Rehumanising International Education

Dino Willox
The University of Queensland

Recent legislative changes are impacting the educational landscape in Australia. These changes are intended to positively influence the educational pathways available to students across Australia, imagining new futures in which academic potential is not restricted by birth, geography, parentage, Indigeneity, cultural or racial heritage, or financial capacity. These are laudable and ethical aims—education, after all, is a human right (United Nations, 1948).

The policy enactment of these legislative changes, however, seems not only to run anathema to this intent but also to have significant consequences for our students—both directly and indirectly. As educational institutions, we have an obligation to ensure that we support our students to participate fully in their learning journey and graduate successfully. The current policy landscape is making this task concurrently both more important and more difficult; the locus of much of this tension is on and around our international students.

The question for universities and other educational institutions is what should we, and can we, do within this context to support our international students to succeed in their studies? How do we maintain and improve the student experience within constraining fiscal and political environments with increasing compliance, regulation, and expectation and ever decreasing resources—human, financial, and emotional? Beyond this, we also need to consider how we, as a sector, respond to the situation such that we change the narrative and challenge the political and economic landscape in which we find ourselves. Firstly, we need to understand how we got into this situation to be able to navigate a way forwards.

What happened?

Over the last several decades, neoliberalism—an ideological focus on individual freedoms and open markets as the primary drivers of economic growth—effectively did two things to education in Australia. Firstly, it reduced access for lower-income students, exacerbating wealth inequality globally and curtailing social mobility. Secondly, reductions in government investment in public education led to institutions relying heavily on increasing international student numbers and fees to offset costs. This has created several financial tensions as institutions attempted to balance a diminishing budget with the need to improve reputation for recruitment purposes. One such tension arises around the cost of delivering a quality student experience and the need to demonstrate a fiscal return on this investment, especially as it relates to high yield international students. This tension has led to the conceptualisation of student as consumer (KPMG, 2024) and international education as an industry (Knight, 2004).

Following two years of COVID-impacted education, the Australian Government tried to rebalance this situation with a clear focus on education as a social good necessary for national financial and social success. They invested $2.7 million over two years to review Australia's higher education system. The resulting "Australian Universities Accord" aimed to "improve the quality, accessibility, affordability and sustainability of higher education, to achieve long term security and prosperity for the sector and the nation" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023, p. 18).

The implementation of the Accord through policy, however, highlights significant challenges in redressing the systemic effects of decades of neoliberal economic policy on education. Current policy consultation has exposed the complexity of balancing budgets in complex institutions where

tensions between education, research, commercialisation, and managerialism are already under strain (Parker et al., 2023). The only lever previously available to universities to deal with decades of chronic underfunding was to increase the fees for, and number of, international students. These same students now find themselves in a maelstrom of debate around immigration, caps, visa processing, accommodation, cost of living crisis, and diminished capacity to deliver on the promise of a quality student experience. Hardly a resounding welcome for students for whom choices are global and multifarious. The result is that universities face a perfect storm of fiscal uncertainty, increasing international student expectation, and reduced capacity to deliver.

What now?

Media rhetoric leading up to the 2024 elections supports the neoliberal view of international education as a transactional service industry in need of direct government intervention. This is as opposed to a service that supports the cultural, economic, and social prosperity of Australia within the world. While COVID exposed the reliance of universities' operating models on international student fees, public debate has not sought to challenge the ideology and associated funding structures that gave rise to this situation. Instead, the focus has been on universities' social licence to operate and the casting of international students as scapegoats for the current cost-of-living crisis, based on fearmongering around immigration.

The language of the Accord and subsequent consultation papers on policy implementation expose a few intersecting elements with regards to international students. Concern was expressed for international students to ensure their safety and wellbeing and "deter those who seek to *exploit* international students and *undermine* Australia's international education system for purposes other than study" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024a, p. 14, emphasis added). Meanwhile, there is concern that somehow these students pose a risk, and we must "*safeguard* the *integrity* and *quality* of Australia's international education sector and tackle *unscrupulous* behaviour" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024a, p. 14, emphasis added). International students, it seems, are both exploited by and exploiting migration pathways.

The *Rapid Review into the Exploitation of Australia's Visa System* (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023b) and *A Migration System for Australia's Future* (Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023a) foregrounded the language of nationalism and fearmongering. During COVID, visa rules were relaxed to ensure that international students were able to fill the workforce shortfall in a range of industries. With the end of the acute phase of the pandemic, traditional service resumed with limits to student visas, delays in processing, and a hike to the cost of visas announced, without warning, overnight. International students once needed to maintain the economic workforce were now cast as unscrupulous immigration hacks trying to migrate permanently into the workforce through nefarious means. The fact that more than 80% of international students return home after their studies exposes the absurdity of this fear.

Finally, international students were cast as the insidious cause of a housing shortage within a cost-of-living crisis, even though they make up only 4% of the rental market (Soong et al., 2024). To deal with the rental market issues in relation to international students, the Accord budget summary demanded that universities supply purpose-built student accommodation. Meanwhile, there is a conspicuous absence of discussion around the lack of a national social housing policy or the impact of negative gearing and baby boomer housing portfolios on housing affordability and accessibility.

