

Speech: Annual General Meeting of University of the Third Age (U3A)

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Australia's Engagement in International Education and Research: Partnerships and Promises

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today at the Annual General Meeting of the University of the Third Age, Hawthorn.

I was especially pleased to accept the invitation last year to be the Patron of U3A, Hawthorn.

It's great to see this organisation going from strength to strength, just like so many other U3As all over the world.

Hawthorn is one of 98 U3As in Victoria with over 25,500 individual members.

Everyone in this room would know that Australian society is becoming, on average, more mature.

This is why one former Treasurer once famously asked Australian mothers to have one for mum, one for dad and one for the country.

If, as the saying goes, demography is destiny, organisations like U3A will have an increasingly vital role to play in the years and decades to come.

We need more organisations like U3A who understand the value of promoting the concept of active retirement, encouraging healthy ageing by enabling members to participate in educational, creative and leisure activities in locations convenient to them.

So I would certainly encourage everyone to get behind U3A to ensure that it can continue to broaden its appeal to more Third Agers.

I would like to speak today on an education-related theme, which I have titled: *Australia's Engagement in International Education and Research: Partnerships and Promises*.

The main thesis that I will develop is that international education and research are essential to Australia's future prosperity.

Today, in 2012, we are barely one tenth of the way into what is known as the "Asian Century".

Australia is well placed to respond to the challenges and the opportunities that the Asian Century will bring – through our proximity to the opportunities that economic

growth present, through our strong traditions of research, innovation and problem-solving, through a culture which embraces diversity and through the Australian predisposition to 'have a go'.

The Three Stages of Australian International Education

People often speak of a number of stages in the history of Australian international education and research.

There are parallels here with the nomenclature that U3A uses in introducing its own mission; the First Age of childhood, the Second Age of employment and parental responsibility, and the Third Age then follows and is often called the "age of active retirement".

The first stage of Australian international education can be traced back to the end of the second World War, with the creation of the Colombo Plan in 1950 following a meeting of Commonwealth foreign ministers in Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka.

This was a foreign aid scheme under which the benefits of an Australian higher education were offered to thousands of students from countries throughout Asia and the subcontinent.

Regarded as a means to the end of improving living standards, fostering political stability and countering communism, the scheme ran for more than thirty years and more than 40,000 young people from across the Asia-Pacific region benefitted from it.

Still today, many people credit the Colombo Plan as being one of the most far-sighted and successful foreign affairs policies that has ever been implemented by an Australian Government.

Many of the Australian-educated Colombo Plan alumni have become prominent leaders in their home countries; this is particularly the case for leaders from South-East Asian nations such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Despite its success as a tool of soft diplomacy in ensuring that a generation of leaders in our region were both familiar with and favourably disposed to Australia, the numbers of participants were relatively small compared with what occurred in the next stage of Australian international education.

The second stage commenced in the mid-1980s with the passage of legislation allowing Australian universities to enrol full fee-paying international students.

This is very much the model of international education that has endured to the present day.

I'll return, later in this speech, to why the particular form of higher education that Australia can offer international students is so vital both to the health of our educational institutions themselves, but also to the broader Australian economy.

The third stage in the development of Australian international education is the stage in which we find ourselves today.

This phase recognises that Australia's success as an innovative nation depends on our capacity to reach out and fully exploit the opportunities that genuine international engagement can bring.

We are therefore now seeing a broadening and deepening of Australia's international education and research engagement so that our links extend well beyond simply serving as a place that the region can send their young people for a quality higher education experience.

We are now seeing, across the Australian university system, a focus on broadening and deepening our international links across many aspects of university life, including research collaboration, higher degree and postdoctoral studies and expanding opportunities for Australian students to take some of their university studies abroad.

I'll return later to talk about the promise of international research, but first I'd like to turn to discuss two major drivers that we see operating today, both of which will have a major impact on the way in which Australian universities – and indeed universities throughout the world – will change and develop in the years ahead.

Those two drivers are internationalisation and rapid technological change.

