American delusions
US universities’ efforts to remain positive won’t wash. Trump is a disaster for recruitment, say Philip Altbach and Hans de Wit

At the recent annual conference of Nafsa: Association of International Educators in Los Angeles, many leaders in the field of internationalisation emphasised that global solidarity would remain despite US president Donald Trump’s “America first” stance and his curbs on travel and immigration from certain countries. They insisted that talk of deep declines in foreign student enrolments in the US were likely overblown, and that the US would remain the destination of choice for international students.

At a national seminar of international higher education professionals that we recently hosted at Boston College, a more realistic stance was generally adopted. But speakers were still hopeful that they could rise above the bigger political picture and provide a welcome on their own campuses that was so warm that it would sustain their international student numbers through word of mouth.

We believe that such hopes are misplaced. Optimism is unsustainable in the current reality, and we predict the acceleration of a trend towards more plurality in global student flows that will anyway take place in the coming decades.

Since the Nafsa conference, the US Supreme Court has ruled that key elements of the Trump administration’s ban on travel and immigration from certain Muslim-majority countries are legal. And although additional court challenges are looming, those judicially sanctioned elements are now being implemented. Moreover, the government has significant leeway to interpret the rules, and essential decisions are in the hands of US consular officials at embassies around the world – and in those of junior bureaucrats in the Department of State and the Department of Homeland Security.

A recent example is for the US to discuss international education. It is time for everyone involved in US educational and cultural exchange – a multibillion-dollar industry and a key part of what really makes America great – to face up to reality and understand exactly what is happening.

The efforts of student information online teams to design welcoming admissions policies are certainly needed. But even more important is for US higher education leadership to make greater efforts to convince politicians of the enormous dangers of the current Trump policy. Optimism is not enough in a time of crisis.