To deal with these phantom issues, the government introduced international student caps. This was immigration policy masquerading as education policy. Moreover, implementation was so poorly thought through that the resulting administration required to manage and implement the caps is beyond the capacity of the government (Norton, 2024c). Andrew Norton beautifully explains the

paradoxical and unworkable nature of the policy consultation for international student caps and suggests ways of making it "less bad" (2024b, 2024c).

There is an unintended human consequence to all this over and above the rhetoric, and that is the impact on sense of self, value, and wellbeing for students. This is especially acute for international students who find themselves at the centre of a media diatribe casting them as villains causing a cost of living crisis, inflating house prices, and impacting the rental market, when they have little impact on any of these (Eltham, 2024; ICEF Monitor, 2024; Property Council of Australia, 2024). In fact, international students have a net positive impact on the economic and social landscape (Monash University, 2024).

What next?

Within this contested rhetorical landscape, we need to focus on the international student as a human being who has needs, expectations, hopes, and fears. We need to ensure that our education sector maintains its reputation as a high-quality, impactful, worthwhile, and supportive one through which international students can develop, learn, grow, and succeed. We need to ensure the success of our international students to ensure the positive impact of education for societal good, economic prosperity, and diplomacy is maintained long term. The question is how to do this while financial levers are challenging, in an environment where universities, and especially international students, are under such insidious scrutiny.

We know what works for student engagement, participation, and success (Bowden et al., 2019; Kuh et al., 2006), but we also know that this requires investment in time, systems, services, and humans (both students and staff). We know that success for students starts with treating their education and student experience as core business, but we also know that this is a challenge in the current fiscally constraining landscape. We know that ensuring adequate support services for increasingly diverse cohorts of students is crucial for engagement, participation, and success, but we also know that personalisation is costly. We know what we need to do, what we need to understand is <u>how</u> to achieve this in the current landscape.

Approaching this issue of delivering both breadth (scale) and depth (personalisation) requires a pragmatic approach. In the first instance, we need to challenge the assumption that personalisation means individual service delivery. The adage sometimes used around flexible learning is "just in time, just for me", but this comes from manufacturing and marketing language. The application of this to education has bought into the idea of student as customer, rather than as learner or partner. In marketing terms, the "me" in those service delivery tropes are personas—conglomerations of individual "types" or cohorts of people. Personalisation means delivery to a cohort of people, not an individual. For our educational engagement with students to be both scalable and personalised, we need to recognise cohort needs and expectations.

The Australian Government recognises the logic of supporting cohorts of students with specific needs as core business, as evidenced in its consultation on needs-based funding: "academic supports provided via Needs-based Funding would continue to be available to all students who may benefit from additional support to ensure their successful completion" (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024b, p. 1). The logic here is sound: provide quality support services that are tailored to cohorts with specific expectations (depth) and the rest of the student population will benefit from these services as well (breadth). This thinking should extend to how we support our international students as another cohort with specific expectations.

As an example, the complexities for underrepresented student cohorts and international students are similar but different to students from rural and remote communities, who face comparable

challenges when moving away from home. First-in-family and Indigenous students can face a similar but different kind of culture shock to international students, with a similar need to establish a sense of belonging and connection in an unfamiliar learning environment. The fact that these student cohorts are *prima facie* different belies the similarities of their lived experience when considered as a process, rather than as an identity.

As a practical example of how this could be manifested in the student experience, let us consider employability. To deliver successful employability development for international students, we know the importance of the provision of relevant timely information, embedded supports throughout the student learning journey, language advancement opportunities, and support networks within and beyond the university (Voninski & Willox, 2020). This framework for employability development for international students is equally applicable to cohorts of underrepresented students. Using needs-based funding to develop these supports for underrepresented students will, necessarily, create the conditions of success for international students at the same time. Furthermore, this approach can be applied as a principle-based framework just as easily to academic, social, and wellbeing support for underrepresented cohorts of students, all of which are necessary for student success.

By creating frameworks based on known best practice principles, we can tailor our service delivery to cohorts of students that have similar but different lived experience in *process* terms. This is key to unlocking the tension between the investment required and the delivery of a quality and impactful student experience for success. This consideration of personalisation as cohort also moves us away from neoliberal individualist ideology to a more community-driven approach to learning. Celebrating the success of groups of students with shared experiences can create a sense of belonging and connection, and create networks that will be invaluable for academic and future career success.

The enactment of this in each institution will need to consider the mission and student cohort mix of the university. To support international students and other student communities, institutions should take a principle-based approach to identify the most appropriate methods of developing their student experience. These principles should include:

a. Retention as success.

Given limited funding, institutions must prioritise efficiency, especially focusing on retention. Keeping the students we already have is just as important—if not more so—than recruitment. This means offering proactive support at every stage of their journey, from orientation all the way through to successful graduation. Engaging students at each transition point helps them stay connected and on track from orientation (and re-orientation) through to successful graduation.

b. Early engagement, connection, and belonging.

