Has Australia turned its back on international students?

Erica Smith and Andy Smith, University of Ballarat, Australia.

Paper presented at the 41st Annual SCUTREA Conference, 5-7 July 2011, University of Lancaster

Introduction

Much of the debate on international students in Australia over the past few years has been negative and critical. The press has focused on training providers seen as ‘dodgy’, or on the activities of overseas agents of education providers. There have been racist attacks on Indian students, particularly in Melbourne, which have harmed Australia’s reputation overseas, particularly in the Indian sub-continent. In recent years the growth in numbers of overseas students in Australia has come mainly from vocational education and training (VET) rather than from higher education (HE) (Ross, 2008: Tran & Nyland, 2009).

+Spokespeople for the university sector, in attempts to divert negative attention from their own sector, have attacked the growing numbers of students enrolled in VET. This paper attempts to provide some empirical data about VET and HE for international students, focusing on pedagogical rather than political issues.

Background and literature review

In the Australian public mind, the provision of education for international students has become linked to immigration issues. Until recently, those enrolling in courses which were on the ‘skilled migration’ list had preferential access to permanent residency visas on completion of their courses. While this might seem beneficial and effective (Hawthorne, 2009) many commentators (eg Birrell, Healy & Kinnaird, 2007) presented this as a way to jump the migration queue. Their arguments applied to HE and VET alike, but focused particularly on VET. The anti-immigration sentiments have been buttressed in 2010-11 by decisions by professional bodies in teaching and nursing to require very high levels of English proficiency to operate in Australia, higher even that is required to undertake a PhD. During 2009, two other developments combined to create a ‘perfect storm’ of troubles for the international student sector, with racist attacks on Indian students, primarily in Melbourne, which were handled poorly by the police and governments, and the financial collapse of a small number of private providers of education which catered mainly for international students. The continued importance of the topic to education providers is reflected in the fact that in Campus Review, a fortnightly magazine covering higher education
and VET issues, there were 30 major articles on international students and the international student market between April 2010 and April 2011.

Scholarly literature on overseas students is situated mainly in the higher education area, and focuses on issues such as the effects of teacher attitudes on their work with international students (Arenas, 2009), learning style preferences (Lashley & Barron, 2006), English language proficiency (Arkoudis et al, 2009) and pastoral care (Sawir, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Rawlings-Sanaei, 2009). Tran & Nyland (2009) highlight the lack of available research in the VET sector. In general it would be reasonable to summarise the available literature as stating that international students, particularly Asian students who form the majority of Australian’s overseas student population, are used to pedagogical practices which emphasise reproduction rather than construction of knowledge, have difficulties with English language, and suffer some challenges in adjusting to living and working life in Australia. Therefore these students need some additional structured assistance. Navaratnam & Mountney (1992) found that strategies to increase motivation of TAFE students and to improve their English proficiency were central to students’ satisfaction, and Owens (2011), more recently reports on the success a new for-credit academic subject on learning in the Australian context Central Queensland University, both suggesting that a high degree of structured support is appreciated by overseas students.

VET students are comparatively neglected in the literature. Noor (2011) maintains that they also experience a lack of voice as well. She states that although half of international students in Australia are in VET, they are under-represented in national forums and debates. She ascribes this partly to the fact that there are fewer student associations in VET compared with HE, and that VET students have longer hours of study and therefore after the hours they need to spend at work they have little spare time.

The lived experiences of international students has been little addressed in the literature. Most international students do not come from wealthy backgrounds and need to accept low-standards accommodation and work to support themselves. Their visas allow only 20 hours work a week. The Australian dollar has been high against most major currencies for several years, exacerbating students’ poverty. A major research project by Marginson, Nyland, Sawir & Forbes-Mewett (2010) goes a considerable way towards redressing the lack of empirical research, with a detailed account of international students adjusting to life in Australia. While some were reportedly very happy, others are reported to feel bewildered, overwhelmed and lonely (Marginson et al, 2010). They report racist remarks and sometimes physical attacks from local people (Marginson et al, 2010). They may be open to exploitation in the labour market, sometimes working for very low wages (Marginson et al, 2010).
Research method

The VET research reported in this paper took place as part of a larger national project on VET teachers and teaching (Smith, Brennan Kemmis, Grace & Payne, 2009). The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from two sources. Telephone interviews were undertaken with senior managers in four Registered Training Organisations (RTOs, the Australian term for VET providers) which provided training in hospitality, tourism and events, retail, and hairdressing to large numbers of overseas students. Two case studies were undertaken in RTOs (one public – 'TAFE' , one private) providing hospitality training to large numbers of overseas students. The case studies involved a number of interviews, with managers, teachers and students both international and Australian-born, most of which were undertaken on-site during one-day visits. The HE case study is a descriptive presentation of practices at several private higher education providers which are affiliated with the University of Ballarat, a university which has a high proportion of international students, most of whom are taught in capital cities in Australia through a partnership model. These practices are gathered together into a collective ‘hypothetical’ case study, which incorporate features of several of the provider.

