

# **Flight Postponed: Is Your Returning Home Program Still Viable?**

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## **Abstract:**

After evaluating the traditional model of the 'Returning Home Program' it has become apparent that by just preparing international students for return to their country of origin does not equip final year students with the information necessary to make an informed decision about their future. Programs which focus on the re-orientation and re-acculturation of students back to their home country overlook the requirements of those students who chose to stay-on in Australia. In recent years, opportunities for skilled migration, access to the local job market and demand for post-graduate qualifications has prompted many students to continue their stay. In response, institutions must investigate ways of diversifying the information and experiences provided to final year international students, empowering them to make an informed decision about the next stage in their career.

## **Introduction:**

Re-entry programs have long been a part of the range of services offered to international students. Unlike commencing Orientation Programs, re-entry programs suffer from low attendance rates, attract limited University resources and from year-to year exhibit little variation in the form or content. To date these issues have drawn limited attention from student affairs professionals and from a program evaluation perspective raise concerns about the viability of re-entry programs and their ability to meet changing student needs.

This paper explores how feedback from completing and former overseas students led to a rethinking of re-entry programs in focus and form. It evaluates the viability of the traditional Returning Home Program puts forward an innovative and relevant alternative which takes into consideration the diverse nature of the cohort and adds value to the student's experience.

## **Framework:**

It is incumbent upon student support services to conduct regular program assessments and evaluations to determine whether and to what degree the stated mission, goals, and student learning and development outcomes are being met. The process must employ sufficient and sound assessment measures to ensure comprehensiveness. Data collected must include responses from students and other affected constituencies (CAS Guidelines).

For the purpose of this evaluation, social research procedures including focus groups with completing students and one-on-one interviews with former overseas students were used to systematically investigate the effectiveness of the traditional model of the Returning Home program. These results were evaluated in accordance with Pillinger and Kraack's six factors for determining program viability shown in Table 1.

## **The Traditional Model of the Returning Home Program**

Re-entry programs are based on the observation that people returning home after a period abroad experience disorientation that is similar to their original 'culture shock' (Quintrell: 1995). As with Orientation Programs which provide a range of information and activities to familiarize students with their new environment and overcome culture shock, the Returning Home Program aims to prepare final year international students for a smooth transition back to their home countries (ISANA: 2006).

**Table 1. Pillinger and Kraack’s Six Factor’s related to Program Viability**

Factor	Assessment questions
<b>Essentiality</b>	Is the Retuning Home Program central to the department’s strategic plan and the University’s operational goals?
<b>Availability</b>	Is the Returning Home Program available and relevant to all final year international students?
<b>Need</b>	What are the changing needs of completing international students?
<b>Quality</b>	Does the Returning Home Program meet intuition and industry standards for quality?
<b>Efficiency</b>	Is the Returning Home Program cost effective while at the same time providing a quality service?
<b>Outcomes</b>	What improvements can be made to maximize outcomes for final year students?

These programs tend to focus on the practical and emotional re-entry needs of students who are retuning to their home country. An overview of the concept, content, objective and format of re-entry programs commonplace throughout Australia is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. The Traditional Model of the Retuning Home Program**

Focus of the Returning Home Program	Student cohorts	Student characteristics and needs	Issues addressed	Program delivery format
<p>The Returning Home Program has a low profile.</p> <p>The program is viewed as just a re-orientation program.</p> <p>The program has not been integral to the university international student program management.</p> <p>Systematic program assessment is not in place.</p>	<p>The program serves only returning home student cohort</p>	<p>Students require practical information and assistance in preparing for their departure (literally).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalising academic issues and graduations</li> <li>• Packing up and sending goods home</li> <li>• Moving out and ending leasing agreements</li> <li>• Sorting out financial matters</li> <li>• Flight arrangements</li> <li>• Visa extension</li> <li>• Cultural readjustment</li> <li>• Job seeking strategies focusing on particular regions representing the finishing students’ major countries of origin</li> <li>• Farewell activities</li> <li>• Alumni society</li> </ul>	<p>Information session based (Face-to-face communication)</p> <p>All issues are addressed via some kind of information sessions or workshops — not considering the students’ prioritised needs and concerns.</p>

## **Essentiality: The Returning Home Program is Vital to the University's Strategies**

Providing students with information that assists them to deal with issues that may arise after graduation is essential. At the University of Melbourne the centrality of this service is demonstrated across several criteria.

