2011 marks the 25th anniversary of the introduction of the full fee international student program in Australia. It is worthwhile taking some time to reflect on what that means.

Celebrating the anniversary is problematic - while Australia has built a remarkable reputation as a destination for international students over that period, we continue to be criticised for focussing on the financial and economic benefits of the program, in spite of many in the field over years highlighting and working to achieve significant non-economic benefits.

The anniversary is in fact an opportunity to celebrate over one hundred years of educating international students in this country, as recent research has discovered. The bulk of that work has taken place since the Second World War, beginning with the Colombo plan, so Australia’s contribution to the World, and to our region in particular is significant.

It is worth remembering that many of the strengths of our education system in general in Australia (including strengths that benefit domestic students) derive from years of engagement with and support for migrants and international students coming to this country.

Australia’s leadership in English language teaching and testing can trace its lineage back over decades of the Adult Migrant Education Program (AMEP) and the Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating scale (ASLPR). The ESOS act with its requirements for service standards to international students raised the bar also for service standards in student welfare and support for domestic students.

Australian universities’ research output, which benefits industry and the community at large, is underpinned by significant numbers of international research students, who provide the only growth in research student numbers in this country, and overseas-born researchers (some former international students). While universities pay more on average in scholarships, stipends and fee waivers each year to international research students than they do to student recruitment agents.

2011 is also the 25th anniversary of the Australian International Education Conference (AIEC). That really is something to celebrate - it is one of the most important events on the international education calendar, each year providing us with an opportunity to debate the issues, engage important stakeholders, celebrate our successes and consider future challenges. The main challenge facing us is indeed the future of international education in Australia. We need a strategy and a roadmap for the future - that’s what this year’s discussion needs to be about.

The strength of international education is that it is a people to people activity. Individual educators, administrators and researchers directly influence the lives of students, and they in turn have an impact on us. All of us have stories of the positive changes that international education can have on people, including the effect that our mentors, peers and colleagues have on us. That is something we do celebrate from time to time.

On this theme I would like to pay tribute to a colleague who recently passed away, Tracy McCabe, International Director at the University of Newcastle and chair of the Australian Universities International Directors Forum. Tracy influenced many in the industry over years, from the way they approached their work to the shoes they wore to work. Her colleagues are discussing ways in which her legacy can be honoured. We should celebrate her contribution, and in so doing celebrate the contribution of all those who have gone before us.

On the shoulders of giants.

Stephen Connelly