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Let's create more global students

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Globalisation is now central to the mission of most Australian universities. All students are encouraged to study abroad, take a foreign language and develop cultural competence. In 2014, over 30,000 students undertook a learning abroad experience, backed by the New Colombo Plan scholarships and OS-HELP loans. Yet not everyone can enjoy global citizenship.

Research conducted by La Trobe University and the University of Queensland reveals that many low socio-economic and regional students are missing out. In 2014, only 11 per cent of students within the OS-HELP scheme were from a low SES background. The students travelling are those who can afford to. Wealthier students also dominate foreign language enrolments. A high SES student is almost five times more likely to be studying a foreign language subject at university than one from a low SES background.

Regional students are also under-represented. Less than two per cent of domestic students study a foreign language at regional universities. By contrast, almost 10 per cent of students study a foreign language in the Group of Eight institutions, all of which are based in the cities. Regional students are less likely to study abroad, and more likely to undertake shorter trips when they do.

There are three major ways that global citizenship can be made more equitable within universities. First, money matters. More universities need to consider bursaries for disadvantaged students to enable them to study abroad. Financial support is often based exclusively on merit rather than need, with students receiving funds as a reward for academic excellence. This model reflects a history in which elite students from elite universities travelled overseas as ambassadors. If all students are expected to become global citizens, a new model is required.

Second, global citizenship must be available and accessible. Regional and low SES students need broader access to foreign languages and learning abroad experiences. Recent agreement among the regional universities network to share foreign language offerings will help, and online enrolments can also be expanded. Similarly, universities should inform students of their opportunities to study abroad, preferably at commencement. Many students currently discover their options by chance or through informal networks. For those enrolled in inflexible degrees, the knowledge may arrive too late. For others, the information does not arrive at all.

Universities could also diversify their learning abroad options, including lengths of placement and countries. Some disadvantaged students may prefer to undertake short-term overseas experiences. However, active promotion of disadvantaged students in long-term placements and selective overseas universities is also needed. Global citizenship is already becoming a new site of division. Access needs to be not only widened but deepened.

The third major way to increase equity is to change institutional culture. Our research revealed many unstated assumptions among universities. Not all students who travel abroad are familiar with international travel or foreign cultures, not all are used to living independently, and not all are school leavers. Providing more support to students before, during, and after they travel is important. This might include a mentor/buddy program at the host destination, opportunities to study abroad in small peer groups, and post-program workshops and debriefings.

The extent of inequity is rarely understood. To move global citizenship from the elite to the mainstream, clear strategies will be required. Universities could start by developing and monitoring participation targets for disadvantaged groups. Low SES and regional students are clearly under-represented in foreign language enrolments and learning abroad experiences, as are students with a disability and indigenous students. Yet few universities have equity targets or publish related data on participation, achievement and post-travel outcomes. More targeted strategies will be required.

We have seen a laudable rise in the number of students learning abroad, and in universities promoting the benefits of globalisation. Yet adapting to a new, broader and more diverse student cohort requires widespread cultural change. Global citizenship is growing, but not all students have a passport.

The research report is at: <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/aaru/publications>

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