

Rebuilding Australia's Universities - Post Covid.

John Simpson

Rebuilding Australia's university and vocational training sector will take an effort unmatched since the University of Sydney took its first students in 1852.

The tertiary sector has never faced anything like this. It's now commonly accepted that even when the all-clear is given for universities to re-activate and accept students back on campus, they will continue to be buffeted by cyclonic challenges for years to come. The lost income from first-year international students who did not take up their places will be felt until 2022 and beyond. That cost to Australia will be not in the millions, but billions.

The unhelpful rift over getting kids back to school, driven as it is by politics, ideology and hubris, augurs badly for the months and years ahead during which time a herculean national effort will be needed to set new, sustainable structures for the education system at all levels.

When the tertiary sector catches its breath from its current survival mode, the cold hard light of day is likely to result in significant job losses and a shrinking of the teaching offering across the board. Before critics of the sector whip themselves into a frenzy they would do well to consider how rapidly universities responded to the instant demand for online tuition across the entire teaching landscape. Staff performed outstandingly.

The jury is out on whether all Australian tertiary institutions will survive the fallout. There are critical implications for Australia's standing, regionally and globally, if we get the rebuild wrong. The kind of courses we offer, the quality of education and training and the international standing of the courses hang in the balance.

We need all levels of government working with the university and VET sector to focus on jobs, research, pedagogy and training as national priorities. That Australia's tertiary education sector is vital to the strength of the economy and society is accepted at all levels of the education policy and delivery hierarchy.

Higher education is our third-highest foreign income earner, generating \$40bn per year and accounting for about 240,000 jobs, not to forget a formidable and growing research reputation in critical areas of science and medicine. On any measure, it matters. The naysayers repudiate this view, suggesting we should not take international students, thus excluding universities from the global market for research and innovative students.

Margaret Gardner, the president and vice-chancellor of Monash University, recently said the nation had seen only the start of the crisis. Conditions will worsen next year and could even be worse in 2022. Gardner says this is the most severe threat that Australian universities have ever faced and the impact on education and research will be hard to estimate.

In a paper published before COVID-19, the Mitchell Institute at Victoria University noted that each part of the system had a role to play in meeting Australia's skills needs. The report went on: "However, Australia has not yet created a tertiary education sector in which different levels of government, and different parts of the sector, work together in a way that meets these demands."

COVID-19 raises some fundamental questions: does Australia have the appropriate national decision-making settings to rebuild the higher education sector? Is the sector sufficiently understood at departmental and political levels nationally? And is the sector itself ready to reassert its confidence as the educator of our scientists, doctors, nurses, innovators and problem solvers?

During the government's last term, it undertook several consultative reviews of tertiary education, some of which are still to be completed. These reviews provide a starting point but are not sufficient as the basis for rebuilding decisions as the sector sets its course for the next half-century.

Co-operation with state education departments will be critically important to forming a comprehensive, holistic approach to the challenges facing the tertiary sector. The government has announced that universities will retain the funding budgeted to them before the pandemic, as well as a commitment to 20,000 places available in six month certificates in nursing, teaching, health, IT and science courses. The government has also capped regulatory charges it would have levied on universities.

But there has been no support for international students at Australian education institutions, and this has had a disproportionately high impact on those with higher numbers of international students, such as Melbourne University, Monash and RMIT in Victoria, and the University of NSW and the University of Sydney. All have announced significant cost-cutting regimes that will affect jobs and curriculum.

The universities have set up hardship funds (supported by the States except NSW) for students who can apply for cash support. These measures have been essential to assist students while they study online. The university and VET sector does not see itself as above or separate from the rest of the economy. It does, however, play a demonstrably vital role in our standing as a place of globally competitive research, teaching and learning.

Australia has much to gain from maintaining and enhancing its hard-fought reputation as a destination for international and domestic tertiary students. Decisions taken in the next two years will determine what international markets,

employers, students and their paying parents think of this country as an education and research destination. The consequences of failure will be felt by all of us for decades.

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