weather, environmental situations, and dense population in the Indo-Pacific region. Heat, humidity, air pollution and crowds were the most common obstacles encountered by respondents, affecting their general health and comfort.

#### **Challenge #9: adapting to local food**

Trying and accepting local cuisines seemed to be challenging to NCP students who had little experience with food variety. Students that had food allergies or special dietary requirements found it particularly hard to get appropriate food in local areas. Some complained about the food safety in host countries as they experienced food poisoning or digestive problems.

#### **Challenge #10: travelling in a foreign country**

Navigating a foreign city was difficult for many students, especially for first-time overseas travellers. In crowded cities with chaotic traffic, even crossing roads could be stressful. Travelling on their own on public transportation was also a concern for students as they experienced difficulties in communicating with the drivers due to the language barrier.

#### **Challenge #11: logistical issues**

Some students reported having a hard time navigating the visa application process and finding accommodation in countries that had complicated

visa requirements and stringent regulations on house renting for foreigners. Some students also had unpleasant experiences with landlords and had difficulties gaining access to necessary facilities such as printers and hot water.

#### **Challenge #12: navigating legal and financial systems**

A lack of knowledge about local regulations, such as parking or traffic rules, and internet censorship laws put students at risk of legal violations. In addition, adjusting to the payment system in the host country could be challenging due to differences such as preference for cash payment, use of pre-tax prices, or payment via government app.

#### **Challenge #13: feeling unsafe**

Safety was concerning for NCP students in some host countries. Some experienced distress and disruption to their study due to uncontrollable occurrences such as political unrest in Hong Kong, earthquakes in Nepal, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from that, keeping their personal belongings safe was a challenge for students staying in countries where theft is a common social problem.

#### **Challenge #14: dealing with locals' attitudes towards foreigners and vice versa**

Some NCP students encountered an unwelcoming attitude to foreigners from local people, particularly in areas where the former are not numerous, and therefore experienced difficulties in connecting with locals and engaging in social life. At the same time, students had to deal with negative attitudes from other Australian people towards local people.

#### **Challenge #15: feeling the time pressure**

Due to the short timeframe, students experienced heavy workload, long days, and sometimes frequent travel, which impacted on their enjoyment of the study tours. The above-mentioned challenges related to culture,

language, and traffic made it taxing for students to go about their day. In addition, as schedules are packed with educational or professional activities, there was little time left for NCP students to explore the host country and immerse in the culture, or have time for themselves. As the timeframe of the study tours was just enough to “get the hang of things”, students had a fear of wasting any time on the program.

#### **Challenge #16: health problems**

During the stay overseas, some NCP students experienced illnesses due to various reasons such as workload, weather, or food. Visiting doctors and obtaining medication was a challenge for them, which was heightened by the language barrier.

#### **Challenge #17: lacking support network**

Lack of support network in the host countries was reported as a major setback for NCP students. Without the needed support from a community of family and friends, many students struggled to manage their life in a foreign country. Although not being frequently mentioned, lacking guidance from supervisors under internship programs created difficulties for NCP interns to navigate through their tasks. In some cases, local co-workers were not willing to share the workload or involve NCP interns in their work, causing the feeling of being excluded and unwanted among these students.

#### **Challenge #18: learning and accepting new approaches and perspectives**

Students identified another challenge in understanding how host universities/organisations functioned on a daily basis, and why local employers, workmates and people thought or felt in certain ways. Where there were disparities in standards and expectations such as technology used, fieldwork safety, time management, NCP students reported feeling confused. Disagreements and conflicts

occurred when they could not handle different views.

### Category 3: Challenges related to home countries

Survey respondents frequently reported not receiving sufficient support from their home country before and during the program. Issues were often related to logistical arrangements and communication on the part of their home university.

#### Challenge #19: receiving insufficient logistical support from home universities

Some students indicated organisational issues with their home universities, resulting in some unpleasant experiences. Examples of these problems were irregular scholarship payments, discontinued accommodation and uneasy extension approval process, especially if their home university was running an NCP program for the first time. In some universities, there were frequent delays in providing documentation for legal/administrative purposes, approving requests, and responding to enquiries.

#### Challenge #20: experiencing disrupted communication

During the program, some students received only sporadic communication from their home university. In some cases, they had to 'chase' staff multiple times to obtain a response and sometimes received conflicting information. Some students also reported poor university support in granting an extension, even when their request had been approved by DFAT.

#### Challenge #21: lacking pre-departure information

It is sometimes challenging for students to learn about NCP programs such as eligibility criteria and available opportunities. In addition, home universities might not provide them with sufficient information about the host country, e.g. their culture, laws, accommodation, and practical

advice before departure. Therefore, some students reported not being sufficiently prepared to handle difficulties while being overseas.

### Category 4: Personal challenges

#### Challenge #22: feeling lonely and isolated

In addition to homesickness, living away from home for the first time, learning to do things on their own, being away from friends, and feeling isolated (due to living away from campus, often without internet) were identified as key challenges facing NCP students. Where students were placed in host organisations without other Australian students, this feeling was heightened and therefore affected students' performance during the program. Adding to that, having no mentors or buddies contributed to students' loneliness and isolation.

#### Challenge #23: meeting and working with new people

Meeting and working with new people was identified as another key challenge to NCP students. Through the program, NCP students have an opportunity to make new friends and learn to live and work with other students or scholars. However, this is not easy for many students. For one, personality differences can lead to clashes between group members. Second, spending too much time with the same group of people and sharing accommodation can lead to distress and conflict as students might not have enough privacy or time alone. Third, some students are less sociable than others and can find it challenging to make new friends. Fourth, more mature students usually found it harder to get along with others due to different lifestyles and interests. In addition, making connections and interacting with local students and people outside the campus was identified as challenging, especially for short-term mobility students, due to time constraints.



## Category 5: Challenges upon return

### Challenge #24: readjusting to the home environment

Students indicated that being away from Australia (especially for scholarship recipients whose stay overseas is longer) can lead to reverse culture shock and difficulties in readjusting to their home culture. Besides that, they found it hard to apply for jobs in Australia from overseas, and therefore felt unprepared for their return and for the future after the program. However, some indicated that this challenge was not a big concern.

### Challenges #25: Linking abroad experiences to employability

NCP alumni mentioned that one of the challenges was the lack of re-entry support in translating their Indo-Pacific experience into employability skills, and articulating what they had learnt abroad in a professional manner.

### Challenge #26: keeping connections with the host contacts

Some students indicated that they valued the relationship with local people and even wished for more time to spend with local students to deepen their relationship. However, upon returning to Australia, they found it hard to maintain these valued connections due to the geographical distance and lack of a mechanism facilitating these cross-nation relationships.

# Host perspectives

## Motivations and benefits

From the host perspectives, the New Colombo Plan brings them multitude of benefits at the macro (national), meso (organisational) and micro (individual) levels.

**At the macro level**, like Australia, host countries view the NCP as a *public diplomacy mechanism to foster sustainable relationships* with Australia and a catalyst for their international agenda, achieved through mutual understandings and collaborations at the individual and collective levels (Tran & Bui, 2021). In this context, host organisations see themselves as facilitating and contributing to their national geopolitical capital through long-term collaborations with the Australian Government and universities. One of the hosts indicated:

*In the long-term, they [NCP students] can contribute and share the information to their communities in Australia, contributing to the relationship between two nations...One of our responsibilities is public diplomacy then we consider receiving Australia students as our responsibility. (Host, Vietnam)*

**At the meso level**, host organisations' aspiration to host NCP students is driven by the motivation to enhance their institutional capital through:

- Internationalisation of the university
  - Diversifying student body
  - Internationalising academic staff
  - Internationalising student experience
  - Upgrading services
  - Boosting international ranking
- Enhancing their branding at both local and international levels
- Impetus for innovation in teaching and learning
- Improving English language for staff and students
- Generating revenue
- *Establishing collaborations with Australian universities and partnerships with the industry.* Host organisations perceived that hosting NCP students contributes to enhancing their social capital through establishing contacts, making connections, and building institutional trust. These are expected to pave the way for the formation of research collaborations and other sustainable relationships for host universities in the future. One host articulated:

*...for [the] academic part, I think the connection is important, since they understand the university, if they want to do research in the future or collaborate in the future. (Host, China)*
- **Contributing to the internationalisation agenda and international branding.** Having the physical presence of Australian students around the campus, facilitating their participation in different activities and encouraging their interactions with local students are among the activities that build the international capital and enhance the international branding of host organisations:

*When we have international NCP students coming in it's good for the branding like when our main revenue still coming from the Vietnamese, the local students, if they see that Dong Phuong attracts a lot of international students, means like they believe in the quality... Honestly the Vietnamese higher education market at the moment is very competitive... We also need to do a lot of things to*

*attract students coming in and this kind of internationalisation also is something attractive for local students. (Host, Vietnam)*

*[A]t the end of the day, our University is, you know, selected as by Japanese government to promote internationalisation. We are ... trying hard to attract not only the international student but also we are trying to dispatch as many students as possible. (Host, Japan)*

Although hosting NCP students does not bring many direct economic benefits, international branding subsequently facilitates student recruitment and results in potential economic gains for host universities.

- **Accessing a diverse workforce.** With regard to the internship programs in particular, the NCP provides industry hosts with access to a diverse labour force who possesses distinctive knowledge, mindset, skills and culture that can enrich the local workforce. This diversity makes NCP interns crucial actors:

*somebody with great English, somebody that can think a little bit differently, they hope that it will challenge their local staff to think a little bit differently, to practice their English. And also, it's just fresh ideas. They're bringing up-to-the-minute ideas, plus they come from a totally different education background. (Host, Malaysia)*

- **Creating a pathway to international markets.** While the direct economic impact of hosting NCP students is limited, host organisations expect that their involvement in the NCP can create a pathway to international markets thanks to increased awareness and understanding of host countries:

*we hosted Australian students to market our program to international students. (Host, China)*

*...more and more international students and especially Australian students know about our company and Vietnamese market will help us gain access to the international markets including Australia market in the future. (Host, Vietnam)*

- **Improving training capacity.** Host organisations also position NCP students as valuable actors who can improve training capacity, as staff have to take on different roles in training Australian students and therefore learn new skills along the way:

*The increase in recruiting these interns will also increase the company's training capacity. In training the interns, the staff have to play different roles such as procedure training, basic knowledge training, gaming business indicators training, technical training, fine arts training, graphics training. Therefore, the training capacity of our staff has developed. (Host, Vietnam)*

- **Strengthening host communities' self-esteem.** In some cases, working with people from other cultures helps to increase local communities' awareness of their own values and strengths (which can otherwise be underrated) or makes them re-examine their current situation from a different perspective:

*...when you realize what the strengths are, that I think results in pride. And being able to point that out in the future and notice the value in what you, what you do, what may be very normal to people in this community. (Host, Japan)*

**At the micro level**, the NCP program is positioned by host organisations as a tool to develop language, cultural and social capital of local staff and students, as reported in the following comment:

*I see our students actually improve their language skills in speaking with the partners here. Yeah, they understand better the Australian cultures in their daily life, when we play with them or study with them. (Host, China)*

- In terms of *language capability*, using English as a means of communications improves proficiency for host staff and students, which not only enhances the organisations' international capital, but is also a vital

component to building individual human capital.

