

## **Reducing student visas is wrong**

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About 65,000 migrants who settled in Australia last year were former international education students. That's about 10 per cent of the 630,000 students that were living in the country in December 2009. So what do the other 90 per cent do when they finish their studies? They go home and provide benefit to their communities from the experience they've had in Australia.

Reducing student visas is the last thing Australia and the industry needs right now. What we do need is a global student mobility charter, to codify the responsibilities of sending and receiving countries in relation to the 2.5 million students around the world who at any one time are studying somewhere other than their home country.

If a global student mobility charter existed, how would Australia measure up to its responsibilities? Considering the lack of strategic focus and the failure of both sides of politics to recognise what's actually required to support this \$18 billion industry, we would probably barely muster a pass.

Education institutions across the country are suffering from the problems afflicting our industry, initially from the global financial crisis (the effects of which are still flowing through economies around the world, including ours), the continuing strength of the Australian dollar, and lately from the downturn in numbers of commencing students. This downturn is almost entirely driven by Australia's inconsistent approach to immigration issues, including student visa processing and migration regulations. The effect is being felt most immediately in the English language and private college sectors.

In spite of being well run, some colleges are simply unable to sustain themselves in the face of 30 per cent decreases in offshore visa applications. A college run by someone I know recently closed its doors. These were good people running a good operation, employing staff who are now out of work. It's happening across the country, but it doesn't need to.

In the early 90s, the Australian Government spent around \$75 million assisting students displaced from language centres that had been affected by the fallout from Tiananmen Square and the subsequent downturn in student numbers from China. While the Government allowed colleges to collapse, it then stepped in to refund students, thereby protecting the reputation of an industry that grew to become the nation's third largest export earner within the next twenty years.

When a college collapses and students are displaced, the new college they are sent to must teach them for free. This is reasonable for the students – who have already paid fees – but not sustainable for the colleges. Government needs to ensure these colleges are paid to teach students affected by the closure of their original education or training providers.

This will achieve two objectives. Firstly, it will prevent a string of college closures and therefore protect the reputation of international education in Australia. Secondly, it will save Government money because if closures spiral out of control, it's the Federal

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Government that, for diplomatic reasons, will have to pay a significant amount in refunds to these displaced students.

The kudos Australia has received overseas among agents and parents whose students and children have been rescued by colleges willing to pick up the pieces left behind by closures has been enormous, but has largely gone unrecognised here.

Why should government step in like this? Quite apart from the diplomatic and trade benefits we derive from teaching tomorrow's business and world leaders right here in our own country, and the positive effect international students have on classrooms and communities across Australia, if international student numbers drop by 100,000, as is predicted, more than 25,000 Australians will lose their jobs. It's that serious.

Meanwhile, the peak bodies are attempting to get the attention of the Australian Government – not an easy task in an election climate. Given the benefits of international education to this country, economic and non-economic, it is a travesty that so little action is forthcoming.

COAG's International Student Strategy for Australia (ISSA) is clearly stalled somewhere between Canberra and the states. Unless all providers up stumps and move to marginal seats, it's hard to see just how and when we will break through.

And the global student mobility charter is a concept that needs to be progressed. Depending on how it is constructed and under whose auspices, it might be a way to force governments to recognise their responsibilities to students, institutions and the community as the key stakeholders in international education.

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