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Australia's Pacific scholarships as a tool of statecraft: student perspectives

Priestley Habru, Wilhelmina Utukana,
Feagaimaalii Soti Mapu, Jim Tawa Biliki, and Epo Mark

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Introduction

Australia and its partners are concerned about the ‘crowded and complex’¹ geopolitics of the Pacific Islands, and the perception that they need to compete with China for ‘influence’ in the region. In response, each is deploying a web of tools of statecraft to try to improve their relationships with Pacific states and peoples.²

One of these tools of statecraft is soft power, the ‘intentional deployment of mostly non-material resources to influence recipient states, actors, or individuals to develop positive beliefs, attitudes, and/or opinions about the partner state, or the partner state’s worldview.’³ A key tool of soft power deployed by the Australian Government is its attempts to develop ‘people-to-people connections’ between Australia and Pacific Islands countries.⁴ It identifies education, sports, media, cultural, and church partnerships as integral to these connections.

Education is the most longstanding and well-developed aspect of Australia’s people-to-people connections in the Pacific. In the region, Australia partners with the University of the South Pacific, the region’s pre-eminent tertiary institution, and funds the Australia Pacific Training Coalition (APTC) to provide vocational education. The Australia Awards provide opportunities for Pacific peoples to study at Australian and Pacific tertiary institutions. The Australian

Government also provides scholarships for Pacific Islands students to study at Australian tertiary institutions through the Australian Government Research Training Program International Fee Offset Scholarship and the Australian Government Research Training Program International Scholarship.⁵ In 2020 the Australian government also created the Pacific Secondary School Scholarships Program to fund Pacific students to attend Australian secondary schools.

¹Pacific Islands Forum, ‘Boe Declaration on Regional Security’, 2018, <https://www.forumsec.org/2018/09/05/boe-declaration-on-regional-security/>

²Joanne Wallis, Henrietta McNeill, Alan Tidwell, and Czes Tubilewicz, *Statecraftiness: weaving webs of statecraft in the Pacific Islands*, Adelaide: Stretton Institute, 2022, <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/stretton/ua/media/665/statecraftiness.pdf>

³*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁴Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, ‘Building a stronger and more united Pacific family’, 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific>

⁵Department of Education, ‘Research Training Program’, 2023, <https://www.education.gov.au/research-block-grants/research-training-program>

This paper focuses on the Australia Awards as a soft power tool of statecraft. The Awards explicitly aim to 'build an engaged influential global network of leaders, advocates and change-makers and establish a network of ambassadors across the world'. Therefore, one of the intended outcomes of the program is 'Alumni viewing Australia, Australians and Australian expertise positively'.⁷

The developmental benefits of scholarships are clear – with investments in education outcomes widely recognised as leading to improvements in employment, health, the empowerment of women and girls, and increased earnings for individuals, and in economic growth, social cohesion, and institutional strengthening for societies.⁸

But less well-understood is whether, and how, scholarships are an effective tool of statecraft for Australia, and other states, seeking to improve their relationships with Pacific states and people. Does giving a Pacific student a scholarship improve that person's perception of Australia?

This policy paper is written by a former Australia Award recipient, Priestley Habru from Solomon Islands, and incorporates the voices of Epo Mark from Papua New Guinea, Feagaimaalii Soti Mapu from Samoa, and Wilhelmina Utukana and Jim Tawa Biliki from Solomon Islands. As Epo, Feagaimaalii, Wilhelmina, and Jim are current recipients of Australia Awards, their comments have been anonymised. In this paper, they discuss:

- their experiences of their scholarships and studies in Australia;
- how holding one of these scholarships has shaped their opinion of Australia (and Australians); and
- what they plan to go on and do after their studies.

The reflections of these students will help Australians and other policymakers and analysts to better understand how scholarships are perceived by their recipients, whether they effectively improve their recipients' opinions of Australia, and what might need to be changed to improve the Australia Awards Scholarship program.

⁶Australia Awards, Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook, January 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/aus-awards-scholarships-policy-handbook.pdf>, p. 22.

⁷Australia Awards, Australia Awards Scholarships Surveys: 2020 Executive Summary Report, 2020, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/australia-awards-2020-student-surveys-exec-summary>, p. 9.