- Establishing connections and setting up relationships with Australian students as a form of *social capital* aggregation and learning about different cultures and values as a form of *cultural capital* are also perceived impacts of the NCP program on local staff and students.

## Challenges and tensions

Despite the perceived benefits and positive impacts of the NCP, Indo-Pacific countries faced a number of related challenges and tensions in hosting NCP students:

### #1 Lack of awareness and information about the NCP

Hosts reported they need more information about the NCP, including the overview, goals and nature of the program, and require guidance about hosting NCP students, especially for organisations that lack experiences in hosting foreign students. Downstream hosts who are engaged by a host university or partner to provide internships or some activities for NCP students as part of their mobility program are in particular unaware of the NCP and not integrated in designing the program.

*We need a unified instruction/booklet for all Chinese hosts, at least [to understand] a general picture [of the New Colombo Plan]. (Host, China)*

*We need to learn more as [an] organiser. [...] I was [an] organiser of this project but before I organised this project, I didn't see any booklet, I didn't read any brochure of this New Colombo Project and after students came and I read – because they brought one – they have this brochure I read and it [the NCP] looked like this, I said to myself. (Host, China)*

### #2 Pre-departure preparation for students and host engagement in pre-departure

Some host organisations found it challenging to host NCP students due to a lack of understanding

about their needs, expectations and characteristics. Accordingly, they recommended they should be connected with students prior to their departure. For example, they expressed their wish to talk to students via Skype or Zoom around six weeks prior to departure, so that they could better understand their expectations and their institutions' requirements, and tailor the program to suit students' needs. This pre-departure engagement with hosts also helps Australian students understand the background of their host organisations earlier on.

More engagement between host organisations and students before departure also means that students have time to engage in conversations about and familiarise themselves with the host organisations, their needs and requirements with regard to learning and internships.

Some hosts suggested the need for targeted professional development for host academics/supervisors/mentors/buddies so that they can be better informed about the NCP and provide more suitable support and a conducive learning environment for students.

### #3 Duration of short-term programs and heavy workload for host staff

One of the most popular challenges reported by hosts was the short duration of mobility programs. As they are typically only a few weeks long, host organisations reported having difficulties in arranging meaningful activities for students. Particularly for internship programs, host organisations found it challenging to involve Australian interns in a project cycle in the workplace and evaluate their performance. An informant stated:

*Some feedback is that the time's too short [for] foreign students to stay in the lab... considering this short timing, [what] we can do is just give them some cultural impression and [for example] how we, universities, do these research things. (Host, China)*

Host organisations emphasised the need to prepare Australian students with knowledge about host cultures and workplace environments prior to commencing study or work. However, due to the short duration of mobility programs and internships, staff in host organisations felt the *time pressure and a heavy workload*.

Another challenge associated with duration of short-term programs was to change the mindset of host staff and some NCP students themselves, who tended to see short-term mobility as holiday or recreational activities.

#### #4 Meeting students' needs

Meeting the demands of students was also a challenge for host organisations, as indicated in the excerpt below:

*They expect to gain the work experience so we have this discuss with the [Australian partner university] how we can do better this year in terms of job matching to find the suitable projects for student to do in the company. (Host, Vietnam)*

For internship programs, concerns were raised with regard to finding suitable tasks or projects that match the preferences and abilities of Australian students and the duration of the short-term programs.

#### #5 Logistical and facilities challenges

In making arrangements for NCP students and scholars upon their arrival, host organisations faced numerous challenges related to *logistics and facilities*. Many host countries struggled to meet the expectation of NCP students regarding the quality of accommodation, facilities, transportation, and environment:

*When it come to the delivery phrase... when we deliver the program it also not easy to host international student in general and Australian in particular. From the very basic things like visa. The logistics. To prepare for accommodation for example. (Host, Vietnam)*

The logistics of hosting NCP students may involve complicated bureaucracy and increased workload for human resources staff and academics in host organisations.

#### #6 Language barrier

Languages were another critical barrier hindering the experience of Australian students during their stay in host countries. As members in the host communities might not speak English or have limited English proficiency, Australian students' lack of Indo-Pacific language skills led to difficulties in communication.

*While university staff and students relatively speak English, English is still a foreign language in Indonesia. This means people outside the campus may not be able to speak English. (Host, Indonesia)*

Despite the presence and guidance of academic program leaders, interpreters were sometimes needed, as reported by some Japanese organisations.

Although the use of English has increased in universities in Indo-Pacific countries, the number of programs delivered in English language remains limited, while Australian students might miss out on the benefits of undertaking study in Indo-Pacific languages due to limited proficiency.

*The only problem for Japanese university to attract to many foreign student is unfortunately the number of English program is limited. That is a very big disadvantage. (Host, Japan)*

#### #7 Cross-cultural tensions

*Cross-cultural tensions* occurred in some cases due to a mismatch in expectations between hosts and students. For example, some hosts in Japan complained about the manners of students using their accommodation. In places where there is language barrier, cross-cultural communication incidents made the matter worse. As a host stated,

*The challenge, I think [is] their lifestyle. Compared to Australian culture, especially in Tokyo, everything is ... very strict ... in terms of rules of the accommodation. Not everyone, but many Australian exchange students use the dormitory in their way. Sometimes they don't wash the dishes. That kind of cultural communication [is] problematic. (Host, Japan)*

Therefore, host countries were concerned about equipping students with knowledge about the people and culture of the host destinations, and supporting. However, this was sometimes hard to achieve due to time constraints.

#### #8 Maintaining contact with NCP students

Another challenge for host organisations was to maintain post-study contact with NCP students. The practices exercised by the hosts were mainly ad-hoc and unstructured. Bigger organisations might find it harder than smaller ones to keep the connection with their Australian interns, as observed by the following participant:

*There's nothing structured. Some hosts keep really good contact with their interns. But it's ad hoc. And you know where that is – it's the smaller companies. So, the smaller companies, they maintain contact... I don't think it happens with larger companies. (Host, Malaysia)*

This indicates a need for more structured approach and more official channels to foster and maintain ongoing contact between NCP students and host communities for mutual benefit. Hosts shared that NCP students turned to them for work references and shared new projects related to the host country, but the contact overall is fragmented.

#### #9 Lack of access to student evaluations collected by Australian universities

Some host organisations found it challenging to not be informed of the evaluation collected by Australian universities on the mobility program hosted by their organisations, although hosts might seek feedback from students directly. Therefore hosts recommend it is critical to share

evaluation and feedback between home and host organisations for mutual improvement.

*We are not sure about whether A university require students to make any report after return... For us, we also have a review/ reflection meeting with students to discuss about their work, the comments & feedback of students about the program in Vietnam. We also want to listen to students' feedback to improve our program. If [A University] has requested students to do the report, it will be very good if they can share the report with us. (Host, Vietnam)*

#### #10 High cost of promoting host universities and countries

Promoting their countries as attractive destinations to Australian students was another concern facing the hosts. Some host universities arranged for their staff to travel to Australia to promote their organisations, entailing high costs that go beyond the revenue from hosting NCP students:

*We have to pay the expense for promotion to send people to fly in Australia to do the promotion activities. (Host, Vietnam)*

In this regard, these host organisations seemed to place building international capital and capacity ahead of the immediate economic gain of hosting Australian students.

#### #11 Differences in expectations and demands

There are unmet demands raised by host organisations regarding home university status and ranking. Some host organisations expect to receive students from the world's top universities; universities in Japan and China in particular are sensitive to ranking in selecting NCP partners. Hosts in China, Vietnam and Malaysia cited the need to re-balance student mobility and an aspiration for a two-way flow of students between their country and foreign ones:

*Every year we have more than 30% students go outside and many to the States. And we also want the students from abroad to China also. (Host, China)*



# Academics' perspectives

## #1 Students' lack of understanding about the NCP and lack of motivation to participate

As academics indicated, although some universities extensively promoted the program through different channels such as emails (by academics) and websites (by the central international offices), often students lacked a full understanding of the NCP program.

As a result of students' lack of awareness, they might not participate, which created difficulties for some universities in reaching the required number of applicants:

*But honestly, I must say it's actually quite hard to find students who are willing to go. So, I mean, the two candidates for last year were fitting quite well. But we didn't have more than the two candidates anyway so we couldn't select in the end. ... it's not easy to find students who fit into that and who are actually interested to go overseas even in cases everything is paid for them.*

## #2 Academics' difficulties in promoting NCP outside their course

The role of academics in promoting the NCP to students is identified as essential. However, this marketing approach proved to be ad hoc, since some academics reported difficulties if they were not teaching at the time: in that case, they would rely on the help of other staff or students to promote the programs, which they had little control over:

*I wasn't teaching in first semester so I didn't have a class to promote it to, so I sent it out to lots of other people and asked them to promote it. But you don't really have a lot of control over that and to be honest, if they don't see any value in promoting, they don't do it and I can't really force them to. So I went around and*

*I put up posters. I put them up in my Physics students' hang-out area.*

## #3 Faculty's limited understanding of and limited engagement in the NCP program

As reported in the excerpt below, many academics did not know about the NCP:

*I will say I've never heard of the scheme until Andy [pseudonym] mentioned it to me so I don't know how he found out about it. So I would say probably 90 per cent of the academics that you're hoping to attract don't even know the scheme exists.*

Academics' lack of knowledge about the program was partly attributable to the fact that they were not very involved in the process, since NCP programs are mainly managed by international offices instead of academics:

*... basically kids [students] find out the opportunity and never even consult anybody in the faculty, they go directly to the international office...so as a result there is not even a single person here, not even an Associate Dean International who knows about the possibilities of NCP in curriculum terms rather than in mechanical terms ... Those kinds of [mechanical] things become dominant issues rather than curriculum driving it... [But] I think the program ought to be driven by the faculties...*

## #4 Heavy paperwork for academics to obtain reimbursement

As the NCP fund is mainly managed by the international offices, some academics reported funding is not directly allocated to the faculty. As a result, academics often had to use their own money to pay for the trip upfront and go through complicated paperwork to be reimbursed, as indicated below:



*The system is too complicated because we are at the faculty, we applied and were granted the fund, but the fund was held by international office. NCP has a clause that allows 10% admin fund to be allocated directly to the faculty, but it was not. My current situation is that I have to pay upfront from my pocket, and do a reimbursement claim which is frustrating. You see, how much paperwork I have to go through.*

