

Towards 2020

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**There has been much soul searching about the nature of Australia's international education sector. Now the time has come to look forward, writes Stephen Connelly.**

Last year will be remembered as the year in which international education in Australia finally made the headlines - for all the wrong reasons. It was the year in which issues of international student safety, the financial failure of a number of private providers and the link between international education and migration were thrust into the public consciousness as never before.

As a long-standing professional in this field, I can't remember a year in which I have had so many conversations about international education with people who would otherwise show no interest in the topic. The negative headlines, as is always the case, have far outweighed any coverage of the very tangible and positive benefits international education brings to Australia.

2010 will be the year in which that part of international education known as 'the industry' - bringing international students onshore for studies at our local institutions - suffers the negative enrolment and revenue consequences of some of the underlying problems of the past three or four years. If the industry is to recover from this, and if the broader enterprise of international education at our institutions and in our communities is to flourish in this country, we need to learn from the past and focus on what the future for international education might look like.

While bringing international students to Australia is a very significant component of the broader field of international education, it is just one part. A comprehensive overview of what international education could or should look like in Australia in, say, 2020, needs to encompass all the different strands of this complex and important national undertaking.

International education brings more than \$17 billion in export revenue into Australia, employs well over 100,000 people, supports many small to medium-sized enterprises across the country, brings untold benefits to our diplomatic and trade relations, and engages Australian students, staff and communities in international dialogue and activity. It is part of our connection with the countries in our region, most significantly, as well as other parts of the world, and is an undertaking worth the effort to preserve and grow.

As a nation we need to agree on a means to ensure international education continues to contribute positively to Australia, to our image abroad as well as to the international and domestic students it serves both here and around the world. What might international education look like in 2020?

The first step is to consider the public policy – educational, business, social, cultural – and strategic aspects of internationalisation. Federal and state governments, to varying degrees, are guilty of abject failure over at least the last 10 years to set any sort of direction for international education in this country. They have been happy to employ various levers to either encourage or inhibit growth in the industry, depending on the flavour of the times, and then sit back without consideration of the impact of policy settings, which have been set, by and large, with little real liaison with experts and practitioners in the field.

The recent controversies around increases in private vocational education (VET) enrolments in areas such as hairdressing and commercial cookery, the link to skilled migration, and subsequent issues of safety and security and failed private colleges are a classic example of the outcomes of minimal government interest in strategy development for international education. Currently the federal ministries of education, immigration, trade and foreign affairs have some form of responsibility for, or significant interest in, international education, with implications for other

ministries including innovation, industry, science and research. State governments, their various departments all around the country and their offices overseas, are involved as well. Devising a national strategy for international education in this complexity of cross-jurisdictional responsibility has always been and remains nigh on impossible.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is currently working on a national international students strategy and peak bodies such as Universities Australia are trying hard to ensure it is as broad as possible. We await the outcome of consultations with interest, but the structure to develop, deliver and monitor a long-term national strategy remains missing. There is no Tourism Australia equivalent for international education, yet this is what is needed.

The most visible form of international education is international students studying onshore in Australia. Federal government figures from November 2009 show there are about 630,000 international students in Australia. The current threat to the health of the industry is partly due to the massive increases in private VET enrolments over the past few years, a situation allowed to unfold by weak quality assurance and registration processes at state level and poor implementation of the student visa program.

In 2002, university enrolments of international students comprised 42 per cent of all international students in Australia. Private VET enrolments comprised just 14 per cent. Immigration policy settings, which skewed the industry away from an education focus towards migration, have resulted in private VET enrolments now comprising 31 per cent of all international students in Australia, almost as large as higher education, which has fallen to 32 per cent. Other sectors (schools, public VET, English language) have either stayed at the same proportion or fallen over that seven-year period (though it must be noted, these statistics do not include English-language enrolments by students on working holiday or tourist visas).

Clearly, our current onshore enrolment profile is not healthy. Recent publicity, plus further changes to government policy settings (again with little consultation) will result in a drop in commencing numbers during 2010, something observers will label a market correction, the magnitude of which is as yet unclear. But if we are to take control of some of the elements that have buffeted the industry during 2009, we need to have some idea of what enrolment profile the industry should develop.

One way to do this is to start with research undertaken in 2007. Feedback from universities and modelling commissioned by IDP Education demonstrated that demand for international higher education places in Australia would grow at about 4 per cent per year to 2010, then at 3 per cent to 2015.

