IMPROVING THE SAFETY AND WELL-BEING OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

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On 4th August 2010, in partnership with the Australian Human Rights Commission and Universities Australia, the ASSA Policy & Advocacy Committee convened a policy roundtable in Sydney. Titled Building an integrated response to the safety and well-being of international students in Australia, the roundtable was the second in a series and had the aim of building on the findings of an earlier workshop1 by discussing policy futures for the wellbeing of international students in Australia. The roundtable assembled 21 social scientists, state-level policy makers, tertiary education administrators, and representatives of international students in Australian tertiary education institutions. Late 2010 saw international student commencements decline by as much as 20%, and the context of the roundtable was the increasing awareness in the tertiary education sector and also beyond it of the need to deal effectively with issues confronting international students:. In addition to the adverse impact on Australia’s reputation, issues which adversely affect the experiences of international students are affecting the viability of a number of tertiary institutions.

A wide-ranging and constructive dialogue was entered into. In particular, participants agreed that leadership in the public sphere, including by political leaders, would be needed to increase social inclusion and improve the well-being of the significant number of international students currently resident in Australia, and of migrants and temporary migrants more generally. It was the view of participants that policy instruments can achieve only so much, and that public leadership on issues of tolerance and multicultural social inclusion has been lacking in recent years. Participants also agreed that a central issue for international students, as well as students more generally, was the shortage and cost of suitable housing. Improvements in the quantity and cost of suitably located accommodation for students, including international students, would act to mitigate issues facing them in other areas, such as personal safety and employment undertaken.

Discussion entered into at the roundtable can be categorised into five main areas: The Issues; Responsibilities; Government Responsibilities; The Responsibilities of Tertiary Providers; and The Views of Students.

(a) The Issues

The key issue is racism in the broadest context. Violence against international students is only part of the problem although it may have received the highest profile. However, racism on campus does not seem to be a significant issue.

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International students are very significant part of the resident Australian population. There were about 600,000 international students, including dependents, in Australia in early 2010. They are significant economically but, also, their experience can have short term impacts on Australia’s relations with other countries. Furthermore, many international students will become leaders and their experience can have long term impacts on international relationships. There is considerable reputation risk to Australia if international students have an unhappy experience.

There is evidence that racism in Australia has grown in recent years and this will affect our international reputation. Surveys have demonstrated that many students have experienced racism although relatively few have experienced actual violence.

There is some urgency in addressing this problem. There has been a 20% decline in Student commencements in 2010 and a further decline is expected next year. Education is one of Australia’s most important areas of export earnings and declines in earnings will occur. Furthermore, the decline in student commencements is threatening the viability of significant parts of the tertiary education sector especially some of the private colleges.

(b) Responsibilities

Many organisations and individuals have responsibility for addressing the issue but the Roundtable focussed on those with the major responsibility – governments and tertiary education providers.

It is also noted that there had been a lot of reports but not much response to date. A stronger solution orientation is required.

(c) Government Responsibilities

Governments have responsibilities for policy and the legislative frameworks. They also have responsibilities for the distribution of funds and additional funding would certainly be able to assist in some important areas. However, the Roundtable agreed that funding decisions should be aligned with an agreed strategy for international students.

Importantly, governments can also provide the leadership that might influence community attitudes to international students. This applies to all three levels of governments. A bipartisan approach is preferable and this occurs in some States and local government areas. However, this is not occurring at the Commonwealth level. The Roundtable was concerned that international students were caught up in the more general debate on immigration. There is an urgent need to decouple the debate about international students from the immigration debate. The issues are quite different. The Roundtable noted that revised ABS definitions of migrants included international students and consequently plans to reduce immigration numbers will also impact on the number of international students coming to Australia.

It is also important to get across the view that cultural diversity of Australia has been one of our comparative strengths and should continue to be so. Arguably, it has been one of the most important reasons for Australia’s progress over recent decades. International students contribute to the cultural diversity. Furthermore, many become future residents and citizens of Australia and contribute to the richness of our multi-cultural society.
Others may become future leaders in their countries and thereby influence relations with Australia at many different levels.

The Roundtable recognised that the Government had been reviewing policy and legislation impacting on international students. It was supportive of the recommendations and findings of the Baird Review into the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act. It also supported the sentiments of the COAG communiqué following the Baird Review particularly the agreement to develop an international student strategy. However, the Baird review (by design) did not address some important issues pertinent to international students and the content of the international student strategy are still unknown. The findings of this Roundtable should be seen as complimentary to government initiatives that already under way.

The focus of the government should be on preventative strategies. At present a lot of government effort is spent reacting to individual incidents. This is not cost-effective over the longer term.

What are the policy options for Government? It might be first useful to identify areas where policy development may not be useful mostly because the areas are intractable.
- Whilst some decoupling of migrant and international students was sensible, complete decoupling was probably not possible.
- It is not possible to separate racially motivated crime from other crime. A reference to a person’s nationality may be incidental to the main purpose of the crime.
- Policies around minimising opportunities (eg curfews) are unlikely to be acceptable or effective.

The changes proposed by Baird to ESOS were sensible and should be carefully considered. He recognised the social inclusion issues although did not address them fully because of limitations on his terms of reference. In this context, the following policy options should be considered.
- There should be a Compact with the relevant Embassies on how Australia will deal with international students. This could draw on the human rights language.
- There should be an agreed approach to the division of labour between the three levels of government and funding distributed according to the agreed division of labour. As an example, the standard of student housing is important and policing this is really the responsibility of local government.
- There should be body which would enable the views of international student representatives to be canvassed.
- The social inclusion policies, and supporting research, provide a good framework for developing policies and programs that address the issues associated with international students.

International students are usually in Australia for at least 3 years. Whilst here, they should be treated as quasi-citizens with rights and obligations. There may be real benefits in treating the relationship in this way. There is an emerging academic relationship on ‘guest-host’ relationships may be relevant to this question.

(d) The responsibilities of Tertiary Providers
There is increasing recognition among the tertiary institutions of the importance of the services that they provide. There were anecdotes about some tertiary institutions not taking responsibility for off-campus incidents but the representatives of the tertiary institutions felt this was now the exception rather than the rule. It was increasingly recognised by tertiary institutions that international students should be treated as more than a much needed source of income.

Improved and affordable access to student housing may go a long way towards addressing many of the issues. If international students were able to live on campus or in tertiary institution managed accommodation, their risks would be greatly reduced. For example, affordable (subsidised) housing would reduce the needs for students to be employed in high risk situations. Furthermore, if domestic students were part of the accommodation it would support ‘integration’ and provide a much richer student experience.

International student information services were important. There was dissymmetry in the relevant knowledge between domestic and international students and the latter need a reliable source of information for when they face problems of various types.

Training in English language skills is important. Even though international students will have some knowledge in English, their skills will not be strong in many cases and the Australian use of English can be quite confronting.

(e) The views of Students

Student representatives were very concerned about recent developments. They felt strongly that reform was necessary and suggested that reforms should be of the type that “provided more freedom, more support and fewer restrictions”.

The student representatives also emphasised the importance of reasonable equity between international and domestic students in the provision of services. The representatives of the tertiary institutions strongly supported this. They did not want international students to be seen as having special privileges. This is particularly important for student accommodation.

A more detailed paper contextualizing and discussing the findings of the roundtable was commissioned from Professor Andrew Jakubowicz and Dr Monani Devaki from the University of Technology Sydney, and has been published as a peer-reviewed Academy Occasional Paper. Copies of this paper are available for free download from the Occasional Papers page in the publications area of the Academy’s website: http://www.assa.edu.au/publications/