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'Young Asians in Our Homes': Colombo Plan Students and White Australia

Daniel Oakman

'We need to understand and be understood by the countries of South and South-East', said Richard Casey, Australia's Minister for External Affairs, while addressing the Australian Institute of International Affairs on 25 September 1952. One of the principal means by which Australia initiated such understanding was through the ambitious foreign aid scheme known as the Colombo Plan. Casey championed the scheme throughout his career, extolling the virtues of cultural exchange facilitated by the scholarship program. He said for Asian students 'to see Australia at an impressionable stage of their lives and to exchange views at our universities and with our officials should do a great deal to break down prejudices and misunderstandings on both sides'.¹ During the early 1950s the Department of External Affairs (DEA) spent more on capital aid projects than it did on educational scholarships. Nonetheless, the arrival of Colombo Plan students was one of the most conspicuous and striking examples of Australia's aid program, which had an immediate impact on the lives of many Australians. The social and political impact of their presence has not yet received significant treatment in the context of the demise of the White Australia policy (WAP) and Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region.²

The rich historiography dealing with the WAP has tended to neglect the more abstract cultural forces present during the liberalisation of Australia's immigration policy. Instead, it focuses on the pressure to consolidate political and economic relations with the newly independent nations of Asia and domestic institutional and structural reforms, such as the work of the Immigration Reform Group (IRG), and internal changes in the public service.³ In *The Australian Dilemma*, Bruce Grant deftly identifies an important, yet overlooked theme, in Australia's history:

The most intriguing question about Australia, and about the potential of ordinary Australians, is how a narrow, fearful racism, expressed in the succinctly explicit 'White Australia' policy, could apparently change over a period of twenty to thirty years to such an extent as to support an official national policy of 'multiculturalism' backed by all the major political parties.⁴

The answer, Grant posits, lies in the force of historical circumstances and not in any 'hidden spiritual depths'. He does not explore the links between institutional forces, which implement legislative reform, and the attitudes, values, and understandings (both in a collective and individual sense) of 'ordinary' people. One of the most significant, and perhaps least understood, factors in achieving immigration policy change was Australia's growing awareness of its place in the Asian region and the changing perceptions of Asian people. James Jupp states in *Immigration* (1991) that, along with the collapse of Nazi ideology, the presence of Asian students in Australian universities saw the racist claim of genetic inferiority brought into intellectual disrepute.⁵

Between 1951 and 1964, Australia hosted nearly 5,500 students and trainees, representing 16 per cent of the 33,000 places offered by all donor nations contributing to the Colombo Plan. Students studying in Australia came from over 15 nations in South and South East Asia. Malayan and Indonesian students were in the majority representing 27 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively. Overseas students represented 4 to 6 per cent of the main student body, with a high proportion of these students coming from Asia. Between 16 and 25 per cent of all overseas students were on Colombo Plan scholarships.⁶ The expansion of the Colombo Plan program coincided with a dramatic shift in the destination of private Asian students. It is not an overstatement to suggest, as the DEA did, that there had been 'something of a revolution in the way in which countries such as Malaya, Singapore, Burma and Indonesia have sent their people to Australia for training rather than more traditional countries'.⁷ In 1959, there were 2,350 overseas students in Australia plus an additional 450 Colombo Plan students. In 1961, the number of overseas students had increased to 3,250 and the number of Colombo Plan scholars in the country was over 500. Universities subsidised private Asian students by almost 80 per cent. Consequently, media commentators and government policy makers often drew little distinction between Colombo Plan and private students — both were considered part of Australia's overseas aid program.⁸ The DEA established a correspondence program in 1955 to extend the influence of the Colombo Plan.⁹ By June 1961, nearly 1,000 students had completed a correspondence course and over 1,800 students were still receiving training under the scheme.¹⁰

The political and cultural imperatives served by the Colombo Plan scholarship program remained largely unchanged during the 1950 and 1960s. In January 1962, Arthur Tange, Secretary of the DEA, submitted a statement on the demand for tertiary courses from foreign countries to Leslie Martin, Chairman of the Australian Universities Commission. Tange predicted that Australia was likely to continue to grow as a preferred destination for overseas students in the Asia-Pacific region and explained that the Colombo Plan education program 'incidentally' fulfilled two broad political and cultural objectives. First, it was a practical demonstration of Australia's intention to assist 'countries geographically near us from which Australia has been cut off culturally until the last 15 years'. Second, students who had lived and studied under the program were generating goodwill and prestige for Australia.¹¹ The DEA also believed that the scheme promoted social and technological development and encouraged the adoption of Western liberal-democratic values. After spending time in Australia, the DEA envisaged that students would return home with positive experiences to share with family and colleagues. The preoccupation with the impact of the WAP was obvious:

Questions of race and colour play a large part in determining the attitudes of the Asian and African States to many significant international problems. In these circumstances Australian aid programmes like the Colombo Plan ... which gain wide and favourable attention are a valuable testimony to the absence of racial prejudice in our foreign policies. The presence of Asian and African students in Australia and their experience of the tolerance and friendliness of the Australian people are an effective counter to the charges of racial discrimination which are sometimes levelled against us.¹²

During the first half of the 1950s, the Colombo Plan appeared to boost Australia's profile in Asia. The Official Secretary of the Australian High Commission in India, Francis Stuart, reported widespread 'public curiosity' about Australia, and the 'remarkable extent to which Australia's existence as a power in the world is known and accepted'.¹³ Three years later, Stuart's replacement, Walter Crocker, was more circumspect about the impact of the Colombo Plan and cautioned the Secretary of the DEA, Alan Watt, not to expect any gratitude or benefit for aid contributions. Crocker saved his most positive remarks for the educational program: 'the best publicity we have received so far has been from students who have been studying in Australia. In fact I am inclined to feel that the only political value which Australia has got out of its Colombo Plan efforts has been from the students'.¹⁴ He told Casey that the student's negative expectations enhanced their appreciation of Australian hospitality: 'They have been surprised and gratified by the friendly reception they have met with there. Their gratification is the greater because they go half expecting to encounter something in the form of a colour bar'.¹⁵

The presence of Asian students in Australia caused some anxiety, especially among official bodies. In 1951, the DEA denied a request for financial assistance from the student-oriented East-West Committee to stage an exhibition of Asian culture after the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) investigators revealed the potential for distribution of Communist propaganda. Once more this raised the alarming prospect of leaving students vulnerable to 'communist influence, thus largely nullifying our efforts under the Technical Assistance Programme'.¹⁶ While the government's concerns are understandable, they were largely unfounded. In response to a request from the Malayan Government that the Malayan Students Association and Colombo Plan trainees were falling under the influence of Australian Communists, ASIO reported that although the association was left-wing and nationalist, there was little evidence to suggest that the communist presence was significant.¹⁷ The anxiety expressed by conservative media about the vulnerability of Asian students to Communist blandishments was similarly misplaced. In August 1953, Sydney's *Daily Mirror* proposed that Australia's eagerness to accept Asian students risked bringing spies into the country.¹⁸ In December 1955, the Melbourne *Sun* ran the alarmist headline: 'Reds working on Asian students here'. The article, based on the observations of engineering student, Hin Quek, did however explain the failure of communist groups to attract Colombo Plan students.¹⁹

The unprecedented demand for places and the success of students meant that demand outpaced supply. Although annual placements rose between 1959 and 1965 from 434 to 656 respectively, over 250 nominations from recipient nations remained unplaced for the 1964/65 financial year.²⁰ The increasing pressure on universities to accept overseas scholars was not without its problems. The Principal of Melbourne High School, George Langley, wrote to Menzies in 1956 about the failure of a number of Asian scholars to find places at Melbourne University's medical course due to restrictions on the number of places available to foreigners. Langley crystallised a fundamental government concern when he wrote that:

[T]he international aspect of this is so important — especially when one considers the part played by Australia in the launching and implementation of the Colombo Plan — that I think the Universities might consider it logical to approach the Commonwealth Government for some assistance in the building of further medical schools ... Panic might lead to ill considered letters home and poor publicity.²¹

Student experience while in Australia became increasingly important, particularly when it came to fulfilling the foreign policy objective of instilling among students an understanding of Australian social and political culture. During the first few years of the program, the DEA struggled to integrate the rising numbers of Colombo plan students (and private overseas students) into the academic and social community — sometimes with tragic consequences. Between 1950 and 1951, three Asian students studying at the University of Western Australia committed suicide and another suffered a mental breakdown. The social and emotional neglect of the growing student body had the potential to jeopardise the political *raison d'être* of the student program. Casey raised these concerns with Menzies as early as July 1951:

My Department has for some time been concerned that accommodation difficulties, problems of orientation and a good deal of ordinary loneliness may not only lead to occasional instances of personal tragedy, but also leave the way open to Communist influences.²²