Growth in demand has in fact been much faster, with two semesters of double digit growth in enrolments in higher education in 2009. Even with the inevitable slowing in demand over the next few semesters, demand should still hit the projected 260,000 by 2020, up from 204,000 now. At 260,000 in 2020, many universities will have reached the limit of their appetites and capacities for international students. Flattening supply and increasing demand in the university sector should create an environment in which the quality of international students also increases.

If we assume that a healthy onshore enrolment profile has university enrolments as 40 per cent of all international students in Australia, we can make some predictions about possible enrolment levels in the other sectors, in part due to the influence higher education enrolments have on other sectors acting as pathways to university studies. Private VET enrolments were just under 200,000 in November 2009. Recent modelling for IEAA indicates that enrolments of international students in this sector could fall to 85,000 by the end of 2012, increasing again via a combination of factors – including an impending shake-out of poor quality providers and subsequent consolidation – to 129,000 by 2020.

With public VET and schools enrolments at about 36,000 each, English language enrolments at about 150,000, and various other enrolment types around 40,000, the number of international students studying in Australia in 2020 could be around 650,000 – 20,000 more than November 2009, or growth of 3 per cent between 2010 and 2020. This may be the profile for a healthy and

sustainable international education industry in Australia in 2020, generating export revenue around \$22 billion annually, and still a top five export industry, given the size and current growth trends of other industries. The question is - where are the mechanisms by which this could be debated, agreed or modified as appropriate, and then a national effort made to achieve these numbers?

Many other elements of international education are ignored by the media and by government in discussions about the industry. Yet they are as important as bringing international students to Australia, and a number of them underpin that high-profile aspect of the enterprise. They include:

- internationalisation of staff - ensuring staff in our schools, colleges and universities have the requisite skills, professional development and linkages to progress the internationalisation aims of their institutions, and by extension the country;
- internationalisation of curriculum - which we would need even if there were no international students at all, but which ensures our graduates are equipped to succeed in an internationalised workforce;
- internationalisation of research - supporting vital links between Australian researchers and their colleagues overseas, for collaboration and training;
- internationalisation of student services - provision of support services to international students studying Australian programs here and overseas;
- international mobility of local students - providing opportunities for Australian students to undertake a part of their studies overseas;
- transnational education - the provision of Australian programs and courses to international students living at home in their own countries; and,
- international projects - the engagement of Australian institutions with mainly development programs in countries in our region and others with which Australia has developed strategic or business linkages.

All these elements make up a comprehensive framework for the development of institutional and national strategies for internationalisation. Such a framework enables debate about the relative importance of each element, target setting, assigning responsibility for achieving targets, measurement of progress towards targets and identification of quality issues and how to deal with them.

There is one final element of an overall internationalisation framework that is crucial to dealing with the current challenges facing the industry in this country – engagement of the community, business and industry in international education.

Even though the negative press coverage both here and overseas has not been good for the reputation of Australia as a leading provider of international education – and has often not been balanced or very well informed – it has done us all a great service in raising the profile of the industry amongst the general population.

This is an opportunity we cannot miss. The long-term health of international education in Australia relies on government and institutional ability to mobilise community support and understanding for the international students living and studying among us, mirroring in the community the efforts already underway inside institutions to achieve greater interaction between domestic and international students. This will be the most effective means of assisting international students to lead safe and rewarding lives in our communities, to contribute to those communities and enrich their own experience of studying in Australia.

Local councils around the country, from Darebin in Melbourne's north to Adelaide City Council, are recognising the contributions international students can make – and the support they need – and

are setting up structures to support international students. Much more needs to be done, and good practice needs to be showcased and disseminated.

In 2020, international education in Australia could be a \$22 billion, top five export-earning industry for a country that needs to be more than a quarry with a view. At least 20 per cent of our university students and a healthy proportion of our VET and school students should be participating in an international experience overseas as part of their studies. For those who cannot travel, delivery modes and curriculum content will connect them with fellow students, ideas and influences from around the world. Australian institutions will contribute to the development of our region through the delivery of their programs overseas, although modes of delivery and the scale of operations will differ from today's profile.

Our involvement in international development projects will cement our engagement with our neighbours and other strategic national partners. But it will only be possible if we get the national strategy right, and that requires an approach to international education fundamentally different to our current piecemeal approach to strategy and policy development. Otherwise the imminent downturn in commencements will become a trend that will be difficult to turn around.

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