



New Colombo Plan Semester Program 2026 Round Advice to Applicants

This **Advice to Applicants** provides information to assist applicants for the 2026 round of the New Colombo Plan (NCP) Semester Program. The Guidelines (available on [GrantConnect](#)) outline eligibility requirements, assessment criteria and how funding is allocated and administered. **Before applying please ensure that you read the Guidelines in full.**

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong, announced the next phase of the NCP on 30 July 2025 to ensure the program delivers on the Australian Government's objective to strengthen the Indo-Pacific capability and Asia literacy of Australians. The Foreign Minister provided information on the next phase, including reforms, [here](#). Key features of the 2026 Semester Program Guidelines aim to ensure consistency these reforms and other policy priorities.

Priority areas for selection and assessment criteria

Applications are assessed on their merits. A satisfactory score must be achieved on each selection criterion at a minimum.

Priority Host Locations

Projects which are to be undertaken in the Priority Host Locations outlined in section 6.1. These priority locations for the 2026 round align with Australian Government foreign policy priorities for engagement in the Indo-Pacific region and will be reviewed annually.

Applications are welcome from all other eligible host locations.

Travel cannot proceed to locations for which Smartraveller advice is 'Do not travel' or 'Reconsider your need to travel' at the time of departure (see Guidelines Section 2.4 (c)).

Applicants must not propose programs to a host location (or a region within a host location) with such a travel advice, except where that advice is likely to be short-term, for example due to the temporary impact of a natural disaster.

Priority Sectors

Projects where the main area of focus is for study that falls in a Priority Sector, as outlined in section 6.1, will be prioritised. The Priority Sectors are broad and encompass a number of areas, including academic disciplines. Examples are provided below but are not exhaustive.

- **Economics and Business** – including but not limited to digital economy, business, including financial services, visitor economy and tourism

- **Environment, Primary Industries and Natural Resources** – including but not limited to agriculture and resources (including water management and mining)

- **Infrastructure, Climate and Energy** – including but not limited to clean energy, renewable technologies, climate change science and policy
- **Law, Asian Studies, Culture, and Human Development** – including but not limited to education and skills, health, sports, culture, the arts and creative industries
- **Technology and Innovation** – including but not limited to Technology and IT, Space

Priority Asian Languages

Projects where the main focus is for the study of a Priority Asian language, as outlined in section 6.1 of the Guidelines, will be prioritised.

In the 2026 round, all NCP Programs (including the NCP Semester Program) will have a language target set at 15 per cent. To meet the language target, 50 per cent or more of the planned Semester experience duration will need to be language acquisition and learning through study of the official or commonly spoken language (other than English) of an eligible primary NCP host location, where the Semester project is to be undertaken via face-to-face mode.

Applications that incorporate structured study of a Priority Asian Language will receive the highest scores under the Priority Language criterion.

To be considered satisfactory, applicants must demonstrate that participants will be exposed to an Indo-Pacific language (excluding English) during the project experience, including through social contexts, though these proposals may be less competitive.

Two-semester projects may be prioritised over one-semester projects where all other assessment criteria are comparably equal, in recognition of the greater potential for an immersive experience and Indo-Pacific capability development.

Transnational Education

Universities will be able to propose Australian transnational education campuses as a host location as part of their applications. This should only be where participants will have a genuinely locally immersive experience. As examples, this may include Asian language learning or delivery of a program codesigned with a local organisation at an Australian transnational education campus.

How to address the assessment criteria

Criterion 1 – Alignment

Applicants should consider:

- How the proposal is aligned to Australia's geographic priorities in the Indo-Pacific region. Priority Host Locations where Australia is seeking to expand the level of engagement will score most highly. Priority Host Locations where Australia is seeking to maintain the current level of engagement will also be considered highly favourably. Applications which demonstrate Indo-Pacific capability building and align with Australia's strategic priorities to non-Priority Host Locations are still encouraged.

- How the proposal is aligned to Australia's sectoral priorities in the Indo-Pacific region, as set out in the list of Priority Sectors. Applications that demonstrate advancement of Australian Government sectoral priorities will score highly. As examples, this could include (but is not limited to) reference to priority sectors outlined in government strategies including [Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2040](#), [A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India](#), and the [Australia-Pacific Regional Development Partnership Plan 2025-29](#). DFAT's [Countries, economies and regions](#) page provides relevant information for each eligible host location, including bilateral partnership agreements where relevant.

