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TIME TO RETHINK THE STRATEGY BEHIND AUSTRALIA'S IMMIGRATION PROGRAM – DON'T LET THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC GO TO WASTE

In 2019, international students in Australia amounted to 26.7% of the student cohort in Australian universities, or some 875,000 students. They generated over A\$17bn in market stimulation (fees, services, accommodation and food). In 2018 Australia was ranked third in overseas study options for international students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen a dramatic decrease in the number of such overseas students living in Australia. As a result, some universities are laying off staff. All are undertaking significant lobbying of Government to make special arrangements to have these students fast tracked on shore.

But is our high educational standing really about the brilliance of our educational offering or is it about the fast tracking of those students who obtain degrees being able to obtain Australian residency, followed by Australian citizenship?

Instead of thinking the Australia attracts the best and brightest students in the world because our education system has so much to offer, perhaps there are two more realistic value propositions:

- If families can scrape together enough money to get a student to Australia then that student will be a gateway to them being able to migrate to Australia in the longer term; and/or
- A government with the long term goal of influencing Australian politics over the longer term will pay for students whose families are part of the political elite, to enter Australia and work towards that process, while Australia fast tracks such students to permanent residence and then citizen status.

As to the first value proposition, there is evidence available that some international students who study in Australia are not “up to the grade” and universities are under significant pressure to pass students who would otherwise fail. A close relative, for example is studying a Degree in Communications at a capital city university. He reports that he is one of only a few local students and most of the work undertaken is in groups so that the overseas students can prop each other up. Many do not speak or write good English. In the life of the course he has not sat an exam, the course assessed subjectively. He will obtain his degree but what will be its real value for him? Only time will tell. However, to the international students it is a gateway to Australian residency and then citizenship, not only for themselves but their families.

There is also evidence that universities are under continuing pressure to drop standards or change assessments to allow students, especially those with a poor command of English, a better chance of passing. When I taught legal subjects in an accountancy program at a regional university in the 1980s, we were forced to change exams from essay format to multiple choice and short answer questions. As to the former, the lecturer determines the options of the solution – the student merely had to guess the correct option. As to the latter, no critical thinking was displayed, just the ability to regurgitate facts. This has not changed.

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As to the second value proposition, the press has been reporting the influence of at least one foreign government in the operations of universities and the monitoring of that country's students in Australia. International students have been also involved in local politics on behalf of their country.

When one also takes into account that Australia also offers up to 7,000 special investment visas to foreign nationals who invest over \$5m here, then there is plenty of evidence to assert that Australia's immigration program is based on who can buy their way here, as opposed to who do we want here.

It follows that are the immigrants that we are permitting to come to Australia through the gateways of universities and being cashed up really the ones that we want, especially when we currently have 1m unemployed? Do we really want to have a Golden Passport Scheme similar to the ones operating in Malta, Cyprus or Bulgaria where the passport is an entrée to Europe?

In each of the three cases noted above, the COVID-19 crisis does allow Australia time to stop, think and re-calibrate its underlying immigration themes, both in terms of what type of citizens we want, whether they bring a political agenda with them and whether they can properly integrate and become Australian citizens, leaving behind their history.

Instead of appearing to be desperate to attract anyone with cash to Australia, we should sit back and accept that much of the world would like to live in Australia and be an Australia citizen. That means we should be able to pick and choose who we offer those opportunities to, based on a broader criterion than our apparent need to make a fast buck.

The key two questions are:

- 1 Does Australia see this issue of our future immigration program as one of national importance?
- 2 If so, is Australia able to have that debate in a mature and sensible way, without proponents and opponents of any particular view being dragged into the mire of accusations of either rampant nationalism, xenophobia, and/or rabid racial discrimination?

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