



Engagement with Asia via the new Colombo plan: impact on Australian students' career directions and employability

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**Engagement with Asia via the New Colombo Plan:
Impact on Australian Students' Career Directions and Employability**

Ly Thi Tran, Glen Stafford, Thao Thi Phuong Vu & Mark Rahimi

Abstract

The growing popularity of Asia as a destination for study abroad for Australian students has been largely attributed to the introduction of the New Colombo Plan (NCP) in 2014. Despite the NCP being positioned as a 'Rite of Passage' between higher education and employment for Australian's young generations, to date little is known about how it impacts students' career aspirations and employability. This paper is a response to this critical gap by examining the potential impact and benefit of undertaking study or internships in Asia on students' career aspirations and employability from the perspectives of NCP students themselves. It is derived from a study that includes 52 interviews with academics, mobility officers and NCP students undertaking short-term mobility and internships in China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Nepal and India. The findings show initial evidence of how mobility and interaction with Asia via the NCP experience enables Australian students to enhance, modify or transform their career habitus. The paper concludes with recommendations for developing effective strategies for translating study abroad experiences into enhancing students' employability and real career outcomes.

Key words: New Colombo Plan, Australia, Asia, study abroad, employability, career direction

Introduction

Over the past decade, the number of Australian students undertaking study or internships overseas has significantly increased, reaching more than 49,000 in 2017 (AUIDF, 2018). One in five Australian domestic undergraduate students were engaged in international learning experience in 2017, with the participation rate of almost 23 percent. The number of Australian students studying in Asia increased by more than 30% within just two years between 2014 and 2015 (AUIDF, 2016). The latest data shows that NCP students have been the main growth driver in the number of study-abroad students in 2016-17 while there was very little growth in non-NCP students (Ilieva, 2018). By 2018, the NCP had funded 40,000 students from 40 Australian universities to study and undertake internships across 35 locations in the Indo-Pacific (Australian Government, 2018a).

The New Colombo Plan is considered as the Australian government's premier student mobility and public diplomacy initiative. The key goals of the NCP are to 'broaden and deepen' Australia's engagement in the Indo-Pacific region through 'people-to-people connections' (Australian Government, 2016a; Byrne, 2016; Lowe, 2015) and to provide Australian students with the opportunity to establish learning experiences in the Indo Pacific region as a 'rite of passage'. Such an opportunity takes them beyond the traditional classroom settings, into communities, workplaces and other experiential environments (Harrison & Potts, 2016). This is in line with the literature which indicates study abroad is or is expected to increase students' professional competence and prospects for employability after graduation (Nerlich, 2013; Pietro, 2013; Potts, 2015).

The NCP is well funded, with a budget of AUD 50.93 million pa across 2018-2022 (Australian Government, 2018b), by the federal government and strongly supported by Australian Universities. Yet, little has been known about the impact of students' international experience through the NCP on their development of career choices, career transformations and life goals despite the program being positioned as a 'Rite of Passage' between higher education and employment for Australian's young generations. Such knowledge is important to test the

intention or claim that NCP participation boosts students' employability. Such knowledge is also essential for developing sustainable effective mobility programs integral to the government agenda to strengthen national human capital. This paper is based on a study that responds to this knowledge gap by generating fresh insights into the relationship between participation in the NCP and employability, viewed from the students' perspectives. The study shows that exposure to different ways of constructing disciplinary knowledge, direct professional and personal experiences in Asia, new outlooks, skills and attributes, fostered via the NCP experience have the potential to benefit students' long-term career development and in particular, enhance their readiness for a future in relation to Asia. The findings point to many instances in which students' professional and personal selves have been shaped and reshaped through engagement with the host communities. However, how to maximise the potential benefit of study abroad via the NCP into students' future career outcomes and bridging the gap between students' self-perceived employability and actual employment outcomes remains a critical question. This paper puts forward a number of practical recommendations for universities and related stakeholders to assist students in translating the experiences, learning and connections gained through the New Colombo Plan into real career outcomes for students. It stresses the need to ensure that there is a close relationship between the student mobility unit and the career support service. It also underscores the importance of a coordinated and systemic framework to integrate study abroad experiences into pedagogy and other support services rather than treating them as stand-alone add-ons.