Particular attention should be paid to both underrepresented groups of domestic students and international students. Often, the barriers experienced by these students can have similar foundations—culture shock when confronted with a new educational landscape, disconnection from families, and language barriers (administrative terminology is just as confusing as slang!). Early intervention is essential to address their shared challenges and ensure they have access to additional support services that meet their specific needs. Tailoring these interventions for cohorts of students can help students feel connected with others and significantly enhance their sense of belonging.

c. Value the student voice.

To do this, we need to listen—actively, authentically, and often—to what students want and need. This will require institutions to reflect on what they hear and, if necessary, change what they do and how they do it to demonstrate the value and importance of the student voice. Each cohort will have its own distinct set of expectations, needs, and requirements, and institutions need to not assume that they know these. Further, institutions need to provide timely feedback directly to students to ensure that they can see the value of their voice. This will ensure a positive feedback loop that encourages ongoing discourse and, ultimately, will empower students to co-create their learning journey with institutions.

d. Co-creating the educational community.

Authentically partnering with students to create a sense of community on campus is key, but, given the diversity of international students, a "one-size-fits-all" approach will not work. Students must be viewed as partners in shaping their experience, and institutions need to demonstrate a commitment to this through valuing the student voice. This approach must be mindful, however, of cultural challenges that some international students may face in relation to hierarchies, learning landscapes, and the role of student and educator. Institutions must create developmental pathways for students to engage and form meaningful connections, while continually reflecting on and challenging our own biases.

e. Intersectionality.

It is critical that the impact of intersectionality on individuals be treated as central to understanding the whole student, rather than being an afterthought. Institutions can do this at scale by creating inclusive spaces and opportunities for connection across and beyond limited (and limiting) identities and cohorts. Considering the whole student and their situatedness within communities allows for a deeper understanding of students' expectations, needs, hopes, and fears. This creates an authentic engagement that will support and reinforce the student voice and enable students and institutions to co-create their mutually compatible successes. Critically, this should be enacted and delivered in practice, not just used as a rhetorical device in strategy documents (Harpur et al., 2022).

Through a principle-based approach that begins and ends with student lived experience at the centre of development, delivery, and refinement of services, institutions can maintain strong relationships with international students and ensure their success. In practical terms, institutions will need to establish effective communication, feedback, data capture, and reporting mechanisms that are founded on listening first and delivering in partnership with students. In financial terms, this means initially investing in building the right foundations, including a systemic and long-term sustainable process, co-created with students, to flex and change service delivery depending on as-yet unknown factors.

As an example, The University of Queensland established their approach to student partnerships over several years, investing significantly in the establishment of processes that continue to be refined and developed in partnership with students. The delivery of Student-Staff Partnership Projects, and support for both student representation and voice, has engaged thousands of students and hundreds of staff to continuously develop and refine all aspects of the student experience across governance, education, assessment, and cocurricular engagements. Almost half of the students engaged through this program of activities have been international students, and we continue to listen, respond, and refine our services as part of this ongoing authentic dialogue.

What else?

Longer term, however, we need a sustained ideological rejection of the language of education as industry and corollary fearmongering around international students. We need to challenge the current commercial rhetoric and focus on the social, cultural, and ethical benefit of education (Giroux, 2022). We need to recognise that, while access to education is necessarily commodified in the current landscape, education itself should not (cannot) be commodified (Connell, 2013). Further, we need to emphasise the importance of engaging with international students as partners in the educational landscape. The internationalisation of content, pedagogy, and cohort mix is a necessary condition of a constructive and creatively challenging educational environment. Without international students, we will not have a diverse, creative, and culturally capable educational environment within which all students learn, grow, and succeed.

To achieve these objectives, we need to do one of two things. We can maintain the existing neoliberal discourse and work within the existing logic to demonstrate financial stability through managing market share, scaling customer service models, and providing evidence of return on investment for individuals. Alternatively, we can shift the language away from neoliberalist tropes that cast education as a transactional industry and take on a more humanistic lens, focusing on education as a public service and measuring success in terms of social impact, community development, and global collaboration. This may be a big ask as international education has always been underpinned by a consumer discourse, but education at its core is a human right that should be freely accessible to those with the ability to succeed. Shifting from education as industry to education as a public good would require changes to policy, investment, and ideology.

To effect meaningful change, Australian educational institutions must unite with a shared voice that reinforces education as a vital public service, not simply a transactional export industry. This collective voice must engage more effectively with government to develop a shared understanding of the social, global, and economic benefits of education. Third-party advocates can lend credibility and strength to this position, but ultimately institutions must prioritise collaboration over competition. Through collaboration and solidarity, we can performatively demonstrate the importance and power of education as a catalyst for innovation, creativity, social justice, and sustainable development, showcasing the fundamental role that education has in shaping a thriving, interconnected, and future-focused global society.

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The author may be contacted via:

Dr Dino Willox — d.willox@uq.edu.au

Please cite this paper as: