

**DISCUSSION PAPERS IN DIPLOMACY**

*Australia's International Education as Public Diplomacy:  
Soft Power Potential*

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## **DISCUSSION PAPERS IN DIPLOMACY**

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The Editors



## **ABSTRACT**

Australia's international education serves as public diplomacy, essentially engaging and influencing public audiences in a way that progresses Australian foreign policy priorities and ultimately, national interests. The multidimensional and increasingly globalised nature of international education presents enormous opportunity for vital exchange and interactions between and with students, academics and communities via onshore and offshore modes of delivery. Positive experiences of exchange and the development of intellectual, commercial and social relationships can build upon a nation's reputation, and enhance the ability of that nation to participate in and influence regional or global outcomes. This is ultimately the essence of soft power. For Australia, however, this soft power potential inherent in international education is yet to be fully realised. In the case of Australia's international education, there is room for more active public diplomacy leadership, improved evaluation and expanded dialogue both within the sector and broader community. Such strategies would maximise the soft power potential of Australia's international education, and contribute to Australia's future international positioning.

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# **AUSTRALIA'S INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION AS PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: SOFT POWER POTENTIAL**

*Caitlin Byrne and Rebecca Hall*

## **Introduction**

International education has featured as a significant element in Australia's evolving presence in and engagement with its immediate region for six decades. The policy imperatives driving Australia's international education engagement have shifted during this time, primarily from an early focus on development through technical skills and education exchange scholarships delivered under the Colombo Plan,<sup>1</sup> to a commercialised full-fee approach from the mid-1980s to present day. Today, Australia is one of the world's five leading English language based exporters of education services (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2010).<sup>2</sup> In 2010, 620,000 international students were enrolled to study through Australian education providers with 400,000 of those having relocated to Australia to do so (Australian Education International 2011a). Furthermore, during the 2009-10 period, international education generated in excess of A\$18 billion for the

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- 1) Australia is a founding member of the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic and Social Development in Asia and the Pacific, which was established by the agreement of the foreign ministers of seven Commonwealth nations, Australia Britain, Canada, Ceylon, India New Zealand and Ceylon, 1950. As a regional intergovernmental organisation the Colombo Plan today comprises 26 members including both Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth nations, and continues to work towards economic and social development in the region inter alia via technical skills improvement and educational exchange programs. Notably, Australia represented by the High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, Ms Kathy Klugman currently holds the presidency of one of the principal decision-making organs, the Colombo Plan Council.
  - 2) According to the OECD Australian universities report the highest percentage of international enrolments on their campuses, compared with other OECD countries with an average of 20 per cent of the student cohort being identified as international students. The OECD average is 7.2 per cent. Australia's closest competitors are the United Kingdom (16 per cent), New Zealand (13.5 per cent), Canada (7per cent) and the United States (3.5 per cent).

Australian economy (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010) and provided employment for just over 188,000 people (Access Economics 2009: i).<sup>3</sup> The dollar value of Australia's international education services secures its place as the nation's largest service export and third-largest export category overall, a fact well recognised by providers and policy-makers across the diverse and extensive sector (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2009: 8, Gillard 2009). The many and diverse stakeholders across the sector are cognisant that they now operate within a highly competitive domestic and international marketplace wherein the opportunity for immediate commercial gain, primarily through inbound students numbers, is a dominant driver. While not discounting the commercial value of international education, this article highlights the overarching and enduring soft power value of international education as an instrument of public diplomacy. For Australia, this soft power potential inherent in international education is yet to be fully realised. Public diplomacy provides an appropriate framework that can enable such a view. Public diplomacy is defined for the Australian context as 'the work or activities undertaken to understand, engage and inform individuals and organisations in other countries in order to shape their perceptions in ways that will promote Australia's foreign policy goals' (Australian Senate 2007: 42). It is of increasing importance as an instrument that can build and leverage soft power to facilitate a nation's long-term strategic positioning. In its current form Australia's public diplomacy, coordinated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) reflects a confused mixture of information, education and culture based activities, delivered primarily through Australia's overseas missions with no clear connection to strategic foreign policy outcomes, limited direction and little funding. Systemic issues within Australia's fragmented and under-resourced public diplomacy program were brought to light in 2007 by a Senate Inquiry<sup>4</sup> into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy and were revisited recently (June 2011) by practitioners and scholars through the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) Forum on Public and Citizen Diplomacy in

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3) Figures based on Access Economics estimate that 'each international student (including their friend and family visitors) contributes an average of A\$28,921 in value added to the Australian economy and generates 0.29 in full time equivalent (FTE) workers'.

4) Full details on the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy are available at [http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fadt\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/public\\_diplomacy/index.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/fadt_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/public_diplomacy/index.htm).

Canberra.<sup>5</sup> Australia's international education, in its many forms, was recognised in both arenas as a key instrument of Australian public diplomacy. Discussions at the June 2011 AIIA Forum in particular reaffirmed the central theme of this article, that the long term and strategic public diplomacy opportunities arising from international education remain largely undervalued and unharnessed.

Australia has already entered into some 24 bilateral agreements to facilitate education and training exchange into each region of the globe. The multidimensional and increasingly globalised nature of international education presents enormous opportunity for vital exchange and interactions between and with students, academics and communities via onshore and offshore modes of delivery in ways that are likely to have broader foreign policy implications. Australia's international education as public diplomacy progresses Australian foreign policy priorities and ultimately its national interests.

Australia's international education sector is diverse and fragmented, with limited consideration given to the potential public diplomacy benefits to be cultivated. Universities Australia, the peak body representing the university sector, suggests that this is to be expected as 'public diplomacy and soft power are not the primary goals of universities international activities. Education has primacy, and while the public diplomacy benefits are welcome, they are [only] secondary benefits' (Strategy Policy and Research in Education Limited 2009: 50). Indeed, the link between international education and public diplomacy has only recently been made explicit within the Australian context. The 2007 Senate Inquiry articulated this linkage into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy program. The Inquiry, however, went largely unnoticed by the international education sector, and only three Australian universities made formal submissions on the issue. One key university's submission to the inquiry observed 'that the role and significance of universities in the conduct of Australia's public diplomacy is poorly articulated and relatively unexplored, and hence is not well supported' (RMIT 2007: 2). As this article suggests, it is time to recognize the strategic benefits of public diplomacy via international education and pursue the latter

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5) For details of the AIIA Forum on Public and Citizen Diplomacy refer to <http://www.aiaa.asn.au/events/national-events/event/246-forum-on-public-and-citizen-diplomacy>. This Forum was the first of its kind to bring academics and practitioners in a discussion of public diplomacy in Australia.

as a foreign policy priority. To this end, this article is divided into three broad sections. The first section establishes the groundwork for the discussion of international education as public diplomacy and reviews the meaning and significance of public diplomacy as an instrument of soft power in the Australian 'middle power' context. The second section examines the multifaceted nature of Australian international education, not through the commodity lens that is usually applied but through the lens of education as public diplomacy and as a tool that enables engagement and exchange, builds lasting relationships and contributes to Australia's international reputation. This section reviews the various modes of delivery and the many actors and networks that claim an interest in the international education agenda. The third and final section concludes by identifying potential leadership opportunities for developing a public diplomacy view of international education that will maximise Australia's soft power.

### **The Soft Power Imperative of 'Middle Power' Australia**

The questions why and how international education, as an instrument of public diplomacy, contributes to Australia's soft power deserve consideration. Soft power, defined broadly by Joseph Nye as the influence and attractiveness a nation acquires when others are drawn to its culture and ideas (Nye 2004), is a phrase that has appeared with increasing frequency in Australian policy reports and articles, particularly since the 2007 Senate Inquiry. For example, the Lowy Institute (2009) identifies 'soft power' as a highly desirable outcome of Australia's diplomatic endeavours. The current international discussion about soft power draws upon Nye's assertion that the attractiveness of the state, portrayed through its identity, values and culture is central to building soft power, whereby:

countries most likely to be more attractive in post-modern international relations (that is countries that have soft power), are those that help frame the issues, whose culture and ideas are closer to the prevailing norms and whose credibility abroad is reinforced by their values and policies. (2008: 94)

The phrase has also received attention within international education circles. For example, 'soft power' featured prominently as a discussion topic on the

2010 Australian International Education Conference (AIEC) agenda.<sup>6</sup> Positive experiences and exchanges (both in-country and offshore), and the development of intellectual, commercial and social relationships can build upon a nation's reputation, attractiveness and ability to participate in and potentially influence regional or even global outcomes. This is ultimately the essence of soft power. The enduring soft power value of Australia's international education engagement is acknowledged in rhetoric, but the rhetoric does not penetrate the densely woven commodity focus of the sector. The concept of soft power remains difficult to translate into practice and outcomes and therefore just out of reach for those in the international education sector seeking tangible instructions. In practice, the soft power concept has been viewed with significant scepticism with regard to its application in an Australian context. The vague language of soft power does not necessarily resonate with Australia's traditional and pragmatic approach to strategic international policy. There is a sense that soft power is lacking in hard-edged appeal that makes it relevant to Australian practitioners and academics alike. For example, Alison Broinowski (2005: 230) notes that 'image like culture has a "soft edged" reputation in official Australia. It is an area that serious politicians and bureaucrats stay out of.'

