

# **DFAT's management response to the mid-term review of the Australia Awards in South Asia and Mongolia Program**

## **Context**

Australia Awards are provided to build the skills and knowledge of individuals to contribute to their country's development, and to support the ongoing development of links with Australia. Australia Awards are an important part of the Australian Government's public and economic diplomacy. The Australia Awards in South Asia and Mongolia (AASAM) program supports the implementation of Australia Awards in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, incorporating long term scholarships, short courses, fellowships, Australian Professional Opportunities, on-award scholar engagement, alumni engagement, communications and enabling activities.

The current total contract value of AASAM covering February 2021 to June 2027 is \$73,887,966. It is funded from DFAT bilateral and regional allocations of the Australian Aid program. AASAM was designed to run until 30 June 2030, with an initial contract period from February 2021 to June 2024, and two (2) extension options, each up to a further three (3) years. However, as it was merged into ASSAM after it begun, Mongolia activities are subject to one (1) extension option up to a maximum of four (4) years, with services ending no later than 30 June 2028. In June 2024, DFAT exercised the first three-year option and extended the contract period to June 2027. Palladium (acquired previous contractor Scope Global) has managed the program since February 2021. AASAM is currently managed by the South and Central Asia Division (SXD) of DFAT.

The goal of AASAM is to support the program's partner countries to achieve their development goals through education and knowledge transfer and to build enduring relationships with Australia that advance mutual interests.

To advance this goal, the program aims to achieve two key outcomes:

- Alumni are using their skills, knowledge and networks to contribute to sustainable development.
- Alumni are contributing to cooperation between Australia and partner countries.

Each country program articulates its own specific set of objectives to promote these outcomes in their annual country plan.

## **The AASAM mid-term review**

The Mid-Term Review (MTR) was commissioned to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the implementation of AASAM during the initial contract period, and to identify opportunities for improvement for the remaining period of the program. The MTR team visited Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka only as it was not practical to visit all countries. Online interviews were conducted with a wide range of stakeholders and awardees across the region to collect and validate review information for the report.

Overall, the mid-term review found AASAM was a well-planned and managed Australia Awards program that continues to deliver results for the Australian Government. It was supported by a professional and experienced managing contractor team and by the global Australia awards delivery framework. Its design and implementation were strongly aligned with Australia's international development priorities and local needs. The regional 'hub and spokes' model of delivery provided considerable advantages for the program, including cost-efficiencies, access to corporate and specialist resources and collaboration. Monitoring and reporting of results were comprehensive and provided useful information on the delivery of the program, achievement of outcomes and its contribution to long term impacts.

The MTR identified areas for improvement including:

- more strategic and integrated approach across current delivery modalities
- stronger program governance and oversight
- stronger engagement with employers to achieve long-term outcomes
- rebalancing program M&E reporting to focus more on outcomes and impacts
- global benchmarking of implementation costs and greater global guidance to ensure continued consistency, alignment and value for money.

The report made 19 recommendations and DFAT's management response is below.

The report represents the independent views of the consultants and not necessarily the views of DFAT or AASAM managing contractor. DFAT considers this review an important opportunity to learn and improve AASAM in the remaining period of the program.

## Response to recommendations:

### *Monitoring, evaluation and learning*

Recommendation	Response	Explanation	Action Plan	Timeframe
1: That DFAT strengthen AASAM's MEL strategy by ensuring that all indicators are mapped to outputs and outcomes, and increasing its focus on impact assessment by undertaking periodic synthesis studies of alumni contributions to long-term outcomes	Agree	Measuring the outcome and impact of long-term global Australia Awards Scholarships (AAS) needs to be done consistently under the leadership of DFAT's Global Education and Scholarships Section (GLE). GLE manages the global AAS M&E framework including conducting surveys and tracer studies. AASAM MEL indicators are focused on short to medium-term outputs and outcomes particularly designed for measuring AASAM activity implementation.	DFAT will review existing AASAM MEL strategy and indicators to identify information that could contribute to impact assessments of global AAS outcomes and impacts. AASAM MEL will focus more on reviewing indicators for short courses and APOs to ensure information collected will contribute to long-term outcome impact assessments.	July 2025
2: That DFAT and GLE review the AASAM and global program logic and consider refocusing the outputs to directly and clearly reflect program deliverables and reconsider the appropriateness of including employer enabling factors as outcomes in the program logic.	Not agree	AASAM was set up primarily to contribute to achieving the AAS goals and outcomes and was designed based on the global program logic.  See explanation under Recommendation 1.  Including employer enabling factors as outcomes in the program logic is challenging and difficult to measure.	DFAT will consider defining AASAM program deliverables as clearly as possible and link the deliverables with anticipated outputs in program Annual Plan.	N/A

