

## ADDRESS TO BHERT

### INTERNATIONALIZATION, GLOBALIZATION AND UNIVERSITIES

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In this brief disquisition I seek to elaborate three issues in relation to internationalisation in higher education.

In summary I wish to suggest firstly that our approach to internationalisation in higher education is overly narrow and that we need a far better balance between the export of higher education services and other objectives such as the provision of international opportunities in study and training for local students; secondly, that the recent Australian government manifesto on international activity (*Engaging the World Through Education* - October 2003) is seriously flawed; and thirdly, that the export of higher education as a commodity and globalisation may in the long term have a dramatic effect on the role and rationale of universities in skewing them towards an essentially training function.

I should stress at the outset that my remarks relate solely to the university sector, not to schools or private providers.

A cursory reflection makes it clear that the term "internationalisation" means different things to different people. Probably there are two prevalent interpretations, although I would argue that they are both merely aspects of a more sophisticated concept.

Firstly there is the widely held view that internationalisation is to be equated with the export of higher education and training services. Such a view has a natural attraction for governments because it implies additional income generated by the universities themselves and thus becomes a potential alternative to further public support .

Secondly there is the view, commonly held in universities and occasionally given the honour of lip service in official rhetoric, that internationalisation includes the provision of international opportunities for local students. In practice this view has not proved very attractive to government because it implies investment and thus the prospect of expenditure.

I shall concentrate on these two interpretations (or components, as I would style them), although in reality there are many other possibilities, such as collaborative activity with overseas universities in teaching, research and development; or targeted aid in co-operation with international agencies, and so on.

## 1. Export of Higher Education Services

This is now a massive enterprise worth many billions of dollars both directly (to universities) and indirectly (through spin-offs to local enterprises and the like). The numbers are substantial, amounting to 175,000 students in 2003, worth some \$5 billion in direct payments. Almost certainly such numbers will grow.

Many countries are now involved and not just long established competitors such as the USA, UK, Canada, France, and NZ. Perhaps most notably, China, a substantial source of students to Australia, is now a player and staff training in English is becoming a high priority there, so that the best universities can compete for fee-paying students. Increasingly too in China there is interest in the development of private, fee-paying universities. Australia at its peril will ignore these new competitors and at its peril fail to improve its infrastructure support to match that of these newcomers.

The operations of universities are now highly diversified, and off-shore activities are increasingly numerous. Many universities teach in local languages too. Thus, (for example) at La Trobe University programs are offered in Chinese and Japanese. Also the growth of customized programs for specific purpose groups is now common - thus La Trobe University currently is undertaking a short training program for administrators from Qingdao who are to run the yachting events of the Olympic Games. Most universities have such programs.

Such export activity is not only legitimate but undeniably useful, indeed indispensable, to many recipient countries. But it is important to understand clearly that for the most part the key stimulus for interest in Australian education is rapidly escalating demand in countries which cannot currently satisfy the huge numbers seeking higher education and training. There could be no greater mistake than to assume, as some carelessly do, that our product and our facilities are in some sense superior and that this is the rationale for student interest. This manifestly is not so - it is just that in a country like China there simply are not enough institutions in existence, or in immediate prospect, to satisfy surging demand. This situation will change with time and we should not lose sight of the fact that most of the best students in China go to prestigious universities there.

The clear rationale for export is, naturally, the desire to generate income. This is perfectly intelligible and acceptable, but I feel bound to make two points.

Firstly the real surplus generated by such activity is quite small - probably about 10% at the very maximum, assuming that an institution is taking due account of the infrastructure and staffing needs for the additional students, as it should be for reasons of quality. It is, of course, true that many staff are employed who would not be otherwise, and that this benefits the university generally, but a clear surplus for other initiatives is small. This is often

conveniently forgotten by external pundits who affect to believe that universities must be awash with funds as the result of their export activities.

Secondly, the temptation to rapid growth is great, and it is often encouraged by bodies lacking real experience of education, as opposed to marketing or the like. As I have frequently stated to audiences that do not want to hear such things, overly rapid growth leads inevitably to diminished quality of infrastructure, which will be detrimental to students generally in terms of overcrowding, shortage of facilities (especially ICT facilities), reduced contact hours, diminished access to over-utilised laboratories and so on. Here surely is a domain for quality audit - namely, to provide assurance that appropriate infrastructure support is available to accompany growth in international enrolments.

