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China's Youth Exchange Programs Target Future Australian Alliances

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China's expanding youth exchange programs with Australia, offering scholarships and curated visits, aim to shape perceptions among young Australians to foster future alliances. This article scrutinizes Beijing's strategic soft power push, questions the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) response, and emphasizes the need for vigilance to protect Australia's interests.

In July 2025, Chinese Premier Li Qiang and ALP Prime Minister Anthony Albanese agreed to boost youth exchanges, welcoming more young Australians to China through Beijing-funded programs (ABC News, July 23, 2025). Modeled on the Young Envoys Scholarship (YES) program, which targets 50,000 American students over five years, China's initiative covers flights, accommodation, and curated tours to showcase a modern, welcoming image (ABC News, July 23, 2025). The Australia-China Youth Association (ACYA) supports this through events like the Australia-China Emerging Leaders' Summit (ACELS), set for Beijing in July 2025, aiming to build "Asia literacy" among 90 delegates (acya.org.au). Beijing's goal, as Xi Jinping has stated, is to "tell China's story well," countering negative narratives and cultivating goodwill among future leaders.

Critics warn these programs are a calculated charm offensive. Rory Medcalf of the Australian National University (ANU) cautions that China's tightly controlled exchanges prioritize propaganda over open dialogue, risking one-sided narratives (ABC News, July 23, 2025). The Lowy Institute highlights rising nationalist sentiment among Chinese youth, citing 20 million online hits claiming sovereignty over Australia after naval drills in the Tasman Sea (lowyinstitute.org, March 31, 2025). Such rhetoric raises concerns about Beijing's long-term intentions, especially as the ALP's trade-heavy approach to China—evidenced by the China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (CHAFTA) review—may overlook security implications.

The ALP's embrace of these exchanges, without robust safeguards, invites skepticism. With public spending at post-war highs, critics argue the government's focus on economic ties with China diverts resources from defense and sovereignty priorities. Shadow Foreign Minister Simon

Birmingham has urged stricter oversight, warning that unchecked exchanges could compromise Australia's strategic autonomy (The Australian, July 22, 2025). While cultural engagement has value, Australia must prioritize programs fostering genuine mutual understanding, not Beijing's narrative, to safeguard its future.