In this paper, the term 'Asia' is used in relation to this research, which focuses on Asian countries while 'Indo-Pacific' is used to refer to policies on the New Colombo Plan, which focuses on the Indo-Pacific region, including Asia, the Pacific and the subcontinent (Tran & Vu, 2018).

Study abroad and employability

The European Council (2012, p. 4) defined employability as “a combination of factors which enable individuals to progress towards or enter employment, to stay in employment and to progress throughout their careers”. Various studies indicate the impact of the transformative experiences gained through study abroad on participants' career choices and employability. Focusing on the expansion of the European ERASMUS student exchange program, Parey and Waldinger (2010, p. 220), find that mobility programs may have a potentially large impact on “affecting students' behaviour in their labour market mobility decision”. The authors (2010) argue that students with study abroad experience are more likely to follow their career in the

country of their program or even in a different overseas destination. Such tendencies towards working abroad post-graduation can be attributed to either students' skill sets in relation to a particular context (i.e. language and knowledge of the labour market) or the overall impact of the overseas experience on widening student's horizons.

Gaining global work-ready skill sets is often regarded as an advantage that can potentially be achieved through either acquisition of overseas learning/work experience or graduation from overseas universities. Potts (2018) identifies and analyses 10 studies published between 2014 and 2018, which explore the link between learning abroad and employability. Based on her analyses, the author (2018, p. 19) concludes that "learning abroad facilitates skills development and provides an environment for applying new and existing skills". Potts points out that learning abroad can "provide a competitive edge in the graduate employment market" in some Anglophone contexts and foster particular skill sets such as "developing capacity in a second language" in some contexts such as Europe and Japan. A study by Matherly (2005) shows that study abroad experiences result in developing various employability attributes, including "increased confidence, adaptability and creativity in problem solving" in alumni (p.30). Similarly, another study by Doorbar (2003) indicates the association of study abroad with interpersonal communication development in participating students.

Scholars (for example, Harder et al., 2015; Orahod, Kruze & Pearson, 2004; Trooboff, Vande Berg & Rayman, 2008) show that employers value study abroad experiences listed on graduates' resumes. Trooboff, Vande Berg and Rayman (2008, p. 29) state in the US, "employers in general, and some classes of employers in particular, place significant value on studying abroad." Another US-based research by Harder et al. (2015) reported that majority of employers in the agriculture and natural resources industries would prefer to recruit candidates with previous study abroad experience. In the field of business, graduates emphasised that mentioning study abroad experience on their CVs, greatly grasps the attention of employers at job interviews (Orahod, Kruze & Pearson, 2004). From this perspective study abroad is a "symbolic capital" (the term coined by Bourdieu, 1986) that improves the position of graduates in an increasingly competitive global employment market.

Bourdieu's theory as a conceptual frame

In this paper, Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus were used to interpret students' perceptions of the potential impact of the NCP experience on their career directions and employability. Three forms of capital: social, cultural and economic were classified by

Bourdieu (1986). (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Social capital refers to the social assets arising from social memberships, networks and relationships. Cultural capital is understood as the skills, knowledge, titles and sensibilities people possess. The concept of cultural capital encompasses the embodied (including language competence and style), the institutionalised (e.g. educational qualifications) and the objectified (including books and artwork) (Bourdieu, 1986). Economic capital is associated with the access to material and financial resources.

In the Bourdieuan scheme, habitus refers to “deeply internalised dispositions, schemas, and forms of know-how and competence, both mental and corporeal, first acquired by the individual through early childhood socialisation” (Swartz, 2002, p. 625). As an individual might possess or aspire to possess a different capital, habitus is also distinct for each individual.

Research Design

The research focuses on two universities across South Australia and Victoria, Australia: one is part of the Group of Eight (Go8), which is a coalition of elite research-intensive Australian Universities, and another is a ‘young’ university among the world’s top universities under 50 years old. Fifty-two semi-structured interviews with NCP students, academics, mobility coordination staff and policymakers were conducted over the two sites. Critical discourse analyses of national and institutional policy texts and policy settings and programmes were also conducted (Gribble & Tran, 2016; Tran & Rahimi, 2018).