Criterion 2 – Priority language

Applicants should consider how the inclusion of language studies may impact the scoring. Higher scores will be given to projects with a priority Asian language at a location where Australia wants to expand linkages, followed by priority Asian language in a location where Australia wants to maintain the current level of engagement, followed by the inclusion of an Indo-Pacific language (excluding English) in a non-Priority Host Location, and then those without a language study component.

While applications without formal language studies are still eligible, at a minimum, to be considered satisfactory applicants should demonstrate the proposal consists of exposure to an Indo-Pacific language (excluding English) during the project experience that is commonly used or spoken in an official capacity at the host location, including (but not limited to) in social contexts.

Criterion 3 – Quality

Applicants should aim to address all four subitems in these criteria:

- Higher scores will be given to those applications which plan to use the Program Support and Administration (PSA) funding to undertake NCP-related activities including to:
 - assist with the development of Indo-Pacific capability and priority Asian language learning;
 - develop or participate in consortium arrangements related to Indo-Pacific capability and priority Asian language learning;
 - develop partnership arrangements with new host institutions in the Indo-Pacific to support new and innovative NCP Semester Program experiences.

While applicants are not expected to be able to achieve all of the above, at a minimum they should explain how they plan to use PSA fund to ensure diverse student participation and develop initiatives to raise the quality of the experience.

- Higher scores will be given to those with realistic and measurable project outcomes in all assessment areas, such as how the project will building Indo-Pacific capability, including language.
- Higher scores will be given to applications with robust quality assurance mechanisms.
- Higher scores will be given to quality risk assessment and management plans specific to the host location and project type.

Criterion 4 – Potential to maintain engagement with host locations

Proposals should demonstrate active partnerships in the host location, and the applicants' plans to establish new and innovative partnerships include through joint activities with host institutions. High-quality responses will have a strong focus on maintaining engagement beyond the NCP experience. At a minimum, applicants should explain how engagement with host locations will be maintained beyond the relevant semester experience. All applicants will be required to attach evidence (ie MoUs/letters of support) from proposed host organisations.

Tips for completing the Application form

Project title

The project title should be succinct and include the host location, discipline/subject and type of educational activity. For example:

- Two-semester exchange in PKU, Beijing, China
- Engineering study and internship for two semesters in Hanoi, Vietnam
- Language immersion semester in Bandung, Indonesia

Project description

While the project description does not contribute to the assessment score, a clear description will help assessors understand the project's objectives, rationale and approach to implementation, including:

- activities students will undertake offshore, including details of any language study (provider and duration),
- any use of third party providers in the implementation of the project, including logistical elements, should be explained.
- project budget

Semester project grant value

- Section 5.2.1 of the grant guidelines provides student grant amounts. The student grant is intended to contribute, in the first instance, to the cost of a student's international travel and in-location living expenses during the project.

Use of third party providers

Universities may choose to outsource part or all of project implementation, including logistics, to third party providers. Where this is the case, that relationship must be outlined in the Project Description. The Australian university remains responsible for the project, including adherence to policies outlined in the Guidelines by third party providers.

Where a third party provider implements part or all of the project, the Australian university must outline how quality and risk management will be assured and how lasting relationships will be established between the Australian university and overseas partners. Australian universities must carry out due diligence on third party providers before including them in applications.

Third party providers are not considered to be NCP partners as they receive payment for their participation. Nor are third party providers able to be host organisations. If a third party provider is used to implement the project, a host institution in the host location must still be identified. ISEO now allows for the recording of third party providers separately from project partners in funding applications.

Host locations

Applications must nominate one eligible primary host location. Secondary host locations are not accepted for Semester programs. Applicants may choose to nominate more than one host institutions

in the same host location (e.g. one semester of study in Tokyo and another in Osaka for a combined two-semester experience).

No alternative project delivery locations (e.g. alternative semester host locations,) may be included in applications.

Student grant numbers

Applicants should only seek Semester grants for the number of students they confidently expect to recruit and send offshore during the Semester program term (1 January 2026 to 31 July 2028).

