

Episode 2: International Education

Hello and welcome to 'Smart Societies', I'm Barry Clarke. In this program, 'International Education'. It's a growing global business, particularly in English speaking countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia.

ANTHONY BOHM: I think what we're finding now is that there's immense opportunities for Australia to capitalise on education as part of a knowledge economy, a part of the future smart societies of the world.

CLARKE: Anthony Bohm, Head of Planning and Research with the International Development Program or IDP, an umbrella group for Australia's tertiary education sector.

ANTHONY BOHM: We forecast that the number of international students in Australia or at least the demand for international higher education in Australia will increase from around about 68,000 students in 2000 through to 562,000 in 2025. On some of our optimistic scenarios that number might rise to as much as 856,000 by 2025. In terms of the major drivers of that growth we see India and China by far emerging as the major markets. In fact on all of our scenarios we find that India and China represent just on half of the total demand for Australian higher education by 2025. I think that we do see encouraging signs in terms of some other markets emerging at a global level - Turkey, Iran, Morocco - emerge as major sources of global demand, and I think also therefore represent sources of opportunity for Australia to diversify.

CLARKE: Australia currently hosts in excess of 170,000 overseas students, many of whom come from various Asian countries.

CLARKE: "Whereabouts are you from?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "I'm from Malaysia."

CLARKE: "What sort of problems did you face as an international student coming to Melbourne?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "I think it was mainly adjustment problems to the climate. I came in winter so that was a bit difficult. It's all the minor things that add up like the culture, the accent, which was different, the language problems. At the same time you had to get used to a new environment, making new friends, which causes a lot of stress."

CLARKE: "Two years down the track how is the experience for you?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "I think it has changed vastly since the time I first arrived in the sense that now I can actually say that I'm quite adapted to this place. I'm really enjoying myself here, and I guess that's why a lot of international students are looking at staying back after graduation and working because you just get so used to the life here, to the people, to the friends that you have, the culture and it's a really interesting place."

FEMALE STUDENT: "I'm from Japan."

CLARKE: "Can I ask you to sort of cast your mind back then to when you first arrived in Australia as an international student. What sort of problems did you face?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "It was very hard to make Australian friends because my English wasn't good, but it's ok now because I've been here for three years, so it's getting much easier and easier."

CLARKE: "And what about actual teaching style as well, did that differ very much from Japan?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "Yeah because in Japan teachers just keep talking and telling us the stories, but in Australia we are encouraged to have discussions, more than just listening. So I think that's the biggest difference."

CLARKE: "What advice would you give other students who may be contemplating coming to Australia to study?"

FEMALE STUDENT: "Just don't be scared to make any mistakes in second language and go out a lot and meet lots of people and get experienced."

CLARKE: Having a good command of English is a major hurdle for many students from Asia. But as we've heard the problems range across different teaching styles and adjusting to the culture.

So how do our universities address these issues?

Homer le Grand is Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Monash University in Melbourne. Monash has one of the largest intakes of overseas students.

HOMER LE GRAND: There are particular needs of course that international students have, academic needs and also in terms of expectations they might have of study and having realistic expectations of the experience they will have here. To meet those international students are typically assigned a mentor, an academic mentor or often in addition if you like a buddy, a fellow student, an Australian student. And I think those sorts of programs are very helpful in terms of making the student feel a little more at home. Besides that all universities I would hope but certainly the ones with which I'm familiar do provide specialist staff in language and learning, English as a second language skills, a number of social events which bring international students together but also bring international students together with I'll call them Australian students. Obviously with more and more international students the demands on those services have grown but I think the services have grown in proportion thus far.

SUE SLAMEN: So you're confident that there is sufficient preparation of the academic staff themselves to handle the increasing demands of growing numbers of overseas students and the general internationalisation of universities?

HOMER LE GRAND: Well again I can only speak from my own university and obviously even more closely my own faculty. Monash I think has taken a rather bold step and that's requiring all new academic staff to complete a graduate certificate in higher education, which includes components which deal with international students, or students from different cultural backgrounds, who are less experienced shall we say in trying to sort through diverse interpretations of say a particular historical event or competing frameworks in my own field for the analysis of scientific change. They're used to getting the answers, learning the answers and then repeating the answers, I mean that's a bit cruel and it's an oversimplification, a huge oversimplification, but that is something which we do have to deal in our own teaching.

MALE STUDENT: My name is Bernard, I'm from Hong Kong.

MALE STUDENT: I'm Nathaniel and I'm from Hong Kong as well.

BERNARD: The first difficulty of course is I think language because the way Hong Kong speak English is very different from Australia, and Australians speak with accents. When I first came I faced problem of listening and speaking, people don't understand what I'm speaking and I don't understand what people talking. Yeah, the other thing that I faced is the culture, I mean I know

Australian but I don't know their culture, their way of life, so it's a bit hard for me to know them because we have nothing to talk about. I mean they like football, I don't know much about it, they like cricket, I don't know much about it. When they talk about it I have nothing to say.

NATHANIEL: I can say the first time that we leave our family and we stay here on our own we have to be very independent and also we have to decide many things for ourselves.

CLARKE: So can you give an example of say when you did arrive here and then you had to make a decision about something that normally you might have made as a family decision or your parents would have helped you?

NATHANIEL: For me moving because I've moved from suburb to city, I don't know what to do because now I have to look for transportation, then I have to look for furniture myself, I have to look for the agent to apply for the apartment, also I had a very bad experience of having my car crashed, that's another thing I've learned a lot from that because the aim of coming to Australia is to learn to be independent.

CLARKE: So what advice would you give to other people who might be contemplating coming to Australia?

NATHANIEL: Australia is a good place for them to study of course. It's really they have to learn a lot how to take care of themselves, and I think they have to be very careful when they're looking for friends because here you actually rely on friends a lot.

MALE STUDENT: My name is Teddy Goenawan, I'm the president of Melbourne University Overseas Students Service. We are the peak representative body for all overseas students in Melbourne University. In general students who come to my office basically they want to know more about what they can do in Australia apart from studying, so they want to have a balanced lifestyle while trying to get the most out of their stay in Australia. As you know that most international students will come to Australia mainly from the South East Asian countries, and they come from a culture where study is important. But what we are trying to tell the students that apart from studies, please do enjoy the other side of Australia that you've never seen before.

FEMALE TALENT: How do students overcome feelings of loneliness?

TEDDY GOENAWAN: We normally do have several activities on campus to actually encourage students to make networks right from the start. So the first day of orientation when they come to university we tell them that don't choose your friends now, build your networks and after that you start selecting later on. But this is the place where you won't have your family with you so friends are the most important things in your life now, because they're the ones who will know why you're not turning up for school, what are you doing in the afternoon, where you're going after your class, and they're the ones that you will spend most of the time while you're studying in Australia. Basically the friends that they have are the ones that they will be relying upon.

CLARKE: Teddy Goenawan from Indonesia. So why do international students want to study in Australia? Anthony Bohm's research indicates they're prepared to pay for an overseas education to enhance their opportunities in life.

ANTHONY BOHM: What the research has really shown us more than anything is the critical importance of the quality of education and the employment prospects that an Australian education can deliver to international students. We found that really when we looked at the concept of quality, that international students particularly from Asia were driven very much by the employment prospects that they could expect to receive at the end of that education. The perception of quality

within the international student markets was somewhat below the US and UK, and I think that's really what's going to drive the future demand for Australia is the perceived quality and employment prospects from our education.

CLARKE: Well it is all about perception that's for sure, so what can you do to change the perception that currently it may be not as high as the US or the UK?

ANTHONY BOHM: I think the critical thing in looking forward is that Australia's made some great movements towards setting up quality assurance agencies, these focus predominantly on the process of education and what we're talking about here is students being driven by the outcome of the education. So I think there's a lot that we can do in terms of wanting to put in place the recognition of Australian qualifications around the world would be a great start.

CLARKE: The largest number of Indonesians who study overseas choose Australia as their destination. Isla Winarto is the Director of IDP in Jakarta.

ISLA WINARTO: Up until recently the perception has been that Australia is the best destination in terms of proximity to Indonesia, in terms of value for the dollar, in terms of quality of education and so on. But now I think after the acts of terrorism and September 11 and so on there are perhaps some perceptions that maybe not all Australians welcome Muslims to the shores, but that is purely a perception because we certainly don't have any evidence that there are any institutions or many Australians who are not welcoming Asians, specifically Muslims, to Australia.

CLARKE: How has that perception been gained?

ISLA WINARTO: Oh I think from the press, the ASIO attacks on Muslims living in Australia, and perhaps when there have been reports of Australian leaders making statements regarding Indonesia's domestic politics and so on. But still these don't have a major negative impact on the flow of students from Indonesia to Australia, by and large Indonesians tend to go along with their plans and it's more the economic situation in Indonesia which has I believe a major impact on whether or not one goes ahead with plans to study overseas.

ANTHONY BOHM: During the Asian economic crisis the number of international higher education students from Asia continued to grow and grow very strongly, and I think that's linked to the fact that international education is a major investment in their future wealth, in their future income and employment prospects. I think it's important to note that international education, particularly at the higher education level has been amazingly resilient to economic changes, to even the SARS crisis that we've seen.

CLARKE: Offering higher education to international students has become a key contributor to the Australian economy. Where Australian students have largely been subsidised through the government's higher education contribution scheme, HECS, most overseas students, unless they're on a scholarship, are full fee paying. And universities have become quite reliant on this source of income.

Homer Le Grand from Monash University.

HOMER LE GRAND: Like really all the universities, some starting later than others, Monash starting earlier than most, we have become quite reliant upon that as an additional source of income. Now obviously of course it costs a fair bit to provide the support services and to provide the teaching for these students, but nonetheless if one were going to be a cold economic rationalist, which I'm

not, I would have to say that yes there is a reasonable profit margin with those students, and there is a deficit in terms of the funding of Australian students who are studying on a HECS basis. That I should hasten to add is not all that different in the other system with which I'm very familiar, the North American system, in that typically at state supported institutions out-of-state students pay very high tuition and they help subsidise the cost of the in-state students.

CLARKE: May I ask where you're from?

MALE STUDENT: I'm from Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

CLARKE: Well tell me what sort of problems did you face as an international student coming to Australia?

MALE STUDENT: I found it hard to talk to Australians and stuff at first and it was kind of hard because when I came here I was in year 12 in a boarding house and Asian and Aussies there they didn't really mix, it was kind of hard but after a while it got a bit better I guess.

CLARKE: And what were the things that made it after a while a bit better?

MALE STUDENT: I find that if you take the stereotype view it's not so good because you become very hard to mix but after a while if you get to know most people they're pretty nice.

CLARKE: So how long have you been here now?

MALE STUDENT: This is my third year of uni, so four years.

CLARKE: And what advice would you give to students leaving a country in Asia perhaps to come and study in Australia?

MALE STUDENT: I think most Australians are pretty comfortable with Asians, I mean look at Melbourne, you walk in the city it's like 30, 40 per cent Asian, so I'm sure they're used to it. But when I was in Western Australia I found like the old people they're very hard to change. You still get stuff like oh you're stealing our jobs and things like that, and you know it feels kind of odd because I'm like commerce student, so like I'm like learning stuff, hey it's good that we're here, we're giving your country money and all that so.

CLARKE: The benefits of the internationalisation of higher education are not restricted to those who come here to study; there are real advantages for all students.

ANTHONY BOHM: What I guess the research is showing us is that international education both in its financial contribution, in its educational contribution and certainly in the social contribution is providing much greater opportunities for Australian students in terms of the choice of courses. Simply the number of international students and their contribution to the university is expanding dramatically the range of courses that are on offer. We're making those courses more globally relevant, so we're responding to the needs of the global markets.

I think also in terms of the networking that international students bring in are just tremendous in terms of the value to Australian students. The tendency is that we talk about internationalisation as international students and it's certainly true that you can have internationalisation of education without international students, and I think the aspects like internationalisation of the curriculum is a critical area where that happens, ensuring that our curriculum is relevant within the region, relevant to global trends in labour markets, social global trends is going to be critical. And I think there is a tendency to look at the financial benefits and not perhaps focus on a lot of the broad ranging social benefits that students bring.

HOMER LE GRAND: International students bring to a campus I think a number of additional dimensions which are terrifically important. It will never be possible for every Australian student to have an international education experience. But by having significant numbers of international students on campus they can get at least I think a very useful and important exposure to different ways of thinking, different cultures, different backgrounds. And so the international students enrich the Australian system in a number of ways, not just financially.

CLARKE: Hajime Nishitani is a Professor of Law at the University of Hiroshima. He was an international student himself, undertaking a degree at a New Zealand University. He testifies to the benefits of cross-cultural education.

HAJIME NISHITANI: Once you go to other countries and you're put into totally different situations you are going to get information through the channels, not like 20 years ago there was no internet, so you are going to get information only through the local people, or local newspapers. It means that you're going to be put into a totally different situation like you were. Like in Japan we get most of the news from the United States and then Europe and almost none at all from the South Pacific, Australia or New Zealand.

And once you get to New Zealand, Australia most of the news you can get is from those local news and also from United Kingdom. And it's going to put a totally different kind of perspective. In that way you're going to understand what kind of a culture, what kind of a society you have, not just thinking or knowing that New Zealand, Australia was a former dominion of the empire and so on. That is information, but once you know and live there then you kind of feel, this is so important to have a different perspective.

CLARKE: What did it mean for you to be an international student, to come over from Japan, come into a completely different culture?

HAJIME NISHITANI: I think I had a bigger emphasis not only to the United States and Japan, but also have to look into some other part of the world, especially since I had a lot of friends from the South Pacific and South East Asia, then that kind of first time for me to talk to them. I didn't have enough experience in Japan. But once you know the people from those areas and then get to know each other and not just culturally wise, but kind of reaction, kind of personal reaction to the different issues, then you are going to understand more and more about not just that person but also the background culture and then that is going to be the basis for understanding each other. But I should say understanding itself is not really always solve the problem, but still that is a basis and then that is where we start.

