In the Chinese winter of 2004, fourteen young Australians from RMIT University were selected to receive UMAP Scholarships to China. They spent three months at Dalian Maritime University (DMU) in northern China as representatives of the University and UMAP Scholarship program. The program was a rare opportunity for these students to enhance their Chinese language skills and engage in meaningful cultural exchanges as part of the local community.

Delegate and International Studies graduate Simon Smith reflects on his time in Dalian and the unique opportunities offered by the UMAP experience.

The three months I spent in northern China in 2004 as part of the UMAP scholarship program was the most memorable experience of my undergraduate degree at RMIT University. The program provided students with a unique opportunity to observe and engage modern Chinese society through the country’s education system. The skills and relationships that I fostered during this time are invaluable as I seek to better understand China and its prospective role in international affairs.

For native speakers of English, Mandarin is one of the most difficult second languages to acquire. In Dalian, students learnt in a saturated environment, allowing individuals to use their language skills in everyday contexts. The Chinese language program provided by DMU was effective and rewarding. The team of dedicated Chinese teachers at the university provided a stimulating and intimate classroom environment. In three short months, students were able to greatly increase their respective Chinese language abilities.
As part of their scholarship requirements, each student taught conversational English language classes to English language students at Dalian Maritime University. Teaching in a linguistically and culturally different environment was an incredibly rewarding experience. With the freedom to create our own lesson-plans, we gained a fascinating insight into the personal experiences of Chinese students. As a group, we were able to broaden our understanding and appreciation of the Chinese education system and its unique learning culture.
As cultural ambassadors of Australia, we enjoyed the challenges, opportunities and responsibilities of representing one’s own country. Our time in Dalian gave us a great deal of self-awareness: What does it mean to be an Australian? How is Australian culture perceived in a foreign context? Through community presentations, media interviews and public meetings we facilitated the transferal ideas surrounding cultural values, beliefs, and issues surrounding identity. In three months we were able to build long-lasting relationships with members of the local community and strengthen the relationship between Australian and Chinese universities.
Yet, in addition to our interactions with Chinese society, the most rewarding part of the 2004 program was spending three months with an amazing group of young Australian students. By living, learning and teaching with one another in a vastly different country, we were able to develop strong, lifelong friendships. I am sure that the UMAP program of 2004 will continue to be a highlight for all students involved and I strongly encourage future students whom have an interest in the Asia-Pacific to pursue this wonderful opportunity.