## **#5 Lack of information about selection process and outcomes**

Academics reported that there was a lack of information about the selection process (i.e. who makes the selection and how), its outcomes, and the selected students (e.g. their cultural and ethnic background):

*And of course how the universities are selecting that's also a major issue, we don't know enough about that. You know, who's being selected and how that's happening and who's doing the selecting. Because at [our university]... it's a very opaque and mysterious process... I mean there is very little data that is available as to which categories and how and when and what it is ... and at what level of their studies.*

## **#6 Heavy student workload**

Academics indicated that students might experience a heavy workload with assignments for various units in addition to undertaking the learning abroad experience. This might be due to academics' high expectations of their students and underestimation of the challenges of an intensive short-term mobility program. As a result of this, students might experience burnout. This finding was confirmed by in-depth interviews with short-term mobility students in many programs and by in-country fieldwork observations:

*It was a big challenge for them [students] and because it was the first time for me too, probably made the academic requirements too high standard, I made maybe too many assessment and assignments and things... they were physically exhausted... I think that was the biggest challenge that student and myself did realise after coming back. Before we went we didn't think about it too much, but just the weight of the workload just hit us after coming back.*

## **#7 Sustainability of the program**

Academics complained that NCP funding for universities on a year-to-year basis caused challenges for the sustainability of the programs and of the partnerships between Australian and foreign universities:

*So our program was funded once, but that was just once ... from next year onwards we don't have any funding, so student will have to fund it themselves and that will change the student numbers. So I don't know how sustainable that program is going to be next year onwards.*

Academics also indicated that the success of the program and the long-term relationship with partner universities depended also on the personalities of the people involved, due to working in close proximity:

*And if you have trouble with a staff member that you're running the program with, I think that can have a really big impact, not only on your experience personally as an educator but also that does get played out with the group generally... I have heard of clashes in personalities on programs before and it has had some pretty devastating consequences and has damaged institution relationships as well, partner institution relationships. So I think that that's pretty critical.*

## #8 Project application selection and outcomes

Another challenge identified by academics involved in the NCP programs is that application for funding is highly competitive. In addition, there seemed to be confusion about the characteristics of a successful application:

*I have been involved in a number of [NCP] proposal submissions and I have seen there's quite a small fraction eventually successful. ... So the time and effort you have to put in is quite substantial and the success rate is not that large. And it seems as if you have to provide something very special to be successful. So the main purpose of getting them into contact with another culture is not sufficient, of course...that makes it a little bit of pity.*

On another note, academics were dissatisfied with the timing of outcome announcement: if application outcomes are delayed, academics do not have time to promote the program to students.

*I cannot say anything very much because it's a very bureaucratic... until today they haven't announced yet what is going ... [T]his is week four already [and] I can't do the promoting. You see that it caused a problem for me. If I know by July I got it all the first week, I already do the promotion.*

## #9 Lack of post-study events

As reported by academics, there were very few debriefings as part of post-study programs available for alumni.

*... the only thing that I would change is just, you know, potentially with what I do, which is making sure that the students have a proper debriefing from the program which I think is really lacking at the moment.*

In addition, academics reported that there was a lack of interest from non-mobile students in NCP students' mobility experiences. The knowledge gained by NCP students during their time in the Indo-Pacific region was not given sufficient recognition and appreciation from the community of their home university:

*... not only NCP study abroad program or student mobility programs is the complaint that the students have when they come back in sort of saying nobody wants to know. Nobody wants to know. And as a result sort of saying when I mentioned the various things that I have learned or various things I've experienced then apart from my best mate the faculty are not interested. They're bored by it.*

## #10 Variation in the selection criteria across universities

From academics' perspectives, student selection criteria were not clearly described and there was great variation across Australian universities. Where competition was low, selection was based on a 'first come, first served' basis, or sometimes all applicants would be accepted. While some universities employed a range of criteria to assess students' applications, others focused on students' academic performance, which is reflected in the high percentage allocated to academic merit criterion:

*... basically they look at those four criteria... 40%, 10%, 20%...[but] why is it 10% you know ... So I don't think they've paid enough attention on the criteria that they have listed. Those things ought to be discussed much more widely ... I mean at one level it's largely reward for academic results. The way that the criteria reads with the 40% allocated to academic merit ...*

From academics' views, the reason for valuing academic merit is that high-performing students are believed to take the experience more seriously and make the most of the mobility experience. However, academics did not entirely agree with this approach. Rather, they believed that NCP funding should provide equal opportunities for all students, not just academic high-achievers:

*... but what I notice that there are students who went there for non-academic reasons and that was really not very good idea you see... this year we really looked at the academic scores and did select students carefully, ...[those] students who go abroad tend to be concentrated... [But it is] equally important for students who are not academically perfect, so I don't*

*hundred percent agree to sending students on the basis of academic achievement.*

### #11 Difficulties in crediting NCP experience

Academics also identified difficulties in giving credits for the Indo-Pacific learning experience to the unit students were enrolled in at their home universities. This was particularly challenging if students were not enrolled in the courses led by academic leaders of the short-term mobility programs:

*The big problem is one of the rules is participating in the workshop has to count as a mark to a unit the students are studying back here. And that is a huge hurdle. That is so difficult to meet that criteria because we're just not geared up to do that.*

In addition, academics felt a lack of support in solving issues related to giving credits to students as well as other academic issues.

*it would make me a bit reticent to do it again if a student wasn't enrolled in my course... If they're not in my course, uh, I found it really difficult to negotiate that with other people because they deal with an equity issue. How can I give marks to one student for this, when everyone else in the course is not going? ... everyone kind of thought it was someone else's problem to solve...I went up through so many different channels of admin where they just found it was impossible to solve that problem for me...*

### #12 Management of in-country risks

Academics reported challenges related to the lack of clear guidance and a systemic mechanism to deal with critical incidents, such as sexual harassment and accidents that happen during the short-term mobility programs. This becomes extremely complicated in consortium programs because academic program leaders have to go through multiple layers of administration and reporting (International Office, Faculty, Department, Dean of Teaching and Learning, Student Disciplinary Committee, Student Welfare, Counselling, Medical Advice) across different universities and host organisations, where

protocols for critical incident management are different.

Late payments to students, as well as insurance claims when they were overseas, could be a significant challenge. Specifically, as commented in the excerpt below, students could not have their medical fees paid directly due to the sudden change of insurance provider. As a result of this, the new insurance provider had not linked to the hospital's system by the time students had checked out from the hospital, forcing them to pay the fees out of their pocket. This not only caused stress for students but also for accompanying academics:

*The student didn't get the money on time. So that is a big problem... The second one, is when the student get sick, we don't know who we're meant to contact... Last year in Bangkok...after two days we arrived one student got sick. I had to bring her to the medical [centre]. The problem is that when we call to the Australian, nobody pick up the phone...Finally, after the next day, the student emailed back and then [they said] 'we changed the insurance and please use this insurance company'... By the time we had to pay this insurance was not in their payment system. So my student had to use her own money.*

### #13 Contents being too individual-focused

As indicated in the excerpt below, some short-term mobility programs were highly individualised, with the focus mainly being placed on individual experience. This was identified as less effective than collective learning, which could draw on group members' diversified perspectives:

*[I]t's highly individualised to start off with ... I actually think learning is much more effective when it's done collectively... And as it is you know I mean some of the study tours can be very productive not because individual benefits but group benefits from learning from each other as they experience and observe different things when they're abroad. Individual also runs the risk of being lost or reproducing their existing prejudices.*

## #14 Challenges associated with evaluation

Academics indicated that NCP program evaluation was often conducted through student feedback in their Units, which does not allow sufficient detail. However, the lack of resources restricts their capacity to address this. Further, many academics are not made aware of the student evaluation collected by DFAT. This finding is echoed by hosts who are ambiguous about how program evaluation is conducted by home stakeholders, how they can learn from it, and how they can share the feedback they themselves collected from NCP students. This indicates a critical need to have a more coherent mechanism for the evaluation of individual programs and keep home and host stakeholders involved and informed.

*We're not [having an evaluation system], which is a bit sad, isn't it? The only way that it will get evaluated is through student feedbacks, through normal unit processes. It would be nice to be able to do them more than that, [but] we just don't have the capacity or the resource to be able to do it.*

# Mobility practitioners' perspectives

Mobility practitioners reported a number of challenges and tensions associated with running the NCP Program.

## #1: Students' limited awareness of and interest in NCP programs

As identified by mobility practitioners, attracting students to NCP-funded learning abroad programs was one of the challenges facing Australian universities. It was sometimes hard to raise students' awareness of the NCP scheme as they might simply have no interest in mobility experiences, or care more about the amount of funding rather than where the funding comes from. As a result, information sessions promoting the NCP program did not always have a good turnout. Further to that, mobility practitioners reported that students tended to be more interested in short-term mobility programs than semester-long ones. This was due to (i) students' work and study commitments at home, (ii) students' hesitancy to stay in non-English speaking destinations for a long period of time as they might find it confronting, and (iii) students' preference for traditional Anglophone countries, as indicated in the extract below:

*I feel that students see Asia as a really good opportunity for a short term program. I don't think they necessarily have it in their heads to have a full semester or a year-long exchange to Asia. I think it's either too confronting for students or they're still drawn to the traditional markets of the US, UK, Canada.*

## #2: Students' unrealistic expectations and lack of preparedness for mobility experience

Mobility practitioners reported that students could have unrealistic expectations about mobility

experiences if it was their first time overseas or were poorly-prepared prior to departure. As a result, students could experience difficulties adapting to the new systems in host organisations. Further to that, some students had complaints (e.g. about accommodation) or inappropriate behaviours (e.g. drinking overnight), which was identified by mobility practitioners to be a challenge that needs to be addressed "on an immediate level":

*Probably they stayed in a 5\* hotel with their parents and probably they've never lived away from home before. If we send them to a university program in Malaysia, ... they complain ... We have had some instances where students have been out partying all night.*

Irrelevant expectations about in-country experiences could be due to the quality of pre-departure programs. For example, the pre-departure briefings delivered by one contractor were criticised as generalising Asia:

*So the Asialink training in particular, the feedback that my students have given me, and to take this in context, these are students in our degree programs who've had some exposure to Asia content before ... so a lot of them aren't coming at this as their first exposure to Asia but they've found that the training that's been delivered kind of homogenises Asia which is hugely problematic.*

## #3: Lack of consistency, transparency and inclusivity in the student selection process

Mobility practitioners reported inconsistency in the student selection process across different Australian universities. In some GPA was the main criterion, which is considered a simple and straightforward approach, but specifically targets

high-achieving students. Mobility practitioners indicated that they would like to see a variety of criteria to be used so as to make the program inclusive for different groups of students, such as disadvantaged ones. In some universities, no “stringent” selection criteria were employed as they wanted mobility opportunities to be open to everyone; however, this process was criticised to be “vague” and “subjective” due to the lack of transparent criteria:

*I think one [challenge] is [to have] increased transparency on how the selection is actually made. In my experience, the feedback has been quite vague.*

*Yeah it can be very subjective as well, and hard to explain to students why one got it over the other one basically.*

As a result of this, it was challenging to provide applicants with clear feedback on the outcome of their applications. This was difficult also due to the large volume of applications and staff limitations. This reflected a tension between mobility practitioners’ expectations of what should be done, and their actual capacity to take on the workload.

