LABOR CAUGHT OUT ON SCHOLARSHIP CLAIMS

Study aid rebadged for Asia

BERNARD LANE

THE 12,000 Asian Century student scholarships program talked up by Julia Gillard is just a rebadging of an existing scheme with no new money or awards.

In the white paper, the government says: “We will commit 12,000 Australia Awards (Asian Century) over the next five years to nations in Asia to encourage people-to-people links with the region.”

It was widely reported as one of the few genuinely new initiatives in the paper, but a government spokeswoman has confirmed there are no new scholarships.

On Monday, the Prime Minister cited the student awards when ABC radio host John Faine suggested the white paper was yet another case of empty rhetoric on Asia.

“What we are looking for in the future is 12,000 Australia in the Asian Century scholarships, which will not only enable people in our region to come here and study, but kids from here to go and study in parts of Asia,” she said.

The Australia Awards, bringing together merit-based education scholarships and development aid scholarships, were launched in May last year as “the Colombo Plan of the 21st century” by then foreign minister Kevin Rudd.

Asked whether the Asian Century awards involved any new scholarships, a government spokeswoman said they were “part of the existing Australia Awards programs” run by development agency AusAID and the Tertiary Education Department.

Most of these scholarships already involve Asia: last year, 63 per cent of awards brought students from that region or sent Australian students there.

Last year, the government spent $270 million on 4400 Australia Awards, almost all of them for students funded to attend Australian universities.

The white paper says some of the Asian Century-badged awards “will be extended to include work placements and support mid-career sabbaticals”, but gives no numbers or costings.

In the May budget, the government cut $10m over four years from the Endeavour scholarship arm of the Australia Awards.

The government said it would seek to quarantine awards involving Asia.

Last year, 73 per cent of incoming Endeavour students were from Asia.

The month before, the government’s advisory council on international education, chaired by businessman Michael Chaney, had called for debate on an expansion of the Australia Awards, which it said kept alive “the spirit of Colombo”.

The idea was to give more balance to the image of Australia, which has become better known for building a profitable industry on the fees paid by international students.

The post-war Colombo Plan is usually represented as a form of enlightened self-interest because it educated future elites of the region at our expense, generating goodwill and forging lifelong personal links. Sunday’s white paper appears to belittle the Colombo Plan as part of a pre-emptive strike against the opposition.

In June, Tony Abbott drew on the political capital of the Colombo Plan when he promised that a Coalition government would send “Australia’s best and brightest” into the region as a variation on the Menzies-era initiative. The white paper says the Australia Awards are “much larger in scale than the Colombo Plan” and Ms Gillard and her Asian Century Minister Craig Emerson have both boasted in media interviews that these scholarships “dwarf” the Colombo Plan.

Opposition foreign affairs spokeswoman Julie Bishop said she had been looking into the capacity of universities and visa systems in the region to absorb much larger numbers of Australian students.

She said she had raised the Coalition’s new Colombo Plan with Indonesia’s Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa, last month and he had responded with “a great deal of enthusiasm”.

Dr Natalegawa took his PhD in international relations at the Australian National University.

Ms Bishop has said under the Coalition, study in Asia would become “a rite of passage” for “thousands and thousands” of young Australians.

The Coalition has yet to give details or to cost the plan.
A government spokeswoman has confirmed there are no new scholarships.
Fund plan axed after standards concerns

Results-based assessing is not the ideal way to guarantee quality

ANDREW TROUNSON

The possibility of the federal government shifting some funding from enrolments to completions appears to have been abandoned amid fears it could put standards at risk.

David de Carvalho, head of the Innovation Department’s higher education division, said yesterday: “This is an issue that is constantly being considered but at the moment there are no concrete plans to move down that track.

“It is a question of balance. Certainly the minister is very interested in improving retention rates, but funding of completions is inherently risky, given the potential for perverse behaviour and unintended consequences,” Mr de Carvalho told a student engagement conference in Melbourne.

Conference chairman Alan Robson, who heads the government’s higher education standards panel, said Denmark funded universities based on completions but it had a “rigorous system of external examinations to ensure institutions did not drop standards just to graduate more students to get more money.

Mr de Carvalho said based on conservative departmental modelling, the government was ahead of its target of 40 per cent of 25 to 34 year olds with bachelor degrees by two years. The target could be achieved by 2022 if dropout rates lessened.

