

March 2013 – HES - Central joint fund vital to spur student mobility

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Student mobility is in grave danger of being as popular as motherhood, the flag and apple pie. But while universities and the Australian Government are introducing new measures to increase Australian students taking some of their study abroad, deeper changes will be needed to hopefully make it as pervasive as students taking some of their study in the workplace.

Australian university students are reasonably mobile internationally. Alan Olsen has tracked Australian international students over several years for the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum. His most recent report notes that the number of Australian students with an international study experience has increased markedly from 8.8 per cent of domestic bachelor graduates in 2008 to 12.3 per cent in 2011. This compares well although it is still somewhat below the 14.0 per cent of US bachelor students who study abroad.

Nonetheless, there is welcome bipartisan support for increasing Australian university student mobility. For some years the shadow minister for foreign affairs and former education minister Julie Bishop has advocated a 'reverse Colombo plan' to increase the number of Australian students taking part of their program overseas, particularly in Asia, and this is included in the recent statement of the direction, values and policy priorities of the next Coalition Government.

The *Australia in the Asian century* white paper aims for more Australian university students to study overseas and a greater proportion taking part of their degree in Asia. The Gillard Government introduced a \$37 million AsiaBound grants program to prepare students to study an Asian language and to study for up to a semester in Asia. Earlier this month the government introduced legislation to increase the maximum HECS-like loan OS-HELP for students taking part of their study in Asia by 24 per cent to \$7,500.

Australia participates in University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific, a student and staff exchange program involving many participants in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Unfortunately this program is complicated to access and its take up has been modest.

Australia backs the Vladivostok declaration of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum of September 2012 which seeks to increase the mobility of students, researchers and education institutions within APEC by increasing cooperation in higher education. It plans to improve course accreditation and quality assurance, improve the regulation of education and increase the transparency of student visa requirements. APEC comprises 21 economies of very varied size, culture and development. Strong educational mobility between APEC economies would be most valuable, but it will be difficult and take a long time to achieve.

In the interim Australia should promote student mobility in south east Asia by establishing a central joint fund for students' fees and living expenses to which all participating countries would contribute either directly or through an agency. The joint fund would include a credit transfer scheme that supported the easy transfer of credits amongst participating countries and institutions and was easily administered. It would promote an internationalised curriculum. Employers would be encouraged to endorse the scheme and recruit graduates who had participated in the scheme.

Each program and institution wishing to participate by sending or receiving students supported by the scheme would be required to implement the scheme's credit transfer principles and meet criteria for internationalising its curriculum. To encourage employers' preference each program participating in the scheme would be required to include employability skills. The

scheme would need a mechanism or body to allocate funds and administer or monitor employer engagement, credit transfer and curriculum internationalisation.

Such a scheme would link organisational and academic support for study abroad and incorporate it within the standard arrangements for programs. The model should be work-integrated learning, which makes work experience a strong expectation if not requirement, structures programs to include periods of work experience and incorporates work experience within standard program, curricula and financing arrangements.

But the biggest obstacle to study abroad remains finance. A centralised regional student mobility scheme funded by participating countries and offering a combination of loans and grants would greatly help students overcome the finance hurdle. Such a scheme would also be able to monitor and measure learning and career outcomes and identify benefits not only to individuals but to nations as well.

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