International student recruitment: lessons from Australia


Gavin Moodie

Thank you for this occasion to reflect on Australia’s international education. I don’t write on international education much, but I always enjoy it when I do, as I did this time. I will present a graph on Australia’s international enrolments, which I will use to outline some broad characteristics of Australian international education and make 2 general points. I will then make 3 points on Australian recruitment of international students: the involvement of several sectors and all 3 levels of government; on Australia’s educational developments for international students; and internationalisation challenges for Australian universities and colleges.

**International student enrolments in Australia by sector 1994-2016**

Figure 1 shows international enrolments in Australia by sector from 1994 to 2016 and the figures are given in Table 2 in an appendix. I draw your attention to 3 points about this graph.

![Graph showing international enrolments in Australia by sector 1994-2016](image)

*Source: Australian Government Department of Education (2017a)*. There is a break in the series between 2001 and 2002 when the method for collecting enrolment data changed.
First, most enrolments are in higher education, which includes enrolments in university pathways programs, which I will describe later. The next biggest sector is vocational education and training. This sector combines enrolments in college programs, tho these are much weaker than Ontario college programs, and enrolments in private career colleges. Australian federal and state or provincial governments do not distinguish between public colleges and private career trainers for most purposes: they are accredited by the same body according to the same criteria, they are subject to the same quality assurance, and they are required to offer the same training packages or qualifications for national recognition. Some states have provided the same public subsidies to private for profit career trainers on the same conditions as their grants to public colleges, according to a principle of competitive neutrality which has greatly weakened colleges in most states.

The next biggest sector shown here, whose enrolments closely align with vocational education and training, is English language intensive courses for overseas students (Elicos). These are understated since they count only Elicos students on a student visa; many people undertake Elicos courses on a tourist or other visa. Elicos courses are typically taken in modules of 5 weeks which students might intersperse with backpacking or with seasonal work such as fruit picking, which they may take concurrently while working up to 20 hours per week, or study full time. Students typically take as many 5 week modules they need to pass an approved English language test at a specified level. Almost two-thirds of international students on a student visa who completed an Elicos course in 2014 undertook further study in Australia in another education sector (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Non award courses are in about equal numbers foundation and enabling courses to prepare international students to undertake an Australian qualification, and mobility courses which include study abroad and study exchange programs (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017b).

Second, we observe that major external shocks such as the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the outbreak of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) at the end of 2002 and the global financial crisis in 2008 seem to have had little effect on Australia’s international student enrolments.

Third, we observe the effects on international enrolments of a sequence of changes within Australia. The costs of education and indeed other expert services such as health increase faster than inflation, due to the effects of the cost disease (Baumol and Bowen, 1966; Baumol, 1967; Baumol, 2012). So governments have to increase educational funding by more than inflation just to maintain education services at their current level for the same number of students. But in 1996 the Australian Government stopped increasing university grants by the educational index and increased them by the lower consumer price index. The effect was hardly perceptible initially: in 1996 universities’ grants increased by 1.016 times rather than by 1.036. But the effect is cumulative and by 2001 university grants increased by 1.109 rather than by 1.229 and the government had saved $500 million (Burke and Phillips, 2001).
Universities’ response was correspondingly slow initially but they steadily increased their recruitment of international students to compensate for lower increases in government grants. In 1996 international students were 8% of all students, having increased by 0.5% a year since 1988 when international students were 4% of all students. But by 2002 international students had increased by more than 2% a year to 21% of all students (Moodie, 2008) and now international students are 27% of all university students (Department of Education and Training, 2016, Table 4.3: Actual student load (EFTSL) for all students by State, higher education institution and citizenship, full year 2015).

Next we note a big spike in international students in vocational education and training from 2006 to 2009. During this period students were able to win high points towards gaining permanent residency by completing vocational education and training programs that employers said were in ‘high demand’. For profit vocational education providers provided these programs for high fees but with short durations and minimal attendance requirements. The scams became notorious and extensively shamed in national media, and employers claimed that graduates were not meeting minimum standards. The government removed the link between education and immigration in 2009 which, we observe, also resulted in falls in international enrolments in higher education. Numerous vocational education and training provides went bankrupt and students lost their fees. At the same time two international students were killed in what the police were slow to acknowledge were racist attacks. In September 2009 the Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard (2009) led an educational delegation to India which led to the restoration of relations between Australia and India and the restoration of Australia’s reputation for international education in that country.

