

International Education: A New Era, A New Focus

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Thank you for inviting me to speak here today. What I would like to talk about is how we might expand our ideas and assumptions surrounding the value and function of international education. It is important to note that I will not be delving too deeply into the current circumstances shaping international education. Instead, I would like us to look ahead, and consider how international education can play a pivotal role in addressing the most pressing challenges of today and tomorrow.

This is undoubtedly a new era in international education and one that requires a new focus.

As we all know, the pandemic has presented Australian universities with some of the biggest challenges that they have ever faced. This required quick and effective action so that we could respond to government and health directives, while at the same time ensuring our standards in teaching and research were maintained.

We have also experienced significant losses in revenue, particularly due to the drop in international student numbers. This situation has cost us dearly, and it cannot be easily fixed – particularly since there are still so many variables at play.

The first, is the issue of how we might safely return international students to Australia. The good news is that progress has been made on this front, through collaboration between universities, State governments, and the Commonwealth. Although it looks like these plans will be superseded by the imminent opening of our international borders.

Another variable is increased global competition for international students. Students are currently preferencing countries with open borders ahead of Australia. International student recipient countries are also repositioning themselves in the market. Countries, such as China, Singapore, and Malaysia, for example, are ramping up their efforts to attract in-bound students and the United States has reasserted the value of international education to America in its recent statement titled '*Reengaging the World to Make the United States Stronger at Home*'.

Lastly, there is the geopolitical dimension, such as the current tensions with China.

But perhaps this is an excellent opportunity for us to stop and think about our longer-term priorities and how international education, and internationalisation more broadly, might assist us in meeting those needs.

First, a quick disclosure of my credentials. I am the Vice Chancellor of Australian Catholic University – a role which I was honoured to accept in the beginning of this year. ACU has not been

impacted as badly as other universities, but we have experienced revenue loss due to the decline in our international student numbers.

I am also a sociologist and have committed much of my research to the concepts of global citizenship, immigration, and global responsibility. I am deeply interested in how individuals move between the familiar and the unfamiliar, looking at how they develop intercultural competencies and engage with issues of global concern – a skill which is becoming more and more necessary.

I was also an international student. Thirty years ago, I came to Australia on an Overseas Postgraduate Research Scholarship to do a PhD at Flinders University. As a foreign student, I went through the types of emotions, trials, and successes shared by so many other international students. These were experiences which continue to shape my appreciation of international education today.

The benefits of hosting international students in Australia have long been recognised. We know that in terms of export revenue and market reach, there is significant economic benefit in having a robust strategy for attracting international students. But ‘soft power’ is also an important function of international education – that is, sharing ideas, building beneficial relationships, and having international influence.

An example of soft power is the Colombo Plan which was launched in 1951 and involved over 25 countries. The objective was to build relationships and support economic development in the Asia-Pacific. Australia focused on providing educational opportunities to university students in the region through scholarships. This not only helped the students, but it also helped Australia to strengthen relationships with its neighbours.

In the 1980s, Australia’s emphasis on the Colombo Plan decreased and we started moving towards a commercial model of international education. Over the past twenty years the pace of international student enrolments has particularly picked up. For example, numbers increased from 125,000 students in 2002, to over 440,000 in 2019.

While an inward flow of students brings benefit, so does an outward flow. Before COVID-19, domestic students often had the chance to study overseas as part of their degree. A ‘study abroad’ option makes our domestic offerings more appealing to Australian students, and it gives them an opportunity to gain intercultural awareness. For a long time, I have been a vocal advocate of the importance of preparing students to be globally competent. This means embedding in the student experience, the opportunity to appreciate cultural differences and recognise their responsibilities not just towards Australia, but also to the international community. International study and overseas work placements are integral to this ambition.

In fact, the New Colombo Plan speaks to some of these imperatives by offering students scholarships and grants to study or do work based learning in the Indo-Pacific region. It differs from the original Colombo Plan in that there is a ‘two-way flow’ of students, and is intended to increase their education, employment, and networking opportunities. It is also aimed at achieving soft power outcomes and increasing students’ sense of global citizenship and responsibility.

As I said, over the last twenty years there has been a rapid increase in international students studying in Australian universities. According to the Mitchell Institute, between 2014 and 2019, the revenue universities received from international student fees doubled, increasing from \$5 billion to over \$10 billion. Over the past two years, however, universities have seen a 17% drop in enrolments with an associated revenue loss of around \$868 million. Also, given that a university degree takes 3 or 4 years for a student to complete, the financial impact will be felt over an extended period. This means that we will be feeling the consequences for a few years yet – even if there is an enrolment upsurge when border restrictions are lifted.

Recently the government invited universities and other stakeholders to make submissions about how they believe recovery can be best achieved. This will inform the *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*. Looking through the publicly available submissions from universities, we can see a broad range of identified concerns and suggestions. There is also consensus on many key points, including the need to communicate the value of international students to the Australian community, and the importance of diversifying the market to ensure sustainability and growth.

International students are a valuable part of Australian classrooms, industries, and communities. However, this benefit may not always be fully appreciated. There is an obvious economic contribution to the country, not only to universities, but also to others as international students require many goods and services during their time in Australia. But we should remember that international students contribute much more than just revenue. They enable our domestic students to build skills in intercultural awareness and competency by offering different viewpoints. They are also a vital part of our multicultural social fabric, bringing new perspectives and ideas to their university community. Our international student alumni are also important advocates for Australia. They can create many opportunities for network and partnership building with international businesses and governments. Finally, the importance of international student talent for enhancing national capability is well recognised. This is particularly evident in our research endeavours where international students can play an important role in the innovation process.

