

## Submission to the public consultation on Australia's new International Development Policy

**From:** Richard Heller, Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Newcastle

**Title:** Improving higher education's contribution to international development: A network for global online learning

**To address the key questions:** *'How should the new policy reflect the Government's commitments to build stronger and more meaningful partnerships in our region, founded on mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality?'* and *'How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities?'*

### **Rationale:**

- Education is a key development objective (SDG 4, Quality Education), and contributes to *'building effective, accountable states that can sustain their own development'*
- Australia is already a major supplier of international education and its universities have much to contribute
- However, there are global inequalities in access to higher education that Australia's current efforts are not addressing
- Strategic opportunities for Australian higher education to contribute to international development policy are being missed
- While international education is regarded as an 'export industry', contributing to the economy of Australia and cross-subsidising Australian higher education and research, the focus on benefit to Australia rather than on international development does not meet the criteria expressed in the key consultation question of *'mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality'*
- A network for global online learning proposed here, as an addition to the current provision of international education, would earn the trust and respect of international partners, as it would be seen to be focused on the needs of the international partners rather on benefits to Australia. This would build on the trust and respect already gained by the high quality of education offered by the Australian higher education sector
- Online education has many advantages for international education including lower cost and the ability to scale up, hence offering access for larger numbers as well as for disadvantaged populations. It also has a much smaller carbon footprint than bringing international students to Australia
- There are global population trends, particularly relating to young people, which suggest that this programme might extend to partners beyond our immediate neighbours

### **The need:**

There are large global inequalities in access to higher education<sup>1</sup>. A full examination of the proportion the population of various countries accessing higher education is beyond the scope of this submission. However, it is unlikely that the source country of the students coming to Australia as international students represents the real global or even regional needs. For example, as a proportion of its home population Nepal has 20 times more international students in Australia than India or Indonesia, and Malaysia has twice as many as Vietnam and three times that of Cambodia<sup>2,3</sup>. Africa, the continent with the lowest access to higher education globally, is poorly represented among international students in Australian universities<sup>2</sup>. Within ASEAN, there are demonstrated inequalities in access to international education, with disadvantaged students facing barriers to successfully accessing internationalisation opportunities<sup>4</sup>.

The Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030<sup>5</sup> is completely focused on the economic benefits to Australia from bringing international students to Australia. There is no mention of the potential to reduce global inequalities in access to higher education, nor of taking a strategic approach to this as international development.

International education thus seems to miss opportunities for international development, including one of the key questions of this consultation '*How can Australia best utilise its national strengths to enhance the impact of our development program and address multidimensional vulnerabilities*'. A change in approach would allow international education to fit into the context identified for this consultation: '*Australians want an effective development program that is grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and works with our neighbours to help lift them out of poverty. Supporting sustainable and inclusive development in our region is both the smart and right thing to do*'.

### **A network for global online learning:**

To address the global inequalities in access to higher education, I have proposed an Australian-led network for global online learning<sup>6,7</sup>. A collaboration of Australian universities would offer online education to low- to middle-income populations, at large scale and low cost, with long-term benefits for future enrolments and global soft power. As the key drivers of a network for global online learning, Australian universities would include universities in partner countries - this would have the dual advantages of contributing to the education of individuals, as well as to the development of universities in those countries.

Advantage would be taken of modern information technology, while leading further developments in educational technology for distributed learning. There are many exciting and growing initiatives to provide the IT infrastructure for online education, both in Australia and globally, through research and education networks and open source solutions<sup>8,9</sup>.

There are examples of successful global online education programmes aimed at building capacity in developing countries, such as the People's Open Access Education Initiative, Peoples-uni<sup>10</sup> which had Australian leadership and deep involvement. As well as positive educational outcomes, large savings in carbon emissions can be demonstrated<sup>11</sup>.

### **Our region and beyond:**

While Australia's international development policy focuses on our region, an eye to both global needs and future population trends might be worthwhile. There are clear needs within our region, as the section above on variations in access demonstrate. But even populations with small numbers, but of high strategic importance, such as our Pacific neighbours, would benefit from the network as proposed.

Beyond our immediate region, Africa has the greatest need for increased access to higher education. Population trends indicate that by 2050, about 40% of all the people under 18 in the world will be African, a proportion that will reach half by century's end<sup>12</sup>. There will be a growing need for higher education for Africans, to which Australia can contribute, as well as future proofing its international student population.

### **Will universities collaborate in a network?**

Collaboration among the members of a network will be essential to making it a success. Although the competitive business model is currently ascendant in Australian universities, and beyond, there are many examples of collaboration between Australian universities, mainly in research but also in educational programmes<sup>13</sup>. The Biostatistics Collaboration of Australia is an example of this, where

six universities have combined to offer a master's programme to meet a national and international skills shortage<sup>14</sup>.

### **Costs:**

As discussed above, Australian universities use international student fees to cross-subsidise teaching and research costs. To meet the criteria identified in the key question of this consultation, of '*mutual trust and respect and shared values of fairness and equality*', student fees should be used only to cover the costs of the programme. Contributions to the costs could also come from elsewhere, such as the international aid budget, to keep costs lower and reach more disadvantaged populations. Costs would, in any case, be marginal if current courses could form the mainstay of the programme. The advent of open access materials and infrastructure will also keep costs low.

### **Practicalities:**

Interest could be assessed from among Australian universities, especially those who have expertise and experience of online course delivery. A needs assessment and expressions of interest from universities in partner countries should be a first step, closely followed by a pilot.

### **A personal note:**

I first proposed this idea in a chapter in my 2022 open access book *The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education*<sup>6</sup>, and fleshed it out in a blog in the *Australian EduResearch Matters*<sup>7</sup>. I have a long experience in education for global capacity building and in online education, but have no personal stake in any developments that might arise from the ideas I have proposed as I have no institutional attachment (other than my Emeritus title).

### **References:**

1. Richard Heller. Global Inequalities in Educational Need are Ignored. Section 2.6, *The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education*, 2022. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6\\_2#Sec6](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6_2#Sec6)
2. Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. International Education. Student numbers. <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/datavisualisations/Pages/Student-number.aspx>
3. World Population Review. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/>
4. Nathan Lefievre et al. Achieving Inclusive Higher Education in the ASEAN Region. Lee Kuan Yew School of Public policy, National University of Singapore, March 2022
5. Australian Government, Department of Education. Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030/resources/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030>
6. Richard Heller. Reduce Reliance on Overseas Student Fees and Develop the 'Global Online Learning' Programme. Section 3.10, *The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education*, 2022. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6\\_3#Sec10](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6_3#Sec10)
7. Richard Heller. How Australian universities could stop inequality and save the planet in one easy move. *EduResearch Matters*, September 2022. <https://www.aare.edu.au/blog/?p=14344>
8. National research and education network. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National\\_research\\_and\\_education\\_network](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_research_and_education_network)

9. Open EdTech. <https://www.openedtech.global/>
10. Peoples-uni. <https://www.peoples-uni.org/>
11. Richard Heller et al. Impact on carbon emissions of online study for a cohort of overseas students: A retrospective cohort study. [F1000Research 2022, 10:849](#)
12. Howard French. Megalopolis: how coastal west Africa will shape the coming century. The Guardian, October 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/oct/27/megalopolis-how-coastal-west-africa-will-shape-the-coming-century>
13. Richard Heller. Focus on Collaboration—And a New Taxonomy. Section 3.2, The Distributed University for Sustainable Higher Education, 2022. [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6\\_3#Sec2](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6_3#Sec2)
14. The Biostatistics Collaboration of Australia <http://www.bca.edu.au/>