Diversity holds key

KEVIN Pope is on the money ("Principal hits out at 'useless testing'", The Age, 15/10). Having taught for 35 years in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and in government and private schools, I know that assessment is a highly complex process. Yet we are asked to believe that NAPLAN can tell parents how their children are performing, empower teachers to plan learning programs, enable policymakers to judge school performance and compare school systems.

More importantly, teaching to the test takes all the joy out of learning, stifling the potential of children as dynamic, creative learners. The Scandinavian countries that are universally acknowledged as world leaders in education shun regimes like NAPLAN.

The overwhelming evidence from history in all spheres of life is that diversity, not uniformity, produces strength and sustainability over the long term. Teachers need to be responsible for assessment for they know their students best.

Bryan Long, Balwyn
Safety preys on students’ minds

Australia’s ability to attract overseas students is being compromised by our reputation in some regions, Geoff Maslen reports.

VEN if I wanted to go to Australia, and I got the course I wanted, there is no way I could convince my mum and dad,” a young Indian student told British Council researchers in Delhi last month.

The student’s parents are not alone in worrying about sending their offspring to Australia. The number of Indian students enrolled in our colleges and universities has collapsed over the past three years — from 121,000 in 2009 down to 48,000 by August this year — at an estimated cost to the national economy of more than $2 billion.

Figures compiled by the government’s Australian international education agency reveal higher education enrolments of Indian students fell from 27,500 three years ago to fewer than 12,000 by August. Yet the number from China has continued its rapid rise — up from 64,400 in 2009 to 92,000.

Savage attacks on Indian students in Melbourne and Sydney three years ago created a media storm across India and that, coupled with the rising value of the Australian dollar and tighter immigration restrictions, has had an overwhelming impact on Indian attitudes on Australia as a study destination.

“All the students we spoke to in Delhi and Mumbai were aware of incidents of violence towards international students around the world and the high-profile incidents involving the safety of Indian students that occurred in Australia,” say the British Council researchers in a report published in London last week.

The report on rising safety concerns among international students was prepared by the council’s Education Intelligence division and used data from online surveys completed by more than 160,000 international students between 2007 and 2012, as well as a poll of student safety concerns. The researchers also interviewed students, school teachers, parents and education agents in Delhi and Mumbai.

While the number of violent incidents involving foreign students has been increasing globally, the report says Australian institutions have experienced “an acute number of crimes”, with the causes and their handling scrutinised by the international media. The perception of Australia as a safe destination appears to have changed: the British research shows Canada, Germany and New Zealand are now perceived as “safer” study destinations.

Australia’s Race Discrimination Commissioner, Helen Szoke, was with the Victorian Human Rights Commission when the attacks on Indian students occurred in Melbourne. “I was acutely aware of the damage being done by not acknowledging and recognising that an element of racism was the basis of the attacks,” she told Higher Age.

Dr Szoke has just launched a “bill of rights” for international students — a set of principles to promote and protect their rights that, she said, had too often been ignored by individuals and organisations. Outlining the principles at an international education conference in Melbourne, she said the aim was to create discussion and awareness of student rights “where sometimes it does not exist”.

“This awareness is essential, whether in terms of the obligations of organisations working with international students, or of the support students should expect during their time here,” Dr Szoke said. “As we discovered during our consultations, many students do not know where to seek help or what their entitlements might be.”

Social isolation, poverty, exclusion from...
health services or affordable housing, sexual harassment and exploitation, excessive transport costs and prohibitive fees to access government schools for their children were some of the disadvantages confronting students who rightly came to Australia expecting more, she said.

“This is in addition to the occasional physical violence experienced by some in recent years, as well as the discrimination and hostility that many report. All this means some international students experience life in Australia as second-class members of the community, despite their hopes of a first-class education.”

Another international student study, to be released this month by the Melbourne-based global student recruitment agency IDP Education, will reinforce how wary Indians are of studying in Australia while also demonstrating how widely perceptions can vary. As part of the study, a survey of 463 students in a dozen overseas countries who had used IDP to select courses in universities across America, Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand was conducted by independent research agency, Forethought Research. IDP’s head of research, Lyndell Jacka, told Higher Age the study found that international recognition of a university’s qualification and the quality of its education were the top two factors influencing student choice. The next most important were home country qualification recognition and affordability.

“Safety was ranked between fifth and eighth on a list of 14 factors in choosing which main English destination to study in],” Ms Jack said. “The one exception was students from the Middle East where safety ranked fourth, although Canada was clearly the leader in terms of perceptions of safety no matter which country the students came from or the destination chosen.”

