Wake-up call on education
Sydney Morning Herald: June 28, 2010 - 7:11AM
Julie Bishop

While there have been significant concerns raised in recent weeks over the fate of Australia's mining and resource sector, in particular our two major export earners coal and iron ore, as a result of the Labor Government's proposed 40 per cent mining super tax, the fate of our third largest export earner – education services – is also under pressure.

It has been to Australia's credit that it has long hosted students from our region through a system of scholarships.

The Colombo Plan, which supported development in the Asia Pacific, is remembered for the opportunities it provided for thousands of students from the region to study or train in Australia during the operation of the plan from the early 1950s to the 1980s.

Initially championed by Menzies government foreign minister Percy Spender this initiative has had a profound impact on Australian foreign policy that is still felt today. It is not uncommon for regional political and business leaders to be Colombo Plan alumni from Australian universities.

Australia continued to expand its scholarship program, but it has also welcomed hundreds of thousands of students taking fee-paying places at our universities and vocational colleges.

During the years of the Howard government, the popularity of our educational institutions led to strong growth representing $16 billion in export income with about 500,000 overseas students studying at our institutions.

As minister for education, science and training in 2006 and 2007, I was keen to promote greater student exchange with a focus not only on students studying in Australia, but also increasing the number of Australian students undertaking studies overseas.

It was and remains my view that educational exchanges enhance long term mutual understanding between nations. One of the most powerful and productive ways to engage with our region is to have critical numbers of people with first-hand experiences of living and studying in other countries.

In April 2006 I hosted an International Education Forum in Brisbane, with 900 delegates from around the world, which focused on future directions and influences on international education and training in Australia.

A separate Asia-Pacific Education Minister's Meeting was convened, attended by 27 ministers and senior officials representing the education and training portfolios from across the Asia-Pacific region. As host, I sought to strengthen opportunities for student exchange in the region encouraging greater social, economic and cultural development.

After years of rapid growth, I believed it was important that Australia ascertain what the students thought about the experience of studying in Australia.

The Department of Education through Australian Education International (AEI) commissioned a research paper aimed at assessing the overall satisfaction of international students studying in Australia published in September 2007.

Interviews had been conducted with more than 7000 international students in their final year of study in Australia in higher education, vocational education, secondary schools and English language courses.

The survey showed that:
• 84 per cent of international students were satisfied with living in Australia; • 83 per cent were satisfied 82 per cent were happy with the course undertaken; and • 78 per cent were satisfied with the quality of education.
While the results were positive, there was also room for improvement, particularly in terms of the quality of courses on offer and ensuring students received value for money.

With the spate of attacks on India students in recent months, the reputation of Australia as a safe destination for students has been damaged. While efforts are now being made to restore our reputation in India, the impact of the negative publicity continues to take its toll.

Universities are reporting a massive drop in overseas student enrolments, and as high as a 90 per cent decrease from previous years in relation to students from India.

I fear that Prime Minister and Education Minister Julia Gillard has failed to build on the groundwork laid by successive governments.

Gillard has not reconvened the International Education Forum, despite significant interest from representatives at the original forum.

Nor has she reconvened the Asia-Pacific Education Minister's meeting.

I am not aware of any new initiatives to encourage Australian students to undertake any part of their studies overseas.

There is no evidence that the Labor government has commissioned any follow-up research about the satisfaction levels of international students studying in Australia. Statistics gathered during the previous Coalition government years are the only information quoted on the AEI website. Former federal Liberal MP Bruce Baird was asked to undertake research into international students in Australia and his report published in February this year exposed a range of concerns held by international students.

Baird wrote to Gillard urging action on the issue, as there was "an urgent need to develop, implement and enforce relevant and robust solutions to address issues including student safety, accommodation, employment, transport and health".

While legislation has just been introduced into the Parliament to address some aspects of the report, it must not suffer the fate of so many of former Rudd government reports destined to gather dust on Canberra archive shelves.

The federal government announced major reforms for the skilled migration program earlier this year, to make it more difficult for international students to gain permanent residency.

The new changes are favouring employer-sponsored migration, yet making it harder for international students to migrate. All applicants for independent skilled migration under General Skilled Migration visa applications must now have qualifications relevant to an occupation on the Skilled Occupations List.

While the system needed reform, the overseas education sector is now in turmoil.

Other countries, including the United States and Canada are making fresh inroads into the international education sphere.

The long term sustainability of our international education will hinge on whether Australia offers international students a high quality education that is value for money with welcoming entry procedures and a safe and secure environment.

Julie Bishop