The long term value of education aid, and international education more broadly, is held within students. Students become both the medium, and the message of the educational, diplomatic and development goals of the education systems within which they are educated.

However, understanding the post-study lives of students as enablers of education aid and diplomacy is necessary to understand and improve the outcomes of education delivered. An understanding of trajectories, social and community impact and agency is key to ensuring that those funding education as a modality of aid or diplomacy are making the best decisions in the design and implementation of programs.

Demonstrating and communicating the benefits and legitimacy of these policies to the citizens of countries sending and receiving students may help to sustain global flows of students across the world.
Students as public diplomacy

International education is now seen as a crucial element of Australia’s public diplomacy effort. This was recognised as far back as 2007, when an Australian Parliamentary Standing Committee Report on Public Diplomacy strongly endorsed:

measuresthatwouldopenupmoreopportunitiestointernationalstudentstopstudyinAustraliaandforAustralianstudentstostudyoverseas.TheseeducationprogramsareimportantbuildingblocksforAustralia’spublicdiplomacy(DefenceandTradeSenateStandingCommitteetonForeignAffairs,2007).

This committee’s report, research by Byrne and Hall (2011) and others have located international education clearly in the domain of international diplomacy. Assaults on Indian students in Melbourne in 2009 led another international relations scholar, Michael Wesley, to write a piece dramatically titled Australia’s Poisoned Alumni, highlighting the negative consequences to diplomacy that issues in international education could cause (Wesley, 2009).

These examples are indicative of heightened scholarly and policy interest in the educational aspects of public diplomacy – or what Jane Knight referred to at IEAA’s Research Roundtable 2016 as ‘knowledge diplomacy’, in an effort to better anchor the research in its focal realm. The field of research is still evolving. As one of the authors of this paper has previously written, ‘to incorporate students as a dimension of foreign relations is not a terrain of neat paths and well-trodden methodologies, but it seems to have dawned as a field of study’ (Lowe, 2015). Thus, contributions from disciplinary backgrounds of international relations, communications and public relations, public policy, history and higher education research are jostling in ways that sometimes connect through common questions and methods, and sometimes do not.

Through this increased attention, international students themselves are becoming tied up in the discourse of international relations. International education is soft power, the enduring value of international students as ambassadors is increasingly important, and ensuring their study experience is positive has become a large focus of many government international education strategies – no doubt in part to address the risks raised by Wesley in 2009.

This becomes more acute for students who are studying in Australia under the auspices of the Australian aid program – contemporarily known as the Australia Awards. Students are the recipients of Australian aid, and they are also expected to ‘be’ Australian aid on return to their home country. This is particularly common for those coming from public service positions, who are expected to return home and impart the lessons of ‘good governance’ they have learnt in Australia.

The links between aid and foreign policy are indisputable, but the level to which foreign policy dictates aid allocations is ever changing, dependent on governments, agencies, prevailing national and global moods and financial situations. The Australian case is ably covered by Jack Corbett in his recent book, Australia’s Foreign Aid Dilemma: Humanitarian aspirations confront democratic legitimacy (2017), which addresses the way the administration of Australian aid has interacted with the politics and implementation of Australian foreign policy. What this book demonstrates is that the connections between aid funding and foreign policy are not new, nor are they likely to dissolve. This is no different for aid delivered as education – either as direct aid or scholarships. And while the authors of this paper have argued elsewhere, the links between the development outcomes sought through most aid funding and scholarships are difficult to establish (Lowe & Kent, 2012), this paper will focus largely on education aid delivered as scholarships.

Much research on alumni of Australian aid funded scholarship programs indicates that many of the students and alumni are happy to bear the burden of delivering on the promise of Australian aid (Lowe, 2015). But as is the issue with much international scholarship evaluation, those who respond to tracer surveys and remain engaged in alumni groups are the students who have enjoyed their studies, those who have translated their studies overseas into their working lives at home, those for whom the experience was a success. Less likely to respond are those who failed, have been unable to turn their degree into a promotion or who are unhappy with their experience in Australia. This presents a challenge to scholarship designers, funding bodies, and those who assume positive outcomes from international education.
The peril of positive assumptions is an element of education aid that has persisted. A culture of more rigorously assessing aid programs has developed over time, and was codified in 2005 with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness. Renard and Molenaers in their analysis of OECD aid funding found that ‘higher education on average has a lower social rate of return than secondary education, which in turn has a lower rate of return than primary education’ (Robrecht & Molenaers, 2003).

