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Making Soft Power Work: Theory and Practice in Australia's International Education Policy

NATALIE LAIFER

London School of Economics

NICHOLAS KITCHEN

London School of Economics

Policy makers around the world are increasingly concerned with the challenge of cultivating and capitalising on soft power. Yet government efforts to increase others' feelings of attraction toward their countries face conceptual and practical challenges. This article examines Australia's attempt to operationalize soft power in Asia through its international education strategy. Drawing on interviews with key officials, we show how the design of Australia's international education policy was consciously informed by multiple dimensions of soft power. Yet the nature of soft power means that whether the policy will achieve its soft power objectives is up to Asia, not Australia.

Keywords: Australia, Public Diplomacy, Operationalizing Soft Power, International Education, Asia, Theory, Practice, DFAT, Colombo Plan, [Soft Power](#), [Education](#), [Higher Education](#), [Students](#), [International Students](#), [New Colombo Plan](#), [National Strategy for International Education](#), [AIE2025](#), [Australian Global Alumni Engagement Strategy](#).

Soft power has become something of a fascination with foreign policy makers around the world. Initially coined in critique of Paul Kennedy's (1987) materialist decline thesis, Joseph Nye (1990) emphasized the vast reserves of nonmaterial attraction that would enable the United States to continue to lead even as its hard power declined. As economic interdependence has grown and the perceived utility of coercive instruments declined since the end of the Cold War, policy makers have increasingly looked to soft power as a route to securing national interests—

the concept itself proving as seductive as the phenomenon it describes.

Yet operationalizing theoretical concepts as public policy—making soft power work—is challenging (Nye 2007, 171-2). Since soft power is a relational form of power and operates indirectly—through what others find attractive rather than through negotiation of specific demands—the potential sources of soft power are almost limitless, and their influence difficult to determine, particularly in advance of the fact. Critics point out that claims of soft power tend to be associated with the possession of hard power capabilities, and that the “attraction” on which it relies may be underpinned by coercive phenomena (Mattern 2005). Moreover, the policy mechanisms by which states might *change* others’ preferences—to *get* others to want what you want, as opposed to their already wanting what you want—are unclear. Indeed, such has been the proliferation of possibilities for soft power that some scholars view the concept as more a “category of practice” than a “category of analysis,” one that is intuitively useful in policy debates but which collapses under more experience-distant analysis (Hall 2010).

Such conceptual difficulties have not dimmed policy makers’ enthusiasm for capitalizing on soft power. In the West, democratic triumphalism in the 1990s led soft power to be initially operationalized through democracy promotion policies. Increasing the scope for soft power as foreign policy has widened, it now includes diaspora communities, public diplomacy, cultural programming, disaster relief, media, sport, and even the military. Different actors have conceptualized soft power in different ways: from the European Union’s (EU) embrace of “civilian power” as a means to superpower status, to Nye’s own politically-driven synthesis—“smart power” (Armitage and Nye 2007).

Perhaps the country where the term has attracted most interest at a strategic level is China (Minjiang 2008; Shambaugh 2015), with Chinese academics prominent in research interrogating the application of the concept (Wang 2008; Nye and Jisi 2010). The rationale is twofold—to ensure that China's “peaceful rise” is perceived as such; and to benefit from the real economic gains concomitant with positive perceptions (Rose 2016). A clear example of this strategy is sport, with the Beijing Olympics in 2008 a triumph of sustained investment in Chinese sporting success.¹ Most recently, football—that most international of sports, but one in which China has little history—is the object of ambitious government plans to build an \$850bn sporting economy through massive investment in the Chinese Super League, which underpins a 15-year aim of hosting and winning the World Cup (Chadderton and Chapman 2016). Using sport to present a positive national image has led a number of rising powers to prioritize hosting major international sporting events as part of an explicit soft power strategy (Grix and Lee 2013).

Indeed, such has been the willingness of emerging nondemocracies to embrace the language and modes of soft power that some Western scholars regard the concept as having been “hijacked” (Walker 2016). Such academic concerns from liberal institutionalists are reflected in more politically immediate concerns that Western powers may be losing their soft power advantage. In 2014, the United Kingdom's Parliament established a dedicated Select Committee on Soft Power and the United Kingdom's Influence, which based its rationale explicitly on the need to maintain the United Kingdom's standing in the face of the “rise of the rest.” Yet such political activism risks backfiring: one academic witness warned of the danger that explicitly

¹ China tripled its number of Summer Olympic golds from 1996 to 2008, when it topped the medal table at its home Olympics.

seeking soft power might undermine its potential benefits, and concluded that “the more distance the better between the government and a nation's soft power capacity” (UK House of Lords 2014).

This is a major dilemma confronting policy makers eager to cultivate and wield soft power but finding the tools of government rather blunt. It is the subject of soft power that determines its possession: in short, I get to decide whether I find you attractive or not. In large part, that attraction is out of your hands—behavior designed to curry favor is likely to be met with ambivalence at best; or worse, disdain.

If soft power is more about who you are than what you do, agents face particular challenges in operationalizing it. And analysis of soft power that focuses on the agent cannot tell us that soft power works: it can only explicate the strategies by which agents seek to make it work. This article examines Australia's attempt to operationalize soft power through its international education strategy. It seeks to identify how soft power considerations have informed the attendant policies and how surrounding governance arrangements can reinforce or undermine the operationalization of soft power. The article proceeds by first considering the theoretical challenges implied by attempts to operationalize soft power through policy making. It then briefly considers international education as a site of soft power, before discussing the Australian case. Drawing on interviews with key officials, we find that the design of Australia's international education policy was driven by core soft power considerations around relationship building, as well as multiple dimensions of attraction. This is a new departure for Australia: although previous policies have had clearly identified soft power benefits, those had not been the

explicit intent of policy. Today Australia believes it can extract those benefits through policy design, and is explicitly prioritizing soft power in international education. This article examines how Australian policy makers have sought to operationalize soft power in international education policy, and highlights the practical and conceptual challenges they face in making soft power work.

