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We have 18 billion reasons to find a strategy

- Stephen Connelly
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AUSTRALIA sells to overseas markets 120,000 tonnes of oranges annually, second only to chickpeas in fruit and vegetable exports. The Australian dollar is killing orange exports, so the industry is calling on Australians to eat more of them. I'm eating an orange a day at the moment, although that's partly because bananas are so expensive.

I know all this because Alan Kohler mentioned it on television. It spurred me to do bit of research -- it's not easy to find out about orange exports. The best I could establish was that fruit and vegetable exports earn between \$500 million and \$1 billion annually. Not bad for a niche industry.

Kohler also mentioned that other export industries are hurting, including international education. Yes, international education was mentioned on the ABC news, and not because of the usual controversies. It's the dollars that matter, apparently, and that's what gets airtime. And \$18bn annually is a lot of dollars.

The real issue though is not the Australian dollar. We can't do much about that. International education in Australia is very much at the crossroads, and for reasons other than the value of our currency.

Across the country people are waiting for the outcome of Michael Knight's review of the student visa program. Important as the review is, it's still not the main game. What we have consistently failed to do is agree on a national strategy for international education, and that is the real reason we are at a crossroads. Without a strategic approach, international education will always be a victim of headlines, controversies, anti-foreigner sentiment and anti-intellectualism.

The dollar will go up and down, but a national strategy would help ride out the vagaries of global financial crises.

There are many aspects to international education, not simply bringing students to Australia, and many benefits, not simply financial.

What might a national strategy look like?

The first element should be to position ourselves as a key destination for international students over the next 25 years. We have natural advantages: we are English-speaking, set to remain as one of the five world languages; we have a great lifestyle and environment; we have more than 60 years of graduate outcomes for international students; and, in spite of the dollar, we continue to offer value for money when graduate outcomes and the overwhelmingly positive experience most international students have.

A comprehensive strategy for international education should encompass more than our interactions with international students here or in their own countries. It needs to consider domestic curriculum issues, such as foreign language study at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels of education. It needs to recognise and make use of community languages and to develop bilingualism as a defining characteristic of being Australian.

The next phase of international education co-operation will see increased regionalism, with Asian countries and institutions engaging with each other along the lines of the Europeans and their collaborative programs in research, education and student mobility. Australia can operate on the

periphery of the region, or we can position ourselves as strategic partners as our neighbours develop their education systems further.

There are few prospects for growth in research funding in Australia, so we need to connect in meaningful ways with strategic intent to partner universities, industries and governments around the world to access research funds and contribute to knowledge generation in collaborative ventures.

In Australia, international education is a truly national endeavour, engaging country and city alike, and connecting Australians with the rest of the world in a fundamentally different way to simply being a beach or a quarry. We need to be a part of the growth of international education globally because if we are not we will be left behind.

I predict the Knight review will deliver a reprieve to universities, although not immediately; some comfort to those parts of international education that are connected to universities; little comfort to private providers of various types; and will continue the frankly boring and narrowly focused dialogue about dodgy providers and shonky agents.

It will lead to an improvement during the next couple of years in onshore student numbers, but it won't be a strategy for the future. It will be like eating an orange a day.

And that's not really going to be enough.

Stephen Connelly is president of the International Education Association of Australia.
