



Geopolitics and the Australian Higher Education Sector

Time to do more homework

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Executive summary

Australia's long and successful track record in international higher education has resulted from two intersecting 'Golden Ages' in globalisation and higher education. But these Golden Ages are now passing, both impacted by a changing geopolitical landscape. This is a key risk factor to Australia's COVID-19 recovery and is creating new realities for universities that must be understood and managed to ensure institutional and system-wide sustainability.

Australia is the third largest recipient of international tertiary students worldwide, a status which has been underpinned by a series of favourable 'push' and 'pull' factors. Australia's lifestyle, geography, institutional reputation, and quality of teaching have attracted students from across Asia and further afield to our universities. However, both the push and pull factors are becoming increasingly subject to geopolitical uncertainty: it is time for Australia to take stock of the situation and our options.

The university business model came under significant pressure in 2020, although predictions of market downturns and failures had been rife for many years. Despite this, the sector remains hopeful that it can recover the previous international student numbers, but it is impossible to predict when or to what extent international students will return to Australia's universities.

Uncertain global dynamics are driving two central interactions between geopolitics and international education.

The first relates to how students make choices as to where they study, based upon geopolitical factors such as nationalism and populism. The imperative to study in a particular location is in a state of flux. Student flows will change as a result.

The second is 'the innovation imperative', which highlights how higher education is used as a tool in global competition, as the skills and knowledge acquired via international education are either retained or repatriated between competing states. 'Knowledge is power' in a world where nations strategically compete.



Universities can:

- 1. Refresh strategic risk frameworks taking into account current geopolitical risk**
- 2. Establish great international student experience (SX) for each target market**
- 3. Extend partnerships and alliances to manage geopolitical risk**

Governments can:

- 1. Refresh Australia's national 'Go to Market Strategy'**
- 2. Leverage international students as a key driver of economic recovery**
- 3. Bolster support for diversification**

01

Factors and trends in international education

The End of the Golden Age

Higher education around the world has a huge challenge on its hands. In two separate reports; *The Future of Higher Education in a Disruptive World*¹ and *Student Experience in the Age of the Customer*,² we argue that a Golden Age of universities' expansion and growing esteem is passing, and life for universities is becoming tougher.

In those papers, we lay out the case that higher education since the Second World War has been an extraordinary growth story, moving from an elite system to a mass- or high-participation system in most countries. As a result, the overall growth in the sector outstripped concurrent global population and real GDP growth between 1970 and 2013, and the proportion of higher education graduates in many countries has increased significantly.³

Domestic student growth was driven by economic and social factors including human capital theory, which justified investment in higher education as an investment in economic growth. At the same time the equality of opportunity agenda extended the reach and purpose of higher education into social mobility, driving growth further. Rising GDP and insufficient domestic provision in many countries then drove a global flow of people seeking international higher education.





Enrolments are increasingly concentrated

International higher education enrolments have become highly concentrated in terms of source markets, disciplines and course types. In 2019, China and India represented 50 per cent of all international student numbers (China with almost 171,000 students or 33 per cent of the population and India with 87,000 students or 17 per cent of the population).⁴ The majority of those students were concentrated in just two broad fields of education: management (41 per cent) and IT (14 per cent).⁵ And due to significant growth since 2010, international students came to represent 61 per cent of overall postgraduate coursework load in 2019.⁶

Over-dependence and decline in demand – the COVID-19 effect

Many Australian institutions have become highly dependent on the income derived from international students, as has been brought into sharp relief in 2020. Higher education enrolments were 5% lower in 2020 than they had been in 2019. Critically, key feeder ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) enrolments and school enrolments dropped by 32% and 20% respectively during 2020, creating demand issues that will manifest for some years to come.⁷ Universities Australia estimates that the sector's operating revenue fell by 4.9 per cent in 2020, resulting in 17,000 job losses and predicts further falls of 5.5 per cent in 2021.⁸ This impacts the whole Australian economy. The ABS has calculated total education export earnings (including international students' spend on all goods and services while in Australia) to have dropped by nearly \$9b (from \$40.3b in 2019 to \$31.5b in 2020).⁹

Before COVID-19 interrupted the international flow of people, the global market for tertiary education saw 5.6 million people cross borders for tertiary education (3.9 million of them into the OECD). Australia has been a major player in this global market for many years (almost equalling the UK with an 8 per cent share of the market, but significantly behind the US at 18 per cent).¹⁰ Year on year international education was Australia's third or fourth largest form of export, and in the state of Victoria, it has been the largest for some years.¹¹ This is reflected in the amount of economic activity generated by international education, peaking at \$40b+,¹² including \$10b+ in university tuition fees or 24 per cent of our universities' revenue.¹³ In 2019, international students represented 32 per cent of the student population in Australia's universities (523,000+ in a total population of 1.6 million).¹⁴