Making Hard Policy for Soft Power

Whilst Nye's nomenclature of "soft power"—and the idea's popularity among contemporary policy makers—is relatively new, the fundamentals are found in the classics of international relations. Classical writers such as Sun Tzu (544-496 BC) and Thucydides (460-395 BC), as well as modern classical realists including Morgenthau (1904-1980) and Carr (1892-1982), exhibit a richness to their conceptions of power that embrace both material and ideational, and coercive and attractive, elements.

Nye's (2011, 19) definition points to the possibility of making policy for soft power by identifying soft power with a particular ability "to affect others to obtain preferred outcomes by the co-optive means of framing the agenda, persuasion and positive attraction." While the use of "ability" may suggest the existence of specific soft power capabilities, Nye's approach is more in keeping with a relational approach to power (Frey 1971) that treats power as the "capacity" to make or to receive any change, or to resist it, within a particular agent-subject relationship (Lukes 2007, 84). This is the essence of Robert Dahl's definition of power—deliberately imitated by Nye—that power is the ability of A to get B to do what B would otherwise not want to do (Dahl 1957).

A key difficulty in such relational approaches to power is that they equate power with success, and in so doing collapse the space within which strategy takes place. To devise policy options, we need to understand what influences *how* an “agent” state relates to a “subject” state. Nye (2006, 2004) provides a continuum of agent state power resources that equate unidirectionally to a continuum of subject state behaviors. He argues that material “sticks,” such as military force or economic sanctions are used to command; material “carrots,” such as bribes, payments, and rewards are used to coerce and induce; and “preference shapers,” including culture, are used to co-opt and attract.

Such an approach may be practically useful for policy makers, but it neglects the intersubjectivity inherent within power relationships. If we admit that what the subject finds attractive is dependent on their context and sense of what is valuable, Nye's one-way explanations suddenly become more complex. This is the crux of Lukes' (2007, 87-92) critique: that Nye's approach fails to distinguish between modes of persuasion and ways of shaping preferences. Whilst nonmaterial capabilities may play a role in the first and second faces of power—those of decision making and agenda setting—soft power is concerned with Lukes' third face, where forces of attraction precipitate the voluntary alteration of preferences (Lukes 2005).

On this point there is, at best, weak theoretical literature explaining what happens between agents and subjects, or resources and the behaviors generated (Vuving 2009). This is a “deficiency in the international relations literature in the operationalization of the concept of soft power” (Wojciuk, Michalek, and Stormowska 2015, 300). As the academic co-chair of the Australia 2020 Summit's Security and Prosperity working group put it, “I don't think anyone

from Joseph Nye down has yet really captured exactly what it is that countries want to achieve through soft power, and how they can go about achieving it.²

One potential way to structure the intersubjectivity inherent in soft power is to think in terms of “power currencies.” Alexander Vuving (2009) proposes three different power currencies that take the form of the portrayal of particular traits of “brilliance,” “beauty,” and “benignity.”

“Brilliance” relates to high performance and perceived achievement by others. It works on the tendency of human beings to learn from the successes of others, considering that if one is more capable than them or than most, learning from them can be both effective and safer. This success may relate to a country’s practices, industries, policies, institutions, values, or vision (Vuving 2009, 10-11). Brilliance generates soft power through the production of admiration, which can lead to imitation or emulation and respect or fear or reverence (Vuving 2009, 8).

“Beauty” relates to the resonance that is evoked between actors who share ideals, values, or visions. It can give actors a sense of warmth, familiarity, self-extension, identity, and community (Vuving 2009, 9). “Beauty can come from a country that acts as the agent of a value, a country that is perceived as the avatar of an ideal, or a country that articulates a vision compellingly. It can then gain credibility, legitimacy and even moral authority as a representative and guardian of the cause” (Vuving 2009, 11). Beauty generates soft power through the production of inspiration.

“Benignity” works on the tendency of reciprocal altruism (Axelrod and Dion 1998) where feelings of obligation to reciprocate or acquiesce are generated through acts of kindness.

² Professor Michael Wesley, Australia National University, interviewed by the authors on July 26, 2016.

Many behaviors are considered benign—from not doing harm to others to more selfless behavior actively supporting others or putting their interests ahead of your own. Benignity generates soft power through the production of gratitude and sympathy (Vuving 2009, 8). It can also reassure others of an agent's peaceful or benevolent intentions, thereby inviting cooperation (Vuving 2009, 9).

The three frames of “brilliance,” “beauty,” and “benignity” are not mutually exclusive: elements of policy—not to mention subject responses—may overlap, reinforce, or cut against each other. However, as a device to evaluate how agents go about operationalizing soft power, they provide a basic typology that can be used to structure a comprehensive analysis.

International Education as Soft Power

International education has long been recognized as a potential source and expression of a state's soft power. The United States promoted student exchange programs and scholarships specifically in order to foster Western elite unity during the Cold War, and universities have been sites of intercultural interaction and diplomatic influence since the Enlightenment, but particularly since their proliferation in the first half of the 20th century. That international education has a soft power impact is presumed and reflected across econometric rankings, and has even played a prominent role in the debate surrounding American decline (Cox 2012).

In contemporary terms, “international education” comprises all the ways that academic systems, institutions, and individuals are responding to an increasingly globalized world (Altbach and Knight 2007). Its key features are student mobility, academic mobility, and institutional mobility (Garam 2012, 16). Nye (2004) argues that “international education” is a

soft power *resource* under the category of “culture.” In this understanding, educational institutions are vehicles to showcase cultural forms.

