

REVIEW

Edited by Michael Visontay

DEGREES OF DOUBT

THE face of Australian universities has changed. In some courses, almost half the students are foreign, paying fees. For academics, this spells fear.

They say there is pressure to pass undeserving candidates. "The usual offer is that this person would be spectacularly good if they didn't have to write their work in a foreign language. There is a sense of 'Let's look for the extenuating circumstances, nod nod, wink wink'," says Dr Bill di Maria, from the faculty of social work at the University of Queensland. They also say pieces are being denied to



pass international students] is there." For one thing, lecturers do not usually know which of their students are international fee-payers and which are not. On top of the overseas contingent, a further 15 per cent of students are from non-English speaking backgrounds. At the University of NSW, the two groups total 48 per cent of students. The international office at the UWS was alerted to an alarming rate of failure among a group of students in one faculty last year. All the students turned out to be Australians — with non-Anglo names. Leal says pass rates for international students "are not higher than [those] for Australian students". About half the

work at the University of Queensland.

They also say places are being denied to local students to cater for those who pay.

Such conflicts are inevitable by-products of change. The embrace of overseas students by universities is more than just a change. A revolution is upon us.

There are now more than 57,000 overseas students in our universities. They contribute \$1.7 billion annually to the economy. They comprise 10 per cent of students and account for six per cent of university revenue, and the proportion is growing. In number, they almost equal the annual immigration program.

Overseas student numbers doubled every year between 1987 and 1990, and have doubled again since, growing at 40 per cent a year, on average, for the past seven years. More than 85 per cent are Asian. In some courses — business at Curtin University and commerce at the University of Southern Queensland — almost half the students are foreign.

It is expected that overseas students will account for most of the growth in our university system into the next century. IDP Education Australia estimates we could be hosting more than 200,000 international students by 2010.

Their influence has already been profound. On campuses you can buy foreign newspapers, halal food and air tickets to anywhere in the world. They've done more to teach multiculturalism to the denizens of Toowoomba and Wagga Wagga than 13 years of Labor rhetoric.

Their fees have created some 500 jobs a year (in and outside universities) plus courses and buildings which universities could not otherwise have afforded. Services for all students have increased. They have brought international friendships and cultural links which will eventually translate into trade benefits.

They have also prompted major reassessments of university practices. Courses have been overhauled to include "international" content and teaching and assessment methods have been revised to be more "user-friendly".

Yet there remains a "dormant feeling of resentment" among some Australian students against international students, says Professor David Wilmoth, pro-vice chancellor of international programs at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, where 17 per cent of students are from overseas.

The perception that overseas students are taking places away from Australian candidates has never been satisfactorily erased. It cannot be, as long as locals who seek a place at university are excluded.

Despite the Federal Government's attempt to fix the problem by allowing local students to buy places too, this perception will remain. Universities simply do not track their costs accurately enough to be able to prove that they are not subsidising their overseas student operations with Government funding.

An even greater problem examined here, and one you hear much less about, is the resentment felt by Anglo academics floundering in front of predominantly non-Anglo classes.

The coming years will test university leaders. Under pressure from a 4.9 per cent cut in operating grants over the next four years, they plan almost to double the number of overseas students in that time.

THE conflict at the core of overseas student programs is that, in the eyes of many academics, providing a "good ser-



Overseas students comprise 10 per cent of all tertiary students and their presence is growing fast. As our universities lap up their fees, however, they are accused of trying too hard to help them pass and of taking away places from locals. Catherine Armitage reports on a revolution in education

vice" for the fee-paying clients is the same thing as prostituting your academic standards for the sake of a dollar.

Federal Government guidelines require that "offers of admission should not be made to overseas students on a less selective basis than those made to prospective home students".

Yet it is a common claim among academics that overseas students are accepted under spurious entrance criteria ahead of qualified students, then herded through courses despite inadequate performance so they can make way for the next lot of milch cows. Another grumble is that paying for their degrees gives them unrealistic expectations of passing.