⁸The World Bank, 'Education', 2023, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/overview#:~:text=For%20individuals%2C%20education%20promotes%20employment.institutions%2C%20and%20fosters%20social%20cohesion>

What are the Australia Awards?

The Australia Awards consist of three prestigious international scholarship schemes:

Australian Awards Scholarships (AAS), which fund students to study at Australian tertiary institutions, the Australia Awards Pacific Scholarships (AAPS), which fund students to study at Pacific tertiary institutions, and Short Courses. The Australian Awards are administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR).⁹

The Australia Awards aim to contribute to the long-term development needs of Australia's partner countries, in line with global, bilateral, and regional agreements.¹⁰

In 2022, 1,235 scholarships were provided for long-term study in Australia, 484 of which went to people from Pacific Island countries (240 of whom were from Papua New Guinea).¹¹ A snapshot of the top 10 recipient countries of the Australia Awards Scholarships in 2022 is displayed on the following page:¹²

⁹Australia Awards, Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Australia Awards, Information Brief: Australia Awards, 2022, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/sites/default/files/australia-awards-statistical-profile.pdf>

¹²Ibid.

Top 10 represented countries - Australia Awards Scholars in Australia (3/02/2022)

Rank	Country	# of current scholars	% of total scholars	Female	Male	TVET	Undergrad	Postgrad
1	Indonesia	156	26	84	72	0	0	156
2	Papua New Guinea	46	8	23	23	0	4	42
3	Kiribati	43	7	31	12	5	24	14
4	Samoa	40	7	25	15	0	39	1
5	Solomon Islands	39	7	23	16	0	26	13
6	Myanmar	36	6	23	13	0	0	36
7	Vietnam	31	5	17	14	0	0	31
8	Tonga	22	4	18	4	0	0	22
9	Laos	18	3	12	6	1	0	17
10	Nauru	16	3	8	8	0	13	3
-	All other countries, total	151	24	76	75	0	31	120
-	All countries, total *	598	100	340	258	6	137	455

* = Total number includes ACIAR scholarships

The AAS priority study areas are usually premised upon each individual country's critical human resource gaps¹³ and development needs in collaboration with the Australian Government. For instance, Papua New Guinea's priority sectors are agriculture, education, governance, health, law and justice, transport and infrastructure.¹⁴ People with Disabilities are also encouraged to apply, as well as women, with the goal of graduates taking up leadership roles and contributing to the development needs of their respective countries.

¹³Australia Awards, 'Australia Awards Papua New Guinea', 2023, <https://www.australiaawardspng.org/>.

¹⁴Ibid.



Why did the students apply for an AAS?

One of the most important factors that the students identified when discussing why they applied for the AAS is the proximity of Australia to their own respective countries, with one noting that, even if they had not received the AAS, "I personally would have still chosen to study in Australia because not only did it offer quality education, but it is also geographically closer to home." Another commented that, "if there is any option to study elsewhere outside Australia, to be frank, I would not accept it". Similarly, another observed that:

"Australia is adjacent to Solomon Islands, the Melanesian sphere's closest neighbour, and the island nation employs the same technical standards in infrastructure as Australia. Even if a scholarship were available to study in the United States or Europe, I would still prefer to study in Australia since I feel a much greater connection with the country than with other countries".

The students also identified the perceived quality of Australia's education system as influential, with one noting that "my reason for coming to study in Australia is because of its high-quality reputation of providing high-quality education and research, diverse culture, and welcoming atmosphere".

The students also saw Australia as an attractive place to live, with one observing that it is "known for beautiful landscapes and outdoor lifestyles".

The students also explained their choices of study programs which reflected that one of the most common reasons for applying for an AAS was to contribute to their countries' development. One student observed that she intends to return with the knowledge she acquired to help her nation's economy grow. Another student is confident a postgraduate degree from Australia will meet his country's development requirements.

Experiences under the AAS

The students identified positive experiences of their studies in Australia so far as including:

- The opportunity to be taught by lecturers who are well-qualified in their respective fields of work;
- Access to quality support services like counselling and rich academic resources; and
- The convenience of reliable transportation, fast internet, and customer services.

The students also appreciated the knowledge and skills they feel they are gaining from their studies, and the world class qualifications that Australian universities provide. One student was pleased with the work experience they had been able to gain while on their student visa.

