



Australia Awards

South and West Asia Scholars Forum 2018

LEARN | LINK | LEAD



Strengthening links with South and West Asia

The inaugural Australia Awards – South and West Asia Scholars Forum was designed to facilitate institutional and people-to-people links between Australia and South and West Asia.

Australia Awards scholars from South and West Asia, selected through a competitive process, came to Canberra in October 2018 for a Scholars Forum supporting institutional and people-to-people links between Australia and the region – **a first for Australia Awards**.

The inaugural Australia Awards Scholars Forum for South and West Asia attracted **over 100 participants, including 58 Australia Awards scholars** from South and West Asia, alumni, senior diplomats from the region, representatives from Australia's education institutions and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Ahead of the Forum, DFAT hosted a Welcome Reception at the Australian National University (ANU) on Tuesday 16 October. Formal proceedings commenced on Wednesday 17 October at the Old Parliament House in Canberra.



Above: Simon Merrifield delivering the keynote address at the Scholars Forum.

Key Speakers

Simon Merrifield, First Assistant Secretary, South and West Asia Division, DFAT delivered the keynote address, setting the tone for the Forum with a high-level overview of the event's theme, LEARN | LINK | LEAD. Mr Merrifield outlined the importance of Australia Awards for Australia, "Australia Awards increase the impact of other aid interventions across a range of sectors, encourage a positive view of Australians and their country, and enable ongoing contact with Australian people, businesses, institutions and governments".

The keynote address was followed by an inspiring response from His Excellency Mr Somasundaram Skandakumar, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka. "Asia is in the middle of a historic transformation: thanks to the Australia Awards, each of you can become part of that challenge and contribute towards that exciting transition" he said. Scholar Syeda Farrukh from Pakistan described these opening addresses as "captivating", stating that they will "remain front of mind" for her for some time.

"Cultivating skills, knowledge and networks, and ensuring their dissemination, is a foundation of development. Consider how the personal experiences and knowledge you are gaining in Australia, and the networks you are forming here, can be utilised most powerfully"

- **Simon Merrifield**

First Assistant Secretary, South and West Asia Division, DFAT



“You, our Australia Awards scholars from South and West Asia, are all drivers of growth and innovation...At this point in human history, the links that we are forging with you through this program are more important than ever”

- **Dr Stephanie Fahey**
CEO Austrade

The theme for the Forum reflected on the Australia Awards experience: **LEARN**: scholars acquire the knowledge and skills to drive change and contribute to development in their countries; **LINK**: they create and nurture lasting connections between Australia and their countries, professions and the region; and **LEAD**: scholars return home and become part of an influential global network of leaders and advocates making a difference in their respective fields and countries.

Dr Stephanie Fahey, CEO Austrade and Dr Robert Styles, International Development Adviser, ANU, shared insights with scholars on how global linkages build human capital, generate innovation, and contribute to economic growth. Highlights included discussions on key skills for future graduates and how Australia Awards scholars can be drivers for growth and innovation. Dr Fahey advised scholars that both technical skills and soft skills are required to place them in good stead to impact the future.

Scholar feedback from this session was highly positive, with one scholar posting: “this presentation made me realise the importance of networking in building our professional capacities, and to lead forward”.

Top image: Dr Stephanie Fahey, CEO Austrade, addressing participants at the Scholars Forum.

Middle image: H.E. Somasundaram Skandakumar, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka, engaging with Forum participants.



“These awards are not merely about learning and linkages. They also embrace leadership and empowerment...local development priorities and policies are adequately addressed... eventually all of this contributes to the prosperity of the South West Asian countries and the wellbeing of the region.”

- H.E. Somasundaram Skandakumar
High Commissioner of Sri Lanka



Top image: Australia Awards scholars arrive at the Scholars Forum.

Image above (left to right): Mr Andrew Collins, Assistant Secretary, South Asia Branch, DFAT, with Heads of Mission from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal.

Diplomatic Roundtable

A Diplomatic Round Table was held with H.E. Mohammad Sufiur Rahman, High Commissioner of Bangladesh; H.E. Lucky Sherpa, Ambassador of Nepal; H.E. Babar Amin, High Commissioner of Pakistan; and H.E. Somasundaram Skandakumar, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka – together with James Hall, Assistant Secretary, Afghanistan and Pakistan Branch, DFAT. Scholars were offered insights into their home governments' perspectives on Australia Awards and how the modality enhances relationships between Australia and the region.

Innovative Technology and Media

Interactive mobile technology was integrated into the event, with participants providing real-time feedback during each session and at the end of the Forum. Participants were also given the opportunity to receive their professional images through a text message to aid them in their social media engagement, made possible through WalkerKam technology.

Social media and traditional media coverage for the event was highly successful. There were 55 trackable social media posts across channels regarding the Scholars Forum and 119 professional images were brought into the private and public social media channels of Forum participants as a result of WalkerKam. **Traditional media coverage included three dedicated SBS interviews.**



Scholar and Alumni Engagement

Australia Awards scholars and alumni gave insightful presentations on their budding linkages in Australia. The Forum was co-empowered by dynamic scholars who helped guide the Forum's proceedings.

