


International sector haemorrhaging must stop

DAVID GRANT

By **DAVID GRANT**

9:37PM APRIL 28, 2020 •  4 COMMENTS

With the COVID-19 curve seemingly beginning to flatten, we must urgently pave the way to walk our international education sector back from the brink.

A failure to do so will eviscerate the \$40bn that the sector contributed to higher education — especially universities — and our wider economy last year.

Moreover, it will have a devastating impact on the ability of our universities to continue investing in much-needed infrastructure, subsidise vital science, technology, engineering and mathematics research, and punch above our weight in the hugely competitive global environment.

Internationally, Australia's hard-won reputation for high-quality research and education is at risk.

Domestically, a failure to act will compromise our universities' capacity to contribute to the economic and social fabric of the nation and, critically, their ability to play a major role in our post-COVID-19 recovery.

Currently, there are a half-million international students still in Australia and tens of thousands linked from their homes through digital connections that transcend the imposed COVID-19 border restrictions.

Our first priority must be to ensure that we show unequivocally how much we value their personal, cultural, social and economic contributions to Australia.

Of course, as president of the Australian Business Deans Council, the peak body of Australian university business schools, I represent a vested interest. In short, our members graduate more than half of our country's international university students.

But, let me be clear, the interests I represent are looking well beyond the billions of dollars at stake. At the heart of our concerns is how we want to position Australia globally; our trustworthiness and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region; our strengths as a vibrant, diverse society; and our ability to care for those we have previously welcomed into our home.

Much has already been said about our federal failure to alleviate the hardship of international students pummelled by the loss of jobs during our economic hibernation.

Where possible, universities, state and local governments, and community organisations are trying to assist them and, in doing so, countering what some see as the baffling and somewhat callous “if-you-can’t-afford-to-be-here-go-home” rhetoric of the federal government.

Inevitably, Australia is being compared unfavourably with countries such as Canada and New Zealand that have captured international students in their safety nets while we have left many falling.

By year’s end we stand to lose tens of thousands of students who will rightly feel let down by a country that has been all too ready to take their money but has shown no compunction to help them in their time of need.

These are students whose keenness to experience Australian education has been celebrated by successive governments as those same governments have continued to lower levels of direct support for our tertiary sector.

We must demonstrate how much we value and care about our international students before the damage being done becomes irreparable.

Government and universities need to come together to design and implement a package of measures that enhance Australia as an attractive destination for overseas study and one that supports our current international students to complete their education.

For starters, here are a few suggestions:

- Put in place measures that enable international students to access at least some of the financial and other forms of support currently available to those affected by COVID-19. These students should not be left suffering immense hardship in a place many want to continue calling home. This is a humanitarian, ethical and strategic issue.

- Work with the relevant health experts and other arms of government to put in place measures that enable new and current international students to enter Australia, using systematic testing and quarantining as we are doing for Australian arrivals from overseas.
- Count those studying online with Australian universities from overseas as if they are still present in our country so their time away does not affect their post-study work rights once they can physically be in Australia.
- Mount a concerted and co-ordinated recruitment and marketing campaign for the sector that highlights the advantages of studying in Australia — one that shifts the rhetoric from them and us to a more welcoming just us.

Like the rest of the world, Australia's higher education sector is undergoing, and will continue to undergo, transformation in this time of profound change.

But, right now, we need to stop the haemorrhaging, before it's too late and we arrive at the point of no return.

We must move rapidly to nurture and build the kind of higher education sector that will serve our international students and Australia well into our post-pandemic future.

David Grant is president of the Australian Business Deans Council.