My point here is that we must be careful of viewing international education all too readily through the lens of economic advantage. I would agree with many of the submissions that we need to be doing more to communicate the value of our international students to the broader community. This would help build much needed support as we move forward with our plans to bring international students back to Australia.

Many university submissions advocated the importance of market diversification. Even before COVID-19 there was discussion surrounding the tertiary sector's reliance on a limited number of international student source markets. This conversation has now obviously been ramped up. Broadening the scope of our international recruitment is widely acknowledged by universities as being necessary to recover student numbers and manage market shifts. But what we have learnt from the past two years, is that while we need to work to recover and increase our student numbers, we must always be prepared for an unpredictable market. If we do not diversify and mitigate risk, we make ourselves vulnerable.

There is an understandable preoccupation with immediate economic recovery, but we should also be thinking about what function international education and internationalisation can serve us in the future. The concept of internationalisation not only involves student mobility. It also includes delivering an internationalised curriculum and working with global partners to solve global problems. I would argue that a global crisis event such as the one we are experiencing is a powerful example of the need for greater international focus and engagement. And, as guardians of the global knowledge economy, universities should be at the forefront of finding solutions to the many global challenges we are currently experiencing.

Well before COVID-19, the world was under threat and our lives were changing on many fronts. Widening economic disparity, climate change, security threats, and environmental damage pre-date the pandemic. Since the pandemic, any progress that was made towards addressing these issues has slowed or been reversed. Moreover, because of the economic and social costs of managing COVID, the *2030 Sustainable Development Goals* may not be met.

According to the United Nations, this is the first time in a generation that there has been an increase in extreme poverty. There is at least an extra 120 million people living beneath the poverty line and an additional 100 million people are being impacted by hunger or malnutrition. The pandemic has also eliminated 20 years of educational progress, with over 100 million children failing to meet minimum reading proficiency standards. Job loss figures translate to 255 million full-time jobs – around four times worse than the Global Financial Crisis. Young people have been particularly affected, with ongoing threats to their educational and employment prospects. Furthermore, concentration levels of greenhouse gases have continued to rise.

Universities not only have the skills, but also a social and moral responsibility to be working towards addressing these problems.

There is considerable scope to include global responsibility as a function of both international education and internationalisation. To date, the dominant narrative has centered around developing intercultural competencies in students. While this is important, there is a need for universities to operate at a higher standard of global leadership. This would involve leading transformational change, sharing expertise, driving innovation, teaching others to be globally responsible, and most importantly, practising global responsibility across all our activities.

I am not saying that Australian universities are currently failing to demonstrate global responsibility in their internationalisation efforts – on the contrary. Monash University, for example, has developed an excellent strategy that aims towards global impact. This spans across their research collaborations, community engagement, and project areas to address issues of global importance. Western Sydney University is co-leading the Australia India Water Centre, partnering with Indian research institutions to develop solutions to issues of water security and management. Also, ACU is steadfastly committed to anti-slavery in all forms, including supply chains. We go to great lengths to ensure that human dignity is prioritised. These are all wonderful examples of Australian universities working collaboratively towards the global common good, but there is greater scope for us to significantly expand our efforts, and to do so in a more coordinated way.

What we do, however, must be financially rewarding, and global responsibility will bring economic benefit. For example, there is increasing consumer pressure for industries to prioritise global sustainability. Many customers are simply refusing to support industries which do not, and financiers are beginning to require sustainability disclosures before they lend or invest funds, as a matter of course.

Think also of the opportunities. The Business Council of Australia, for example, has not only forecasted that carbon reductions will make every day Australians financially 'better off', but points to the opportunities for Australian businesses to find and market, innovative solutions and technologies to achieve emission cuts. There is also considerable opportunity in helping to find solutions to global water, food, and energy shortages. The BCA is, however, warning against complacency. It says that "Australia is at a crossroads [and that] we can either ... seize a competitive advantage in [the] developing of new technologies and export industries; or be left behind and pay the price."

Australian universities are also at a crossroads, and our competitive advantage lies in helping to develop those new technologies and create those new export industries. If we do not, we will be left behind, but this will require a comprehensive internationalisation strategy.

Returning to the international student market, this is another way in which diversification can occur – not only in who we teach, or how we teach, but in what we teach. As the sustainability imperative gains momentum, the world will need people who are both future ready and globally attuned. It will need a workforce able to imagine, innovate, and inspire. Australian universities should be at the forefront of training that workforce.

The benefits of an international education agenda are more than economic. This is an opportunity for us to consider long-term needs, and to think about an approach that is sustainable in all aspects – social, environmental, economic, and global. We can, as a sector, draw upon our expertise to provide leadership and adopt an approach which involves and encourages; a global perspective, co-operation and collaboration, collective benefit over individual advantage, and building a reputation for thought leadership

It also means equipping our students to lead with impact. When trying to attract students, we often market Australia as being an attractive lifestyle destination, but we need to be more than just a nice place to come to. We need to meet the growing global demand for sustainability skills and be working to offer the international student market educational experiences and capabilities that put education and research in direct service of advancing answers to global challenges.

I would argue that this is both our responsibility and our opportunity.

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