Others have separated education from culture as a soft power category in its own right, Cowan and Arsenault (2008, 10) going so far as to argue “the provision of educational opportunities for foreign students is one of the most important instruments of soft power of the state.” This reflects international education’s relatively significant weighting in various measures of soft power (McClory 2016). Foreign graduates tend to become highly qualified personnel in their own countries, as a so-called “Trojan horse” (Tremblay 2010, 117), where the original educational exchange generates reputational gains that accrue to a host country when foreign students return home (Atkinson 2010) and advocate on behalf of their host country of study—a positive indirect “ripple effect” (Olberding and Olberding 2010). In research that supports the significance of this mechanism, Amirbek and Ydyrys (2014, 502) found that unfolding political events demonstrated that political leaders show sympathy and favor to the countries where they studied. Miller (2006) makes the simple, yet powerful point that the ability of a country to attract foreign students, or facilitate exchanges, is a powerful tool of public diplomacy in and of itself, even between countries with a history of animosity.

The soft power potential of international education is keenly appreciated by policy makers internationally. The United Kingdom, which has a higher education sector that ranks second only to the United States, has long appreciated the soft power benefits of scholarship schemes such as the Chevening, Marshall, and Commonwealth scholarships (UK BIS 2013). The driving idea behind such programs is to “expose students to British values, culture and diversity”

which can “build a strong, international network of friends of the UK who will rise to increasingly influential positions over the years” (UK House of Lords 2014, para 207). The UK’s hope is that playing a leading role in the education of the next generation of international leaders—particularly those from rising powers—will help maintain its legitimacy as a great power actor even as its relative hard power strength declines.

As the preeminent emerging power, China’s commitment to a “peaceful rise” has driven a sustained interest in soft power in both academic and policy circles (Mingjiang 2008). The signature initiative of China’s soft power approach in international education has been the establishment, funding, and staffing of hundreds of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius Classrooms around the world. Linked directly to universities and schools, they provide language and cultural education (Paradise 2009; Yang 2010). Yet China’s approach—characterized by one American think tank as “soft power with Chinese characteristics” (Glaser and Murphy 2009)—is directive: reports of tight, top-down government control over research and teaching at CIs has generated suspicion among partners that these institutions are for propaganda purposes, rather than genuine learning experiences (Yang 2010, 237-38). The extent to which such perceptions are widespread highlights the difficulty for governments in directing policy and resources in pursuit of soft power ends.

Yet operationalizing soft power requires that states do exactly that: commit resources in ways directed by policy to activate core considerations of the concept (i.e., relationship-building; attraction; brilliance, beauty, and benignity). The remainder of this article considers Australia’s approach, to assess how policy makers approach the challenge of generating soft power through

international education policy.

Australia's International Education Strategy

I remind the 2016 scholars here tonight that your scholarship is only the first part of your journey, for I hope you will maintain and nurture your connections, friendships you make and links in the Indo-Pacific region, including through the alumni program. New Colombo Plan scholars carry great personal dreams and ambition for their future careers. I do not want to lay upon your shoulders too heavy a burden, but you also carry the hopes and ambitions of our nation. (Bishop 2016)

Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, laid out the soft power component of the New Colombo Plan in stark terms: the "hopes and ambitions of our nation" relied on the "connections, friendships and links" that the Colombo scholars would make. Most crucially, they would build those people-to-people relationships "in" the Indo-Pacific region.³ The significance of Australians going to the Indo-Pacific is reinforced by the reference to the "Colombo Plan." Remembered fondly as a demonstration of Australia's willingness to share its know-how with newly independent states (Oakman 2004), the reversal of student flows within the New Colombo Plan suggests quite different assumptions about how Australia can best build relationships and operationalize soft power in its region.

On 30 April 2016, the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs joined Australia's first ever Minister for International Education to launch a suite of national strategies underpinning

³ The 2013 Liberal Government reintroduced this geographic reference to describe the region of critical national interest. It covers 38 countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Burma, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kiribati, Laos, Malaysia, Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mongolia, Nauru, Nepal, Niue, Pakistan, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, and Vietnam.

Australia's international education sector to 2025. Australia's international education policy has four elements. One of these is the New Colombo Plan, launched in 2015. According to Peter Varghese, Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Secretary at the time and among the senior officials of most influence on the new international education policy, “[w]hat the policy does is that it says that Australia's relationship with the Indo-Pacific region is not only of the mind, it's also of the heart.”⁴

By many measures, Australia “punches above its weight” in international education. Accounting for just 0.3 percent of the world's population, Australia attracts more than 6 percent of all international students—the third highest share globally (OECD 2015, 356)—and has between six and eight of the world's “top 100 universities,” depending on the ranking methodology (Universities Australia 2016). It has been heralded as a “super-growth” sector (Deloitte 2013) and in 2014, the international education industry overtook natural gas to become Australia's third largest export. By 2015, it had become the biggest services export earner, contributing over \$AUD19.7 billion to Australia's GDP in 2014-15 (Deloitte 2016, 1).

International students—inbound, outbound, and borderless⁵—represent the most significant component of international education and generally the activity of most interest to governments. International students are reported to have studied in Australia as early as 1904 (Goldring 1984, 29), but it was not until the 1950s under the *Colombo Plan for Co-operative*

