



LOWY  
INSTITUTE  
POLICY BRIEF

# **Crumbling cornerstone? Australia's education ties with Southeast Asia**

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## CRUMBLING CORNERSTONE? AUSTRALIA'S EDUCATION TIES WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Education has been central to Australia's ties with Southeast Asia since the 1950s, creating people-to-people connections and supporting human capacity building in the region.
- Yet Southeast Asia's rapid economic development and the growth of alternative education markets mean Australia has lost relative advantage as a destination for future leaders from the region.
- Australian government international education policies have not adequately recognised the strategic importance of education ties with Southeast Asia, instead approaching the region through a narrow "market" lens.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **What is the problem?**

Successive Australian governments have billed education as the cornerstone of its people-to-people connections and influence in Southeast Asia. Yet the era of the Colombo Plan, in which Australia educated the region's top leaders, is over. Changing economic relativities, and the success of both established and new competitors such as China and Japan, mean Australia's access and influence through education to the region's future leaders will decline. Moreover, a narrow focus on Southeast Asia as a market for generating international student revenue may lead to Australia missing opportunities to help build regional human capacity and advance its bilateral relationships.

### **What should be done?**

The Australian government needs to increase and diversify scholarship offerings to students from Southeast Asia. This includes refocusing on the Australia Awards and reintroducing a merit-based scholarship targeted at the regional countries that do not receive bilateral development assistance from Australia (Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei). A new international education strategy should develop a focus on building regional human capacity, rather than viewing international students solely in terms of a market opportunity. The government should also reshape the New Colombo Plan to focus more on long-term study opportunities to ensure it is meeting its original goal of strengthening Australia's relationships with countries in the broader Indo-Pacific.

## INTRODUCTION

Australia's relationships with the countries of Southeast Asia are diverse. Some are characterised by deep security partnerships, others by strong trade ties, and others still by development cooperation. Education, however, is a mainstay in each of these relationships, whether through the growing presence of Australian university campuses in the region or the outbound flow of Australian undergraduates to the region through the New Colombo Plan. Above all, the long-term relationships formed by educating students from Southeast Asia in Australia have been a source of Australian access and influence in political, economic, and other institutions across the region.

*Leading experts, including key academics, have recognised education as “the cheapest and most effective soft power a country like Australia can deploy”.*

These ties have been recognised by all recent Australian governments. Speaking in Malaysia in June 2022, Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong described education as “the foundation on which our countries — and our peoples — have built mutual respect and understanding”.<sup>1</sup> Former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull described education as the “hallmark” of Australia–ASEAN cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Education is often central in Australian diplomats' talking points,<sup>3</sup> and acknowledged by regional leaders in their public statements about Australia.<sup>4</sup>

Since the heyday of Australia's participation in the Colombo Plan — between 1951 and the mid-1970s — the lifeblood of these education relationships has been the students travelling from Southeast Asia to undertake higher education in Australia. As Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said in 2019 while in Australia, these include “two presidents, several cabinet ministers, two heads of Civil Service and many senior public servants”.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, prominent Southeast Asian leaders with connections to Australia are too numerous to quantify. However, in Indonesia alone they include former vice president and Central Bank governor Boediono, former foreign minister Marty Natalegawa, and former trade minister Mari Pangestu, who were among five Australian alumni to serve in Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's cabinets during his decade as Indonesian president.

Leading experts, including key academics, have recognised education as “the cheapest and most effective soft power a country like Australia can deploy”.<sup>6</sup> These connections do not necessarily mean that the alumni of Australian universities will support Australian policy positions or adopt Australian values.<sup>7</sup> Yet education creates connections between people, institutions, and

governments that can be used as building blocks for further cooperation. According to Peter Drysdale, the leading intellectual architect of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), few of Australia's achievements in building economic ties with Southeast Asia since the 1960s would have been possible without the connections to regional scholars and practitioners built through education.<sup>8</sup>

However, Australia has been slow to recognise that the era that established this unique network of influence across Southeast Asia is largely over. The Colombo Plan generation of scholars who studied in Australian universities from the late 1950s until the 1980s has largely retired. This is already reflected in the changing composition of cabinet ministries in the region: the cabinets of both Singapore and Indonesia each now contain only one minister who has studied in Australia, an appreciable decline

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compared to even ten years ago.<sup>9</sup> Lao Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Saleumxay Kommasith, who studied at Monash University under the Australia Awards in the 1990s, is likely the most senior alumnus of an Australian institution in government in Southeast Asia at present.

In large part, this decline is the result of shifting economic relativities. In 1980, Australia's economy alone was around 85 per cent of all the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) economies combined. Even excluding ASEAN's newer member states such as Vietnam, these combined economies are now around twice as large as Australia's. The region's growing and prosperous middle class need no longer rely on Australia for education, as access to higher education at home has proliferated. For example, in Malaysia, just four per cent of the population had a tertiary education in 1980. This number has since expanded tenfold.<sup>10</sup> And while the quality of tertiary education remains a challenge across Southeast Asia, the region has been serviced by increasingly competitive international education markets, from the United Kingdom and United States to newer destinations such as Japan.