Analysts have been busy since the beginning of the pandemic predicting just how seriously Covid might affect Australian universities. The Mitchell Institute predicted losses of up to \$19b through to 2023¹⁵ and the Centre for the Study of Higher Education modelling showed that more than half of Australia's universities were facing notable risk to their financial sustainability due to the collapse in the international student market.¹⁶ More recent analysis also shows that a 20 per cent drop in international student fee revenues would bring up to half of Australia's universities into or to the brink of deficit operating positions.¹⁷

It remains impossible to predict how the international student market will function when borders re-open. According to the Mitchell Institute, international student visa applications have 'dried up' and numbers of international students who reside in Australia will continue to decline for some time yet as those remaining complete their studies. This will have highly detrimental impacts on our universities and the broader economy as 57 per cent of the economic activity generated by international students occurred outside the university gate.¹⁸

The sector has made a number of calls for the Australian and state governments to build a safe corridor for international student returns, citing the welcoming and open stance of competitor nations as "eating up Australia's market share."¹⁹ It is thought that any delay in implementing a safe corridor, combined with the insufficient support mechanisms that exist for international students during the pandemic, will have long-term impacts on Australia's student pipeline.



Supply and Demand

There are several factors which can be identified as important drivers of international education enrolments – these drivers can be divided into either ‘pull’ or ‘push’ factors. Push factors are those stemming from within the source market, such as population levels, economic growth and local standards of living, and higher education provision. Pull factors are those related to the host country and its institutions, in this case Australia, and include factors such as proximity, quality, education experience, personal wellbeing, and resulting work opportunities. In the current market and geopolitical climate, both push and pull factors are being dramatically affected.

Push factors

There are a range of local factors which influence an individual’s impetus to explore international education options. In some countries, this is characterised by perceptions of insufficient local availability of education offerings, or in some cases, the reverse, where the market is dominated by a highly competitive university system which restricts access. A challenging domestic job market can increase the attractiveness of an overseas education as a mechanism to differentiate oneself. For example, in highly competitive labour markets such as China and India, accessing international qualifications and/or foreign work experience opportunities are increasingly seen as a necessary mechanism to stand out amongst crowded graduate pools. The global international student market is dominated by countries offering English-language provision, which has long been held as a differentiator in the graduate job market. In addition, periods of sustained economic, political, and/or social instability can be critical drivers for those seeking residency in other countries.

Domestic economic conditions in source countries are another important driver of demand for international education, underpinned by perceptions of financial security and a sense of likely return on investment. Developing countries with growing GDP and populations in the 18-24 age cohort generate the vast majority of international students – primarily China and India in Australia’s case. When economic conditions contract, so too does global demand for international education, as seen in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis.

Pull factors

Australia has historically benefited from a range of pull factors which have contributed to it being an attractive and sought-after destination for international education. International student survey results show that the top five reasons students chose Australia are: the quality of teaching; the reputation of the qualification; personal safety and security; the reputation of Australia’s education system; and reputation of the provider.²⁰ Australia’s international tertiary students express high levels of satisfaction with these aspects of their experience and rate both the learning and living dimensions of their time in Australia favourably against the international benchmarks.²¹

Of course, there are many factors that influence students’ choices including; proximity to home, the welcome students experience, overall cost of study and living, and post-study work rights. Australia’s location, long history in international education, and established cultural diasporas combine to create unique advantages. Our proximity to countries which have been the source of large numbers of international students, particularly China and India, makes for more affordable and convenient travel for students and their families, allowing for more frequent returns home or visits from family. For students away from home for the first time, this is an important support for their wellbeing.

Cultural familiarity between Australia and our significant source countries has also grown over time due to the long history of Australia welcoming international students. Prospective students and their parents can rely on the word of mouth of many previous generations of students who had successful experiences in Australia. The diaspora of familiar faces and cultural practices in Australia's multicultural landscape also makes time here less foreign than it would otherwise be. Both of these factors add significantly to the attractiveness of Australia as a destination to live and study. The connections students can build among the international student and larger cultural diaspora make the transition to Australia and much of daily life much easier to manage (such as access to part-time work).

Price of education and cost of living are also obvious considerations for students when deciding where to study. The ease of access to part-time work whilst studying and post-study work rights are critical factors in offsetting the cost of living and studying internationally, and add to students' and graduates' employability. In the current economic climate however, the availability of these types of employment has diminished for the short to medium term.

As we explore in *Student Experience in the Age of the Customer*, these factors are likely to become increasingly important over this decade as students' needs change and the market for international students becomes more competitive.²² In the near term, students and parents are likely to demand new products and services, become more price conscious, and require clearer return on investment. Achieving graduate employment and career success are the most critical factors in achieving return on investment. While pre-pandemic employment outcomes were strong for both international undergraduate and postgraduate alumni, at 90 per cent of those available for work being employed, this is likely to be compromised for the period of economic downturn arising from COVID-19.²³



Changing patterns of demand

Until recently, geopolitics has not been considered as a major factor in either the push or pull factors for international students coming to Australia. However, as the global geopolitical landscape shifts, so too do students' perceptions of an 'ideal' place to study. The next section of this paper will explore this dynamic in more detail, including its potential for real implications for the education sector in Australia, and for the Australian economy. Indeed, COVID-19 gives us some thought-provoking insights on how education in Australia looks with fewer international students.