### ***Effectiveness of AASAM implementation***

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
3: That DFAT review its governance arrangements including Oversight Committee functions to ensure they are better aligned with the complexity and interdependence of the AASAM program	Agree	The Oversight Committee is not fit for purpose. Some strategic decisions take place outside the committee, or its decision making is often subject to endorsement by other senior officials. The membership of the committee is too high level for the operational discussions that take place	DFAT will consider a more practical oversight committee membership, structure and scope that provides strategic direction, and ensures accountability of the AASAM. This will include a mechanism to escalate unresolved operational matters.	May 2025
4: That DFAT consider strengthening the quarterly update meetings' focus on strategic management of the program, and escalation of issues to the Oversight Committee	Agree	Quarterly Update Meeting currently brings together all implementing stakeholders (GLE, SxD country desks and Posts, and Palladium staff in Australia and overseas) to discuss strategic program updates and operational matters.	The revised Oversight Committee arrangement will include a mechanism to escalate unresolved operational matters.	May 2025

### ***Alignment with Australia Awards global policies***

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
5: That DFAT GLE consider developing guidance to support the global implementation of activities such as short courses and APOs, consistent with the broadening of Australia Awards modalities highlighted in Australia's International Development Policy	Partially Agree	APOs are unique to AASAM and are not included under AAS. AASAM has specific offer letters and guidance notes for the effective implementation of short courses and APOs.	DFAT will consider developing a short course offer letter template with generic terms and conditions that are applicable to all DFAT funded short courses. AASAM will update its offer letter to conform with the template once finalised.	December 2025

### ***Relevance of AASAM-specific modalities***

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
6: That DFAT consider the use of undergraduate and doctorate level scholarships to respond to specific priorities and needs and develop an approach to its AASAM-specific modalities (such as short courses and APOs) that is more strategic and integrated across modalities	Partially agree	Master's degrees are the most cost effective long-term AAS. PhD degrees are not supported as they are more expensive with high non-return risks.	Apart from doctorate level scholarships, the proposed recommendation has already been implemented under AASAM.	Already being implemented under AASAM

## Efficiency

Recommendation	Response	Explanation	Action Plan	Timeframe
7: That DFAT (through GLE or the relevant area) consider developing a mechanism for benchmarking the costs of delivering its Australia Awards programs	Not agree	Benchmarking delivery of Australia Awards programs is not easily achievable given programs vary between regions and countries including delivery modality, costing structure, and personnel inputs.	DFAT will continue to work to harmonise outsourced management arrangements provided across the Australia Awards network.	N/A
8: That DFAT harness opportunities for efficiencies in the design and delivery of AASAM's modalities, including multiple delivery of short courses (and build this option into provider contracts where appropriate), delivery of complex APOs through local partners and leveraging synergies between short courses and APOs	Agree	This recommendation has already been explored by AASAM in the last two years.	This recommendation has already been planned for implementation as outlined in the 2024-25 AASAM Annual Plan.	Already being implemented under AASAM

### *Continuing benefits*

Recommendation	Response	Explanation	Action Plan	Timeframe
9: That DFAT ensure that AASAM activities promoting the continuing benefits for employers target a diversity of employers, including private sector and NGO employers or employer organisations	Agree	AASAM reaches out extensively to private sector and NGO employers to promote AAS. In Mongolia, half of the scholarships are earmarked for private sector/NGO applicants. However this would not be effective in South Asia where job insecurity makes potential applicants reluctant to resign from their positions to take up a scholarship and employers very rarely keep positions open while an employee is on scholarship.	DFAT will continue to promote AASAM activities including long-term AAS and short courses to a diverse range of employers.	Already being implemented under AASAM
10: That DFAT explore opportunities to support employer utilisation of alumni benefits through strengthening the reintegration process, securing employer engagement and commitment and ensuring that AASAM short course and APO proposals clearly articulate a benefits realisation strategy	Agree	AAS long-term and short course awardees are required to prepare Development Impact and Linkages Plan and Return to Work Plan respectively before commencement of studies to enhance the sustainability of AAS objectives and to support participants in sharing their learning and experience when they return home.	DFAT will review its existing scholar reintegration process to place more focus on engagement with employer and utilisation of alumni benefits as far as possible.	April 2025