After gaining the ethics approval from the university where the research is based, the researchers asked the director of mobility programme and student mobility coordinators from each university to invite undergraduate students who were taking part in the NCP mobility programme, academics, and outbound mobility staff to participate in the study. This paper, however, focuses mainly on the perspectives of NCP students. Student participants came from a range of disciplines, including science, health, humanities, education and business. Participants were involved in either mobility or scholarship programmes. A total of 35 NCP students participated in this study. Both pre-departure and re-entry interviews were conducted with 12 students (n = 24). Re-entry interviews alone were conducted with 23 other students. The recruitment of participants was based on their availability, access and willingness to share their experiences and offer sufficient information. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. The participants’ names and institutions are kept anonymous to protect their identity. The

interview with NCP students focused on their motivations to undertake international mobility through the New Colombo Plan, types of learning and engagement in Asia, effects of learning in Asia on their career pathways and access and equity.

All the interviews were audio-taped with participants' consent. They were then transcribed, entered to NVivo and analysed using *open coding* of responses to interview questions. This open coding method via NVivo enabled thematic analysis to identify patterns and different stakeholders' perspectives.

Discussion of Findings

Existing literature on outbound mobility on students' career outcomes and employability is mainly restricted to research in the European contexts, especially ERASMUS programs (Potts, 2016). The current study provides an Australian perspective about this aspect of mobility programs through the perceptions of NCP student participants, who are generally positive about the effects of the program on their *career orientation* and *employability prospects*.

Career orientation

In this study, NCP student participants provide vivid accounts of how their abroad sojourn contributes to the (re)orientation of their future career:

[Going over] there made me more excited about moving overseas to teach. It was always a dream of mine to move overseas and teach anyway but I guess going to Malaysia enhanced that dream that little bit more because it made me think, "Well you know what, this is the focus, I'm still going to go overseas." It's not really my plan to teach in Australia, probably not until I've got that experience then I'll come back. So in that sense I guess teaching overseas rather than here that's just where I see myself in life. (Ingrid, Teacher Education, Malaysia) (Emphasis added in italics)

It was really eye opening in the fact that I realised how much international business actually interests me. I think it was probably the most interesting subject that I've done at university so far. Like just seeing how this economy is--it's a completely different emerging economy and how they face different struggles compared to what we face in Australia. I feel like I've got a much more--my career focus will be more focused on international business now that I've done a study tour like this. (Jane, International Business, Thailand)

...also, actually for me it's more opened up the doors to one day want to teach in Asian countries, because prior to this I was more inclined to move away to go to English speaking countries, so across to Europe, England or the Americas. But that's opened up Asia and I think I do want to go back to Malaysia or somewhere close, somewhere near there. So it definitely changed my views on where I want to be in the future, what I want to do as well. (James, Teaching Science, Malaysia)

In light of Bourdieu's theory, students' 'new' experience of discipline/profession-related engagement in transnational fields integrates with their habitus ('a dream of mine'-Brigid or 'prior' inclination to teach in Anglo countries-Scott), and exerts different influences. The interview excerpts above indicate multiple ways in which the students' habitus about their future career has been affected following their NCP participation. Specifically, the NCP experience is reported to *enhance* their career habitus ('made me more excited about moving overseas to teach... – Ingrid), *transform* the habitus ('it was really eye opening...I realised how much international business actually interests me... my career focus will be more focused on international business' - Jane), or *modify* the habitus ('it definitely changed my views on where I want to be in the future, what I want to do as well' – James). By looking at students' habitus, these research findings lend a new perspective to support previous studies that endorse the positive effects of the sojourn abroad, such as fostering students' motivation for their chosen career direction (Potts, 2015) or clarifying their imagination about their future career (Brandenburg, et al., 2014) and decision about their future professional pursuits (Ingraham and Peterson, 2004).

In addition, it is shown from the current study that the NCP experience draws students' attention to Asia as 'where' they see their future career to be ('I guess teaching overseas rather than here that's just *where* I see myself in life' – Ingrid, and 'it definitely changed my views on *where* I want to be in the future, what I want to do as well' – James). This finding reinforces the association between international study experiences and an international career that has been suggested in various prior studies (Jahr & Teichler, 2007; Norris & Gillespie, 2009; Orahood, Woolf & Kruze, 2004; Wiers-Jenssen, 2008).

