

The Regional Universities Network – Submission to the Menzies Research Centre on the New Colombo Plan

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) supports a new Colombo Plan which would encourage two way student-staff exchanges with the Asia-Pacific.

Any new Colombo plan should involve regional Australian universities and students. RUN strongly endorses the aspiration that, to achieve the goal of developing much stronger links between Australia and the Asia-Pacific, significant numbers of Australian as well as international students from a range of universities, backgrounds and studying various disciplines should participate.

Students and staff exchanges should including regional Australian university campuses – this will enhance the cultural development of regional Australia, as well as enriching and educating participants, and build links between regional Australia and the Asia-Pacific which will enhance economic development.

We consider that the scheme should build on the funding and initiatives the Commonwealth already has in place, but with rebranding and reprofiling to enhance uptake by, in particular, Australian students. The scheme will be greatly enhanced by the participation of business, including the offering of internships and potentially full time employment to students following the completion of their studies.

Target countries in the Asia-Pacific

Target countries should include: Indonesia, Philippines, Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Timor Leste, Bhutan, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, as well as others.

Scholarship eligibility

Awards should be merit based and subject to a means test.

Scholarship coverage

The scholarships should be for undergraduate and postgraduate (including masters by course work and higher degree by research) study, and for components of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (e.g. units undertaken either in Australia or overseas, field work etc.). For international students intending to study at regional Australian campuses, preference would be given to students studying in areas of strategic relevance to regional Australia (e.g. health and wellbeing, agricultural and environmental science, mining engineering etc.), subject to merit-based and means test assessment.

Short courses for professionals (e.g. teachers, scientists, academics) wishing to upgrade their skills in particular areas (e.g. language, agricultural science) would also be potentially covered by scholarships. Australian higher degree by research students could be covered for field work overseas, and potentially for dual or joint degrees with universities in Australia and in relevant Asia-Pacific countries.

Awards would vary in duration from 3 months to 4 years.

Scholarship benefits

The scholarships would cover tuition fees and provide a living allowance for both foreign and Australian students for up to 4 years of full-time study.

Scholarship management and administration

The responsible, funding Australian Government department / agency would manage the scholarships, including issues around applications, means testing, funding etc. Funding would be from the Foreign Affairs portfolio.

Universities (both in Australia and in relevant Asia-Pacific countries) would implement the program and agree on placement of students.

Quality issues

The quality of institutions and courses would be assessed under the Australian Government's Australia Education International NOOSR framework. Reference would also be made to any register of approved institutions in eligible countries. The issue of recognition of credit towards Australian degrees would be addressed by the Academic Boards, Councils and Executives of participating Australian universities, and with reference to the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and the Australian Qualifications Framework as required.

Other

Implementation of a new Colombo Plan in regional Australian universities would be enhanced if an incoming government also adopted various other policies RUN is advocating to attract more international students to regional universities, including:

- Providing additional bonus points to students towards Australian residency for attending regional campuses, particularly for those studying in areas of regional skills need;
- Extending the work rights of international students who study in non-metropolitan locations; and
- Providing work rights to students who have completed a bachelors or masters at a regional campus regardless of the duration of study.

Dr Caroline Perkins

Executive Director, Regional Universities Network