

Engaging with our Asian partners: getting it right

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Keynote Address at the Welcoming Dinner of the

Sixth National Meeting of China Matters

Canberra, 16 October 2017

Thank you Linda.

I would also like to acknowledge and celebrate the First Australians on whose traditional lands we meet, and pay our respect to the elders of the Ngunnawal people past and present.

Can I also thank our hosts, China Matters – I am honoured to have been asked to speak tonight. It is wonderful to be able to catch up with so many high level people who are here.

It is particularly appropriate that I am here tonight to reflect on Australia's engagement with China, because I have just returned from China, where I was reminded again of that country's exceptional energy and talent; its huge global cities and its increasingly global reach.

It also left me in no doubt: China is a partner of Australia, and it must remain so. We are geographically close, and the Free Trade Agreement our governments signed in 2015 has narrowed the distance further.

This week the Chinese Government will map out their economic plan for the next five years. Extraordinary investment figures of around \$US300 billion are being reported for innovation and high-tech industries.

There are clear opportunities here for Australian research and development collaboration – and even greater opportunities for Chinese and Australian students in the future.

In international education – from schools to universities – the number of Chinese students studying in Australia rose this year to almost 170,000.

There is a lot for us to build on – and, as always between friends – we will sometimes see things differently.

Last week Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson, who is here this evening and who has spent so many years building bridges between China and Australia – touched on the many positives, and some of the differences, in the Confucius Institute Annual Lecture in Adelaide.

She talked about the significant benefits of international education in terms of Australian and Chinese students being able to build deeper engagement and collaboration. But she also addressed the security concerns that may limit what we hold as the central idea of a great university education: academic freedom.

Frances's lecture was timely, because with our partnership growing and our ties strengthening, there is now an opportunity to reflect on what this all means to us as a nation, to universities as providers of education, and to the benefits and challenges in the changing relationship between Australia and China.

First, I am encouraged that our relationship has become more mutual. The numbers of Australian students going to China to broaden their experience has grown significantly, up 83 per cent since 2011, and at ANU we particularly encourage them to do so. After all, one of our roles is to build Australia's knowledge of Asia and the Pacific, at the heart of which sits China. Our nations can work well together when we understand each other's cultures and worldviews.

Second, international engagement through education is not just good diplomatic practice. It is a major slice of the Australian economy. Last week the news came that education exports earned Australia \$28 billion dollars this year. An incredible 29 per cent of international students in Australia this year are from China.

Education is Australia's largest non-mineral export – something we should be proud of.

But we must also carefully steward this industry, which is a sophisticated, reputation-based, global enterprise. Australia's success is based on our hard-won reputation for academic quality and critical engagement with ideas. Students choose Australia because we are a home of rigorous inquiry. Anything our sector does to change that will also damage our quality and consequently our reputation.

Exporting education on this scale is an exceptional opportunity to build affinities across borders and cultures, and create a network of influence and soft power that will have unimaginable reach in the decades to come.

It is also an enormous privilege for us to be able to educate the next generation of global citizens.

We know this because ANU has been welcoming Asian students to our university for decades.

Some of them have returned to their homelands and gone on to contribute at high levels in Governments in our region. Take Indonesia for example. Former Indonesian Vice-President, Boediono graduated from UWA and later studied at Monash, did a PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, then he worked in the Indonesia project at ANU in the early 1970s.

Other examples of ANU alumni from Asia include former Foreign Minister Dr Marty Natalegawa former Minister of Trade and Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy, Dr Mari Pangestu and former Minister of Finance, Dr Muhamad Chatib Basri.

All of these people have gone on after politics to be key influencers in other ways to Indonesian society and the impact they have on their society and culture is immeasurable.

Five years ago, most of the Chinese students who came here wanted to stay in Australia. Now, most of them want to go home.

When I look at our alumni, we have a pretty good idea of what their net worth is.

And guess what, the ones that go back to China are where our very rich young alumni are emerging.

Staying in Australia, of course has its benefits, but if getting rich quick is one of your objectives, your chances are better in China.

In China, among our alumni, we have at least 40 CEOs, Managing Directors, Presidents or Chairs of Boards. We have directors in the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Agriculture and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission. We have other high ranking officials in government departments, companies, banks and universities.

These people share a common experience—that of an Australian education and exposure to our lifestyle and values – and they will be the foundation of positive long-term relations between our countries.

If we give Chinese young people a wonderful experience in Australia, and then they return to China, we have created a network of alumni who are also ambassadors and champions for our nation. In this century, where China is so crucial to the world's economy, security and stability, this magnifies Australia's influence.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. International education is also very complex, and – at its heart – involves people making significant sacrifices and making huge adjustments to grab an opportunity.

Inevitably, many international students, including those nearly 170,000 Chinese students in Australia right now, have experienced the difficulties of adjusting to Australian society. Some of these are about acclimatising, overcoming the language barrier, getting familiar with the culture.

Others are more serious and, thankfully, much less common. If you follow the news, you will have seen allegations of spying, monitoring by the embassy and other students, infiltration of our society, or harassment of families at home.

It is incumbent on us to recognise and address those challenges and we are working in partnership with other universities and the Australian government on this important area.

