The New Colombo Plan: addressing the barriers to scholarship recipients’ contributing to Australia’s public diplomacy goals in China

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Abstract
Australia’s New Colombo Plan (NCP), as a public diplomacy initiative, is about refreshing the nation’s brand by providing imagery of a modern, innovative and secure country that is ready and willing to lead and do business. The Chinese Communist Party continues to report that Australia is a mouthpiece for the U.S. and the Australian Prime Minister’s attack against China’s response to the COVID-19 outbreak has increased tensions. This article investigates the research question: What barriers need to be addressed to maximise the New Colombo Plan alumni’s contribution to Australia’s public diplomacy in China? Recommendations to practitioners are offered, including the need for higher language skills and increased collaboration between the NCP and the Australian Studies Centres. The findings support current studies tracking alumni stories to combat inevitable criticism of funding domestic students to study abroad. Future success requires, the continued high-profile support by the Foreign Minister. Interviewees reported that the NCP has received positive comments in-country but measurable outcomes will be slow in coming. Addressing the barriers to achieving the program’s objectives is a way to address any criticism of using funding to support international education as public diplomacy as the implications of defunding such programs could be much worse.

Keywords Public diplomacy · Scholarships · Australia · New Colombo Plan · Nation branding · China

Introduction
The Australian Government has recently bolstered its public diplomacy efforts in the Indo-Pacific region as a means of influencing foreign public opinion. Foreign policy and diplomatic strategies are increasingly developed within the ‘intermestic’ sphere, in which domestic and international policy issues and implications blend. The Australian Government promotes the New Colombo Plan (NCP) as a pillar of its Public Diplomacy Strategy, highlighting its success in building a secure future for Australia in the Indo-Pacific (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016b). This article investigates the research question: What barriers need to be addressed to maximise the New Colombo Plan alumni’s contribution to Australia’s public diplomacy in China? This work contributes to the field of higher education and public diplomacy by identifying some of the skills and attributes which are necessary for scholarship recipients to achieve the Government’s NCP objectives to build sustainable people-to-people links.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) has prioritised engagement of the Australian domestic audience in international policy debate, however, creating meaningful dialogue with Australian audiences that positively promotes the Government’s foreign policy objectives in China remains a challenge. The Australian public rarely discusses diplomatic issues, and is consequently unaware of developments in public diplomacy, resulting in issues of domestic importance being conflated with those of global significance. Appealing to a domestic audience while promoting the Government’s public diplomacy agenda in China has long been a point of contention for both sides of politics. This balancing act points to a change in the field of diplomacy since Nicolson (1963), in which he inferred it would be unthinkable for governments to appeal to the common people regarding an issue of international policy.

Australia’s public diplomacy is about refreshing the nation’s image by developing its ‘brand’ as a modern, innovative and secure country in the region that is
ready and willing to lead and do business, especially in education. Former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, during her leadership, promoted Australia’s unique place in the world of international politics, in which its geographic position, combined with its cultural and historical ties, create something of an identity crisis. However, public diplomacy requires more than just image building; the strategy must also work towards building relationships and engaging with people in a meaningful way. DFAT’s staff resource Public Diplomacy and Advocacy Handbook, states that public diplomacy is one of four key outcomes and that the Department aims to bolster the Australian, and international, publics’ view of Australian foreign and trade policies in order to paint a picture of Australia as a great destination for tourism and education, an advocate for trade liberalization and a trusted partner in the region (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2011). Australia continues to deal with fluctuations in its image within the region bred from racial exclusion policies of the past and compounded by contemporary asylum seeker policies that are seen to be nationalistic and harsh. Added to this, scholarships cannot produce instant, quantifiable results in the same ways that information campaigns might which makes it difficult for the Australian Government to justify expenditure on public diplomacy initiatives focussed on sending domestic students abroad.