Nevertheless, donor countries continue to invest in scholarship programs and scholarships (tertiary and vocational) are now included as a part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – where under Goal 4, target 4B is:

By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training … in developed countries and other developing countries. (UN, Sustainable Development Goal 4)

While the framing of international scholarships and international education as aid or public diplomacy impacts on design and policy making, there are many similar expected outcomes. Dassin, Marsh and Mawer contend that this should encourage scholarship and international education practitioners to recognise the ‘limitations of planning an ‘idealized trajectory’ and … heterogeneity in scholars’ ambitions and learning priorities, in the employment environments to which they will return, and in the dynamic nature of socially meaningful work open to highly skilled and committed graduates’ (Dassin et al, 2017).

As will be further illustrated later in this piece, there are a multitude of reasons students and scholarship awardees choose the country they travel to for study, and the scholarship programs they target. The expectation that alumni more broadly, and especially those who have studied under scholarship will perform an ambassadorial role for the country they studied in, will catalyse change and will improve their home country in specific ways is a significant impost.

Many alumni report that their study experience is life shaping in ways they didn’t expect when they ‘signed up’, so to have such concrete expectations of alumni potentially fails to recognise the serendipitous turns life takes, especially when one is empowered with knowledge and agency previously unknown.

At its most fundamental, we welcome suggestions by scholars working on public diplomacy who stress the importance of mutual understanding, intellectual capital and increased mobility, and the importance of the relational quality in exchanges (Gregory, 2008; Fitzpatrick, 2010). These qualities seem to fit the higher education scene well, and go some way towards bringing the truism for domestic students of education being about life-long learning closer towards the more ‘life-long’ experiences of international students.

What do we know?

Some of the main conclusions we draw from an in depth study, based on both questionnaire and long-form life story interviews with former students from Indonesia and Papua New Guinea are helpful in probing this slippery realm of where soft power assessment meets lived experience. The study, of 50-years of students from Indonesia and PNG sponsored to study at a tertiary level in Australia from the 1950s to 2010, was conducted in 2013–15, resulting in a number of research outcomes and policy suggestions, and importantly, an oral history archive of over 100 life stories accessed via the Deakin University Library.

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2. An illustrative example is outlined in a story by Jewel Topsfield in Fairfax papers, discussing two returned Indonesian alumni who have used the schooling experiences of their children to transform a number of Indonesian schools: Jewel Topsfield, “Happy Teaching” a Lesson for Indonesia,” The Age, 3 July 2016.
One of the broad conclusions to draw from these interviews is that sponsored students generally arrived in Australia from such a diverse set of circumstances, and sometimes after trying unsuccessfully to win funding to study elsewhere, that they saw themselves as imaginative interlopers more than anything else, for a good deal of their time in Australia. Near the end of their time (or occasionally times) in Australia, and more often once back in home countries or on a more mobile career path, they often developed a stronger sense of attachment to Australia as a major factor in enabling their life and work choices. We are therefore, in any analysis of the soft power of students, separating this study into two phases that we are calling, from the students’ perspective – but perspectives that also help our analysis – ‘Serendipitous Australia’ and then ‘Enabling Australia’.

The in-depth study is also a reminder that we need to shed two closely-related qualities that lie behind the pages of some assessments of student mobility and international student experiences in Australia. The first is an underdeveloped appreciation of the mobility of others. There is little doubt that a strong base of wealth, however unevenly shared, has enabled Australians to travel in ways not available to those from other countries. But Australians have, until recently, allowed cultural comfort zones to merge with institutional longevity and established reputations in their own journeying for education. They travelled primarily to English–speaking Britain and North America for educational experiences; and this history has arguably encouraged in Australia assumptions about low-risk, low-adventure behaviours in international students originating elsewhere.

