

# The End of Endeavour

The short and tumultuous life of 'Australia's Fulbright', the Endeavour program

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## Introduction

In April 2019, the Australian Government's well-regarded Endeavour Leadership Program was quietly scuttled. Since 2003, the Endeavour program (previously known as the Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships program) had supported Australian postgraduate students, researchers and career professionals to study overseas. It also brought talented international scholars and fellows to Australia from all over the world. On the data available for the past 12 years, about 2000 Australians and 4500 foreign nationals were the recipients of Endeavour awards.

The official rationale for the termination was that the money would be more effectively used to fund a scholarship program for studies at regional Australian universities. The beneficiaries of the new program will be a few Australians and incoming international students who wish to study in regional Australia, outside the major metropolises. The losers are a larger number of Australian researchers and professionals who wish to advance their work overseas, and many international scholars who wish to access the best research and professional development opportunities available in Australia.

Endeavour was a two-way program, which differentiated it significantly from other Australian government international scholarships programs. But it suffered from a 'cure-all elixir quality which allowed it as a policy prescription to be spread too thinly to try to achieve everything' (Anderson & Barker, 2019). Within the two primary categories – incoming and outgoing – it encompassed a complicated framework of sub-categories

for different purposes, ranging from one-month executive fellowships for Australian working professionals (value \$A8000 per person), to four-year incoming PhD programs covering tuition fees, living allowances, flights and more (value \$A272,000 per person).

The result was an excessively complex and bureaucratic program which, as funds diminished incrementally in successive Budgets over several years, tried to spread itself too thinly between the multiple components it contained. It became increasingly difficult for stakeholders working in universities to understand what Endeavour was about and for whom it was intended. The program was delivered by the Department of Education and Training, but confusion was exacerbated by the official name 'Australia Awards Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships', which blurred the identities between Endeavour and the larger 'Australia Awards' aid scholarship program offered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). Unlike the major DFAT scholarships programs (Australia Awards and the New Colombo Plan), Endeavour lacked a political champion. Not since the days of Brendan Nelson, Education Minister from 2001 to 2006, had Endeavour had strong representation at the highest levels in Canberra.

## Endeavour is launched

Where did it all begin 16 years ago? The Endeavour Scholarships and Fellowships program was launched in the 2003-04 Budget by the Howard Government as part of a package of support for international education. It was created at a time when international student enrolments

in Australia were growing at a rapid rate. International education is dependent on strong relationships and those relationships are undermined when Australia is perceived to selfishly take without reciprocally giving back. As Education Minister in 2003, Brendan Nelson issued the 'Ministerial Statement on International Education' which pointed out that internationalisation is a two-way process, and that there are significant benefits for Australians from the experiences and relationships developed through international education (Nelson, 2003). At that time, less than one per cent of Australian students travelled abroad for study experiences. Endeavour served to redistribute some of the enormous economic benefits Australia receives from educating privately-funded international students. The scholarships also assisted Australian universities with new market development opportunities and further diversification of the regions from which international students came.

Michael Gallagher – notable education bureaucrat, university administrator, and later Group of Eight Executive Director – was one of the key architects of the Endeavour program. He identifies 'immigration, cultural-strategic and commercial' as the three major themes underpinning the Australian government's engagement with international education since 1950 (Davis & Macintosh, 2011, p. 116). In the case of Endeavour, Gallagher suggests that it was created in recognition of the cultural-strategic dimension of international education. It was intended to attract high-performing students from many countries around the world (not only those countries which were eligible for Australian aid) and provide opportunities for Australians to undertake studies overseas. Importantly, the Endeavour initiative also served as a response to the pleas from Vice-Chancellors for more government support for international education in Australia, which was increasingly perceived around the world as 'all take and no give'.

The program's name, Endeavour, was taken from the ship in which Captain James Cook sailed to Australia in 1770. It is not known whether this had a detrimental impact on the uptake by Indigenous Australians of the Endeavour fellowships, one component of which was specifically designated for Indigenous applicants.

## Endeavour sets sail

In its first iteration in 2003, Education Minister Nelson created the new Endeavour program to 'boost the profile of Australia's education sector in overseas markets' (Nelson, 2003) and to diversify away from traditional recruitment markets and disciplines. Initially the program

targeted inbound postgraduate students and outbound Australian teachers of languages other than English.