Education and culture diplomacy are slow, long-term approaches that might only prove to be effective years or decades after the initial contact has been made. This is an issue for the current Australian Government as it deals with the domestic fall-out from having five different Prime Ministers in the last 6 years and now the impact on Sino-Australian relations due to Prime Minister Morrison’s criticism of China’s handling of the COVID-19 virus. This instability has now been inflated as countries across the globe battle the global health pandemic. Adding to this, the Australian public are increasingly preoccupied with the rising national debt which makes it difficult to gain domestic support for funds spent on public diplomacy programs (particularly those with limited short-term outcomes. If the Australian Government attempts to play both sides, to win domestic and international points, it may prove problematic as the nation’s image issues within Australia are notably different to those within the region. Clearly defined and genuine deliverables from the NCP scholarships that are linked to measurable outcomes of achievement, are important as this may go some way towards appeasing the evaluation-hungry public at home and the apprehensive audience abroad. Byrne (2016) supports this in that the NCP is robust, but she argues that key issues of strategic coherence, partnership and evaluation require further attention if the program is to deliver on its public diplomacy promise. Breaking down barriers to the alumni achieving the program’s objectives will go some way towards gaining the political support required for continued funding during the current difficult economic times.

The New Colombo Plan scholarship

The New Colombo Plan is a 2013 foreign policy initiative of the Australian Government with a framework shaped out of the long-standing Colombo Plan developed during the early 1950s from a meeting of member countries of the Commonwealth of Nations in Colombo, Sri Lanka (Wicks 2000). The original scheme significantly raised Australia’s profile within the Asian region (Oakman 2010). While the Colombo Plan invited students into Australia to acquire useful skills and knowledge, the NCP is instead focussed outwards with Australian students gravitating towards the region in order to strengthen ties with the Indo-Pacific region (Oakman 2010; Byrne 2016; Byrne et al. 2016). The NCP is highlighted in policy documents as an influential public diplomacy program in building a secure future for Australia in the Indo-Pacific region. Prime Minister Abbott described the NCP as a two-way street in which Australia and the region could learn from each other (The Sydney Morning Herald 2013). Foreign Minister Bishop reported, over time we anticipate that through this, and other student exchanges, it will be the norm, rather than the exception, for Australian students to have lived and studied in countries in our region (Bishop 2015). The specific aims outlined in the NCP Guidelines include building the knowledge of the Indo-Pacific in Australia through undergraduate education and internships throughout the region. A key focus of the program is the development of strong people-to-people links and institutional relationships through the engagement of students, universities, business and other stakeholder networks. Ultimately, the Government would like to see Australians studying in our region as a ‘rite of passage’ that is highly valued (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016a). The NCP’s strategic objectives, which have been largely consistent from the inception of the program, include the offering of prestigious scholarships to support undergraduate study in the region for up to 19 months. The objectives also include opportunities for regionally-based internships and/or mentorships, language study and ‘flexible mobility grants’, which allow for internships, practicums, research and both short and long-term study in the region. The program is focused outwards with Australian undergraduates funded to study and work in the Indo-Pacific region in order to learn from, and continue to strengthen, Australia’s ties with the region. Julie Bishop was the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs from 2013 to 2018. In 2014 she launched the program describing her vision:

My inspiration for this policy was to support Australian undergraduate students to live, study and work in
our region. As a former Education Minister, I saw the need for greater opportunities for Australian students to study in our region. I reversed the original Colombo Plan in order to achieve that outcome. In 2013, I launched the NCP as a signature foreign policy initiative of the Coalition Government to reflect its potential to contribute to Australia’s prosperity and security, which is anchored in the Indo-Pacific (Bishop 2018).

DFAT anticipates that over time the growing cohort of NCP alumni will play an increasingly important role, with an expectation that in the years ahead the NCP alumni will become an influential and diverse network of Australians. There has been considerable rhetoric around the NCP recipients contributing to Australia’s public diplomacy, however, there has only been one government-funded external evaluation of the program (ACIL Allen Consulting 2017). Any longitudinal evaluation will be difficult, as the findings show that universities are currently doing little to track the longer-term impact of the NCP experience on the participants’ education, research, professional and social achievements. In addition, the contact details on students’ applications are their university emails, which many do not update once they graduate. Even though the ACIL external evaluation was formative, in that it focuses specifically on questions of design, administration and implementation, it nevertheless purports to provide evidence to suggest that the NCP is achieving, or is on track to achieve, its strategic objectives. The NCP outcomes, and high-profile, have firmly positioned the program into the planning and strategic hierarchy of Australian higher education institutions.