Second, and relatedly, is the creeping Australian-ending teleology that enters many forms of evaluation of scholarship experiences: the assumption that life and educational experiences prior to arrival in Australia led to that outcome of an Australian venture, and should be interpreted through the lens of a desire for an Australian educational experience.

We tend to conveniently forget that many applicants applied elsewhere beside Australia and either missed out, later seizing on Australia as the next best option, or choosing the Australian offer because it arrived first. To draw on the Scholarship and Connections research, Kos Atma from Indonesia recalled that he and his friend applied for a new Bachelor of Technology at the University of Adelaide in the mid-1950s. Atma was successful as his marks were slightly stronger. His friend got a comparable opportunity in Russia one year later. And then he went to Belgium soon afterwards\(^4\). Atma’s friend was not the only Indonesian scholar who was encouraged to go Russia or to Eastern Europe in the early 1960s, at a time when Sukarno was cultivating his relationships with the Russians. When Atma’s mother questioned his decision to head to Australia, considering the likely racism flowing from the White Australia policy, Atma shrugged it off, and reflecting later said, ‘My aim was the education. I didn’t care if I went to the moon to get it’.\(^5\)

In other cases, Australia (as a destination) was a case of second or third time lucky with scholarship applications\(^6\). Or the inspiration to go overseas to study came from listening to the BBC World Service as a child\(^7\). One of Australia’s golden alumni from Colombo Plan days, former Indonesian Vice President, Boediono, made it clear that, as a restless young man, his overriding aim was to go overseas. The Australian opportunity offered under the Colombo Plan funding was serendipitous\(^8\).

Others were very much influenced by ambitious or educated and internationally-minded parents, who wanted the best for their children and pushed them to find ways to study overseas. Even in these circumstances, factors of chance, timing and the availability of easily-accessed information played significant roles in students arriving in Australia.

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\(^5\) Ibid.


In an embrace of serendipity, contemplating international students in terms of soft power projections also means looking outside the realm of education at other aspects of the student experiences. The Indonesian student, Houw Tan, who arrived in Melbourne in November 1955 and was immediately taken to Flemington to experience the Melbourne Cup – and who, one year later witnessed some of the Olympic Games in Melbourne – had good reason to recall sport as one strong theme among others shaping his experiences.

Similarly, paid work and internships have long been well-remembered by international students, not just recent ones but also early scholarship holders. Mustakim, a Colombo Plan student from Indonesia, studying Architecture in Melbourne in 1963, recalled a time when most international students chose to work where possible, in holiday breaks between academic years, rather than pay the prohibitively high costs for traveling home.

During my work experience, I was in a part of the Victorian public service, taking care of post office and Telcom public buildings. My first time working in Australia, I couldn't find a job that fitted in my field, so I worked as mean labourer.

None of these observations about fortuitous discoveries and the non-academic dimensions of their experiences are new ones; our suggestion is that they need to be folded in more systematically to analyses of influence, agency and other sometimes overly-clumsy terms used in conjunction with soft power.

The second phase of analysis, the one we are calling ‘Enabling Australia’ is perhaps more ready for those seeking to find ‘agents’, but it also needs some substantial tweaking. One of the overriding conclusions drawn from the Scholarships and Connections research project was that students celebrated above many other qualities a sense of enhanced mobility arising from their study experiences, and were indebted to Australia for this.

This is consistent with more recent studies considering student movements at a more global level. To be part of a global need for talent, or part of an Asian ‘brain circulation’ is exciting and enabling, as Marsh and Uwaifo-Oyelere suggest, even if not all individuals’ hopes are met.

Those who seized an opportunity to study in Australia often looked forward to the next chance to study overseas. This might be again in Australia, or might be elsewhere. A Bachelor of Letters and then a BA at the Australian National University gave Papua New Guinean researcher Ray Anere the confidence to then head, on his own, to Los Angeles, to study for a PhD. And he returned to Australia to further build research networks after that.

Another PNG scholar, Lalen Simeon, built a short-term experience at the University of Wollongong into a more ambitious planned return, to complete a PhD there. There are dozens of Indonesian cases of similar arcs, and some cases of those who are frustrated at not being able to spread their wings again, as much as they would like. In all cases, the building of intellectual capital and the enhanced mobility of graduates – both perceived (and sometimes frustrated) senses of mobility and actual movements to other experiences – stand out as features that enabled sponsored students to speak of their experiences in Australia as an unfinished good.