The rapid speed, depth, and breadth of change in the global system we are currently witnessing is being reflected in both the push and pull factors behind international students choosing whether or not to study in Australia. While pre-pandemic, it was easy to say that there were millions more potential students who might choose Australia, the market is not as confident as it once was.

International education has made a considerable contribution to Australia's economic prosperity and international standing, but the particular shape of our market holds significant concentration risk that deepens any particular geopolitical risk. Many of our institutions are therefore highly exposed to the geopolitical relationship between Australia and our top source markets.

02

Geopolitical trends and international education

Geopolitical dynamics affect education, and at the same time, the shape of international education will increasingly affect global geopolitical dynamics. The push and pull factors that drive international student choices are ever more impacted by the global geopolitical dynamic. Meanwhile, nation-states continue to wield education as a geopolitical tool. This section will explore the major geopolitical dynamics of the moment and examine how they impact international education.



What is globalisation?

“Globalisation broadly refers to the expansion of global linkages, the organisation of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a global consciousness, hence the consolidation of world society.”²⁴

“A social process in which the constraints of geography and social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding.”²⁵

“The inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach around the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before.”²⁶

The end of the Golden Age of Globalisation?

Much debate exists about when or what constitutes a 'Golden Age' for globalisation. However, it is now broadly accepted that the vision of a world on an immutable trajectory towards global cosmopolitan harmony, based on the values of Western liberal democracy and shared by many in the status quo powers at least, is no longer tenable. Much of the idea's shine had already been destroyed by the horrors of the First World War. From that, we learned about the connective tissue that needed to be painstakingly developed to hold nations together. We saw the foundation of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, and the Bretton Woods Institutions as means to build and maintain those connections. However, despite these efforts, the vision is in crisis again. Many around the world have lost faith in globalisation's promise of shared prosperity, are angry about 'elite mismanagement', and cynical about whether the existing institutions can be reconfigured sufficiently to meet the challenges of growing inequality and poverty. Convergence is being replaced by fragmentation, cooperation is being replaced by competition, and protectionism and populism are on the rise.

Around the world we are seeing a wave of political instability, the likes of which we would not have predicted ten years ago. While the specific causes are country-specific, at its simplest, the overall driver is real and perceived inequality, a growing sense of unfairness and disillusionment, and a belief that leaders aren't fulfilling their obligations to their people.²⁷ For many, this is a crisis of faith in globalism and liberal democracy, and a growing discomfort with capitalism – the promised benefits aren't materialising or 'trickling down'. In some cases, this is because the system itself is seen to be fundamentally flawed, and in others, because of a perception that a thick layer of elites is actively obstructing the benefits from reaching everyday people. As a result, we see huge deficits of trust in status quo elites, and a search for alternatives, be they left, right, religious extremes, or other, and a corresponding rise in populist leaders.

Related to this, nationalism has become more prevalent in global politics in recent years.²⁹ Populism is also on the rise – in the last decade, populists around the world have taken advantage of "the anger, fury and disgust targeted at members of 'the elite'" for their own political gain.³⁰ The instincts of populist leaders are inward-focused, unilateral, nationalist and protectionist, and these sentiments are stirred and encouraged across the population. As these sentiments grow stronger, the idea that an international system based on blurring some lines of sovereignty for the greater good erodes. Rather, the strength and protection of the nation-state becomes seen as the ultimate political purpose.



“Nationalism is best understood as a malleable and narrow ideology which values membership in a nation greater than other groups, seeks distinction from other nations, and strives to preserve the nation and give preference to political representation by the nation for the nation.”²⁸



The rise of nationalism, populism and the associated inward-focused instincts is leading to the weakening of global networks, norms and institutions. Existing multilateral governance mechanisms are increasingly unable to manage global challenges.” Lack of reform at the WTO over the past two decades has meant many countries have turned to bilateral trade agreements focused on pursuing competitive benefits in particular markets rather than working towards a broader regional outcome. The organisation’s weakness was exploited rather than addressed by former US President Trump’s refusal to appoint new judges to the Appellate Body, crippling the WTO’s dispute settlement mechanism. The response of the G20 (born out of a major global crisis) to COVID-19 and other global challenges, has been inadequate.³¹ Progress on addressing global issues at recent G7 (formerly G8 until Russia was excluded following its annexation of Crimea in 2014) summits has been hampered by internal divisions among leaders around what the key issues facing the world are, let alone agreement on how to address them.³²