Universities face increasing scrutiny of their teaching performance through proxy indicators such as satisfaction surveys and attrition data being published on the My University website. Mr de Carvalho said data on the site was constantly being improved. For example, students who leave one institution but enrol in another are no longer counted as drop-outs.

Attrition rates fell from 18.6 per cent in 2002 to 16.5 per cent in 2010. However, when students transferring to another university were not counted, the
average drop-out rate between 2005 and 2009 was a steady 12.5 per cent.

The University Experience Survey was piloted last year and this year all universities are participating. Mr de Carvalho said there was unease at the prospect of the results being published on My University amid concerns about the robustness of the results. Independent technical advice has been sought to feed advice to Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans before he decides whether to publish.

By the end of last month, 110,000 students had participated in the 2012 UES for a response rate of 23 per cent.

“The results of the UES and the development of other performance indicators have the potential to contribute significantly to enhancing the esteem of teaching,” Mr de Carvalho said. “But it would be dangerous to overstate the ability of metrics to capture the essence of what makes a quality teacher.

“It is vital for universities to be encouraged to focus on continuing improvement in the quality of their teaching and find ways of balancing the esteem in which research is held with esteem for teaching performance.”

University of Melbourne pro-vice-chancellor participation and engagement Richard James told the conference the university was considering taking a lead from North America and introducing formal individual student “action plans” around co-curricula activities to promote engagement, but he was wary that formal action plans would be a turn off.

“We are flirting with the idea of a student action plan, but there is a bit of anxiety over whether we can hit the spot in terms of student reactions to this,” he said.

He said an action plan would have to tap into student values and be serious enough for them to want to do it without it being seen as onerous.

James Cook University’s deputy vice-chancellor academic Sally Kift said that in promoting co-curricula activities to boost engagement, universities needed to ensure that students from poorer backgrounds could participate equally, given they were more likely to have work commitments.
Call to base foreign ties on the European model

Call to base foreign ties on the European model

ASIAN Century-style links between Australian and regional institutions should be modelled on the European experience, a leading internationalist academic says. Queensland University of Technology director of international graduate research Acram Taji said the European credit transfer system had taken a decade to harmonise the higher education syllabus under the Bologna process, but a similar attempt should be made in Australia and then across the region.

In this way students would eventually be able to take undergraduate as well as postgraduate courses across a range of countries and institutions, extending the sector’s already keen engagement with the region, as argued on this page by University of Sydney business dean Geoffrey Garrett and co-author Sean Gallagher.

But while Professor Taji welcomed the government’s Australia in the Asian Century white paper, she joined the chorus of academics and others calling for additional funding to achieve that and another crucial goal, a workforce proficient in at least one other language.

“Unless there is new money for higher education to build world-class centres of research and teaching excellence so that we can remain internationally competitive, then chances of achieving the goals and aspirations set in this paper may be low,” Professor Taji said. “I would like to see (us) start teaching all university students, irrespective of the field of studies, an Asian language.”

Professor Taji is an Iranian-born plant biotechnologist who was completing postgraduate training in Australia when the 1979 revolution began.

She remained here, teaching principally at the University of New England and at QUT.

Although Professor Taji is lobbying for Australia to forge links via the ASEAN University Network, in the meantime she has cultivated a wide range of connections on her own, with stints at institutions in the South Pacific, Sri Lanka, Japan, India, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam.

“I have supervised PhD students in these countries and they are now my research collaborators,” she said.

About 15 per cent of QUT’s students are from overseas, from 101 countries, and the proportion of international postgraduate research candidates is about one-third.

Professor Taji’s most recent protege is Thai doctoral candidate Kuanhathai Kuadnok, a lecturer at the research-focused Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, who has a masters in education.

Ms Kuadnok, 35, came to Australia under an agreement Professor Taji signed with CMRU, whereby the Thai institution covers candidates’ living costs and QUT waive tuition fees.

Ms Kuadnok arrived three weeks ago with her husband and three-year-old daughter to start work on her PhD in developing a self-directed learning model in English lessons online.
Grants pay the way for Asian studies

ABOUT 10,000 university students will receive grants worth up to $5000 each to help them study in Asia.

The AsiaBound scheme, costing $37 million and to be announced today by Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans, will also provide $1000 grants for students to study an Asian language before they travel.

It comes after the Labor Government this week launched its Asian White Paper blueprint aimed at giving Australians a deeper knowledge of Asia.

University students will be able to apply for grants worth between $2000 and $5000 covering study exchanges lasting from two weeks to 12 months.

