Overseas students rate unis

International students are reporting record levels of satisfaction with private tertiary courses in Australia. The news has been welcomed by the beleaguered sector, which has experienced years of declining enrolments amid a spate of high-profile assaults against Indian students in Victoria, and the strengthening Australian dollar. This year, international student numbers dropped by 6.9 per cent in the year to June, with university enrolments falling by 3.5 per cent, vocational education and training by 13.2 per cent, and school enrolments by 10.4 per cent. But the survey of 6000 students by the Australian Council for Private Education and Training showed 88.3 per cent of international students who studied in Australia were satisfied with their “learning spaces”, compared with 86.9 per cent studying elsewhere.

Bianca Hall
INTERNATIONAL student enrolments will continue to decline, reaching a low of 485,000 next year before creeping up to 600,000 by 2020, new modelling has found.

The sector’s value to the economy will “bottom out” at $14 billion from a high of $18bn in 2009. At the same time, 27,000 jobs will go, including 7300 in educational institutions and college collapses, says Stephen Connelly, outgoing president of the International Education Association of Australia.

“The top to bottom drop of 23 per cent in numbers of students between 2009 and 2013 will account for a 22 per cent drop in the value of education as an export,” Mr Connelly said.

The modelling also looked at the impact government reforms would have on demand, including streamlining visa processing.

“These reforms are likely to have a positive impact on numbers of commencing international students. It’s essential that post-study work rights are legislated as quickly as possible. If all recommended reforms are implement-
ed, IEAA has modelled that from 2013 numbers of commencing international students across most education sectors will grow by 5 per cent annually.”

The new modelling will be presented to next week’s Australian International Education Conference in Melbourne.

It also reveals that, as a result of the government’s reforms, higher education will again attract the most students with other sectors acting as conduits into university.

“Higher education students will make up nearly 50 per cent of Australia’s international student program, up from 36 per cent in 2009,” Mr Connelly said.

Education as an export industry doubled in value every five years from 1990 to 2010, overtaking tourism as the top service export in 2007 and edging out gold, briefly, in 2009.

Mr Connelly said in one year, NSW and Victoria dropped a combined $4bn in export income.

“Mr Connelly said next week’s conference also would hear that one in eight Australian undergraduates took an international study trip as part of their studies.

One in three students choose to go to Asia, with China, Malaysia, India, Japan and Indonesia in the top dozen destinations.

Nearly 60 per cent of international study trips were supported by university funds and 20 per cent of students had access to OS-HELP, the federal government’s loan program to assist undergraduate students undertake some of their study overseas.
Elf seeks refuge from regional round freeze

ANDREW TROUNSON

The head of the Education Investment Fund advisory board, Phil Clark, has called on the Gillard government to protect the $500 million regional priorities round from any spending freeze.

An announcement on successful bidders had been expected this month. But there are growing fears the funding round could be put on the backburner as the government’s razor gang seeks savings to restore a budget surplus next year.

Concern about the regional EIF round comes amid general angst that research funding is also at risk of being put on hold.

The Australian Technology Network of universities has backed up the concerns of the Group of Eight by similarly writing to Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans.

ATN president Jeanette Hackett wrote that “a very conservative estimate” of 2000 jobs in science and research could potentially be at risk.

The Go8 and the ATN are yet to receive a reply.

Queried on the delay to the announcement of the EIF regional round winners, a spokesman for the Department of Innovation would only confirm no decision had been made.

Speaking to the HES, Mr Clark urged the government not to freeze the round.

“We have submitted our recommendations to government and it is in their hands,” he said.

Curtin University’s upgrade of its WA School of Mines at Kalgoorlie is one of the short-listed projects.

Professor Hackett, who is also Curtin vice-chancellor, said the $30m bid to modernise laboratories and teaching spaces would leverage $20m in associated state funding to boost student housing.

She said the project was aligned with government policy to address skills shortages.

In its letter to Senator Evans, the ATN warns: “Because of the international and industry reputational issues and the long-term planning cycle factors, the suspension of the research grant programs even for one cycle would have dire consequences for Australian research and our global competitiveness, from which it would take years to recover.

“Given the previous stated commitment to university research and innovation that we have received from the government over a long period of time, we are sure these reports are simply speculation and we seek your urgent assurances that this is the case.”

They, like the rest of the sector, are still waiting.
Union says cut states to finance the TAFEs

JULIE HARE

The federal government should withhold $6.85 billion in funding to the three eastern states for failing to meet a key condition under national skills agreements, according to the education union. And it could use that money to fund TAFEs directly to avoid unnecessary fallout.

The Australian Education Union wrote to Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans on Monday pointing out that all states had signed a clause requiring them to resource their TAFE institutes adequately. "The federal government must use the considerable political and financial weight that it wields in VET (vocational education and training) and TAFE to force state governments to back down from their budget cuts," wrote AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos. "It has the capacity to withhold funding, and it also has the capacity to allocate funding directly to TAFEs, bypassing recalcitrant state governments. "It has a great deal to gain politically and electorally by choosing to save the public TAFE system."