### *International Student Services is Committed to Providing a 'Cycle of Support'*

At a policy level ESOS guidelines govern the responsibilities providers have when accepting international students (ESOS:2001). The Returning Home Program aligns with International Student Services' commitment to a 'cycle of support' and the broader expectation that Universities address the ongoing support needs of international students.

### *Program Development is Essential to International Student Adviser Roles*

International student advisors are expected to contribute to program and project development which systematically improves services to students. In the context of the Returning Home Program, it is incumbent upon ISS staff to monitor the changing needs of final year students and to evaluate and adjust the program according to changes in student need.

### *Great Student Experience Contributes to Great Reputation*

Central to the success of the Melbourne Model are mechanisms which enable students to access well coordinated and responsive support services, including excellent international student support services. These programs contribute to the quality of the international student experience and reinforce the University's reputation as an internationally engaged institution.

## **Availability: What about Me? — I am Not Going Home!**

To be effective a program must serve the needs of its audience. From 2004, the traditional model of the Returning Home Program exhibited low participation rates in workshops and information sessions which focused on departure preparation. Over this same period, the program exhibited dramatic increases in attendance at sessions focusing on skilled migration presented by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA). Sessions which focused on re-entry and re-acculturation had an average attendance of around 25 students, whereas those lending information or advice on visa and permanent residency attracted over 300 students.

In a program designed to service over 2500 graduands annually, low attendance at departure preparation sessions triggered concerns that the focus and content of the program may be inapt. Determining why intended users participate heavily in some sessions but not in others is an important step in the evaluation process. If a program does not penetrate users or potential users to a great extent, it could be deemed inefficient (Schuh and Upcraft: 2001).

### *Skilled Migration and Global Career Mobility Trends Urge a Reinvestigation into Students' Needs*

A series of early focus group interviews asked final year international students to comment on the suitability of the traditional Returning Home Program to their needs. Feedback revealed that the post-study intentions of students varied. Not surprisingly, not all completing students planned to 'return home' after the successful completion of a degree. A significant portion indicated that they planned to stay on in Australia; others remained undecided about whether to stay-on or return home. The characteristics of these cohorts have been summarized in Table 3.

**Table 3. Completing Student Cohorts and Characteristics**

Student Cohorts	Characteristics
<b>Returning home students</b>	Definitely returning home after graduation e.g. sponsored students with returning home agreements, study abroad and exchange students.  The traditional Returning Home Program model works perfectly with this cohort. However, the awareness of the importance of returning home issues can be increased.
<b>Students applying for permanent residency</b>	Interested in applying for permanent residency or perusing further education.  Skilled migration information and career or professional development information is sought. The traditional Returning Home Program may not be suitable for this cohort. Additional support and issues must be addressed/provided.
<b>Undecided students</b>	Not yet made a decision whether to return home or to stay on.  These students need additional support to facilitate their decision making. The traditional model of the Returning Home Program does not adequately equip these students to make their decision.

In a series of secondary focus group interviews, completing students were asked to rank the level of importance they place against issues relative their needs. These varied from traditional Returning Home issues such practical advice for students planning to return home, to broader issues such as job seeking strategies for global employment and sharing experiences with former international students as displayed in Table 4.

**Table 4. Final Year International Student Issues and Their Importance Perception**

Ranking*	Primary Focus Group Interview	Secondary Focus Group Interview
1	Skilled migration	Career development and global mobility
2	Career development and global mobility	Former alumni students' experience in settling into Australia as skilled migrants and returning home
3	Former alumni students' experience in settling into Australia as skilled migrants and returning home	Skilled migration
4	Cultural readjustment	Cultural readjustment
5	Finalising academic issues and graduation	Keeping in touch (i.e. alumni, networking)
6	Keeping in touch (i.e. alumni, networking)	Packing-up and sending goods home
7	Packing-up and sending goods home	Sorting-out financial matters
8	Sorting-out financial matters	Moving out and ending leasing agreement
9	Moving out and ending leasing agreement	Finalising academic issues and graduation

**Note:** \*One indicates the issue is ranked as the most important and nine indicates the issue is ranked as the least important.

It is evident from these rankings that career development and skilled migration issues are most important to final year students. Practical advice on issues such as moving out, sending goods back home and financial matters are still applicable, but less important.

The results of both focus groups challenge the viability of the traditional model of the Returning Home Program. A program which emphasizes departure preparation and re-acculturation is likely to overlook issues which are important to students who plan to stay-on in Australia, or those who remain undecided about their future. To be viable, the Returning Home Program must provide content which addresses the needs of *all* final year students.

