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Get out of the diplomatic freezer: Bring back the Chinese students

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April 2021

WE HAVE A PROBLEM

The Australia-China relationship is at a low point. China has made its displeasure with Australia clear through a freeze on ministerial contact, trade import restrictions and criticisms of Australia's human rights record. Beijing is waiting for Australia to make a move to improve the relationship, while Canberra has said that the ball is in China's court.

A circuit-breaker is needed – and there is one in plain sight.

It has been estimated that nearly 65,000 Chinese students studying at Australian universities are currently stuck overseas. Many students have shown great commitment by continuing their studies online. It is taking a toll, however. With no easing of border restrictions, new enrolments are in free-fall, with applications declining by 23 percent. If nothing is done, the higher education sector is facing a massive fall in income and extensive job losses.

A FIRST STEP TOWARDS FIXING IT

Australia and China should work together to enable Chinese students to return to Australia. This issue is not intrinsically contentious and it invests in the future of the relationship – in youth.

A model for bringing Chinese students back to Australia could utilise one of more of the following:

- Vaccination in China
- Quarantine in China
- Pre-departure COVID testing
- Chartered flights
- Home or student accommodation quarantine in Australia.

If trust in vaccine efficacy is high enough, it could be sufficient for the Chinese government to provide students with vaccinations as well as assisting with chartered flights. Students could then enter with proof of vaccination and negative test results.

If additional safeguards are needed, students could complete pre-departure quarantine in China and/or a further period of self-isolation at home or in student accommodation in Australia.

There is, of course, the important question of cost, which would have to be shared among students, universities, state and territory governments, the federal government and the Chinese government.

WHY IT WILL WORK

Getting Chinese students back to Australia is in the interests of both sides.

Australia benefits from students returning – not just directly in the higher education sector, which is haemorrhaging jobs, but also in the flow-on economic benefits from housing, food and services. Pre-COVID 19, higher education was Australia's third largest export industry and contributed $37.5 billion to the wider economy. Australia risks falling behind competitors like the UK and Canada which are assisting international students to return. Australia benefits from arresting the downward spiral in its relationship with China in a low-risk area where security interests are not in play.

China benefits from a feel-good story focused on ordinary Chinese and people-to-people engagement. Children really matter in China, with families going to great lengths to provide them with an educational edge. China can also use students' return to forefront just how successful China has been in combatting COVID-19, providing a positive narrative. It shows that China is willing to allow some thaw in the relationship, which may be important in relations with the US.

There are sticking points that need to be managed. China will have to go back on its advice that students should reconsider Australia due to racist incidents. A way to assist China do this would be to announce a program to combat racism and promote students' safety, in line with calls from Australia's Race Discrimination Commissioner. This would be a positive initiative to address an increasing problem and invest in Australia's reputation as a study destination. On its side, Australia will need to show the flexibility to vary its existing quarantine model. Recent reporting of a plan for a Singapore quarantine hub shows the government is open to new options.

While the cost of the program would be substantial, it can be shared among those that benefit. Students are likely to be willing to contribute, although they would be unable to meet the full additional costs given the sacrifices their families are already making. Universities have a direct interest in the restoration of this market and should be able to provide some support. State and Territory governments have a direct financial interest in students' return of the students, with some like ACT and South Australian governments taking the lead. The federal government

should be willing to invest in the recapitalisation of an important market given students' contribution to the national economy. The Chinese Government will need to provide support, particularly for measures in China.

Details like capacity, timing and the priority to put on different groups of students can be hammered out in negotiations. It does not require all states and territories to agree; it is likely that some would be early movers.

A particular advantage of working together in this area is that initially it should not require direct Canberra-Beijing negotiation, thus not bringing any loss of face to either side. From the Chinese side, discussions could take place at the level of the Embassy in Canberra. From the Australian side, other actors can take the lead, including vice-chancellors, state and territory governments and student accommodation providers. If they can work-up an acceptable model, this can then be endorsed by the Commonwealth.

Working with China on returning students does not compromise Australia's interests; it promotes them. It is a win-win proposition with most of the benefits falling on Australia's side. If China is showing interest in working together on bringing students back, it is a gesture that Australia would be self-destructive to ignore.

A RETURN TO DIPLOMACY

It is time that both Australia and China resolve the current impasse by stopping rattling their sabres and starting a constructive conversation to get the relationship back on track. Diplomacy is about identifying common interests and realising common benefits. As China's first Premier once quipped, "diplomacy is the continuation of war by other means".

It is a sad fact that mutual knowledge and understanding has eroded in recent years. The anti-Chinese sentiment that characterised Australian attitudes towards China from the 1850s to the 1970s gave way to a significantly more confident and enlightened approach. In just a couple of months' time, we will be marking the 50th anniversary of Gough Whitlam's ground-breaking visit to China. Our ability to collaborate since then has been remarkable, not simply with respect to economic and trade relations, but also for our ability to discuss security issues and to build strong people-to-people links. It would be disappointing were we to revert to the suspicion and mistrust of a bygone age. And it would be tragic if incomprehension were to lead to sustained tension.

Strong international relationships depend on trust, and that in turn depends on the ability of leaders in all sectors to talk to each other, identify common interests and common goals, and address common problems. Between governments, that's diplomacy. Between commercial enterprises, that's business. And between universities, that's building the knowledge economy.

For people of goodwill on both sides, the current situation is a sign of obstinacy and short-sightedness. Working together on an issue of mutual benefit is a way to break the impasse. There have been indications that China is willing to meet Australia half-way, as when Madame Fu Ying, China's former Ambassador to Australia suggested, "We should make more effort to

increase... mutual understanding and trust in the process of solving problems and narrowing divergences".

And the best way to start the ball rolling: through quiet discussions between the Chinese Embassy and the many parties who will benefit from the return of Chinese students.

Let's get the students back here.

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