Findings and discussion

VET interviews and case studies

In the RTOs researched via telephone interview, overseas students were drawn from a wide range of countries. The major groupings were Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, Malaysian and Korean, but a number of North American and European students were also enrolled. Students were mainly young adults. Students were mostly studying at Certificate III, moving up to Diploma level. The focus of all of the RTOs in terms of their perceived strength was on their links with industry. They aimed to produce graduates who were able to meet the needs of industry and find employment. There were very structured systems in place in the two private RTOs to maintain the quality of training and assessment. Training materials were detailed, prescriptive and explicit; teaching teams met frequently. Teachers' performance was monitored to ensure quality was maintained. The public RTOs tended not to be so prescriptive in their quality systems, but they all offered professional development in cross-cultural issues. One public provider said that only experienced teachers were allowed to teach international students:

… because they can identify if they're struggling or not, compared to a new teacher who we would tend to (give) our Cert II groups or things like that.

The main specific need of the international students in all cases was perceived to be the language barrier. The limited language skills of some students meant that teachers needed to be careful to use only the level of complexity of language
necessary to teach and assess the relevant skills. As one interviewee said of her teachers:

Yes… I think they just realise that they’ve just got to have a little bit more time and patience for internationals compared to - sometimes the local students catch on a bit quicker.

Allied to, but separate from, language problems, was the general propensity of overseas students from Asian cultures particularly to be relatively unparticipative in class. This was generally addressed by two strategies: by modelling participative behaviour and deliberately engaging the overseas students in teacher-student dialogue; and by ‘forcing’ overseas students to mix with Australian students in class.

Each RTO had additional support staff available to help students with their language and it was noted in all cases that having staff with a multicultural background or that had travelled widely helped to ensure that students felt at home. As one participant said:

somebody that has come from overseas and has come to Australia can understand the alien-ness of it … particularly if they’re from a non-English speaking background.

The RTOs provided additional services that were available to all, but particularly appreciated by overseas students; for example one provided a ‘common room’ that provided facilities such as quiet reading spaces, a television, and computers, which domestic students were likely to have in their own homes. It was noted that some students had given up a great deal to attend an RTO in Australia; an example was given of one student who had left a small child in her home country. Pastoral care arrangements such as assistance in finding accommodation were commonplace, as was the provision of English language conversation classes.

An important element of teachers’ work was to ensure that students had a good understanding of the cultural requirements of Australian workplaces. It was reported that students sometimes had difficulty in accessing part-time work in the appropriate industry, partly because of language barriers and more recently due to the economic recession, and partly because small businesses were found not always to be able or willing to devote time to assisting overseas students settle into a workplace. In the end, despite the special needs of overseas students, good teachers made good teachers of overseas students. As one manager said, when asked to think about a teacher who was good with overseas students:

there’s one teacher I can think of who is just a very genuine, patient, nurturing, but sort of also a little bit of no nonsense … Whereas someone might have a class and know two or three students, she would know all of them and remember them.
While it was reported that most students went on to work in the industry, there was some indication that future teachers were also being trained. One RTO manager said one of her international students, after a period in the industry, now worked as a hairdressing teacher; an overseas student from another RTO said that his eventual goal was to become a chef teacher.

**Higher education case study**

The International College of Business and Technology (ICBT) – the name given to this ‘collective’ case study - commenced operations in Australia in 2000. The college is a for-profit provider of higher education, mainly in the areas of business and information technology, with premises in Sydney and Melbourne and with a smaller operation in Brisbane. The college is owned by a wealthy Indian family which made its fortune in the construction and real estate businesses in India and latterly in Australia. ICBT makes a small profit, which is all re-invested in the college.

ICBT offers its own, State-accredited higher education Diplomas in Business and Information Technology. ICBT entered into a partnership with the University of Ballarat (UB) at the same time that it opened its Melbourne operation. The partnership involves the delivery of UB’s undergraduate degrees and Masters by course work degrees in Business and Information Technology at the Sydney and Melbourne campuses of ICBT under the university’s moderation model. Most of the students who enrol at ICBT come from a lower and middle class background. They are students whose families wish them to obtain an overseas degree but who cannot afford the living expenses and fees associated with studying in the USA and the UK. The families of the students are also concerned that they are educated in a culturally supportive institution.

