

## Australian Awards: Sacred cow in an age of uncertainty?

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### Background

The Australian government's longstanding development scholarship program, the Australia Awards (AA), is premised on achieving both development and foreign policy objectives, including building 'soft-power diplomacy'; involving strengthened regional and diplomatic ties through higher education programmes; and people-to-people linkages. The program is aligned to the overall development policy targeting the promotion of prosperity, reducing poverty and enhancing stability. In this paper development is described as a form of progress, moving towards something considered better, or a form of 'good change', a change that is meaningful, relevant, people-centred and with outcomes that meet the specific development context (Chambers 2004).

This paper examines the AA program in the context of significant funding cuts to the aid budget that took place during the 2014–15 financial year. During that time, predicted cuts of \$11 billion increased by an additional \$3.7 billion announced later that financial year. While commitments to the aid program were uncertain in the lead up to 2016 budget announcements, funding for the AA program for 2015–16 was set at \$360 million, a decline from the previous year's allocation of \$371 million, providing for around 4,500 scholarships and fellowships (DFAT 2016).

In the same financial year, other programs also incurred significant funding cuts including cuts to NGO, volunteer and community programs, together accounting for \$176 million. Of particular note are cuts to the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program, which has similar aims to the AA program including building capacity and people-to-people linkages, albeit with a different approach. Despite findings that the AVID program is cost effective, contributes significantly to capacity building and people-to-people linkages, and generates goodwill in terms of foreign diplomacy, commitment to this program dropped from \$56.6 million in the 2014–15 year to \$39.6 million in 2015–16 (DFAT 2014). In relative terms the AA award program receives around nine times the allocation provided to the AVID program.

### Introduction

This paper considers the rationale for upholding the status of the AA programme as a DFAT investment priority that continues to command higher priority compared with other capacity building and community development initiatives. The paper reviews the AA program in the context of Australian national interest, as returns to the Australian economy to date have lacked transparency and accountability in terms of development outcomes, including the aim to develop people-to-people linkages.

To address these issues, the paper identifies a number of practical interventions that have the potential to strengthen development outcomes of the program. Such interventions can inform bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, educational policy makers, higher education institutions and research scholars. Development effectiveness relating to the AA program can be strengthened by: improving the alignment of development objectives with selection of awardees; early preparation for repatriation; and subsequent contribution to nation building which emphasises long term sustainability. To enhance the sustainability of the AA, it is incumbent on policy makers and practitioners, in both the host and recipient countries, to address ongoing concerns that a weak enabling environment is hindering knowledge transfer after the repatriation of awardees to their home country.

## Methodology

To examine the AA program, this paper draws on secondary program and policy documentation and related empirical data from a case study of the Indonesian AA program (Medica 2016). Although the case study focused primarily on cultural adjustment issues, this paper considers the AA program in the context of the overall aid program and development effectiveness. Data was collected in 2011–12. Responses from 60 informants were analysed in relation to their experience of the program, focusing on reintegration. Specific feedback from AA alumni related to:

- their motivation for undertaking the program;
- re-entry challenges they faced following repatriation;
- details of people-to-people linkages maintained since completing the program; and
- recommendations for program improvements.

Data was disaggregated by gender and time and coded to identify emergent themes pertaining to the logic for the AA program. The emphasis on a qualitative research approach was used to better understand the program context from the perspective of the beneficiaries.

## The Australia Awards program—long term scholarships

Foreign aid funded scholarships have been a feature of Australia's aid to the Asia Pacific region since the emergence of the Colombo Plan in 1951. Since then, scholarships have assisted individuals from a range of developing countries to undertake studies at Australian education institutions. Development scholarships form a significant element of Australian aid, with more than 10,000 scholarships provided over the past 50 years. These awards are the principal bilateral aid mechanism by which Australia provides scholarship assistance for international students to undertake higher education studies in Australia. The AA program is implemented in over 30 countries, across regions of Asia, Pacific, Africa and the Middle East. Fields of study strategically target human resource and development priorities agreed in national plans of Australia's bilateral partner countries.

The AA program seeks to develop capacity and leadership skills so individuals can contribute to economic and social development in their home country and build people-to-people linkages at individual, institutional and country levels. The program aims to equip scholars with skills and knowledge to drive change and influence sustainable development outcomes in their own countries. Graduates are required to return home after completing their awards. It is assumed their educational sojourn in Australia will contribute to their nation building.

In 2015, DFAT provided 1,676 long term AA scholarships, around 90 per cent of which were at post-graduate level, including masters and doctoral level. The leading country for Australia Awards long term scholarships is Indonesia, followed by Vietnam and Papua New Guinea. The majority of awardees typically come from government, however in recent times the program has increased efforts

to seek participation from the private sector. The average total cost per long term scholarship award ranges from \$130,000 for a masters course work program to \$272,000 at doctoral level (DFAT 2016).