#### #4: Conflicts in timing between home and host universities

As the academic calendar and in particular the trimester model adopted by Australian universities are different from those in the Indo-Pacific systems, mobility practitioners indicated that home universities had difficulties in fitting the timeframe of mobility programs into the university calendar. This timing-related issue had a particular impact on longer term programs, as reported in the extracts below:

*[O]ur trimester model ... doesn’t necessarily give a lot of flexibility for longer term experiences that do include internship.*

*The only concern that comes to mind for me is often timing because our academic calendar often doesn’t align with that of overseas institutions because we do it the wrong way round in Australia*

#### #5: Credit recognition and transfer

Mobility practitioners reported a major challenge around crediting Indo-Pacific learning abroad and internship experiences towards students’ degrees, which caused confusion and frustration among students:

*I think the second biggest issue that I was aware of for students was getting the course or the NCP activity credited towards their degree. And it was a huge frustration for the students and I had to elevate the situation to the deputy vice chancellor on a number of occasions.*

Therefore, in selecting partners for NCP programs, universities need to consider numerous factors such as transfer of credits, quality of programs offered by host organisations, and language of instruction. As such, establishing partnerships could be challenging at times, as indicated in the excerpt below:

*... if we look in China we have limited partners because quite often we have issues with credit being approved or with English taught classes.*

#### #6. Insufficient funding

Mobility practitioners reported a number of issues in relation to NCP funding structure for students and universities. With respect to funding for students, equal allocation regardless of destination proved ineffective, as the amount of money is insufficient for expensive host countries such as Japan:

*I think for most countries in the Asia-Pacific region, the funding is sufficient. But I do think that some of the more expensive countries like Japan it doesn’t generally cover it all and the students have to rely on things like the OS-HELP loan additionally to help them.*

Similarly, the amount of administrative funding allocated to universities varies from year to year (as it depends on the number of students being awarded the grants), and therefore it prevents employment of additional supporting staff. Also, this funding allocation model was criticised for not



fairly recognising the work involved in delivering a mobility program for academics and mobility practitioners. These issues are reflected in the following excerpts:

*So we're not sure how much money we're going to get each year. So we can't employ somebody to do the job of supporting NCP. Because I could win 10 funds, 10 projects with \$100,000 funding. That's \$10,000 [for the university]. I can't employ somebody on \$10,000.*

*I mean, say, an academic takes ten students to Indonesia, they get \$3,000. They have the same work if they send five students to Indonesia but they only get \$1,500.*

In addition, there are strict regulations on how the funding could be spent. Therefore, as mobility practitioners reported, the majority of the funding would go to the central university office, while only a small portion is allocated to the academic unit, i.e. the faculty, that delivers the program:

*But I think the challenge would be admin funding is that there's very strict things that you can use it for and not all of those are aligned with the costs that you need to cover from the academic unit's perspective in delivering the program. Because we've had to use so much of the admin funding to fund the central position to make sure that we can actually administer the grants correctly, it means that there's less of that admin funding available for running of the actual program.*

Besides, year-to-year funding for mobility projects (with no opportunity for roll-over, as reported by mobility practitioners) caused difficulties for universities in long-term planning and building sustainable partnerships with host organisations:

*One year you get funding and then next year, nothing. It's very hard to plan and to be strategic and to build a long lasting relationship, which is one of the aims, if the program funding is so variable and comes and goes from things.*

## #7. Engaging alumni

Another challenge reported by mobility practitioners was to support alumni's post-study

experiences and engage them in the recruitment of the next cohorts of students, for example by sharing their experiences in NCP information sessions. However, universities might lack the financial and human resources to keep them engaged:

*And my experience is that it's very difficult to keep them [NCP alumni] engaged but also I think that comes down to resourcing from our perspective as well.*

## #8: Working with third-party providers

Third party providers played an important role in helping the universities recruit students, administering short-term mobility programs, and building partnerships with host organisations. However, mobility practitioners indicated that universities experienced a number of issues related to cost effectiveness and quality:

*... we've had a lot of bad experiences with third party providers ... Many of the third-party provider programs are expensive. So we've cut them down to ones that are cost effective, can deal with our administrative processes that work well, that support students that have great experiences.*

## #9: Request for specific feedback from DFAT on applications

Despite the availability of generic information and feedback provided by DFAT based on previous applications, some universities might not be aware of or engage adequately with this resource. Nevertheless, mobility practitioners requested specific feedback from DFAT on unsuccessful applications so that they can improve future ones:

*I mean, my biggest thing is getting feedback from [DFAT], and I know DFAT, they won't give feedback on unsuccessful projects. But I think if you want better projects, then you need to be able to provide feedback on why they're not being approved.*

*From the application point of view, from DFAT selection of successful applications, I think it'd be very beneficial if how they made their selections was clearer ... I think that would be hugely beneficial so we can work out where, where our program was not*

*successful. We have a better chance of then building a better program and application for the following year so it increases chances of being funded. (Mobility office manager)*

## #10: Difference in expectations

While acknowledging the positive impact of the NCP on students' learning abroad opportunities and outcomes and on institutional partnerships, mobility practitioners expressed their wish for more adequately recognising the large amount of pressure and workload imposed on universities in running NCP programs.

*... the workload and I think the lack of understanding of the department as to how universities work, what students are really like ... and how much is involved in making sure that the ship is moving along. And so that all the names can be in their lovely database and all the applications in on time, is a huge amount of work.*

There is a difference in university and DFAT expectations. In addition, the current structure creates an expectation among universities that DFAT is a problem solver. Universities feel they are under-resourced to run NCP programs and are at times unclear about where to seek help in a timely manner on a range of matters such as visa applications and consortium arrangements.

## #11: Heavy workload for staff

Due to universities' lack of resources to employ additional staff to support NCP programs, staff experienced heightened workload. Mobility practitioners reported that for academics who worked with them, engagement in NCP programs was "an added extra" to their existing workload but was not necessarily recognised by the university.

*And I think the real gap is the support for academic staff who run the short programs particularly because quite often I'm still seeing that it's not counted in workloads or it's not seen as a career path that academics can take.*

Similarly, for mobility practitioners, the administrative workload involves multiple tasks such as preparing grant applications, overseeing the project, reporting and accounting. Such workload could be at peak at particular times of the year due to the trimester model. As one manager of the global mobility office stated,

*So because of our trimesters we've lost our ability to send programs in the June/July period because we've only got usually one or two week break. So they all go at the end of the year between November, December or January and February. So that's an extremely busy time for our office.*

## #12: Opportunities for mobility practitioners to gain in-country experiences

The administration of short-term mobility programs and their actual delivery in country entails different types of experiences and skills. Therefore, mobility managers expressed their desire for their office to have first-hand experience in-country through a mobility program:

*...our officers very rarely get to go out to particular places to accompany the student groups... the poor administrators back here in the office get little opportunity to engage with, you know, Southeast Asia or whatever.*

# Recommendations

This section puts together recommendations that were directly suggested by NCP students and alumni, hosts, academics, mobility practitioners and third party providers or drawn from the challenges they reported.

## Category 1: Promotion, recruitment and selection process

### #1 Increase inclusiveness of the NCP

Mobility and academic staff largely agreed that the NCP should be more accessible and inclusive to diverse groups of students to enhance equity in access and enrich students' experiences, while not necessarily increasing the costs for the government. Different groups of students to be included in the NCP could be:

- low socio-economic students, Aboriginal students, students with disabilities, regional students, students being carers of elderly parents:

*I think my other recommendation would be to ensure that we're giving more consideration of how we support students from diverse backgrounds, from disadvantaged backgrounds, you know, aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, students from low SES, students with disabilities, students with different health needs, to make sure that the programs we're developing are actually suitable for everyone. (Mobility office manager)*

*It's a huge equity and access issue and that's why we were determined... to give it to as many students as we possibly could, who financially otherwise wouldn't be able to go... So I think that maybe part of what they could do is try and focus it around proving equity of opportunity for students who are low SES ... (Academic staff)*

- postgraduates and mature age students who would benefit from the life-changing impacts of the NCP program on their career and future opportunities:

*I really wish they would remove the age limit entirely from the NCP because I do think it can be just as life changing for students who are mature age. (Mobility office manager)*

*I think that it should be extended to include postgraduate students and students over the age of 28.... My feeling is that this doesn't increase costs to government, this just increases the quality of students. (Academic staff)*

- full-degree international students to ensure equity in access and bring diverse views and ideas to enrich Australian students' experiences during mobility. That being said, international students might need to seek other funding sources, such as institutional grants or self-funding. Some universities interviewed have included international students funded by institutional grants alongside NCP-funded domestic students in the same short-term mobility program:

*I think the benefit of having a small number of international students as part of an NCP cohort is that they will bring a very different perspective to the Australian students as they're having that in-country study experience and I think that diversification of views, ideas, and cohort, is going to make for a much more rewarding study experience for students. (Mobility office manager)*

*I mean transnational networks and transnational groups are always beneficial. When I used to take groups of students abroad I always try to look out for one or two or three out of ten students from that background with some knowledge of that*

*space, of that country, as a way of facilitating greater learning. (Academic staff)*

To achieve inclusiveness, academic and mobility staff suggested:

- including different groups of applicants in the selection criteria;
- profiling NCP awardees based on their backgrounds to encourage low socio-economic status or disadvantaged students to apply for NCP funding, as they might find it more achievable knowing that students of similar background have been successful;
- having better promotional channels and engagement with the university regional campuses;
- providing government's promotional materials that are specifically targeted to students from underrepresented, disadvantaged, Aboriginal and low socio-economic backgrounds;
- providing extra assistance specifically to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as arranging airport transfers for students from regional areas or supporting Aboriginal students with paperwork;
- redirecting NCP funding from the scholarship to the mobility schemes to make the funding available for a larger number of students.