### ***Gender equality, disability and social inclusion***

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Response</b>	<b>Explanation</b>	<b>Action Plan</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
11: That DFAT further mainstream and explicitly state the use of an intersectional lens to support increased affirmative outreach and interventions for women who experience multiple forms of marginalisation	Agree	AASAM's GEDSI Approach and Action Plan is explicit on this including a commitment to intersectionality. This principle is mainstreamed in every aspect of AASAM implementation.	The program will further look for opportunities to mainstream GEDSI in program implementation.	Already being implemented under AASAM
12: That, in relation to scholarships, DFAT increase its engagement with disabled people's organisations (DPOs), especially women-focused DPOs, in targeted countries to promote scholarship opportunities	Agree	AASAM currently engages with 249 Organisations for People with Disability (OPD) during scholarship promotions. AASAM's OPD list is reviewed annually, including with input from AASAM's Alumni Disability Advisory Group.	DFAT will continue to maintain and update the OPD list and actively look for ways to increase engagement with those organisations and scholarships promotion opportunities.	Already being implemented under AASAM
13: That DFAT consider offering a limited number of undergraduate scholarships in targeted fields to people with	Agree	AAS is a prestigious program that is merit based requiring applicants to meet minimum course entrance and language requirements including for undergraduate scholarships. AASAM offers support to people with disabilities to improve their	At each country Post's discretion, a limited number of undergraduate scholarships will be allocated with a specific objective of attracting applicants who have not previously benefited from higher education studies, in particular	From 2027 intake (as country profiles and promotional materials have already



disabilities from targeted countries		participation opportunities such as providing extra language training support.	people with disability and people from marginalised backgrounds.	been finalised for 2026 intake).
14: That DFAT Post decisions on short courses are made more strategically and with an intersectional lens to enable improved targeting and increased participation of women, people with disabilities and members of other marginalised groups	Agree	See explanation under Recommendation 11.	AASAM supports short courses, scholar and alumni engagement activities and APOs on specific topics to improve inclusiveness by targeting women, people with disability and people from marginalised groups. AASAM 2024-25 Annual Plan included a range of such activities. A couple of examples as below: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional Short Course on <i>Women in Executive Leadership</i>; and</li> <li>• Regional Alumni Workshop on <i>Development for All</i>.</li> </ul>	Already being implemented under AASAM
15: That DFAT offer an increased number of short courses specifically for women, people with disabilities and members of other marginalised groups to address imbalances	Agree	See explanation under Recommendation 11	See Action Plan under Recommendation 14	Already being implemented under AASAM
16: That DFAT ensure that an increased proportion of	Agree	See explanation under Recommendation 11.	Further consideration will be given to participant selection to increase women,	April 2025

women, people with disabilities and members of other marginalised groups are selected as participants in APOs through use of an intersectional lens and affirmative action measures			people with disabilities and members of other marginalised groups in APOs.	
17: That DFAT, Post, and GLE strategically support alumni who contribute as advisors and leaders (and continue to do so for those already receiving support, such as the Alumni Disability Advisory Group). This could include the provision of stipends or honoraria; nomination to participate in short courses, APOs or other professional development activities; or another form of support	Agree	AASAM strives to provide support to scholars and alumni as appropriate to encourage engagement and contribution to the program.	The recommended support is currently provided under AASAM. For example, a stipend is already provided to some members under the Disability Advisory Group.	Already being implemented under AASAM
18: That AASAM offer at least one Alumni Disability Initiative Grant that meets merit criteria at the	Partially Agree	AASAM resources devoted to region-wide selection processes might be disproportionate to the potential outcomes if only a single Alumni Disability Initiative Grant is offered. It	At least one Alumni grant in each country that offers grants will be earmarked for disability initiatives subject to availability of eligible and quality applications and being selected on merit.	To be offered from 2025-26

regional level on an annual basis		would be more effective to support such a grant at the country level.		
19: That AASAM explore with Indigenous scholarship recipients the potential for establishing a regional Indigenous alumni network	Agree	Other than in Bangladesh, there does not appear to be any evidence that indigenous scholars are demonstrating great interest in networking with other indigenous scholars at the country level. Establishing such network at a regional level would need careful identification of objectives and realistic outcomes.	DFAT will explore the feasibility of establishing a regional indigenous alumni network.	July 2025