Many universities are happy to admit they go to considerable lengths to avoid failure for overseas students. It is this intervention that seems most to raise the

ire of academics and also begs the question: do they go to the same lengths for local students?

IN the campus international offices that recruit them, foreign students have a powerful advocate which local students lack. These offices have power because they bring in money: between \$200 and \$300 million a year in total, including \$40 million-plus a year each for the biggest players, Monash University and RMIT. The money's real value is even higher because universities can spend it as they like, unlike government funds for specific purposes.

It is perfectly normal for the international office to intervene where international students are failing. Wilmoth says RMIT has "early warning systems" to head off failure for international students. Professor Deryck Schreuder,

vice-chancellor of the University of Western Sydney, says: "We address that before we get to [that] point."

Ian Harris, director of the international office of the Australian National University, says: "I will talk to the dean and the head of the academic department to work out where expectations are not being met."

Administrators say adjustments to entry criteria and the provision of academic support services is the limit of their intervention, because lowering standards will only do damage in the long run. Says Barry Leal, vice-chancellor of the University of Southern Queensland (with 15 per cent overseas fee-paying students): "If we pass students from overseas and the story gets around that this [university] is an easy cop, that might bring students in the short run, but certainly won't in the middle or long term."

Bill di Maria, a self-described academic dissenter at the University of Queensland, says colleagues have come to him with claims of being subjected to "subtle pressures" from above when they have tried to fail work submitted by international students.

The pressures are hard to resist, he says, especially for "powerless, fear-driven young academics on five-year tenure tracks [who] know at the end of the day they have to have the head of department's signature".

Universities consistently declined to supply comparative failure rates for international students for this article, but the available evidence is that they are not systematically passing easily.

Agnes Lee Sagama from Sabah, Malaysia, a final year arts student at the ANU, says: "I know too many people who have failed to believe that the pressure [to

LIFE WITH FOREIGN STUDENTS

- Overseas students contribute 6 per cent of all university revenue. They comprise 10 per cent of all students. Universities plan to almost double that level during the next four years
- It takes five to 10 years for a non-English speaker to acquire the same level of English skills as a native speaker
- The Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology has early warning systems to head off failure for international students
- The Australian National University has introduced supplementary exams due to concern about high failure rates
- At some universities, overseas students get extra reading time in exams and are allowed to use dictionaries
- This year 24,000 local applicants who were academically acceptable missed out on places due to lack of government funds

submitting are no higher than those of Australian students". About half the students who appeared before "unsatisfactory progress" committees at Melbourne University last year were from overseas or from non-English speaking backgrounds, despite such students comprising only 10 per cent of the university population, according to international student adviser Lindi Millman.

THE ANU has just introduced supplementary exams, largely because of concern about high failure rates for international students. Figures obtained by ANU Students Association president William Mackerras showed failure rates in economics/commerce and law up to twice as high as for local students. "I kept going around telling everyone they should be ashamed ... There was quite a fuss."

Neomy Storch, a lecturer in Melbourne University's Centre for Communications Skills and English as a Second Language, told a recent international student summit it takes five to 10 years for a non-English speaker to acquire English skills which place them on academic parity with English speaking students.

Study skills specialist Bridg Ballard of the ANU says research shows that no matter how competent the student, working in a foreign language under time pressure is a severe disadvantage: "The majority of students, when there is language involved, will drop a grade in exams," she says.

Disadvantage is recognised by extra services for overseas students. The minimum offering is supplementary English language tuition. At some universities, including Melbourne, students get extra time to hand in assignments to the Centre for Communication Skills, which advises on improvements before they are submitted for marking.

Some universities, including the ANU, give international students extra reading time in exams and let them use dictionaries. Individual lecturers provide supplementary reading material, often on the Internet. Some faculties appoint international student advisers. There is also a fashion for mentoring programs, where international students are looked after by an individual student or lecturer.