The cumulative effect of these changes means that Australia can no longer take for granted the proposition that it will educate the next generation of Southeast Asian leaders.

## AUSTRALIA AS AN EDUCATION DESTINATION FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

Over the decade prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Australia hosted a declining share of international students from Southeast Asia. According to data from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in 2010, Australia received 57 142 international students from Southeast Asia, accounting for 26 per cent of all international students from the region. Although total enrolments from Southeast Asia grew by 33 per cent to reach 75,925 in 2019, Australia had become a relatively less important destination for students from Southeast Asia, now accounting for just 22 per cent of all students from the region. Australia declined in relative importance as a destination from Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. Australia gained market share in Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, and particularly the Philippines.<sup>11</sup>

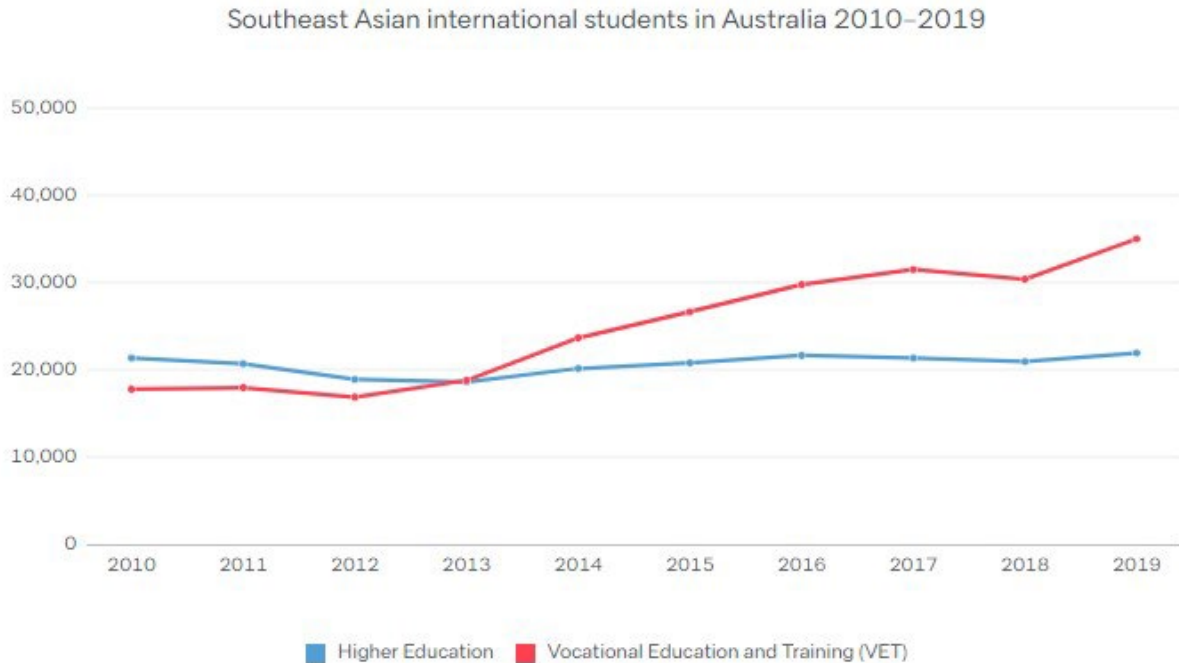
*Developing industry-relevant skills to prepare workers for the transition to the fourth industrial revolution is an important priority for many Southeast Asian economies.*

Between 2010 and 2019, Vocational Education and Training (VET) enrolments doubled from 17,000 to 35,000. However, higher education (university) enrolments remained flat at around 21,000 (see figure, following page).<sup>12</sup> This trend is not consistent across the region: higher education enrolments from more developed countries — including Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia — declined steadily across the ten-year period. Enrolments from Vietnam, the Philippines, and Cambodia all increased, with Vietnam now the largest source of higher education enrolments from Southeast Asia. Indonesian higher education enrolments increased only very slightly over the ten-year period.

Growing vocational education enrolments present new opportunities for Australia's education relationships with Southeast Asia. Developing industry-relevant skills to prepare workers for the transition to the fourth industrial revolution is an important priority for many Southeast Asian economies.<sup>13</sup> Australia's active support in upskilling workers, through training in Australia and cooperation to build the capacity of regional countries' own vocational education providers,<sup>14</sup> is likely positive for government-to-government relations. Yet it is unclear whether VET programs — mostly shorter courses delivered by private training providers<sup>15</sup> — lead to the same sense of connection with Australia as gained through higher education programs.