Subsequently, the program evolved haphazardly through numerous iterations depending upon the government of the day and its policy priorities. As Prime Minister in 2008, Kevin Rudd introduced the Prime Minister's Australia-Asia Awards as an elite 'Asian Rhodes' program, and his successor Julia Gillard created the AsiaBound program, a broad-based initiative to support short-term mobility to Asia. The funding for both these programs was carved out of existing Endeavour funding without any new money, hence the tinkering with and shifting priorities of Endeavour began.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the political divide, Julie Bishop as Shadow Education Minister was considering another scholarship initiative, bearing some resemblance to the Labor government initiatives AsiaBound and the PM's Australia-Asia Awards. Bishop's signature program, the New Colombo Plan, was launched in 2014 after the Coalition had won government and Bishop had become Foreign Minister. The New Colombo Plan (NCP) offered young Australians elite scholarships to Indo-Pacific countries and support for broad-based short-term mobility for undergraduates within the region. This new program, unlike Endeavour with its broad remit, was targeted specifically to a particular cohort – young Australian undergraduates studying in the Indo-Pacific.

## Endeavour runs aground

In the last three years of Endeavour's life, the Government sent confusing signals as to the purpose and importance of the program. In November 2017, the Foreign Policy White Paper declared: 'Endeavour Scholarships and Fellows and Endeavour Mobility Grants ... build Australia's reputation for excellence in the provision of education and research' (Australian Government, 2017, p. 111). Yet just a few months later the Government announced that Endeavour's budget would be cut by \$63 million over four years, with an immediate cut of \$7.2 million (Australian Government, 2018, p. 36). To achieve the budget cut, Endeavour's mobility grants component would be merged with its scholarship component to create the newly-named 'Endeavour Leadership Program'. The purpose, it was stated, was 'to better target the delivery of the previous Endeavour programs to ensure that overseas study education, training and research opportunities for Australia's highest-performing students, researchers and professionals *are sustainable into the future* and aligned with the Australian Government's strategic priorities'

[emphasis added] (Birmingham, 2018). This led to lengthy bureaucratic processes to bind the two components together, which emerged looking remarkably like the two original separate components. The long-awaited opening of applications for the 2019 round was received with great anticipation among the hopeful beneficiaries.

In due course, Minister Tehan announced the 2019 winners of Endeavour scholarships for local and foreign students. The Minister's press statement trumpeted its support for '2095 Australians with [international] study and research grants' and '387 international leaders [to undertake] education and research at Australian institutions' (Tehan, 2019). Enthusiastic tweeting from the Department of Education and Training followed. Behind the scenes, however, the axe was ready to fall, which unbeknown to all was scheduled to happen just 25 days later.

The impact of the 2019 round on hopeful international applicants was devastating. The numbers announced in the Minister's press statement caused immense confusion. Australian applicants were dismayed by the apparent contradiction between the '2095 places for Australians' and the list of just 65 individual Australian names. The comparatively low cost per student of the mobility programs had encouraged the Government to offer more mobility places than in previous years, at the cost of the prestigious individual awards. This, it turns out, was the explanation for the mismatch between the number of places announced by the Minister, and the very short list of individual awardees released on the same day.

On the incoming (international) side, there were just two offers to incoming PhD scholars, two to masters, and two to VET programs - a total of six long-term incoming places to international applicants. By comparison, in 2018 there had been 52 incoming PhDs, 84 incoming masters' scholars and 30 incoming VET places - a reduction of 96 per cent across these three categories. International applicants understandably felt that they had been duped into applying for scholarships which essentially did not exist. A contributor to the Whirlpool.net.au discussion forum wrote:

'I have spent about \$1,900 for my IELTS test, for notary fee, and for my flight to get some documents from my home country. I'm totally fine if my application is not successful due to my lousy application, but seeing there are only two awardees I feel I should not put in such efforts for this scholarship.' (Whirlpool, 2019)

At best, the results were nearly impossible to explain and at worst masked a major shift in policy. The Whirlpool blog exploded, and even experienced commentators such as @harejulie tweeted 'This is bizarre'.

Many individual applicants asked for an explanation. A response from the Department posted on the Whirlpool blog showed how competitive the round had been. There had been 7049 applications for the 107 individual awards, and this was the lowest number of awards ever made - in the previous year there had been almost 700 awards. In 2019, the 65 Australian and 42 international individuals who succeeded represent a success rate lower than 1.5 per cent and presumably an enormous amount of time and effort in selection. The success rate compares unfavourably with the American Fulbright program which reportedly had success rates of around 22-24 per cent in the period 2013-2016 (ProFellow, 2018). Endeavour's success rate of 1.5 per cent means that in 2019 an Endeavour award was almost as difficult to win as a Rhodes scholarship, which anecdotally has a success rate of about 0.7 per cent.

