

# Uncharted Territory: The (Re)Politicization of International Education

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Australia has been one of the most successful countries in the world at internationalizing our tertiary education system. There are some obvious reasons for this – we had the historical good fortune of being an English-language system on the edge of Asia as it has integrated into the global economy and its students sought an education that would allow them to participate in the resulting growth; we have long had policy settings that promote entrepreneurialism within institutions; and we have an innovative, mobile and workforce of international education professionals.

And because we have been at the leading edge of international education for three decades we now find ourselves in uncharted territory on a number of fronts. Our campus communities are as cosmopolitan as any in the world. We attract academic staff from across the world and have internationalised our student body more comprehensively than any other system, with nearly 30 per cent international HE enrolments, and there are just as many onshore international students studying outside higher education. Our students learn abroad as part of their university studies at a higher rate than nearly any other country, with around 20 per cent of Australian undergraduates now having a mobility experience. It has come to be taken for granted that tertiary education providers have an international mission as well as serving local communities.

These are huge achievements that have resulted in education now playing a leading role in shaping Australia's place in the world. And yet our success in embracing the global education market makes us highly vulnerable as governments assert their ability to steer international educational flows for political purposes.

## The Return of Soft Power and Weaponizing Students

Before the 1980s most international student mobility was state-sponsored. During the colonial era and the Cold War, governments sent students to important partner countries to cement alliances in much the same way as European royalty had used intermarriage to forge pacts across the continent. While the soft power dimensions of international education never disappeared, it became much less significant with the rise of a global education market in which privately-funded students came to comprise the large majority of mobile learners. After the end of the Cold War governments' scholarship programs became more explicitly focused on development needs. Following the UK and in parallel with New Zealand, Australia famously made the shift from aid to trade in 1985, from policy centred around Colombo Plan scholarships to attracting self-funded students, and one of the reasons this shift worked so well was that the rest of the world was also changing in the same direction.

So how will this global education market, which was built upon the foundations of the liberal international economic order and which has provided enormous benefits to Australia, fare in the face of growing statist intervention aimed at remedying perceived market failures?

The success of nationalistic movements in many countries has been accompanied by efforts to constrain foreign engagement in higher education, for example through selective

tightening of visas in the USA and UK, instructions to purge foreign influence in Chinese universities, efforts to close the liberal Central European University in Hungary, and so on. So far we successfully fended off home-grown efforts to restrict incoming international students of the kind that have derailed the UK, Singapore and the USA. As a consequence, we (along with Canada and New Zealand) are reaping a diversity dividend, as students travel instead to more welcoming study destinations.

Instead, international education's next major political challenge is likely to be posed by our engagement with China. As tensions have flared between the Australian and Chinese governments over a range of issues, education has often been centre stage, both in Australia and in China. On the Australian side, the dominant policy concern is how to continue to welcome and educate a large number of Chinese students, and to pursue a wide range of other educational and research collaborations, without ceding sovereignty, particularly in relation to freedom of expression, academic freedom, protection of intellectual property, and so on. On the Chinese side, the dominant policy concern remains to ensure the ability of Chinese students and scholars to move freely and to protect their interests wherever they are in the world. But the Chinese government is not afraid to use its ability to influence where students travel to, and who universities collaborate with, in order to apply pressure. In recent years the number of Chinese students studying in Taiwan and South Korea dropped sharply in response to government displeasure at actions those countries had taken, only to pick up again once the political climate had been resolved. There doesn't seem to be any softening of interest in study in Australia among Chinese students, but that is clearly a fear for many institutions if the relationship deteriorates. There is also the risk of China putting pressure on individual institutions in order to change behaviour, as the world's airlines discovered recently when they were required to refer to Taiwan as part of China or risk unspecified repercussions. The consequences were largely symbolic in this case, but the message was very clear.

