

Australian Universities Losing Their Appeal In ‘Asian Century’

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AsianScientist (Feb. 24, 2012) - The “comprehensive failure of Australian universities to engage with Asia is rapidly unraveling their appeal to the biggest market of international students, an expert in Asian education, Professor Greg McCarthy, told a conference on higher education today.

Professor McCarthy, Head of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Adelaide, told the Future of Higher Education Conference that Australian schools and universities had neglected Asian studies – and exploited international students – for so long that “they would really struggle to find a way back from here.”

“The problem with our universities is that we have marginalised Asia for decades: very few history departments have Asian studies sections,” he said.

“We’ve got a fundamental decline in the teaching of Asian languages across the country as well. We’re worse now than we were in the 1960s in terms of Asian languages.”

Australian universities could no longer expect to compete for students whose history, culture and language they did not understand or respect. In 2009, just 300 students from non-Chinese backgrounds

studied Mandarin at year 12 level. Indonesian language studies are in worse shape.

“Are we engaging fully in this so-called Asian century if Indonesian language learning disappears entirely at year 12 level, as it will, on current trends, within five years?” Professor McCarthy told the conference, hosted by the National Tertiary Education Union at the University of Sydney today and tomorrow.

According to a report by the Asia Education Foundation, the proportion of students at all levels studying one of the four key Asian languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indonesian) dropped from 24 percent to 18.6 percent between 2000 and 2008.

Only a tiny proportion of Year 12 students study anything about Asia in History, English, Geography, Economics, Politics and The Arts, the report said.

As governments in China, South Korea, and Japan continue to fund their universities at much higher levels, they will weaken the appeal of studying in Australia, Professor McCarthy said.

“They are strategically going to outstrip us in world research and teaching rankings. We’ll be an inferior education system, and they will see us that way. We won’t be the direction that Chinese students come. I think we’re heading backwards,” Professor McCarthy said after the conference.

Australia would only appeal to students who were very rich, but not competitive enough to gain admission to better universities in their own countries.

“The top students and the really rich are not going towards Australia, they’re heading towards doing a degree in America, or in their own universities, which will rank much higher than ours.”

Speaking beforehand, the President of the Council of International Students, Arfa Noor, said universities here were not doing enough to ensure international students were engaging with their local counterparts, experiencing the culture and speaking the language.

As a result, the reputation of Australian universities, usually spread by word of mouth among friends and not through expensive marketing campaigns, was suffering overseas.

“Every time there is an increase in international students, every time there is an increase in numbers and in money that is coming into the higher education sector, the government says, 'That’s great.’

“But there is no conversation about increasing the quality of the experience those students have when they get here.”

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