### **Needs: The Completing International Students' Needs are Changing**

Students who stay-on in Australia encounter a set of challenges and issues very different to those who return home. These include issues related to employability in the Australian workforce and the transition to post-study life in Australia. Upon further investigation, these challenges appear symptomatic of broader concerns underlying Skilled Migration policy and reinforce the need for institutions to raise awareness among completing students about the challenges which can arise during the next stage in their career.

### *Research Shows International Student Graduates' Job Readiness is Concerning*

In the mid-1990's the government proceeded with a series of reforms advantaging overseas students trained in Australia. These changes facilitated a steady increase in demand from overseas students seeking Permanent Residency in Australia. The number of successful applications has more than doubled since 2001, the majority being from Central and Northern Asia and with a background in accounting or information and communications technology.

Despite attracting increasing number of overseas students, a recent Evaluation of the General Skilled Migration categories led by Monash University demographer Bob Birrell revealed significant flaws in the onshore students program. Notably the Evaluation raised serious concerns over the job readiness of graduates. Competence in the language of the settlement country has a powerful impact on the labour market outcomes of graduates. Poor communication skills, trouble with colloquial English and difficulty writing professional reports create barriers to entry into the local job market. These, in turn, impact on lifestyle and career outcomes for former students.

### *Former International Students Encounter Difficulties in the Transition to Post-study Life in Australia*

The issues raised in Birrell's Evaluation were measured against the experiences of former students who were granted residency after the successful completion of an Australian degree. Interviewees were asked about their motivations for applying for residency, the challenges they faced and advice they could provide to current students.

Former students agreed that issues relating to communication skills and work experience impacted on their degree of job readiness. Interviewees highlighted difficulties associated with living away from home and managing their family's expectation to find a job. For some former students, limited access to welfare support within the first two years of residency and no ready access to familial support networks contributed to finance-related stress and affected general wellbeing. Interviewees also noted problems associated with gaining permanent residency, citing the protracted visa application process made it difficult to gain skilled employment or participate in relevant graduate programs immediately after study.

All interviewees strongly agreed that their universities could have provided additional support and information. They believed that this would in turn help them be more prepared to settle into Australia as a skilled migrant and become more confident in job seeking and adjusting.

The results from Birrell's evaluation and the feedback gathered from former international students have been summarized in Table 4. It is incumbent upon tertiary institutions to raise awareness among final year

students of these employment and transitional issues which may arise should they choose to stay-on in Australia after the successful completion of an Australian degree.

**Table 5. Issues Encountered by Former Overseas Students and Possible Contributing Factors**

Issues encountered by former overseas students (compared with local graduates or other migrants)	Possible Contributing factors
<b>Employment Issues</b>	
Less likely than Australian graduates to find employment in a skilled occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient communication skills</li> <li>• Limited or no work experience</li> <li>• Less familiarity with Australian cultural norms</li> <li>• Over-representation of graduates in high demand occupations (e.g. accounting, Information and Communication Technology)</li> </ul>
Less likely than Australian graduates to find employment in a skilled occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insufficient English language and communication skills</li> <li>• Financial pressure to secure work quickly encourages some former students to settle for less</li> </ul>
Lower overall job satisfaction compared to other migrants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lower use of qualifications and skills leads to job dissatisfaction</li> </ul>
Lower overall earnings Compared to Australian graduates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited or no work experience</li> <li>• Propensity towards vocations which have a low starting wage (accounting, ITC)</li> </ul>
<b>Transition issues</b>	
Financial instability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited access to government income support services in first two years</li> <li>• Limited access to familial support networks;</li> <li>• Pressure to manage student debt.</li> </ul>
Stress derived from family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family pressure to gain a well-paid or skilled job quickly</li> <li>• Family expectation for students to return home after study</li> </ul>
Isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sudden changes in existing peer support networks</li> <li>• Lack of awareness about community support networks available</li> <li>• Low connectivity while students between the local community.</li> </ul>

