Private sector not to blame

Government needs to pursue immigration and education reforms with a scalpel, not a sledgehammer

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LAST month, five education and training peak bodies—Universities Australia, TAFE Directors Australia, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, English Australia and the International Education Association of Australia—wrote to the Prime Minister requesting an urgent meeting to discuss the challenges faced by the international education sector.

We wanted to discuss how government changes to immigration and student visas policies were worsening, not alleviating, these challenges.

The request was an indication of the serious and real damage that our sector is experiencing at the hands of a government that is applying immigration and education reforms with a scalpel, not a sledgehammer, when what is required is a scalpel.

Moreover, that letter was an indication that these complex challenges are shared by our entire sector—private and public, vocational and higher education—and that the sector is, for the most part, committed to working as one to address them.

But when Jeffrey Smart of Swinburne University chose to publicly disparage the private vocational education sector in the HEA last week, his comments were not just inaccurate. They were grossly offensive to the thousands of Australians running private education and training institutions, the vast majority of whom, myself included, have dedicated their careers, their financial security and much of their lives to building and running innovative, high-quality institutions.

His comments were also an irresponsible and disappointing display of finger-pointing that makes the entire sector’s job of responding as one to these challenges even harder.

The fact that some in our industry adhere to an outdated, myopic view of education that would deprive Australians and international students of the innovative, industry-responsive education and training that they increasingly demand from private institutions does not excuse ignoring the fact that private institutions have been critical in providing the success that our entire sector now enjoys.

Nor does it excuse discounting the evidence, including independent research conducted this year, that private sector international student satisfaction is comparable with or better than that racked up by many leading universities and TAFE colleges.

Our sector deserves greater respect.

Many of the high-quality private institutions that are suffering during this period have been pioneers, building relationships around the globe and paving the way for the success that is now enjoyed by both the public and private education and training sectors today.

Several Australian universities outsource all or part of their international education programs to private institutions.

Others enjoy the benefits of public-private joint ventures.

And the entire sector is all the better for the exchange of ideas—and personnel—that makes our sector globally admired.

We are fortunate in Australia to offer students a genuine choice between many different educational institutions, be they public or private, which are all held to the same standard by regulatory authorities and accreditation processes.

Students today want to have a choice between attending a university, a TAFE college or an innovative private institution with closer links to their chosen industry and more flexible modes of delivery.

It is not just students who benefit from a single tertiary system offering genuine choice between private and public institutions. The federal government knows that increasing investment in private tertiary education is critical to achieving its education participation and productivity targets.

Funding for students at private institutions costs the government 25 per cent less than a publicly provided place, and higher completion rates mean funding is more efficiently spent, with less money wasted on unfinished studies.

Ultimately, an education and training system that offers genuine diversity and choice between public and private institutions is one of our greatest assets in facing the most significant national challenges of our generation: recovering from the global financial crisis, rising demand for skilled labour; a rapidly ageing population; and improving Australia’s diplomatic ties in an increasingly globalised world.

Does this mean that ACPET advocates turning a blind eye to poor educational quality because of the greater national interest? Absolutely not.

ACPET has long acknowledged that problems in the international education sector need to be addressed.

A minority of unscrupulous providers who are doing the wrong thing must be stopped.

A regulatory system demonstrably incapable of keeping pace with the success of the industry needs to be better equipped. And a legislative framework that creates artificial barriers that favour one type of institution over another must be overhauled.

These challenges are being addressed, but they must be addressed in a way that does not slam the brakes on a $7 billion industry.

At the moment, that is not happening, and if the government continues to undermine the international education sector through an ill-conceived migration policy developed without consultation, more than 32,000 Australians will lose their jobs and $36bn will be wiped of the value of this export industry by March 2012.

We would not accept it for Australia’s tourism, our resources or our agricultural industries, and nor should we accept it for our education and training industry.

Kay Canley chairs the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.