Come to our international rescue

- Stephen Connelly
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A DROP in foreign students will have crippling economic and social effects.

FOREIGN students are in retreat, with universities vocally predicting alarming repercussions.

Monash appears to be the first Group of Eight casualty. Prospective students say new rules, for student and residency visas, put Australia in the too-hard basket. Immigration Minister Chris Bowen defends the reforms.

We need to ask him why we continue to put all foreigners - migrants, refugees, international students, international visitors - into one simple category, thereby undermining our relations with the rest of the world.

Of the 630,000 students in the country in December last year, fewer than 10 per cent will become permanent residents this year. What do the other 90 per cent do? If they are not still studying, they go home, they provide benefit to their communities from their experience in Australia, they become ambassadors for our country. This complements the work of Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd and Trade Minister Craig Emerson.

If we get our act together, international education can remain an important part of the economic, social, cultural and political landscape in this country for years to come. But we must move now.

Last week, at the 24th Australian International Education Conference, delegates agreed the main challenge was to convince politicians in Canberra that there was a problem, and that the benefits of international education were too great for us to allow this great enterprise to continue to suffer. Queensland senator Brett Mason, opposition spokesman for universities and research, came to the conference to learn about the industry and understand the challenges we face. Bruce Baird, who headed a review of international education, was also there.

International education in Australia is an $18 billion industry contributing 15.5 per cent of university sector revenue, providing 135,000 jobs across the economy, and is the top export industry in Victoria and No 2 in NSW.

Education Minister Chris Evans needs universities to sustain that revenue stream.

Universities contribute, on average, 4.2 per cent of revenue from international students towards research scholarships for international students - there is no growth in domestic research student numbers and we need increased research output - as well as contributing towards the costs of Australian students spending some of their degree programs studying overseas. That's millions of dollars annually at risk, more than we pay student recruitment agents, which would concern Innovation Minister Kim Carr.

State governments know that the revenue from international education is critical to economic prosperity. Business and industry understand (they came to the conference as well). They need access to skilled graduates, domestic and international, schooled in internationalised classrooms, and ready to connect us with the rest of the world. They need to avoid the impending skills shortage. Local governments, community groups, retail traders associations appreciate the
benefits of international education and what we may lose from our communities if Australia continues to decline.

The higher education sector can get the rest of the international education industry back on track. This is because other sectors, such as English language, foundation studies and vocational programs, act as pathways into degree programs. A focus on higher education, as well as high-end public and private provision in other sectors, also helps reinforce a message about the quality and standing of education in Australia to balance adverse publicity about college closures.

English language teaching has been halved. In December there were 42,000 students in English-language programs, yet in August only 20,000. Millions of people want to learn English and Australia has an experienced sector that caters to the demand. However, these students need visas.

We need to do two things. First, Bowen could enable bona fide students to access visas to study in our country. At the moment, it appears that the drawbridge is up and the blinds are down.

Second, the sector and Canberra need to devise a long-term strategy for international education so that next year, as delegates celebrate the milestones of the 25th Australian International Education Conference and more than 50 years of international education in Australia, we can celebrate how Canberra listened and acted in the nation's best interests.

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