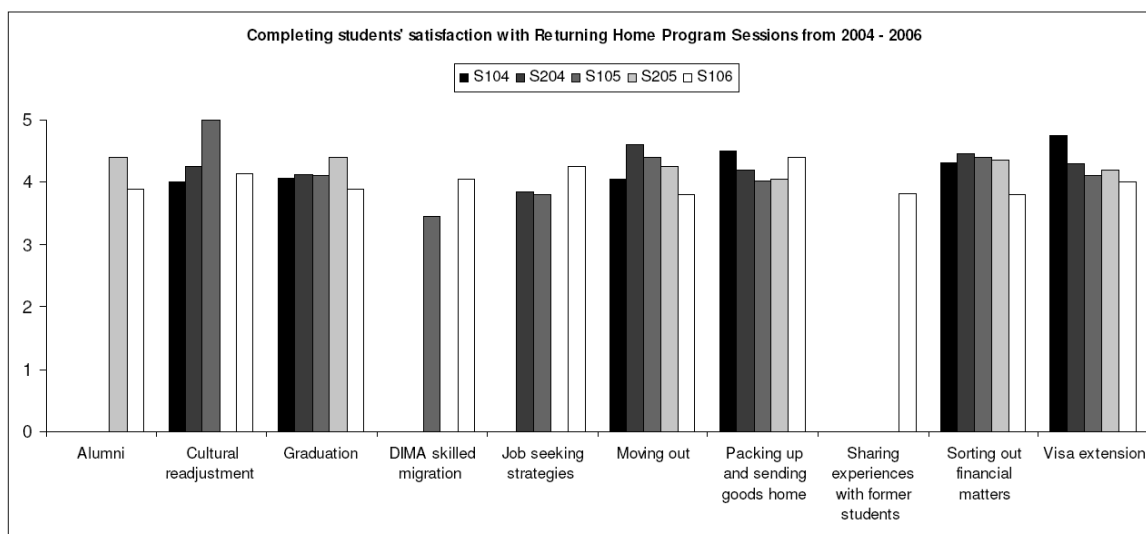
## Quality: Industrial Standards and Benchmarking Can Help Improve the Quality of the Returning Home Program

Students' satisfaction with the Returning Home Program alone cannot indicate the quality of the program. To be viable a program must meet standards of quality at both an institution and industry level. Whilst traditionally the Returning Home Program has met University expectations for quality, at an industry level there is room for improvement.

*Students who attended previous Returning Home Program sessions found the information very useful*

Completing international students who attended the Returning Home Program have been very satisfied with their experience. Looking at Figure 1, the average satisfaction rate was 4.17. This ranking is on par with University requirement that services meet a minimum average satisfaction ranking of 3.50.

**Figure 1: Students' Satisfaction with the Returning Home Program Sessions at The University of Melbourne**



### *Industry Standards is Vital for the Program Quality Control*

In an industry context, guidelines developed by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) to monitor the quality of higher education programs indicate that the Returning Home Program can be improved.

CAS Standards for student orientation programs require all services and programs to operate at an optimal level. Re-evaluating the traditional model of the Returning Home Program revealed International Student Services could strengthen the quality of services provided to final year students in a number of ways which may include, but not limited to, the followings.

- Diversifying the content of the Returning Home Program to meet the needs of all completing students (e.g. returning home students, students applying for permanent residency and students continuing studies)
- Encouraging students to think more broadly about issues which may arise after graduation (e.g., barriers to entry in the Australian job market)
- Assisting more intensely with job seeking strategies, especially in the context of the Australian job market

- Providing opportunities for completing students to meet with former international students and learn from their experiences
- Providing complimentary resources (program booklet, online information).

### **Efficiency: Low Cost on Program Organisation Does Not Always Mean Efficiency**

Although the traditional model of the Retuning Home Program is inexpensive to run, only measuring the efficiency of the Program against cost is not ideal. Aspects such as value for attendance, students' perception towards the importance of final year international issues, benchmarking and the experiences of former international students who participated in the program can also be measured against the resources expended and the desired outcomes to determine efficiency.

Re-evaluating the traditional model of the Retuning Home Program provides several opportunities for student services to increase efficiency:

- Feedback from final year students indicated that sessions on issues such as packing-up and sending goods home are not necessary. Re-adjusting the content of the Program to include only sessions which students rank as important increases service quality and contributes to overall efficiency
- To be efficient, programs also need to be competitive with similar programs offered by other institutions. Diversifying the experiences and information provided to final year students sets the University of Melbourne apart from its competitors, benchmarking services provided to final year students
- Taking steps to minimize overhead costs can also contribute to efficiency. The Returning Home Program can be subsidised if budget is limited. Strategies include sponsorship opportunities with related services and delegating workshops and presentations to appropriate units and organisations within and outside the University

### **Outcomes: Final Year, What's Next? Program – The New Model of the Returning Home Program**

Simply preparing international students for return to their home country does not equip them with the information necessary to make an informed decision about their future.