Senator Evans said there will also be “low-cost student-friendly loans”, worth up to $7500, for studying in Asia.

“AsiaBound will support more than 10,000 Australian students to enjoy the experience of living and studying in an Asian country,” he said.

Senator Evans said it was a key part of the Government’s aim to have a greater proportion of Australians undertaking part of their degree in an Asian country.
Scholarships a study in rebadging

EXCLUSIVE

BERNARD LANE

JULIA Gillard’s 12,000 Asian Century student scholarships involve the rebadging of an existing program without providing any new scholarships.

The scholarships have been reported as one of the few initiatives in the Asia white paper released this week. But a government spokeswoman said there were no new scholarships. The revelation came as the government today announces a $37 million program offering grants and loans to encourage more than 10,000 young Australians to take up study opportunities in Asia.

On Monday, the Prime Minister cited the student scholarships when pushed on whether the white paper was another case of empty rhetoric on Asia. “What we are looking for in the future is 12,000 Australia in the Asian Century scholarships which will not only enable people in our region to come here and study but kids from here to go and study in parts of Asia,” she said.

The Australia Awards — merit-based education scholarships and development aid scholarships — were launched in May last year by then foreign minister Kevin Rudd. Asked whether the Asian Century awards involved new scholarships, a government spokeswoman said they were “part of the existing Australia Awards programs” run by development agency AusAID and the tertiary education department — 63 per cent of which involve Asia.

Yuanjiang Pei came to the University of NSW from China, courtesy of an Australian Leadership Continued on Page 6

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HIGHER EDUCATION P29
Scholarships just rebadging

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Award, one of the scholarships that form the Australia Awards. It covers his tuition fees — he is close to finishing his PhD — and living costs in Sydney.

He said an old university friend from China, now at UNSW, had recommended the institution.

"I came because I wanted to elevate my professional knowledge — and I found a great supervisor," he said.

His prize-winning doctoral research could help redesign the diesel engine, making it cleaner and more efficient. Although he hopes to next move to a post-doctoral role in the US, he plans ultimately to return to China, perhaps to industry or academia.

"I want to go back to have some new challenges," he said.
WHILE THE GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN SLASHING ITS FOREIGN BUDGET

We've engaged Asia: business

ANNABEL HEPWORTH TOM DUSEVIC

BUSINESS has spearheaded stronger economic ties with Asia at the same time that Canberra's spending on its main trade and diplomatic agencies has plunged as a share of the federal budget, adding to pressure on the Gillard government to match its rhetoric about the Asian Century with action.

As critics yesterday lined up to question how the government would bankroll and implement its ambitious blueprint, business leaders called for the role of corporate Australia in Asia to be better recognised and urged the government to significantly lift funding for agencies that encouraged trade, including Austrade.

Trade data reveals that exports to our five biggest Asian trading partners have soared from $577 billion in 2001 to $188bn last year — led by China, where yearly exports have risen from $8.85bn to $7.1bn over this time. Two-way trade with our top-five Asian partners has soared from $97.5bn to $274.1bn.

But analysis by The Australian reveals that over the same time, there has been no real increase in the Austrade and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade budget, even though spending on the federal bureaucracy has doubled.

As a proportion of the budget, spending on DFAT and Austrade has dropped 47 per cent since 2001-02. Of every $1000 of spending, $7.10 went to the agencies in 2001-02 compared with $3.76 at the end of the forward estimates period of 2015-16.

Had the spending rate of a decade ago been maintained, this year there would be $990 million extra funds for Austrade and DFAT.

For the first time in a decade Austrade's staff numbers have slipped below 1000, while the number of DFAT staff deployed overseas has dropped by 13 per cent since 1996.

Launching the Asian Century white paper on Sunday, Julia Gillard said the government was committed to helping Australian companies build their presence in Asian markets, saying the entire economy “must be as engaged in the region as mining and agriculture”.

We should devote a national effort to building more comprehensive relationships with our key partners across the region, including through our diplomatic networks,” she said, promising to create an “Asian Century Business Engagement Plan”.

Mining entrepreneur Owen Hegarty — a former head of Rio Tinto Asia and Oaxiana — said Australia’s resources sector had been “engaging and trading and dealing and investing and building and all those sorts of things” for years in Asia, but now it was crucial the government supported capability in the resources and mining sector, rather than slugging it “with every tax to use it as a bit of a milch cow”.