Project partners

Applicants must list the local host institutions, based in the host locations, who will be their project partners. Please note that third party providers are not considered to be NCP project partners as they are paid for their participation.

It is possible to nominate an Australian transnational education campus in the Indo-Pacific as host institutions, as long as the experience is considered genuinely immersive.

Applicants must provide a letter from the proposed host organisation indicating approval in principle to hosting the project. Alternatively, a current exchange agreement may be uploaded where it indicates that students of this project will be able to secure places at the host university.

Applicants must exercise due diligence in their choice of partners, including investigating partners' capacity to comply with NCP Guidelines (for example, by having appropriate policies and risk management processes in place).

Applicants should consider how their projects impact local communities. For example, paying to volunteer can lead to demand-driven activities in disadvantaged communities. Applicants whose projects include volunteering overseas should read Smartraveller advice on [responsible volunteering](#).

Attachment 1 – QUESTIONS ASKED DURING APPLICATION

Priority Locations, Language and Sectors

Can universities apply for locations outside the priority host locations?

Yes. DFAT welcomes high-quality applications for all eligible host locations in the Indo-Pacific.

If a location is listed as a priority host location but does not have a corresponding priority Asian language, can I still apply without including a language study component?

NCP programs do not have a compulsory language learning element, although it is strongly encouraged. Applicants should note that, consistent with the advice to applicants, all NCP Scholarship and NCP Semester applications will need to satisfactorily answer the language criterion of the selection criteria. This includes addressing how such a program will lead to exposure of a language other than English.

Is health related study considered as a priority sector under the 2026 Guidelines?

Health-related programs are considered as part of the Law, Asian Studies, Culture, and Human Development priority sector, which is set out in the Advice to Applicants across all 3 programs. DFAT encourages applicants to read the regional strategic documents and other information relevant to host locations, including (but not limited to) *Invested: Australia's Southeast Asia Economic Strategy to 2024* and *A New Roadmap for Australia's Economic Engagement with India*, available on DFAT's website.

Partnerships

Do applicants need to upload exchange agreements with host institutions at the time of application?

As per section 7.2 of the Guidelines, DFAT requires a letter of support as part of an application. While exchange agreements are accepted, other forms of evidence that assures the delivery of projects at host locations are acceptable as well.

Can applicants apply without supporting documents from host institutions?

Section 7.2 of the Guidelines refers. A letter of support can also be an email.

Can universities recruit students outside an exchange agreement and then the student will pay the tuition fees at the host institution?

The student grant is intended to contribute to the cost of international travel and in-location living expenses. A letter of support would also be required from the host institution.

Per section 5.2.1 of the Guidelines, "You may use funding for student grants to make group travel arrangements (and not pay all funding directly to students), where there is a benefit for the students (such as discounts through group bookings). In such cases, students must provide written consent to part of their grant not being paid directly to them. You must retain evidence of this. Universities must ensure appropriate refund provisions and insurance arrangements are made".

Universities don't have control over what students are studying – which may not be related to their major at their home universities. For priority sectors – is it on their home degrees, or what they study on program?

Including a priority sector as part of an application is not mandatory, although applications related to a priority sector will score higher. Applications that seek to include a priority sector should demonstrate

how they believe the application aligns to these priorities. This could be either through alignment with the home degree or linking it to the proposed study on program.

Program Structure

Should applicants submit separate applications for different host institutions in the same location?

As a general recommendation, higher scores are likely to be given to projects with specific focus which address priority areas for selection. Applicants should still provide supporting documents from all proposed host institutions in a general application.

Does DFAT prioritise study over internships when assessing Semester Program applications?

DFAT doesn't prioritise one over the other. Alignment with priorities and project quality are the two criteria assessed. The Semester Program project must provide credit or otherwise count towards the course completion requirements for the student's undergraduate course (Guidelines section 5.1).

Can applicants include multiple project lengths (one and two semesters) in the one application?

Applicants can only select either one or two semesters as the length of the project in a single application. Applicants must submit separate applications for programs of different lengths.

Should an application include multiple priority sectors in the same application, or provide separate applications for each sector?