**Involvement of several sectors and all 3 levels of government**

We have already observed the strong effect that immigration policy has on Australian international enrolments. Immigration is also important in the processes and speed with which it considers international students’ applications for study visas. Many students visit initially as tourists and change their visa status while in Australia, and the speed and efficiency of this process is also important. We have noted international students’ reliance on police for protection.

Local government also has important roles. For example, at the start of each academic year the Melbourne City Council and other councils hold a ceremony welcoming international students. There was a problem with taxi drivers’ racism against international students on the Gold Coast so the city council held training sessions for the drivers. Landlords in Brisbane were crowding international students into rental houses, which not only exploited students but annoyed neighbors, so the city council passed and enforced a new bylaw to regulate the practice.

**Changes for international students**

This describes briefly some of the changes Australian universities have made to attract international students.
Agents

Australian universities recruit 62% of their international students thru agents (Olsen, 2014: 4), both agents based in other countries and those based in Australia. Not all agents of Australian institutions have been of high quality. A principal such as a university or a college is responsible for the actions of their agents in law, but this is expensive to enforce so the national higher education accrediting and quality assurance body reviews as part of its quality audit universities’ arrangements with their agents, and reviews the behaviour of the university’s agents.

Pathways programs

Most Australian international students study in multiple sectors. Of the international students commencing a program in 2015 some 48% of international higher education students and 54% of international vocational education and training students had studied in another sector immediately before starting their program (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). And in 2011 some 11% of higher education students transferred from another higher education provider (Australian Education International, 2011: 6, 8). Many of these pathways programs are offered by a private for profit provider such as Navitas. Typically they are 1 or 2 years’ of intensive study of a curriculum specified and monitored by a parent university after which the student transfers with credit to the parent university’s program.

International partners

Many Australian universities have pathways agreements with colleges in other countries, such as Canada and Ontario in particular. Typically these provide for students who complete a specified program with a specified grade point average to transfer to a specified program with specified credit. A close pathway agreement with an international college is known as a twinning arrangement.

Shared services

Institutions are advantaged if they can respond to inquiries quickly around the clock, since inquiries come from prospective students in different time zones. Institutions are also advantaged if they can process applications quickly. So several Australian universities participate in a shared service centre in Melbourne which handles inquiries and applications on their behalf.

Year round admissions

Institutions are also advantaged if they can decide on applications quickly. There is no reason to keep prospective international students waiting to have their application considered in a batch admissions process once or even twice a year. Australian universities specify their admission requirements for international students sufficiently precisely in advance for decisions to be made on applications as they are received.
International student services

Australian universities have substantial expert international centres which are resourced well, usually from a proportion of international student fee income. Australian universities allocated an average of 11% of their international student revenue to all their international operations in 2013, which included their international office, commissions and devolved costs (Olsen, 2014: 2). Typically such centres develop with faculties international student marketing campaigns by program and region. They advise faculties on what programs and offer strategies may be attractive to international students. They also provide a full range of services needed by international students.

Campus or study centre within the country

An important factor in international students’ choice of institution is location. Broadly, international students prefer to study in capital cities or in resort locations such as Niagara. So some Australian universities whose main campus is not in a place attractive to international students establish a campus or study centre in such a location. Similarly, some regional English universities have established campuses in London. Some such campuses are run in partnership with private for profit providers, such as the Ontario ministry has recently prohibited colleges from operating.

Campus or study centre outside the country

Some 23% of Australian international students study offshore in Australian universities’ off shore campuses, study centres, and a few study off shore on line. Proportions vary markedly by institution (Table 1).