In 2016, the Australian Survey Research Group was commissioned by DFAT to design and implement The New Colombo Plan Alumni Survey—Year One. As reported by McConachie (2019), with less than 100 responses to certain questions from a sample of 1324 alumni this low response rate cannot be easily generalised. The majority of alumni who responded, stated that their NCP experience was worthwhile and will have a lasting impact on their personal, professional and academic lives, but as Lowe (2015) states, these results should be treated with caution as students who receive funding for an overseas experience are likely to respond positively to a sponsor’s evaluation. Not unexpectedly, in the interviews conducted for this paper, the scholars were cautious so as not to be seen as criticising the Government, as they were very appreciative of the opportunities that the NCP scholarship offered.

Another key document addressing the issue of partnerships is the Global Alumni Engagement Strategy 2016–2020 which is a public diplomacy initiative aiming at building on the success of Australia’s past international education programs (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016–2020). Its mission is to foster a global alumni community. DFAT has acknowledged their inability to maintain a record of Colombo Plan alumni from 1950 to 1985, as it predated the era of computer databases, but state that they are currently doing more to review and evaluate networks of scholarship alumni (Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Defence and Trade 2007). Over a decade ago, the Public Diplomacy Senate Inquiry identified the lack of appropriate performance indicators for Australia’s public diplomacy strategies (RMIT 2007). This continues to be a concern to some of the interviewees in this study, who reported limited to no change in government’s public diplomacy evaluation processes. The majority of experts were aware an alumni strategy had recently been enacted; however, there was little knowledge of the details, and how this would involve the international education sector as a whole. Comments were made about the challenges of keeping in contact with Australian alumni groups. It was mentioned that the management of the NCP would need to maintain the current level of prestige in order to motivate students to remain engaged with the program as they build their careers.

**Government-funded international scholarships as public diplomacy**

For some time, writers such as Goldsmith and Horiuchi (2012) have argued that public diplomacy is increasingly growing in prominence as it involves managing, and sometimes influencing, foreign publics’ views on foreign policies as these views are directly relevant in shaping future policy outcomes. Wilson (2014) states that it is unsurprising that diplomats and politicians do take some trouble to enhance the symbolic value of creating scholarships, seeking favourable media coverage and tying them to their state visits and international summits. However, his work does not support the idea that going abroad causes net change in the political attitudes of large groups of students. His findings show that changes in one student’s attitudes while studying abroad are generally cancelled out by other students in the opposite direction who, through negative experiences, may build unfavourable stereotypes. He reported that not only were students’ political views as a whole unaffected by their study abroad experience but they also did not seem to become more positive towards their host country. Some students who went abroad did have more positive attitudes to the host country but only because they were more positive before they left home. His findings contradict those of other authors, such as Carlson and Widaman (1988), who claim to have found that students who go abroad tend to become more favourably disposed to their home country while in-country. DFAT is not alone, as it continues to appear tempting to many practitioners to assume that international student mobility changes attitudes and those changes would be to the benefit of the sponsor. If this is true, international relations
theorists and practitioners should be fixated on scholarships. However, evidence that the programs have any impact on international relations is weak. Bochner et al. (1977) supports this statement:

The sponsors of international education have repeatedly justified the huge cost of the enterprise by claiming that exchange programs self-evidently contribute to mutual understanding and international peace…the evidence all too often reveals a gap between promise and reality.

Policymakers should be cautious when politicising international scholarship programs as these activities bring a range of other social benefits, not least actually educating people about other cultures and polities. There is a risk that instrumentalising support for foreign visitors as a diplomatic tool might lead to a neglect of other benefits that international education might bring. The framing of international scholarships as public diplomacy impacts not only on the design and evaluation but also policymaking. Gregory (2008) and Fitzpatrick (2010) believe that some of these challenges may be addressed through the inclusion of mutual understanding, intellectual capital and increased mobility when writing about international education as public diplomacy.

According to Lowe and Kent (2012), the expectation that alumni of scholarship programs will perform a positive, influential role for both their host and home countries is a significant expectation. The Australian Government promotes the NCP in alignment with Nye’s (2005) work, in that, on their return, scholars will contribute to Australia’s soft power through shaping the behaviour of publics in China, as well as, throughout their networks at home in Australia. The Government is transparent in the NCP objectives that there is an expectation the recipients will contribute to public diplomacy and to the reputation of the program. However, scholars vary greatly in how they give back to the program according to their interests, career motivations and environment. According to Lowe (2015), understanding that NCP scholars are not a homogeneous group will go some way towards seeing international education, and the role of international student ambassadors, more realistically as ‘life-long experiences’ rather than ‘life-long education’.

