



## New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group – IRU Submission

1 November 2024

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity make a submission to the New Colombo Plan External Advisory Group. The IRU represents seven universities around Australia – Flinders University, Griffith University, James Cook University, La Trobe University, Murdoch University, Western Sydney University and the University of Canberra. Our members are committed to inclusive education and innovative research that advances our communities.

IRU member universities also share a commitment to strengthening engagement with partners in the Indo-Pacific region through education and research. Our universities were, for example, the first in the country to teach inter-disciplinary Asia-Pacific studies. Our current *IRU Strategy 2022-27*, includes a focus on strengthening Indo-Pacific collaboration.

### **Increasing Australia’s Indo-Pacific capability requires programs that meet student needs**

The universities in the IRU are strong supporters of the New Colombo Plan (NCP) and have been enthusiastic participants. For example, in 2023 and to-date in 2024, participation in short-term programs at IRU members include 760 at Griffith University, 726 at Western Sydney University, 176 at Flinders University and around 300 at James Cook University. To the Pacific region, in recent years IRU universities contributed 12 NCP scholars, over 140 NCP mobility programs and more than 1,200 students.

However, recent changes to the guidelines for NCP mobility grants will materially affect the delivery of our NCP programs and will make it harder for students and universities to participate in this beneficial initiative. This in turn reduces the ability of the program to achieve its stated objectives and inhibits access for students to increase their Indo-Pacific capability and literacy.

In particular, the increase of the minimum program duration of two weeks to four weeks will severely impact participation from both students and academic project leads. This increase will:

- Make it harder for students from equity groups and non-school-leaver backgrounds to participate, as these students are more likely to have work or caring responsibilities.
- Make it harder for students studying courses with professional accreditation to participate, as their curricula typically do not allow the flexibility to spend more time away.
- Severely impact our universities’ ability to resource mobility programs due to the availability and workload of accompanying academic staff.
- Severely impact our international partners, including Pacific region universities, to support the programs.

[iru.edu.au](http://iru.edu.au)

According to a recent CISAustralia survey, the most popular programs for Australian students are those of two-week duration (92%), and recent data from Studymove shows that in 2024, 74% of NCP programs were shorter than four week's duration. This indicates short-duration courses have greater uptake than the longer format required in the changes to NCP mobility.

Senator the Hon Penny Wong told the [Centre for Asian-Australia Leadership lecture](#) that she wants "more students to spend more time in the region". We agree. However, removing the ability of students to participate in their preferred programs — programs that fit in with the modern student lifestyle — runs counter to this.

In addition, it is essential that the ability to engage with the region is not limited to those with more extensive financial resources. This would further entrench existing inequalities in our higher education system. A more diverse cohort will provide a broader foundation for engagement and encourage a deeper interest in the region. It is also in keeping with the Government's priority through the Australian Universities Accord to increase overall participation in higher education by focusing on students from equity group and under-represented backgrounds. If the NCP does not evolve as the student population evolves, it will become less and less representative of Australian students over time.

For students studying in Health and Education disciplines, two-week programs allow them to fit international experience into strict schedules that are dictated by industry accreditation. Enforcing minimum four-week programs would effectively disqualify students from those disciplines from participating. The IRU has also received reports from members that academics who have previously participated in successful NCP mobility programs had to withdraw their proposals for 2025 due to the duration change.

[Research shows](#) that a key predictor of engagement with international opportunities is previous exposure to international opportunities. This means that students who participate in short-term programs are more likely to go on to longer-term opportunities in the future, which satisfies the NCP's key strategic objectives. [Research also shows](#) that short-term programs still provide students with increased understandings of global communities and different ways of thinking about the world around them.

We strongly support the NCP's aim of lifting knowledge of the region among Australians and we welcome the increasing focus on Pacific partnerships and on language study. However, the data clearly shows a need for programs shorter than four weeks that fits more effectively into the needs of the students, staff, and curriculum.

### **Ensuring long-term support and access for international education opportunities**

Beyond the NCP, Australian Government support for broader international education programs has been cut in half in recent years. The 2018 Budget showed investment of \$59m in 2017-18, around \$71m today, accounting for inflation. The 2024 Budget showed investment had declined to \$29m in 2023-24. Based on the current forward estimates, it is projected to decline to \$8.6m in 2027-28. This funding supported broader international engagement and student mobility objectives which complemented the NCP. Cuts to programs such as the Endeavour scholarships and fellowships have narrowed opportunities for students from both Australia and partner countries.

The aims of the NCP should be seen in light of broader Australian Government aims and support. If the NCP is to focus on certain kinds of students or mobility opportunities, there should be other programs in place to support broader opportunities. Furthermore, a system-wide improvement of Australian students' Indo-Pacific literacy should also include postgraduate and higher degree by research students, which are currently excluded from NCP program funding.

It is essential that universities and other stakeholders are consulted before changes to the NCP program are made. That changes to the 2025 funding rounds were announced without consultation and with limited time for universities to make changes to existing, successful, programs before applications were due.