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Australia in the global higher education environment

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A. Possibilities: the internationalisation of Australian higher education

1. Successful internationalisation is a function of the following elements; (1) research capacity and outputs, (2) ICT capacity and communications activity, (3) institutional autonomy and academic independence, (4) staff movement inwards and outwards, (5) student movement inwards and outwards, (6) a spirit of institutional and academic engagement, including genuine curiosity about the other
2. Australia has known areas of research strength but our overall global research standing is not highly competitive
3. Australian higher education is relatively well networked in ICT terms
4. The structure of economic incentives has driven a primary focus on income generating activities, particularly the provision of coursework programs for international students
5. Australia is a relatively high volume provider of international education and in numbers, is intensively internationalised
6. Australia has run international education programs on a relatively commercial basis, with little public subsidy in areas like scholarships
7. International education has required major outlays on institutional infrastructures and staff capacities, and has dominated the developmental priorities of institutions
8. Institutions have made significant progress in developing non-academic services, especially to newly arrived students
9. A high level of foreign involvement has been managed without substantial cultural tensions
10. The rapid expansion of international education in Australia is a product of
 - the financial incentives
 - demand in Asian nations especially for English-language education
 - the potential to migrate to Australia opened up by international education
 - national management including deregulation, and selective collaborations between institutions
 - entrepreneurship and institutional management
 - the cost advantage vis a vis USA and UK
 - lesser advantages such as location, climate, public safety

B. Limits: the character of internationalisation in Australia

11. The international education program is focused on coursework at Bachelor and Masters level – compared to the USA and the UK, Australia is relatively weak in international research degrees
12. Cross-border student movement is largely one way – the movement of Australian students to international locations is not great
13. In terms of the educational, social and economic security of international students, recent research suggests that gaps remain: provision of security is uneven by institution, the extent of institutional responsibility is unclear, and academic English continues to be a significant and under-resourced problem for many students
14. While we lack comprehensive data on the effects of internationalisation on cultural contents, pedagogical methods, subject enrolments, and language(s) of instruction, in on-shore programs in Australia the effects appear to be modest
15. Cultural mixing between international students and local students is less than many international students would like. There is an unrealised potential for more cosmopolitan engagement
16. The deregulation of course lengths in full-fee programs, and a relatively loose boundary between Bachelor level and coursework Masters, enable downward variations in quality
17. Only surplus from international education is available for cross-subsidisation. The overall profitability of the industry is unclear, but is likely that many universities do not profit from international education
18. In the last two decades internationalisation has coincided with a running down of publicly-funded infrastructure, while most of the new market incomes are absorbed in production costs. Resources available for basic teaching and basic research have deteriorated
19. The character of internationalisation, and the global position, varies significantly by institution, e.g. ANU compared to RMIT or Central Queensland. At the same time, from the global viewpoint reputation is understood at least as much in national terms as institutional terms
20. In sum:
 - Australia has become particularly strong at global level as a producer of high volume, standardised cost, medium quality programs to Asian students, particularly in Business and IT
 - Australia has developed an extensive engagement with education in Southeast Asia, East Asia and South Asia; an engagement that is nevertheless asymmetrical (1) in terms of the teaching/research balance of activities, (2) in terms of cross-border student movement and (3) in linguistic and cultural terms
 - Research capacity sets limits on potential in many ways, including (1) collaborations with, and competitiveness vis a vis, foreign universities (2) the capacity to retain high quality local students, (3)

the capacity to attract high quality foreign students, (4) the global reputation of coursework degrees, i.e. research reputation affects reputation in teaching despite the absence of an instrumental link between the two: for this reason among others Australian degrees are overall less attractive than those of the USA and UK (though the reputation of Australia varies by importing nation)

- Problems of quality are placing downward pressures on long-term global reputation: (1) the material deterioration of research and teaching infrastructure, (2) deregulated course length and levels of content in Masters programs, (3) English-language support
- AT BEST Australia is poised for a broader and richer global engagement if not a major global role in higher education in relation to some nations in Asia, on the basis of the internationalisation already achieved plus a strengthening of teaching resources and of research infrastructure, and some strategic public and private investments, e.g. in international research scholarships; AT WORST Australia will have positioned itself as the global polytechnic with narrow international options

C. Futures

21. Online provision will continue to develop as part of student administration and teaching/learning, but the last five years demonstrates that the One Big Global Online U will not happen.
22. The Nelson reforms have differential effects across the system in relation to internationalisation, as everything else. For the G8 (1) fee-based revenues from domestic students reduce the incentive to maximise international student volumes enabling a more nuanced and quality-driven approach, (2) there is potential to increase international research competitiveness and hence global reputation by building up research activities via fee revenues. On the downside (3) with the reduction in incentives to raise international income there may some shift of attention to North America and Europe at the expense of (rather than in addition to) attention on Asia, and (4) with fee-based programs spreading in undergraduate education there is potential for brain drain of bright students to British and American universities. For the 'lesser' institutions (in terms of research) the pressure to generate fee revenues from international students via high volume standard cost approaches continues unabated.
23. A possible negative scenario is a layer of global research players combined with a layer of 'global polytechnics' with the latter not the former determining national reputation.
24. International education in the USA is faltering at present, especially but not only in relation to Muslim nations. The trend creates potential openings for Australian universities, in both SE Asia and China.