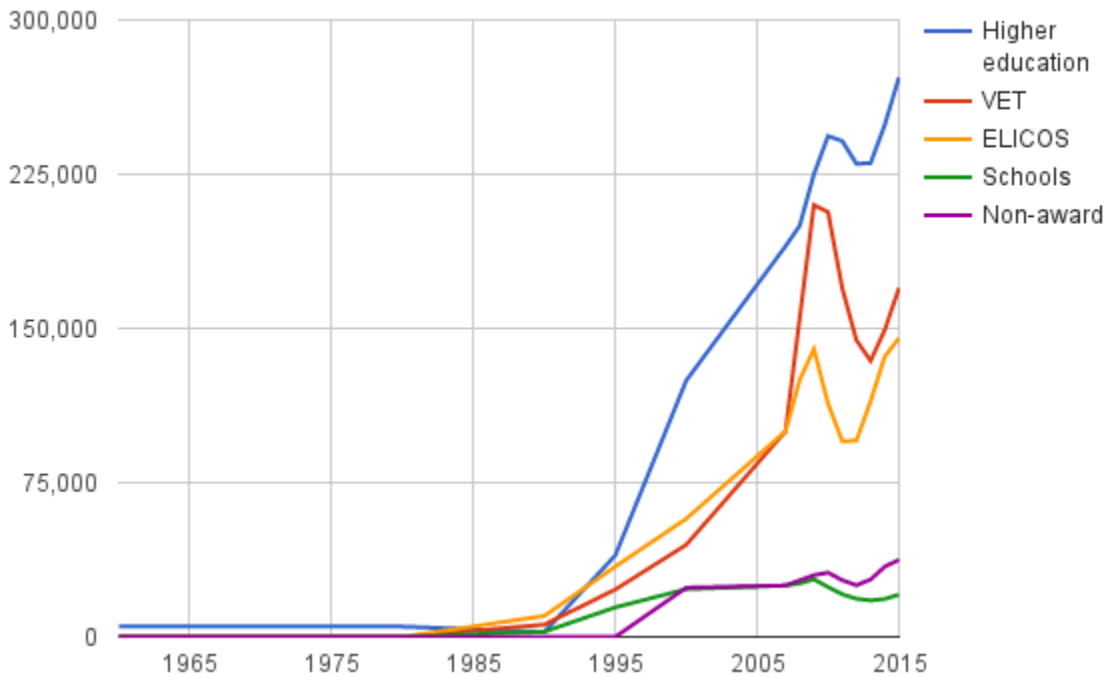
⁴ Peter Varghese, Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade until July 2016, interviewed by the authors on August 15, 2016.

⁵ “Borderless” students are those receiving an education service from another country by means other than travelling to that country or attending a physical “offshore campus” of an overseas institution in their home country. Typically, the mode of delivery is online.

Economic Development in South and Southeast Asia program (the “Colombo Plan”) that international student numbers became significant. Over the life of the program, Australia provided 20,000 scholarships to Asians to study in Australian higher education institutions (Lowe 2002; Oakman 2004). As is shown in Figure 1, over the last 25 years alone, international student numbers have risen almost 3,000 percent, from 21,118 in 1990 to 645,185 in 2015—the largest enrolment of international students in Australia’s history (AG DET 2016b, 3). Students studying higher education make up the largest share, accounting for more than one in every five higher education students in Australia (OECD 2015, 352). International students studying for Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications and those studying English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) also make up a sizeable and growing portion.

Figure 1: International Student Growth in Australia, 1960-2015 (AG DET 2016b, 16)⁶

⁶ International students counted here are those: on a student visa and studying in Australia at a Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS) registered provider in higher education, VET, or ELICOS) institutions; on tourist or working holiday maker visas and studying ELICOS in the same period; aged 16 years or over, in years 11 and 12, studying in CRICOS-registered Australian secondary schools with more than five international student enrolments.



While often cited as *Australia's* first major international education initiative, the Colombo Plan was, in fact, a Commonwealth aid program supporting the development of newly independent Commonwealth colonies. Today, officials responsible for delivering the new plan are keenly aware of that legacy and its importance.

If you look back in time, we had the Colombo Plan, which was a Commonwealth initiative but Australia talks about it in fonder terms than just about anybody else. It was hugely significant as a foreign policy measure and as a catalyst for international students in Australia helping to break down misperceptions of what our place in the world was.⁷

It is clear from the perspective of today that the 'old' Colombo Plan was more than an

⁷ Robert Tranter, First Assistant Secretary, Public Diplomacy, Communications, and Scholarships Division, DFAT, interviewed by the authors July 5, 2016.

education initiative and more than an aid initiative. For Percy Spender, an architect of the Plan and Australia's External Affairs Minister (1949-51), the Colombo Plan was about influencing and stabilizing regional geopolitics through attracting allies and shaping their ideological preferences. It was, at its heart, a policy designed to mitigate decolonization and sustain ties between the imperial core and among the states of the former periphery, but its focus on elite-elite connections does not suggest an understanding of soft power in the way we tend to think about the concept today. Its particular implementation in the Australian case had more direct and particular geopolitical purposes in the context of communism's spread in South and Southeast Asia (Lowe 2002, 186, 190-1). Richard Casey, Spender's successor, saw the Colombo Plan as fulfilling Australia's "need to understand and be understood" by Asia, believing that students' exposure to Australia "at an impressionable stage of their lives... should do a great deal to break down prejudices and misunderstandings on both sides" (Oakman 2002). Those with whom Australia sought geopolitical influence were to be cultivated through direct exposure to institutions, values, politics, and people. However, if the Colombo Plan was a deliberate attempt to operationalize principles of soft power with international education policy as the vehicle, it was somewhat narrow in its singular focus on elites, and on showcasing Australia—the "brilliance" dimension. As David Lowe (2002, 196) writes:

There was a solid, if somewhat woolly, logic to training Asian elites in Australia who would then return to their countries, hopefully with no antagonism towards the white continent, and with a strong sense that the development of their own countries would benefit from continuing collaboration with countries such as Australia.

Australia's New International Education Policy

The soft power logic of the original Colombo Plan didn't last. The program had been wound up by the early 1980s, and the imposition of an Overseas Student Charge was representative of a broader shift in Australia's international education policy—from aid to trade—taking place. By the end of the decade, policy makers were talking about “educational services exports” and the baton had been passed from DFAT to the Department of Trade (Meadows 2011, 60-8). Yet, by the 2000s, the rapidly expanded industry was receiving attention for all the wrong reasons, with a series of scandals affecting international students. For the Liberal Party, then in Opposition, the Colombo Plan's positive legacy under previous Liberal Governments provided the blueprint for rehabilitating Australia's international education policy—but half a century of scholarship on the third face of power and policy experimentation provided for a more comprehensive and potentially sophisticated approach. If the “Old” Colombo Plan hoped that international education would precipitate geopolitical benefits, Australian policy makers at the turn of the 21st century believed that they could design policies that would have soft power effects. Their proposal—the *New Colombo Plan* (NCP)—was a manifesto commitment in 2013 and is a “signature initiative” of the Liberal Government (Liberal Party 2013). It reverses the direction of travel of its predecessor by sending Australians to Asia: sponsoring study and internships in a choice of 38 countries spanning the Indo-Pacific region. \$AUD100 million has been allocated over five years and, since 2014, 17,059 Australians have received support (AG DET 2016b; AG DFAT 2016c).