Regardless of some minor bipartisan deviations through the decades, Australia's reliance on strong alliances with powerful and culturally like-minded friends and emphasis on pragmatic trade and security frameworks have defined Australia's traditional realist approach to international policy (Kelly 2006, Wesley 2009a, Gyngell 2011). Discussions of reputation, identity and Australian values, (the core currencies of soft power) have infused public debate from time to time, but have not generally gained serious attention from within the foreign policy bureaucracy. At best, soft power has been viewed as an inadvertent or 'serendipitous' consequence of other activities (Senate Committee Hansard 2007a:71). As a consequence, consideration of soft power currencies and the opportunities that might arise through diverse networks and relationships has until recently tended to occur on a largely ad hoc, inadvertent or at times damage control basis without regard for strategic foreign policy objectives or priorities (Senate Committee Hansard 2007b: 41).

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6) For the AIEC 2010 agenda see [http://www.aiec.idp.com/past\\_papers/2010.aspx](http://www.aiec.idp.com/past_papers/2010.aspx) (accessed 7 June 2011).

The damage control approach dominated from 2009 when the culmination of violence against Indian students in Australia, associated migration crackdowns, and the collapse of dubious provider institutions ricocheted through the international education sector and onto Australia's foreign policy agenda. In early 2009 a series of unrelated but violent attacks targeting Indian students occurred in the City of Melbourne. While the initial official response labelled the attacks as 'opportunistic violence', it became apparent that police had been concerned about a trend in racially motivated violence towards Indian students for some time (Banham and Gilmore 2009). At the same time, a series of education-migration scams exploiting commercial opportunities within the sector came to light. Fraudulent migration agents were found providing false education documentation and qualifications to international students via bogus provider institutions in order to support subsequent claims for Australian residency (Johnston 2009). An official investigation resulted in the deportation or detention of a number of Indian and Chinese students, tightening of student migration rules and the ensuing collapse of unregulated providers, all of which impacted negatively in particular on the Indian student experience in Australia. The combined coverage of these controversies, particularly by Indian media outlets attracted significant regional criticism of Australia. Not only did the attention damage Australia's reputation as a safe and credible destination for international students, putting at risk the A\$15 billion international education industry<sup>7</sup>. It also reinforced lingering stereotypes of Australia as a racist nation (Wesley 2009b: 1). The combined impact of these events highlighted serious gaps in the credibility and coherence of the Australian narrative as a provider of quality international education and destination for international students and travellers. As Michael Wesley also comments, the realisation emerged that:

students who return to their country with negative experiences could become a poisoned alumni conveying critical attitudes about Australian society and poor impressions about Australia's reputation as an education provider. They could ultimately destroy a strong export product.

This damage control approach resulted in a flurry of official visits by Australian politicians to India to reassure the Indian authorities and public

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7) In 2010 the trade value of Australia's international education had grown to more than \$18 billion.

that Australia was a credible and safe destination for Indian students. In August 2009 high profile Australian political leaders, including then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard and Foreign Minister Stephen Smith, all included India on their international visits schedule. A taskforce on violence against Indian students was also established and seven Indian journalists were brought to Australia under DFAT's International Media Visits (IMV) scheme as a part of the immediate response (DFAT 2009: 5, 6). The crisis nature and urgent pace of the Australian response appears to have had a mitigating effect. At the very least it demonstrated that at a political level, Australia is concerned about its identity within India and the rest of the region. The crisis response was too little, too late, however. As leaked official United States cables describe, the diplomatic response amounted to 'Australia's band-aid diplomacy in India' (Sharma 2010).

The decline in inbound Indian student numbers immediately after the attacks was a matter requiring immediate attention. In fact, as Nicholas Cull (2010) notes, 'Indian perceptions of social equality in Australia had declined from 7th place in 2008 to 34th place in 2010', which has been of significant strategic concern for Australia's broader regional interests and positioning. In launching the 2010 Nation Brands Index, Simon Anholt (2010) stated that while Australia maintained its position (ninth in overall rankings), 'recent episodes of xenophobia', especially with Indians have contaminated the overall rankings. According to Anholt (2010), in 2008 'Indians considered Australia one of the most welcoming countries on the planet while now it ranks 46 out of 50'. He also noted that Australia's reputation as a welcoming destination had fallen amongst South Korean, Italian, Brazilian and Japanese audiences, again most likely a flow-on effect from the Indian situation (Hare 2010; Anholt 2010).

As the Indian crisis illustrates, for middle-power Australia operating within an increasingly uncertain regional and global environment, the soft power imperative is intensifying. The positive reputation and relationships that Australia can build and leverage through international education extend well beyond the immediate gains apparent on the current account ledger. Conversely, the negative impact of poor international education experiences will tarnish Australia's reputation as a destination not just for students, but also for tourists and investment and may also hamper broader foreign policy ambitions. At a strategic level, Australia's emerging foreign policy challenges are increasingly global and complex in nature and are compounded by Australia's 'unique set of geopolitical realities' (O'Keeffe and Oliver 2010:

43). The emerging challenges include shifts in global and regional power dynamics particularly as China and India assert their increasing influence. Non-traditional issues such as terrorism, weapons proliferation, climate change, food and resource scarcity and health loom large with no regard for national boundaries. These issues require not just political will and determination, but also a certain degree of soft power that will enable Australians to join in creative collaborations across research, innovation, technologies and commerce, particularly within its own region, if they are to be managed forward.