Benefits of an AA scholarship usually include:

- return airfares to Australia for the scholarship recipient;
- pre-departure programs, including English and cultural programs;
- an establishment allowance;
- introductory academic programs;
- contributions to living expenses;
- overseas student health cover;
- study enrichment allowances for fieldwork;
- conference support funding;
- tuition fees contingencies to cover extensions; and
- thesis preparation and supplementary academic support for some recipients.

Management of the AA program is often through an appointed contractor funded to provide country-specific support, promote the awards, pre-select awardees through annual competitive selection rounds, place students in Australian higher education institutes, deliver pre-departure and reintegration programmes and report on program performance. In addition to benefits funded by the Australian aid program, many awardees receive stipends from their government employers, on the basis they will return to their previous employment after completion of the program.

Currently, DFAT statistics indicate around 97 per cent of alumni return to their home country. These retention statistics should, however, be viewed with caution as the Australian government is only able to check movements in and out of Australian borders and some awardees resettle in third countries, even within the mandated return period (Medica, 2016). Notwithstanding this, the majority of awardees complete the program and return to their home country to form part of an extensive global AA alumni network.

## Promoting Australian national interests

The AA program is built around the logic that developing countries will benefit from aid scholarships, a position that has guided the Australian scholarship program since its inception with the Colombo Plan. Key drivers of the AA program have included an eclectic mix of foreign policy and economic objectives, associated with a neo-liberal, or free market approach. Scholars from the orthodox neo-liberal school would argue that investment in higher education is a key element of the development process to enhance the skills, knowledge, attitudes and motivation necessary to drive forms of economic and social capital accumulation, with 'trickle-down' effects that provide for economic and social development to occur (Stiglitz 2004).

The intended goal for the Australian aid program is to promote Australian national interests through sustainable economic development and poverty reduction. While the AA program generates benefits for its awardees in relation

to enhancing their skills and prospects for employability, there are also significant economic gains for Australia. In 'development-speak' this is often referred to as 'boomerang aid' because funding is tied to benefits for Australia, which flow to Australian higher education institutes and Australian domestic goods and service providers, including contractors. The promotion of Australian national interests is obvious with a significant proportion of funding for the AA program spent within Australia. Added to this are multiplier effects accruing to international education and other spillover effects from increased consumption of Australian goods and services (Medica 2011).

A less realised aim of the program, linked to Australian national interest, is the building of people-to-people linkages. Studies of international students in Australia consistently find Asian students mix more with those of similar cultural background with less evidence of ties or friendship networks with Australians (Kiley 1999, Rosenthal et al. 2007, Medica 2016). There is also an unmet desire for international students to form social connections with host country nationals, particularly in the case of students with independent study programs (Sawir et al. 2008, Shaw 2014).

I think one of the issues that Indonesian or international students have is that they have nothing in common to talk about with Australians when they get there. This is why all of the research shows that their main friends are other international students. It's very hard to initiate conversation with Australians. I think there's a real gulf there, and I think universities work hard to bridge it, with the ubiquitous sausage sizzle, but it needs something more. (Malcolm, AA scholarship informant)

## **The imperative to address development effectiveness**

In spite of a long history of aid funds supporting higher education, there is a lack of compiled data on the outcomes of AA graduates. A recurring theme in Australian National Audit Office Reports (1999, 2011) on the management of the AA program relates to insufficient reporting of outcomes and lack of publicly available performance details despite numerous reviews and evaluations. A global tracer study scheduled to commence in 2016 may provide greater accountability and transparency if its findings are made available in the public domain.

Whilst the impact of the AA program is vague, measuring the return on investment, other than at an individual level, represents a serious challenge. Measurement of attribution is problematic, given the inherent challenge of tracing causality to any one particular intervention. In addition, program impacts can also be attributed to local conditions and policies, adding further complexity in terms of understanding impacts from the AA program.

### *Discussion of findings*

Analysis of data from the study of the Indonesian awards program highlights a number of practical initiatives likely to positively address issues relating to development effectiveness.

### *Optimising selection of awardees*

On paper, awardees tend to allege they are highly motivated to undertake an award to further development aims, yet findings from Indonesian award recipients challenge the authenticity of development-related motivation because their motivation was linked to individual career advancement (Medica 2016). Thirty-five awardees, from a total of 41, reported career as their major motivating factor to apply for the Indonesian program (ibid). There is a discrepancy between student motivation and foreign policy objectives which assume development will be addressed by sponsoring foreign students. As selection criteria are generally weighted around 40 per cent against perceived development outcomes, this finding has program implications, especially in terms of awardee selection. While career advancement is not mutually exclusive to economic and social development, such findings challenge the accuracy of government-commissioned surveys that report motivation is unequivocally linked to home country development (Orima 2012).

