

Tackling Barriers: Enhancing International Students' Employability in Australia

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International education is big business in Australia. Australia needs international students in order to run their universities and also to fill the gap of highly skilled workers in the labour market. The country has implemented various immigration policies to recruit international graduates. The process started with the liberalisation of the study-migration pathway in the late 1990s with the intention of allowing international students to apply for permanent residency if they obtained local qualification. However, a large number of international students failed to find employment, mainly because of inadequacies in English proficiency and soft skills. To ensure a better employment rate among international graduates, the government then launched the employer-sponsored migrant policy. Unfortunately, very few employers are willing to be sponsors because of complicated administrative procedures and extra training. The Australia government has reinforced the employment of international graduates by launching the National Strategy for International Education 2025 in April 2016, which emphasises the need for relevant local communities and industries to be more engaged in supporting fieldwork by international students so that they can benefit from hands-on experiences.

From the side of higher education, Australian curricula and pedagogies have been revised to embed attributes that are believed to match employability skills expected by industries and employers. Common attributes are communication, critical thinking, creative thinking and teamwork. This agenda is a “must” because both the government and accrediting organisations make it a requirement that universities must show how their students are learning the skills and attaining their claimed attributes. Employment success rate is now used to gauge the quality of higher education. One significant condition of assessment for public funding requires Australian higher education providers to demonstrate how they are engaged in embedding graduate attributes in their courses and programmes. The government makes public funding for universities partially contingent upon demon-



strable graduate outcomes, with an emphasis on the production of “work-ready” graduates who are competent within their disciplinary fields, and possess the abilities necessary to negotiate a world of work that is in constant flux. The emphasis on judging the quality of education through graduate employment is also shown in the establishment of the myUniversity website (<http://myuniversity.gov.au/>) by the Federal Government in 2012, with the purpose of collecting data about the number of graduates in full-time employment in order to rate Australian universities.

There have been, however, lots of arguments about the effectiveness of the attributes agenda, especially in the case of international students. This is because it is hard to interpret these attributes. How people understand the attributes depends on their background, expertise and position. Understanding these attributes is doubly hard for international students because they come from different backgrounds with different cultural values. For example, international students are often perceived as “not active”, “unconfident” and “not critical”. Workplace supervisors see Asian employees as being disengaged because they do not ask questions. However, Asian students tend to think that asking many questions is not necessary because it means challenging people — a sign of disrespect. Moreover, no matter how much international students could improve these attributes, they are still disadvantaged in the labour market when they have to compete with domestic students. For instance, it is impossible for an international student in education to compete with domestic students to apply for a teaching job at a mainstream school because English is still their second language.

More problematically, the implementation of the graduate attributes process is mostly hindered at the academic level. This is because such attributes are often seen as extra skills and qualities that students need to achieve beyond their discipline knowledge. Therefore, academics

often see this task as additional work, on top of their main duty, which is teaching disciplinary knowledge, leading to their lack of seriousness in working with their students to achieve attributes. Furthermore, a common issue is that even if academics take the graduate-attribute approach on board, many of them do not have the capacity to be able to teach and assess the attributes. This is a big concern for “hard” disciplines such as STEM because there still appears to be an emphasis on the acquisition of content knowledge, at the expense of more work-relevant skills and capabilities applicable to real-life settings.

Tapping into Resources

So what should be done to better prepare international students for employment? Recently, more attention has been paid to how international students could utilise their own capitals in managing their employment. These arguments have evidenced that international graduates tend to be more successful in the market where they can use their own cultural and intellectual resources. They have succeeded in securing positions in which they could work with clients from their own country or finding a job in their own community. For instance, many Chinese graduates have found a Mandarin teaching position instead of a general teaching position. Similarly, many international students have secured jobs in global companies where they are in charge of clients from their home country.

Australian universities also need to take into account the fact that the development of emerging markets in Asian countries such as China, Vietnam, Korea, India and Malaysia is leading to “reverse mobility” — the phenomenon of a significant number of overseas Asian students returning to home countries to seek career-development opportunities. China represents this trend very clearly because around 70% of Chinese students overseas have returned home. This phenomenon is situating “Western” education in a new position where there is the need to prepare students with skills and knowledge to succeed in both host and home countries.

As a researcher who has been working in intercultural education and graduate employability for many years, I would think it is time for Australian higher education to work on the following initiatives:

- Curricula and support services need to assist international students to tap into their own markets and capitals. International students should be advised about where their own market for jobs would be so that they could invest in exploring the market and developing connections with business and industries in that market. It has been well-evidenced that social networks and relationships are important in applying for jobs in every labour market, including Asian countries and Australia.
- Australian higher education needs to prepare international students for employment not just in Australia but in their home

country and a third country. Knowledge and skills embedded in the current programmes need, therefore, to be more internationalised and globalised so that international students can be kept updated with what is happening in other contexts. Returnees have been found to be disadvantaged in their home countries due to their shortage of understanding about the local markets.

- Australian universities also need to be more engaged and strategic when placing international students in internship programmes. International students need to be provided with guidance on being strategic about where to do their internships. If they plan to return, they should find opportunities to take internships in their home country and not in the host country.

To sum up, enhancing graduate employability is a priority in Australian higher education. Although efforts have been made at various levels, a concern is that Australian higher education is still applying a “one-size-fits-all” model in teaching and providing services. International students have been evidenced to be able to use their own resources and capitals to succeed in studies in Western institutions. It is timely to draw our attention to how this cohort could utilise their resources in managing their employability so that we could develop programmes and services that enable them to tap into their strengths. ■

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