Within this environment, international relations academics and practitioners are recognising that there is value for middle powers to pursue foreign policy objectives and addressing global challenges through collaborative approaches that engage with broader foreign audiences, including foreign publics with the intellectual, political, commercial and social capacities and focus to influence outcomes. Public diplomacy as an instrument of soft power therefore is increasingly recognised by other nations facing similar global challenges as the diplomatic tool of choice. Indeed as noted by the Lowy Institute:

Making Australia, with all its cultural and political differences, attractive in the region – in other words, projecting its soft power – should be a fundamental aspect of Australia’s efforts in minimising tensions, facilitating prosperous trade and ultimately enhancing its influence (O’Keeffe and Oliver 2010: 44).

DFAT also directly acknowledges that ‘in an increasingly complex and inter-dependent world, developments in a particular relationship or issue may have wider resonance and that international cooperation and coordination accordingly is more important than ever before’ (Australian Government, *Portfolio Budget Statements – Foreign Affairs and Trade Portfolio* 2011: 13). These global challenges present new opportunities for creative Australian public diplomacy initiatives.

Australia self identifies as a ‘middle power’ meaning it is neither powerful enough to impose its will onto other nation-states nor so insignificant or isolated as to be ignored or to operate on the fringe of the global stage. Australia has indeed a strong record in exercising a middle power approach, primarily through diplomacy, to persuade like-minded to align to particular perspective, and therefore plays a meaningful role in building coalitions and influencing global outcomes (Byrne 2010:5). As Foreign Minister, Kevin

Rudd continues to refine this view asserting that Australia is ‘a middle power with global interests and a creative middle power ... well placed in bringing together major, regional and small powers to shape and implement solutions’ (Rudd 2011). In his analysis of middle power public diplomacy Eytan Gilboa (2009: 24) suggests that ‘public diplomacy provides middle powers with ample opportunities to gain influence in world affairs far beyond their limited natural capabilities’. DFAT rhetoric suggests that ‘if implemented effectively, public diplomacy can reinforce Australia’s over-arching diplomatic infrastructure in advancing the interests of Australia and Australians internationally’ (Australian Government, *Portfolio Budget Statements 2011-12 – Foreign Affairs and Trade Portfolio* 2011: 13), which, as the Lowy Institute reaffirms, is ‘ultimately supporting Australia’s prosperity and promoting its strategic interests’ (O’Keeffe, Oliver 2009: 44). International education as public diplomacy provides middle power Australia an opportunity to build diverse and rich relationships and leverage the understanding and networks that come from such relationships towards collaborations that will shape the medium and longer-term regional, if not global, outcomes.

Furthermore, public diplomacy offers an alternative view of international education that extends beyond the immediate commercial perspective and allows for the development of soft power outcomes. The public diplomacy lens supports Australia’s identity and reputation as a quality provider of and collaborator in international education, but also as a connected and dynamic nation pursuing regional and global interests on the international stage. Australia’s Ambassador to the United States, Kim Beazley refers to the opportunities for education engagement encompassing student mobility, research and exchange capabilities that might be cultivated more extensively (Australian Trade Commission 2010). Additionally, the current Minister for Tertiary Education, Chris Evans commented recently to a Canberra-based audience: ‘our international students are making us part of the future and linking us to the most dynamic regions of the world’ (Evans 2010). However, the rhetoric hasn’t shifted the practice of Australia’s international education as public diplomacy sufficiently and remains underpinned by a singularly commercial focus, based on numbers of incoming and outgoing students, enrolments and export dollars. This pervading short-term commercial focus combined with a fragmented bureaucratic structure and lack of cohesive community engagement continues to undermine the longer-term economic and public diplomacy opportunities of Australia’s international education.

Clearly, a public diplomacy approach is determined by this strategic intent rather than the actual activity or mechanism employed on the ground.

Given that the primary objective of public diplomacy is ‘to influence foreign public opinion in a way that supports a country’s national interest’ (O’Keeffe and Oliver 2009: i), the vehicle utilised must appropriately engage foreign publics while at the same time delivering on the underpinning principles of public diplomacy. Those underpinning principles tend to encompass tailored credibility, dialogue and exchange, alliances and partnerships and authenticity of message (Ross 2006, Nye, 2004: 95, O’Keeffe and Oliver 2009: 8). Where these principles are adhered to, public diplomacy has a greater chance of building soft power outcomes for the nation. International education is a vehicle that enables and fosters authentic engagement, exchange and collaboration at the individual, institutional and community levels. Furthermore, the quality, content and rigour of the education, collaboration and research opportunities, alongside the supports offered to ensure the wellbeing of those involved, provide for an authentic insight into and direct experience of the values of a nation. Such learning experiences and insights ripple outwards across public audiences building upon the known reputation of the nation itself. The fact that Australian international education attracts the bulk of students from a range of its strategic regional partner nations, including China, India, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia and a large number of students from Latin America and the Middle East (Australian Education International 2011a). In Australia’s case, the strategic reach of international education further highlights the potential it offers to progressing Australia’s national and foreign policy priorities.