"There is a lot more happening in the 1990s than there was in the 1980s," says Ballard. She has been invited to 23 of Australia's 36 universities to give seminars on how to teach international students. "With the larger numbers, they can't be handled by a small support centre or an individual tutor," she says.

But so far, it is dedicated teachers working in isolation who seem to be doing the hard yards. One such is Dr Judy Snodgrass, for 15 years a teacher of English as a second language, who lectures in Asian studies at UWS.

The startling experience of receiving a word-perfect regurgitation of one of her early lectures from an Asian student in an exam started Snodgrass thinking that "this effort ought to be redirected".

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tains. So it was curtains for the national anthem. Not ours, theirs. Indeed, the curtailed tradition had defined the dimensions of our citizenship. You would be sitting in an Australian cinema watching an American movie concluding with a British anthem.

porridge. Yet the Brits have any number of alternatives — *Land of Hope and Glory*, *Rule Britannia* and the theme from *The Dam Busters*. Or that splendid pastiche from the BBC's *House of Cards*, currently being recycled for *The Final Cut*. Now, that's what I call an anthem. It's bad enough having a flag that

pretend to sing *Advance Australia Fair*. The deep, desolate strains reach the waters and, sinking beneath them, sound like cetacean instructions to turn right and drown yourself in the shallows. All those renditions of *Advance Australia*. All those dead whales. It can't be a coincidence.

Fair but, amazingly, because he hears the approach of four blokes riding horses. A squatter mounted on his thoroughbred, and one, two, three troopers. Whereupon this poor bastard, whose only crime in the world is to have borrowed a jumbuck, whatever the hell a jumbuck might be, responds by chucking himself in the drink.

ing from depression and and without ready access to lithium camped by a billabong". Okay, that doesn't scan too well. Nonetheless, despite the tragedy therein, *Waltzing Matilda* is a very cheerful song. Far more amusing and uplifting than *God Save the bloody Queen* or

There's something else that makes *Matilda* wholly appropriate as our national anthem. As I recall, the copyright for the song now belongs to someone in the United States. Like most of our national icons, from the Speedo swimsuit to Vegemite, *Waltzing Matilda* is firmly in the grip of foreigners.

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She has since radically changed her teaching methods and, by the sound of it, doubled her workload. The old days when you could set a couple of essays and finish the semester with an exam are gone for Snodgrass. She focuses on smaller core reading lists, but demands that students study them in greater depth. She writes key words on overheads so students can look them up in dictionaries later. Instead of giving individual seminars to the whole class, students are broken into small groups and elect a spokesperson.

At the same time, says Snodgrass: "You must not slow down the learning process of the students who speak English." This is "tricky", but not impossible. One method is to distinguish between essential and additional reading lists and make it clear that sticking to the former will result in a pass or credit only.

There is no extra pay in this. The only tangible reward is the possibility of extra money for your school or faculty. But even this is uncertain, because most universities keep up to half of the fee income for other purposes. At Southern Cross University, and no doubt others, the faculties actually get less money per head for international students than they do for locals because of the extra costs associated with overseas students.

So some academics harbour an abiding resentment towards them. Dr Jane Orton, co-ordinator of languages other than English education at the University of Melbourne, believes the shift required in academic practice is "as fundamental ... as changing your medium from handwriting to the Internet".

Meanwhile, rather than acknowledge they are floundering, people "go for objectives and standards. They say, 'This essay is not good enough,'" says Orton.

Derek Leung, a chemical engineering student from Hong Kong at the University of NSW, says "some lecturers believe people not from an English-speaking background have not got enough English level. They try to not discriminate, let's say disadvantage [by setting] an oral quiz. It means it's likely you will lower the mark because the student can't explain the idea or the information fluently."

Joo-Cheong Tham, a law student from Malaysia and convener of the Melbourne University Students Union Cultural Collective, says: "The lecturer doesn't have to come and say, 'You Chinks, go back home'. In the classroom [they can] systematically exclude groups of people."