Whatever measures we take, at the heart of our response will always be a commitment to **academic freedom**, and making sure our students are exposed to new ways of thinking. These philosophies are embedded in our policies and are an essential part of the fabric of who we are.

We understand and respect the different academic traditions around the world, and that our increasingly global universities need to support students they admit who are based in those alternative traditions.

But at the core of ANU's success – is one key principle – that everyone is free to challenge ideas, to counter received wisdom, and has the ability to feel comfortable being challenged.

We want our graduates to be resilient, respectful, critical thinkers. That is the set of skills they are paying to learn.

But part of acquiring intellectual maturity is rooted in belonging. And that requires a campus community that is welcoming and cohesive.

We know from our own campus that students from different backgrounds sometimes club together based on their common nationality.

This is understandable – but it's not optimal. Nor is it an issue unique to our Chinese students and we will continue to encourage ANU students from every background to integrate.

Australia is often described by our own Prime Minister as the most successful multicultural society in the world. So integration, on this continent where so many immigrants have made their home, is part of the quintessentially Australian experience.

How do we encourage this community to form? By creating structures and mechanisms for them that make it easier to engage, and to give them alternatives to self-organised or government-organised activities.

Simple changes in our residential halls, where we will prioritise housing a wider range of nationalities, mean people from across the world will live together, engaging naturally and experiencing each other's cultures.

What makes these student communities so richly diverse and fulfilling is that they are made up of individuals. And this, for me, is the key insight when we think about how we engage with China, or any other country: that we do so through individuals. Each of them is unique.

Each one of the 170,000 Chinese students in Australia is an individual. Not all are from the People's Republic.

Security concerns need to be acknowledged and addressed. This is part of ensuring that our international relationships – whether in research, teaching or student recruitment – are sustainable and in the national interest.

But security issues also need to be taken in context. There is no upside to letting the security concerns about a small proportion of international students affect our attitude to the wider international student body, whether from China or anywhere else.

What we absolutely must avoid is the flat-out wrong idea that Chinese students are all spies, or incapable of critical enquiry, or that they all think alike.

The students who come to the ANU, who meet our tough entry thresholds and pass our rigorous assessments, are some of the very best and brightest. In fact, they are so impressive, so extraordinarily bright and open to new ideas, that they can succeed in the highly competitive academic environment of the national university.

And, let's not forget, they do all of this in a language that is usually not their first language, while coping with an unfamiliar culture, a long way from the support that they would have at home.

This makes these students extraordinary, ambitious, and bold. They have the potential to be a great generation of ambassadors for both nations.

The contribution they make to Australia economically, and their role as our champions and ambassadors in the years ahead, means we are doing Australia a huge disservice if we allow negative perceptions of Chinese students to set in.

Our job is to welcome them as colleagues, support them to integrate, encourage them to succeed and hold them to the exceptionally high standards we expect of any member of our community. **We will be rigorous in doing this.**

At ANU our international cohort supports our global standing as one of the great universities of the world. In fact, all of the great universities of the world are international. But it also enhances the value of the education we provide to all our students, including the Australians. Everyone we enrol learns to work alongside

colleagues from around the world. The simple act of engagement across cultural boundaries and traditions broadens the scope and horizons of every one of our students.

And we cannot rest on our laurels. The Chinese university system is improving in leaps and bounds, so these advantages and opportunities for Australia are threatened not only by our competitors around the world – but also by the emergence of the great Chinese universities, like our partners Tsinghua and Peking, who are rapidly rising up the global rankings.

And the war for talent is not just in students, of course – we value enormously our staff of Chinese background, whether from the PRC or elsewhere. When I consider the next wave of outstanding academic hires, I expect some of them to come from China.

For us this means that the question now is: how do we keep attracting Chinese talent, who may be disinclined to invest their time, money and hopes in coming all the way to Australia?

The answer to that question lies in remaining distinctively excellent, which is my mission as the Vice-Chancellor of ANU. Our University is blessed with the most exciting remit of all: to improve our nation and our world.

The scope of our ambitions, and the genuinely free intellectual environment by which our institutional integrity lives or dies, is how we will remain distinctive in Australia, and attractive to students from around the world.

One lesson we can certainly learn from China is this: Investment in higher education, research and innovation is one of the most important strategic investments the government can make. China's targeted strategy to build a world-class university sector is bearing fruit: seven Chinese universities now in the top 200 of the Times Higher Education rankings, up from four last year, and just two a few years ago.

This acceleration comes at a time when Australian governments are questioning the funding of Australian Higher Education, and looking at ways to save dollars rather investing in our nation's future. (As an aside - there is no comprehensive University in the world ranked higher than ANU with a budget lower than ours – squeezing us further is not going to make us stronger)

However the debate in the Parliament plays out, Australia's universities, led by the ANU, will continue to be at the forefront of our links to China and the world, helping us understand, engage and influence in the long term.

There is a fork in the road for Australia and China. One direction where we work cooperatively, and one where we don't. The first way is one of mutual prosperity, the second way full of risk.

Working cooperatively does not mean giving up on the diligence surrounding our national security, but it does mean creating a more connected, dynamic and ultimately, peaceful world, which is in Australia's and everyone's interests.