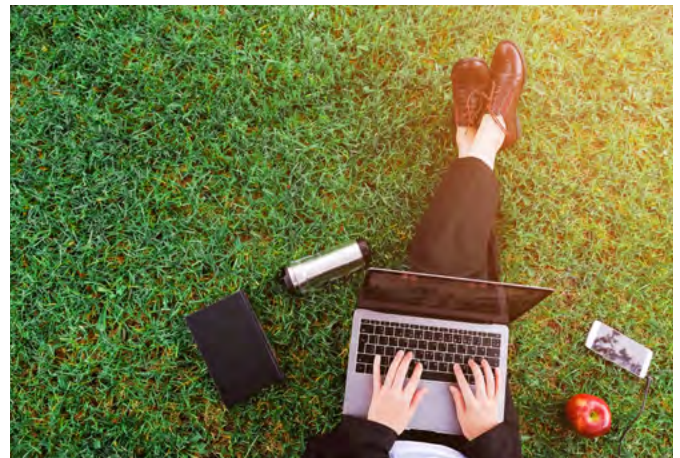
While former-President Trump’s distaste for global norms is not the cause of the erosion of international institutions, it certainly has not helped. What we are seeing is a much deeper shift in how the international system works. Around the world, the perception that the golden age of wellbeing and wealth for all that globalisation was expected to deliver is increasingly seen as an ephemeral dream.

Rather than working on the belief that a rising tide lifts all boats, the current mindset of a number of world leaders with populist, nationalist, and/or protectionist tendencies is that your boat (country) is your lookout and yours alone. The concept, and implications, of ‘vaccine nationalism’ in which countries hoard or protect their access to supplies of COVID-19 vaccines illustrates this point.³³ This mindset does not bode well for managing challenges such as the climate emergency.³⁴ It is as yet too early to say what impact the election of US President Joe Biden may have on the relevance and capability of international institutions to provide vision and guidance on global challenges. The US faces enormous challenges of its own, and will not be able to simply snap back to global ‘business as usual’.

We find ourselves in a world in which globalisation is under fire, with more governments whose instincts are increasingly protectionist, where nationalism is growing, and citizens are also more locally-focused. The ‘Benetton’ view of the world is rapidly eroding. Citizens are also less trusting of elites across multiple arenas, including the intellectual expert, and at the same time, more demanding, such that reputation – both at institutional and at national-cultural level, matters more than ever before.

“Sentiment is everything. International students want to know they will be welcome and safe. These views can shift on a dime depending on the broader geopolitical environment and country-to-country relations”

Emeritus Professor Stephen Parker, AO,
Former KPMG Global Lead for Education and Skills



Student choices

In this kind of environment, both the push and pull factors of the desire for international educational exchange and the positive experiences held to derive from that experience, are being dramatically challenged. Cosmopolitan understandings of the world in which students see international travel and study as an opportunity for growth and adventure are being replaced with skepticism, mistrust, and even fear.

The growing inward focus of leaders and populations around the world also plays out in practice as a less welcoming sentiment for foreign students, a fact that foreign students are acutely aware of. COVID-19 has demonstrated that our assumptions of free movement and the world as an extension of home are just that – assumptions. At the start of the pandemic, many students both in Australia and elsewhere found themselves stuck on the other side of the world from home, unable to return home, struggling financially, with the jobs they had held or had expected to hold suddenly disappearing, and having difficulty finding accommodation.³⁵ In Australia, most were unable to receive any government support. At the same time, there have been numerous reports of students of Asian background being subjected to racist abuse both in Australia and elsewhere around the world.³⁶ There were stories in foreign media of students’ frightening experiences of racism in Australia, and student anecdotes of how the idea of “going to Australia as a popular overseas study destination chills them.”³⁷

By contrast, Ireland’s approach to international students is worth noting. When COVID-19 first emerged in Ireland in March 2020, the Irish government announced that all international students of all nationalities would have access to the healthcare system at no cost, and any international student who lost work because of COVID-19 would be entitled to an emergency payment of €350 per week. This fact has been actively publicised by the Irish government, including the Irish Ambassador to India, who was reported in the Indian press as saying that the country could be viewed as a comparatively more attractive destination than traditional destinations like the US or UK, because of its treatment of international students in this time of crisis.³⁸

At the country level, the geopolitical context of competition and mistrust could see governments actively encouraging their students to study at home, or at least, closer to home. Part of this is to do with real or perceived concerns about safety, as well as cost, or quality of education. However, part of it is also to do with seeking study and socialisation experiences with 'like-minded' and minimising the potential for exposure to what are considered incompatible ideologies. COVID-19 has further exacerbated this tendency to protect the nation-state. And at the same time, we are seeing increasing investment across Asia in high-quality local universities to meet the demand of both domestic and regional students.

Ultimately, students considering going overseas ask the question of whether or not it is all worth it for them – and certainly in some cases the 'push' factor of being more competitive in a global market is not as powerful as it used to be. And while not directly causal, that trend is by no means removed from the broader geopolitical trends outlined here (see 'the haigui/haidai phenomenon' on p.15.) The signal is clear: the decision to study overseas is not to be taken lightly.

Research into geopolitics and international education is an emerging field. However, in addition to the implications for students' own choices, there are two important ways in which geopolitics and international education interact. The first is around how international student movement affects geopolitics, or, the 'innovation imperative' – reflecting the old adage that 'knowledge is power'. The second is how the broader geopolitical context affects international student movement.