## #2 Promote the NCP to students more extensively and strategically

It is essential that information about the eligibility criteria, funding options, benefits and opportunities be made more available and communicated more widely to students to enhance their awareness of, interest in, and access to the program:

*NCP should try to continue to expose the program at universities so students are aware of the program and can have a sense of belief that they too can get into the program. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, survey)*

To this end, mobility and academic staff emphasised the need for DFAT and universities to promote the program more extensively by:

- emphasising its prestige to make sure students see its tangible value, while not framing it as 'too elite' for those from disadvantaged backgrounds
- working together in communicating with students. Despite a range of promotional resources available on the DFAT website, including videos profiling NCP students from different backgrounds, mobility practitioners suggested the government could create targeted campaign materials such as videos or social media for universities to disseminate to their students:

*And again, it's a matter of resources. So if the government could create certain campaigns or videos or certain things...which we can then play or show on our social media or again, send in our newsletters, those kinds of things would really be beneficial....As institutions, I would say we're happy to disseminate that information, but it's in creating the content that is very difficult for us. (Mobility office manager)*

- providing multi-year funding to enable academic program leaders and students to plan in advance and therefore increase their interest in the program:

*So I think one thing that's been really helpful has been the multi-year funding so that we can say with certainty to students from the time that they get here in their first year or even from the time that we're recruiting them, 'these are the programs that we're going to be running in three years' time...' so they can really plan in advance... (Mobility office manager)*

- engaging NCP alumni in promoting the program to future students.

### #3 Promote the NCP to academic staff

Increasing academics' awareness and interest is crucial due to their key role in encouraging their students to participate in and in delivering short-term mobility programs. As suggested by mobility offices, DFAT could strategically promote the NCP programs to academics on a large scale by:

- producing regular newsletters about NCP best practices implemented at other universities, and circulate them to academics to raise their awareness of the opportunities and types of funding available to their students, as well as lessons to learn from unsuccessful experiences:

*I would certainly find it interesting if there was, for example, a six monthly or a quarterly newsletter that came out from NCP about the types of projects that there are. It would also help us when we go and talk to our schools and say, 'well, have you thought about doing this'? (Mobility office manager)*

- organising road shows or visits to campuses to let more university staff know about the NCP:

*I wonder if it would be worth for either DFAT colleagues or Department of Education colleagues to do a road show to tell more university staff about it. Because you still have academics here, which I find is really quite bizarre, who still haven't heard about NCP. (Mobility office manager)*

### #4 Increase transparency and consistency in student selection

Students and academics suggested improving the transparency and consistency of student selection criteria so that students can have clearer expectations about and better preparation for their applications.

## Category 2: Pre-departure activities

### #5 Improve attendance rate and quality of pre-departure briefings

Students' participation rate in pre-departure sessions organised at different levels (i.e. by AsiaLink, university, faculty, department, or specific programs) and the content of these sessions should be improved to make sure students are well-prepared and have appropriate expectations about mobility experiences. This could be improved in the following ways:

- Pre-departure sessions could be delivered online as well as offline to be accessible to students in regional areas, and there should be better communication about these briefings, especially when multiple stakeholders are involved:

*The only factor I would recommend is the communication prior to the programs' commencement. I would have valued joining more pre-departure activities if they were available to me and I was aware of them. (Long-term mobility student, Japan, survey)*

- The content of pre-departure briefings needs to cover issues such as health and wellbeing, especially mental health, gender dynamics, sexual assault, drinking behaviours and drug issues. Students could be provided with a list of contacts and coping strategies to deal with these critical issues:

*[I recommend] more talks on safety and assistance when selecting somewhere for the Scholar to live. (NCP scholar, Malaysia, survey)*

- Pre-departure sessions should avoid generalisations about the Indo-Pacific/Asian region and generating cultural stereotypes. Instead, information specific to each destination country such as culture, political context, history, local weather and ecosystems, food, and transportation system



should be included to equip students with a ‘nuanced understanding’ of the location:

*So it means that preparing a student to go to Japan is very different from preparing a student to go to Mongolia or Thailand or Laos or China. (Mobility office manager)*

*... if they're giving them cultural advice for 40 countries – it must be very general. Do they give them advice for coming to Malaysia, or Singapore, or Japan? Because that's three different types of advice you would be required to give. (Third party provider in Malaysia)*

*Possibly country-specific sessions where people who will be travelling to similar places can meet up and learn more about what to expect in terms of culture or any other differences (NCP scholar, Singapore, survey)*

- Students should be advised about host organisations’ culture, such as the ways in which they function, the teaching and learning styles in host universities, and the working culture in host companies.
- In addition to structured pre-departure sessions, academic program leaders should brief their students on academic expectations and content delivered in country, and possible cultural differences specific to the destination.
- NCP alumni should be involved more extensively in pre-departure preparation to capitalise on their knowledge and skills. To this end, home universities and DFAT could (i) organise more events or seminars where alumni share first-hand mobility experiences with pre-departure students; (ii) compile alumni’s reviews, practical strategies and tips into a handbook in printed or digital form; and (iii) build a large-scale database with the contact details of past students:

*[I suggest] providing a database where students can make contact with past students who have been to the schools before, or a page that has a blog post and review of each experience. (Long-term mobility student, India, survey)*

## #6 Offer intensive language training programs for students

As students reported challenges navigating their life in the host countries due to a lack of knowledge of the local language, stakeholders suggested the Australian government and home universities offer language training to students prior to departure:

*A crash course in the destination's language taken before departing would have been very, very helpful. (Short-term mobility student, Japan, survey)*

## #7 Set up networking platforms and provide logistical support to students prior to departure

Students shared that they needed support from their home institutions to overcome challenges in socialising, working with new people, and preparing for trips. In this respect, home universities could:

- set up virtual networking platforms for NCP students such as Facebook groups or online forums prior to departure. These platforms are indeed available in many universities but some students are not aware of them. These platforms could continue to be in place while students are abroad as they could exchange experiences with and seek help from other Australian students, especially those going to the same destination.

*It would have been nice to meet other NCP students before the trip, or be sent a link to a Facebook page. (Short-term mobility student, Vietnam, survey)*

- provide students with logistical support in the visa application process and accommodation



arrangements, which is best done in collaboration with host organisations.

*Please assist students find safe accommodation. Young people are vulnerable to being scammed or taken advantage of when they are alone in a foreign country. (NCP scholar, Republic of Korea, survey)*

### Category 3: In-country support for students and academic staff

#### #8 Provide frequent check-ins and prompt response to students' queries

According to students, home universities should regularly check in with NCP students while overseas to provide timely support where needed, and at the same time allow them to reflect on their experiences and prevent feelings of isolation or abandonment:

*[I suggest] better checking in and support for scholar's mental health and wellbeing whilst abroad and upon return to Australia. (NCP scholar, Japan, survey)*

It is important that home universities respond quickly to students' queries in relation to documentation and approval request for legal and admin purposes, especially in the case of problems and emergencies:

*[My university] was extremely not supportive, disorganised, [...] consistently late (in approving things, responding to enquiries, providing documentation for legal/school admin purposes). (Short-term mobility student, Republic of Korea, survey)*

It is also recommended to maintain frequent contact between NCP students and host organisations, and between host and home organisations, while students are in country to respond to their needs. This host shares their good practice in maintaining regular communications:

*I think the most important thing is we keep the regular communication during the time student in Vietnam.*

*[Australian University] (pseudonym) has a staff to accompany student and we give regular communication with that particular person and appoint a representative of the school here in Australia so we keep regular communication with them. [...] we have email, we have a WhatsApp group and we have a group on Facebook. (Host, Vietnam)*

#### #9 Provide better arrangements for managing risks

There should be arrangements that enable students and accompanying academics to deal with critical incidents and crises that might occur in country. For example, students and academics should also be given clearer instructions about which hospitals are directly linked to the insurance provider to avoid delays or payment failure.

*For example, the insurance [companies] have to tell us which hospital in that city that you have a payment system directly. (Academic staff)*

At the same time, it is important that host organisations take care of students' safety, physical and mental health and have protocols to support students in turbulences such as geopolitical crisis, pandemic, or natural disasters.

#### #10 Provide in-country induction to NCP students

- To assist NCP students in adapting to new learning environments, it is helpful if host institutions could organise induction sessions at the beginning of the program wherein students could learn about local approaches and expectations.
- As knowing the local language is identified as crucial for students to navigate life in host countries, host organisations could support students in learning the local language after arrival in addition to the intensive language programs provided in Australia. This may be in the form of formal language classes or informal

language practice communities, where NCP students could mingle with local students.

- Host organisations should be involved in providing country/company briefings and cross-cultural communication guidance in pre-departure and in-country orientation programs:

*I'd love to have more lessons in culture from locals throughout the experience not just from Australian lectures predeparture. (Short-term mobility student, Vanuatu, survey)*

*In the orientation we also try to have some communication workshops for them. How to communicate with the other international students in the dorm ... How to communicate with people in the company ... How to use email properly ...how to communicate with the Vietnamese communities, with the local people, understand English [by] local people, something like that. (Host, Vietnam)*

- Student support services should be provided by host universities for students experiencing difficulties with their study or working with local academics.

## #11 Raise awareness and create an inclusive environment in host countries

Students highly recommended that the NCP should be further promoted in host countries to increase the awareness of host institutions, companies, communities and other stakeholders so that students can be better supported during their stay and have more opportunities for employment in the host country after their experience:

*For Thailand at least, there was not much support for scholars in country. I had expected a bit more contact from the Embassy in Bangkok and maybe certain opportunities for networking. It did not seem as if the Embassy staff were fully aware of what the NCP was. (NCP scholar, Thailand, survey)*

Host organisations should avoid treating NCP students in short-term mobility and internship

programs as visitors or guests. Instead, they should provide an inclusive system to make NCP interns feel welcomed and valued in the workplace by assigning them suitable tasks and involving them in social events:

*I think the students...are coming to Vietnam just a few weeks to enjoy, to experience, so for that point we have to change, not just only the awareness of student but also change the mindset of the company as well. (Host, Vietnam)*

## #12 Support students in their in-country daily life

- More in-country support is needed for students in dealing with local healthcare, legal, transportation and payment systems, as well as finding reliable services such as accommodation, food, phone and printing facilities.
- Host universities should connect NCP students with local peers via buddy programs or social activities to build peer support networks. This would create more opportunities for students to engage with local cultures and make them feel more welcomed, thereby ensuring their well-being. It is, however, important to be mindful of cultural sensitivity in relation to gender and religion to ensure the effectiveness of buddy arrangements:

*[T]he only thing I regret is not making friends with locals in my selected country, I only made friends with people from other countries. Maybe organising for students to connect with a local student on their first day might help create better relationships! (Short-term mobility student, Republic of Korea, survey)*

- NCP students should be allowed to express their group preferences (such as age) to socialise with other Australian students with similar interests.
- DFAT/DFAT contractor and home and host universities could collaborate to set up a

platform for NCP students to network with and receive support from other NCP students and alumni during mobility:

*[There should be a way to] facilitate development of strong networks among scholars and alumni to provide peer support while overseas. (NCP scholar, Singapore, survey)*

## Category 4: Program design and collaboration among stakeholders

### #13 Increase the duration of short-term programs

While not recommended by all stakeholders, there is a popular desire by students, hosts and academics that there should be an increase in the minimum length of short-term mobility programs (internship, summer school, study tours) beyond the current 14 days, so that students have sufficient time to adjust to the new environment, enhance their learning opportunity and make connections with the local communities:

*Perhaps a longer period abroad. The time frame of 2 weeks was not enough to be able to understand and fully explore the program to the fullest. (Short-term mobility student, India, survey).*

*... we arrange some time for the students to go to a primary school and a secondary school. So, in my opinion, that's two weeks in university and two weeks in secondary school and two weeks in primary school. That will be better. (Host, China)*

The duration of each program is subject to its design, content, and assignment requirements and therefore should be carefully considered by home institutions in consultation with host organisations. Students' study, work or family commitments at home also need to be taken into account. This expectation could be mitigated by increasing engagement between the students and hosts prior to and post travel, so that the length of

the program could be increased without it needing to be fully overseas.

