



Melbourne Centre for the
Study of Higher Education

Shifting the focus for international higher education in Australia

Dina Uzhegova, Gwilym Croucher, Samantha Marangell, Sophie Arkoudis, Chi Baik, Siew Fang Law and William Locke

Discussion paper

September 2021

ISBN 978-0-7340-5667-2

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to Australian international higher education. By some estimates the number of international students commencing at Australian universities dropped by 23.3 per cent in 2020 due to the closure of borders. The impact on universities has been dramatic, with many making significant cuts to staffing numbers and changes to course offerings. In recent decades international education has provided significant fee revenue to Australia, totalling over \$40 billion in 2019.¹ Universities have come to rely on this fee income. National policies for international higher education have largely followed its positioning as an export industry (as before the pandemic it was the third largest in Australia). However, this focus on education as an export has been at the expense of social and cultural considerations, such as cooperation, partnership, exchange, mutual benefits and capacity building that were traditionally regarded as key values of international education.² The intrinsic value of international education has often been taken for granted under the assumption that international education is in itself a 'public good'. However, in Australia, tensions have existed between the economic benefits and cosmopolitan education.³

It is unlikely that the international student market will return to pre-2019 numbers soon. Australian borders are expected to be closed until 2022 and perhaps beyond, while countries such as the UK and USA have begun easing restrictions and returning to campus life. There is now an opportunity to reimagine and reconceptualise internationalisation in terms beyond its narrow economic value. The dominance of fees in the framing of international education in Australia is such that a starting point is to imagine a scenario where national and foreign students in Australia are all charged the same. This thought experiment allows consideration of how international education might be different when putting to one side the question of fees. There are multiple examples around the world where international students financially contribute to their education on the same basis as domestic students. In the European Union, for example, there are eleven higher education systems where international non-EU students pay the same fees as domestic students.⁴ Similarly, many Asian countries do not depend as heavily as Australia does on international student fees as a source of revenue. This paper elaborates on what international education in Australia could look like.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION ABOUT AUSTRALIAN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION

This paper is an attempt to shift the discussion about the future of Australian international higher education by focusing not on the narrow economic motivations or challenges but on the public good in terms of its social values and rationales. Australian international higher education cannot continue much as it has, but, to move forward, we need to remind ourselves of the core values of international education that we have lost sight of. This paper is an invitation to question how Australian universities can cultivate global competencies and offer a genuine international learning experience to all students with or without the additional value brought by physical mobility.

1 Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2021, June). *International trade: Supplementary information*. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au>

2 Knight, J., & H. de Wit (2018, October 12). What contribution has internationalisation made to HE? *University World News*. Retrieved from <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20181010093946721>

3 Marangell, S., Arkoudis, S., & Baik, C. (2018). Developing a Host Culture for International Students: What Does It Take? *Journal of International Students*, 8(3), 1440–1458. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i3.65>

4 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2020, December). *National Student Fee and Support Systems in European Higher Education 2020/21* (Eurydice – Facts and Figures). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from https://www.eacea.ec.europa.eu/index_en

REINVIGORATING THE CORE VALUES OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Over recent decades, Australian higher education has built a strong foundation for international education. Australian universities are globally recognised, attract students and scholars from around the world, and participate in research collaborations with institutions around the world. However, certain components of international education now warrant more attention, resources and action. We elaborate below on important areas requiring renewed attention.

CREATING A HOST CULTURE AND SOCIAL IMPACT THROUGH COMMUNITY LINKS

The pandemic has brought an opportunity to shift the perception of international students as ‘cash cows’ and to see them as a vulnerable group in the Australian community. When the federal government showed little empathy to the international students affected by the lockdowns and border closure, the multicultural Australian community provided active support. Australian students have also changed their attitudes towards international students during the pandemic. According to the Student Voices Report⁵ that explored engagement of domestic students in Australia and New Zealand with international students through COVID-19, a large majority of students changed their views and increased appreciation of the challenges associated with living away from home and sense of isolation (Table 1).

	Reporting some change in attitude
Appreciate their challenges of living away from home	81%
Their sense of separation and isolation	82%
Their resilience during challenging times	80%
Their ability to adjust to change	80%
Understanding about their day to day challenges	79%
Their desire to be part of the community	78%
Their diversity of backgrounds	75%
Their value as a source of talent	72%
Their willingness to help	73%

Table 1. The extent to which the attitudes of Australian (n=1,313) and New Zealand (n=981) citizens from 15 universities and five TAFE institutes in Australia and four universities in New Zealand have changed towards international students as a result of 2020 events (Source: This table is reproduced from the 2020 Student Voices Report, International Education Association of Australia)

It is important that international student integration goes beyond the university campus. This is important both for international students’ success and for the advancement of international education objectives. For international students, being part of a social community has been shown to ease the transition to the new environment, and interaction with the local community has been shown to aid cultural adaptation, student satisfaction, and future employability. Australian universities need to facilitate the development of a ‘host culture’ that goes beyond the university campus and which is underpinned by the diversity of the local community and Australian ‘mateship’. In this sense, a ‘host culture’ refers not to a culture where international students are ‘hosted’ as outsiders but where they are welcomed genuinely and openly into the community. For example, part-time work opportunities for international students can provide reciprocal benefits for both the students and the businesses. Similar opportunities can be facilitated by universities through informal curricular experiences, such as volunteering in the community, which can benefit both international and local students.