He said while it was welcome that the Asia white paper had suggested a continued commitment to helpful bodies such as Austrade, this needed to be matched by funding. “Not big licks of money — we’re not talking about the national broadband. Anything they can do to help facilitate continued business connections at the highest levels is a good thing.”

The white paper made no commitments to increase funding to DFAT or Austrade, although a parliamentary committee report this week recommended an increased Austrade presence in “North Asia, Central Asia and China” to take advantage of the region’s economic growth.

Other business leaders agreed that agencies such as DFAT were

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COMPA NIES EMBRACE ASIA

Total two-way trade with our top-five Asian trading partners $bn

INSIDE

AUSTRALIA'S push into Asia is being undermined by a chronic funding squeeze, which has halved the share of spending on key diplomatic and trade agencies.

TOM DUSEVIC P6

THIS white paper must not be forgotten in today’s disposable politics. It is a test for the nation and a test for Labor. It needs to become a permanent measuring stick.

PAUL KELLY P12

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We're engaging region already, says business

Continued from Page 1

important to their ambitions to continue to reap the opportunities presented by the forecast explosion in the size of the Asian middle class by 2025, but questioned the goal that one-third of board members of top 200 listed companies have “deep” Asian expertise and pressed the government to make real progress in areas including the reduction of trade barriers in free-trade agreements.

Former Telstra chief executive Ziggy Switkowski said that “for some years now, at least at the top end of town, they have looked at adding Asian faces to their boards”.

ANZ chairman John Morschel said the bank had more than 100 branches in the Asia-Pacific region now, compared with just 30 in 2007, and had grown its customers in the region from 925,000 to 2.5 million over this time, while Commonwealth Bank chairman David Turner said his bank already had a board and senior management team that were well experienced in the Asian region.

Crown chairman James Packer said that after the delivery of the Asia white paper, the “challenge now is to have the courage to go even further”, while Australia Japan Business Co-operation Committee chairman Rod Eddington said that good Australian companies already realised they were up against fierce intra-Asia competition.

ANZ had told the Asia white paper team led by former Treasury secretary Ken Henry that it was concerned about restrictions such as limits on the number of branches and ATMs a foreign bank can own in India and a 30 per cent cap on foreign ownership of Malaysian banks.

Yesterday Mr Morschel said, “the government has generally been very supportive of us, especially DFAT”. “The issue now is for some sort of reciprocity for the fact that our banking market is reasonably open to foreign banks and we would like to see the same thing happen. Now we realise this is not going to happen overnight, but it’s just continual representation by government departments and government officials in relation to this aspect.”

Dr Switkowski said that while many companies had patchy records in their offshore expansions, “many of the building blocks for a successful expansion into Asia have been put in place in the last 10 years”.

“An area that hasn’t been emphasised but is running through board conversations is how to better understand the Islamic community and markets and rules within Asia,” he said.

“My experience going back a number of years is that boards have been very alert to the need to directly introduce Asian expertise into their boardrooms and Islamic awareness.”

Sir Rod said firms that had “only just woken up” to the opportunities in Asia “may have missed the boat”. “But actually a lot of Australian companies have been there a very long time, have a really good handle on it,” he said.

Sir Rod, who has been on the board of mining giant Rio Tinto, said the paper was a “call to arms”, but funding the plan “was not going to come for free.”

Australia now reaps more than $150bn in exports from its top three trading partners of China, Japan and Korea, but to sustain and grow that “we are going to have to make investments of our closer to home”.

“Whether it’s investments in the education system, whether its investments in others shapes in forms, whether its investments in Australian government offices in these places, it is going to cost us money,” Sir Rod said.

“We shouldn’t expect to become more Asia-literate, more Asia-savvy, we’re going to get there for nothing. It’s absolutely right it’s going to cost us money. But if its done intelligently, then it’s an investment worth doing.”
TRADE WITH OUR FIVE TOP ASIAN PARTNERS

Exports  Imports

CHINA

JAPAN

SOUTH KOREA

SINGAPORE

INDIA

Source: Dept
$37m push for overseas study

BERNARD LANE

THE government will offer grants and loans to encourage more than 10,000 young Australians to take up study opportunities in Asia, Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans says.

Senator Evans today will announce a $37 million AsiaBound Grants Program, together with a more generous OS-HELP loan system, to meet a promise of the Asian Century white paper.

“This is a program to give Australian students the opportunity to build lifelong professional networks and friendships,” he said in a statement.