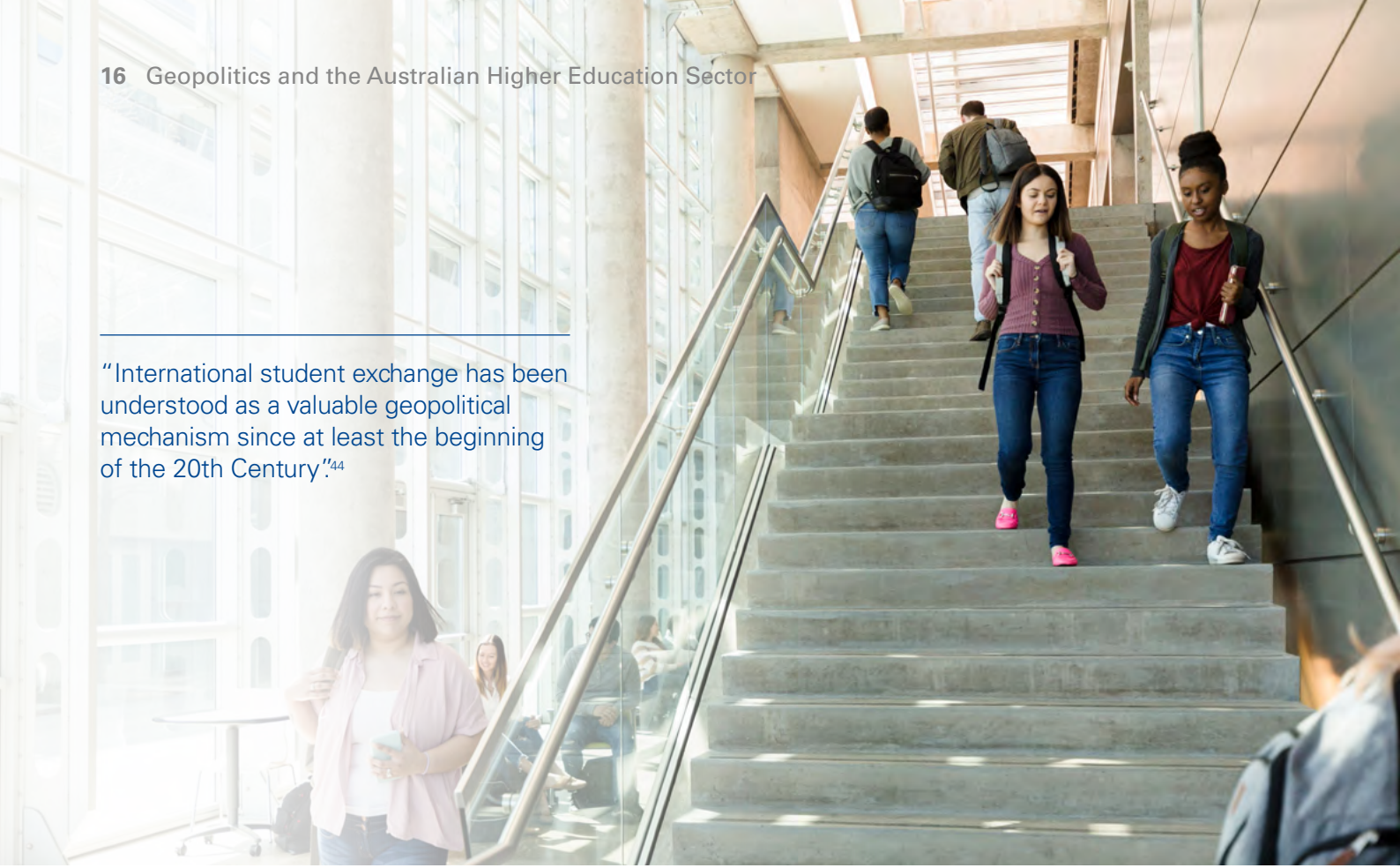


The haigui/haidai phenomenon

In Mandarin Chinese, haigui means 'sea turtle' – but the term is also slang for someone who has studied overseas and returned home. For many years, being a haigui was considered a good route to success, helping students stand out in a highly competitive job market. However, many Chinese students now question whether overseas study is worth it. Some returning students have identified the loss of critical networks, which they would develop if they studied in China, as a disadvantage. Almost half of returning students go into jobs unrelated with their study, and earn less than RMB6000 (~AUD1000) as a monthly salary, which although on par with or higher than their peers, causes them to wonder whether the time and money required to study overseas is really any longer worth it.³⁹