Even on the night Endeavour was axed, the Budget paper in which the death warrant was signed contained direct contradictions, with the following two statements:

'Objective: International education is increasingly important to Australia's prosperity and our engagement with the world. The program aims to support the sustainable growth of Australia's high-quality international education, training and research through strong government-to-government engagement, *international mobility*, strategic policy and legislation.

Delivery: *Ongoing support* for individual and institutional grants for inbound and outbound students, researchers and professionals to undertake projects and study exchanges through the *Endeavour Leadership Program, which will cease after 2019*.' [Emphasis added] (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2019, p. 52).

In summary, over a period of 16 years Endeavour's sails flapped helplessly against the prevailing political and bureaucratic winds. The program had a 'history of offering a little bit of everything to everyone depending upon where one looked and at what moment of time' (Anderson & Barker, 2019). The result was an excessively complex and bureaucratic program without a champion, highly susceptible to being picked off.

## The New Colombo Plan leads the fleet

Any discussion of the Endeavour program is not complete without reference to the New Colombo Plan (NCP), established in 2014. Its rise over the past five years has been inversely proportional to the decline of Endeavour. Located within the Foreign Affairs portfolio as part of the Government's soft power approach, it also carries

key educational objectives. The program is focused on the young (aged 18-28) and aims to develop a change in cultural attitudes by Australians towards Asia.

In its first year, NCP was available for study experiences only in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Indonesia, but it expanded quickly to include 40 countries in the Indo-Pacific. It has steadfastly stuck with its original remit, as a program for young Australian undergraduates, the majority of whom undertake international study experiences of just two to four weeks in duration. The highly competitive 'NCP scholarships' elite component of the program offers longer-term opportunities and offshore internships and is available to a small number of high-achieving students each year. In its engagement with the private sector, NCP differs significantly from Endeavour, as NCP has built its resources and longevity by leveraging private sector contributions.

In the five years that both schemes have coexisted, NCP and Endeavour supported international education values and priorities. However, Endeavour's primary policy focus was education, with soft diplomacy benefits seen as a potential additional

dimension. NCP is the inverse, with diplomacy being the primary objective. Unlike NCP which is for young undergraduates, Endeavour focused on postgraduate, research and vocational. In addition, Endeavour reached beyond currently enrolled students to provide

international learning opportunities for professionals in employment. Endeavour offered both outbound support for Australians and inbound support for foreign students, while NCP only supports young Australians going overseas. A separate program again (and one which dwarfs both Endeavour and NCP in terms of funding) is the Australia Awards scholarships, the part of Australia's aid program which supports incoming postgraduate students from developing countries. Endeavour's eligible regions covered almost the whole world, unlike all other Australian international scholarship programs in which regions are strictly circumscribed.

The 2018 changes to Endeavour, which merged the two separate elements of the old program into the new 'Endeavour Leadership Program' introduced a new level of ambiguity about Endeavour's purpose. Following the changes, the short-term mobility component was prioritised, at the expense of the prestigious individual

awards, which understandably led to comparisons with NCP. Under the Endeavour mobility stream, places were for coursework students (including undergraduates) and were not available to research students or professionals, so it became more difficult to discern Endeavour's unique purpose, other than covering different regions. As I have stated, Endeavour and NCP are funded through different government departments, but as the Endeavour program moved towards something which looked remarkably like NCP, and less like something which supported research excellence, it became more difficult to identify its unique value proposition.

## Heading for the scrapyard

The sub-categories in the Endeavour program given priority over the years have waxed and waned with political priorities. Data in the form of recipients' names on the Department's website enables us to see that in all but two years (2013 and 2019), the majority of awards were made to international applicants, but in 2013 and 2019, the

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majority of Endeavour places were awarded to Australians rather than international applicants. What happened in these two exceptional years? Could it have been because an election was imminent, and because international students do not vote in Australian elections? The political parallels are

stark. As the 2013 awards were being finalised in late 2012, the then-Labor government was struggling in the opinion polls. Gillard was still PM in an unstable environment after having fought off the first Rudd challenge. In early 2019 we saw a strikingly similar scenario, this time with the Coalition in power, and newly-minted PM Morrison shoring up the Government's position amidst uncertainty and key front bench resignations. Behind the scenes, the Endeavour program was being tinkered with, apparently for political ends.