One student observed that Australian universities embrace multiculturalism which helps with the language barrier, cultural differences, and settling well into studies very quickly.

The students have also experienced some challenges. The most common were the difficulty of adapting to new norms of learning environment and the lack of availability of courses relevant to their interest, or their “nation’s development priority”.

However, some of the students also faced unconscious biases, racism, and difficulty finding relevant work experience alongside their studies.



Satisfaction with entitlements under the AAS

The students are generally satisfied with their entitlements as recipients of the AAS. This is also reflected in the Australia Awards Scholarships Surveys.

One student said the AAS is one of the best scholarships that is offered in the Pacific Islands, as it includes tuition and living expenses that covers every basic need. "Not only that but reunion fares as well where students can return home to visit families."

The lead author was a former recipient of an AAPS and an AAS and can attest to the benefits of these prestigious scholarships.

The benefits that AAPS recipients receive when studying at tertiary institutions in the Pacific is greater than what is received by fellow 'wantoks' who are under other scholarship schemes such as those sponsored by their national governments. For instance, an AAPS recipient gets a fortnightly allowance while studying at the University of the South Pacific, whilst a Solomon Islands Government (ISIG) sponsored student gets a monthly stipend, which is sometimes delayed depending on available funds from the sponsoring government. Supplementary stipends such as for establishment costs and family accompaniment are also covered under AAPS. However, under AAS, the stipend does not increase if a recipient brings family members with them whilst

studying in Australia. The primary AAS recipient under a student visa and his or her dependants are allowed to work for up to certain hours.¹⁵

Despite the satisfactions of students under AAS, they all recommended an increase to their stipend due to the rising cost of textbooks, rental market, and food prices in Australia. One commented that:

"I recommend adding to the scholarship an increase in allowance at the beginning of each academic year to cover academic expenses such as textbooks which cost over a hundred dollars and Grammarly which is a software to correct grammar useful for assignments".

Another student suggested that increasing students' funding under AAS would significantly improve their education outcomes because financial challenges can impact on students' academic performance.

¹⁵Australia Awards, *Scholarships Surveys, 2020 Executive Summary Report*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/australia-awards-2020-student-surveys-exec-summary>

¹⁶Department of Home Affairs, 'Check visa details and conditions', 2023, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/already-have-a-visa/check-visa-details-and-conditions/see-your-visa-conditions#>



Recommendations for enhancements to the AAS

While generally satisfied with their experiences under the AAS, the students identified ways in which the AAS could be enhanced to both improve their experience and the outcomes of their studies.

While AAS Alumni support groups in each country and the Pacific region supported by DFAT through its embassies and high commissions support new Awardees with pre-departure briefings, and advice on networking, volunteering, and finding employment opportunities and integration training for new graduates, the students felt that more could be done to support them once they arrive in Australia.

Therefore, the students recommended DFAT or ACIAR provide professional training to Pacific awardees relating to the norms and practices of Australian workplaces, accompanied by individualised assistance to help them get work experience while they are in Australia, such as through internships.

The opportunity for Pacific awardees to extend their experience in Australia beyond their studies would both enhance their skills and employability, and allow them to develop professional relationships that they can draw upon once they return to their home countries. This would also benefit Australia, since, as noted above, the Australia Awards aim to 'build an engaged influential global network'.

The students also recommended that DFAT or ACIAR provide opportunities for Pacific awardees while they are in Australia to engage in research collaborations beyond their formal studies on issues of concern to the Pacific Islands, such as climate change and women's leadership. Again, this would enhance the skills of the Pacific awardees, but would also contribute to building networks between Australia and the Pacific that could endure once the students return to their home countries.

Relatedly, the students noted that, due to differences between Australia and their home countries, some of the material that they cover in their studies is not necessarily easily applicable to the Pacific context. To help address this, they recommended that their studies could be supplemented by parallel programs that help them to translate the material they are learning into their home context. For example, one student suggested that a tailored, parallel program that covered issues of concern in the Pacific, such as combatting environmental contamination through recycling facilities and sea level rise, would help him to make his engineering studies relevant to his home context.