Each year, 3400 university students would be offered a $2000 grant for short-term study in Asia for up to six months.

There would be 500 places, each with a $5000 grant, for university students to do semester-long exchanges, and 500 places with a $2000 grant for vocational education students. Students could take up a variety of study options in the region, including clinical placements, and would not be limited to universities in Asia.

About 3000 Australian university students a year already choose to do some study in Asia but the US and Europe have been more popular destinations, according to the International Education Advisory Council.

Today’s Asia study grants program represented about $30m in new money over three years, Senator Evans’ office said.

Rob Malicki, an expert on study abroad, said the new measure sounded “huge”. “Universities themselves put about $20m in (in annual grants for travel study), the government puts in about $6m — so if you’re pouring in $30m in new money over three years, that’s a big splash,” he said.

University of Sydney student Sinead Maguire, who has recently returned from a semester in Indonesia, said she “had to work really hard personally” to save for her trip because there are few Asia scholarships available.

Under the OS-HELP scheme, which allows students to finance study travel, the maximum loan amount would rise by $1250 to $7500 in 2014, Senator Evans said.

The scheme would be opened to postgraduate students whose university places are subsidised by the federal government.

The cost would depend on how many students took up the more generous loans, and the government had set aside savings from this month’s mini-budget, Senator Evans’ office said.

There would also be loans for students wanting to take Asian language courses before their trips.

Murdoch University’s professor of Southeast Asian studies David Hill said the measure would broaden the appeal of in-country study beyond those students already familiar with a given language and culture.
Asian travel boost for unis

Mark Kenny
Steven Scott

THOUSANDS of Australian tertiary students will have access to small study grants to travel to Asia from next year, the Federal Government will announce today.

The Gillard Government will commit $37 million over three years to a new Asia-Bound Grant program, with parcels of between $2000 and $5000 for work/study periods in an Asian country.

The scheme aims to promote work in Asian countries to the benefit of both the students and the host organisation.

Griffith University will be among the institutions to benefit, with planning students able to visit China’s fastest-growing city, Beihai.

The program has sparked new links for Griffith University in China and is being held up as a model.

The grants, part of the Government’s Asian Century White Paper process, are designed to foster stronger links and to integrate Asian language and culture more fully into Australian post-school education.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans will announce details of the scheme today in Canberra, which will include $1000 grants for Asian language preparatory study and $1000 grants for “intensive language training”.

“Asia-Bound will support more than 10,000 Australian students to enjoy the experience of living and studying in an Asian country,” he said.

He said the program had been designed to provide Australians with “the opportunity to build lifelong professional networks and friendships”.

“In addition, all Australian students, across all disciplines, will have greater support to take up part of their study in Asia,” he said.

“Through the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, we aim to have a larger number of Australian university students studying overseas and a greater proportion undertaking part of their degree in an Asian country by 2025.”

Senator Evans said the next generation of Australian leaders “will need to be increasingly Asian-literate and these are skills best learnt by experiencing Asia first-hand”.

“The updated scheme means low cost, student-friendly loans,” he said.
Balanced tertiary sector needed

Elevating education as a pillar of Australia’s engagement with Asia is essential for lifting productivity and skills mobility. One priority will be tackling restrictions for those completing skills qualifications vis-a-vis university professions.

TAFE institutes have led transnational education with more than 55,000 students completing dual qualifications.

These have been collaborative agreements where TAFE establishes curriculum support, and dual qualifications frequently are also in demand. While university-dominated federal cabinets continue to push through bilateral free-trade agreements, with services focused on support for professions such as engineering and law enabling wider practising agreements, negotiations for skills mobility frequently languish.

Worse, skills course enrolments offered in Australia are restricted with differing streamlined student visas, which combines to create a confronting education gap between universities and VET/TAFE.

Professor Denise Bradley, AO, who headed the Review of Higher Education, recommended a diverse and balanced tertiary sector. This must be a starting point for future engagement planning with Asia.

Martin Riordan
CEO TAFE Directors, Sydney
Asia study grants lifted

Canberra

Australians wanting to study in Asia will be given grants up to $5000 as part of the Gillard Government’s bid to foster ties with neighbours.

Amid criticism the Government has not matched its commitment to boost education as part of its Asian Century White Paper with money, Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans will today pledge $37 million to expand a student exchange program to help an extra 10,000 people.

The expanded AsiaBound Grants program will give 3400 students a year $2000 for a short-term stint of between two weeks and six months.