(Continued)

While the statement stresses the broad benefits of international education in terms of educational, cultural, social, linguistic, labour market and diplomatic matters, and for Australia’s economic prosperity more generally, the statement is strongly focused around the need to support the sector to protect Australian jobs.

Currently over 125,000 Australians are employed full time because of international education. The downturn facing the sector (a conservative estimated drop of at least 100,000 (20%) enrolments across universities, VET, schools and English language centres) means the loss of between 25,000 and 30,000 Australian jobs. At a State level this translates to the loss of at least 9,500 jobs in NSW, 8,250 jobs in Victoria and 3,500 jobs in Queensland, with commensurate losses in other States and the ACT.

PRESIDENT’S COLUMN

In March this year at the APAIE Conference on the Gold Coast I met with Bjørn Einar Aas, President of the European Association for International Educators (EAIE). The meeting was intended as a follow up to the IEAA-EAIE Symposium held last October just prior to the Australian International Education Conference in Sydney. Helen Cook, IEAA Vice President, and Fiona Hunter, immediate past President of EAIE, were also in attendance.

At that time the issue of international student safety in Australia had been prominent in the media for some time. We discussed what this meant in terms of infrastructure and frameworks to ensure that students, communities, institutions and governments understood their rights and responsibilities as stakeholders in international education.

I suggested to Bjørn that we needed something that might be constructed as a Global Student Mobility Charter, codifying in the first instance the responsibilities of sending and receiving countries in relation to the more than 2.5 million international students studying at any one time somewhere in the world other than their home country.

As one example, my own view is that in Australia the international education industry, including government, has not done enough to prepare and support the Australian community in the hosting of significant numbers of international students, 630,000 at the end of 2009. That’s almost the same size population as the number of migrants who arrived in this country between 2002 and 2006, the point being that the Australian community is geared up, funded and prepared to accept and support numbers of arriving migrants. In comparison, the infrastructure to support international students in our community is far less developed and almost entirely reliant on institutions and related organisations directly involved in international education.

My idea of a Global Student Mobility Charter was then discussed at a meeting of the Network of International Education Associations (NIEA) at the NAFSA Conference in May, with further meetings and discussion planned at the EAIE Conference in September. If something like a Global Student Mobility Charter existed, how would Australia measure up to the type of responsibilities that might be expected in such a document?

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President Column... (continued)

Considering the lack of strategic focus and the failure of both sides of politics to recognise what's actually required to support this $18 billion industry, Government at the moment would barely muster a pass. The industry - teachers, administrators, support staff and others - on the other hand has done extremely well. Over fifty years of bringing international students to Australia, twenty five years of growing numbers of fee-paying students, have taught us a great deal about the types of protections and assurances we need to provide to ensure students achieve the outcomes they expect from their time with us. Do we do enough to protect students?

Education institutions across the country are suffering from the problems afflicting our industry, initially from the global financial crisis (the effects of which are still flowing through economies around the world, including ours), the continuing strength of the Australian dollar, and lately from the downturn in numbers of commencing students. This downturn is almost entirely driven by Australia's inconsistent approach to immigration issues, including student visa processing and migration regulations. The effect is being felt most immediately in the English language sector, the entry point for most international students pathwaying into tertiary education, and by private vocational colleges. In spite of being well run, some colleges are simply unable to sustain themselves in a climate of 30% decreases in offshore visa applications in, for example, the ELICOS sector. A college run by someone I know recently closed its doors - good people running a good operation. It's happening across the country, but it doesn't need to.

In the early 90s, the Australian Government spent around $75 million assisting students displaced from language centres that had been affected by the fallout from Tiananmen Square and the subsequent downturn in student numbers from China. While the Government allowed colleges to collapse, it then stepped in to refund students, thereby protecting the reputation of an industry that grew to become the nation's third largest export earner within the next twenty years.

Now when a college collapses and students are displaced, Australia is fortunate to have student protection mechanisms in place that see other colleges provide tuition to those displaced students at no cost to the students. This is reasonable for the students - who have already paid fees - but not sustainable for the colleges, which receive no income to cover the substantial, additional cost of delivery, at a time of significant industry downturn. The current assurance mechanisms are creaking. Government needs to ensure these colleges are paid to teach students affected by the closure of their original education or training providers.

This will achieve two objectives. Firstly, it will prevent a string of college closures and therefore protect the reputation of international education in Australia. Secondly, it will save Government money because if closures spiral out of control, it's the Federal Government that, for diplomatic reasons, will have to pay a significant amount in refunds to these displaced students.

It should be added that the kudos Australia has received overseas amongst agents and parents whose students and children have been rescued by colleges willing to pick up the pieces left behind by closures has been enormous, but has largely gone unrecognised here.

Meanwhile, the peak bodies are attempting to get the attention of the Australian Government, not an easy task in an election climate. Given the benefits of international education to this country, economic and non-economic, it is a travesty that so little action is forthcoming from Government. I would ask where COAG's International Student Strategy for Australia (ISSA) is, it's clearly stalled somewhere between Canberra and the states. I'm not excited by its prospects. Unless all providers up stumps and move to marginal seats, it's hard to see just how and when we will break through. Nevertheless, we will continue to energetically pursue our public policy and advocacy agenda. The collaborative nature of our work with the peak bodies is a definite positive arising from the current crisis.

And the Global Student Mobility Charter is a concept that needs to be progressed. Depending on how it is constructed and under whose auspices, it might be a way to force governments to recognise their responsibilities to students, institutions and the community as the key stakeholders in international education.

Stephen Connelly,
President