

Australians split on the level of foreign students: ANUpoll

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Australians are divided over whether the nation's universities have too many foreign students, according to the Australian National University's ANUpoll, released Wednesday.

In the polling, 52.8% said the mix between foreign and domestic students was about right, but 46.1% favoured a lower level of foreign students. Only 1.1% wanted a greater proportion of students from overseas.

But there were big differences in attitudes between those who had attended university or were there now, and those who had not.

Of those who had never been to university, 51.3% supported reducing the proportion of foreign students. This fell to 43.6% among those who had previously been to university, and to 25.6% among current students.

Foreign students have become a huge source of income for Australia in general and the universities in particular, but critics are concerned about pressures on the institutions and on standards.

More than 690,000 international students were in Australia on student visas last year, an increase of 11% on the year before. The two largest source countries were China and India.

Read more: [**Students from China may defend their country but that doesn't make them Communist Party agents**](#)

The ANUpoll – the 29th in its series – also asked about people's confidence in a range of institutions and occupations.

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The results showed people have a great deal more confidence in Australia's universities and schools and those who staff them than they have in major companies, the public service, the federal government or the press.

Some 78.8% had confidence in universities while the figure for schools was 73.6%. Nearly eight in ten had confidence in university lecturers and school teachers; just over eight in ten expressed confidence in university researchers.

The numbers for other institutions were: the public service 46%; major Australian companies 43.6%; banks and financial institutions 28%; the federal government in Canberra 27%.

The press did worst in the poll, with only 20.2% expressing confidence in it. This dismal rating comes as media organisations are running a high profile campaign to secure greater guarantees for media freedom, in the wake of raids on a News Corp journalist and the ABC.

The survey found some mixed feelings about universities' teaching.

Asked whether universities were teaching the important things students need to know, 60% agreed they were. This was down from about 66% in 2008 research.

About five in ten thought they were teaching what students need for the current and future workforce.

Read more: [**More international students should mean more support for communication and interaction**](#)

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In a series of questions about the role of universities, Coalition voters were less supportive than Labor voters of their public policy roles.

On freedom of speech, the poll found nearly nine out of ten people agreed with the proposition that “Australian universities should invite speakers with a variety of ideas and opinions to campus, including speakers whose perspectives are very different from most students”.

Universities are under pressure from the government over freedom of speech issues, and commentators on the right have been strongly critical about some controversial speakers being excluded or their sponsors facing hefty bills for security.

Education Minister Dan Tehan has been driving a free speech code for universities, after a review by former chief justice Robert French.

ANUpoll is conducted for the ANU by the Social Research Centre, an ANU Enterprise business. It is a national poll done via the internet and telephone. 2,054 people were polled in April.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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