Australia is perceived to have a strong presence within international education and is therefore well-placed to exert its influence through programs such as the NCP in China. Some researchers have discussed the possibility that public diplomacy may not be benign, as it is inevitably linked to power (Melissen 2005; Hall 2010; Wilson 2014). More well-researched programs, such as Fulbright and Rhodes, state that their goals include making a contribution to international goodwill and the pursuit of peace. In contrast, the Australian Government places its public diplomacy focus on boosting the nation’s domestic understanding of China, and its reputation abroad. Given the recent outbreak of Coronavirus and the political fallout from Prime Minister Morrison’s request for an inquiry into China’s handling of the communication, the Government’s decision to focus on the domestic audience in Australia may be one way to ensure the important trade relationship with China is maintained when inevitable political disagreements occur.

Sino-Australian relations

The history of the Australia-China relationship goes beyond trade and state-to-state relations. In the early years in particular, the story is about individuals, families and communities; and the flow of people, ideas and capital that have bound the two nations. Since Whitlam formally established diplomatic relations in 1972, the bilateral trade relationship between Australia and China has gone from strength to strength, but the diplomatic relationship between the two nations has been more of a challenge.

Jain and McCarthy (2016) noted the increasing economic partnership between Australia and China:

China’s centrality to Australia’s economy, migration, tourism and international education is obvious today and likely to continue. Yet there appears to be anxiety among some Australians about China’s rise, its growing military power and seemingly aggressive behaviour in disputed maritime space, global economic influence, and apparent quest for global leadership. The increasing economic importance of Australia’s relations with China heightens the need for future Australian leaders to understand how to build strong social and professional ties with China.

As of January 2019, roughly a third of Australia’s exports were shipped to China, so to say Australia has an economic reliance with China would be an understatement (Chau 2019). With the ongoing trade war between the two global powerhouses, many economists believe any ripple in the economic ecosystem could cause Beijing to send shockwaves into Australia’s steadily growing economy (Li et al. 2018). The change in global power is challenging for many nations, as stated by Medcalf (2014), ‘today, for the first time in the nation’s history, Australia’s chief trading partner is neither an ally, nor the ally of an ally, and does not share its democratic outlook’. Given the overwhelming contemporary significance of China to the Australian economy, it is easy to forget that bilateral relations are comparatively young. Due to the vast cultural and political differences between the two countries, it can be argued that international education is more able to contribute to bridging this gap. Managing the narrative and bridging the gap is something more aligned with the professional communication arena than international relations.
Changing negative stereotypes

While China is the centre of policy discussions in Australia, Australia has never attracted the same level of interest in China. The primary focus for Chinese scholars and policymakers is the US, with middle powers such as Australia less important. However, in the case of Sino-Australian ties and perceptions, Australia’s relatively marginal position is reinforced by the fact that it is stereotyped as a rather predictable and subordinate extension of US defence and foreign policies. Given the importance of the economic core-periphery relationship, historical perceptions and stereotypes need to be managed by the current Australian Government.

Buchtel (2014) explains that ‘stereotypes are typically perceived as inaccurate, prejudiced perceptions of groups that are misused to describe all individuals within the group. Eide (1970) work shows that images and stereotypes are an intrinsic element of international relations. Lima (2007) expands on this, ‘we hear the words…[Australian or Chinese], or any other that refer to an individual’s nationality, and a whole set of (mis)conceptions come to our minds’. It is difficult to avoid the tendency of stereotyping and, indeed stereotypes have the role of making the world more manageable.

The NCP international scholarships have the possibility to facilitate international relations by targeting negative stereotypes and building personal networks for young scholars who show leadership potential. However, outcomes such as altering negative stereotypes and relationship building are abstract and difficult to measure. Dassin et al. (2017) contend that practitioners and politicians need to be encouraged to recognise the limitations of planning or promoting an idealised trajectory. Scholars will return to different employment environments in the dynamic nature of socially meaningful work. As an example, law students studying a semester in China would find it difficult if not impossible to find employment in their host country immediately after graduating.