The experiences of students were, in many ways, a private and deeply personal affair. The case of a group of Burmese students studying in New South Wales (NSW) provides an interesting example of problems faced by visitor and host alike. Twelve Burmese students studying mining technology at the NSW University of Technology had the misfortune of achieving the worst academic results of the 1956 Colombo Plan students, with all twelve failing their exams. Although the DEA attempted to shift responsibility to the students for their general 'attitude to the course', a closer examination of the reports, however, reveals a more complex picture.²³ Language difficulties appeared to be the most significant and persistent barrier to their success. The physics teacher, E F Palmer, noted that the natural shyness and 'embarrassing amount of courtesy' displayed by the students was in marked contrast to the 'brusque manners' of the Australian miners responsible for practical demonstrations in the mines. Teachers and students frequently misunderstood each other, and the generally passive and withdrawn nature of the Burmese students compounded these difficulties. C Harrison, the coal-mining instructor, noted that in some cases when 'students received little encouragement' they hid in dark recesses of the mine, avoiding miners altogether. On weekends the students escaped to the rear of the hostel to cook on campfires by the riverbank, apparently suffering from 'the change of food'.²⁴

Geoffrey Blainey suggests that the creation of International House in Melbourne represented a 'tangible expression of [Australia's] new consciousness of Asia', but it also epitomised the anxiety and defensiveness pervading Australian society.²⁵ Douglas Wilkie, journalist and ex-war correspondent, wrote of the risk to Australia's foreign policy objectives of failing to provide adequate housing. It was 'anomalous to bring Asian students here and then force them to live in drab boarding-houses or in isolated communities because we could not "afford" an International House'.²⁶ Ian Clunies Ross, Chairman of the International Service

Committee of the Melbourne Rotary Club, targeted Casey's preoccupation with shielding students from Communism, when he suggested that Colombo Plan funds be used to construct an International House. He asserted that by closely integrating Asian and Australian students the Government would avoid any suggestion of sustaining policies of racial segregation. Increasing student numbers and the pressure to minimise exposure to potentially subversive influences forced the DEA to make student housing a fundamental priority. Australia's first International House opened in 1957, with an allocation of £50,000 from the Colombo Plan budget.

In addition to the cultural shock of living in Australia, students faced the difficulty of living on a substantially reduced income to what they might have been accustomed. Reports of the inadequacy of the living allowance flowed back to the DEA. Patrick Shaw, Assistant Secretary of the Economic and Technical Assistance Branch, wrote to Casey in 1956: 'Dissatisfaction with these rates under present conditions is general and we have received copies of reports to their own Governments from trainees who have returned home, stressing the inadequacy of the living allowance we are paying'.²⁷ Once again, the management of Colombo Plan students revolved around the damage disgruntled students might cause on return to their home countries.

One consequence the DEA had not fully taken into account was the impact of Asian students on their host families. The response from ostensibly middle-class families was striking. Mrs M G Swinburne, of Surry Hills in Melbourne, provided lodging and part-board to three Colombo Plan students and in 1954 penned her observations to the editor of the *Age*:

Our contact with these young men proves to us that they are normal, natural boys from good homes. They have [a] distinct personality, are generally of excellent character, good intelligence, fine sensibilities and very likeable ... We find that to know these students better is to regret very much that we are debarred by our own immigration law from having them as our real next-door neighbour.²⁸

Swinburne's reference to the 'distinct personality' of her boarders is particularly significant. She simultaneously acknowledges and challenges the nineteenth century 'Asian Hordes' metaphor which had been transplanted into a cold war context, where Asians were mentally homogenous and vulnerable to communist influence. Swinburne's letter prompted the more conservative Irtaza Zaidi to write to the newspaper:

It is through personal contacts that we know and understand each other fully well and not merely by reading in schools and colleges ... I do not want to indulge in controversy on whether Australia should allow Asians to settle here or not — a point raised by Mrs Swinburne — but I think Australia should at least encourage more and more Asians to come and visit Australia on social and cultural missions. At the same time Australians should be encouraged to visit different countries of Asia.²⁹

In these two letters the embrace of Asia is genuine — if circumspect. It is important to note the role personal encounters with students played in altering the image of Asians and their ability to live harmoniously with Anglo-Australians.