Applicants are encouraged to read the program Guidelines and the Advice to Applicants to understand how the priority areas for assessment will be assessed. Only one priority sector can be indicated as part of an application.

Applicants are to lodge separate applications for each priority sector. Applicants do not need to indicate a priority sector, but these will score less highly. University mobility staff are encouraged to engage with relevant faculties to understand the student pipeline and likely demand and make realistic applications for Semester Program grants.

Can students take a language course without credit, while getting credit for the rest of their studies?

The overall approved study program needs to provide credit or otherwise count towards the course completion requirements for the student's undergraduate course (Guidelines section 5.1). Universities are responsible for determining what attracts credit or otherwise counts towards course completion requirements.

In a university's language degree, students are to undertake two semesters of overseas study at a partner institution. The university could apply for a two-semester grant but is concerned that students may not go for the full year, thus resulting in under-utilised semester grants.

What should the university apply for?

DFAT recognises the increased likelihood of grant variations in longer-term projects. To mitigate financial risks associated with early student returns, section 5.2.1 of the Guidelines recommends disbursing payments to students in tranches. You can apply for two-semester grants if meeting the eligibility requirements – in the event of early student returns, universities are encouraged to maintain thorough documentation and notify DFAT as early as possible.

Some students may wish to stay at the host location for continued studies or travel internationally after completing an NCP semester program. Would this be permitted?

When applying, applicants are asked to put an end date for their NCP projects. DFAT does not dictate the return date of NCP students after program completion – this is at the home universities' discretion. Applicants must be aware of the insurance implications and risk management obligations associated with international travel beyond project end date.

Transnational Education

Can applicants nominate a transnational education institution headquartered in a third country as the host institution?

Transnational education partners can only be approved as host institutions when they are Australian offshore campuses, and able to offer a genuinely immersive experience (section 5.8 of Guidelines refers).

Program support and administration Funding

Can the Program Support and Administration funding component be used to offset staff costs?

Yes. This funding can be used to support study abroad staff, especially to service new or expanded exchange or partnership arrangements. The funding must not be used for academic staff core salaries (Guidelines section 5.2.2).

Can DFAT provide assurance that expensed program support and administration Funding will be honoured regardless of student participation rate, which determines the actual amount of funding universities are entitled to at the project completion stage?

Yes. Amounts of program support and administration funding higher than the available amount based on the student participation rate may be retained by a university, provided DFAT has given you approval based on a justified expenditure report. Universities must retain adequate records of administration funding expenditure and be able to provide these upon request.

Can DFAT clarify how to calculate the amount that can be spent on study abroad staff costs as part of the program support and administration funding component?

Study abroad staff costs must be directly related to managing the NCP-funded project, not for general staffing costs. Applicants should note that there are different criteria for the program support and administration funding component under the Semester Program and the administration funding under the Mobility Program.

Should universities ask upfront about how and what can be spent from program support and administration funding to avoid the need to repay DFAT?

If universities are unsure about what they can spend program support and administration funding on, then they should seek clarity from DFAT or its managing contractor prior to expending the funds.

Variations

Would a change of student discipline from priority to non-priority sector be considered a variation?

Yes. The selection process is guided by the selection criteria. When any changes after award could potentially alter how a project aligns with the priority areas of selection and the basis on which a

program is awarded the grant in the first instance, it would be considered a variation. (Guidelines section 12.3)

Language Target

How is the language target met for the Semester Program?

The language target is an overall target for the Semester Program. It is not mandatory for applications to meet the language target.

DFAT recommends that applications for language-focussed programs meeting the language target should be submitted as a distinct application and not part of a broader application incorporating language and non-language programs, to maximise an application's chance of success.

Examples of programs that may meet the definition include

- a) at least 50 percent of study unit/s (either one or two semesters of study units) are language units, or
- b) at least 50 per cent of study units are delivered in a local language,
- c) the program is for in-country language training.

It is unlikely that an internship-based program will meet the definition for the language target unless it includes a formal study component.

In answering Criterion 1, what information should be put in the answer to the question, and the supplementary question?

The information submitted in the answer to Criterion 1 will be used to assess the application. Answers to the supplementary question are used to provide supporting information if the project meets the language requirements and does not contribute to the assessment scoring of the project.