Methodology

This research was conducted over a two-year period in Beijing, during which time Australian Government officials, experts within international education and public diplomacy were interviewed to further understand why governments fund scholarships as public diplomacy. Follow-up interviews with NCP alumni provided valuable personal insights into the perceptions of individuals from their time studying in China and whether they believed they had any influence on the attitudes of those around them. The researcher in this study collated the stories told by the NCP alumni through surveys and interviews. One hour interviews with experts within government, the Australian Embassy in Beijing, universities and the private sector with expertise in international education, public diplomacy and Australia-China relations in Beijing, Canberra and Sydney were undertaken. The initials of experts have been used, as all interviewees listed below have given consent to be identified as the source of their comments: Stephen Fitzgerald (SF) (Australia’s first Ambassador to China); Colin McKerras (CMcK) (Sinologist); Peter Vaghese (PV) (former Secretary of DFAT and current Chancellor of the University of Queensland); Kevin Hobgood-Brown (KH) (Chairperson of the Foundation for Australian Studies in China); David Walker (DW) (founding BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University); Gregory McCarthy (GMc) (BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies). A written response to the interview questions was also provided by Australia’s Foreign Minister at the time, Julie Bishop (JB). Responses from other experts and the scholarship recipients have been kept anonymous.

The researcher created a spreadsheet of NCP alumni from 2014 to 2016 using the list of awarded scholars on the DFAT website. This study is limited to scholars who elected to study in mainland China and/or Hong Kong. WeChat IDs and accounts were also used to obtain scholars’ contact details. In addition to individually emailing and messaging all participants, DFAT assisted by posting a link to the survey on the NCP Alumni Facebook and LinkedIn pages. Fourteen scholars who were identified as continuing their engagement with the Indo-Pacific as NCP alumni were interviewed to gain an in-depth understanding of how their specific experiences could be utilised to offer recommendations to policymakers in the development and design of future international education programs as public diplomacy.

Results

The interviewees’ responses were analysed using a thematic approach to increase the understanding of the importance of tying the Australia-China economic relationship to diplomacy, including public diplomacy and the impact that scholarships can have on changing the participants stereotypical thinking.

Theme One identified that the NCP had high-level government support and one of the major reasons that the Australian government funded the NCP scholars was to strengthen the nation’s relations within the Indo-Pacific region and in particular the nation’s trade partnership with China.

All interviewees believed the Government funded the NCP scholarships as a strategy to strengthen Sino-Australian trade relations.

Well it’s not simple but I suspect that what is behind this government’s push is to secure Australia’s future as China emerges as a super power (Interviewee 7).
Peter Vaghese, Chancellor of University of Queensland and previously DFAT Secretary:

Public diplomacy itself is a very important but under resourced element of our overall diplomatic strategy. Australia more than any other country needs to carve out a distinctive image of itself. Public diplomacy has a big part to play in that. Education is a very neat fit because it sends out a number of different messages which can be well integrated into public diplomacy.

Several participants observed that locating the NCP in DFAT ensured the program achieved a high-profile both at home in Australia and China:

Locating the NCP under DFAT signals the Government’s intent that this is government priority as a public diplomacy initiative. Having Julie Bishop as the owner and major proponent has meant that the Australian Consular staff have engaged with the program actively and use it in their government-to-government relations as a signal of Australian intent to engage (Interviewee 7).

This has encouraged Vice Chancellors and others to be more engaged in student mobility (both a benefit in terms of profile raising and a curse in terms of them competing with each other over funding (Interviewee 3).

Julie Bishop’s personal support of the program was seen as a crucial part of its success as it is quite unique and sends a powerful message to have the Foreign Minister presenting countries in Asia with an image of Australia as motivated to engage with its region by sending their best and brightest to study abroad:

What other country has the Minister for Foreign Affairs so publicly sponsoring international education as public diplomacy (Interviewee 5)?

It is evident in the responses that Julie Bishop’s public sponsorship for the NCP was a major reason that the program achieved its high-profile success not only within universities but also within the Australian and Chinese Governments.