## CRUMBLING CORNERSTONE? AUSTRALIA'S EDUCATION TIES WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA



Source: Australian Government, Department of Education

Stagnant university enrolments from Southeast Asia are consistent with the findings of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies–Yusof Ishak Institute annual survey of Southeast Asian policy elites. In 2019, when the survey was first conducted, Australia was the first choice of destination for tertiary education for around 25 per cent of respondents. However, by 2022, this had fallen to just ten per cent. The decline was common across almost every Southeast Asian country, including Vietnam, Indonesia, and Malaysia (see following figure).<sup>16</sup> The Lowy Institute *Indonesia Poll 2021*, a nationally representative survey of some 3,000 Indonesians, similarly showed that just four per cent of respondents preferred Australia as a destination for study overseas, behind Japan (23 per cent), the United States (17 per cent), South Korea (seven per cent), Malaysia, Singapore, and the United Kingdom (between four and five per cent).<sup>17</sup> Perceptions may improve following the 2022 reopening of Australia’s international border after Covid-19 restrictions.<sup>18</sup>

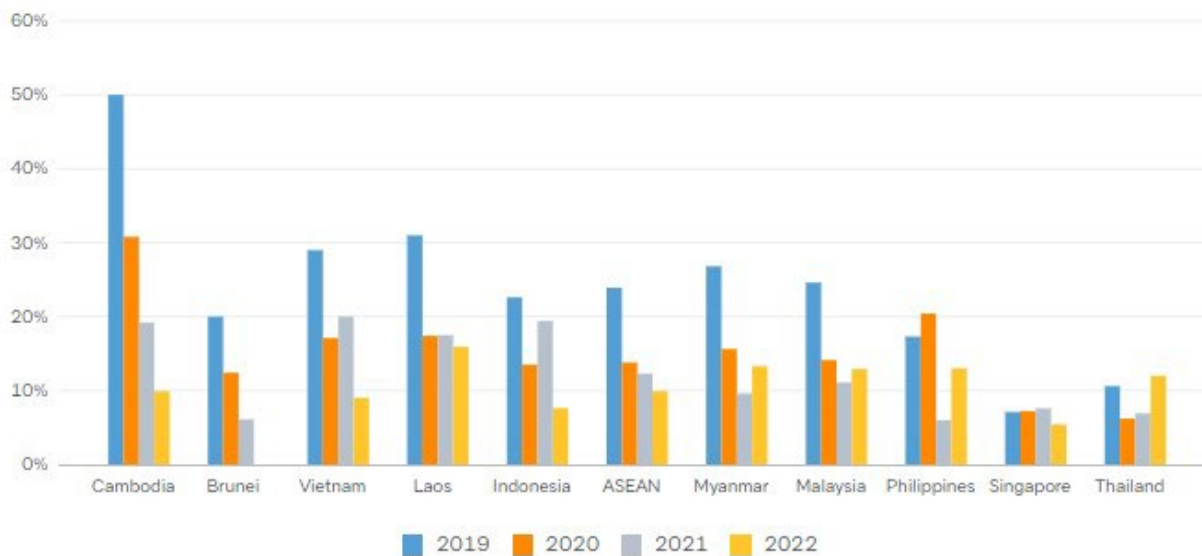
These broad trends are also replicated at the most academically competitive level. Between 2007 and 2021, just three out of hundreds of students awarded Singapore’s prestigious Public Service Commission scholarships chose to study in Australia. No student awarded the top President’s Scholarship has chosen to study in Australia.<sup>19</sup> The overwhelming majority of recipients chose to study in the United Kingdom, the United States, or at home in Singapore.<sup>20</sup>

## CRUMBLING CORNERSTONE? AUSTRALIA'S EDUCATION TIES WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

It is hard to be definitive about why Australian universities are in relative decline as a destination for Southeast Asian students. As with all international students, many decisions will be based on affordability (including work rights) and perceptions of student safety. However, anecdotal evidence from experts working in the field of higher education points to several factors that may specifically affect choices by students from Southeast Asia. Australian universities are large by international standards and have a mixed performance in terms of offering international students a rewarding experience.

By contrast, some institutions in the United States or the United Kingdom offer a more intimate learning experience, which may account for why comparative surveys show international students are more satisfied with their experiences in these countries than in Australia.<sup>21</sup> Australia may not be perceived as a technologically advanced or highly innovative economy in comparison to competitors.<sup>22</sup> Relatedly, other destinations such as Japan or the United States may be seen as better for developing professional networks and connections with relevant businesses.<sup>23</sup> Unlike students from China and India, few Southeast Asian students are seeking a migration outcome in Australia through their study, meaning that post-study work rights are a less important factor for students from this region.

ISEAS State of Southeast Asia Survey respondents choosing Australia as preferred destination for tertiary education



Source: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), State of Southeast Asia Survey

## POLICY RESPONSES

Many of the underlying factors that have made Australia a less attractive destination will likely be stubborn issues, requiring far-reaching reforms to Australia's higher education sector to improve the quality of students' experiences. And as Commonwealth officials have acknowledged, elite students will likely always be more attracted to study at elite institutions in the United States or the United Kingdom than in Australia.<sup>24</sup> Yet there is still scope for government to implement policies to strengthen Australia's education connections with Southeast Asia.