The Forum broadened the scholars' experience outside their academic pursuits, offering them an opportunity to develop professional networks with Australians, senior diplomats from their countries, alumni, and other scholars from their countries and the region.

Australia Awards scholar from Pakistan, Mehak Masood suggested that the values and lessons learnt from the Forum will influence the scholars throughout their education experiences and professional lives moving forward.

Of the 51 scholars who responded to the Scholars Forum evaluation: **98% confirmed they gained new knowledge and ideas about developing professional linkages with Australia or within the South and West Asia region**; 100% confirmed that, following the Forum, they were motivated to increase their professional linkages with Australia or within the South and West Asia region; and **98% confirmed they made new connections through the Forum.**



"Standing here looking at you - it's like looking at a tapestry of cultures, skin colours, different philosophies, interests, passions and spiritual orientations, it's just wonderful. It's like a microcosm of tomorrow's world"

- Robert Styles

International Development Adviser, ANU

Top image: Australia Awards scholars from South and West Asia at the Forum.

Above: Australia Awards scholars networking and making new connections at the Forum.

Scholar reflections



“The Scholars Forum created opportunities for me to network with fellow scholars, diplomats and industry leaders.

I must also highlight that H.E. Somasundaram Skandakumar, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka, stated in his speech that *‘every life born has so much potential, but it is the opportunities that we are given that differentiates us’*. This comment touched me because I believe that I have been very blessed with the opportunities I have received.

I want to make the most of the opportunities I receive here in Australia and take what I learn and discover here to improve the lives of others. I want to be a leader who creates opportunities for others, and helps others see their potential”

- Hawwa Yumna

Australia Awards scholar, Maldives

“It was a wonderful experience to meet with the other scholars at the Forum and to listen to their inspiring stories on how they are planning to utilise their knowledge and networks to help in the development work in their own countries.

The Forum provided me with an opportunity to link up with my fellow scholars from my home country, some of whom I was meeting for the first time, and make lasting friendships with them within a short span of time. It was also great to listen to what the various diplomats had to say during the morning phase of the Scholars Forum, which was indeed a thought-provoking session.

Overall, it was a highly satisfying and enlightening experience, and I am deeply humbled to have been given the opportunity to be a part of the Scholars Forum”

- Anuk De Silva

Australia Awards scholar, Sri Lanka





"The most valuable aspect was listening to the experiences of the current scholars and alumni. It motivated me to engage more and make the most of my time here"

- Nilusha Abeysekara

Australia Awards scholar, Sri Lanka

"[The most valuable aspect of the Forum was...] to take my learning an extra mile.. to scaffold links ... and finally to take lead in initiatives close to my heart"

- Attiya Malik

Australia Awards scholar, Pakistan

"[The most valuable aspect of the Forum was...] learning a lot in just one day. It was like a crash course on Leadership!"

- Sonam Jamtsho

Australia Awards scholar, Bhutan

"It was a great opportunity to learn and link with the other scholars from different countries. It is a good platform to [learn how to] 'make a difference' globally..."

- Anonymous

Australia Awards scholar

"[The most valuable aspect of the Forum was...] leadership development through networking and knowledge sharing"

- Fatema Zohura

Australia Awards scholar, Bangladesh

"The Scholars Forum was an important event where we, the scholars, got the opportunity to meet and get to know each other closely. The agenda was designed in such a way that we were able to share our own visions towards driving change in our own countries and the work we have done so far, till now, to achieve it. It was an honour to listen to Heads of Mission of each country share their thoughts and their advice on what it means to be a leader.

The forum was also a platform for new scholars to hear about the significant achievements of other scholars and alumni. This provided much-needed encouragement. I made close friendships with a few scholars that I will value throughout my life.

I believe that such Forums are very important and should continue every year, as it provides an excellent platform for individual growth, building self-confidence to speak up in public, build networks and learn to lead.'

- Wangmo

Australia Awards scholar, Bhutan (*featured*)

"The Forum created the perfect opportunity to engage meaningfully with fellow scholars... It made me reflect on solving development issues collectively in a world that is becoming increasingly transnational"

- Tashi Chozom

Australia Awards scholar, Bhutan

"Engaging with peers from the same region sharing similar development needs... Scholar presentations, country needs and linkage identification were the best aspects of the Forum..."

- Mahanand Joshi

Australia Awards scholar, Nepal

"I enjoyed the program from the beginning till the end. Thanks for having me in this great program to share my exciting experiences"

- Ms Sadia Afroze

Australia Awards alumna, Bangladesh

"[The most valuable aspect of the Forum was...] learning the importance of links and maintaining them over the years..."