At stake is $8.8bn nationally. Of that, Victoria is scheduled to receive $2.2bn, NSW $2.85bn and Queensland $1.8bn if they meet certain conditions. But the AEU says Victoria has walked away from its commitment by cutting $300 million in the May budget. Meanwhile, a Queensland taskforce has recommended the closure of nearly half the state's TAFE campuses and cuts to the NSW education budget put more than 800 jobs on the line. "Neither NSW nor Queensland has announced how they are going to implement the requirements in the national agreements. Both sets of budget cuts in these states would put them at odds with requirements," AEU national TAFE secretary Pat Forward said. "The federal government is a powerful player... and it wields that through funding. It contributes almost 28 per cent of total government revenue for vocational education in Victoria and 38 per cent nationally."
FOCUS on the need for job cuts. At one stage he called her plans “hare-brained”. After circulating a critical economic analysis to state and federal members of parliament, he was threatened with a possible defamation action from then chancellor Frank Vincent. 

Joining the new management regime is an opportunity to back up his past criticisms with action, he says. 

“I haven’t gradually turned into Kafka’s cockroach and people who know me know that,” Doughney says. “My outlook hasn’t changed.”

If the university is going to do its job of educating largely low socioeconomic students into the future and serve the western region, we are going to have to put all shoulders to the wheel.”

Doughney’s switch comes as a VU seeks a further 200 voluntary redundancies, mainly among administrative staff, in a bid to turn around a $13 million deficit. 

Doughney, an economist, says he can play a constructive role in helping management and unions understand each other at a critical time for the university. And there are certainly sensitive industrial relations issues at stake as Dawkins seeks to more closely integrate higher education and TAFE staff in a new combined college structure.

VU also needs to focus its teaching to support rising numbers of under-prepared students.

His union colleagues have reacted “with interest!”, he says laughing. Certainly, VU branch president-elect Paul Adams reacted cautiously when asked about the move. “It is a decision that Jamie has made,” he says, noting that VU’s deputy vice-chancellor (academic and students) Greg Baxter is also a former branch president.

Doughney was an outspoken critic of former vice-chancellor Elizabeth Harman and in 2008-09 frequently used his position on council to challenge her on the need for job cuts. At one stage he called her plans “hare-brained”. After circulating a critical economic analysis to state and federal members of parliament, he was threatened with a possible defamation action from then chancellor Frank Vincent.

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JAMIE DOUGHNEY
Universities must help in secondary school solutions

BACK in 2009, when Julia Gillard was education minister, she urged universities to “broaden their gaze ... to understand and assist the performance of disadvantaged schools”. She sought to institutionalise universities’ pressure on government: “I want universities to care deeply and passionately about our schools and I want a systemic reason for universities to hector governments about school resourcing and school quality.”

Analysis in the OECD’s Education at a Glance 2012 supports the importance of school education in achieving higher education goals and suggests there is more scope for universities’ involvement in school education.

The OECD report confirms that university attendance is strongly related to parental educational attainment, and that expanding the number of university places on offer improves the chances of participation of students whose parents did not go on to higher education.

However, the OECD study found expanding places has only a modest effect, with schooling accounting for a substantially bigger impact on preparing students from less educated families to enter higher education. It concludes that “countries that succeed in providing high-quality compulsory schooling to all students, regardless of their background, are also those that show better odds for students from low educational backgrounds to be enrolled in higher education”.

Unfortunately, Australian schools are not very good at redressing the effect of students’ socio-economic background. This is partly because they are strongly segmented, with pupils from poorer backgrounds congregating together. The OECD and David Gonski in his recent review say learning is strongly influenced by a student’s peers.

While education academics were very active in submissions to and comments on the Gonski review, universities have generally not taken institutional positions on school funding. It’s the same with discussions of the school curriculum and of the nature and structure of senior secondary certificates. Universities appear most interested in applicants’ ATARs and their performance in prerequisite subjects.

This is a marked change from two decades ago, when universities were actively engaged in the senior secondary curriculum, assessment and certification. Universities appear most interested in applicants’ ATARs and their performance in prerequisite subjects.

There would be no benefit in returning to the earlier contests between universities and school authorities, and presumably this was not sought by Ms Gillard. But neither is it sufficient for universities to demonstrate that the inequality which occurs in higher education participation originates in schools without seeking to contribute to the solution.

While most universities are now working with schools, their efforts need to be broadened beyond one major program and beyond organisational areas with responsibility for equity student recruitment.

There is considerable scope for academic boards to revive their interest in school resourcing, quality, standards and student attainment. They may broaden the understanding of their regions’ schools beyond the statistics reported on the My School website and engage schools and teachers in a collaborative effort to improve student outcomes.

Gavin Moodie is a tertiary education policy analyst at RMIT.