The NCP was supplemented in April 2016 by three other initiatives. The *National Strategy for International Education* (NSIE) is Australia's first national strategy for international

education. It sets out a “10-year plan for developing Australia's role as a global leader in education, training and research” (NSIE 2016, 1). While the NSIE is led by Australia's Department of Education and Training (DET), its partner national strategy, the *Australia International Education 2025 Roadmap* (AIE2025), seeks to realize the economic potential of the international education “market” and is being implemented by Austrade (2016), the Australian Government's trade commission. While these strategies look forward, the *Australia Global Alumni Engagement Strategy* (GAS) looks to Australia's record in international education, seeking to engage the estimated 2.5 million “global alumni community that actively engages and promotes Australia and advances its national interests, especially in the Indo-Pacific region” (GAS 2016, 10). This third initiative, like the NCP, is led by DFAT. With these four major initiatives across three branches of the bureaucracy, Australia's new international education policy is a significant whole-of-government undertaking.

In seeking to understand what motivated Australian policy makers in designing this new approach, it is important to appreciate that some of the structural drivers of the original Colombo plan remain at work. Australia remains a geographically isolated Western state, orientated toward an Asian region that is ethnically and politically different. But the Asia of today is far larger, stronger, and more independent—in geostrategic, economic, and political terms—than the Asia of the 1950s. Australia today sees its regional interests in Asia in terms of the Indian Ocean-Asia Pacific, or “Indo-Pacific,” stretching as far West as Pakistan (Byrne 2016, 108).

If Australia's relationship with Asia has and will continue to change, so too the modes of interaction across individual relationships in international education. It is clear that in developing

the international education policy, Australia's policy makers had people-to-people relationships at the forefront of their thinking. In his 2016 interview with the authors, Peter Varghese described its more "multi-dimensional engagement with the region" as the most extensive by Australia to date:

It was not enough for Australia to just have strong trading and investment relationships with Asia; it's important we're not seen to be too mercenary about international education, as if we are only interested in one thing, which is the international student dollar. We also need to have a relationship with the people, societies and communities of the region.

The leading trade policy official responsible for Austrade's input echoed the diplomatic importance of relationship building over and above commercial concerns during an interview with the authors:

It's not specifically about creating soft power but it is about saying relationships need to be sustained and maintained. There's always been a view that Australia has been aggressive in the international education space and that it's only about economics and commercial interests. So one of the big pushes from the sector and the people we consulted in Australia was the need to make sure the policy wasn't purely about making more money. It needed to be about how we would contribute back to the greater good as well.

The way Australia's new international education policy has been crafted and implemented represents a significant change in Australia's foreign policy approach. Australia's foreign policy establishment had previously viewed cultural and public diplomacy, and notions of reputation, identity, and values that are the core currencies of soft power, with some cynicism (Byrne and Hall 2013, 423). Julie Bishop's explicit emphasis on the soft power benefits of international education pushes back at that skepticism; according to one academic, not since Gareth Evans' tenure (1988-96) has Australia had a Foreign Minister "so attentive to building

Australia's international reputation, and who designs policies to build support for, engagement with, and the attractiveness of Australia's values and international reputation.”⁸ But to reframe international education in this way required a repudiation of three decades of treating education purely as an export commodity, a rebranding that explains the revival of the language of the Colombo Plan. In its new international education policy, Canberra is seeking to change perceptions of an education sector viewed as a source of Australia's hard economic power, to one engaged with affecting how Asia views Australia itself.

International Education as Soft Power

If Australian policy makers are interested in reframing the purpose of international education towards building international relationships, how are they going about it? Drawing on Vuving's (2009) typology, this section seeks to assess the balance between “brilliance,” “beauty,” and “benignity” that policy makers have sought to strike, and to point to the challenges involved in crafting policy where the subject of the policy is determining of its impact.

“Brilliance” – the Quality of Australian Education

It is unsurprising to see Australia emphasize the quality of its higher education sector in operationalizing soft power in its education strategy: after all, Australia is behind only the United Kingdom and United States in its number of elite universities.⁹ Yet under closer inspection, Australian policy makers' reference to the “quality” of Australia's international education is not as simple a claim as the requirement for perceptions of “brilliance” might suggest.

⁸ Michael Wesley, Australian National University, interviewed by the authors on July 26, 2016.

⁹ Australia boasts six universities in the top 100 worldwide, according to the QS World University Rankings 2016/17.

First of all, Australia's quality is hamstrung by the global excellence of those two competitors, and particularly the United States. While the AIE2025 clearly seeks to increase the instance of global excellence within higher education so that it might "become a sector-wide culture that we are recognised for" (AIE2025 2016, 7), DFAT official Robert Tranter admits "on straight prestige, the UK and USA are still favoured." This view was shared in DET, where Robert Griew, the Associate Secretary responsible, acknowledged in an interview with the authors that "the elite will always go to MIT, LSE, and the blue chips."¹⁰ So for one Austrade official, while "we know there are a billion learners in the world that need access to quality education and training in the next ten years," the question that will really test Australia's soft power is "how do we get quality education to other places? We want to deliver it in-country."

However, Griew set out a different characterization of quality from simply global excellence: "I think Australia is seen as being a really good quality environment, a safe place to send your child where the values they'll be exposed to won't be too jarring." In his interview, Varghese also pointed to a wider societal vision of "quality associated with lifestyle. So a quality degree in an environment which is friendly and easy and welcoming and hopefully one that students enjoy."

This reframing of "quality" away from notions of "prestige" or "excellence" and toward notions of reliability and safety is critical when considering how the subject in soft power operationalization interprets the communication of the agent. But Australian policy makers faced particular challenges in crafting a message that might be understood in the desired way both

¹⁰ Robert Griew, Associate Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International Education, DET, interviewed by the authors on August 3, 2016.

abroad and at home.