5 Lawrence, R., & Ziguras, C. (2021). *Student Voices: Domestic cohort engagement with international students through COVID-19* (Research report). Retrieved from International Education Association of Australia website: www.ieaa.org.au/studentvoices

By being actively engaged in developing a culture in which all students are welcomed and integrated, Australian students will also be better equipped to interact with different communities. A recent study on the social impact of Australian students' learning in the Indo-Pacific from the perspective of host communities has shown that Australian students are seen as valuable actors able to make a range of important contributions to the local community.⁶ It is therefore important to draw attention of Australian students to the potential social impact they can make in the communities they engage with and develop their intercultural competencies.

FACILITATING PURPOSEFUL ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN DIVERSE GROUPS OF STUDENTS

To offer a truly internationalised learning experience to all students, Australian universities need to facilitate opportunities for purposeful interaction between diverse groups of students in the classroom and beyond. This will help to create positive student experiences and bridge the 'interaction divide'. According to the International Student Experience Survey, for the past seven years international undergraduate students have consistently rated satisfaction with their learning engagement, including interaction with other students in and outside the classroom and sense of belonging to their institution, lower than other aspects of their student experience (Table 2). Data from the 2020 Survey has revealed that the satisfaction with learning experience has fallen sharply for both international and domestic students.⁷

	Skills Development	Learner Engagement	Teaching Quality	Student Support	Learning Resources	Quality of entire educational experience
2014	80	57	78	70	84	74
2015*	79	57	78	70	85	74
2016	79	58	78	71	84	75
2017	79	57	78	72	83	75
2018	80	58	79	71	83	76
2019	80	59	78	73	83	75
2020	76	49	74	71	72	63

Table 2. International undergraduate student education experience, % positive rating between 2014 and 2020 (Source: This data is reproduced from the 2020 International Student Experience Survey, www.qilt.edu.au.)

Universities need to create dedicated programs to ensure that there are real opportunities for students to engage and connect. It cannot be assumed that having students from diverse cultural backgrounds in the classroom guarantees an internationalised learning experience or that international and domestic student interactions would occur naturally.⁸ Poorly facilitated multicultural groupwork may 'trigger perceived discrimination/bias between groups' and potentially further divide students and foster intolerance.⁹ More resources should be directed into training academic staff in how to facilitate purposeful student engagement that develops their appreciation of diversity. This may not be as easy as it sounds, given a large proportion of current undergraduate teaching in Australian universities is delivered by casual staff.

In addition, more resources should be allocated in the (re)development of curricula to make it more inclusive and reduce overdependence on the knowledges of the Western world.

6 Tran, L. T., & Bui, H. (2021). Public Diplomacy and Social Impact of Australian Student Mobility to the Indo-Pacific: Host Countries' Perspectives on Hosting New Colombo Plan Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1028315320984833>

7 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching. (2021, August). *2020 SES International Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.qilt.edu.au/>

8 Arkoudis, S., Baik, C., Dollinger, M., & Patience, A. (2019). International students' experience in Australian higher education: Can we do better? *Higher Education*, 77, 799–813. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0302-x>

9 Héliot, YF., Mittelmeier, J., & Rienties, B. (2020). Developing learning relationships in intercultural and multi-disciplinary environments: A mixed method investigation of management students' experiences. *Studies in Higher Education*, (45)11, 2356-2370. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1610865>

BROADENING ALL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATION COMPETENCIES

One way to facilitate student engagement and interaction is through creating opportunities for students to learn another language. This needs to be approached as a multi-directional process: increasing English language skills, safeguarding opportunities for foreign language instruction, and increasing all students' ability to communicate across cultural and linguistic divides.

Australia has leveraged the success of its international higher education on a dominance of English as a 'global language'. However, Australian universities have failed to ensure that international students have sufficient English language skills to be successful in their studies. Standards and practices have not always been consistent as universities are trying to accommodate the growing demand for Australian education from overseas students and increasing dependence on the income from their higher tuition fees. For example, a report released by the Centre for Independent Studies in 2019 pointed out that some universities apply lower minimum English language scores to international students admitted through pathway preparatory programs.¹⁰ There is a need for a national agreement on how best to ensure English language standards that are flexible enough to accommodate different courses of study and distinct pedagogies. Having a good level of academic English is important for the overall student experience as it impacts students' transition to university life and cultural and social adaptation.