## **2. Providing Opportunities for Local Students**

Most universities regard the provision of greater opportunities for international experience for local students as a high priority, and obviously there is a quality issue here, given the international nature of the employment market. Some universities also try to generate such opportunities. The International Network of Universities (INU) established by La Trobe University and Flinders University is an example of such a mobility program and there are some others. But few universities have the capacity to offer such overseas experience to large numbers of students. Regrettably, there are scant signs of government interest, beyond lip service to the principle, the prospect of a loan scheme for some 2500 students nationally in 2004, and a minor investment in the University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific scheme (UMAP), which sees a tiny handful of students spend time in overseas universities. (In practice the government funds about 350 students annually on this scheme, representing the equivalent of about 0.05% of all students. By contrast ERASMUS has a target of 10%).

This lack of support for international experience disadvantages our own students and needs urgently to be addressed if government is really interested in quality of education as opposed to evaluating administrative processes.

Basically, there can be little doubt that hitherto in practice the government has taken internationalisation essentially to encompass the export market. It has also claimed to be supporting universities in this endeavour, although the practitioners could be forgiven for thinking otherwise, as impediments in terms of extra charges, regulations and visa problems pile up.

But recently it seemed that things were going to change. For a Ministerial Statement was produced in October of this year purporting to be "a policy framework for the coming decade".

If I may be permitted to adapt a famous aphorism of the historian Tacitus, this manifesto was universally welcomed until it actually appeared. It is a disappointing document, replete with self praise for the AEI, whose performance to date has in university eyes been dismal, dismissive of the university sector that the AEI supposedly partners and supports, designed to introduce further regulations with no prospect of regulators of greater competence, and desperately one-sided in strenuously promoting the export aspects of international education and envisaging huge increases not just in students but also in providers - presumably private providers.

Clearly time precludes detailed discussion of these issues, but I venture a few remarks.

Firstly, the manifesto is overtly and almost exclusively concerned with exports. The benefits to the economy are covered in detail, optimistic assertions from AEI about growth are reproduced without any discussion of the impact upon institutions, and four key objectives of the policy are set out. These are: -

- (a) to widen the mix of overseas students by recruiting more intensely from Europe and the Americas while continuing growth in Asia;
- (b) to extend the participation of international students in fields other than business and IT;
- (c) to attract more students to schooling and to postgraduate coursework and research degree programs
- (d) to increase Australia's delivery of educational and training services in overseas settings and through online partnerships.

In other words this is a blueprint for a comprehensive export industry and it surely renders laughable the comment on page 17 that "Australia's engagement in international education is driven by the pursuit of knowledge.....". I must be missing something, because I can only see pursuit of dollars!

To be fair, however, there is a reference to broader objectives on p.25 (after 24 pages in enthusiastic support of the export industry) - viz. "less than one percent of Australian students travel abroad for study. This is low compared to students from most other developed countries". Quite so! But, regrettably, there is no obvious support offered to correct this very poor statistic, which is surely disgraceful for a country parading itself as a world leader in education, as claimed in the Minister's Foreword - only a continuing contribution to UMAP [\$1.4 Million per year currently] and the possibility of loans for students to travel. The upshot is that the institutions, who are essentially ignored in this manifesto, are to shoulder the responsibility for this vital desideratum. So much for the foundations for the knowledge-based society!

The projection of the AEI as a support system for the university sector can only arouse the ire of most universities who have long been dissatisfied with the antics of this body; but the giving to the AEI of vaguely defined new duties in respect of “quality assurance” can only excite incredulity in the face of their perceived shortcomings to date.

In this context the assertion (p. 32) that “Australia must do better at representing our education, training and research strengths to the rest of the world” is perhaps more revealing than was intended. For if this proposition really is true, it is an ostentatious demonstration of the abject failure of the AEI and its predecessors in the key task of generic promotion of Australian higher education and training.

From the point of view of most universities the AEI will not be useful unless two desiderata are met. Firstly it must acquire a degree of professionalism appropriate to its mission. At present a few key operatives are attempting to carry the organisation. Secondly it must engage meaningfully with the education sectors instead of seeking to force its views upon them as it notoriously did in the past in the infelicitously named joint consultative committee.

It would be invidious to recount particular instances of shortcomings, but such infelicities as the provision of incorrect data on the identity of the leadership of a country during a Ministerial visit certainly contribute to the despair in the university sector over this body as currently constituted.

“Quality” has become an international buzz word in recent times and it permeates the manifesto. It also permeates many official pronouncements at home and abroad, and, as a general comment, I can only say that persistent, gratuitous, unqualified assertions that great efforts are being taken by government to assure quality are doing a disservice to the public universities. In part this is because of a lack of clarity over what is being assured. I can see at least three areas of quality that are relevant...