Looking to the past, Australia’s leadership and involvement in the Colombo Plan from 1950 to 1967 provides an example of international education as effective public diplomacy. As Richard Casey, Australia’s Minister for External Affairs responsible for nation’s involvement in the Colombo Plan stated in support of Australia’s Colombo Plan role in 1952: ‘we need to understand and be understood by the countries of South and South-East’ (Oakman 2002: 89). Developed as a post cold war engagement strategy, the Colombo Plan enabled Australia’s international engagement in the Asia Pacific region and levered Australia’s international outlook away from the limitations of the White Australia Policy towards engagement with its own region. Through his study of the impact of Australia’s involvement in the Colombo Plan, Daniel Oakman makes a clear link between the inflow of regional scholarship students under the Colombo Plan and the shift in the attitudes, values and understandings of ordinary Australians that allowed for the relatively swift structural and psychological dismantling of an otherwise

deeply embedded White Australia Policy (Oakman 2002: 90-91; Lowe 2010: 6).

Oakman's assessment is not an isolated one. Political commentator, Paul Kelly (2002) suggests that the Colombo Plan was 'the best example of Australian soft power', while a former Australian ambassador to the region suggests it was 'one of the most successful interventions they ever made' (Strategy Policy and Research in Education 2009: 52). Underscoring the soft power impact of the Colombo Plan were the personal relationships that it fostered and 'a general awareness that the student program was a valuable precursor to deeper professional and political links' (Oakman 2002: 96). Indeed, such personal relationships provided the scholarship recipients with 'more enduring and meaningful basis for continued contact with Australia'. Today, Australia counts the Indonesian Minister for Trade and the Chief Economist for the World Bank among its many influential Colombo Plan alumni. Australia's current Minister for Finance and Deregulation, Penny Wong's father was also a Colombo Plan scholarship recipient. Each of these alumni is the product of Australia's international education industry, and each through their capacity to influence Australian foreign policy -either directly or indirectly- contributes to Australia's soft power.

One aspect of a public diplomacy approach not directly drawn out in Australian definitions and descriptions, but increasingly addressed in international discussion, is that of the engagement and consolidation of support within domestic audiences and communities. Alan Henrikson asserts that effective public diplomacy includes the political process of increasing the understanding of, and confirming support for a country which in fact includes the country itself (Henrikson 2006: 11) and thus the domestic public audience. Jan Melissen also affirms that 'domestic public diplomacy can in a way be seen as the successor to public affairs during the Cold War, and its objectives go beyond traditional constituency-building' (Melissen, 2005: 8, 13). In support of these international positions, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT 2007: 1) noted in their submission to the Senate Inquiry the need for effective public diplomacy to 'include strong engagement with domestic populations about its intent and conduct'. There is good sense in the process of engaging domestic publics and consolidating their support for outwardly focused public diplomacy approaches, particularly in the case of Australia's international education. To use the phrasing presented by RMIT:

a citizenry with a strong understanding of Australia's standing in the world and its engagement with regions and partners is less insular in

outlook, better equipped to respond to the pressures and challenges of globalisation, and more likely to promote Australia's public diplomacy goals in their own professional and personal lives.

The Colombo Plan specifically allowed for targeted community engagement and consolidation of domestic support of the Plan, which revolved particularly around the placement of students in Australian communities and homes for the duration of their studies. This is perhaps where some of the most profound experiences of mutual understanding and respect between Australian families and students representing an 'alien' Asian region first occurred. According to Daniel Oakman (2002: 98), 'with a few exceptions, the experience of Asian students proved illuminating and meaningful for student and host alike'. Nevertheless, the involvement and understanding of the domestic community was limited and indeed remained insufficient overall. Over time and with the impact of other pressures, including migration restrictions, increasing domestic demand for higher education places and a building tension between domestic and international student numbers, community concerns about the inflow of international students into Australia (whether or not under the Colombo Plan) became apparent.

Australia's current approach to international education reflects very little of the early Colombo Plan approach, having been fully commercialised, reinforcing education as a commodity and enabling international students to purchase their education through Australian institutions at a full fee. This current approach to Australian international education has alienated domestic audiences further and led to a sense of unease within communities about the place of international students and a concern about student wellbeing and safety. The opportunities for the Australian domestic public to engage with, contribute to and participate in the benefits that are attached to the many dimensions of international education are therefore diminished.