While most students will continue to be self-funded, scholarships remain an important tool of government policy. Australia needs to review its scholarship offerings and ensure that they are appropriately calibrated to attract top future leaders from Southeast Asia. Currently, the majority of Australian government scholarship offerings for Southeast Asia are under the banner of the Australia Awards, a development-focused scholarship program that funds study at Australian universities.<sup>25</sup> In Southeast Asia, Australia Awards are primarily offered in the context of Australia's bilateral development assistance programs with (in order of size) Indonesia, Timor-Leste, the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. Recently, some scholarships have been offered to students from Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand as part of Australia's cooperation with ASEAN.<sup>26</sup>

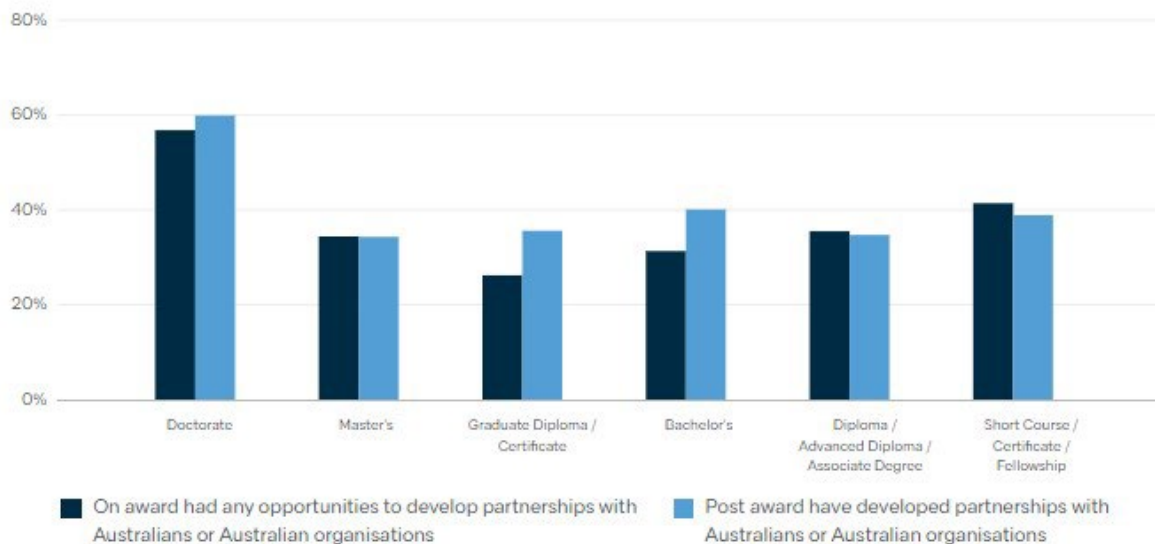
Australia currently does not offer general merit-based scholarships designed to attract top achievers, regardless of the development status of the sending country. The Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships program, which was acknowledged by the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper as building Australia's reputation for excellence in education and research,<sup>27</sup> was in 2019 abruptly discontinued by former education minister Dan Tehan.<sup>28</sup> This has particular implications for Southeast Asia because of the traditional importance of education within Australia's bilateral relationships and because increasingly, Australia's relationships within the region are no longer defined by development assistance.

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The Australia Awards have had many outstanding successes in producing notable alumni and offering transformational education opportunities in Australia.<sup>29</sup> Yet as a 2019 review of the Australia Awards Global Strategy found, the scholarships carry a heavy burden, with multiple objectives expected from a single tool.<sup>30</sup> These include development objectives as well as the expectation of building both relationships and influence with future leaders.

In Southeast Asia, the Australia Awards have been affected by sizeable cuts to the aid budget, reducing the amount of funding available from AU\$129.4 million in 2014–15 to AU\$84.8 million in 2019–20, prior to the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> Some Australian academics with lengthy involvement in supervising students in Australia under the Australia Awards argue that the program is not successfully building influence with a cohort of potential future leaders from Southeast Asia. They note that the program is increasingly focused on master's degrees, rather than doctoral studies,<sup>32</sup> though graduates of the former are less likely to develop an enduring connection to Australian institutions (see figure below). Some also argue that the target fields of study are too restrictive, preventing talent-spotting of top achievers. Finally, there is a perception that initiatives such as the "Australia for ASEAN scholarships" only reshuffle and rebadge existing programs, causing confusion and generating little overall effect.

Alumni by level of study who had opportunities to develop partnerships with Australians (N=5049)



Source: Australia Awards Alumni Global Tracer Survey 2020. More than 6200 alumni, who completed their awards between the 1980s and the 2010s, participated in the Survey.

Of particular concern, the Australia Awards may not be consistently recruiting students to study in strategically important fields. Decision-making on scholarship priority areas is decentralised to Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) posts, where choices are made based on consultation with host countries. Few students are currently studying PhDs in economics under the Australia Awards, even though capacity-building in economic governance is a top priority for many of Australia's bilateral development assistance programs. Earlier generations of economics PhD students were facilitated to study in Australia under arrangements such as the Australia-IMF Scholarships Program for Asia (AISPA). This yielded major benefits, creating a generation of economists in Vietnam, for example, who were instrumental in encouraging their country to adopt pro-market and open trading policies.<sup>33</sup>

Simply reinstating the Endeavour Awards, as peak body Universities Australia has called for, would not be a win. Research by education expert Joanne Barker suggests that this scheme was poorly designed and did not have clear policy objectives.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the new Labor government should consider how a competitive scholarship program could be better designed to reinforce Australia's foreign policy priorities in the Indo-Pacific, with Southeast Asia as a particular priority. The government should also consider adopting specific measures to recruit students in fields such as economics, which would be of strategic advantage to Australia.

