

“The World as Our Encyclopedia”: the Importance of International Students

In large measure, the national collaboration of medical experts and political leaders has contained the impact of COVID-19 in Australia to low levels, especially compared with many countries overseas. Of course, whatever the statistics, no COVID death, no consequent business closure, no unemployment queue, no loss of hope, no poverty and no violence or abuse can be dismissed or ignored.

While there have been extraordinary fiscal measures to deal with the crisis, and while there is an increasing commitment of support from State and Territory governments as well as from our universities, at the Federal level it seems that our international students have been too readily dismissed and largely ignored. The message that it was time for international students to leave and return home was insensitive and inhospitable to say the least. Many students who had made personal and not just financial sacrifices to be here at our invitation could not return home as a result of travel restrictions and had also lost part-time and casual employment. Many continue to be anxious about family and friends in their home countries; many are struggling with the uncertainties of their on-line courses, assessments and examinations; and, even if living in compliant community accommodation, there can be a sense of loneliness and isolation, and of being unwelcome.

Some 70% of international students who were able to commence this academic year in our country have remained, including a large proportion staying in university residences with all the appropriate restrictions and protocols applied. I have the enormous privilege of heading Toad Hall at the Australian National University, an on-campus residence for mainly postgraduate and international students. About 80% of our nearly 230 residents remain in the Hall at this time. It is my eleventh year working with this community and I continue to be enriched by the range of background, creativity, experience, knowledge and culture of students who have come from some 50 countries across the world, many who are already leaders and others future leaders in their own lands and in global organisations. The residents continue to demonstrate the Hall motto ‘Unity in Diversity’, though currently with apt reference to unity in adversity!

There are myriads of examples of the part overseas born and international students have played since World War II in Australian universities, with, for example, the first two women engineering graduates of the University of Tasmania, Koesmarihati Koesnowars and Trismiati Harsono, being from Indonesia; the first two PhD graduates of the ANU, Antoni Przybylski and Ken Burrridge, coming from Poland and Canada; boat refugee from China, John Yu, graduating in medicine from Sydney University, becoming CEO of the Children’s Hospital in Camperdown and Westmead (Sydney), 1996 Australian of the Year, and Chancellor of UNSW 2000-2005; and Hong Kong born John So, Lord Mayor of Melbourne 2001–2008, having lived at Australia’s first International House, opened at the University of Melbourne in 1957.

Before coming to the ANU I was at the University of New South Wales, and for four years I was a Governor and President of the then UNSW Alumni Association. I attended a number of graduations and alumni functions in places such as Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, and hosted young alumni functions in New York and London. It was clear and heart-warming to see the impact of international graduates’ experiences of their Australian education, some, for example, from their time

as early Colombo Plan students and later as national leaders in areas such as politics, teaching and research, business, development and diplomacy.

In his ANU E Press publication (2010) 'Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan', Daniel Oakman notes a report in 1953 from the then Australian High Commissioner to India, Walter Crocker, who commented that "the best publicity we have received so far has been from students who have been studying in Australia. In fact I am inclined to feel that the only political value which Australia has got out of its Colombo Plan efforts has been from the students." International students who continue to be among this country's most influential advocates and 'ambassadors'!

I lived on campus at UNSW for 15 years as Dean at New College and then as Principal of The Kensington Colleges, where my residence was in Basser College. Basser opened during the height of the Colombo Plan and, in a recent history of The Kensington Colleges, the author Claire Scobie (UNSW Press 2015 p.17) notes the Basser College motto '*Humani nil alienum*' – no human is alien. She comments "In broad terms, this encouraged students to see their world as their encyclopedia, where no field of endeavour, no branch of learning, no aspect of human nature is foreign." This applied and continues to apply to both Australian and international students alike in the special value of their interaction with each other and continues, for example, as part of the New Colombo Plan established by the Chancellor of the Australian National University, Julie Bishop, when she was Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs. Far beyond any economic value, it is an engagement of minds and knowledge, of friendships and connections, of skills, service and stories in the shared exploration of the world as our encyclopedia.

We are now, of course, a much more digitally connected world and even more on-line engagement will be part of whatever will frame the 'new normal'. Nevertheless, our domestic students, our universities and our nation will be the poorer without such on-campus and especially in-residence shared 'exploration'. It is not just the inevitable loss of revenue, but, without much needed Federal support, the likely loss of real and lasting relationships, of research activity and output, of far-reaching respect and reputation and, indeed, of philanthropic return.

Toad Hall was named by its students in 1974 – a somewhat radical and quirky reaction to their concern, in a time of change, that the University might name it after a Prime Minister or Vice-Chancellor! There is a creek with willows at the back and so, from Kenneth Grahame's children's novel 'The Wind in the Willows', with its main character Mr Toad who lived in the "finest house on the river", they posted the name on the construction site sign '*Toad Hall*'! It was sanctioned by the University Council! It remains, with its 'river' a symbolic reminder of international connection, discovery and worth. Our Toad Hall 'river', Sullivan's Creek, flows into Lake Burley Griffin and to the Molonglo River, on into the Murrumbidgee and to the great Murray, and out into Lake Alexandrina to the Southern Ocean, and into the seas beyond! In Grahame's novel, the character 'Mole' sits on the bank "while the river still chattered on to him, a babbling procession of the best stories in the world, sent from the heart of the earth to be told at last to the insatiable sea."