

Session III Discussion Paper

What should Australia do to meet the aspirations of Chinese international students?

Simon Longstaff

A recent meeting with university leaders and education officials considered the implications of Chinese engagement with Australia's tertiary education system. The conversation turned time and time again to one central question: what is the economic impact of Chinese students on the education sector and how can it be maintained?

This should come as no surprise. Nearly one-fifth of the roughly 800,000 PRC students studying abroad are in Australia. There are approximately 150,000 Chinese students in Australia. Last year the number grew by 23 per cent. Tim Dodd, writing in *AFR Weekend* on 10 May 2016, noted:

The new figures mean that international education, Australia's third largest export industry now worth nearly \$20 billion a year, is even more dependent on a healthy Chinese economy. Chinese students made up 29.4 per cent of all international students enrolled in Australia this year, the highest level ever reached in the January to March period.

As an outsider listening to this conversation, the thing that struck me most was the overall tone of the discussion. For example, Chinese students were said to be especially profitable because of their attraction to low-cost/high margin courses such as those offered by business schools. Chinese students were spoken about as if they are little more than a commodity to be sourced, competed for and ultimately harvested.

In saying this, I do not intend to call into question the good intentions of those from the higher education sector who led the discussion. I am sure that they would be appalled by my characterisation of their views. Yet, that is how it seemed to me.

I am not the only one to observe this mercantile attitude. If one monitors relevant social media channels it is clear that Chinese students often feel valued for little more than their role as 'cash cows'. Many of them also complain of isolation from Australian society. As Gill and Jakobson note in their forthcoming book (*China Matters, Getting It Right For Australia*, 2017 p. 173):

Government surveys reveal that Chinese students' satisfaction with opportunities to interact with Australia is consistently almost 10 per cent lower than the rest of international students in Australia.

The unfortunate truth is that the language and mind-set underpinning most discussions of Chinese students risks giving rise to a perception within the wider Asian region that Australians are predominantly motivated by self-interest and uninterested in the formation of relationships based on stronger, non-economic ties. Does Australia wish to

be viewed as a neighbour out of brute necessity rather than by choice; a 'fair weather friend' who can only be relied upon when self-interest dictates?

The good news is that there is nothing fixed and immutable about this perception. The better news is that Chinese students could be powerful and authentic contributors to an alternative narrative about Australia and its relationship with China.

The challenge for policy makers will be to develop an approach that anticipates and accepts the benefits to Australia of positive student experiences without making the attainment of these benefits a primary objective. To do otherwise is to risk being seen as hypocritical. This is because motivations matter and our Chinese stakeholders – students, their families as well as the government – will (rightly) see such a policy as just another self-serving transaction masked with a thin veneer of altruism.

Instead, Australian policy will need to be sincerely focused on the aspirations of Chinese students and how they might best be realised. Every student survey of the past decade makes it clear that a principal driver of many international students is the possibility that study will lead to favourable immigration outcomes. We need to be clear-eyed and realistic about this expectation.

Beyond this, some expectations are obvious and functional – and our higher education sector is well placed to meet them. For example, Chinese students (like all others) aim to receive a high standard of education from institutions with good standing amongst the international community. Students also expect to be treated well and to receive a high-quality education at a fair price. Any sense of 'gouging' by our institutions is deeply counter-productive.

However, as noted above, immigration is an especially powerful driver. As such, students wish to be exposed to and learn something about Australians and the life we live. Even those students with every expectation of returning home at the end of their studies would welcome the opportunity to be more closely connected to Australian society. This expectation is not being met.

Questions:

What specific measures should universities, the business sector and government adopt to provide a more inclusive and positive experience for Chinese international students?

What are the risks of over-reliance by the Australian higher education sector on Chinese international students?



Australian Government



RioTinto



China Matters is grateful to our sponsors for their financial support