But she said the figures were quite variable. Canada was perceived as the safest among all those surveyed while Australia and Britain ranked in the middle, followed by the US. Indian students perceived Canada as the safest and Australia the least safe whereas Malaysian students saw Australia to be the safest and the US the least.

The British Council researchers say international students are increasingly concerned about personal safety. They warn this trend is beginning to influence student choices of study destinations and, as the number of students moving around the globe rises, so does the potential risk.

“The overseas institutions that welcome these students have a duty of care towards them, which on the most fundamental level suggests taking care of their safety and well-being. This helps explain why it is more likely to be seized on by the media when an international student is put in danger than when a domestic student is endangered at home.”


6 Many do not know where to seek help or what their entitlements might be. 9
Wages growth to falter, says Russell

Jacob Greber, Economics correspondent

The bureaucrat at the forefront of the federal government’s drive to boost productivity has warned wages growth will falter in coming years as the easy-money boost from the resources boom fades.

Don Russell, a former principal adviser to Paul Keating and now secretary of the Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, said after 20 years of continuous growth, Australians regarded annual wage gains of 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent above inflation as normal.

He said much of the gains were driven by an increase in earnings from exports rather than by the economy becoming more efficient.

“A bit of arithmetic tells you; ‘look this ain't going to go on’ – in fact we’ve already seen the beginnings of this going down,” he said in a lecture at the Australian National University in Canberra.

The terms of trade, the ratio of export prices to import prices, which economists estimate has fallen by at least 10 per cent in the past year, were now “more than likely” to detract from wages growth, he said.

“If the community continues to think 1.5 to 2 per cent real wage growth is the norm, there are going to be problems, unless labour productivity lifts,” he said.

The comments are significant as Dr Russell heads the department charged with improving skills and turning scientific breakthroughs into jobs.

They echo recent warnings from a prominent Hawke-era economist, Ross Garnaut, who last month said Australians needed to prepare for a living standards bust as the mining investment boom ended.

Dr Russell, who served as former Labor prime minister Keating’s top adviser between 1985 and 1993 and again in 1996, suggested manufacturing needed to adapt to structural change caused by the high dollar. The department is responsible for billions in subsidies to foreign car makers.

“About 8 per cent of Australians work in manufacturing. ‘You can say ‘well it’s 8 per cent heading for zero’ or you could say ‘look Australia is fortunate that only 8 per cent of employment is in manufacturing’,” he said.

“We are having to live through an extraordinary period of structural change which effects the manufacturing sector, but you can also say ‘well look there's only 8 per cent, it's not an insurmountable task for an 8 per cent allocation to manufacturing to persist.

“It will have to be a different type of manufacturing, but it is a task which I think the nation can embrace … can put in place policies and structures which enable manufacturing not to continue, but it'll have to be a different manufacturing.”

Australia was more fortunate than other countries where manufacturing employed 15 per cent to 20 per cent of the workforce, he said.

“They’re having to adjust to similar levels of structural change and they’re doing that in an economy that is contracting,” he said. “We are adjusting to quite major structural forces, but we’re doing it in an environment where the economy overall is expanding.”

A video of the lecture was posted on the ANU’s website.
Shorten gives away small beer

JUDITH SLOAN
COMMENT

THE government never wanted the Fair Work Act reviewed, but its refusal to subject the bill to a regulatory impact statement meant its hands were tied. Legislation required that a post-implementation review of the FWA be undertaken.

When Chris Evans was the minister, he thought he could get away with an intra-department, behind-closed-doors review. The sort of thing that can lead to an announcement to the effect that: the review has been conducted, a few minor issues emerged but, overall, the act is performing well and in line with expectations.

On second thoughts and with Bill Shorten, MBA, now the minister, it was decided that an independent review with a panel of friendlies would be a better look. In this way, there could be the charade of asking for submissions and the panel could talk to interested parties. Shorten's proposed changes to unfair dismissal provisions are small beer. To be sure, some scope for the awarding of costs against a vexatious party might deter some claims. But there can be no guarantee that Fair Work Australia would actually make such awards, given its track-record in these matters.

In the meantime, all the key changes to the act are being deferred, including the important changes to the greenfields provisions. Resources Minister Martin Ferguson has been calling for changes for months as the unions delay the start of projects and extort excessively generous pay and conditions. By the time any changes are made, there may be very few greenfields projects.

To deflect attention from the main game — changing the industrial relations legislation to promote productivity and reduce cost pressures — Shorten announced on Sunday another wasteful taxpayer-funded project, this time focused on workplace leadership.

Some $12 million over four years has been allocated to establish the Centre for Workplace Leadership. There is absolutely no evidence that this sort of endeavour will make a jot of difference to "leadership capability" (whatever that means) or productivity.

But it will doubtless be welcomed by those who will receive a share of the $12m.