

International education in Australia is in decline. The reasons are well documented – bad publicity over student security issues, a rising Australian dollar, college closures, a question mark over the link between international education and migration, and difficulties for students trying to get visas to come here to study.

The reasons for wanting to reconstruct the industry are equally well known. It is an \$18 billion industry contributing 15.5 per cent of university sector revenue providing 135,000 jobs across the Australian economy, and it is the top export industry in Victoria, number two in NSW.

Less widely known is that universities contribute on average 4.2 per cent of revenue from international students towards research scholarships for international students – there is no growth in domestic research student numbers, and we need more research output – as well as contributing significantly towards the costs of Australian students spending some of their degree programs studying overseas. Then there's the contribution to public diplomacy, trade relations, internationalisation of the curriculum and campus. All of which is being jeopardised by the current perfect storm of factors mentioned above.

What does the industry need to do to reconstruct itself? Is it indeed salvageable? There are plenty of reasons to be optimistic about the future of the industry, despite its current calamitous state.

Until the last few years the bulk of international student enrolments have been in higher education. The sector has the capacity to help pull the rest of the industry back on track. This is because other sectors, such as English language, foundation studies and vocational programs, act as pathways into degree programs. A focus on higher education, as well as high end public and private provision in other sectors, also helps reinforce a message about the quality and standing of education in Australia to balance negative publicity about college closures.

Engaging politicians is critical. The former immigration minister, who oversaw changes to both the student visa and migration programs that had a significant negative effect on international education, is now education minister, and can't afford to see 15.5 per cent of university revenue disappear down the drain.

Austrade has just taken over responsibility for promotion of international education, and the new trade minister can't afford to see Australia's third largest export, and the only significant export industry that portrays Australia as more than a 'quarry with a view', go backwards at the current rate. The new foreign affairs minister cannot allow years of positive public diplomacy brought about by international education diminish our influence in the region. Pleasingly, the new immigration minister seems disposed to listen to reasoned argument from the sector about cause, effect and remedy.

The Australia Unlimited brand is a campaign with a brain, and an opportunity to sell more than beach, barbecues and bush. Austrade needs to engage with the education sector to develop an education sub-brand under the broader Australia Unlimited umbrella.

At the top end of town, business gets it. We need skilled migrants and we have a pool of them on our campuses in Australia and in our trans-national programs overseas. We need to connect our international graduates and our skilled migration program. Because of current government policy, the prospective student market is completely confused about the link, and it is putting students off.

Community relationships are important. We need to communicate the benefits of international education to the people in our communities so they can support institutions and students. Local government, community groups, retail traders associations are all starting to wake up to the benefits of international education, and what we may lose if the industry continues to decline. We need to do more.

International education tells us a lot about what we are as a nation. We require an alliance of industry, government, business and the community if we want to assure the future of international education in Australia. Enough setting policy levers and sitting back to see what happens – we have been there and done that. Can we afford to continue to lump foreigners of all persuasions – migrants, refugees, international students, international visitors – into one simplistic category, thereby undermining our relations with the rest of the world?

Australia will remain one of the key destination countries for international students if we can forge the alliances we need to develop strategies for sustainable growth.

The Australian International Education Conference, runs 12-15 October, Sydney.

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