



International education needs fixing

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This sector is crying out for a national body to shape its future.

THE Federal Government's changes to the skilled migration program will affect thousands of international students. For the industry, the greatest pain will be felt by private colleges. They have boomed because of the present policies and will decline.

While universities may have overloaded on international students in programs such as masters of professional accounting, for example, they do not play in the cookery, hairdressing or mechanics space so will feel only a mild initial impact. If Australia is looking for highly skilled, tertiary-qualified migrants, then universities can only benefit, as will schools and English language providers.

The surge in enrolments at

private vocational colleges in recent years has been unprecedented. In 2002, 42 per cent of international students in Australia were enrolled in universities, with just 14 per cent in vocational education offered by private providers. The immigration policies that skewed the industry away from an educational focus towards migration resulted in private vocational enrolments growing to 31 per cent last year, almost equalling higher education's 32 per cent.

Over the long term, we are likely to see a recalibration of international education towards educational outcomes, rather than migration. With only 60,000 former international students lodging successful migration

applications each year — from 630,000 now in Australia — the impact of this shift will not be as disastrous as some may think.

The real problem facing international education here is our inability to think and plan strategically for the future of a sector that is Australia's third-largest export earner, at \$17 billion, employing more than 100,000 people. The appointment of Shane Warne as an ambassador for Victoria to India is nothing more than gimmickry and does little to tackle long-term strategic needs or the real concerns of student welfare and safety.

International education is crying out for a body along the

Age
10-Feb-2010
Page: 21
General News
Region: Melbourne
Circulation: 200800
Type: Capital City Daily
Size: 258.16 sq.cms
MTWTFS-


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lines of Tourism Australia to shape the industry's future. Without such an organisation to cut through the complexities of myriad departments and jurisdictions involved in education — and develop a cohesive long-term national strategy — the industry will continue to falter.

Federal and state governments, to varying degrees, have failed in the past 10 years to set any sort of direction for international education. They have been happy to set various levers to encourage or inhibit growth in the industry but not consider the impact of policies often set with no real liaison with experts and practitioners in the field.

The Council of Australian Governments is working on a national international students strategy and bodies such as Universities Australia are trying

to ensure the strategy is as broad as possible. But a national structure to implement and drive the ideas that emerge from these consultations does not exist.

We also need to engage the community more. The long-term health of international education relies on community support and understanding for the international students, mirroring efforts under way in educational institutions to gain greater interaction between domestic and international students. This will be the best means of helping these students lead safe, rewarding lives here and enrich their experience by actively contributing to local communities.

Already councils, such as Darebin in Melbourne's north, are recognising the contributions these students can make, and the support they need, and are set-

ting up structures to provide this. More needs to be done.

International education is more than just an economic driver. It brings untold benefits to our diplomatic and trade relations and engages Australian students, staff and communities in international activity.

We need to agree on a means to ensure international education continues to contribute positively to Australia and the international and domestic students it serves. Changes to skilled migration rules only tinker at the edges of what is required to secure a vibrant and sustainable industry.

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