



Asian Studies
Association
of Australia

26 October 2024

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ASAA Submission to the New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) is a peak body of university experts and educators on Asia in Australia. Established in 1976, we promote and support the study of Asia in Australian universities and knowledge of Asia among the broader community. Our 400+ membership is drawn mainly from academics and students. We take a strong interest in promoting knowledge about Asia in higher education and in contributing to state and Commonwealth government policies related to Asia.

In 2022, the ASAA released a new report [Australia's Asia Education Imperative](#) ('the Report'), by Professor Edward Aspinall and Professor Melissa Crouch. This Report surveys the state of Asian studies in Australia from 2000 to 2020, and identifies some of the challenges the higher education sector has faced in promoting and enhancing Asia literacy in Australia. Based on this survey, the Report offers recommendations to universities and the government on reforms to increase Asia literacy in Australia, specifically as it relates to higher education. We draw your attention to Chapter 2 on Asian languages at Australian universities in particular.

Based on this Report, we respond to the following questions regarding the New Colombo Plan (NCP) below:

Do the current strategic objectives of the NCP meet the need for Australians to increase Indo-Pacific capability and literacy?

The ASAA has affirmed the importance of the New Colombo Plan (NCP) in its report and acknowledges the incredibly valuable support it provides for undergraduate students. However, on its own, NCP cannot possibly be sufficient as a government plan to increase the depth and

breadth of Asia literacy in Australia. NCP is certainly one important pillar of a government plan that needs to be maintained. As our report highlights, a cross-sector federal government policy on Asia literacy is needed given that the ability to increase Asia literacy depends upon a wide range of institutions, levels of government, and education providers (from primary through to secondary and higher education) (Report, p 104). The government has had such a policy in the past, but currently has no such policy (Report, chapter 1). Now is the time to reestablish such a policy commitment, and it would *include* but go far beyond the remit of the New Colombo Plan.

How can the NCP help increase Asian language learning in Australia?

There are two dimensions to increasing Asian language learning in Australia – breadth (ie encouraging more students to study an Asian language) and depth (providing the right support, infrastructure and incentives for students who are already studying an Asian language to advance their study to a high level of fluency). At present, NCP largely attempts breadth – ie as many students as possible for mostly short-term programs, many that have no language component.

We recommended that NCP should put in place incentives as part of the application process to prioritise students who are already learning an Asian language, and to prioritise universities that offer relevant Asian language programs (Report, p 105). This will enable students who have already commenced studies to significantly advance their language learning to a deeper level, and also ensure that once the student returns to Australia, they can continue their language learning at an Australian university. Students who undertake NCP and begin language learning through NCP sometimes encounter problems continuing their language learning upon return, such as that their university does not offer such a language program or fails to offer such a program at advanced levels. If it was a requirement that Australian universities be able to demonstrate that they have an existing language program in order to be competitive for NCP funding to certain countries, this may incentivize more Australian universities to either maintain their existing Asian language program, or establish a new one. In this way, NCP can be a means to encourage Australian universities to ensure serious long-term investment in their language programs, including secure and sufficient staffing levels. It would also go some way to ensuring that structural and institutional pathways are in place at Australian universities for students to continue their language learning in Australia.

In addition, we recommend that academics affiliated with Australian universities with Asian language fluency who apply for NCP funding should also be prioritised in the application process. Currently, many NCP programs are run by academics with no language skills. Ensuring academics who design, teach and run the programs are also fluent in the relevant Asian language will enhance the overall quality of the program for the students. The role of the Australian-affiliated academic would then complement the role of any host institution in the region (not replace it) in the delivery of such programs.

We also recommended that the New Colombo Plan could expand its offerings to fund postgraduates, especially PhD students, to undertake field research in Asia and advanced learning of Asian languages (Report, p 105). Again, priority should be given to students who have skills, or are advancing their skills, in an Asian language, and funding could include support to undertake advanced language studies programs overseas. We note that in the past, such support was provided by the Endeavour Awards program or Prime Minister's Australia Asia Awards, however it has been some years since these programs existed. There is currently a significant gap in funding for domestic PhD students to undertake field research and the New Colombo Plan would be a welcome means of filling that gap. Such support is essential to enable PhD students to undertake sustained field work or language studies overseas that often requires significant funding. Several members of ASAA (myself included) are past recipients of programs such as the Endeavour Awards and can bear testimony to the crucial role it played in enabling and supporting original and innovative field work in the region as part of a PhD program.

Kind regards,



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