### #14 Arrange appropriate schedule and workload for students

A well-structured curriculum or well-organised schedule in short-term programs is essential to make the most of students' in-country learning and ensure they have sufficient time for independent exploration:

*Making the program less intensive so students can enjoy the program more. Whilst it is rewarding, it was very exhausting which lessened the experience. (Short-term mobility student, Indonesia, - survey)*

*Perhaps less travel and more focus on either the work we are doing and the exploring the country in our spare time. Spending copious amounts of time on a bus throughout the trip felt tedious and tiring. (Short-term mobility student, India, survey)*

In this regard, home universities and host organisations should work together in co-designing the programs, taking into consideration the following:

- students' tight timelines
- the travel time between different venues
- students' needs and challenges.

Academics felt that they should decrease the assignment tasks to lessen the workload for students, especially in programs that take place within the semester:

*I'm trying to make it more simple and less onerous because they were struggling... it may not be an issue if it's conducted outside the academic teaching weeks or outside the semester time... But that's something that I sort of addressed this year, so it's getting more realistic and getting less burdensome for students. (Academic staff)*

## #15 Emphasise meaningful and collective learning

Academics suggested that the content of short-term programs need to be more authentic and project-based to ensure meaningful learning for students. Project-based learning would enable students to engage and develop the relationship with the host organisations:

*I certainly think that NCP should focus on providing authentic experience to students. The kinds of activities of the study tours and so on, are helpful but it does not really give them a real opportunity to work and learn from that authentic problems. So it should be project based or kinds of program and not just visits... If you're going to spend one or two hour visiting a company, I don't think that would give them enough time to really develop a deep or strong network and connection with people. (Academic staff)*

As indicated by academics, students learn best when learning with other students. Therefore they suggested more focus should be placed on collective learning, in the form of:

- group travelling and team work:

*You know for example they should have had room where 2 or 3 people travelled together and work in a team as a way of creating a network or 5 or 6 people... 2 on each sides, sort of igniting an interest in their issues and having opportunity to reflect with each other when they're travelling together. (Academic staff)*

- writing post-program collective reports on a specific theme to direct their learning in a more meaningful way:

*The trouble with individualised reports is individualised reports normally become what we did on our holidays. Whereas collective reports on a certain theme [are more effective]... Rather than go there and learn whatever. (Academic staff)*

## #16: Embed the short-term mobility programs into the academic curriculum of home and host institutions

One of the key recommendations by mobility practitioners, academics and hosts is to embed short-term mobility experiences into the academic curriculum of home and host universities (rather than being treated as add-on elements) to increase their impact and develop sustainable partnerships with institutions in the Indo-Pacific.

**For home institutions**, treating the NCP program as an integrated part of the educational curriculum would enable academics to see their broader educational objectives and therefore increase their motivation to engage with them:

*Whereas the programs that I've seen that are delivered at the academic area, integrated into the curriculum, delivered by academics that are then building more broad, deep partnerships with the institutions they're working with in the region has meant that those programs have a much bigger impact, both for students and for institutions, to get the objectives that we're trying to get out of this, to build stronger links across the board with our region. (Mobility office manager)*

That being said, some participants recommended the Indo-Pacific experience not being credited into students' degree in Australian universities to avoid difficulties for academics when students are not enrolled in the courses they teach and allow students to explore more about Asian language or culture.

*So I would say if they can drop that criteria because I don't think it really makes any real difference... (Academic staff)*

*The Australian Government should remove the requirement that the NCP study component must receive academic credit for language study. Removing the academic requirement would allow any NCP scholar to study an Asian language regardless of their degree. (NCP scholar, Taiwan, survey)*

**For host institutions**, embedding NCP programs into local curriculum and engaging local students in the program would increase the depth and sustainability of the partnership built on mutual benefits:

*I think it's great when the students from the partner university are involved in an initiative. That doesn't always happen, but that's always great if you can actually have local students working with the Australian students. And that does then require quite a bit of interaction with the partners. (Mobility office manager)*

### #17 Ensure more effective collaboration among different stakeholders

As mobility and academic staff suggested, there is a need for better communication and collaboration between related stakeholders, including government, Australian universities, host universities/organisations, faculties, mobility offices, and third-party providers.

- Databases such as lists of reliable third party providers, host organisations and business champions would also be useful for universities in setting up the programs.

*A list of third party providers is also helpful ... it would potentially be good if government has information on... reliable providers that can help organise these mobility projects and that they showcase confidence in. And then organisations in country, it would be very beneficial if that list that exists where organisations have expressed interest to collaborate through NCP would be available to prospective project leads and the institutions. (mobility office manager)*

- Apart from that, regular communication between international liaison officers (ILOs) with DFAT or/and DFAT contractor would enable ILOs to communicate any challenges and receive more support to address them.
- More effective collaboration between faculties and mobility offices is needed for writing grant application, promoting the program, recruiting

students, writing reports and in logistical matters. To this end, specific requirements and guidance from university management around the expected level of collaboration between academics and mobility offices would be helpful.

*I really believe that the only way you can have a closer bond between academics and us here, for academics actually submitting and actually getting involved is if you have the top down approach, which some universities may have. We don't. (Mobility office manager)*

*We are responsible for the academic component of the program, so we prepare our student for the relevant activities and assessments. Study Abroad Office helps us with organising information sessions as well as preparing our students for the trips, and help us with organising information sessions about health, safety... and booking, registration and so on ... So yeah, we do have some support from them with all that kind of admin requirements which save us time. (Academic staff)*

## Category 5: Post-mobility

### #18 Support students' re-entry transition and post-study engagement

Students expressed their need for institutional support and assistance in their transition back home upon completion of the program. To this end, DFAT and home universities could organise different types of post-study activities, including:

- debriefing sessions with returnees to touch base with them and encourage them to reflect on their growth and transferrable skills gained from mobility experiences:

*I think potentially follow up interviews, follow up discussions, debriefing sessions, they're really what's lacking in a lot of the programs that we run. (Academic staff)*

- events, workshops and mentoring programs for students to catch up with study and work



at home, particularly for semester-long mobility students and scholarship students:

*Probably some kind of program to help scholars re-adjust to life in Australia. (Scholar, Singapore, survey)*

- networking events and opportunities for collaborative work for alumni from the same cohorts as a continuation of the mobility experience, or for international students in Australia who are originally from the host country:

*I'd wished there were pathway opportunities to continue those engagements once we return to Australia (for example more networking with the cohort, opportunities to work in collaborative projects [...]). (Short-term mobility student, Indonesia, survey)*

- collaboration between mobility offices and career support services inside and outside universities to support NCP alumni with employability skills and employment opportunities.

Host organisations could also facilitate alumni's re-entry to Australia:

*We will foster the relationship through our international office by connecting Australian students with one another ... We organised a reintegration meeting to explain how their experience and knowledge might be used in Australia, and we expect their feedback to improve our service. (Host, Indonesia)*

### #19 Support students to translate their Indo-Pacific experiences to enhance employability

Students, academic and mobility staff expressed desire for explicit guidance around enhancing employability, pathways to employment and further study opportunities for returnees:

*[There should be] more assistance upon returning for how to use your NCP experience to access better job and academic opportunities. (Short-term mobility student, India, survey)*

To enhance students' ability to articulate their learning abroad experiences into employability, it is critical to:

- ensure there is a close relationship between student mobility unit, career support services and alumni office
- build opportunities for critical reflection on students' learning and experiences into the NCP programs, with explicit guidance provided around employability
- enhance students' ability to articulate their own growth and transferrable skills into future employment
- tap into institutions' international alumni networks

### #20 Maintain connection with local communities to create employment opportunities for NCP alumni in host countries

As up to 66% NCP alumni are interested in working in the Indo-Pacific region after mobility and appreciate the relationships with the hosts, host organisations could set up systems that support NCP alumni to maintain a connection with the region by:

- putting alumni in contact with local employers. Connections with local organisations and pathways for alumni could be facilitated as early as when students are in country, particularly for scholarship programs:

*[I recommend] more clear pathways to internships with the Indo-Pacific in Australia whilst still studying. (Long-term mobility student, Indonesia, survey)*

- setting up online social networks, virtual networking events for alumni to stay in touch with the hosts, who could potentially offer alumni further work and study collaborations, or assist them in finding employment:

*After they leave, we contact via email. [...] One*



*student keeps direct contact with our organization as the student wants to come back to work. On the other hand, our staff still connect with them as friends and keep updated about their studies. They also ask for reference letter to support their job applications. (Host, Vietnam)*

- creating platforms for NCP alumni to connect with other people related to the host country: Australian peers with the same mobility experiences, diaspora, international students and alumni, and professional organisations and student associations.

## #21 Share and disseminate learning abroad experiences

It is essential that DFAT and universities capitalise on alumni's learning abroad experiences to benefit them as well as new cohorts and non-mobility students, which can be done by:

- integrating mobility experiences into teaching and learning at home universities;
- organising events in which NCP alumni share their experiences and perspectives about the meaning and relevance of NCP programs with future students (not currently implemented in all universities). Since NCP alumni come from different disciplines and different years, these events should be organised at the school level, as it would be less challenging than at course or unit level, and would have an impact on a larger scale:

*The program itself was great, but post-program I would like to be more involved in alumni events and helping future NCP Scholars but am not sure how to do so. (NCP scholar, Republic of Korea, survey)*

*We need to invite all the students who have an international experience whether it be exchange, study tour, practicum, and have some sort of school event where they present - we need to think about doing it differently because getting it within courses is really problematic. (Academic staff)*

- engaging alumni with DFAT-initiated NCP Alumni Program to maintain their ongoing connections to each other and the region:

*The only recommendation I can suggest is reconnecting with participants in the early programs (2013 to 2016) now they are further along in their career and can provide valuable career advice and networking opportunities to more recent NCP scholars/participants. (Long-term mobility student, Hong Kong SAR, survey)*

- connecting alumni with other international alumni networks within their university so that they can share and learn from each other's pathways post-mobility, including career opportunities.
- setting up a website where NCP alumni can share their experiences in the form of presentations, video clips or blog posts:

*So if each university or even collaboratively, I don't know, had a site where they can upload a video clip about their experience of this trip, for instance, that might be a wonderful way of sharing the experience and knowledge and it may not be too difficult to organise that. (Academic staff)*

- providing incentives or rewards for non-NCP students to listen to the experiences shared by NCP alumni, which would help disseminate knowledge and facilitate learning:

*I mean just imagine I go to Russia, come back and start talking about Russia to you, the likelihood of it is ... "OK, that's enough, you can tell me some general things. I don't want to know too much" ... That's kind of a human response unless it's structured into some rewards structures for others to listen to you. (Academic staff)*

## #22 Evaluate long-term impacts of the program

There should be more rigorous and systemic research and evaluation of the NCP to understand students' motivations, expectations and the long-term impacts on students' life, employability and

future career from the employers' perspectives. Such evaluation would help universities improve the design of the programs as well as promote them to students:

*But we really need to know ... why do students choose to do it, what do they get out of it, what do they think it means for them, where do they think it's going to take them and in a few years' time... I think that we really need to start to evaluate the longer term impact that that has and how that's valued by the field that they're choosing to work in.. [T]hat will help us shape what our international experiences look like for students [and] also better sell it to students. (Academic staff)*

To promote quality, evaluation reports could be shared between home and host organisations.