For Chinese students in Australia, the decision is further complicated by broader geopolitical trends, including the challenging bilateral relationship between Australia and China. Our trade relationship with China is at a low point at present, and there are regular indications from the Chinese government to students considering Australian education providers to be cautious of safety and quality concerns when doing so.⁴⁰ Chinese newspaper The Global Times has noted several times that Australia should not assume that exchanges including students will remain intact while tensions continue to rise.⁴¹ In 2020, the publication noted that "if bilateral relations continue to deteriorate, private Chinese investment, tourism and study in Australia may also be affected because people can always find alternative destinations in these aspects."⁴² The Chinese government has warned students that studying in Australia may not be safe, and research suggests that many students are factoring that concern into their decision-making.⁴³

“International student exchange has been understood as a valuable geopolitical mechanism since at least the beginning of the 20th Century.”⁴⁴



‘The innovation imperative’: education as a tool for global competitiveness

As part of the ‘Asian Century’ (see more on p 18), global economic and political power is shifting from the West to the East, and the post-Second World War international order we have been used to is unravelling. The question is not so much, which state will be the leading power in the system, but rather, what kind of system will we have, and where will the various actors find themselves positioned in that system? Changing politics and demographics will be central to these shifts.

Nation-states around the world are caught up in this dynamic, assessing their national interests against their alignments and alliances. As countries face increasing global competition, many are seizing the opportunity of uncertainty to advance their own position. Attracting – and keeping – top international students and talent is becoming a strategic tool for state competitiveness. As we race into the 4th Industrial Revolution, the ‘innovation imperative’, in which technological progress contributes to a state’s rise, or imposes constraints, is becoming increasingly important.⁴⁵ Skills and capabilities are an increasingly critical commodity, and countries are looking to import from overseas to complement their home-grown talent. The fact that migration is closely linked with innovation and skills is not new. Research from the US into start-up companies founded by migrants shows the importance and contributions of migrants to the economy.⁴⁶ The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) notes how critical innovation is for both developing and developed countries.⁴⁷

“American-led international [education] programmes during the interwar period into the Cold War sought to impose alternative programmes of modernisation to counteract the threats of Soviet state planning, thereby transposing American cultural views and technical knowledge to reconstruct a world in its own image.”⁴⁸

Countries like Canada and China have enthusiastically embraced the role of international talent for innovation, and the critical role of foreign students in achieving their national goals. For example, the Canadian Government’s International Education Strategy (2019-2024) cuts across several government departments, and explicitly notes that “international education is an essential pillar of Canada’s long-term competitiveness.”⁴⁹ Both inward and outward-focused, the Strategy aims to ensure that Canada’s future labour force has the skills and talent needed to ensure the country can compete in global markets, create jobs, and foster prosperity across the country.⁵⁰

Like many countries around the world, “China is strategically using its higher education system to realize many of its national and global objectives.” China’s ‘Double World-Class Strategy’, launched in 2015, is China’s vision for building “world-leading universities... with Chinese characteristics.”⁵¹ According to China’s State Council, that means “socialist flagship universities that honour the Chinese Communist Party’s leadership and the country’s traditional culture.”⁵²

In China’s case, education is a priority sector for the government, which provides much of the funding and sets the direction for universities and colleges.⁵³ The long-held role for education in achieving the country’s national interests was reiterated in the precursor discussions to the next Five Year Plan (2021-2025), held in October 2020, in which innovation is a central pillar.⁵⁴ China has a clearly-articulated goal of being a world leader in Artificial Intelligence (AI) within the next two decades, reflecting the broader competitive dynamic between itself and the US in the digital domain.⁵⁵

Should it achieve this goal, this pre-eminence will have enormous implications for the global structures of power and influence. In addition to investing domestically, China is building its innovation capacity through a concerted program of providing scholarships to overseas students – and to motivate overseas Chinese to use their skills back home. The scholarships have a soft power dimension too, with the goal of familiarising foreign students with local language and culture, not unlike the United Kingdom’s Chevening Scholarship program, the US’ Fulbright Program, or the German Goethe Institute program, among many others which include Australia’s long history of welcoming students via the Colombo and New Colombo Plans.



The 'Asian Century', COVID, and the Australian education sector.

For some time, Australia has placed its faith in the growing Asian market, including for international education.

Many analysts and commentators have accepted the concept of the 21st century as being 'the Asian Century'. So, where the 19th century was arguably dominated by the United Kingdom, and the 20th by the United States, the current moment and the near future will be shaped by Asia.

The idea that the weight of the world is shifting to this region is based on projections that – COVID-19 notwithstanding – overall Asian economic growth will be larger than the rest of the world within the first few decades of this century. This growth is being powered by India and China as well as smaller but similarly dynamic and strongly growing economies such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, among others.

It is not clear how recovery from COVID-19 will play out in developing Asia. On the one hand, some analysts note that “an uncontrolled health crisis followed by another deep global economic recession may be a far more existential threat to the stability of emerging middle powers in Southeast Asia, and even India [...] Moreover, without a truly global public health infrastructure, the economic rise of many smaller countries may simply prove unsustainable.”⁵⁶

For the immediate future at least, COVID will have a substantial impact on Asia's ability to provide students for the Australian education sector.⁵⁷ However, despite the profound health, social, political, and economic impacts COVID-19 has had on Asia, other commentators argue that the pandemic will accelerate the power shift from West to East.⁵⁸ Despite Asian economies and societies being hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, many look set for recovery – albeit on a long, slow, difficult road.

