

# Before you slam universities, think about the benefits

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Last week, in Nine Entertainment newspapers, respected political editor Chris Uhlmann decided to weigh into the media tsunami that had been building up about overseas students in our universities.

In attempting to find a new angle to this story, Uhlmann referred to the “mess” that vice-chancellors had made “as they built gilded palaces on rivers of gold flowing from full-fee paying foreign students”. While we are well used to media hyperbole, this type of unhelpful personal attack significantly lowered the tone.

This must be more than just a debate about the merits of international student tuition fees cross-subsidising building works (and thousands of construction jobs in the process) at our public universities.

For what our nation has achieved during the past 50 years is far more substantial. Going back to the original post World War II Colombo Plan, we have imbued future leaders of our neighbouring countries with our Western democracy-inspired ideals, ethics and “can do” multicultural spirit.

The pedagogical framework that our academics have put in place encourages critical thinking, creative learning and team-based project work. Given that many students from Asian countries have been educated in systems reliant on rote learning, our universities are often opening their eyes and minds to what is possible.

There is, nowadays, a happy juxtaposition between the pedagogy provided by Australia’s higher education institutions and the world of work. Global corporations are actively seeking out young graduates with the same above mentioned attributes.

Our own domestic higher education students have voted with their feet with one in five now undertaking a study abroad opportunity through initiatives such as the New Colombo Plan. In doing so, they also are keen to objectively benchmark their own culture by studying and working in a different one.

What is therefore missing from Uhlmann's analysis is the incredible soft power benefit that our nation has accrued by teaching students from around the world. For, by imbuing global citizenship attributes into young adults from different political systems and cultures, we are surely delivering on a fundamental social good.

However, what was also galling about Uhlmann's attack on the vice-chancellors was that it failed to mention the paucity of capital works funding that our universities have been subjected to now for decades. Faced with many competing demands on the public purse, successive state and federal governments have been largely content to let our higher education institutions find their own funds for necessary building works.

Does our nation's media genuinely believe that some of the world-leading research that Australia has been credited with during recent years was cooked up in laboratories that were originally constructed with taxpayer dollars in the 1950s? Does our latest graduating class of young journalists honestly think that all of the state-of-the-art equipment they may have had access to in their course has been paid for from their HECS fees?

If the answers to such questions are in the affirmative then clearly the international education sector needs to do a better job at communicating the benefits for domestic students of the "rivers of gold" that one of our country's leading journalists was so upset about.

As a former governing council member of Swinburne University, I am well aware that every dollar spent by our education institutions is subject to some of the most rigorous probity and audit procedures on the planet.

In equal measure, it is the governing board of a university that invariably determines the merits of any new lecture hall, laboratory or creative arts facility to be constructed on campus.

What many journalists appear to be oblivious to is that each university is subject to their own separate state government act of parliament with every premier in the land able to appoint a number of their governing council members. On this basis, if they choose to do so, Australian governments can still hold significant sway over funding decisions made by our public universities.

Of course, like all countries, Australia must address the potential for macro political issues to affect the integrity and autonomy of our education institutions.

But it is another thing entirely to conflate these concerns with the assumption that there is a lack of due diligence on course entry standards and even construction of building works on our campuses. Such simplistic analysis overlooks the governance and the financial constraints to which our 39 public university chief executives have long been subject.

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