The teaching and assessment model adopted by the partnership of UB and ICBT is based on a very close level of engagement between both institutions and their staff to ensure the quality of the degrees through the partnership. This starts with the selection of partner staff who will teach in the programs, where selection of the staff is carried out to UB staff specifications and interviews conducted by UB staff. The staff at ICBT are then inducted to the teaching method used in the partnership by UB staff, who conduct professional development sessions for teaching staff at the partner locations. The heart of the quality control is the moderation process which involves the provision of learning materials designed and created at UB to staff and students at ICBT and the joint design and moderation of all assessment. This involves a high level of communication between staff at UB and ICBT – usually via email and telephone, but also through visits primarily by UB staff to partner locations to ensure the quality of delivery. Assessment is moderated using a sampling system in which 10 per cent of marked assessment items are submitted electronically using a specially designed moderation website.
Assessment is designed to allow early intervention processes to occur after an early and lightly weighted first assignment. This is not common at the parent university, but is important in the partner providers where students often struggle at first with academic requirements in a different language. The electronic moderation system automatically generates emails to students who score poorly on the first assignment, requesting that they discuss their results with the local subject co-ordinator. The model is regulated through frequent meetings of teaching and senior academic staff from UB and from ICBT. At these meetings, statistics on student performance are presented comparing results for ICBT with other UB teaching locations to ensure a consistent level of teaching quality is maintained and any issues discussed.

ICBT provides a variety of pastoral support mechanisms. As mentioned previously, Indian families are attracted to the idea of their sons and daughters studying at an Indian owned and operated institution in Australia whilst at the same time gaining an Australian qualification. The teaching fees for programs represent a significant sacrifice for average middle class Indian families. The families cannot support the substantial living expenses incurred by students on top of their tuition fees. For this reason, nearly all the students require part-time employment to survive. ICBT is proactive in helping students find work up to the weekly limit allowed by their visas, and in finding cheap accommodation, usually on the fringes of the city. Class times are arranged at evenings and weekends to allow students to work during the day and attend classes in non-work time.

Student academic progression is also closely monitored, more closely than would be the case for Australian students studying at Australian universities. Despite the availability of on-line materials as supplements to the teaching, ICBT uses face to face teaching as the most culturally appropriate method of teaching and insists on 100 per cent student attendance. Students who miss a class are immediately contacted by ICBT staff – usually using Facebook or SMS (text messages) – are requested to discuss their progress with the Program Co-ordinator at ICBT. Early intervention after the first assessment item is taken seriously; with ICBT insisting that students who are not progressing well at this point meet with the Program Co-ordinator. ICBT run concurrent academic study skills and English language skills programs for students which many attend. This is the level of student support that, it is reported, Indian families expect when agreeing to send their sons and daughters to ICBT, and the organisation understands that the provision of a high level of support for young Indian students is key to their success.

What works well?

The findings about issues needing to be addressed with international students did not differ markedly from the literature. However considering that the literature is primarily situated in higher education and not VET, it is not surprising that the research in RTOs uncovered an additional strand of challenges, which were
associated with finding work, finding work placements, and preparing students for the demands of eventual full-time work in Australian workplaces.

In summary the observed and suggested strategies for dealing effectively with international students can be described as follows.

Teachers can:

- Show that they value different cultures;
- Mix international with local students in group activities;
- Ask the students easy questions – definitely do not avoid them in questioning;
- Be approachable and friendly;
- Ensure that domestic students are not disadvantaged while attending to international students;
- Ensure that assessment tasks in VET do not include English language requirements over and above the appropriate level;
- Use visual teaching as much as possible in VET, where students’ English skills are initially poor.

RTOs and universities can:

- provide English language support;
- forge and maintain good relationships with local employers to ensure the maximum availability of placements and of part-time work;
- ensure that students understand the cultural norms of the industry or profession as well as developing the necessary skills;
- provide pastoral support services and structured early intervention systems to follow up students in danger of dropping out;
- provide very structured teaching materials and assessment regimes.
- focus on professional development in all areas;
- evaluate teacher/trainer performance with relation to their effectiveness with international students;
- provide a substitute, where necessary, for paid work or work placements for VET students, where work experience is mandatory.

Conclusion

The pedagogical, curricular and pastoral ‘additions’ provided for international students represent a considerable investment in the success of the students. With the levels of support and high quality training and education noted in the research reported in this paper, it is likely that these students look favourably on their Australian experience, integrate well, and are disposed to stay in the country and in the industry to which they have been introduced, as has been shown in recent surveys (Australian Education International, 2008). Recent research by Richardson...
(2010) with tourism and hospitality students found that international students were more likely to join the industry upon graduation than domestic students, refuting the notion that students enrol in a course that provides immigration benefits but then work in another field. However a decision was made by the federal government in 2009 to remove chefs and hairdressers from the ‘critical skills’ list used for immigration purposes (Birrell & Perry, 2009). This was undoubtedly affected by the relentless campaigning by anti-immigration commentators and has left the hospitality industry with even greater labour shortages.

The research in this paper is based on small-scale research. Some RTOs and some HE providers may deliver less than perfect service to their international students and some students may be less diligent in their application to their qualifications. However the same criticisms could be levelled at any education provider teaching any cohort of students, yet we do not see suggestions that other sections of the education industry should be closed down or subject to draconian regulation, because a few providers are said be of low quality or because some students lack motivation. More empirical research is urgently needed to inform Australian public debate so that policy decisions are based on evidence of teaching and learning quality and not prejudice.

References


This document was added to the Education-line collection on 28 June 2011