Mentoring programs fail in aim for equity

Britain's commitment to disadvantaged students has struggled to yield results

GAVIN MOODIE

TEXAS may be better than Britain as a model for equity in higher education. This seems evident from the outcomes of two British higher education equity programs that have close analogues in equity programs recently introduced to Australia.

Britain introduced what it now calls Aimhigher in 2003 to increase the number of school pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds aspiring to enter higher education.

The government funded higher education institutions and schools to introduce activities for pupils in years 9 to 11, such as summer schools, residential courses, day visits to universities, mentoring by undergraduates and higher education staff, masterclasses, student ambassadors and study support activities such as homework clubs.

The Australian government allocated $12 million to similar programs at five universities in last year's diversity and structural adjustment fund and in this year's budget established a partnerships program with funding that will grow to $44m in 2012-13.

This program is to link universities, schools and vocational education and training institutions with the aim of increasing enrolments and participation from disadvantaged students. However, Aimhigher did not increase the number of students attending a highly selective university.

The other program to improve the participation of students from a low SES background in the Australian government's budget this financial year is the loading for each low SES student on an institution's budget.

Andrew Smith

A THRIVING international education industry is Australia's greatest assets in facing the most significant national challenges of our generation: the global financial crisis, rising demand for skilled labour and leaving Australia's diplomatic ties in an increasingly globalized world.

It is also an industry of tremendous complexity, a complexity that is often little understood and easily misrepresented for the sake of political expediency.

I was alarmed when I read assertions that seek simplistic solutions to these complex challenges. The most alarming of these is the assertion that we need to decouple the link between education and migration.

Certainly the way this link has been fashioned in recent years has attracted unsuccessful operators and led to poor practice in some areas of this vital export industry.

Federal and state governments, educational institutions, industry bodies such as the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, and many other stakeholders who know this and are working hard to strengthen the sector through a broad legislative review, rapid regulatory audits, better information for students and extensive student research.

But although the link between education and migration must be improved, to suggest, as MP Kelvin Thomson did in The Australian last week, that these problems could be fixed overnight by breaking the link altogether is absurd, unrealistic and, frankly, reckless in its insensitivity.

Surely a globally competitive industry, with many nations— including the US, Britain and Canada — eager to attract the students we might send home to cool off, such a move wouldn't fix the international education industry overnight. It would cripple it.

The existence of unsuccessful operators in our industry is unacceptable, but contrary to recent media reporting, they are in a minority. Every industry has its rogues and it is the job of the regulatory authorities to police an industry and take action against people who do the wrong thing.

I do not want to join a chorus of commentators in overemphasizing this issue, but it has to be said that chief among the challenges we face has been the failure of government agencies to effectively and consistently enforce the robust set of rules governing our industry.

And yet, instead of tackling the challenge of improving regulatory practice and enforcing appropriate standards head-on, Thomson would take the easy option of blithely down a pathway that is so fundamental to our prosperity. Where our industry fails to meet the standards set for it, we will have to take action.

Where there are problems with educational quality or social and cultural integration, we should address them. But we should not ever be embarrassed by, or seek to decouple, the link between education and immigration.

Andrew Smith is chief executive of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.