Changes to initial screening processes could target improving assessment of an applicant's motivation and commitment to nation building. Given the significant investment in each scholarship awardee, the current practice of interviewing shortlisted candidates in person provides further scope in assessing motivation. As past behaviour can be predictive of future behaviour, inviting award candidates to share evidence of past involvement in development-related activities can assist in selecting awardees with a genuine and demonstrated commitment to social and economic development.

### *Start with the end in mind*

Since reintegration is a critical component and linked to the sustainability and effectiveness of the AA program, re-entry preparation should not be left to the end of the sojourn. Reintegration efforts should at least align with preparations at the 'front-end' of the sojourn, yet, 'too often, reintegration is first considered when a scholar returns home' (AusAID 2011:5). Preparations to repatriate are often overlooked in comparison to efforts in preparing for an educational sojourn.

Re-entry preparations for the AA program extend to formal reintegration programs and informal arrangements to assist awardees in settling back into their home-based organisations and adjust personally and professionally. Reintegration workshops are, however, poorly attended in comparison to pre-departure and orientation programmes (DFAT 2016). Reintegration programs can prepare returnees likely to encounter reverse culture shock, and facilitate ongoing contact with colleagues, especially those who may have shared similar experiences.

### *Strengthening the enabling environment*

Since the vast majority of AA awardees return home following their studies, the enabling environment to ensure they can contribute skills and knowledge gained in Australia is of critical importance, both in terms of the effectiveness of the AA program and in meeting aspirations of the repatriated awardees. The program currently emphasises the 'on-award', in-Australia, phase of the program and

capacity building at an individual level. Repatriation of skills and knowledge is assumed to be a by-product of the program and is often poorly monitored over time.

Findings from several early and recent studies of Australian development scholarships illustrate that repatriation of skills and knowledge can be compromised if there is a weak enabling environment for knowledge transfer and active participation (Keats 1969, Daroesman and Daroesman 1992, Kiley 1999, Cannon 2000, Chalid 2015, Medica 2016). There is also the issue of reverse culture shock related to work place issues (Daroesman and Daroesman 1992, Cannon 2000).

A poor enabling environment is likely to preclude effective transfer of knowledge and skills in the work place, even when awardees are motivated and willing to disseminate knowledge to colleagues (Daroesman and Daroesman 1992, Kiley 1999, Chalid 2015, Medica 2016). Features of the enabling environment encountered by repatriated awardees from Indonesia included internal resistance to change, work place jealousy, and limited time for research activities due to competing priorities, such as administration and contracting to external parties (Medica 2016). Returned awardees have expressed frustration and reverse culture shock due to under-utilisation of their knowledge and skills gained on-Award. This is related to rigid bureaucracies, including outmoded human resource development practices which value progression through time-serving and seniority rather than merit (Chalid 2015). Issues are likely to be exacerbated in the case of female awardees (Nilan 2005, Boey 2014, Medica 2016). Limited access to resources, especially in remote areas, creates further obstacles and diminishes the post-Award experience.

A further risk lies in the potential mismatch between training conducted in Australia and local needs. Alumni from the Indonesian programme were questioned about the relevance of skills and knowledge transferred to the home context. Despite many declaring this to be a good match, there was reservation about the potential to transfer skills to the Indonesian setting and poor facilities the alumni face to implement change.

There's a very good match of what I learned in Australia and its use in Indonesia but it would be much better if we had more opportunities and facilities to actually implement those skills. If we had more facilities and access to everything then the skills would have been much better used. (Banyu, Australia Awards alumni)

## Conclusion

The study of the AA program shows that while it is meeting output requirements, it is remiss in assuming the delivery of awards will in turn contribute to nation building. Issues such as a poor enabling environment appear to be largely ignored. To realise the aims of the program it is incumbent upon donors and recipient governments to devise ways to strengthen the local enabling environment for it to absorb and optimise the transfer of knowledge and skills gained on-Award. In spite of recent efforts to address reintegration challenges, the AA program has demonstrated a level of

inertia with respect to these issues, illustrated by the *status quo* over several iterations of programming in different country contexts.

There is currently a need for reforms to optimise the post-Award experience as reintegration issues continue to undermine the development effectiveness of the AA program and limit possibilities for nation building. Careful selection of awardees to ensure genuine commitment to development and an earlier focus on reintegration offer ways forward to improve sustainable outcomes.

This research highlights the importance of public accountability and transparency, especially in terms of limited and coveted aid dollars. The AA program will continue to compete under conditions of disparity in terms of funding for other initiatives, however this again raises the importance of demonstrating effective development. Tensions between advancing Australian national interests over interests of the poor are becoming more apparent, given the uncertainty of aid allocations that are no longer predictable or targeting poverty alleviation.

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