While we might describe the educational impact of political tensions with China as simmering, Saudi Arabia's use of students as a weapon to punish Canada's government is by contrast nothing short of explosive. After taking offence at a Twitter post by the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs expressing alarm at the arrest of women's rights activists, the Saudi government ordered all of the 17,000 or so Saudi students in Canada to return home over the Northern summer break. This marks a new high-water mark in the weaponizing of students as a tool of international diplomacy.

In Canberra there has been a steadily growing recognition of the significance of education in Australia's soft power, as evidenced in the 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper, and the current Review of Australia's Soft Power will further develop this thinking. This is very timely, and will help both the government and the international education sector to shift our thinking to reflect a more politically charged global education environment. We need to develop the tools to think beyond the instrumental management of transactions with markets, providers and consumers, to instead recognise that we need a deeper and more meaningful engagement with countries, communities and learners.

## A Globally Competent Nation

Decades ago, many of us lamented that international dimensions of higher education were treated as *ad hoc* optional extras, to be sprinkled across an otherwise inward-looking institution. I think it is now safe to say that international engagement is now core business in most facets of most institutions – in student services, in recruitment, in research strategy, in curriculum design, and many other functions. And in some respects, the 'international' divisions are victims of their own success, seeing their staff 'mainstreamed', and endless rethinking of the proper jurisdiction of the office of the DVCI.

Old hands in the international education sector worry that such a diffusion can easily result in a loss of strategic focus, and purpose. The question is clearly no longer whether an institution is international, but how its international engagement aligns with its broader strategy. Some institutions are very clear about this, for a while, but stable clear strategies are rare.

Being able to articulate a coherent vision has proved more difficult for Australian governments who struggle to articulate any policy goal beyond 'let's increase the dollar value of education export revenue'. We only need look across the ditch to New Zealand's recently launched International Education Strategy which sets out three clear goals (along with assignment of responsibilities and success measures): delivering an excellent education and student experience; achieving sustainable growth; developing global citizens. As a sector, we need to get better at helping our governments, federal and state, to understand the broader social and economic benefits that derive from such a focus on qualitative outcomes.

A key problem we face is the lack of a shared language for articulating the broader benefits of global engagement. As Wendy Green and Craig Whitsed recently [pointed out](#), the language of 'internationalisation of the curriculum' seems to have almost disappeared from Australian campuses. The term was perhaps always a stretch in Australia, since it presumes that the problem is that a curriculum is too national, whereas so much of our curriculum has always been imported, reconfigured and exported rather than being stuck within the bounds of the nation. (The European term 'internationalisation at home' also makes little sense here; just try asking a classroom of students where home is.)

The idea of global (or international or intercultural) competencies is, however, taken for granted now, and such notions have for at least a decade been ubiquitous in institutions' pronouncements about their graduates' attributes. More recently these have been subsumed under the rubric of employability. And here we should look closely at the OECD's work on global competence, which it has this year included as an optional component in the hugely influential Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA) for 15 year olds. The OECD's rationale aligns nicely with the way we think about such matters here:

Whether in traditional or more entrepreneurial work environments, young people need to collaborate with others from different disciplines and cultures, in a way that solves complex problems and creates economic and social value. They need to bring judgment and action to difficult situations in which people's beliefs and perspectives are at odds. They need to identify cultural traits and biases and to recognise that their own understanding of the world is inevitably partial (OECD 2016, 1).

Whether the term we use is 'global competence', 'global citizenship', or something else, we need to get better at articulating an educational vision that resonates with students, educators, governments and the broader community. We know from the rise of xenophobic movements around the world that in order to successfully counter naïve nativism we need both compelling evidence and an inclusive vision of a globally-engaged future which the whole community can relate to.

It is likely that we are entering into a period in which international education will again be politically contested by an increasing number of governments and factions, and often in unpredictable ways – who would have thought a year ago that how we teach about 'Western Civilization' would be more contentious than whether to host Confucius Institutes? The difference between the coming era and a half century ago is that now international education is now our core business, and global competencies are our new survival skills.