
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CAN HELP REBUILD OUR ECONOMY POST-COVID

Professor Iain Martin

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When ATN universities brought together thought leaders for a roundtable discussion on ‘what next’ for international education, one specific theme consistently emerged: Australia’s looming skills shortage.

It is little surprise that the topic came up as it’s occupying governments, businesses and education providers as a pressing economic issue and potential blocker to Australia’s economic recovery.

NSW Premier Dominic Perrottet agrees, having recently made headlines when he revealed advice that Australia needs a World War Two-style immigration surge of around two million workers over five years to address worsening labour shortages and to re-build the national economy.

The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and Infrastructure Australia have recently called on governments to urgently bring more workers into Australia once international borders are open.

These calls should not go unheeded, and universities and other providers of international education have a constructive – and critical - role to play in ensuring Australia has an adequate pipeline of skilled workers.

Australia’s international education is a great success story and has served our nation well for more than three decades. But if we look to the future, it can also play a pivotal role in rebuilding Australia’s economy and ensuring our businesses have a strong supply of skilled workers, supplementing the strong pipeline of Australians getting the skills they need for the post-pandemic economy.

To get this right we need to have a serious look at our domestic education, migration and international education settings together. ATN universities are taking this opportunity to re-imagine our role as the educators of nearly 100,000 international and 300,000 Australian students.

There is long-standing tension between skilled migration and creating local opportunities in Australia. It need not be this way – countries like Canada have an integrated migration system, recognising that immigration is a major source of their ongoing economic growth.¹ Canada’s migration streams, both permanent and temporary, warmly embrace the premise that all migrants contribute meaningfully to Canada’s economy, diversity, and multiculturalism.

Australia needs to rework its migration system with a focus on our future skills needs, removing the perverse scenario in which we send skilled graduates back home after their studies, but then need to find skilled workers from overseas to meet our workforce needs.

Australia does an excellent job of skilling these students for their future careers – we should more readily allow those that want to stay here to make Australia their home. We need these students now, more than ever.

A three-way partnership between universities, industry and government is a crucial part of the integration of international education, and delivering better outcomes for industry, students and the economy. Using this ‘triple helix’ approach, the focus on student outcomes would be sharpened to include opportunities for work integrated learning, part-time work and ultimately improved graduate outcomes.

¹ 2020 Canada Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration

This three-way partnership is absolutely vital for this approach to succeed – importantly we are suggesting that this strategic approach to international student pathways would unashamedly give preference to agreed areas that are in the nation’s wider interest. Pathways to permanent residency in priority areas need to be re-cast and Australia should embrace longer periods for post-study work rights for international students who as skilled graduates will contribute to the workforce that Australia so deeply needs.

Australia’s skilled migration settings post-pandemic need to ensure that they are guided by an integrated, pragmatic, and coherent migration policy - one that voices the characteristics and ideals that all Australians can support.

The pandemic has laid bare Australia’s current and future skills needs, accelerated by changes in our economy, and our need to creatively source and supply those skills. As educators with a mission to serve our communities in Australia, ATN universities are acutely aware of the importance of educating Australians for Australian jobs, but we cannot afford to ignore the reality that our economy will need a greater number than domestic supply alone will create.

Given the current closure of our border and a pause on onshore arrivals, now is the time to get the settings right for when we re-open. We may not get an opportunity to do this again.

Refreshed policy settings for our international education sector will see a more sustainable, more adaptive approach to the real challenges the nation faces. This coupled with greater communication to the broader Australian public of the benefits of international education and the students that choose to study within Australia will mean shining a light along the collective path to success.

ATN universities are ready to play our part and we look forward to working with collaboratively government and business on this important economic issue for our future.

Professor Iain Martin is Vice Chancellor of Deakin University and ATN Chair

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