The roots of the messaging around quality in the international education strategy are bureaucratic. Within Australia's education system, the word “quality” tends to be used in association with regulation and minimum (quality) standards. This is especially the case in public policy contexts. When government officials highlight “quality” in education, they are typically talking about “quality assurance” as a synonym for “regulation.” This association is apparent in the policy documentation—although written to be outward-facing, it had to speak to domestic sectoral interests, in particular universities. The NSIE dedicates its first “Pillar” of goals and actions to “Strengthening the Fundamentals,” and highlights the setting of nationally consistent approaches in government’s policy settings, mandatory transparency of provider information, strong quality assurance systems, and strong student protection (NSIE 2016, 13-17). In the AIE2025 “Game-changers” section, “maintaining an Australian edge” is linked to “quality assurance arrangements” (AIE2025 2016, 11). This inward, bureaucratic focus is striking for its failure to proceed from a consideration of the target audience of the strategy: namely, international students. Even the appointment of Australia’s first ever Minister for International Education was dominated by regulatory language, with Richard Colbeck declaring it “quite exciting... to provide effective quality assurance and regulation; that is important in students understanding of the quality of the institution that they are going to choose” (Colbeck 2016).

Showcasing Australia’s “quality assured” educational offering makes some sense, but it is hardly an evocation of “brilliance,” particularly when set against international measures and competitors of the calibre of the United States. Relative to nations in the Indo-Pacific, Australia

can boast rigorous regulatory arrangements comprising independent standard-setters and regulators dedicated to each segment of international education. Other nations have sought to learn from Australia's regulatory framework. Additionally, Australia's international education reputation was tainted in the late 2000s by provider closures in the deregulated VET sector that left international students unprotected and out of pocket. Other negative accusations around student safety, particularly affecting Indian students in 2009, generated claims that Australia was potentially unsafe (Chauhan 2009). Australian policy makers have implemented a number of regulatory changes over the last five years to correct these issues, and clearly feel it remains important that the international community is reassured of this "quality" of Australian education.

That policy makers seek to highlight Australia's educational offering as safe, reliable, and somehow culturally unchallenging would intuitively seem to emphasize "benignity" rather than "brilliance." Yet in the language of the policy documentation and reflections of policy makers, "quality" is marketed as a feature to be admired, rather than being an "act of kindness" producing gratitude and reciprocation, as per Vuving's (2009) typology. Given this framing, it is revealing that this focus was driven more by internal bureaucratic and institutional concerns than by an assessment that quality assurance really is what Asian consumers might admire about Australian education. It is far from clear how the intended targets of this language are likely to understand the use of "quality" when confronted with it in this context.

Moreover, a major problem with associating quality with regulation—at least in soft power terms—is that the extensive imprint of government may undermine the effectiveness of the hidden third face of power. State government official, Rebecca Hall, argued that there is

more “government” in Australia's “public diplomacy puzzle” than in any other country.¹¹ Indeed, the fragmented and competitive nature of Australia's education sector may undercut its international attractiveness. As Peter Varghese noted in an interview with the authors, “often the marketing is very narrow and quite competitive, especially between institutions. In other words, ‘don't go there, come here.’ I think that is narrowing for Australia.” Individual states' marketing campaigns play up their own distinctiveness, and a lack of coordination undermines attempts to create a single national message.

This is a particular challenge in designing policies that will ultimately be judged by the subject. Do foreign nationals question the difference between Queensland's culture, Victoria's culture, and Australia's culture, or does that sense of fragmentation undercut the “Australian” narrative? According to Hall in her interview with the authors, prospective international students “don't want to read that you want to take more from another part of your own country. They want to read that you're investing in all the right places, that you care for them and that the student experience is at the heart of what you do.” At a governance level, the decentralization of the education sector in Australia clearly creates issues for national policy makers' attempts to showcase a “brilliant” vision of Australian education.

¹¹ Rebecca Hall, Executive Director, International Education and Training Unit, Trade & Investment Queensland, interviewed by the authors, July 2016.

“Beauty” – Values and the Alumni Experience

All of the feedback we get suggests that Asian middle-class people see Australia as a fairly safe cultural environment... there's a kind of values consonance, a respect for Asian countries and some knowledge of them in the Australian classrooms they'll be in. So there was always a sense on the part of the people close to developing and implementing the initiatives that we are building on strength, including from the Colombo Plan. We were seeking the resonance of the positive experience that generations of parents have had.¹²

The Global Alumni Engagement Strategy (GAS 2016) is an explicit attempt to draw on this perceived resonance of positive experiences and activate “beauty” as a mechanism of attraction. It is premised on the assumption that the 2.5 million foreigners who have studied in Australia have overwhelmingly shared a positive experience of their time in the country, and subsequently feel a sense of warmth, familiarity, and self-extension with Australia. The GAS asserts that alumni identify with Australia and share in its aspirations. It also makes a direct link between the affinity generated by their educational experience and their propensity to “give back” to Australia:

Alumni promote Australia's capabilities and expertise. They help us in the broader endeavour to lift prosperity and to promote gender equality and other shared values across our region and globally... Because of their affinity with Australia, our alumni are active consumers and promoters of Australian goods and services in the region and further afield... Alumni contribute to Australia's ongoing competitiveness in education, science, research and innovation. They reflect positively on the quality of our expertise. They inform, invite and encourage others to consider Australian educational institutions and Australia as destinations for study (GAS 2016, 5-6).