Increasing English language capabilities of international students alone will not be sufficient to reduce the divide between student groups. While supporting students' English language skills is important, there is more to students' interactions than their language skills. There is a need to embrace the idea that learning a foreign language is an important component of the international learning experience of Australian students. For too long Australian universities have neglected foreign language learning which is a powerful tool for fostering cross-cultural interaction, promoting tolerance, and increasing cultural awareness and sensitivity. This was brought to light in the report, *Languages in Crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*,¹¹ commissioned by the Group of Eight Australian universities in 2007. The report highlighted over a 40 per cent reduction in the languages offered at Australian universities between 1997 and 2007, from 66 to 29. Despite the report's urgent call for action, the situation has not changed much in the past fourteen years. According to the University Languages Portal Australia, there are currently 34 foreign languages available to study in Australian universities. The disruption of the higher education sector caused by the pandemic has also put under threat the availability of language programs, for example the recent closure of both Chinese and Japanese programs at Swinburne University and Indonesian programs at the University of Western Sydney and La Trobe University.¹² While language studies are included as one of the national priorities under the Job-ready Graduates policy package, the presence of a documented 'priority' will not be sufficient to sustain and grow the prevalence or impact of language programs in Australia. Yet, the incorporation of foreign language learning into curricula would serve as an important avenue for offering an international education to all students, regardless of their level of mobility. Reduced income and limited university resources significantly impact universities' abilities to offer foreign language study, but these challenges could be mitigated by embracing opportunities to engage with the multicultural communities which already exist within Australia, opportunities which have not yet been fully explored.

10 Babones, S. (2019, August). *The China student boom and the risks it poses to Australian universities* (Analysis paper 5). Retrieved from the Centre for Independent Studies website: www.cis.org.au

11 Group of Eight. (2007). *Languages in crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*. Manuka, ACT: Group of Eight.

12 Asian Studies Association of Australia. (2020, December 14). *Statement: A crisis in Asian languages*. Retrieved from <https://asaa.asn.au/news/statement-a-crisis-in-asian-languages/>

INVITING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE AND CONNECT GLOBALLY THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Speculating about the future directions in higher education internationalisation five years ago, Hudzik rightly pointed out that countries that adopt high-quality technology-assisted education will be more competitive in a 'global higher education market place.'¹³ The educational turn brought by the pandemic made use of technology in education more of a sustainability need rather than a competitiveness issue. As Australian universities leaped to teaching online in 2020, many hoped that the change would only be a short-term solution. However, going back to the previous status quo seems highly unlikely, and Australian universities need to start developing a long-term strategy of internationalisation that fits within the virtual space.

International education scholars pointed to 'the emergence of the digital citizen for whom mobility can be at least as virtual as real'¹⁴ a decade ago. It is yet to be seen how many students will choose to study online, at times and places that are convenient to them, even when international travel becomes available. International experience is no longer limited to the privileged few who can physically travel overseas. Increased use of technology allows more flexibility in the curriculum and can incorporate virtual 'internships' overseas or an online single-subject learning experience at a university in a different county. The global connectivity, which will continue to grow as the use of technology in education is on the rise, can also offer alternative opportunities for foreign language acquisition.

The year 2020 showed how quickly Australian universities, with true or forced enthusiasm, adopted the use of technology while adapting to the rapidly changing circumstances. The efficiency of the adjustment was impressive. However, as we move forward, more critical and future-oriented thinking is needed. Relying solely on technology cannot be a solution to the challenges ahead for international education, nor should a virtual university become a new marketing strategy for attracting international students to study in Australia. It is time to critically explore how we can creatively use technology to move beyond transferring academic content to invite students to engage and connect globally, regardless of their physical location, and to support core values of international education.

CONCLUSION

By reinvigorating the different but complementary components of international education that support its core and purpose, Australian international education can build resilience in a time of uncertainty and rapid change. This requires a shift in focus from a transactional approach of bringing diversity (in the form of international students) to Australia to the ways we can truly engage with it and learn to appreciate it.

13 Hudzik, J.K. (2016). Drivers of and speculation over the future of higher education internationalization. In E. Jones, R. Coelen, J. Beelen, & H. Wit (Eds), *Global and local internationalization. Transgressions: Cultural studies and education* (pp. 23-30). SensePublishers, Rotterdam. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-301-8_4

14 De Wit, H., & Brandenburg, U. (2011). The end of internationalization. *International Higher Education*, 62(Winter), 15-17.