“How universities respond to the pandemic will likely determine the future of higher education internationalisation for years to come. Universities that can find the opportunities in COVID-19 – to retrench, reposition, reimagine, and re-engage with the intrinsic purpose of internationalisation – will be the first out of the gate in a new higher education global playing field. The changed internationalisation landscape will be an opportunity to reset the conventional dependence on international student mobility, replacing the quantity-over-quality model with high-value international collaborations that build academic quality, enhance research capacity, and produce social impact”

Ann Mason, Senior Higher Education Internationalisation Consultant

We are already seeing geopolitical impacts on the international education sector, including in Australia, where our challenging bilateral relationship with China is correlating closely with a decrease in numbers of Chinese students in Australian universities.

It is critical for the Australian tertiary sector to acknowledge that these geopolitical trends are not temporary, and the world will not be going back to 'business as usual'. The unfamiliarity of this geopolitical dynamism can appear alarming, and to some extent it is. However, change also provides opportunity for those who are prepared for it. This is true for the Australian education sector.

03

Impacts on Australia's Education Sector

The various ways that student choices are becoming increasingly impacted by global geopolitical dynamics adds up to a picture in which potential international students inbound to Australia are:

1. Having their needs increasingly well-met by quality education at home or in the region;
2. Seeing fewer advantages in terms of networks, skills, or job opportunities in overseas study;
3. Feeling uncertain about how welcome and safe they would be in Australia;
4. Finding their choices framed by growing discourses of national pride and self-sufficiency; and
5. Less supported by international networks as connections in the global system start to unravel.



The field of geopolitics and education is still nascent, but practitioners in Australia are clear that the broader, macro geopolitical context matters increasingly to the education sector, and we ignore it at our own risk. For example, we know that factors like price and accessibility will still be critical factors in how students make choices. The likelihood is that a small minority of elites and the middle class will continue to want to pursue the opportunities that international study can offer. However, the macro setting is set to play a much greater role in the whole global education market. Much of the international student market will find that nationalist sentiment and fear of the unknown, combined with an increasingly competitive on-shore or near-shore education offering, renders study abroad an increasingly unappealing choice – including in Australia.

While the outlook for the international student sector is not one of unalloyed optimism, opportunities certainly exist for Australia. However we cannot rest on our laurels or wait for things to “go back to normal”. In a recent publication, *Pathways to Recovery International Students Will Boost our Living Standards*,⁵⁹ KPMG has proposed that the Australian Government should seek to increase Net Overseas Migration (NOM) by attracting more higher education students. International students are younger than the Australian population as a whole and can be expected to be highly skilled as a result of their educational attainment before and after arriving here. We argue that doing so will increase GDP per head over time.⁶⁰

To take advantage of the opportunities that exist within the sector, Australia needs to ensure it makes strategic long-term choices about what it offers international students, and what markets it is targeting to attract international students. It is unwise for Australia to rely too much on any market for any export, and international education is no exception – in this context, Australia needs a concerted and stronger focus on diversifying its global source markets, disciplines and course levels for international students. For example, in some parts of the world, such as Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa, the demographic and development trajectory suggests there will be considerable market potential. One of Australia’s key advantages is its accessibility to the large and increasingly wealthy markets in Asia. Hence, South-East Asian markets including Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines also represent untapped growth opportunities. Other markets to watch will include Europe, where the uncertain impacts of a post-Brexit transition loom as a potential disruptor of EU student mobility.

In addition, boosting Australia’s immigration intake by making our country more attractive to international students has the double benefit of freshening up the age profile of our population and augmenting our skills base. While on-shore provision is most likely to enable this, our universities also need support to diversify channel offerings and grow digital offshore provision.



04

Impacts on broader business



Outcomes in Australian higher education have a deep impact on broader business communities, and geopolitics is a major driver of the ebbs and flows in international student numbers. Student and academic populations are consumers, employees, and partners for businesses in their own rights. Organisations across Australia need to be responsive to how changes in these groups influence their strategies, in both the obvious and less obvious ways. Top and bottom-line growth will be impacted.

Consumers

Student populations have represented consistent customer bases for local businesses across Australia. International students not only pay higher fees to the institution – they rent, eat, purchase, and travel in the surrounding regions. It is estimated that international students spent \$25b in the broader economy on goods and services pre COVID-19.⁶¹ ‘*Daigou*’, Australian-based Chinese nationals who purchase and ship Australian products on behalf of their contacts at home, have long supported businesses across categories such as vitamins, infant formula, and clothing. Many businesses have successfully positioned their product or service offering to meet the needs of these groups. These strategies will need to change as the number and mix of students in Australia deviates with geopolitical trends. Organisations will need to intimately understand the preferences of their new customers, more than ever before.