Theme Two identified the barriers to building people-to-people links and breaking down stereotypes. Firstly, it should be gratifying to the Government as the funder that the majority of the scholars and experts said they were often asked their opinion on Sino-Australian relations, stating:

100%—all the time. Anyone studying or interested in China asks me. People in Australia talk about how terrible this is and then you come to China and see how many people they have brought out of poverty and some of the control is necessary and intrusion in people’s lives when you are dealing with billions in the population. I have a more tempered view than some.

When the Dali Lama visited Australia, it was reported that the Chinese government paid money to student unions so that they would influence them to do things that China wanted. People sometimes feel that it could not happen whereas I am not that naïve to think that the Chinese Government would not interfere by supporting the student union. Then are we thinking that the Australian Government does not seek influence to gain their way?

Kevin Hobgood-Brown, Chair of the Australia-China Council stated:

Frankly, five years ago you didn’t find as many people such as yourself who were finding a way into China. It happened you know but it was much more sporadic and numbers were insignificant. I think you have to keep banging away, you may not know exactly what opportunity is in China.

He and other experts who were interviewed for this research, reported that there was more interest in the bilateral relationship today because of the economic interdependence of Australia and China.

NCP scholars were asked if their experience living in China altered any of their preconceived stereotypes, with 67% responding that after spending time in China they did change their preconceived stereotypes. One student said, “I thought Chinese were rude but this changed once I gained a deeper understanding of their values, culture and living conditions. Living in a country of 1 billion + requires some level of selfishness”. Another spoke of how experiencing language barriers first hand changed their perspectives “I believed that most people spoke English fairly well; while this may be true for younger generations, it is not true of older generations.” In most cases students felt they were treated overly well “I now think Chinese are extremely welcoming which can turn into ‘positive racism’ whereby foreigners overtly receive favourable treatment over fellow Chinese people.” Most students felt their largest area of learning was a better understanding of the country’s political system which resulted in a more balanced and nuanced view of the Chinese Communist Party, “I now understand that not all Chinese people necessarily desire political change, many believe democracy is not the right fit and do not actively seek to use tools such as VPNs to gain access to unfiltered information.” One student summed up these sentiments by saying, “Things aren’t done wrong, they’re done right for China.” Although some felt they had learned a lot, they still felt that “Chinese culture/language is somewhat impenetrable for foreigners.”
In summary, scholars were confident that their experience had broken down some cultural barriers through change to some of their own negative stereotypes regarding the values and attributes of Chinese people. Conversely, they believed they had also strengthened some of the stereotypical beliefs they held. Finally, they had a level of confidence that they had some small positive impact on changing the negative stereotypes of some Chinese (within their network) about Australians.

These stereotypes included that all Australians were rich, unwelcoming to foreigners in their country, and racist against Chinese.

The Chinese are curious about Australia. Many only see the government run media which shows Australians as anti-Chinese. Sometimes the local Chinese would ask is this really what it is like in Australia. They are more likely to believe me because they know me.

Many Chinese believe that Australia is ‘anti-China’. I was often asked why Australians do not trust China.

There were mixed responses to the question: Do you think that an individual can make a difference in the negative stereotypes held by their networks?

My own personal experience has shown that an individual can make a difference but small. How effective are you on a case by case basis probably not very in terms of the broad scheme of things (KH).

Not all scholars thought they had made, or could make, a positive contribution to the Australia-China dialogue:

I don’t think that I am fully involved in current affairs. I don’t think I know enough about the big picture to be an expert about anything like politics.

Secondly, even though scholars understood the importance of building people-to-people links it was unanimously reported that the major challenge for scholarship recipients to build influential networks and develop partnerships to break down anxieties and negative stereotypes, was a lack of language skills. There was a strong response that NCP scholars should be encouraged or, in the case of scholars travelling to mainland China, mandated to undertake language training prior to their arrival in their host country. Scholars were unanimous in their thoughts that intermediate language skills were essential for anyone to assimilate into the community:

If Australia wishes to be seen to have the influence of a middle power in the Indo-Pacific, the school curriculum must change for students at an early age to start to learn an Asian language (Expert 6).