- i) quality of the produce and the outcomes;
- ii) quality of the infrastructure support
- iii) quality of the attendant process.

Most countries overseas interpret assurance of quality as referring to the product (ie. the content of the course and the infrastructure base to support it), but, confusingly most official statements about quality by Australian officials actually refer to the processes. In my experience the quality of the content of Australian university programs has never been seriously doubted overseas, and persistent assertions about the government’s need to “assure quality” (ie. quality processes) are likely to undermine existing trust in our programs for no good reason. Part of the difficulty here, of course, is the refusal to differentiate between universities, which have legislative requirements in respect of quality, and private providers - an issue that needs urgent attention.

I feel bound to add that quality of infrastructure (equipment, buildings etc) is being seriously impaired in Australia through shortage of funding and that we are in serious danger of slipping well behind the standards of universities in neighbouring countries who are investing heavily in this arena. In China, for example (never mind Hong Kong and Singapore) even provincial universities are acquiring high quality facilities, especially ICT facilities - and I invite sceptics to go to (say) the remote Heilongjiang Province in northern China and to visit Harbin, or Daqing, or Qiqihar, all of which are developing magnificent facilities. Needless to say the favoured universities in the so called 985 program are prospering still more mightily. And, to be topical, consciousness of developments elsewhere is a crucial consideration for VCs in asserting that the system urgently needs better investment from some source before we fall irreparably behind.

So quality is certainly important, but we need clear definitions before indulging in rhetorical flourishes about its assurance. At a specific level the idea that the AEI, as currently constituted, could be custodian of international quality would be risible, if it were not so dangerous.

It is of course easier to be critical than constructive, so I should like simply to suggest two things that need to be done, if we are to export higher education at an optimum level .....

Firstly, if there is to be a body like the AEI, let us have a professional and well-qualified group of practitioners; let us have some meaningful consultation with the university sector about objectives; and above all let there be absolute clarity about the role of such a body.

Secondly, in the interests of harmonious recruitment overseas it is surely time for a more user-friendly visa regime, especially in regard to China, which is likely to be a major source of students for the foreseeable future. At present visa issue is subject to massive delays, many of them inexplicable on any rational basis, and in many instances major universities of world class standing, who are collaborating with Australian universities are being treated with contempt. In the MBA arena, we are losing massively because of inordinate delays and supposed financial deficiencies, even though the prospective participants are senior bureaucrats whose companies, provinces or cities are providing the funding. One specific improvement must be to abort the experiment of locating the visa centre in Adelaide. The location of the centre there has proved disastrous, since the operatives are remote and lacking in sensitivity and capacity to evaluate applications. In the recent visit to China the Minister of Education (PRC) made it clear that the desire to send many more students to Australia was there - will our visa regime allow us to take advantage of this opportunity? Or shall we leave the way open for others with swifter and more user-friendly facilities?

Finally, and quite importantly I should like to make a plea that we do more in support of our own students to ensure that they get the opportunity for international experience. This means investing in them and bringing a better

balance to our international education policy. The universities cannot do this alone.

I conclude with a brief word about the possible impact of globalisation on universities.

One observable effect of our globalized sector is the growing “comodification” of educational programs - not just customized courses (which are increasingly popular and may one day replace the regular degree in the way that *Readers Digest* has for many supplanted the reading of literature) but also degrees themselves. Some will see this as a benefit rather than a danger, though UNESCO is on record as being hostile to the effective downgrading of educational programs to “products” or “commodities”.

Perhaps more significantly, the massive growth in higher education in recent decades has been accompanied by a rapid explosion into vocational and professional fields in universities, and, as student numbers have grown, so the link of the university with the workforce has become stronger and so the training aspects of university education have become more and more dominant. This process can only be exacerbated (or “ameliorated”, if you are an economic rationalist) by the steadily growing export market - for it is clear that most international students seek vocational or professional training, and it is surely doubtful that the exhortations of the recent manifesto will arrest this trend. Given the increasing tendency to user-pay type systems for universities, a key question is - Will these changes subvert the hitherto diversified nature of universities and force them into a utilitarian mould essentially on the basis of demand? There is certainly a danger of this and it is perhaps time to pose the following questions :-

Firstly, do we still believe in universities as more than mere training factories serving the economy and the needs of the workforce?

Secondly, if so, and if we seek to maintain diversity and the continued existence of universities as centres of learning, how is this going to be paid for?

These seem to me to be questions demanding urgent answers in a supposedly civilised society.

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