Meredith Worth, DEA Liaison Officer at the University of Melbourne, noticed the changing sentiment towards Asian students. A memorandum to Casey explains that the first wave of Colombo Plan student posed a problem because the 'right type of landlady' was difficult to find and few people were aware of the Colombo Plan students' existence, let alone being interested in assisting them. Worth continued:

The position now is very different, mainly due, I think to the excellent impression which Colombo Plan students have made here and to their willing co-operation with all efforts to publicise the Colombo Plan and the importance of closer relations between Australia and South East Asia. I now receive many unsolicited offers of good accommodation and the recent appeal in the *Sun* and over 3DB for hospitality ... has resulted in over fifty offers of hospitality in Melbourne as far afield as East Gippsland'.³⁰

Worth proposed that the Good Neighbour Council, created by the Chifley Government in 1949 to assimilate migrants, establish a sub-committee dedicated to Colombo Plan students. Easily incorporated into its assimilationist agenda, the sub-committee would greet students on arrival, assist in the location of appropriate accommodation, organise social events, assist with personal problems, and arrange publicity.³¹ In 1953, Casey created the 'Meet Your Neighbours Campaign', which saw Colombo Plan students attending arranged dinner parties with Australian families. 'While they have returned to their home countries armed with much information and professional and industrial experience', Casey said, 'few have known the average Australian working man in his own home surroundings. Yet this is hardly a less vital part of their education'.³² Casey hoped that these casual meetings would counter perceptions that western citizens led selfish and indolent lives, surrounded by limitless wealth. Although the campaigns were publicity stunts, it reveals Casey's, and the government's, preoccupation with personalising student experience in Australia in the hope that cultural interaction would endear Asians and Australians to each other.

During the early 1950s, the administration and integration of Colombo Plan students had been a sporadic, ad hoc affair. In order to create a more flexible and 'less haphazard procedure', the DEA delegated various administrative functions to other government instrumentalities and shifted responsibilities to private community organisations.³³ Guided by the Centres of Excellence (COE), the Coordinating Committee for the Welfare of Overseas Students brought together the functions of middle-class community organisations across Australia. Fortunately for the DEA and the Menzies Government, a significant base of support became active. These groups included Rotary Clubs, Apex Associations, the Asian Student Council, the YWCA, the Malayan Students' Association, the Australian-Indonesian Association, the Country Women's Association, the Thai Students' Association and many others.

University administrators themselves were also instrumental in soliciting support and offering guidance to private citizens. Reverend Frank Borland, Warden of the Union at the University of Adelaide and President of the Australian-Asian Association (South Australia) between 1957 and 1958, sent letters to 'potential hosts' of Asian students and short booklets to those already providing accommodation, offering instructions on how to prepare their homes and how to

converse with Asians. 'Their happiness and well being is greatly influenced by the hospitality they receive', he advised, 'But please do not over-mother them or smother them with attention. They like to be independent, and are able to make their own plans and decisions'.³⁴

As visitors, scholarship holders posed little threat to Australia's economic and social fabric, thus minimising the chance of a hostile reception. The socio-economic background of the students themselves facilitated their ready integration. Colombo Plan students were typically male, from wealthy, middle-class families, already educated, and able to speak adequate English. Occupying a conspicuous place on the university campus, Asian scholars soon developed a reputation as successful, industrious, and hard working. Between 1956 and 1963, the pass rate for Colombo Plan students sitting leaving examinations rose from just over 70 per cent to 79 per cent. These figures were higher than the equivalent statistics for Australian students.³⁵ The increasingly rigorous selection of students and the introduction of compulsory English classes helped to improve academic performance. Their academic success may have given rise to new stereotypes of Asian diligence and dedication, yet it debunked the myth of Asian intellectual inferiority or backwardness. Collectively, Colombo Plan students (and private Asian scholars) were a non-threatening, but powerful, challenge to conventional stereotypes of non-Europeans and, in many ways, epitomised the ability of non-British people to adapt and assimilate to Australian conditions.