## INTERNATIONAL COMPETITION

The United States and the United Kingdom are clearly the most preferred destinations for students from Southeast Asia.<sup>35</sup> The United States' Fulbright scholarship program has a global two-way remit and therefore offers a relatively small number of inbound scholarships in the region — fewer than 600 for the whole of East Asia and the Pacific.<sup>36</sup> As with the United Kingdom's Chevening scholarship program, the prestige of these awards means they attract a highly competitive cohort of applicants.

However, the largest East Asian countries — China, Japan, and South Korea — are all seeking to attract students from the region under scholarship schemes, creating new potential sources of competition.<sup>37</sup> China appears to offer around 10,000 scholarships each year for students from Southeast Asia, though the precise numbers are unclear. This estimate is based on 2018 data from China's Ministry of Education about top international student sources, assuming that students from Southeast Asia are receiving government funding in line with the global average of 12.81 per cent.<sup>38</sup> Japan makes public the number of government scholarships provided to students from top destinations, and in 2019 funded 2,819 students from Southeast Asia to study in the country.<sup>39</sup> Based on these data sources, the estimated number of students from four key Southeast Asian countries that are receiving scholarships annually from Japan and China is as follows:

Students from key Southeast Asian countries receiving scholarships annually from Japan and China (estimate)

	JAPAN	CHINA
VIETNAM	601	1,447
INDONESIA	888	1,928
THAILAND	614	3,665
MALAYSIA	237	1,214

Source: Author's own estimates based on data from China's Ministry of Education (2018) and Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2020).

By contrast, in 2019, Australia provided just 545 long-term Australia Awards to students from Southeast and East Asia,<sup>40</sup> meaning that, like the United States, it is offering Southeast Asian students just a fraction of the scholarships that China and Japan do.

Funding and conditions offered by the Australia Awards are relatively generous when compared to competitor schemes, although some experts argue that they could be more generous, for example in providing additional bursaries to fund research.<sup>41</sup> Of note, while the scholarships allow spouses to work in Australia and children to attend Australian public schools, they do not provide additional allowances for spouses or children. This compares unfavourably, for example, with Indonesia's own flagship scholarship program for outgoing students, which pays a generous loading for accompanying dependents.<sup>42</sup>

## NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Beyond the traditional mode of students from Southeast Asia physically studying in Australia, new opportunities are emerging for Australia to build people-to-people connections and to contribute to human capacity development in the region.

One major change over the past 20 years has been the development of “transnational education”, enabling international students to study at Australian universities without coming to Australia, either through online learning, study at

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an Australian overseas campus, or jointly delivered programs. Australian universities have operated campuses in Southeast Asian countries for more than 20 years, including in Malaysia (Monash, Curtin, and Swinburne Universities), Vietnam (RMIT), and Singapore (James Cook and Curtin Universities). More recently, two Australian universities — Central Queensland and Monash — have opened campuses in Indonesia, leading to optimism that these facilities will foster new bilateral cooperation in human capacity-building, as envisaged by the Indonesia–Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA).

These institutions will undoubtedly contribute to human capacity development and may also generate greater research and academic exchanges, which could be valuable given that Australia does not have dedicated funds for bilateral research with partners in Southeast Asia.<sup>43</sup> However, this type of education delivery is unlikely to create the same deep familiarity and connections with Australia that students gain from physical presence in the country, especially given that quality of life is seen as one of Australia’s comparative advantages.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps reflecting these doubts, the Australian government does not currently provide scholarships for study at these overseas campuses through the Australia Awards.

The New Colombo Plan has been successful in mobilising thousands of Australian students to study in the Indo-Pacific, including Southeast Asia, since its inception in 2014.<sup>45</sup> The Commonwealth government has spent more than \$300 million on the program over this period, with annual expenditure of just under \$50 million at its pre-pandemic peak.<sup>46</sup> DFAT has commissioned several surveys and evaluations of New Colombo Plan alumni, which have shown that



students are positive about the program and have had rewarding experiences.<sup>47</sup> However, although the program is described as focused on deepening Australia's relationships with the Indo-Pacific, it has not been rigorously reviewed to assess its role in furthering Australian foreign policy objectives.

The impact of the New Colombo Plan in improving Australia's relationships with Southeast Asia is almost certainly low. The overwhelming majority of students receiving funding under the scheme — around 99 per cent — are recipients of “mobility grants”, which fund only short-term placements or travel. Since the scheme's launch in 2014, just 684 students have been awarded scholarships for study of at least one semester at a university in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>48</sup> Qualitative academic research on the experiences of students travelling to Indonesia for short-term placements indicates that while short-term study tours may be “thought provoking”, they are unlikely to forge enduring connections to the country.<sup>49</sup>

*Pathways to Asia-focused employment in Australia remain limited, according to those studying the impact of the New Colombo Plan.*

While Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia, is a top destination for mobility grant recipients, the region accounts for only one-third of long-term scholarship recipients. Of these, two-thirds have been in just two countries, Indonesia and Singapore (79 and 114 scholars, respectively).<sup>50</sup> Just seven scholars have ever studied in the Philippines, and 16 in Vietnam. These choices likely reflect the accessibility and quality of education in Singapore, and the role of the Australian Consortium for In-Country Indonesian Studies (ACICIS) in facilitating study in Indonesia.<sup>51</sup> Even still, the story is not all positive. Prior to the pandemic, the number of Australian students undertaking semester or year-long study in Indonesia had declined despite the New Colombo Plan.<sup>52</sup>

A further limiting factor on the impact of the New Colombo Plan is the lack of supporting policies to facilitate Australian engagement with Asia. Programs to support the learning of Southeast Asian languages, especially Indonesian, have declined precipitously in recent years.<sup>53</sup> While more than 800,000 Australians speak a Southeast Asian language at home,<sup>54</sup> Australian universities offer few opportunities for the structured learning of important Southeast Asian languages such as Vietnamese, Thai, or Burmese. As a result of all these factors, pathways to Asia-focused employment in Australia remain limited, according to those studying the impact of the New Colombo Plan, meaning that scholars may lack opportunities to use knowledge acquired during study in the region.<sup>55</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT

### **Recognise that education is a declining asset for Australia's engagement with Southeast Asia**

Successive foreign ministers have identified education as a key element of Australia's relations with Southeast Asia but have tended to overlook shifts in economic relativities that make Australia less attractive as a destination for higher education. Without policy interventions to strengthen education relationships with Southeast Asia, it will become more important for Australia to harness the potential of other types of people-to-people connections, especially those developed through its own Southeast Asian diaspora communities.

### **Increase and diversify scholarship offerings to students from Southeast Asia**

While most Southeast Asian students will continue to be self-funded, scholarships are an important lever of government policy. The Australia Awards scheme has shrunk under successive budget cuts and cannot fulfil all the policy objectives it seeks to achieve. Since the scrapping of the Endeavour Awards, Australia no longer has a purely merit-based scholarship scheme, which impinges on its ability to recruit the most talented cohort of potential future leaders and policymakers from across the region. Scholarships that support a blend of in-country study in Australia with remote or online study should be targeted to attract emerging mid-career professionals.

### **Focus on building regional human capacity in international education strategy**

Australia's international education strategy under the previous Coalition government focused narrowly on Southeast Asia as an education export market, rather than on promoting human capacity development or building bilateral relationships. The Commonwealth Department of Education needs adequate resourcing to develop new initiatives and pathways that respond to regional countries' interest in human capacity-building, especially in areas where Australia has an advantage, including vocational education and training, and education quality and standards.

### **Reshape the New Colombo Plan to focus on long-term study to strengthen Australia's relationships with countries in the Indo-Pacific**

The New Colombo Plan has offered transformative opportunities to young Australians, but it is unclear whether it has been successful in improving the quality of Australia's relationships with regional countries. Funding for short-term mobility grants, which have an uncertain impact on students' long-term engagement with Asia, should be reallocated to programs supporting longer-term study in Asia or Asian language education, as these programs are more likely to generate deep and lasting connections.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author conducted 14 interviews with officials and academics with direct experience of Australia's education connections with Southeast Asia and is grateful to them for their assistance and insights. The author also thanks the three anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful feedback and Jack Sato for research assistance.

## NOTES

Cover image: Brett Jordan/Unsplash

<sup>1</sup> Senator the Hon Penny Wong, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Keynote Address in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 29 June 2022,

<https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/keynote-address-kuala-lumpur-malaysia>.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Turnbull, Remarks at ASEAN–Australia Special Summit New Colombo Plan Reception, Sydney, 17 March 2018,

<https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/new-colombo-plan-reception-asean-australia-special-summit-meeting-sydney-sa>.

<sup>3</sup> Sao Phal Niseiy, “Australia Sees Education Key to Cambodia’s Future”, *Cambodianess*, 24 March 2022, <https://cambodianess.com/article/australia-sees-education-key-to-cambodias-future>.

<sup>4</sup> Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, Address to Joint Sitting of Parliament of Australia at Parliament House, in Canberra, Australia, 12 October 2016,

<https://www.pmo.gov.sg/Newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-address-parliament-australia-parliament-house-canberra-australia>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Wesley, quoted in Sarah Ison, “Scholar warns on security failures”, *The Australian*, 21 June 2022, available at:

<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/defence/scholar-warns-on-security-failures/news-story/8c8d689b04ee4432fbc0cb10b8d47dc6>.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Australian alumni were among the most vocal in opposing Australia’s response to the 2014 military coup in Thailand. See Khaosod English, “Pro-Army Group asks Australia to Reconsider Denunciation of Coup”, *Khaosod English*, 9 June 2021, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/politics/2014/06/09/1402319252/>.

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Drysdale, interview with author, 12 April 2022.

<sup>9</sup> David T. Hill in Tim Lindsey and Dave McRae (eds), *Strangers Next Door?*, (Bloomsbury, 2018), 422. David Hill has noted that Australian alumni played a far less prominent role in President Joko Widodo’s first cabinet. Likewise, in the first cabinet of Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2004–06), five Australian alumni

held cabinet positions. In Lee's current cabinet, just one Australian alumnus, Transport Minister S. Iswaran, holds such a position.

