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Access the advantage: industry will benefit from international students, regardless of wealth



By: Christopher Ziguras in Faculty Focus, News, Opinion, Top Stories April 25, 2016

Helping qualified foreign students who lack great wealth earn degrees in Australia will have benefits for our sector.

It is just over 25 years since the publication of the landmark report on equitable access to Australian higher education, *A Fair Chance for All*, which examined participation rates and barriers to entry for a range of groups: people from low socioeconomic backgrounds; Indigenous Australians; people from regional and remote areas; women in non-traditional areas; people with disabilities; and people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The authors' ambition was "to improve participation in higher education of people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds so that the mix of commencing students more closely resembles the mix of the general population".

Understandably, the population being considered was the resident population of Australia, and the aspiration that higher education should be within "everyone's reach" refers only to Australian citizens and permanent residents. That is a reasonable approach for a national government that is elected, and funded, by a national political community and which has designed a national higher education system to serve that community.

A quarter century later, however, our higher education system serves a far larger population. A quarter of our students come from outside this national community – and that proportion is growing. In May, La Trobe University vice-chancellor professor John Dewar will launch a book edited by Andrew Harvey, Catherine Burnheim and Matt Brett that reflects on equity in Australian higher education in the 25 years since the publication of *A Fair Chance for All*. In planning this book, the editors noted that international students were completely overlooked 25 years ago, but given our system's international reach, any text reflecting on equity today should consider the international dimension.

When they approached me to write a chapter, I was excited, because I had been thinking about this issue for a long time, but also terrified, because for those of us committed to both internationalisation and social justice, there are no easy answers.

I set out to consider three questions:

- Why has equity not been a prominent feature of Australian international education policy in the past 25 years?
- Why would Australian education providers and governments care about equity for international students?
- What can be done to broaden access to Australian higher education for international students?

The conclusion? All is not lost. While, on the surface, Australia's market-driven approach to providing education to international students would seem to be disinterested in equity, there are many features of our system that do broaden access for less privileged international students and which have significant scope for expansion.

Equity clearly has not been a prominent feature of Australian international education policy since the 1980s, when government subsidies for international students were ended and full fees introduced. Australian education came to be seen as a luxury good available to affluent students from across the region, rendering any considerations of equity of access for international students nonsensical. Since that time, discussion about our obligations towards international students has been almost purely couched in terms of consumer protection.

The major impediment to equitable merit-based access to Australian education for international students is, of course, socioeconomic status; self-funded students are overwhelmingly drawn from the wealthier social strata in their origin countries. From the perspective of these home countries, the ability for affluent students to buy a place in a university in another country can undermine states' abilities to ensure meritocratic access to higher education. In many countries of origin, there can be simmering resentment if high-performing graduates of competitive local universities feel that they are beaten in the job market by students who have not performed as well but have been able to afford a place in an overseas university.

A financial means test is one of the core features of our student visa screening process, requiring students to have sufficient funds to travel to Australia, pay their tuition fees and

support themselves during their studies. As a result, the majority of international students in Australia do not experience any financial hardship, but those who do struggle financially find they don't have access to many of the safety nets available to domestic students, including the ability to defer temporarily, reduce their study load, or access various forms of social security. The challenge is that the less stringent the student visa finance test becomes, the more students are likely to experience financial hardship in Australia. Some have argued for the finance test to be made more restrictive by raising the amount of money students must have available for each year in Australia and making the application of the test more rigorous. This, they feel, will ensure that all students coming into Australia are more financially secure during their studies. However, such measures would seriously restrict access to those from less affluent families and less-wealthy countries.

We do continue to provide funded places to sponsored students, and in recent years, the number of Australian Government and university scholarships for international students was higher than during the Colombo Plan period, at an estimated cost of about \$720 million a year, with roughly half of the spending coming from government and half from universities. About 85 per cent of international research students are supported by scholarships from the Australian Government, their home government or their universities. However, these students represent a tiny fraction of the hundreds of thousands of international students in Australia, and nearly all of the students in bachelor and masters coursework programs are self-funded.

The number of scholarships funded has declined significantly under the Abbott-Turnbull Government, as have other forms of foreign aid. This is happening at the same time as many funding schemes in home countries for Australia's foreign students are facing sharp cutbacks, such as those in Saudi Arabia and Brazil.

Given the self-interested nationalist tone that has framed international education policy since the 1980s, is there any way we can mount an argument that broadening access to less-affluent students and other excluded groups is in Australia's national interest? There are three considerations – scale, quality and diplomacy.

First, a desire to continue to increase the scale of onshore international student numbers in Australia requires us to find ways to make our education affordable to more students. Second, the quality of student experience, for both international and domestic students, is influenced by the ability of universities to select the best applicants from a large and diverse pool, rather than acceptable applicants from a very small but affluent pool.

A third reason for broadening access is that international education has always been a huge form of social interaction between Australia and the region, and has never been purely motivated by revenue generation. As the sector has matured, universities have sought to integrate international student recruitment within a broader strategy that also focuses on internationalisation of the curriculum, mobility of domestic students, and international research engagement. To achieve the deeper international engagement to which Australian universities now almost universally aspire requires the development of reciprocal and respectful relationships with partner universities and governments overseas. While Australia may not be concerned with equitable access to higher education for their students, these

partners most certainly are. We have reached the point where disregard for equity is becoming the major impediment to the building of meaningful relationships in the countries from which we recruit our students.

Clearly, the restoration and expansion of foreign aid scholarships would make a huge difference to a small proportion of international students, but also to an important group that tends to go on to influential roles in government and academia.

In the short term, there is no chance of public subsidies for the bulk of international students, an idea that has been off the table since the 1980s. So let's move beyond funding to consider those features of the Australian system that make education here more affordable to a wider cross-section of the world's students than some other destinations, both in terms of program design and access to work in Australia.

One way of broadening access is to reduce the cost of obtaining a qualification by offering short and low-cost programs to international students. This includes short vocational education programs, ELICOS, and articulation arrangements that offer advanced standing into Australian degrees based on affordable pathway programs in a student's home country. Such programs are often used as a stepping stone towards a higher qualification, and we should support such pathways both offshore and onshore. The most affordable way is to deliver the whole of a program offshore, since both the cost of living and tuition in most parts of the world are substantially lower than in Australia.

On the income side of the ledger, providing international students with the ability to work in Australia reduces students' dependence upon family savings. Allowing students to remain in Australia to work after the completion of their studies enables students to recoup the cost of their education sooner after graduation, which is an especially appealing prospect for students from less-wealthy countries, and an important means of reducing the riskiness for their family's investment in education.

Another major impediment for less affluent international students is the shortage of low-cost, purpose-built student accommodation, and here Australia fares poorly compared with other destinations. International students crowd into houses and apartments, using bunk beds to share bedrooms as students on university campuses across Asia do. There is certainly unconscionable exploitation of students by landlords taking place, which should not be tolerated, but we must also recognise that students with low socioeconomic status are seeking low-cost forms of accommodation that are in short supply.

In recent decades, without much fanfare, we have taken steps to broaden access for less-affluent students, and we can use what we have learned from this experience to further expand access. Now that we are striving for a broader and deeper educational and social engagement with the countries from which we recruit students, we need to be able to demonstrate more clearly how we ensure fairness and merit-based entry within a user-pays system.

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