Many Endeavour alumni are still not aware that the program has been axed. On Twitter, @DJMay19 wrote: 'This is horrible. I hadn't realised the Endeavour program had ended. My Endeavour Fellowship made a huge difference to my PhD studies, my career development, and (not to get overly sentimental) my life. It would have been impossible to have such a strong experience without it.' One wonders whether any consideration was

given to the impact on individual scholars and fellows who constitute Endeavour's distinct alumni network. In an interview with me, Gretchen Dobson, an Australian-based global alumni relations consultant who has worked closely with Australian government scholarship programs, commented:

'The Endeavour alumni umbilical cord is cut. The last class of 2019 scholars will inherit an alumni community full of esteemed professionals around the world but, without a program, all alumni will navigate their own networking and determine for themselves the value proposition for staying involved with an organisation with a shelf life of 15 years. The notion of alumni being brand ambassadors is now moot.'

Adding to the complexity and inscrutability of Endeavour is the apparent lack of any transparent evaluation of the program since its launch in 2003. As part of my research, a former bureaucrat told me that an 'evaluation framework' was established in the early years of the Endeavour program, but it is not clear whether formal evaluation was ever implemented beyond the level of impact on individual recipients. A lack of rigorous evaluation contributes to the vulnerability of any government program, since it will not have the evidence it requires to respond to criticism. Only through rigorous evaluation can a match be made between program goals, recruitment processes, and scholarship target groups, particularly in rapidly changing environments (Dassin *et al.*, 2018, p. 94).

## Uncharted waters ahead

By March 2019, Endeavour's constantly shifting priorities had left it without a core narrative. Its lack of a champion is particularly noticeable when contrasted against former Foreign Minister Julie Bishop's high-profile advocacy for the New Colombo Plan. Against Bishop's clear and consistent message for NCP, Endeavour was buffeted by numerous changes in the Department of Education and Training, turnover of ministers and the revolving door through which senior public servants came and went.

Back in 2003, when responsibility for international education was still primarily seen as a broader education issue, it was natural for Endeavour to reside in the government's education portfolio, rather than in its foreign affairs, trade or aid portfolios. In 2019, with Endeavour now in its final year, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade carries all Australia's international education programs, apart from the new scholarship program for those wishing to study in regional locations (which is only marginally about supporting international education).

The current situation represents a shift by the government of core responsibilities for international education from the education portfolio to the foreign affairs portfolio. Of Australia's several international scholarship programs, only the new regional scholarship program Destination Australia remains within the education portfolio. The switching out of Endeavour in order to fund Destination Australia is not rational or consistent with various Ministerial statements about advancing Australia's international education interests (Birmingham, 2018; Tehan, 2019).

When the axe fell on Endeavour in favour of Destination Australia, Catriona Jackson at Universities Australia responded 'we shouldn't have to choose between supporting students in the regions and tapping into the latest global knowledge that strengthens our own research... the two programs should exist side by side as part of Australia's strategic education and research effort' (Crace, 2019). Kent Anderson observed that the change in policy 'shifts Australian government policy settings from one that rewards excellence and merit to a five-year plan type program that favours one set of marginal seats over another' (Anderson, 2019). Yet few other voices from the universities sector have been heard, possibly due to the identity crisis which Endeavour has suffered for at least the past decade.

The loss of Endeavour leaves Australia significantly exposed in the international education mobility space - an area in which we have made great achievements. Other countries continue to treat education mobility as a priority, with programs such as the Fulbright in the US, the Commonwealth Scholarships and Fellowships program in the UK, MEXT Scholarships in Japan and the DAAD in Germany. The benefits of two-way international education should not be interpreted solely through the lens of diplomacy and soft power. Australian universities have recognised this by making significant contributions to the costs of outgoing mobility, and collectively they contribute \$27.3 million per annum in outbound mobility support (Australian Universities International Directors Forum [AUIDF], 2018). The amount contributed by universities towards outgoing mobility exceeds the total funding allocated by the government to the Endeavour program in its last year of life. Leveraging this spend with the government commitment - for example, as matching funding - could produce broader and deeper results both for institutional and governmental objectives. Will the newly re-elected Coalition Government in Australia recognise this during its current term?

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