Brigid Ballard observes: "Improvements in teaching for international students without question improve teaching for all students. Teachers have to think about their teaching and about their presentation. Everybody benefits."

Fears tempered by optimism

A SAMPLE of international students at a range of campuses reveals widely differing experiences and circumstances. They have some grudges, but being exploited is not one of them. Like all students, they worry about failing.

"I worry about that very much," says Bing Keeratiwasin, 28, from Bangkok, who is about to start an MBA at the University of Technology, Sydney. Despite five months of intensive study at UTS's commercial language school, Insearch, he is plainly daunted by what lies ahead, buoyed only by the thought that others have succeeded before him. "I still have a lot of problem about English," he says. "I still think in Thai."

But Agnes Lee Sagama of the ANU has friends who have not taken their studies seriously. One failed civil engineering three times and was kicked out. "There are two extremes," she says. "You get some who come here for the sole purpose of studying. Or those who come here because mummy and daddy can afford it, so they have no real commitment."

Some students are hassled by the lack of affordable inner-city accommodation. But others speak about how kind their host families are, and how they are enjoying Australian "tucker". Four students sharing a two-bedroom flat is the worst living situation Joseph Kwok, third-year accounting student and director of international students at the University of NSW, can recall.

The vast majority of overseas students — 86 per cent — come from Asia. In 1995 the biggest group (18 per cent) came from Malaysia, followed by Singa-

On entry criteria, the difficulty of comparing education standards between countries leaves universities room for manoeuvre and their critics room for doubt. Minimum marks in international English language tests are among the entry criteria universities set for prospective students from abroad.

Beyond this, for some countries (including Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore and India) mathematical formulae are used to match a student's qualifications against the tertiary entrance ranking in their nation. Where assessment systems are not directly comparable, universities settle for rougher measures.

pore (15 per cent), Hong Kong (14 per cent) and Indonesia (7 per cent).

There is concern that international students stick to figurative "ghettos" with their compatriots.

Dr Elaine McBride, who runs a Brisbane organisation offering social support to overseas students and their families, says there are "thousands" of students "who never make a friend, never have a reason to write a letter back".

Professor Drew Nesdale of Griffith University believes this is because overseas students are now big country groups concentrated in very few faculties.

In 1995 more than 40 per cent of fee-paying overseas students studied business or economics; the next biggest group studied science (13 per cent) or arts (12 per cent).

But Dr Ian Somerville, a lecturer in civil engineering at UNSW, says the obvious segregation of previous years seems to be receding partly, he thinks, because of "the number of 'Asian' students who are in fact Australian".

The blatant "Asians Out" graffiti of 10 years ago is largely gone. There is a subtle variation on the back of a toilet door at UNSW, however: "No squatting".

Surveys repeatedly show that the main reason for choosing Australia is the reputation of its institutions. Proximity to Asia, and price — an Australian degree is 25 per cent cheaper than a comparable one from the United Kingdom or United States — are also important.

For example, UNSW wants students from China, Japan and Thailand to have completed the first year of a bachelor degree in their home country; applicants from Pakistan must have completed two years. For many courses, students are accepted on an interview or the submission of a portfolio of work.

RMIT selects more than one third of its students — local and international — this way, according to Wilmoth.

A 1993 report by the Victorian Auditor-General on international student programs said the selection arrangements in Victorian universities for international students were "not consistent" with the

Government's guidelines and "may not be conducive to the safeguarding of academic standards".

The report was particularly critical of the lack of uniformity in the assessment of overseas qualifications and of the practice, still widespread, of offering places to international students for the following year before entry standards for local students are determined.

La Trobe University had lowered its entry standards in some courses to build market share, the Auditor-General found, while a sample of admission files from Monash and the Swinburne University of Technology revealed cases where students had been admitted at lower than the established standard.

La Trobe rejected "this attempt to denigrate the ongoing academic judgments made by qualified university staff in this highly technical area". RMIT said the criticisms showed the auditors "do not understand the selection process".