### **Understanding The Dimensions of International Education**

The profile of international education as a vehicle for public diplomacy has emerged with a deliberate focus on the experience of the student travelling inbound to the host country. Today such a view is a limited one though. The world has seen a transformation of international education over the past five decades, not only evidenced by the changes in modes of delivery but also in the markets providing and seeking access to international education. The

layers and dimensions of exchange and collaboration have expanded, incorporating both students and academics and occurring both onshore and offshore with technology playing a more visible role in enabling connections. This section presents the modes of delivery of Australia's international education, the interests and the structures that underpin such delivery. Understanding these layers of delivery is crucial to re-conceptualising international education as an instrument of public diplomacy.

### ***Options on Offer: Modes of Australian International Education***

For Australia this inflow of international students presents the most obvious and tangible evidence of Australia's involvement in international education. Despite the many challenges to the sector in recent years, Australia has successfully grown its inbound student program in the past decade at unprecedented rates. For example from 2002 to 2010, the total enrolments of inbound students across all education sectors (including higher education, vocational education and training, Schools, and English language intensive courses) has more than doubled (Australian Education International 2011a). Global demand for quality education experiences clearly exists and is projected to continue rising at unprecedented rates. Within the current environment international student inflow is likely to remain as the dominant thread in Australia's international education experience. There is value in noting that other nations, including the United Kingdom and Canada, are also taking advantage of the global demand and Australia will be competing to maintain its reputation in the marketplace.

An often overlooked element of public diplomacy engagement is Australia's funding and commitment to outbound student programs. For Australian students the opportunity to travel outside Australian borders and become immersed in other culture, language and education communities, particularly within the immediate Asia Pacific region, is vital to the ability of Australians to make sense of an interconnected world, tackle complex global challenges, and build future relationships that progress Australia's wider interests. In her previous role as Minister for Education, Julia Gillard (2008) articulated this point further as follows: 'People connections [gained through outbound mobility] are vital to the future prosperity of our country, constituting part of what's known as the 'global supply chain' and ensuring that Australia is truly 'globally connected' going into the future'. Yet evidence suggests that Australian students' participation in international study experiences is lagging behind other developed and globalised economies. A

2008 study involving 36 Australian universities, reported that approximately 6 per cent of all completing domestic students undertook international study (Olsen 2008).

There is certainly scope to improve the uptake of outbound study opportunities, but of additional concern is an apparent lack of language skill and readiness amongst young Australians to engage effectively within the diverse cultures of the immediate region. In 2009 12 per cent of Australia's year twelve students were studying a second language and only 5.4 per cent of those were studying an Asian language (Perkins 2009). Language offerings within Australian universities have declined drastically in recent years. Despite Kevin Rudd's assertions during his recent tenure as prime minister that Australia is living in 'an Asia Pacific Century', and his aspirations for Australia to be 'the most Asia-literate country in the collective West' (Gyngell 2008: 7) only three per cent of Australian university students are estimated to be pursuing Asian language studies (Perkins 2009). Current trends indicate that Australia's global and regional literacy skills are lagging and signal a potentially serious gap in the ability of young 'monoglot' Australians to engage competently and competitively in the global world.

International education is not just about the visible inflow and outflow of students and academics. The growth in offshore delivery models for the sector means that in many cases international students are engaging with Australia (through academics, other Australian students and the curriculum) without leaving their home country, or from within the borders of a third country. Certainly offshore models provide a valid delivery alternative, particularly where there are conflicts in international and immigration policies, and student entry into Australia is restricted. While Australia's higher education offshore programs peaked in 2003, today enrolments in such programs represents over 31 per cent of all international higher education students enrolled with Australian institutions (Australian Education International 2011b).

As a result of the strength of the Australian dollar, visa restrictions on the inbound student program and demand for in-country skilling, transnational programs are in greater demand with many providers re-evaluating their models and markets of operation. Within this environment general mobility of staff is also a significant contributor to soft power potential. Leading academics, industry experts and administrators are actively engaging with government, institutions, industry and civil society on a range of pressing global issues. As Australian universities are encouraged to continue to develop world class research capability and reputation, the sustained contribution of Australians to global knowledge networks is also vital.

A final layer in the international education puzzle is the knowledge transfer, exchange and capacity building that occur in association with Australia's Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) program. With core education and training objectives that reflect the spirit of those pursued under the Colombo Plan, AusAID's development focused education delivery is a conduit for education providers to not only commercialise education and training services, but also to contribute to public diplomacy. As noted in the AusAID's submission to the Senate Inquiry: 'the global education program [they offer] enables the government to directly target tomorrow's leaders and create aid advocates among Australia's teachers who will promote the activities of the aid program and an awareness of global issues year after year' (AusAID 2007: 18). In terms of program engagement, AusAID notes that between January 2000 and 2007, its developed programs had worked with over 80,000 teachers who in turn reach up to 1.5 million students each year (AusAID 2007: 18). AusAID developed education programs and resources which are made available to a wide audience of international publics, including the Pacific Island nations, Indonesia, Cambodia and Vietnam and a number of African nations. In addition to specific programs and resources, AusAID directs A\$200 million annually into a range of education scholarships for international students, researchers and professionals, drawing upon both onshore and offshore delivery methods 'to promote knowledge, education links and enduring ties between Australia and out neighbours and the global community' (AusAID 2011). As with other modes of delivery, the public diplomacy value of these networks remains relatively untested.