Similarly, the students recommended that DFAT and ACIAR could offer additional capacity building initiatives such as the Women Leading and Influencing (WLI) programme of AAS.¹⁷ This would boost the confidence and knowledge of Pacific students when they return home. Such programs, one student suggested, should be integrated into the academic curriculum of the institutions at which they study and involve other Pacific Islands students for greater collaboration on issues that they commonly share. "This would open dialogues and possible collaborated research spearheaded by Pacific researchers of more than one country."

Another student proposed that AAS awardees should be allowed to stay in Australia for a year or so after they have completed their studies to gain work experience in their fields. The current offerings of "experiences shared through networking program and LinkedIn is not sufficiently benefitting the awardees. This experience would be helpful in the country of their origin," he suggested.

¹⁷Australia Awards, 'Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative', 2023, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/australia-awards/Pages/australia-awards-womens-leadership-initiative>



Value of the AAS

The students all hope they will be employed under their area of qualifications they are currently studying in Australia.

Furthermore, they wish to contribute their new skills and knowledge to advance the development needs of their respective countries. They believe their knowledge and skills attained in Australian universities are competitive, well-recognised, and can contribute to the development needs of their respective countries. The students also want to build on their networks established during their time in Australia to boost them in their work and their country's relationship with Australia.

The students want to go back and make a difference on their country's education, legal, business, and infrastructure sectors and either join or form networks and

associations with fellow colleagues in their related professions and take leadership roles in whatever careers they will end up in upon completion of their studies.

Some of the students have had work experiences before coming for studies, and thus they want to go back and apply their new set of skills and knowledge to improve the standards of their respective industries or institutions.

One student wants to continue to higher degree research after his current degree to fit well with the Pacific context.

The students are grateful to be selected to take up AAS. They are often selected on merit through vigorous selection process such as interviews and sitting for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).¹⁸

One student observed that Australia's use of education as soft power will further strengthen ties between Australia and the Pacific as a whole.

"The Pacific is small, but we are not as insignificant as we may seem. We offer Australia a unique combination of stability, cultures, and future partnerships that is unmatched elsewhere and can only be offered by someone in the same sphere as Australia. My education will allow me to strengthen these ties for the prosperity of my country, Australia and the Pacific region. As the Australia Awards programme is a prestigious and well-recognized scholarship programme, it is hoped that more scholarship quotas would be allotted in the future for study programs that are associated with climate action as climate change has now become a major threat to our way of life and food security."

¹⁸Australia Awards, *Australia Awards Scholarships Policy Handbook*.



Conclusion

Many AAS alumni in the Pacific have gone on to become prominent leaders in business, government, non-government organisations, regional, and even international organisations and institutions.

While Pacific students' perception of Australia varies, when they graduate and go back to their own countries, they experience the value of their AAS through work promotions and national alumni support groups. Australia's institutions and businesses operating in the Pacific often look for AAS graduates to employ and Australians working in the high commissions or embassies in the Pacific are always active and present in supporting local AAS alumni groups. This reinforces Australia's people-to-people connections with its closest neighbours in the Pacific Islands region beyond universities, colleges, and lecture rooms.

Therefore, education, in this case the AAS, is a key soft power tool of statecraft. This suggests that Australia should maintain, and we argue enhance, the AAS to increase both its developmental value, and its role in improving Australia's relationships in the Pacific Islands region. Our proposed enhancements are:

- Increasing the number of AAS offered to Pacific Islands recipients. Only a relatively small number of Awards are made in each Pacific Island country each year (except Papua New Guinea, which has a much higher population).
- Increasing the value of Awardees' entitlements under the AAS to reflect the rising cost of living in Australia.
- Offering professional development and targeted assistance to facilitate Awardees developing their professional skills and gaining work experience while in Australia.
- Allowing students to stay in Australia for a year after their studies to gain professional experience.
- Offering parallel programs that help Awardees to translate the material they are learning into their home context.

About the authors

Priestley Habru is a PhD scholar in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Adelaide.

Wilhelmina Utukana is completing a Bachelor of Law at the University of Adelaide.

Feagimaalii Soti Mapu is completing a Bachelor of Philosophy, Politics and Economics at the University of Adelaide.

Jim Tawa Biliki is completing a Master of Engineering at the University of Adelaide.

Epo Mark is completing a Master of Education at the University of Adelaide.

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