Universities argue that local students are selected on equally arbitrary criteria. After all, in 1995 nearly 30 per cent of students were aged 30 or more, the vast majority having entered university by routes other than high school marks.

In any case, cut-off marks for local students are set primarily with a view to supply and demand for places rather than the amount of brains needed for a particular course. "There are some qualifications from other countries you just can't compare mathematically," says Max Schroder, the director of the international office at UNSW.

Schroder says universities take a conservative approach to entry criteria, often demanding higher standards of overseas students than local ones, because "there is no profit in bringing students here and failing them".

And if they fail? "They fail," he retorts. "Plenty of people coming in on the TER [Tertiary Entrance Ranking, NSW's matriculation standard] fail too. It is simply not the case that all students come in and pass and go out the other end."

On campus, the issue of whether overseas students have taken places away from locals is sensitive, to say the least. One representative said even suggesting it was "playing the racist card".

Yet as long as there is unmet demand from Australian students, while overseas students can buy places which local students cannot, it is axiomatic that overseas students are taking places which might otherwise be filled by locals.

Universities reply that they have always argued the markets for local students and international students operate separately. Places for locals are determined and funded by the Federal

Government. Since international students are not eligible for such places, displacement is impossible, they claim.

But this view ignores the fact that the resources invested in educating overseas students could instead have been used to educate more domestic students.

The Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee estimates that this year there were 24,000 local applicants who were academically acceptable but missed out on a university place because Government funds did not stretch far enough.

The Government has now addressed this inequity by allowing universities to charge fees above the Government-funded student load for up to 25 per cent of local undergraduate places.

Displacement can occur in other ways. La Trobe warned the Industry Commission in 1991 that universities might be tempted to seek tight quotas for locals in

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subject areas which are attractive to overseas students, such as engineering and business studies, and starve unprofitable courses of resources.

It was highly likely that this kind of behaviour prevented domestic students from taking the courses of their choice, the commission found, and this would increase over time. The Federal Government proposal for fees for local students has led to restatement of this concern.

Local students could also be displaced if the fees charged by universities were inadequate to cover the cost of overseas student places and Government funds were used to make up the shortfall.

This is explicitly forbidden by Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs regulations. Universities say it can't happen because they are required to charge at least the cost of providing the course, as prescribed by a schedule of "indicative minimum fees" set by DEETYA. But this is disingenuous. Like most public sector enterprises, universities know shockingly little about the true cost of their services. Wilmoth admits that the allocation of

certain costs to international students involved "a leap of faith" by RMIT's accountants.

Until recently, universities didn't need to worry too much about what cost what. To maximise revenue, all they really had to do was bow especially low before their political paymasters.

DEETYA doesn't know any better. The DEETYA schedule is no guarantee that some universities are not losing money on overseas student places in some courses. The schedule is really just the department's best guess at the average costs of providing a university place.

It does not recognise that the cost of providing a place in a particular course varies widely between universities.

For some universities, the cost will be less than the minimum fee. Some charge well above the schedule on some courses. For example, Curtin University charges

\$15,700 for an engineering degree and UNSW charges \$17,400, while the DEETYA minimum is \$11,800.

It seems likely that these courses are profitable. But since, in the larger sense, an overseas student costs more to provide for than a local one — in marketing, extra tuition and English courses and social support such as transport from airports or help with accommodation — it seems likely that some universities will be losing money on some courses.

From the public purse's point of view, there is nothing wrong with this, provided universities make enough money on overseas student places in aggregate to cover the loss in a particular course.

But thanks to the inadequacy of their accounting procedures, they have not so far been able to provide convincing evidence that this is so.

A series of reports has left the question open. Most recently, an unpublished report submitted by DEETYA to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development last month said the supposed benefit to institutions "may be a net loss".

The upshot is that philosophical and financial tensions persist.

To date, university officialdom has pretended otherwise publicly while working feverishly behind the scenes to fix the problems. For the challenges ahead, braver leadership will be required.