## Category 6: Deepening partnership engagement with hosts

### #23 Enhance hosts' understandings, understand hosts' needs and co-design programs with hosts

- It is essential to raise the awareness of Indo-Pacific partners about the NCP and create an environment where they see and understand the value of hosting an NCP mobility program.
- It is crucial to understand hosts' needs and engage them more closely across all phases of the mobility cycle.
- Home and host institutions should work closely together in planning and designing the program. For example, host institutions should be provided with detailed profiles of NCP students to determine the relevant content to be delivered in-country:

*... we didn't recognise how the students know about the seaweeds. So maybe we should research at first how, what kind of job or what studies they do ... And for people who are not familiar to seaweeds, maybe a simple information is okay. But people who know, people who have interest,*

*interest in seaweeds we should, we should have been given ... more detailed information. (Host, Japan)*

- The Australian government should provide host organisations with holistic guidance about collaborating with home universities in designing and delivering short-term mobility programs to avoid confusion.
- There should be better coordination and communication among host universities and organisations that support the same group of mobility students. For example, this research found that one group of mobility students to Vietnam in 2019 were hosted by a university, an NGO and a small business, but these three hosts were not aware that they were engaged in the same mobility program; therefore, they did not communicate or work together, which could have optimised students' learning and engagement. One host expressed their wish to connect with others:

*... the [host] organizations from Vietnam side may meet and exchange the experiences with each other. [...] if before or during the time students are here, the organizations can have a quick meeting to discuss and sharing experience then it will be really good. (Host, Vietnam)*

- A proportion of funding should be allocated to support professional development for host organisations.

## Category 7: Staff engagement and capacity building

### #24 Engage academics and mobility staff

While acknowledging the important role played by study abroad or international offices in running the NCP programs, academics emphasised the need to be more substantially involved in leading the programs in-country and integrating the study abroad experience into the curriculum:

*I mean the program should be given to particular faculties and sort of saying 'you develop a program in line with your curriculum and we will implement it'... What the international offices' role ought to be the mechanical aspects, [or] the administrative aspects rather than a whole range of other things. (Academic staff)*

As mobility practitioners have limited opportunities to engage with in-country experiences, mobility office managers recommended that lower-level employees should be given the chance to accompany students to the host countries, as well as engage with the Australian embassies and departments overseas:

*I'd really love the opportunities for my team members to be able to either accompany a group, to be able to see what actually happens on one of those faculty-led tours but also have the engagement with the in country, you know, there might be opportunities to engage with the Australian Embassy, DFAT overseas, and see from their perspective as well. (Mobility office manager)*

## #25 Recognise the workload experienced by institutions and staff

As frequently recommended by mobility practitioners, the government should also recognise the effort involved in running the NCP programs, so as to support universities where possible. Firstly, to achieve this, the amount of work undertaken by academics to design and deliver a NCP program should be appropriately recognised in their workload. Mobility practitioners also recommend additional funding should be provided for universities to employ extra staff working specifically for the NCP programs to meet the increased demands from DFAT on the implementation of the program:

*But there has to be some 'give' in terms of additional resourcing, particularly if the department places further and further and further requirements ... on Mobility Global Exchange, whatever team, to comply with the needs of the program. We need to have extra staff either from the university or funded by the department that kind of fits with making a great*

*program, instead of one where we are chasing our tail all the time. (Mobility office manager)*

## #26 Provide relevant PD and support for academic and mobility staff

There is an urgent need for professional development (PD) for both mobility practitioners and academics, especially in the pivot to virtual mobility, as suggested by most participants.

**For academics**, PD should be centred around developing their capabilities as academic program leaders (especially for first-timers), and embed mobility experiences into the curriculum. This could be done nationally at scale. Areas of PD and preparation for academics could include:

- how to manage student overseas;
- intercultural awareness about the Indo-Pacific contexts:

*So I think attending the NCP intercultural awareness [seminars] with the students is probably appropriate... You need teachers who are fairly confident in that environment so they can lead the students and model a good teaching, reflective teaching in a diverse classroom for the students. (Academic staff)*

- knowledge and skills about risk management to support students during critical incidents and in difficult situations and ensure their well-being, including protocols to follow and how to work with related stakeholders:

*So maybe we do need to add panic attack awareness to some training somewhere just to alert the academics that it's a possibility. (Academic staff)*

- strategies for integrating short-term mobility programs into the curriculum;
- working with mobility offices to develop NCP grant applications;
- collaborating with mobility offices, third party providers, host institutions and organisations,

students' counsellors, communities and business partners .

In addition to formal trainings, universities and DFAT could set up champion programs in which academics are supported and recognised for their excellence in delivering the NCP programs.

**For mobility practitioners, PD should focus on:**

- content specifically relevant to NCP programs that is not usually covered in “traditional” PD activities to enable them to take on increasingly diversified and expanded responsibilities:

*I think the traditional training for mobility staff is very narrow and I think the NCP area is such a different area to work in. (Mobility office manager)*

- how to build NCP grant applications:
- how to work with third party providers efficiently, as various providers have emerged over the last few years:

*But it could be useful to have more dedicated information available around generally what a good grant application looks like from a professional in that field. (Mobility office manager)*

*I think definitely in working with third party providers ... And I think sometimes mobility staff aren't sure on how to work within the best way, how to vet them, that kind of thing. So I think that's an area that mobility staff could definitely be better trained in. (Mobility office manager)*

- how to effectively collaborate with other stakeholders such as academics, alumni office, career support services, host organisations, government departments (DFAT, DET), and DFAT contractor Scope Global to ensure the successful delivery of NCP programs.

## #27 Set up best practice guide nationally

There could be a system within universities and nationally to share good practices in building NCP applications, designing and delivering impactful programs, conducting evaluations, writing reports and working with other stakeholders:

*... the people that are running them [NCP programs] can learn from each other ... I think the voice that's missing from this whole thing is what the academics can learn [from the NCP experience]... You never hear anybody talk about this at any of the international conferences. (Third party provider, Malaysia)*

## Category 8: Grant application and funding

### #28 Have clearer selection criteria and provide further feedback on applications

Mobility practitioners and academics expressed their desire for the government to have clearer criteria for selecting project applications and provide specific feedback to universities on unsuccessful ones, apart from current generic feedback and guidance. This would help universities improve the quality of their future applications.

*Even if something like a reflection rubrics that they'd give us the percentages of allocated to each selection criteria. ...Similar to what a lot of universities provide to students when they're working through their assessments. (Mobility office manager)*

### #29 Ensure joint responsibility and integrity of NCP grant applications

It is critical to build an institutional culture with specific guidelines about the joint responsibility of mobility offices and academics to develop NCP grant application, and treat the application process with a higher degree of rigour.

### #30 Change funding structure for universities

- Academic and mobility staff recommended granting multi-year funding to NCP programs

to increase students' motivation, ensure sustainable partnerships with host institutions, and at the same time reduce university workload in preparing new submissions:

*... another program suggestion would be to have some kind of way to roll over existing successful projects that the universities could have more say in that, to recommend their project be rolled over rather than new project, new submission...*  
(Mobility office manager)

- NCP funding should allow for more flexibility so universities can deal with unexpected issues such as changes in host countries or host organisations:

*I mean ideally I would rather that the university just received funding for the NCP and were able to distribute it with more flexibility because I find at the moment the fact that you're locked into a destination in a program, the NCP can be a little inflexible when things change. It's not the type of funding that, you know, you can change countries if you have to if things go wrong. Its program can't go ahead. It's very rigid.* (Mobility office manager)

- The government could consider providing institutions with a pot of funds and allow them to allocate them internally to NCP-related services, based on set requirements.

### #31 Increase funding for staff

While the majority of university resources have been dedicated to administrative aspects (e.g. preparation of grant applications, student recruitment and administration of programs), more resources and investments should be allocated for faculties to ensure the quality of in-country and post-study experience.

- Specifically, there should be changes in the way funding is allocated to academics. As indicated in the extract below, funding for academics is based on the number of NCP students; hence, it can be insufficient if there is only a few NCP grants in the project:

*So we've had an academic taking students to Japan and he took 12 students, but he only had five NCP grants. So he flew to Japan with \$1,500 and you can imagine that's what the flight was. So the college basically had to chip in ... So it's almost a burden to the university financially if the funding is not sufficient based on someone choosing a particular location.* (Mobility office manager)

- Part of NCP funding should be allocated for academic support and professional development for mobility and academic staff to build their capacity to apply for and run NCP-funded programs.

### #32 Develop sustainability and diversification financial plans

The government should encourage universities to develop sustainability and diversification financial plans, focusing on seeking additional funding sources for mobility programs from industry and business partners, professional organisations, and education/research funders from home and host countries.

This research found evidence from individual students seeking complementary funding to the NCP from different sources in their home and host countries (e.g. scholarships and grants from home and host universities and organisations, Australian Workplace Grants for Education Abroad, Walter Mangold Scholarship, Golden Key Asia Study Abroad, Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), Global Korea Scholarship from Korean Government) as well as using their own savings to support their mobility programs. But the effort to seek additional funding sources is ad-hoc, mainly performed by individual students rather than by other stakeholders. This sometimes causes tensions due to mismatching perceptions between students and their home universities about the search for additional funds for NCP mobility experiences. There is a critical need for clear guidelines and transparency around this.