Foreign students undoubtedly encountered discrimination and intolerance on a personal and institutional level. Perhaps the negative experiences shared by Colombo Plan students have been suppressed. After all, Colombo Plan students visited Australia under strict obligations to refrain from political activity, to return home after the completion of their studies, and to not take any form of permanent employment. Serious public criticism was unlikely to be forthcoming from conscientious scholarship holders absorbed with their studies. However, by the mid to late 1950s, diplomatic correspondence, student writings and media coverage drew a distinction between the welcoming and positive reception Asian students received while studying in Australia in contrast to the harsh rigidity of the immigration restrictions themselves. Asian writers struggled to come to terms with the possibility that although protected by racially based immigration laws, Australians themselves were not necessarily or universally hostile or overtly racist. The *Ceylon Daily News*, for example, reported the radical views of Archbishop R C Halse, who supported the recognition of Communist China, welcomed Colombo Plan students, and wanted to admit a quota of Asians 'who would add something to our way of living'.³⁶ The *Hindu* explained quizzically that 'many forward Asian students find no difficulty in getting Australian girl partners to dance with them and a small number of Australian girls have married Asian husbands. The term colour bar is positively misleading when applied to Australia'.³⁷ It was only from 1954 that Australian opinion polls reflected any consistent softening of community attitudes towards Asian immigration. In 1943, 51 per cent of respondents fell into the 'Keep Out' category, peaking in 1954 at 61 per cent. The number of respondents in this category fell steadily to 33 per cent in 1960. After increasing to 39 per cent in 1961, it fell sharply to 16 per cent in 1965.

The pattern described here mirrored a gradual reduction in the number of respondents who believed that overall migration numbers were too high.³⁸

Asian students remained significant witnesses to Australian tolerance and adaptability. Student associations, church groups, and the official Colombo Plan Liaison Office organised picnics, dinners and formal evenings as a means of facilitating social interaction with Australians. Significantly, overseas student groups themselves, such as the Colombo Plan Fellows Association of Sydney, which was established in June 1953, staged parties, cultural evenings, film nights and excursions for Australians and overseas students. There were frequent media reports about the friendship and goodwill generated by the presence of Asian students. Many Colombo Plan students had Australian partners during the course of their studies; others married and settled in Australia.³⁹ The phenomenon of cross-cultural education sparked interest from social scientists, demographers and psychologists. In 1969, Daphne Keats, from the Australian National University, conducted a follow-up study on Australian-trained Colombo Plan students. Among other things, she found that 83 per cent of the 503 respondents kept in regular contact with Australians.⁴⁰ Interestingly, the number of former students who maintained contact with any formal graduate association of ex-Australian students was much lower. While this can be explained partly by the absence of these associations in some countries, it might also suggest that personal relationships was a more enduring and meaningful basis for continued contact with Australia. A 1972 survey demonstrated that most Asian students mixed freely between circles of friends from their home countries and Australia. Only five per cent of respondents preferred to have no social contact with Australians.⁴¹

The presence of Asian students in Australia also instigated various reform campaigns, particularly by church leaders. In 1954, the Reverend Rees-Thomas of the Brisbane City Congregational Church refuted the claim that a quota system would reduce living standards. According to a report in the *Courier-Mail*, the Christian church believed that throughout 'universities and colleges ... there were thousands of educated and cultured Asians who could not only live up to Australian standards, but could elevate them'.⁴² There was a general awareness that the student program was a valuable precursor to deeper professional and political links. Other papers also saw the positive outcome of these interactions and acknowledged the hardship faced by visiting students: '[o]bviously it isn't easy for Asians to settle into life here. But it is probably easier than it was, say, six years ago', with instances of 'abysmal ignorance and intolerance [having] grown less'.⁴³

By the early 1960s, cases of extreme alienation and personal hardship brought to the DEA's attention were rare. With some cause, the DEA interpreted the high success rate of the students as evidence of their ability to overcome intellectual and social obstacles present in Australia. The more common problem for the DEA was 'the reluctance of students who have become over-identified with the Australian way of life to return to their home countries'. The corollary of this issue was, according to the DEA, the possibility that by allowing Asians to linger too long in Australia they would develop unrealistic expectations for their own country and resent Australia for its prosperity.⁴⁴ The use of Asians as ciphers for propaganda had its drawbacks and the DEA risked offending the very students

they hoped to befriend. This sentiment emerged in a letter to the DEA financed *Hemisphere* magazine in March 1959, when a student wrote angrily to the editor:

I am sick of being constantly asked if I am a Colombo Plan student – a fact which goes to show how poorly the Press in general has informed the Australian public. Probably your magazine can put more stress on the private students and use the words “Colombo Plan” with less relish.⁴⁵