- Anonymous

Australia Awards scholar

Evaluation

Of the 51 scholars who responded to the Australia Awards – South and West Asia Scholars Forum evaluation:

98%



confirmed they gained new knowledge and ideas about developing professional linkages with Australia or within the South and West Asia region



98%

confirmed they made new connections through the Forum, with



76% asserting this strongly



100%

confirmed that, following the Forum, they were motivated to increase their professional linkages with Australia or within the South and West Asia region



98%

confirmed that the Forum strengthened their determination to use their skills, knowledge and connections to be a leader on return to their home country



Above (left to right): Australia Awards scholar from Pakistan, Muhammad Hussain; Australia Awards scholar from Bangladesh, Arifa Jahan Ema; with Australia Awards scholars from Pakistan, Adnan Abdul Majid Bhatti and Attiya Malik.



Social media

Social media and traditional media coverage for the Forum was highly successful, thanks to event-specific initiatives.

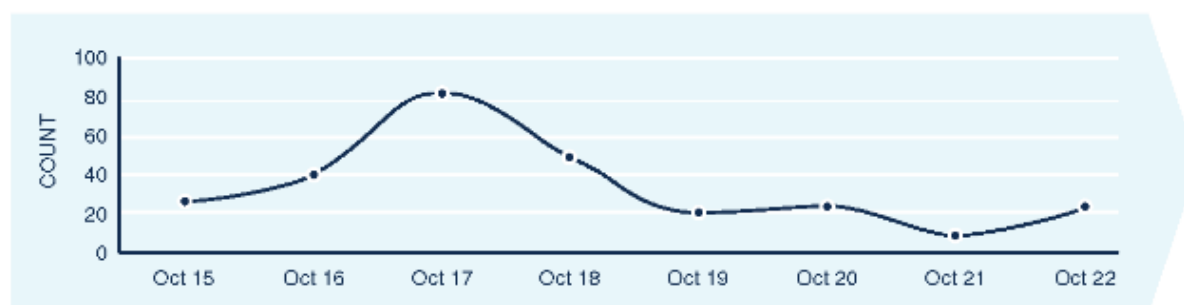
The deployment of WalkerKam technology used in association with a social media competition to motivate generate interest helped ensure high levels of social media engagement at the Forum.

Australia Awards social media data shows a high level of social media engagement during the Scholars Forum, with a peak of Australia Awards social media activity on October 17, representing 83 engagements and mentions related to Australia Awards, as can be seen on the graph below.

Fifty-five trackable engagements explicitly mentioned the Scholars Forum, using the #AustraliaAwards hashtag, between October 16 and 18. Social media regarding the Forum boosted Australia Awards social media after the event also, with new posts appearing through to the end of October.

WalkerKam shared over 1,500 professional images with Forum participants in real time, branded and ready for use on social media. 504 of these images were downloaded by Forum participants to store on their smartphones or to share on social media. 143 images were clicked directly through to public or private social media accounts or to an email account. The composition of these social media clicks suggests where most Forum participants are interested in sharing content (Instagram: 54; Facebook: 53; email: 18; Twitter: 12; and LinkedIn: 6). WalkerKam data provided an insight into social media engagement beyond what was trackable through the #AustraliaAwards hashtag.

Graph: Trackable engagements and mentions on Australia Awards social media channels



Media

Media interest was generated through social media rather than traditional media releases and alerts. Two major media opportunities from the Forum are outlined below. Four articles regarding the Forum – including three scholar reflections – will soon feature on the Australia Global Alumni website. A complete library of professional images from the Forum is available on the official Australia Awards Flickr account [here](#). DFAT's Scholarships and Alumni Branch plan to publish a video reflecting on the Forum, combining text and imagery from the event.



The social media coverage of the Forum caught the attention of Talib Haider, Digital Content Producer at SBS. Talib is a well-known producer with substantial experience in television, radio and online channels both in Australia and Pakistan.

Talib interviewed three Australia Awards scholars from Pakistan, listed below, and will be publishing a podcast and online articles focusing on the aspirations of the scholars and their experience in Australia with their Australia Awards Scholarships to date. The articles will be published [here](#) both in English and Urdu

Ms Sara Ali
Australia Awards scholar,
Pakistan



Dr Adnan Abdul Majid Bhatti
Australia Awards scholar,
Pakistan



Ms Merium Kazmi
Australia Awards scholar,
Pakistan



High Commissioner Skandakumar inspires Australia Awards South and West Asia Scholars

Comments / 669 Views / Thursday, 25 October 2018 00:00



A news story regarding the address provided by H.E. Somasundaram Skandakumar, High Commissioner of Sri Lanka, was published on the [High Commission of Sri Lanka website](#) and across multiple Sri Lankan media websites including the [Daily FT website](#) and the [eLanka website](#). DFAT's social media engagement and endorsement of the article can be found on the Australia Awards Facebook page, [here](#).

*Featured on back page (clockwise from top left):
Australia Awards scholar from Bangladesh, Arifa Jahan Ema; Australia Awards scholar from Sri Lanka, Krishanthan Gnanapragasam; Australia Awards scholars from the Maldives, Usha Moosa (right) and Hawwa Yumna; and Australia Awards scholars from Bhutan (right to left) Tashi Chozom, Kushal Chhetri and Sonam Jamtsho.*

