

International students deal welcomed

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Opinion

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A great university education can be many things, but it assuredly cannot be built without openness to the world. There can be no great university education that is not international at its core.

When international students come to Australia they drive a requirement for diversity and openness into the way we teach, and every student's educational outcomes are improved as a result.

It may make some people uncomfortable because they must deal with the unknown; it may make providing excellent education more difficult because we cannot rely on assumed cultural understanding. But the education is better because good education comes from questioning our assumptions and dealing with matters beyond our immediate comfort zone.

Last Thursday, Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans and Immigration Minister Chris Bowen announced that the federal government had accepted the recommendations of Michael Knight's *Strategic Review of the Student Visa Program 2011*.

The recommendations provide a new framework for strengthening Australian international education. They signal an openness to students seeking to study in Australia, tempered by a more sophisticated risk-based approach to visas. Rather than classifying students by country of origin, the proposed visa system recognises the different profiles of students coming to study bachelor degrees from those seeking short vocational programs, and those undertaking their PhDs compared with other cohorts.

This is the latest and very welcome innovation in arrangements for international students. There have been many examples of successful innovations in the way Australia offers international education.

They include integrated and centralised global offices, inquiry management systems, automated national data systems, sophisticated market intelligence distributed nationally, educational agent networks, and innovative articulation arrangements to provide credit for past study and pathways between levels of program. In many of these areas Australia managed to introduce the first systematic programs of their type.

Among these innovations, Australia has led in managing student visas. This includes deciding student visas according to explicit and public criteria, ranking countries in five levels according to the risk of their students overstaying their visas, and deciding immigration applications by allocating points for sought characteristics. While this latter system was adapted from Canada, Australia's points-based immigration system was linked to its migration skills in demand list.

An operational innovation is the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's provider registration and international students management system (PRISMS).

PRISMS records all institutions, their programs and all their students studying in Australia on a student visa. PRISMS links with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's visa data.

The proposed changes to the student visa system not only recognise different cohorts of students, but by recognising different risk profiles they provide for students enrolled in bachelor degrees or higher to be treated at the lowest risk assessment level (assessment level one).

A two- to four-year post-study work visa for university graduates provides welcome opportunities both for international students and for Australia in allowing vital post-graduation work experience and at least temporary retention of skills in Australia's economy. The length of the visa will vary with the level of graduate study completed.

These innovations in the way student visas will be handled rely on the other changes that have been made to ensure that the quality assurance of Australian education is strengthened and that there is adequate protection of international students.

The introduction of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency this year is a major step to marrying a strong standards framework for tertiary education provision with a compliance regime that is risk-based. In international student protection, Australia relies on recently updated legislation, Educational Services for Overseas Students, first introduced in 1991.

There has never been a reason to expect Australia's current success in international education to continue indefinitely. Increased competition from better-resourced or highly reputable universities from other countries is already evident. There is also increased competition from universities in countries where the cost of

studying and living is cheaper. Some of our past success was due to high quality education, English language in instruction and proximity to the source of many of the world's international students in Asia. Some of this is due to luck, with English becoming a major international language and being in a country in a fast-growing region.

Education investment is a continuing policy item for Australia. Yet while relying on luck might appeal to some views of the Australian character, it is not a recipe for success. Australia's future success in international education will rely as much on high quality regulation as on high quality education. As A.F. Davies opined, the "characteristic talent of Australians is for bureaucracy".

Australian international education is successful because it has innovated strongly for a quarter of a century. This country introduced or professionalised numerous innovations. It cannot continue to be successful without recognising that this has been and will need to be our path to success.

In this latest set of changes to the student visa system, it's very good to see that we are still prepared to use our "characteristic talent". We will need to exercise it continually in the years to come if international education is to remain strong.

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