### ***Actors and Networks:***

#### ***The Structure of Australia's International Education***

Education providers encompassing higher education, vocational education and training (VET), English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) and schools, are at the core of Australia's international education system. These institutions provide the education content, skills, qualifications and much of the support that attract international interest. To highlight the complexity of the sector, a 2009 report identified 185 institutions in Australia approved by the Australian government to deliver higher education courses (Australian Education International 2011b: 3, Heaney, et al 2010: 1, 3). Joo-Gim Heaney further clarifies that of those, 44 were self accrediting institutions (including a mix of public, private and off

shore universities) and 141 were non self-accrediting institutions (encompassing a mix of private arms of public universities, government instrumentalities, institutions of professional association, faith-based institutions and privately owned institutions), delivering to both domestic and international students.

Each of these institutions has developed its own local, national and international networks, some with overseas offices through which administrators are well positioned to engage with public audiences around their specific education offerings. The providers tend to operate separately and competitively within the market, although various coalitions such as the Group of Eight (a network of the eight leading universities) or the Australian Technology Network (a network of five technology-based universities) have emerged in recent years. In addition, peak bodies such as Universities Australia and TAFE Directors Australia represent the interests of various institutional networks on a collective basis. Since 2004, the International Education Association of Australia has played an important role in bringing together professionals in the industry from across all sectors.

Providers of international education operate within a highly structured and complex bureaucratic environment. Current portfolio responsibility for international education promotion, regulation and policy development in Australia is shared somewhat awkwardly by the DFAT through the Australian Trade Commission (Austrade) and AusAID, and the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) through the ever-diminishing Australian Education International (AEI). The working relationship between portfolios was blurred further when in July 2010 the Austrade assumed responsibility for the marketing of international education and training from AEI. The reallocation of responsibilities was accompanied by a funding of A\$8.6 million for promotional activities. More recently, administration responsibility for all development awards and scholarships previously shared between AEI and AusAID, has similarly been consolidated within the AusAID mandate, and therefore the DFAT portfolio.

Several other Commonwealth agencies have an interest in the sector, including the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (visa policy, processing and enforcement) and the Department of Industry Science and Recourses (international science and research and development linkages). The policy, promotions and regulatory role of the Commonwealth bureaucracy is further supported by the role and interests of state and territory governments. For states such as New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, international education is critical to the state's ongoing economic performance. In 2010 international education was the second

largest export for NSW, worth A\$6.8 million and the number one export for Victoria, worth A\$5.9 million (Australian Education International 2011b).

### **Supporting an Inter-Agency Approach to International Education through Public Diplomacy Leadership**

Australian provider institutions have achieved significant success in establishing international networks and collaborations with foreign institutions. For instance, during her recent visit to China, Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the establishment of a Chair of Australian Studies at the prestigious Peking University which is an initiative co-funded by eight Australian universities with private sector support. This is a notable achievement and demonstrates that provider institutions can be extremely active and successful in the collaborations they drive. Yet because of the nature of the sector, each activity of this kind tends to occur and is viewed in isolation. The accumulated soft power potential of these collaborations, in terms of relationships, networks and outcomes are not necessarily harnessed or developed beyond their immediate parameters. A more robust and visible public diplomacy framework into which provider institutions could connect and from which a full picture of Australia's international education links might emerge would be of value.

The Senate Inquiry honed in on the fragmented and diverse nature of the international education sector both in structure and policy approaches as a lost opportunity for Australia's public diplomacy efforts. In their final report to Parliament the Senate Committee made two recommendations regarding the need to improve the current view and practice of international education as public diplomacy. Recommendation 12 proposed that 'DFAT ensure that its public diplomacy framework accommodates the concerns of the educational institutions especially with regard to industry engagement by formulating appropriate strategies to facilitate a more productive engagement by these institutions in Australia's public diplomacy' (Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade 2007: 210). Recommendation 13 made by the Committee further suggested that 'DFAT initiate and sponsor a public debate on measures that could be taken to promote a more productive partnership between government departments and educational institutions in promoting Australia's public diplomacy'. Both recommendations were noted but not accepted by the Australian Government. The Government's response tabled in 2009 recognised that

there was an important role played by educational institutions in promoting Australia abroad. Specifically it indicated that DFAT and DEEWR were exploring strategies to further engage institutions (Australian Government 2009: 12, 13). However, three years later there has been no visible movement to address any of these recommendations.