Internationalisation and the Asian Century

Increasingly, we hear Australian politicians talking about the Asian Century – a period of transformative economic, political, social, and strategic change in the countries that comprise the region of which we are a part.

First, global economic power is shifting to our region.

Within our lifetimes, the scale and pace of Asia's transformation has been unprecedented.

When I was a kid in Canada, we were told 'Made in Japan' was the mark of 'junk.' Before long, carmakers in Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario were stunned as the 'junk' produced using the efficient methods pioneered by Toyota sliced into their markets and outclassed their brands.

By 2020, it is forecast that Asia will account for around 45 per cent of global GDP and one-third of global trade.

Hundreds of millions of people have been lifted out of poverty and there has emerged a new Asian middle class which, by 2020, is expected to account for more than half of all middle-class people in the world – up from around 30% today.

This rising middle class is transforming society in a great arc from India through Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China, replicating the achievements a generation

ago first by Japan and then by the 'Four Tigers' – Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

What they consume and how they consume it will expose Australia to vast opportunities like expanding markets for Australian technologies, services, minerals and agricultural products – along with significant challenges like environmental degradation and escalating competition for scarce water and energy.

Asia's economic transformation has brought an equally compelling political and social shift. In the early 1990s, Asian leaders like Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir bin Muhammad proclaimed 'Asian values' underpinned their order and prosperity to parry Western criticisms of authoritarian government and infringements on human rights.

Today, South Korea and Taiwan, authoritarian societies a generation ago, are vibrant democracies and Indonesia is a courageously developing young democracy.

These economic, political, and social changes are also driving strategic change, as global power shifts to Asia and Asian states adjust to new realities.

Successive Australian governments have seen the challenges and opportunities that the massive shifts in Asian demography, economics and politics will create for Australia.

This has been captured most recently in the development of this year's White Paper on the Asian Century, a Commonwealth Government initiative which describes why we have benefited from the rise of Asia to date, and why we will continue to do so if we are prepared to deepen that engagement.

The key point of the White Paper is that Australia's integration into Asia is contributing to national prosperity through a fortunate combination of geographic proximity, natural resources, human skills and values, business acumen, social cohesion, adaptability and diversity.

By the same token, the White Paper warns that success is not guaranteed, and that in a highly competitive environment, Australia must reinforce its strengths, expand its areas of comparative advantage, adapt and innovate – in sum, to change its mindset as well as develop its skills and capabilities.

The conclusion is there to be drawn: only by responding proactively and innovatively to the vast changes in Asia can we ensure that 'the Asian Century' is also 'the Australian Century.'

For decades, education has been a strong and consistent feature of Australia-Asia engagement. However, this new phase of international education and research will require more of us:

- deeper long-term relationships;
- greater maturity in our discussions to be able to recognise mutual benefit;
- attention to processes, systems and structures that support engagement; and
- a willingness to adapt, learn and be challenged.

If we can do all of those things then we stand considerably to gain from the opportunities that our region's development and growth will present.

Technological change

The second driver that is fundamentally changing the way in which we live and work is technological change.

We live in a world where people, technology and society are changing rapidly.

As my colleague, Professor Shirley Leitch has pointed out, today's young people – the people that will be entering our universities in coming years – simply don't know a world without the Internet.

They are the first generation to grow up techno-dependent and hyper-connected. They have grown up with digital connectedness.

All of us are connected with computers now, and I know that U3A has strong demand for courses introducing people to new technology, to allow them to use the power of the internet to do things like banking, shopping and sharing pictures and videos of grandchildren online.

Technology is changing today at a truly astonishing pace.

It is worth casting our minds back to remember a few technological developments that have occurred in our lifetimes, all of which have now been superseded by newer and better technologies.

For example, most teenagers today are permanently plugged into their iPods; they may never have seen a cassette tape, let alone an 'eight track' in their lives.

Many 'video' stores no longer carry VCRs. In fact many video stores that cleared out their VCRs to be able to rent more DVDs are now going out of business because of the ease with which people can download movies and TV shows directly from the internet.

Some of us even remember life without mobile phones.

The first mobile phones introduced into Australia by Telecom were car phones that needed a large battery which could only be stored in the boot of your car – and were promoted as being able to store up to 16 telephone numbers.