The current research highlights that there could be a possible linkage between the destination of abroad learning and future career, as the NCP experience in Asian countries apparently encourages students to develop *Asia*-oriented career plans. The students' accounts also point to the interconnection between mobility, sense of place, growing understanding and connection to the host country and their professional identity. In this regard, the students reveal how their professional identity attached to their career aspiration is refined and redefined due to their exposure to and increased connection with the host country. The NCP experience thus provides students the cultural capital to pursue careers beyond the traditional ones, which are often defined by national parameters, given their pre-existing habitus and its connection to their place of origin. A growing sense of place, growing awareness of the 'other' culture, hands-on

experience and growing connections with Asia seem to open up a space of ‘new normal’ for career aspirations and trajectories for the students.

For some students, the international experience has the potential to spark a new interest in a career direction (Dwyer, 2004):

It was definitely a worthwhile experience. I learnt a lot about India and I also learnt stuff that I hadn't even asked questions for, I learnt about and it open my eyes to different areas of work in international health. And like things that I might be interested in *pursuing in my career at some point.* (Kristine, International Health, India)

Well, now I understand that it's really beneficial for people like me. I don't think it's really all that beneficial for the place I go to at the time. *It's more beneficial for me when I come back and I have these I guess inspiring ideas and more understanding about maybe where I want to go and do in the future.* It could also just be more of a deterrent for teaching as I learn more about I guess the bad constructions there are in all education systems. But, really this gives me, it more just opened my eyes up I guess would be the best thing out of it. James, Teaching Science, Malaysia)

Interestingly, as shown in the second quote above, the student indicated that the change or the new interest in career orientation did not take place during the in-country experience but after he came back to Australia. This shows the importance of developing a pedagogy underpinning the whole cycle of study abroad including the re-entry stage to guide and support students in engaging in critical reflection, specific activities and explicit thinking about the effects of study abroad on their professional growth, their awareness of the professional self and career possibilities. This finding aligns with Tran and Rahimi's (2018, p.13) argument about the critical need to develop “a more structured and coherent approach to learning abroad that involves not only students but also mobility offices and academics from both the home and host universities/organisations to support deep and continuing engagement, learning, and capacity building during and after international mobility experiences.”

Ways of interpreting disciplinary knowledge and international outlooks

A distinct effect of engagement in study abroad via the NCP indicated by some students is how it helps to provide them with an exposure to different approaches to disciplinary knowledge and instil an international outlook on their discipline-specific learning and professional field:

[N]ow *having gone to China I think that I'm interested in the context of public health in an international sense* as well. So maybe that's something I will pursue as a career later on in life. (Laura, Law-Health Sciences Double Degree, China)

Differences between research they do in Japan compared to Australia, research skills, things that are good for my employability... the study tour helps with my academic learning because [I am exposed to] different kinds of oceanography in Japan (Melissa, Science, Japan).

I thought it was a really great opportunity thinking about *my future career*, seeing as you know the world becoming so globalised I guess. I just wanted a bit of an *experience and an insight* into another country's health issues, and how they're going about tackling their issues pretty much, and then hopefully I'll be able to have some knowledge that can sort of be applied in an Australian setting, or be more knowledgeable about health on a more international scale I guess. [Health, Paul, Health Sciences, India)

Being exposed to alternative approaches to disciplinary knowledge and possibly some contrasts in professional practices in Asia may stimulate students' minds and provoke new thoughts in how things can be done differently in different contexts. Such an exposure fosters the condition to nurture the development of students' international perspectives to disciplinary learning, different or alternative approaches to curriculum-specific issues, international outlooks and comparative and reflective capabilities that are of growing importance for a career in an increasing globalised work environment. However, professional learning may not occur naturally during the international experience without appropriate and purposeful pedagogy to engage students in learning. Tran (2013) stresses the need to design specific learning activities across different stages of learning, including the re-entry, to assist students with the development of international outlook and productive comparative perspectives that are useful to their professional learning. These activities should focus on engaging students in discussing and comparing the professional practices shaped by the different national, political and socio-cultural context to which students are exposed and draw implications for their professional development.