Based on these observations, a new model for the Returning Home Program has been posited. The 'Final Year, What's Next? Program' incorporates workshops and information sessions which raise awareness among students about Skilled Migration, employment in the Australian workforce and life after graduation. The revised title reflects the interests of all completing students and is aimed at encouraging greater participation. The format has been adjusted to include a mixture of face-to-face, online and print communications affording students more flexibility in the way they choose to access and gather information as shown in Table 6.



**Table 6. The New Model of the Returning Home Program**

Focus of the Returning Home Program	Student cohorts	Student characteristics and needs	Issues addressed	Program delivery format
<p>The program must not focus on the returning home aspect alone. Therefore, the name of the program must be reviewed.</p> <p>The program must be integrated to the University’s management aspect — to wrap up and draw an excellence international student experience which will in turn strengthen the University’s reputation.</p> <p>International Student Services must work collaboratively with relevant departments e.g. Careers and Employment Unit, Alumni, International Development, DIMA and local government.</p> <p>Systematic and ongoing program assessment and quality control is required.</p>	<p>The program must respond to the different needs of students e.g. staying on, returning home, undecided.</p>	<p>Students require information on future career and professional development opportunities — a flexible approach to empower students for life after graduation.</p>	<p>Issues relevant to all student cohorts must be addressed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job seeking strategies focusing on both the Australian and global workforce</li> <li>• Challenges of life after graduation — sharing experiences with former international students</li> <li>• Community development</li> <li>• Skilled migration</li> <li>• Finalising academic issues and graduations</li> <li>• Packing up and sending goods home</li> <li>• Moving out and ending leasing agreements</li> <li>• Sorting out financial matters</li> <li>• Flight arrangements</li> <li>• Visa extension</li> <li>• Cultural readjustment</li> <li>• Farewell activities</li> <li>• Alumni society</li> </ul>	<p>Technology-driven.</p> <p>Web and print based e.g. website, weblogs, podcast and booklet.</p> <p>Information sessions can be organised as additional support on complicated issues based on the students’ prioritised needs.</p>

**Conclusion: Don’t Simply Send Them Home, Empower Them for the Next Stage of Their Career**

To be successful, not only in generating income but in equipping students for their future careers, universities need to listen to students to ensure that what is offered continues to meet emerging needs. Australian education providers have a responsibility to ensure that completing students are fully informed about the opportunities available to them after the successful completion of an Australian degree. Diversifying the information and experiences provided to final year students empowers them to make an informed decision about the next stage in their career.

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## Appendix: Students' Interview Quotations

*"When I was making the decision to stay on in Australia in my final year, I was afraid that it would not be easy to gain a permanent job in Australia. It was really difficult and stressful to secure a permanent employment after gaining a permanent residency. Being away from my family back in my home country and having to settle into a new country for good is also challenging."*

Former international student from Swinburne University of Technology  
Country of origin: Malaysia

*"English language was my major concern when making a decision to stay on. As I am not a native English speaker, I found it difficult to explain my thoughts clearly in the workplace. My cultural background also forms my personality and attitudes to be a modest and reserved. These personal attributes worried me to be able to adjust to the Australian working culture and I might not be able to get a job. Finding the first job in Australia was a difficult task particularly for new graduates without work experience. I found that I didn't know the best way to look for a job in the Australia workforce."*

*"I was worried about financial issues if I could not secure a job for an extended period of time. Living away from home where my parents and relatives are not here. My family wanted me to return home so it was very stressful to let them know the decision I made."*

Former international student from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology  
Country of origin: Thailand

*"My circumstances might be more positive than some other former international students I have heard. I worked part time in my professional areas during my studies. That really helped in terms of selling myself to the employers. Italian culture is quite strong here in Melbourne so I did not find it difficult to settle into Australia as a skilled migrant. I heard though that many international graduates were struggling to obtain a job and settling into Australia because of high expectations, financial resources and cultures."*

Former international student from the University of Melbourne  
Country of origin: Italian

*"The University could have provided additional support in terms of providing more information on skilled migration and issues facing new skilled migrants and final year students."*

Former international student from Swinburne University of Technology  
Country of origin: Malaysian

*"I wish the University could have actively promoted the existing services and support including relevant useful programs like voluntary opportunities, career advice, mentoring programs for new graduates and alumni networks in Australia. Strategies to maintain existing or develop new peer/community support network could have also been addressed. Many international students were not aware of such useful services and support both within the University and the wider community."*

Former international student from the University of Melbourne  
Country of origin: Italy