China is where it's at for Australia

Opinion
Michael Gallagher

The Chinese government is investing in universities on a massive scale to bring China to the forefront of global research, innovation and knowledge. It is in Australia's long-term interest to engage with the development of Chinese higher education. Closer links with leading Chinese universities have obvious academic benefits for all parties.

In addition, links of this kind point to the next stage of international engagement for Australian higher education. We should now build on 20 years of successful internationalisation by putting a sharper focus on quality, postgraduate studies and research. Above all, Australian universities need to make a firm commitment to genuine two-way links with other countries.

International education in Australia faces difficult times. A rise in the value of the dollar has made the country a more expensive study destination, at the same time as onerous visa requirements mean it is harder to qualify for a student visa. More worryingly, there are widespread perceptions in Asia that Australia does not welcome international students.

Since it has long been suspected overseas that Australia is only involved in international student education for the money, the recent transfer of some responsibilities in this area from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations to Austrade is perhaps unfortunate.

Australian universities already have strong links with universities overseas. To participate in the emerging global research effort, our universities need to strengthen these links and make new connections. Universities will pursue these links anyway but there is a role for Canberra to support them.

Government funding incentives could help two-way scholarships and research linkages to grow, develop and diversify. Government support could help win wider acceptance for the presence of research and teaching facilities set up and staffed by international academics within Australian universities. Government can also play an important role in brokering international agreements between universities.

More immediately, government should take every opportunity to promote Australia as a country that welcomes international students and actively seeks to internationalise its higher education sector.

On October 10, the Group of Eight universities signed an historic memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the China 9 Research Universities. The China 9 include some of China's leading research-intensive universities, which have been selected by Beijing to receive intensive funding for investment in world-class research infrastructure and staff, and they are the first choice for the top school-leavers.

The China 9 will play a central role in the emergence of a world-leading higher education system, but their efforts are only a part of a bigger funding and development push. Recent government investment has seen the China 9 develop research infrastructure to match any university in the world. They are also using new government money to invest in talent, developing "home grown" potential and recruiting expatriate researchers back to China.

The MOU signed earlier this month gives Australian universities and students a unique opportunity to be part of the growth of world-class Chinese universities.

At the undergraduate level, the MOU extends the China 9's student exchange program to Group of Eight universities. Australian students will be able to spend a semester at an elite Chinese university and receive full credit towards their degrees. Likewise, some of China's best students will come to G08 universities in Australia, bringing their formidable talents and new perspectives on China-Australia engagement.

At the doctoral and post-doctoral level, the MOU creates exciting new opportunities for exchange and collaboration, building on the efforts of the China 9/Group of Eight deans of graduate studies.

The MOU is an example of what is possible. In higher education and research, China is where the action is. There are great rewards for Australia in participating in its emergence as a global academic power through relationships of exchange and mutual benefit.

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