Outcomes and impacts

Regardless of what they studied, or for how long, the goal of most international scholarship programs is the return home of the student. However, there is evidence to suggest that the failure of students to return home is not necessarily failure at all. Recent research, funded by the MasterCard Foundation, on alumni from Africa who have studied in universities across the US and Canada has shown that there are a ‘complex set of factors influencing post-graduation ‘return’ decisions, resulting in paths with significant career and geographic mobility, shared commitments to contribute to African development in diverse capacities, and the possibility of delayed return into transformative roles decades after graduation’ (Marsh et al, 2016).

It is also vitally important for funding bodies and educational institutions to keep in mind the context from which students have come, and to which they will return. Research on returning scholarship alumni from Georgia and Moldova highlighted the difficulty for alumni in deciding between jobs that may have a greater influence on the social and economic development of the country, or jobs that will have less impact but may provide a more appropriate salary. The research found that ‘when alumni are in quality positions—supported by high functioning work environments, sufficient salaries, and respect for their expertise—alumni are more likely to remain in their country of origin following their studies’ (Campbell, 2017). So while funding may be designed with an ‘idealised trajectory’ (Dassin, 2017) in mind for students – study, return home, make impact – the reality is rarely that simple. In addition, the complexity of what happens to students and the multitude of factors, internal and external, that influence their decision making contributes to the richness of education outcomes – but is not necessarily easily traced or measured.

Next steps?

While it may be a case of stating the obvious to say that aid in the form of scholarships serves as an enabler, a catalyst, rather than an end in itself, it is important to keep in mind when one thinks of the future of higher education aid. As mentioned earlier, SDG 4 calls for an expansion in the number of scholarships offered, specifically to the ‘least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries’ (UN). Taking this approach in isolation may lead to unsustainable outflows of high achieving prospective students, further disadvantaging those left behind, however Marsh and Uwaifo (2017) offer three connected approaches to advance access to further education while supporting the source countries:

1. Invest in education and innovation in source countries
2. Incentivise return migration
3. Engage the diaspora.

All of these elements are well within the remit and capacity of universities, other education institutions and non-governmental (and philanthropic) organisations in Australia. An understanding of context is vitally important for both donors and educators, to ensure that educational and socio-cultural experiences will be translatable on return, and support will be provided in that process of translation.

In terms of ongoing research, a large scale tracer facility, funded by DFAT and run by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) may go some way to provide some systematic qualitative and quantitative data on Australian alumni and their experiences and impact, developmental and diplomatic. Other methods of research into scholarship programs are being applied across the world. The MasterCard Foundation scholarship program includes funding for significant monitoring and evaluation of the scholarship program, and the program’s design can be changed in response to research outcomes. As scholarship design, implementation and evaluation comes into its own as a field of study, researchers and practitioners will be able to share knowledge and understanding across programs.
Considering the future

Diverse actors in education aid, public diplomacy and international education enter the field with diverse motivations, there are diverse outcomes and very different measures of success. Tracing the experiences of current and past participants and actors in education aid (students and alumni) allows us to understand the role their study played in their life – as an enabler, catalyst or other. And for Australian funding bodies and universities, recognising and remaining sanguine about the level to which an Australian experience has been sought, and the chance that a student is here serendipitously, may help to ensure that the experience is truly enabling from both an aid and diplomatic standpoint.

Those engaging with international students at an organisational level, including sponsors and higher education institutions, might profitably explore more ways of shifting from snapshots of understanding alumni to longer forms, perhaps more self-representational ways, of viewing them and their connectedness to host countries. Do alumni have a greater desire to ‘circulate’ in ways that re-connect with host countries but also with others, too? How do alumni tell their own educational stories in forms other than responses to standard surveys, that highlight ‘serendipitous’ and ‘enabling’ experiences? And how do alumni leave legacies, in their own thinking, and what might we celebrate in these ideas of legacies that we are not currently recognising?

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