To understand the membership of the scholars' networks, the NCP students were asked: In your friendship groups who were you mostly socialising with and what language did you speak? Responses showed only 8% reported speaking mostly in Mandarin with local students and even less reported speaking with local students in English (3%). However, there was a reasonable response that the scholars socialised with a mixture of local and international students in English and Chinese (30%). For the majority of NCP scholars’ socialisation occurred within a mixed setting of local and international students speaking in English (42%). Just over half (51%) of the NCP scholars interacted with local people on a daily basis, with most of the remaining scholars only interacting with local people on a weekly basis (41%), or rarely (5%).

Most scholars reported that China is a diverse country and future NCP awardees should be encouraged to travel outside the heavily populated and busy capital cities to broaden their outlook. Chinese culture varies greatly from region to region, so building assumptions based on experiences in Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong do not sufficiently represent the depth of Chinese culture. Most scholars believed they had minimal impact on China’s public opinions, but that living in China had a transformational impact on them as individuals. This finding is in line with Marshal (1970) work in which he states that although in theory the flow of information and culture in an educational exchange is two-way, it remains unequal and imbalanced. Inequality of impact, reported by some NCP scholars, is an important finding as it has the potential to reduce the NCP program's impact on foreign publics. An individualist approach, if widespread, has the potential to limit justification for funding. Bishop (2016) however, explains that she has long believed in the transformative power of international student exchange, which is why the Government is committed to the NCP.

It is not just the individual student who benefits from the new insights and skills that they acquire – these experiences also help shape the way countries and their citizens engage with, and understand, each other.

Professor David Walker, the Founding Chair of the Australian Studies Centre at Peking University was resolute in his belief that the NCP and the Australian Studies Centres (ASCs)—a network of Australian Government-funded academic institutes that promote Australian studies in Chinese universities—could form a partnership for the benefit of both programs, and Australia at large.

I would recommend that the NCP scholars spend some or all of their time within universities in China who have established ASCs. It would go both ways the students would be in a university that has an interest in Australia and the universities would benefit from hav-
By B. McConachie

The NCP scholars articulated a clear understanding that the Australian Government funded their NCP programs with the expectation that they would build sustainable, personal and professional networks of influence that break down negative stereotypes and contribute to the nation’s public diplomacy potential. NCP scholars studying in Mainland China require a minimum of intermediate Mandarin skills before commencing their coursework or internship. Immersion courses and opportunities to live with host families, preferably in the regions, would allow students to make faster progress in their language skills and cultural awareness. Promoting extra-curricular activities in China would allow NCP scholars to develop better relationships with locals and improve their cultural and language abilities. If the integration of Australian and Chinese students is not possible on campus, alternate solutions such as homestays, should be considered. This would provide scholars with the opportunity to gain an intimate understanding of Chinese culture through an immersive experience. These arrangements would also decrease the perceived inequality of treatment between local and foreign students.

Collaboration between NCP scholars and the Australian Studies Centres would create opportunities for scholars to work as teacher aides in the Centres outside of Beijing and Shanghai. This would assist the NCP scholars in improving their language skills and knowledge of wider China, while also providing Chinese academics and students in the regions with additional interactions with Australian students.

Asian language training should be a greater priority in high school curricula in order to move Australian students beyond a monocultural way of thinking and strengthen their ability to fulfill Australia’s role in the Indo-Pacific. For Australian students to compete in a highly competitive environment in China they must first understand the importance of language and cultural awareness so that when they commence their exchange, they are willing and able to take full advantage of the experience. Asian students commence English language studies at a young age in preparation for their educational experiences abroad. Student mobility trends are shifting and Australian students need to be prepared for the expectations of the evolving global employment market. Simply speaking English is no longer enough to be seen as valuable in such an important region.

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image. The majority of scholars believe they, to the best of their abilities, overcame the challenges presented through language, cultural differences and cultural perspectives to perform the role of influencers while in China and, upon their return home, within their Australian networks. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the scholars reported the major change occurred within themselves as individuals rather than any influence they may have had on either their Chinese or Australian networks.

To gain greater benefit from the program it is recommended that the NCP scholarships be extended to include postgraduate students as these more experienced students are likely, through life experience, to have demonstrated their desire and willingness to build a career involving the Indo-Pacific. At such a young age, and with differing disciplines and motivations, it is much more difficult to pinpoint undergraduate students who will continue to develop their networks with China. Postgraduate students should also be hosted by academics in the ASCs in collaboration with their home country supervisors, to promote research. However, increasing the support, and encouragement, of NCP alumni to remain engaged with the program may go some way towards improving the lack of students willing to promote the program upon completion.