CLARKE: Hajime Nishitani from Hiroshima. So what feedback do we have from those who've lived and studied in Australia?

ISLA WINARTO: Well I think it's mostly positive, I don't think for one minute it's easy from day one, there's a lot of adjustments to be made because Indonesians, let me take the case of Indonesian girls, they're usually chaperoned a lot in their home country, when they come here they're expected to get on a bus and go from A to B and manage their finances and manage their housing and so on. So I think it's a steep learning curve, but I think Indonesians generally feel quite proud of their achievements in that area, they become more responsible, they have to take the initiative and I think it's character building.

FEMALE STUDENT: I'm from Indonesia, Jakarta Indonesia.

CLARKE: Can you talk about your own experiences?

LYDIA: Firstly the language is quite hard because it's not my first language, and the weather is really different from Indonesia, and friends, making friends when first time to come here I just come by myself so I have got no friends.

CLARKE: What are maybe some of the negative things that they infer when they go back?

ISLA WINARTO: Well I think many of them unfortunately come home with few experiences of Australians. They may never have been to the home of an Australian for dinner; they may have just for whatever reason stayed with their own ethnic group, which of course is very Indonesian to do. But I think that if the projections for international students are in any way accurate then that needs to be changed you know by both sides, Indonesians have to be prepared to integrate more, and Australians I think have to open up a little bit more so there is more integration, there's more bonding, more cultural exchange and exchange of ideas, because I do see that as a bit of a problem. The Indonesians have a great time here but when you actually delve you find that a lot of the experiences they had were with other Indonesians, or other Asian groups.

ANTHONY BOHM: The largest challenge is the way in which we can ensure that Australian students and international students are engaging on campus. There are concerns and I think that Australian universities and institutions across all sectors are aware of these issues about creating much better engagement. There are lots of really good practical solutions that have been put forward. I heard one recently about food days using multicultural food days as a way in which to bring students together. The quote was that Australian students will do anything for food, and so the opportunity to experience foods from different cultures I think is a great opportunity. So lots of small strategies to increase that engagement at the campus level and within the community.

CLARKE: One campus that has responded to this challenge is Melbourne's RMIT University. It also has one of the largest numbers of international students. Yasho Nadarajh is the manager of the Intercultural Projects Unit.

She's helped develop three new academic units, which ensure local and international students interact with each other and the broader Australian community. The units are conducted in rural Victoria.

YASO NADARAJH: I already worked with the international students so when I said to them here's an opportunity to come along and meet some Australians and share your culture, they got really excited, they were very nervous because they said: where are we going and three-and-a-half hours into the wilderness? They'd never been out, they were scared about what to eat, where to get their noodles and chilli and stuff, but I think because they were going in a group there was some security. It's always interesting to watch them because we didn't have any problems about students joining the class, we actually had to tell students the class was full because we can only take 30.

But when they get into the bus we brief them, we have classes before we go and the community says drops them off at Glen Thompson you know, two of them at Glen Thompson and then proceed up to Dunkeld. So the bus stops, we drop two and then this farmer comes in his ute with his dog and he picks up the kids and then we drop them off and they're looking at us because the bus is going off and they are with this strange farmer and dog in the middle of nowhere. They say Yaso, come back, then I look at them and I say this is your learning experience, and I have to let go because I know the

community members and I know that the community will look after them well. So the care becomes collective. And then when you pick them up on the fourth day and we have to come back they start to cry because they've actually built that relationship. And it's amazing what in four days from fear to the unknown to actually having faith, and then coming out of it learning.

SUE SLAMEN: You said that taking students from different nations out into the Australian countryside to share their experiences and even their national dishes with the locals helps to promote this cross-cultural understanding. But what about students in this globalised world who share basically the same youth culture, it seems to me a lot of teenagers they listen to the same music, they dress in the same clothes, do you actually find some of the kids from overseas have forgotten the recipes if they ever have cooked their national dishes?

YASO NADARAJH: Yes some of the students come back and say oh yeah sure, what do you mean by culture and you know what's our culture? And someone from Singapore, we don't have a national dress. But what I say to them is I think it's important to understand where you come from, what is your background, because in the end the most sustaining thing that we can give a student is the identity, and it's an identity that has made me informed by different cultures, maybe informed by different influences.

But they all kind of make a huge tapestry and if you enrich them and tell them that they have to know that, that's their point of reference. And if you don't know how to make your own grandmother's old soup, maybe you need to go back and find out because when you find that out, you not find out about the soup but you find out where your grandmother's from, and I think that's a message we're trying to get across through this, yeah.

CLARKE: Yaso Nadarajh from RMIT University. And in the next program we follow a group of her students into the Australian bush to learn about her cross-cultural programs.

This program was produced by Sue Slamen and Barry Clarke from Radio Australia.