Table 1: number of Australian universities by proportion of international students offshore

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of international students off shore</th>
<th>Number of universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>40% or more</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10% to 39%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1% to 9%</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>11</td>
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Internationalisation challenges

These are some of the prominent challenges faced by Australian universities in their internationalisation.
Study abroad

Australia used to have a very low proportion of domestic students studying abroad for short periods of up to a semester, which was considered a serious problem by the federal government and by institutions. This was improved markedly with the strong policy support of the federal government, by the federal government establishing a prominent scholarship scheme which supported 7% of students briefly studying abroad, by the federal government making loans available to support study abroad (21%), by Australian universities allocating some of their international revenue to subsidising study abroad (47%) and with support from foundations and private sources (7%) (Olsen, 2014: 14).

Some programs also incorporate brief study abroad projects in their curriculum. I recall an architecture program in which the whole class designed a building for a school in Vietnam, researching remotely the school’s needs, site and resources. A sub group spent a month or so at the school consulting the school and its pupils and investigating the site in detail. They returned to report to the whole class which further developed its plans. Subsequent classes started the building and monitored it to completion.

Pedagogy

An important issue for Australian international students is developing their communication skills. Many faculty complain about what they report to be international students’ inadequate communication skills and they make various proposals, typically increasing the English language requirement for entry. This is not strong practice. As Arkoudis and Kelly (2016: 4) write:

The literature is unequivocal that high impact student learning occurs when communication skills are integrated within disciplinary learning and assessment (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012; Dunworth, 2013; Wingate, 2015). There are a number of studies that provide evidence to support the move in this direction (Arkoudis, 2013; Briguglio, 2014; Dunworth 2014; Murray & Nallaya, 2014; Fenton-Smith, Humphreys, Walkinshaw, Michael, & Lobo, 2015).

(Arkoudis and Kelly, 2016: 4)

Arkoudis has published a number of guides on integrating English language communication skills into disciplinary curricula, for example Arkoudis (2014: 5) wherein she proposes that responsibilities be distributed between different levels and areas of the institution:

- **Teaching and Learning leaders** (can include Deputy Vice-Chancellor or Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic) and Associate Deans Teaching and Learning) – What is the evidence base that graduates have attained threshold oral and written communication skills upon completion?
- **Course coordinators** – What communication skills are students expected to have on completion of the course? Where and how are these assessed during the course of study?
• **Teaching academics** – What are the learning outcomes for the unit in terms of communication skills? How will these be taught and assessed?

• **Academic Language and Literacy (ALL) Advisors** – How can course coordinators and teaching academics include ALL advisors in developing resources for teaching communication skills?

(Arkoudis, 2014: 5)

Nonetheless, Arkoudis and Kelly (2016) found that practices in Australian universities is patchy, and faculty continue to complain about international students’ poor English language skills.

**Standards**

Any substantial change in postsecondary education institutions or students raises fears about a lowering of standards. It happened in 1832 when England established the University of Durham, its first university since the University of Cambridge was founded 600 years earlier (Silver, 1996). Concerns about quality were raised when Australia moved from elite to mass higher education (Trow, 1973), and they are raised as Australia transitions from mass to universal postsecondary education. They are also raised when institutions teach in different study modes and when they admit different kinds of students, such as members of equity groups and international students.

Most faculty critics reject any proposal to introduce a systematic and rigorous assurance of the standards of postsecondary education; their solution is just to reject the most recent innovation in postsecondary education. While there is a crisis in the standards of Australian vocational education and training, this has got nothing to do with international students. And while I do not think there is a crisis in the standards of Australian higher education, the lack of systematic and rigorous assurance of standards makes the sector vulnerable to claims of falling or compromised standards.

**Getting off the stage**

My interest in the topic has extended these notes far longer than needed for the session. So I end by thanking the organisers for giving me the opportunity to revisit the area, and I look forward to the rest of the symposium.

Gavin Moodie
2 November 2017
References


Trow, Martin (1973) Problems in the transition from elite to mass higher education, Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, Berkeley, http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/search/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_&ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=ED091983&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=no&accno=ED091983
Table 2: International enrolments in Australia by sector 1994-2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Higher education</th>
<th>Vocational education</th>
<th>ELICOS</th>
<th>Non-award</th>
<th>School education</th>
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