Finally, a longitudinal study of the NCP, and its role in building relations between Australia and the Indo-Pacific, would highlight the benefits of government-funded scholarships as public diplomacy. Although such a study would not yield results for an extended period of time, by collating this data, the Government could track students as they begin their careers and take on positions of influence. In contrast to the original Colombo Plan much could be learned from monitoring their career progressions after completing their studies.

The feedback provided through this research has been, in the main, positive and there is no doubt that in a short time this program has played an important role in influencing Australia’s policy towards the Indo-Pacific region. Education Ministers throughout the region are delighted to see more Australian students engaging with their culture and economies and China has now risen to become the top destination for Australian’s studying abroad. As with any recently implemented program, there are important adjustments that if made, will ensure that the NCP is able to make a lasting impact on Australia’s image in the Indo-Pacific.

It is essential that targeted and evidenced-based evaluation and monitoring of alumni outcomes are achieved to ensure the sustainability of the program. Scholarships as public diplomacy can be highly effective in building the desired reputation of Australia as a safe and dependable economic partner in the Indo-Pacific, however, due to their expense, and at times domestic perception of supporting the elite, these programs do have their critics. Monitoring the outcomes may go some way towards silencing critics as it can provide clear justification for continued funding. The long lead time to achieve outcomes from undergraduate scholarships means that the NCP administrators and the Minister must be skillful in order to manage any unintended political backlash. The students believe that they have met the expectations of the Government through their contribution to the nation’s public diplomacy, however the positive changes in Australia’s image abroad can backfire domestically when there are political disagreements over the use of education as public diplomacy or the expenditure of funds.

Secondly, this research makes a contribution to the fields of higher education and public diplomacy through an increased understanding of how important common language is if higher education scholarships are to be used as public diplomacy in China. Respondents to this research show that international students studying in China who do not have a minimum of intermediate Mandarin tend to socialize and network with their English-speaking peers. Without language all the good will in the world cannot enable the building of a sustainable strong networks with the locals.

There is a risk that the Australian Government’s overt intention to increase its soft power and public diplomacy in the national interest may make, not only achieving the objectives of the NCP more challenging, but also evaluating the outcomes more political. In seeking to utilise these scholarships as a tool of public diplomacy, the Australian Government assumes that other countries will not be suspicious of their motivation. This is particularly relevant given the tensions between the Morrison and Xi Governments and the importance of trade between China and Australia. Most interviewees believe that the NCP program’s high-profile, both internationally and domestically, owes much to Julie Bishop’s strong support as Foreign Minister. Bishop promoted the program at all of her ministerial visits and seminars throughout the Indo-Pacific region gaining strong media attention for the program. Given the level of funding for public diplomacy initiatives, depending on the Minister’s support is a strength and a weakness for the NCP. It may be beneficial to transfer the management of the program to the Department of Education, while maintaining significant input from DFAT rather than where it currently sits within DFAT. This may go some ways towards removing any political backlash, encouraging the focus to be on the “good news stories” emanating from the students, while maintaining the benefit of prestige as a public diplomacy initiative. The alternative is for the program to remain within DFAT, however, the findings from the students and the experts show that success in the future would require the current Minister’s commitment to continue the strong high-profile support for the NCP.
Conclusion

Despite the perceived lack of evidence to support the strategy that domestic students can influence the Australian public to enhance their understanding of the Indo-Pacific region, the Australian Government continues to fund such scholarships. Understandably, as China is Australia’s number one trading partner, the government must be seen to be doing all it can to bridge any misunderstandings and seek to establish genuine ties between the two nations that will help steer the relationship through inevitable rocky waters. There is the added international relations’ complexity as China continues to view Australia as a mouthpiece for the U.S. The experts and the NCP recipients interviewed in this research agreed that the NCP has received positive comments in-country but similar to any higher education program, any measurable outcomes will be slow in coming. Addressing the barriers to achieving the program’s objectives will go some way towards addressing any criticism of funding to support international education as public diplomacy. The implications of defunding such programs during times of heightened diplomatic tensions could be much worse.

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