Technology is moving so quickly, it will fundamentally change the way in which we deliver higher education this century and it will also fundamentally change the way in which we conduct, develop and exploit our research.

Technological innovation will have a major influence on how we teach for the simple reason that the way that people are using technology is already having a major impact on the way that people are learning.

At Swinburne, such has been the enthusiasm for uptake of online learning options that 15,000 of our 60,000 students never touch a campus; many more of our students who are studying on-campus are actively choosing to supplement their face-to-face classes with online units of study for the richness of the educational experience that they receive when studying in this way.

I expect that students will become increasingly discriminating about what they want to see in their university experiences. As educators, we need to be able to keep pace with the way that people are learning to be able to teach them most effectively.

With ready access through the internet to a world of knowledge sources and experiences, and the various devices and social media platforms that link them to each other, they'll be increasingly dissatisfied with universities who teach using traditional, lecture-style methods in which opportunities for interaction – both with the lecturer and their fellow students – are limited.

The way that universities use and exploit new technology in the teaching experience will be the difference between attracting students or seeing them drift off to other institutions.

High quality online education offers a number of benefits for students, not only mobility, flexibility and interactivity, but also in their learning experience.

My own university, Swinburne, has been working hard to be at the leading edge of the way that higher education is delivered online.

We've moved well beyond the old model of distance education in which students were simply posted a set of readings and lecture notes at the beginning of the term and expected to demonstrate content knowledge in a single final examination.

Today, our online students are involved in an active learning environment with a high expectation of engaged contribution and participation.

They are immersed in a social learning environment with educational materials, interaction with teachers and fellow students, feedback and assessment all delivered through digital technologies.

Increasingly, over time, this approach will allow Swinburne to reach out not just to Australian students but also to international students studying abroad who wish to gain access to high quality educational experiences.

Australian international education

Having outlined these two big drivers of change, may I turn now to speak about the contribution of Australian international education and its future prospects.

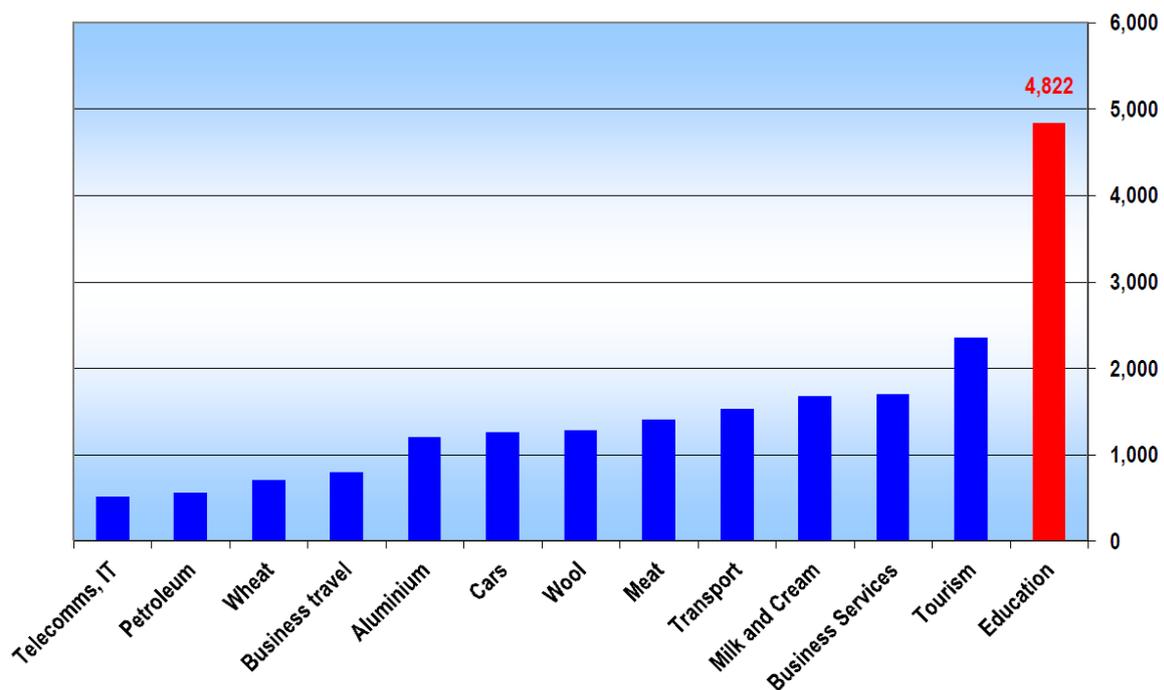
Journalist George Megalogenis, reflecting on the contribution that our mineral wealth and tourism made to national export income, once famously wrote that Australia was seen by the region as "a quarry with a view".