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- <sup>19</sup> Singapore Public Service Commission, Annual Reports, <https://www.psc.gov.sg/resources/annual-reports>.
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- <sup>21</sup> The QILT *2020 International Student Experience Survey* shows 75 per cent of international students in Australia were positive about their overall educational experience, compared to 83 per cent for the United Kingdom and 84 per cent for the United States (see p.29), [https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-ses-international-report.pdf?sfvrsn=c228dcc3\\_0](https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-ses-international-report.pdf?sfvrsn=c228dcc3_0). Compared to international students as a whole, students from Southeast Asian countries are slightly less positive about their experiences in Australia. The percentage of students from Vietnam and Malaysia rating their overall experience of studying in Australia is slightly lower than for students from other top five source countries. In 2019, 73 per cent of students from Vietnam and Malaysia were positive about their experience of studying in Australia, compared to 75 per cent of the total number of international students. In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this had dropped to 61 per cent for Vietnam and 57 per cent for Malaysia, compared to 63 per cent for all international students. See *2020 International Student Experience Survey*, Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, (QILT, August 2021), 9, [https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-ses-international-report.pdf?sfvrsn=c228dcc3\\_0](https://www.qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2020-ses-international-report.pdf?sfvrsn=c228dcc3_0).
- <sup>22</sup> While there is no available data to track perceptions in Southeast Asia on this question, Australia ranks 25th among the 132 countries featured in the World Intellectual Property Organization's *Global Innovation Index 2021*, well behind the United States (3rd), United Kingdom (4th), Republic of Korea (5th), China (12th) and Japan (13th). See [https://www.wipo.int/global\\_innovation\\_index/en/2022/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwnbmaBhD-ARIsAGTPcfUrk\\_q1IFd5tBVIOE21EbTGFbpKbSE6f-VGR6afCJCV3NjllJir0GEaAvmmEALw\\_wcB](https://www.wipo.int/global_innovation_index/en/2022/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwnbmaBhD-ARIsAGTPcfUrk_q1IFd5tBVIOE21EbTGFbpKbSE6f-VGR6afCJCV3NjllJir0GEaAvmmEALw_wcB).
- <sup>23</sup> See for example, "Vietnamese Students Turn to Japan in Hope of Getting Good Jobs", *Retail Asia*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.retailnews.asia/vietnamese-students-turn-japan-hope-getting-good-jobs/>.
- <sup>24</sup> See Nicholas Kitchen and Natalie Laifer, "Making Soft Power Work: Theory and Practice in Australia's International Education Policy", *Politics and Policy* 45, (5), pp 813–840, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83726/7/Laifer-Kitchen%20Politics%26Policy\\_FINAL.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83726/7/Laifer-Kitchen%20Politics%26Policy_FINAL.pdf).
- <sup>25</sup> Students from Southeast Asia are also eligible to apply for "Destination Australia" scholarships, which in 2022 provided a total of 383 AU\$15,000 scholarships for

domestic and international students to study in rural and regional Australia. See Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills, and Employment, *Destination Australia Program, 2022 List of Successful Providers*, <https://www.education.gov.au/destination-australia>. Funding is provided to the education providers, and Commonwealth data on the regional breakdown of international students receiving these scholarships is not available.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia for ASEAN Scholarships, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/australia-awards/participating-countries/australia-asean-scholarships>.

<sup>27</sup> Australian Government, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017), 111, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Kent Anderson and Joanne Barker, "Vale Endeavour, Long Live the New Endeavour", *Australian Policy and History*, 28 May 2019, [https://aph.org.au/2019/05/vale-endeavour/#\\_ftnref2](https://aph.org.au/2019/05/vale-endeavour/#_ftnref2).

<sup>29</sup> The alumni of Australian government scholarship programs occupy key economic positions in the Indonesian government, according to a recent report: John Evers, *Feasibility Study on the Use of Non-Grant Financing*, 25 January 2019, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/feasibility-study-use-non-grant-financing.pdf>.

<sup>30</sup> Australia Awards, Global Strategy Evaluation Report — DFAT Management Response, 2019, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-awards-global-strategy-evaluation-man-resp.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Official Development Assistance Budget Summary, 2014–15; 2018–19, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/corporate/portfolio-budget-statements/portfolio-budget-statements-2019-20>.

<sup>32</sup> Data supporting this assertion can be found in the information managed by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. See Australian Government, Australian Trade and Investment Commission, Australia Awards, <https://www.austrade.gov.au/australian/education/education-data/current-data/australia-awards>.

<sup>33</sup> Suiwah E. Leung, *Reminiscences of an Accidental Economist*, <https://seasiainstitute.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2021-04/Suiwah-Leung-Reminiscences-final-%28revised%29.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Anderson and Barker, "Vale Endeavour", [https://aph.org.au/2019/05/vale-endeavour/#\\_ftnref2](https://aph.org.au/2019/05/vale-endeavour/#_ftnref2).