Employees

16,588 overseas students progressed from student visas onto permanent residency visas during or after their courses in 2019-20, an increase of 12.6% from 2018-19, in addition to a large number who extend their time in Australia on temporary work arrangements.⁶² Foreign migrants, many of whom are in Australia to study, are a major pool of talent for Australian organisations. Offering connectivity to high-growth global markets, language skills, and technical expertise through their degree programs, geopolitical influences in higher education will affect available labour for businesses. Training within the Australian population and sourcing skilled personnel from alternative source nations will become important strategies for organisations to adopt.

Partners

Universities are important partners for private businesses. Contributing research innovation and co-funding to projects of mutual interest, partnerships across the university sector, and business, is crucial to driving commercialisation of new technologies and IP. Changing revenue sources for universities as a result of geopolitical influence are likely to affect how these programs are prioritised and funded. As particular university departments are afforded greater or reduced focus to meet the needs of the times, opportunities for businesses in certain sectors will mirror these changes. University policy and strategies will impact the ability of organisations to access leading R&D and innovation.

05

What next?

Universities can:

1. Refresh strategic risk frameworks taking into account current geopolitical risk

Most of Australia's universities are heavily reliant on one or two key source markets, which bring their own particular geopolitical risks at specific regional and student cohort-levels. Geopolitical risks in each market impact on university-wide strategic risks and must be explicitly understood and managed as such. Institutions need to determine the risk factors in their current portfolio and the efficacy of current mitigations. This should lead to a refreshed view on the institution's risk appetite. Additional mitigations can include diversification of markets with reference to courses, disciplines, channels, and student cohorts as well as regular geopolitical risk assessments per market to determine if the geopolitical risk landscape has changed.

2. Establish great international student experience (SX) for each target market

Students and their expectations are changing. The universities that can deliver to students' learning, personal, and customer expectations at the right price will thrive in the increasingly volatile and competitive world. Understanding how the geopolitical landscape might impact students' needs and preferences will be critical in rebuilding market share and building new markets in a COVID-19 impacted world. Delivering great SX depends on: knowing your target students deeply and in detail; developing an evidence-based SX strategy that meets their needs as well as those of the institution; and becoming student-centric through the necessary optimisations or transformations.

3. Extend partnerships and alliances to manage geopolitical risk

Internationalisation for Australian universities has long meant developing strong student recruitment and teaching delivery partnerships. In the strongest of these, market intelligence is shared and used to inform overall market strategy. Wherever possible, these partners should be explicitly included in geopolitical risk assessments to leverage their 'on the ground' intelligence and understanding of sentiment.





Governments can:

1. Refresh Australia's national 'Go to Market Strategy'

Australia's *International Education Strategy*⁶³ was published in 2016, in entirely different market settings. While much of its content continues to be relevant, there is a need now to review progress against its tenants pre- and post-COVID-19 through deep collaboration with the sector that co-creates the pragmatic actions to support the reboot of Australia's market position.

2. Leverage international students as a key driver of economic recovery

KPMG has argued that increasing Net Overseas Migration via the international student intake could act as a significant offset to the economic losses caused by COVID-19. The 'Pathways to Education' paper⁶⁴ makes a number of specific suggestions to bolster Australia's attractiveness to international students through increasing post-study work rights and permanent residency eligibility. It makes the case that doing so will increase GDP per head over time.

The higher education sector has argued that accelerating border re-opening for international students is vital to securing Australia's market share *vis a vis* our competitors.

3. Bolster support for diversification

It has been clear for some years that the continued success of Australia's international education offering depends on diversification of business models, target markets, products, services and delivery channels.⁶⁵ As shown above, however, most universities remain highly leveraged in one or two markets with student cohorts highly concentrated in two disciplines and over-stacked in postgraduate coursework. Much has been made in the sector of its new-found ability to delivery scaled online education both here and offshore. A collaborative approach between the Government and the sector could see this grow as a new channel.

06

KPMG capability



Australia Geopolitics Hub

The Australia Geopolitics Hub (AGH) provides solutions and thought leadership to track and effectively navigate geopolitical complexity and risk. The AGH draws on specialised capabilities across KPMG in Australia and globally to provide tailored and practical roadmaps for success in these uncertain geopolitical times.



Access Asia

Access Asia is KPMG's response to the increasing trade opportunities in the high growth Asian region. We utilise our teams of dedicated specialists to assess opportunities in international markets and build relevant strategies for accessing them, including market prioritisation exercises.

Understanding and entering international markets is complex, and as such we will tailor our analysis and work to your needs. Our Australian team members have extensive experience of living and working in key Asian markets, enabling us to bring their first-hand knowledge to bear for you.



Education sector specialists

KPMG's Education team is a dedicated group of professionals serving clients in higher education, vocational education and training, early childhood and schools, as well as the strategic planners, funders and influencers of educational services.

The education sector is undergoing significant disruption, accelerated by new technologies, consumer choice, and COVID-19. Our team's expertise can help deliver excellence in student experience, and excellence in education operations, bringing targeted and timely insights.

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