The prismatic structure of the international education sector presents a challenge not uncommon in discussions about the instruments of public diplomacy. While such bureaucratic fractures can be the cause for broader policy disconnect, the diffuse nature of public diplomacy suggests that it is difficult for government or government departments working alone to achieve its goals (RMIT 2007: 1). Yet, there is a leadership deficiency that undermines the ability of the sector to work as a coherent network, when it comes to developing Australia's international presence and positioning through international education.

Leadership for the development of international education as public diplomacy rests most easily with Australia's foreign affairs portfolio. Shifting government priorities has seen key aspects of international education consolidated directly within the DFAT portfolio framework. Furthermore, just as responsibility for international education falls increasingly within the DFAT portfolio, a regard for and interest in Australia's international reputation, presence and relationships is emerging as a primary strategic objective, to which all actors contribute. Official departmental statements reaffirm the agency's responsibility to 'advance the national interest by enhancing Australia's relations multilaterally, regionally and bilaterally, extending Australia's influence on global and regional developments' and to 'project a positive image of Australia and promote a clear understanding of government policy' (Australian Government, *Portfolio Budget Statements – Foreign Affairs and Trade Portfolio*, 2011: 3).

Given the complexity of the sector and interests it encompasses, such a shift must build upon inter-agency activity and partnerships while utilising the existing public diplomacy architecture which exists through DFAT's public diplomacy unit. DFAT must become adept at establishing legitimate measures and evaluating not just cost and quality of public diplomacy efforts, but also the effectiveness of those efforts as they relate to key foreign policy priorities over the long term. The need for such a shift while perhaps clear is not easily realised. As noted earlier, DFAT delivers its public diplomacy program with minimal funding. This is unlikely to change in the short term. The current Gillard Government has committed to tight budgetary conditions in order to deal with a substantial national deficit and public diplomacy spending is simply not going to rate as a domestic political priority in such an

environment. Incremental and cost effective advances, however, might be made through better collaboration and coordination of existing resources and activities. For example, a starting point might include a deliberate and consistent strategy to improve inter-agency communication and collaboration protocols between providers, policy-makers, overseas representatives and researchers, incorporating a clear articulation of the roles and responsibilities they might share as a complementary network, and an identification of priority areas of interest (even on a country by country basis).

Clear and consistent evidence of political support and senior management direction are necessary preconditions to any such advancements being made. Australian universities have already demonstrated that they are reliable partners for government in achieving government policy goals. 'University' targets for supporting the government's social inclusion agenda are one example of this, whereby institutions have articulated how they will support government in meeting its stated goals (Swinburne University of Technology 2010). An improved operating model and strategic vision between government and universities at the most senior level, underpinned by a compact on international education as public diplomacy is achievable.

## **Conclusions**

There is growing support within the international education sector for rethinking the approach to international education. The recent Student Futures in Australia Report illustrates that the ongoing success and sustainability of the industry requires government and providers to re-frame new policy approaches for the industry. As Andrew Jakubowicz and Divinda Monani (2010: 22) further suggest international education is as 'a whole-of-society challenge, due to the fact that they [international students] generate a whole-of society benefit', and effective policy in this area will require open conversations, stakeholder engagement and social change policies.

Dialogue around international education as a core public diplomacy activity that builds Australia's soft power must also draw participants from outside the traditional education or industry based sectors and foreign policy and diplomatic circles. Furthermore, to be successful, the dialogue about Australia's international education future, requires the support of the Australian domestic community more broadly. There is a clear need for additional avenues of discussion that will engage a wider range of stakeholders: practitioners, students, academics and community members and

thereby establish a firm place for international education in Australia's international policy tapestry.

DFAT is the key government agency with a coherent -though under-resourced- international and domestic presence and a mandate to promote and protect Australia's international reputation, presence and future position. The public diplomacy unit within DFAT -while poorly funded- currently undertakes a coordination role on public diplomacy and has developed valuable linkages across the government and non government sectors. Improvements in resourcing of DFAT's public diplomacy leadership and policy skills, domestic outreach and evaluation capacities would underpin the success of any moves to view international education through the public diplomacy lens. Such a role aligns with current foreign affairs priorities, as articulated through portfolio budget statements, and existing structure-resources pending. In this way, DFAT might more actively ensure international education strategies are better considered and consolidated from a public diplomacy perspective across the existing inter-agency network arrangements.

Led and coordinated in a way that allows for the diverse stakeholders to contribute to a coherent narrative, international education could provide a spearhead for Australia's public diplomacy program. Through a public diplomacy approach the soft power value of Australia's international education engagement might be maximised creating the necessary mix of 'intensity, texture and tapestry of relationship' (Evans 2011) that will enhance Australia's regional and global future positioning.

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