<sup>35</sup> See the results of the ISEAS *The State of Southeast Asia 2022: Survey Report*. This is also reflected in student numbers and the choices of elite scholarship holders, for

example from Singapore, who overwhelmingly choose the United States and the United Kingdom.

- <sup>36</sup> In 2019–20 (the most recent year of data available), the Fulbright Program offered 589 scholarships for students from the East Asia and Pacific region. The Fulbright Program has provided funding to 2,800 Indonesians, whereas the Australia Awards have funded 4574 scholars from Indonesia since 1998. See US Department of State, US Relations with Indonesia, Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 19 April 2022, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-indonesia/#:~:text=Indonesia%20serves%20as%20a%20non,security%2C%20and%20global%20health%20security;https://www.australiaawardsindo.or.id/scholarships-quick-facts-5/>.
- <sup>37</sup> Jing Qi, “How China has been Transforming International Education to become a Leading Host of Students”, *The Conversation*, 13 May 2021, <https://theconversation.com/how-china-has-been-transforming-international-education-to-become-a-leading-host-of-students-157241>.
- <sup>38</sup> Ministry of Education, People’s Republic of China, Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018, 18 April 2019, [http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press\\_releases/201904/t20190418\\_378586.html](http://en.moe.gov.cn/news/press_releases/201904/t20190418_378586.html).
- <sup>39</sup> Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology — Japan, Number of MEXT Scholarship Students Accepted, as of May 2020, [https://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/koutou/ryugaku/1338568.htm](https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/koutou/ryugaku/1338568.htm).
- <sup>40</sup> Australia also offered 865 short-term awards to students from Southeast and East Asia. These awards may also offer valuable opportunities for engagement, but it is difficult to compare them with other international scholarships as their duration and focus is variable.
- <sup>41</sup> Interview with Australian academic, 12 April 2022.
- <sup>42</sup> Indonesia’s LPDP (Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education) pays US\$24,000 per year plus 25 per cent for a spouse and up to two children. This total of US\$42,000 is much more generous than Australia Awards’ AU\$30,000 for students with families. See Fajar H, “Housing dan Family Allowance, Masalah Paling Pelik bagi Awardee LPDP”, *Kaldera News*, 8 December 2018, <https://www.kalderanews.com/2018/12/housing-dan-family-allowance-masalah-paling-pelik-bagi-awardee-lpdp/>.
- <sup>43</sup> Australian Government, Department of Industry, Science, and Resources, “\$60.2 Million Investment to Boost Australian Science and Technology Globally”, 7 April 2022, <https://www.industry.gov.au/news/602-million-investment-boost-australian-science-and-technology-globally>.
- <sup>44</sup> Kitchen and Laifer, “Making Soft Power Work”, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83726/7/Laifer-Kitchen%20Politics%26Policy\\_FINAL.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/83726/7/Laifer-Kitchen%20Politics%26Policy_FINAL.pdf).



- <sup>45</sup> Asia Society Australia and International Education Association of Australia, *Asia Literacy and Employability: Generation Asia Report #2*, (Asia Society Australia, September 2022), [https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/GenerationAsiaReport\\_AsiaLiteracyandEmployability.pdf](https://asiasociety.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/GenerationAsiaReport_AsiaLiteracyandEmployability.pdf).
- <sup>46</sup> Data drawn from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2013–14, 2014–15, 2015–16, 2016–17, 2017–18, 2018–19, 2019–20, 2020–21; and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Portfolio Budget Statements 2022–23.
- <sup>47</sup> Ly Thi Tran and Mark Rahimi, *New Colombo Plan: A Review of Research and Implications for Practice*, Deakin University, Report, (IEAA, October 2018), <https://www.ieaa.org.au/documents/item/1448>; and Australian Survey Research, *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade New Colombo Plan Alumni Survey Year 3 Report of Survey Findings*, (Manly: ASR, February 2019), <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/ncp-alumni-report-april-2019.pdf>.
- <sup>48</sup> Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Colombo Plan, Annual Announcement of Scholarships, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan>.
- <sup>49</sup> Agnieszka Sobocinska and Jemma Purdey, “Enduring Connections?: Soft Power and Pedagogy in Short-Term Study Tours to Indonesia”, *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land-En Volkenkunde/Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 175, No. 2–3 (2019): 225–51.
- <sup>50</sup> Data compiled by the author from New Colombo Plan Scholarship announcements 2015–2022, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Colombo Plan, Previous Rounds, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/scholarship-program/previous-rounds>.
- <sup>51</sup> ACICIS Study Indonesia, Annual Report 2020, 23, <https://www.acicis.edu.au/acicis-annual-report-2020/>.
- <sup>52</sup> In 2019, 119 students studied for a semester in Indonesia (down from 126 in 2018 and 142 in 2017) and four for a full academic year (down from 14 in 2018 and 12 in 2017). See ACICIS Study Indonesia, Annual Report 2020, 23, <https://www.acicis.edu.au/acicis-annual-report-2020/>.
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<sup>55</sup> See Julie Hare, "Study Abroad Now a Rite of Passage", *Australian Financial Review*, 11 September 2021, <https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/study-abroad-now-a-rite-of-passage-20220908-p5bgjp>.

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