While many have found this description apposite, this significantly understates the contribution that international education makes to Australia's economic success – which considerably exceeds that of tourism.

Australia's international education industry has become the unsung hero of Australia's economic success. Last financial year, education was the third most lucrative export industry, after coal and iron, and well ahead of tourism, bringing in more than \$17 billion in export income and responsible for creating more than 120,000 full time equivalent jobs.

Here in Victoria, its economic contribution was even more vital, bringing in double the export revenue of the next export industry, tourism.

Victoria's Top Exports 2010/11 (\$ millions)



In *The Competitive Advantage of Nations*, Harvard's Michael Porter describes the conditions that can help a country to gain a competitive advantage over other countries in particular fields of endeavour.

It's clear we have a competitive edge in higher education.

Australia accounts for around 2 per cent of world economic output, measured by GDP, but was home to more than 5 per cent of the world-leading universities, as measured the most recent Times Higher Education University Rankings which placed 21 Australian universities – including Swinburne – in the top 400 in the world.

So the starting point is that we have an excellent product to offer.

Notwithstanding predictions for decades now that Australia's institutions are standing on the precipice and at risk of falling quality, collectively we've maintained and in fact improved the quality of education that we offer which is why we Australian international education continues to be sought after.

At the same time we are on the right end of a demographic surge. By 2020, more than half of the middle class in the world will emanate from the Asian region.

Over the past decade we have seen steady growth from Asian countries such as Vietnam and Malaysia and particularly strong growth from China and India.

It has been predicted that India alone will need to build over 1,000 new universities over the next decade just to meet its higher education needs.

Asia's growing economies all face the challenge of providing their youthful populations with the right mix of tertiary education opportunities to meet their skills and innovation needs in the decades to come.

What this means is that there will be continuing high demand for the benefits of high quality Australian education for the foreseeable future.

Student mobility

While Australia is head and shoulders above other countries in terms of the number of international students that we attract to study in Australia, not enough of our students are taking advantage of the opportunities to travel abroad as part of their degree studies.

According to the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum, around 12.0% of completing Australian undergraduates in Australian universities undertake international study experiences.

Across all types of international study experiences, 58% of international study experiences were for less than a semester, with 35% for a semester and 7% for a year.

This is clearly an area in which we can strive to do even better – particularly as we enter the Asian Century.

Students who study abroad regularly cite benefits of increased maturity, increased self-confidence, and greater ability to cope with unexpected or uncertain situations as well as a better understanding of cultural differences.

If we are to take the full benefits of participating in the fastest growing region in the world, we need to ensure that as many as possible of our students take up opportunities to experience Asia while they are studying, so that they are better able to use that knowledge and those cross-cultural skills when they move into the workforce.

Two of the most significant barriers to increased mobility are:

- the accessibility of programs that are geographically attractive and academically integrated, allowing students to complete their degrees in the normal time; and
- the capacity for students to finance overseas study at a time in their lives that their resources are limited.

To make real gains here will require effort both from Governments and universities themselves.

There is a role for Government, for example, in negotiating bilateral mobility agreements which ensure that students can flow freely to and from countries in our region with full recognition of credit and of qualifications gained.

The Australian Government currently also allows students to borrow up to \$5,824 of HECS for a six-month study period.

This funding can be used for a range of expenses such as airfares, accommodation, and other travel or study expenses. This support is immensely valuable and can be the difference between a student taking or foregoing an international study opportunity.