However, just because there has been an education experience does not guarantee it was a

¹² Robert Griew, Associate Secretary, Higher Education, Research and International Education, DET, interviewed by the authors, August 2016.

good one. In an interview with the authors, Kent Anderson, an academic who has advised policy makers on international education, worried that “there is a perception in government that one of the benefits of international education is that everyone who studies here is going to love us. Look at the cabinet in Indonesia, half of them were trained here.” Anderson is skeptical of an overly simplistic logic that supports alumni policies, “that all the people that come over here will then be soft power proponents.”¹³ Peter Varghese’s views appear to reflect the substance of Professor Anderson’s critique: “It’s always been my view that the best advertisement for Australia is Australia itself” —although he introduces some qualification—“In other words, the more people that can directly know Australia, the better, because *on balance* I’m confident they will come away with a positive view of Australia.”¹⁴

What that balance is exactly remains an open question—a strategy in international education that relies on Australia’s warm weather and good beaches hardly makes the case for education being a source of soft power. That said, there is some support in the literature for recognizing the importance of the personal and community connections that surround student exchanges—what David Lowe (2015) describes as the “vernacular internationalism,” or international students encountering ordinary Australians. But even where student experiences have been educationally positive (as well as socially and culturally positive), that does not necessarily mean that the relationships formed have been imbued with the necessary depth for alumni contributions, let alone soft power generating behaviors. Moreover, educational

¹³ Kent Anderson, University of Western Australia and NCP Advisory Committee member, interviewed by the authors on July 5, 2016.

¹⁴ Interviewed by the authors. Emphasis added.

institutions—and particularly elite higher education institutions—are highly global in character, and so easily denationalized. For Anderson, significantly more “tribalism” is required:

...the idea that because I studied in Australia, a PhD in plant biology at the University of Western Australia, say, I somehow have some connection with another person from my country who's done a 6-month study abroad at Southern Queensland University... I just don't think there's any connection there... What you want with alumni, you want a bit of tribalism... a bit of shared experience that then leads to shared activities. I think the idea of doing that across an entire nation, particularly one as big as Australia with as many international students as Australia, is just insane.

Diplomats are more positive about the prospects for alumni connections, at least at the level of shared values. Peter Varghese views constructive and active engagement within the multilateral system more broadly as enabling Australia to project a positive image of itself and maintain a visibility which can reinforce the value-affinity it is trying to leverage through the GAS. Australia aims to be “perceived as constructive, open-minded, and a generator of ideas. Then your ability to get what you want from the multilateral system is enhanced. Whereas if you are seen as inward looking, difficult, and too narrow in your focus then you are a much less effective, multilateral player.”

Yet while contributions to the values of international institutions can be viewed as acts of “beauty,” throughout its history, Australia has had an uncomfortable relationship with its own values and ideals. In particular, Australia has long struggled with contradictory positions on race and equality. These have been evident in opposing portfolio interests and incompatible policies at the nexus of the trade, aid, and immigration portfolios, all of which have profoundly affected international education. Many across Asia are aware of Australia's contradictory domestic

governance. In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Australia struggled to explain how its highly restrictive immigration policy under an overt “White Australia Policy” did not contradict the values it argued it demonstrated through the Colombo Plan, of openness, generosity, hospitality, and acceptance of diversity (Oakman 2004).

The situation today exhibits some similarities. Contrast an international education policy that highlights Australian values—“open, contemporary and innovative” (GAS 2016, 6) and “tolerant, outward looking and free” (Bishop 2015) with the country’s restrictive immigration policies, particularly toward asylum seekers. Australia’s asylum policy—with its “warehousing” of asylum seekers at offshore detention centers and commitment to “turn back the boats”—was branded a “disgrace” by the *Guardian* newspaper (Guardian 2016); Human Rights Watch condemned the policies as causing “severe and lasting harm” (Westbrook 2017); and Asian newspapers ran highly critical comment pieces (Power 2016). Such policies—and the perception of them—sit uncomfortably with Australia’s education marketing and its claims of “openness” and “tolerance.”

Wider aspects of Australia’s domestic politics may also threaten the credible projection of such liberal values. When Pauline Hanson, representing a “One Nation” party, first rose to prominence, concern was expressed across Asia after she campaigned on a ‘racist’ anti-Asian platform, claiming that “we are in danger of being swamped by Asians” and seeking to abolish multiculturalism (Bolt 1996). In 2016, Hanson was elected to the Australian senate together with three other One Nation party representatives, complete with a proposal to ban Muslim immigration into Australia. A number of Australian universities have expressed concern to DET

officials about the potential effect on international student numbers, in a context of disquiet conveyed by Indo-Pacific governments around what the election result says about Australians' views and values more broadly. For all that—*on balance*—Australia may be a tolerant and open society, the soft power associated with those values is heavily dependent on perception. Beauty is an affinity that is difficult to cultivate, even given alumni experiences. It may erode over distance and over time, and is disproportionately easy to undermine.

“Benignity”—“We need to spend more time with each other”

Speaking to students at Hasanuddin University in Indonesia in March 2016, Julie Bishop struck a humble and empathetic tone. “We need to spend more time with each other. We need to understand each other. We need to talk more often. We need to stand in each other's shoes and see the world from each other's perspectives.” The headline aim of the NCP is “to lift knowledge of the Indo-Pacific in Australia” by supporting Australian undergraduates to study and undertake internships in the region (AG DFAT 2016b). The need to “lift knowledge of the Indo-Pacific” is as close as any government is likely to get to publicly acknowledging that its nationals are ignorant of their closest neighbors.

The principle behind the NCP is that knowledge and empathy is a prerequisite for soft power. For Kent Anderson, who advises on the implementation of the NCP, the program is a direct response to the widely held view that Australians do not know enough about the Indo-Pacific region, a region to which they are increasingly reliant. Student mobility has, to date, been “one way,” with mobile Australian students typically choosing Anglophone universities in America and Europe over Asian universities, while thousands of Asians come to study in

Australia each year.