Development of experiential learning, networking and cross-cultural understandings

Students highlighted that study abroad through the NCP provides them with the opportunity to develop international hands-on experience and overseas networking that could help enhance their employability:

Yeah, because it's all about making connections and getting your name out there so that when you graduate *it's all about who you know*, so that's really what's motivating me. (Janet, Primary Education, Malaysia)

Well that was definitely a plus but I think for me, it was the real world experience. Because I don't really get placement in my course unless I do an internship or something like that. So to be able to study and get *real world/hands on* experience, that was a definitely win win situation for me. Also the *networking with people overseas, I feel like that could be very beneficial for graduands*, like me, at the end of the year. (Helen, Environmental Health, India)

"I guess the main thing was to get some *hands-on experience* and to grow as a health professional. I just think it'd be a really, really good experience and to open my mind to the health issue, as there's such a difference between the health issues, between Australia and abroad. (Caitlin, Health Science, India)

International experience clearly provides students with rich authentic learning environments. In this case, students are provided with the opportunity to be exposed to what is actually happening in a real context related to their study subject but in an overseas setting. International situated learning presents enormous potential for students to develop professional and cultural capitals, ranging from hands-on experience, disciplinary specific knowledge, international perspectives, cultural understanding and networking. However, learning is not simply achieved through observation or engagement in the experience but more from opportunities for them to engage in analysis, discussion and critical reflection of the context.

Other students referred to the development of cross-cultural understandings and professional and personal self as potentially enhancing their employability:

I know its two completely different worlds but it's allowed me to kind of be more mindful of other people and their cultures and yeah. (Mary, Health, India)

And I guess *I'll just grow professionally* and as a person, to be able to do something like this...". (Caitlin, Health, India)

NCP experience as value for employers

A distinctive value of the NCP experience on the students' employment and professional competence is their perception of its attractiveness to employers. In the following excerpts, the

students elaborated on how they perceived their engagement in the NCP program would be valued by employers:

I think *employers want to know that you've got that experience, you've been outside of Australia as well, you've seen diversity, you've seen culture and you can bring that knowledge and experience straight into the work field as well.* Like even in, just like working in Geelong or Bendigo, there's always diversity and you've got to learn to work with people with all different backgrounds and abilities. (Joe, Health, India)

I remember when I had my interview over the phone, both *people that I spoke to were quite impressed about that and they thought, "Wow, what an amazing opportunity you got to go somewhere, like a different country to teach for three week. I think that's fantastic."* And because London is so multi-cultural as well with kids from different backgrounds *it's good to bring that to the table and be able to, you know, when I go there and teach there I'll be more culturally sensitive around those kids because I've been around it before.* (Ingrid, Teacher Education, Malaysia)

Anyone who I've spoken to so far about getting a job as a nurse next year said that *my experience in Nepal will stand out, because no one would have had an opportunity like that in my course, because not many people do the double degree...my ability to transfer the skills that I learnt over there, like overcoming challenges and stuff like that, I know that that will bring confidence into my nursing practice as well.* (Charlotte, Nursing, Nepal)

These students, of different disciplines, all contend that the intercultural and professional experience gained from their NCP participation add value to their employability. They are or become aware that their acquisition of 'career capital' (Inkson & Myer, 2005) such as knowledge, skill and attributes related to their profession, intercultural competence ('diversity, culture') (Joe), cultural sensitivity (Idgrid) and self-confidence (Charlotte) can potentially be valued by future employers. Janet, particularly, was successful in her job application. In particular, a student links the development of flexibility and adaptability to her potentially enhanced employability. She explicitly mentioned 'the flexibility in working in different environments and in different countries' gained through the mobility program will make her more work ready in today's changing and globalised work environment.

Students also made links between the international work placement and the enhancement of their resumes:

And having it on *my resume* is such a great thing to show that, you know, I really do care about what I want to do and that I will go the extra lengths. (Janet, Primary Education, Malaysia)

The key benefits? It was insightful. It provided me with just a good opportunity so it looks good *on a resume* and I've just had a placement and stuff like that, so it's kind of all led onto that. (Mary, Health, India)

The participants see international internships as not only enabling them to have insights into the real world practices overseas but interestingly as an indication of their positive attitude towards their professional learning and willingness to go extra miles to develop their professional capabilities and experiences. In other words, an international experience in this case is regarded as a symbolic capital that helps to present themselves positively for prospective employers. Existing literature also suggests students are attracted by the value of study abroad on their résumés (Chew & Croy, 2011; Mulvey, 2012).