### #33 Increase funding and develop financial skills for students

In addition to funding for universities and staff, students suggested that DFAT should consider:

- increasing the amount of funding for students in both scholarship and grant categories to sufficiently cover their living expenses in some host countries with high living costs, such as Japan and Singapore:

*On the program I attended India with, we used our \$3000 funding to fund our experiences in India. We had to pay a registration fee (approx \$400) in addition to flights (\$1000) and spending money. It resulted in quite a lot of out-of-pocket costs. (Short-term mobility student, India, survey)*

- developing students' financial management skills in host countries, e.g. practical tips on planning their scholarship or grants and managing the spending in host countries:

*I wish that there was a financial coaching element to the pre-departure program. I wouldn't say I wasted my NCP Stipend, but I could have made it last a lot longer had I known what I do now. (NCP scholar, Republic of Korea, survey)*

## Category 9: Long-term vision and planning

### #34 Sustain long-term relationships

Building sustainable relationship between Australia and the host countries to enhance public diplomacy with the region is the strategic goal of the NCP. In line with this goal, participants in this research emphasised that connection and collaboration between home and host institutions should be expanded beyond the NCP programs:

*The other thing that is also important is how do you actually imagine the possibility of a continuing relationship so that the relationship doesn't come to an end once the experience is over ... Public diplomacy is not as a result of one trip. It is a result of ongoing long-term relationship. (Academic staff)*

To develop ongoing relationships, participants recommended that:

- the government should grant multi-year funding and provide greater reward for multi-year programs to enable the continuity of NCP programs, particularly those that demonstrate tangible impacts on building sustained partnerships with host universities and business partners that lead to further student and staff exchange, research collaboration and transnational education:

*And sometimes, you know, we had a really good project that was very successful and yet it was only single year funding and then it wasn't funded again for the next round and that's really disappointing. (Mobility office manager)*

- universities should develop partnerships with host institutions on the basis of mutual benefits, for example, creating opportunities for host universities to send their students and staff to Australia:

*The missing part of the NCP project is that when we design the program and deliver the program, we need massive support from our institutional partners. But we don't do much for them. I wish there is a program or fund where we can have a countered program, where we could bring the host students here. DFAT may want to work with the Vietnamese government for a joint project to bring our host students and the institutional partners here. (Academic staff)*

- Many Australian universities have offices or representatives in Indo-Pacific countries, but academics are not aware of or fully tap into this resource to facilitate the delivery of mobility programs and support ongoing partnerships with host organisations. This is reflected in the following quote where an academic suggested universities should have staff in country as a liaison to facilitate communication with host organisations and assist in the delivery of the program:



*[Y]ou're relying on the email and international phone communication, whereas I suppose when you've got somebody in country ... acting as the middle person, then all is done for you. (Academic staff)*

### #35 Future considerations for program development and expansion

In relation to future developments of the NCP, the government should consider the following:

- Encouraging consortia of universities to deliver NCP programs so as to increase their effectiveness, and support universities that lack resources and know-how to run the program:

*Then [a university] said, 'why don't we try and make it a consortium ... I thought – what a fantastic idea, because [a university] is already established in this sphere... You bring along [a university], which is regional ... and doesn't have a lot of the know-how and resources, and [a university] that does bits and pieces around the place... (Third party provider, Malaysia)*

- Diversifying programs and activities:

*We want to have some students come here for different kind of programs, apart from the summer camp. Maybe they can come in the winter for two weeks just for language and culture; or maybe they can come during semester for a few weeks of research with a professor; or they can have some students led by a professor to have some kind of collaboration [in] a certain project with our professor... (Host, China)*

- Learning from mobility good practices implemented by countries in the region and in the world (e.g. US, UK, EU, Canada, Japan, Hong Kong) in aspects of program design and delivery, student support, impact and engagement, partnerships among key stakeholders and alumni engagement.

- Ultimately, further developments need to focus on aligning the values and impacts of the NCP with student experiences and employability and with institutions' research and offshore education partnerships, industry engagement, national capacity building, public diplomacy and engagement with the region.

# Conclusion

The NCP has significantly changed Australia's student mobility and internationalisation landscape. Specifically, it has:

- **built two-way flow of students** between Australia and the Indo-Pacific
- **re-positioned the Indo-Pacific** as a powerful place for professional, personal and intercultural learning and laid the platform to raise the awareness of the public and local Australians of the value of Indo-Pacific knowledge and engagement.
- significantly **diversified student mobility options**: exchange, internships, mentorships, practicums, volunteering, clinical placements and research
- **broadened destination options** for Australian students to the Indo-Pacific
- **widened the participation and access** to learning abroad for Australian students
- **created, diversified or reinforced various networks and partnerships** between Australian universities and Indo-Pacific universities/organisations that can lead to strengthened research, teaching and learning and service collaborations
- **diversified and expanded industry engagement**, especially with the private sector as hosts and with business champions.

Short-term mobility is often assumed to link to tourism, with the experience being framed as 'fun', 'temporary', and leisure-oriented'. Youth mobility is characterized as being largely centred around the development of the student 'self'. Yet

the findings of this research provide empirical evidence about the impacts of Indo-Pacific short-term mobility experiences beyond the individual student to communal and social impact, national capacity building and regional engagement. The communal impact resulted from being engaged with a group of peers, learning collectively and being connected with and immersed into the host community. In addition, this research shows evidence of transnational service collaborations, where NCP students work with local host students and communities in a range of social initiatives. These include refugee support services, environment protection activities, human rights action, women empowerment campaigns and local community volunteer activities. These dimensions of the social impact of student mobility to the Indo-Pacific need to be brought to the fore and further explored.

The findings highlight the New Colombo Plan as a stellar example of reversal mobility, through which students from a developed country in the Global North are given the opportunity to study, undertake internship and experience life in the Indo-Pacific region. It provides evidence about the benefits of Indo-Pacific learning abroad to students' academic, intercultural, professional and personal development, to institutional relationships, and to home and host communities. These impacts challenge traditional thinking about student mobility, which is predominantly bound to Global South to Global North flows, and in which Western knowledge is positioned to be superior and universal (Stein and De Andreotti, 2016; Raghuram et al., 2014) and Western experiences are seen as elite and a marker of distinction.

The New Colombo Plan marks a reverse trend of student mobility (Tran & Vu, 2018), where formerly colonised countries in the Indo-Pacific such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines, Myanmar, Malaysia, Brunei, Fiji and Papua New Guinea, which used to be periphery learning abroad destinations, now provide powerful learning spaces for students from a Western country like Australia. The learning and connections that Australian students have accumulated and developed through the Indo-Pacific learning abroad experiences as shown in this research demonstrate the values of reciprocal learning, human-to-human experiences and human-to-human connections rather than the predominant one-way flow of knowledge and learning from the West to developing countries.

In sum, despite challenges and areas for improvement, the research shows strong evidence of the New Colombo Plan as game changer for Australian and regional student mobility. It provides evidence about the impacts of Indo-Pacific learning abroad on students and national capacity building in human resource and regional engagement. It shows the 'new possibles' (Tran & Vu, 2018) as well as the effects and challenges of re-balancing regional and global mobility. Insights shared by students, home universities and host communities suggest the need for a regional re-imagination of learning abroad that embraces new potentials.

The NCP contributes to re-framing the commercialisation of international education and of reciprocal international education. The research indicates an evolution from outbound mobility being a largely education-oriented experience to a social impact and regional engagement tool with diplomatic functions.

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- Tran, L. T., & Bui, H. (2021). Public Diplomacy and Social Impact of Australian Student Mobility to the Indo-Pacific: Host Countries' Perspectives on Hosting New Colombo Plan Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, doi:1028315320984833.
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- Tran, L. T. (2021). Legacies and new opportunities in student mobility. *Inside Indonesia*. Edition 145: Student (im)mobility between Indonesia and Australia. Retrieved from <https://www.insideindonesia.org/legacies-and-new-opportunities-in-student-mobility-3>
- Tran, L. & Goddard, T. (2021). Axing language programs goes against our national interest. *The Australian*. August 2021. Retrieved from <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/axing-language-programs-goes-against-our-national-interest/news-story/0ce72d82551c5dd7cdfcd708b50bc722>
- Tran, L. T., Bui, H. & Nguyen, M. (In press). Youth activism in public diplomacy: Australian youth participation in student mobility and multilateral relationship building between Australia and the Indo-Pacific via the New Colombo Plan. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*.
- Tran, L. T., Le, T. & Henderson, F. (In press). Rite of passage into the teaching profession? Australian pre-service teachers' professional learning in an Indo-Pacific practicum through the New Colombo Plan. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*.
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# Glossary

The key terms below are defined in context to assist Australian and international readers to engage with the content of the report. While the terms may be used variably across global sectors, for context, these terms used in the report sit firmly within this Australian Research Council Future Fellowship program on the Australian Government funded New Colombo Plan.

Term	Proposed definition	Supportive sources
New Colombo Plan	The New Colombo Plan is a signature initiative of the Australian Government which aims to lift knowledge of the Indo Pacific in Australia by supporting Australian undergraduates to study and undertake internships in the region	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan">https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan</a>
Mobility grant	Award granted to successful applicants under New Colombo Plan Mobility Program that includes three categories: Mobility Grant, Language Training Grant and Internship Grant. The mobility grant funding is awarded to universities for the mobility program and then the student is awarded the mobility grant internally.	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf</a>
Scholarship	Award granted to successful applicants under New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program that must include at least one Study Component	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf</a>
Scholarship program	The New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program that provides scholarships to Australian undergraduates to undertake study, Language Training and an Internship and/or Mentorship in the Indo-Pacific region for up to 19 months	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf</a>
Mobility program	The New Colombo Plan Mobility Program that provides funding to Australian universities to support Australian undergraduate students' participation in semester-based or short-term study, Internships, mentorships, practicums and research in the Indo-Pacific region	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/mobility-program">https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/mobility-program</a> ; <a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf</a>
Mobility grant recipient	Recipient of funding under New Colombo Plan Mobility Program	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-ncp-mobility-guidelines.pdf</a>

Term	Proposed definition	Supportive sources
Scholar	Recipient of funding under the New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program	<a href="https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf">https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-scholarship-program-guidelines-2021.pdf</a>
Short-term mobility student	A student who undertakes a short-term mobility program, summer school, mentorship or/and an internship abroad for less than a semester	
Long-term mobility student	A student who undertakes semester-length study abroad	
Pre-departure briefing	The program briefing students on the broader social, economic, cultural, political and environmental aspects of the host country and the administrative and academic environment of the host institution related to their learning abroad experiences in preparation for their departure to the host country	
Third party provider	A third-party provider is an independent entity that facilitates part or all of a learning abroad program for university clients or assists universities in organising or delivering learning abroad activities for their students	
Downstream host	A downstream host is an organisation that is engaged by a host university or partner to provide internships or some activities for NCP students as part of their mobility program.	
Learning Abroad	A form of intra-degree outbound mobility which refers to an educational experience where a student spends a period of time undertaking an academic activity in another country while remaining formally enrolled in an institution in the home country	<a href="https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1028315315579241">https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1028315315579241</a> <a href="https://www.ieaa.org.au/documents/item/751">https://www.ieaa.org.au/documents/item/751</a>