There is deep potential goodwill in an approach that says, “we don’t know enough about you and so we will invest our resources (\$AUD 100 million+) in coming to you and spending time having a lived experience according to your way of life.” Policy makers repeatedly noted in interviews the importance of Australians experiencing other cultures, particularly Asian cultures in the region where Australia sees its future. Correcting the huge disparity in numbers between Asian international students in Australia compared to Australians in Asia is a key driver of the NCP. In principle, such benignity may produce gratitude and reciprocal altruism, a condition confirmed by the observations of Australia’s head diplomat Peter Varghese in an interview with the authors:

I have been to several meetings, at the highest levels, just after the New Colombo Plan was announced and the way in which it was picked up, endorsed and embraced was really quite striking. I think there’s something that the region found quite touching about making this a two-way traffic. They all understand why Australia is interested in attracting students but the idea that we would encourage Australians, as a “rite of passage”, in the way that Julie Bishop used to describe it, to spend some time in the region over the course of their undergraduate degree, they found a mark of respect for their country. And many of them were quite taken aback and impressed by it.

Varghese may be over-optimistic in his judgment of the likely success of the NCP in terms of soft power. “AsiaBound,” a precursor to the NCP, was established in 2012 under the former Labour Government. This program sponsored Australian students to do a semester in an Asian university, just as the NCP does. Kent Anderson, a member of the NCP Advisory Committee and former Chair of the AsiaBound Advisory Board, asserted to the authors that “the programs are identical.” Yet it barely had any impact. Despite more money having been spent

publicizing AsiaBound than the NCP, he said, “I bet if you said “AsiaBound” right now, there wouldn't be more than five people in the entire country who would know what you were talking about.”

The difference in traction may well be one of framing—according to Robert Griew, one of AsiaBound's architects, the program was almost called “the new Colombo Plan.” However, it is also an issue of proper spotlighting. Each time Foreign Minister Bishop speaks to NCP audiences, she reflects that the NCP got its inspiration from the original Colombo Plan, which she continuously asserts was hugely successful. But at the same time, the resourcing and attention given to the NCP in the political bureaucracy has mostly reinforced the benign image of genuine cooperation sought. The rapid implementation of the program helped to reinforce the message that Asia is important to Australia, but of the 17,000 Australians to have studied in the region by 2017, a not-insignificant proportion will have spent less than a month there, a period of time that may be insufficient to form lasting relationships, or really come to understand the cultures to which they are so fleetingly exposed.

A range of structural “machinery of government” changes made when the Liberal Government came to power had the explicit purpose of “putting more of a public diplomacy framework around educational exchange,” according to our interview with Robert Tranter. This involved “thinking about how we are harnessing the soft power potential and seeing educational exchange as part of a narrative of Australia's engagement with the world.” Outbound mobility policy, scholarships, and the former AusAID were consolidated in DFAT, and a new Division for Public Diplomacy, Communications, and Scholarship was established. For Anderson, the fact

that the NCP is the “in the Department of Foreign Affairs, not in the Department of Education” explicitly reinforces its soft, diplomatic purpose.

Alongside this, student mobility administration was consolidated in DET. For Robert Griew, the official with responsibility for international education at DET:

the fact the NCP was being done at a diplomatic level as well as through education, really did seem to push it along... DFAT did what they're good at, which was opening doors and unsnagging things like internship visa arrangements. We (DET) did the heavy lifting. We did all the administration and the relationships with the universities.

Yet despite effective departmental collaboration, broader Australian Government Administration may be hindering relationship-building attempts. According to Griew, “domestic portfolios in the Australian government don't have a sense of having a relationship to domestic portfolios in neighbouring countries.” The official did not travel overseas once between the election of the Liberal Party in September 2013 and his departure from the department in July 2015—the prime implementation period of the NCP. Nonetheless, the government's overall reprioritization of outbound mobility has had an effect at the institutional level. According to Rebecca Hall, within 12 months of the Liberal Party winning government, “student and academic mobility had become a strategic conversation between Vice Chancellors, a new currency in terms of how well they are performing.”

Another governance feature supporting the benignity of NCP has been a genuinely highly-engaged, and seemingly personally-invested, Foreign Minister. Interviewees for this paper consistently remarked that the deeper policy engagement by DFAT and the Minister for Foreign Affairs herself explained a greater prioritization of soft diplomacy within international

education policies. Julie Bishop's previous role as the Minister for Education not only explains that level of engagement, but also gives her credibility in pursuing soft power through international education. As Kent Anderson summarizes, "It's really hard to find any other Foreign Minister anywhere in the world who is championing this cause in the way that Julie Bishop does and in the way that she has."

Conclusion

Australia's new international education policy provides the opportunity to assess the deliberate operationalization of soft power in a real-world setting, carried out by policy makers who were cognizant of the challenges of the undertaking. It is clear that both politicians and officials sought to design a policy in international education that would serve the diplomatic interests of Australia. In doing so, they considered the components of Australia's attractiveness in a multidimensional way, consciously seeking to activate perceptions of "benignity" and "beauty," primarily through the NCP and GAS, respectively. These are new dimensions for Australia's international education as a diplomatic instrument, reflecting a more sophisticated approach than simply the promotion of the "quality" of the sector ("brilliance").

There is certainly a boldness to the design of these policies in support of soft power, and—among officials at least—a confidence in their likely impact. Yet domestic bureaucratic obstacles hampered a significantly subject-focused approach, particularly in the framing of the "quality" of Australian education, where the policy reflects the language of domestic bureaucracy, rather than being focused on the target audience. Moreover, how these efforts will be received is unclear, and for the level of resources being committed soft power remains a risky

bet. Will Australia's international education strategy change perceptions of Australia, or make a contribution to bringing other states' diplomatic preferences in line with Australia's national interests? Further analysis will be required across multiple country case studies to understand subject responses, and it is unclear whether good research design can isolate soft power's impact.

A key conceptual issue remains. Skepticism abounds about whether governments—in international education or any other sector—can be effective agents of soft power activity. As Gary Rawnsley, Professor of Public Diplomacy at Aberystwyth University, told the UK House of Lords, “[i]f there is any suspicion about the motivations or method of exercising soft power, any potential benefits are lost” (UK House of Lords 2014). In seeking to cultivate soft power, at least in international education, Australia is assuming that this risk will not transpire in Asia, and is hedging against another risk: that with nations around the world all competing for soft power in the region, it is those that aren't prepared to play the game that will ultimately lose out.

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