Concluding Remarks and Practical Recommendations

The findings from this study shows that New Colombo Plan students see their employability being potentially enhanced thanks to the development of new or different perspectives on disciplinary knowledge, new outlooks, experiential learning, networking, cross-cultural understandings in Asia and critical skills and attributes, in particular, the flexibility to operate in different environments. There is initial evidence that effective engagement with Asia through the NCP and continuing learning post return enables the development of Asia-oriented/Asia-aware mindset in students' career directions. Meaningful engagement and sustainable learning in Asia and beyond the mobility experience helps to foster students' motivation for their chosen career direction, ignite new interest in a career direction or clarify their imagination regarding their future career. Participation in a well-designed mobility program or internship provides students with the opportunity to acquire important disciplinary knowledge and practical experience potentially valued by employers. Increasingly, employers are seeking graduates who have relevant discipline related work experience and the internship component of NCP is regarded as a distinct strength of the program. While study abroad has the potential to enhance graduate employability, more structured and sustainable support and guidance are required in order to equip students with the capability and approaches to translate their mobility experiences into the skills, attributes and competencies valued by employers and meaningful to their life and communities with which they engage. Study abroad can only be regarded as a 'rite of passage' for students if they are supported to use 'these experiences to better effect into the future' (Forsey et al., 2012:137). Tran and Rahimi (2018) stress the importance to "move beyond the ideological frame and normative assumption that increased understanding of the Indo-Pacific, learning and engagement with it will automatically happen" (P.13) and employability will automatically be enhanced simply by sending students to the region. Reflection, continuing learning and sustaining connections are among the key features to truly realise the maximum impact of these experiences for the students.

Recommendations for Practice

Institutions have a key role to play in ensuring the experiences gained through the New Colombo Plan are translated into real career outcomes for students. This study further reinforces the need to integrate study abroad experiences into pedagogy and other support services rather than treating them as stand-alone add-ons.

As study abroad experiences are still only available to a small but growing minority of students, institutions should pay close attention to continuing to build participation. If participation does not increase (including to under-represented groups), the employability benefits demonstrated in this study will continue to be unavailable to most students. This represents an ongoing equity concern.

Strategies for institutions to consider may include:

At this institutional level, ensuring study abroad is considered alongside other initiatives intended to boost employability such as internships and work integrated learning.

Explicitly promoting study abroad experiences as career development opportunities in addition to their benefits in terms of discipline content, global experience and intercultural development.

Ensuring there is a close relationship between the student mobility unit and the career support service. Employability programs for students before their study abroad experience can help them understand the employment value of experiences before and as they occur, and support post-return can help students understand and enhance their ability to articulate their own growth and transferrable skills as they relate to their future employment.

Building opportunities for critical reflection of students' learning and experiences into the NCP programs, with explicit guidance provided around employability.

Finding opportunities for students to use the specific experiences and learnings of their NCP experience in courses/subjects undertaken after they return. Such opportunities may include classroom activities where NCP students are invited to reflect on and share their experiences, case studies and assessments building on the insights they gained during their NCP experience.

Where possible, including exposure to international work environments in study abroad experiences. Institutions' international alumni networks can provide a useful resource for this.

DFAT's increased support for alumni through New Colombo Plan Alumni Program is a welcoming move in boosting alumni's ongoing connections with the region and their employability. There is scope for DFAT and institutions' mobility unit, career service and faculty to work more closely together in optimising the benefits of professional development and networking events and learning opportunities for alumni into real employment outcomes. The combined expertise of these key stakeholders, if effectively tapped on, is crucial to realise the maximum impact of NCP experiences on participants' employability.

Limitation of the research: This study offers valuable insights into NCP students' perspectives on how their short-term mobility or internship has helped them shape or re-shaped their career aspirations and potentially enhance their employability. However, further investigation into the long term impact of the NCP experience on students' career prospects and outcomes after their graduation is recommended to have a more nuanced understanding of the causal relationships between study abroad and employability. A follow-up longitudinal study (2017-2021) by the research team funded by the Australian Research Council is an attempt to respond to this gap.

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