The incongruous and contradictory relationship between immigration restrictions and the personal interactions of Anglo-Australian and Asians grew over the decade. Peter Heydon, High Commissioner in New Delhi, wrote to Canberra about a team of Indian editors who toured Australia and on their return to India wrote enthusiastically about ‘the hard-working character of Australians generally and our egalitarianism’.⁴⁶ The Australian High Commissioner in Malaya, Tom Critchley, believed that the student program was Australia’s ‘most signal contribution to Australian-Malayan amity’.⁴⁷ While they, and others in the DEA, could celebrate these positive affirmations of Australia hospitality, they could not deny the trenchant critical and caustic criticism of Australia’s immigration restrictions. The presence of Asian students exposed Australia to deeper evaluation and censure, precisely what the DEA hoped to avoid. The *Times of Indonesia* attacked the Colombo Plan as empty tokenism: ‘Australian[s] cannot do enough to show how much Australians like Asians in absentia. The Colombo Plan and other such schemes are a kind of blood-money paid by the Australian to silence his guilty conscience towards Asians and Africans’.⁴⁸ Asian diplomats in Australia, while critical, appreciated the subtlety of social change. In 1960, the Indian High Commission in Canberra reported that despite continued intransigence over immigration, Australia’s ‘impregnable insularity’ was beginning to subside and ‘the Asian facet of the Australian personality has been taking clearer shape’.⁴⁹

Minor changes to Australia’s immigration regulations were made during the 1950s. The government abandoned the infamous dictation test in 1958 in favour of a simpler entry system, but it was the influential Immigration Reform Group (IRG) which first used the Colombo Plan to expose the dangers of maintaining a policy offensive to Asian nations. The group cited the cases of prominent Asian leaders educated in British institutions, asking rhetorically: ‘[c]ould they have felt the same if the atmosphere of freedom and racial equality which they experienced in Britain had been tainted by an immigration policy that seemed to them a denial of the fundamental equality of mankind?’ The IRG tactfully refrained from condemning the Colombo Plan as a total failure. Working from an assimilationist perspective, the IRG proposed that Asian students had demonstrated their capacity for ready absorption into Australian society. Indeed, this integration would be enhanced if they could remain permanently: ‘Australia cannot become “home” in their minds ... Knowing that their stay here must be temporary, they have little encouragement to develop a sense of affinity with or affection towards this country’.⁵⁰

Ultimately, it was a combination of forces, both domestic and foreign, which saw the dismantling of the WAP. The 1966 review of Australia’s immigration policy centred on the increasingly complex involvement with Asia. The

interactions and relationships established, or facilitated, by the Colombo Plan featured strongly in Prime Minister Harold Holt's parliamentary address:

Australia's increasing involvement in Asian developments, the rapid growth of our trade with Asian countries, our participation on a larger scale in an increasing number of aid projects in the area, the considerable number of Asian students — now well over 12,000 — receiving education in Australia, the expansion of our military effort, the scale of diplomatic contact, and the growth of tourism to and from the countries of Asia, combine to make such a review desirable in our eyes.⁵¹

While the 1966 reforms did not see the end of the WAP, they did signal its imminent departure. More importantly, by the end of the 1960s Australian society possessed enough residual understanding and tolerance of Asians to allow the liberalisation of the WAP without significant political or social disruption.

The presence of Asian students and the intense publicity given to Colombo Plan trainees was important in facilitating a change in outlook among the Australian people. As Gwenda Tavan has argued, the post-1945 idea of assimilation was a 'transitional doctrine' allowing Australia's time to adjust, understand, and accept radical social and cultural changes associated with immigration.⁵² Asian students fulfilled a similar roll in breaking the myth — at least for middle-class Australians, that Asians were a fundamental threat to the 'Australian way of life'. Even Menzies, who had largely ignored Asia throughout his career, remarked in his memoirs that '[t]he daily association of Australians with students and scholars from Asian countries has greatly widened the experience and understanding of our own people'.⁵³ Colombo Plan students also contributed to a shift in attitude among international observers, who began to draw distinctions between official approaches to immigration reform and the personal reception afforded to students during their visit. Ironically, their temporary status allowed Asian students to have a substantially greater cultural impact, because it removed part of the basis for the extremist charge that the presence of Asians was a forerunner to a physical or cultural 'invasion'.

With few exceptions, the experience of Asian students proved illuminating and meaningful for student and host alike. International condemnation of racial discrimination cannot be discounted as a factor in encouraging the attitudinal changes that swept the country but international pressure alone would not have led the Menzies Government to dismantle the WAP. The ideals of equality, tolerance and understanding were rendered less abstract by Colombo Plan students and the thousands of private scholars who spent time in Australia. Although the numbers of Asian scholars was small, their presence marked something of a watershed in Australia's cultural development, and their appearance on university campuses and in private homes across the country provided a direct — if subtle — challenge to Australian insularity.