Reviewing the maximum amount, and increasing it, might tip the balance so that are prepared to take the plunge in future.

Australian universities also need to improve their offering of collaborative articulation programs with foreign university partners that allow students to undertake study at both institutions and graduate with degrees from each.

This has been a very successful model for international students who wish to undertake part of their degrees in Australia; however, there are clear benefits for Australians who do the same, particularly if their careers may subsequently take them abroad or require them to work with colleagues from around the world.

We also need to offer our students international experiences in all shapes and sizes, including short, intensive study tours right through to semester and year-long programs.

It is important that we recognise that each student will have different appetites for study abroad and encourage a diversity of offerings as a way of increasing access to international study experiences.

International research engagement

At the same time as seeking greater opportunities for our own students to broaden their world view while they are at university, there is also an imperative to lift the level of research engagement that we have with nations in our neighbourhood.

As higher education expert Simon Marginson of the University of Melbourne, recently pointed out, the university systems of East Asia – particularly high-performing research-intensive institutions in small nations such as Hong Kong and Singapore –

will soon rival those of continental Europe.

He makes a very strong point that while Asian universities posed a growing competitive threat to Australia's international education industry, they are also obvious potential research collaborators.

We need to more actively seek out the best opportunities for research engagement in Asia rather than relying on the same collaborators in familiar places.

From a researcher's perspective, it's very easy to stick with tried and tested partners in the Western tradition in the English-speaking world.

Over the next two decades, but starting now, we need to re-balance the geography of those partnerships. In short, we need to orient ourselves towards Asia.

The danger in not doing so is that these growing institutions – often very well-funded by their own national governments who understand very well that research and innovation will be the keys to lifting their peoples out of poverty and into high-productivity economies – will overtake us.

Australia has very strong research traditions underpinned by excellent science and sound analytical methods.

For this reason, there is a lot that we can teach universities in our region about the business of research – that extends to research methods, the communication of results and the application of research findings to real-world problems.

As with any type of international engagement, it is critical that we go into new relationships acknowledging that we have a lot to learn from our partners as well.

The Chinese education system is over 3000 years old and – commensurate with its population base of 1 billion people – everything associated with it is of an extraordinary scale.

The challenges facing China are the same challenges facing most of the rest of the world today: lowering carbon emissions, water and food security, the threat of a pandemic, transportation and infrastructure, social inclusion, wealth disparity.

It is through international research engagement that the best minds in both countries can come together to work collaboratively on solving some of these big challenges.

There's a real hunger for collaboration in internationally-minded universities developing in our region and we need to be developing new partnerships with these institutions.

If we don't start to take better advantage of the opportunities that are on our own doorstep, it's equally clear that our competitors in North America and Europe will.

Similarly, Australia needs to re-invent itself as a destination for the region's best PhD students.

Historically, while Australia has had a strong share of undergraduate enrolments, we've performed less well in attracting high quality doctoral students, who tend to go mostly to the United States and the United Kingdom as well as certain European countries like Switzerland.

These are the brightest of the bright young minds. While some will return home to contribute to the development of their own countries, many will choose to stay and become early career researchers and innovators helping to lift Australia's research performance and output.

Last year, the Australian Government made some very positive announcements which I hope will be the impetus for more international PhD students to come our way.

International PhD students will now be able to access an automatic four-year post-study work visa following completion of their research degree.

This is a very welcome initiative which should see more PhD students staying on at a pivotal and very productive time in their research careers.

Conclusion

I've appreciated very much the opportunity to speak to you today.

I know that you are all passionate about education and lifelong learning – that's why you've built U3A Hawthorn into the strong organisation that it is today.

I'm passionate about education and research and their potential to make Australia more productive and more innovative as an economy and stronger as a society.

Today, I've laid out the case for why the international element of Australia's higher education enterprise is a vital part of our nation's success.

We have a strong foundation on which to build.

And with the will, I'm sure we can find the way to exploit our natural advantages to ensure that Australia continues to be a leader in this field.

Thank you.