

Griffith University Submission in response to the Consultation Paper on the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030

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Griffith University welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Consultation paper on the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030. The challenge faced in developing the Australian Strategy for International Education is in the tension between responding to the current COVID-19 crisis and a broader long-term strategy for the international education sector over the next decade. The development of the Australian Strategy for International Education must acknowledge that tension and respond with the development of a two part strategy consisting of a recovery phase and growth phase.

The recovery phase requires the government to clarify when international students can safely return to Australia. There also needs to be an acknowledgment of the affect the global pandemic has had on current international students. The hardship incurred by current students and the lack of a national response has added to the reputational damage, with research now showing the increasing numbers of current and prospective students that hold negative perceptions of the way Australia has responded to the plight of international students during the pandemic .¹

The second phase of the strategy must focus on growth of the international education sector. More than that, there must be a focus on greater innovation, flexibility and diversification to ensure Australia remains globally competitive. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided Australia with an opportunity to rebuild the international education sector and set Australia on a path for greater success, a more diverse and stronger community and an enhancement of multicultural Australia moving forward.

Griffith University's response to the Consultation Paper discussion questions follows.

1. What are the key priorities for a new Australian Strategy for international education?

The immediate and urgent priority for Australian international education, to make an International Education Strategy 2021-2030 meaningful, is the provision of certainty around the timeframe for when international students will be able to travel to Australia to study. The longer border restrictions remain in place without this clarity, the more ongoing damage is being done to the sector. If border closures remain, the value of the Australian international education sector is set to halve from \$40.3

¹ IDP connect April 2021 survey: <https://www.idp-connect.com/apac-editors-choice/crossroadsiv-international-students-remain-willing-to-quarantine-and-get-vaccinated-for-in-country-experience>

billion in 2019 to \$20.5 billion by the end of 2022.² Ongoing uncertainty around when international students can return to Australia is encouraging both current and prospective international students to look to change their study destination to those that are open, particularly Canada and the UK. The loss of providers of international education services, professional knowledge and expertise, is weakening the infrastructure of the sector and will adversely affect its ability to rebuild its position as a leading study destination.

Key priorities:

- A. Valuing the enormous contribution that international education makes to Australia and the Australian community and amplifying this message clearly through all levels of Government.
- B. A coordinated approach from Government to supporting the international education sector is needed with a view to remaining competitive. International education needs to be a priority across government, with recognition of its role in Australia's foreign trade and diplomatic engagement.
- C. Outline a clear vision for an agile approach to international education through blended delivery modes, digital delivery and offshore delivery while still highlighting the importance of the on-campus experience as pivotal to the international education experience.
- D. Funding for the coordinated promotion of Australian international education that is commensurate with its contributions to Australia.
- E. A student visa regime and settings that support the national goals and strategy, based on attracting talent, supporting student employability outcomes, and retaining talent.
- F. Communication campaign in Australia regarding the value of international education to Australia to influence public perception positively and support initiatives underway by the sector to ensure the social licence that is critical to the success of the sector.
- G. A commitment to the ongoing support for student mobility that enables Australian students to engage internationally in ways that benefit Australia's relations in the world and offset the perception of Australia as only interested in the commercial gains of international education.
- H. Support for collaborative international research activities, and the attraction of Higher Degree Research candidates who are our future collaborators and future academic and professional workforce, as well as influential alumni when they return home.
- I. Government support for the development of links between education providers and industry, both in Australia and overseas.
- J. Support for initiatives that increase the awareness and understanding of the Australian international education offering globally and enhance graduate employability.

² Hurley, Dr Peter, *Stuck in transit: international student update*, Mitchell Institute Policy Brief, April 2021

2. Students should be at the centre of the new Strategy. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience both now and in the future?

The best possible student experience, and the one for which Australia is rightly renowned, is delivered through an on-campus experience in Australia, which is appropriately managed and provides opportunities for international students to develop close interpersonal links with not only the students in their class but also the broader community. Graduates from this experience then return to their home communities and become members of our global alumni network, as well as ambassadors for Australian international education. For the true potential to be recognised, both for the student and for Australia, it is critical that adequate support is provided to ensure the pastoral care and wellbeing of international students (including mental health services.) It is also important that providers are supported and encouraged in the building of diversity in their student cohorts, both in terms of the country mix as well as the programs and disciplines international students are admitted into.

COVID-19 has also provided an opportunity to test market response to the use of technology and delivery of in-market online learning. While much of the growth in revenue and student numbers seen over the past year has been involuntary in nature and a result of travel restrictions, there is now an improved understanding of both the opportunities and challenges alternative delivery modes offer both students and providers. It is important that opportunities to further develop program offerings and technological capacity are supported through the Strategy, from market development and building of distribution channels through to the establishment of a framework that assures the quality while enabling and encouraging a mix of on-campus, blended and online learning to be accessed in a way that meets both market demand and supports growth objectives for the sector.

3. What changes are needed to make Australia more globally competitive over the next decade?

- i. Policy and regulatory flexibility are important in enabling providers to innovate. How can we utilise these settings to pursue opportunities, and in what other ways can we work together to ensure Australia remains globally competitive?

Changes to the policy and regulatory framework governing international education in Australia are needed to ensure Australia remains globally competitive over the next decade.

Responsibility for aspects of international education in Australia is currently split across the Department of Education, Skills & Employment, Department of Home Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade, and Austrade at the federal level, and a number of study clusters and destination marketing bodies at the state and territory levels. The creation of a centralised agency with responsibility for all aspects of government to government liaison and promotion of Australian international education would ensure consistency across the whole of government approach to international education, ensuring Australia remains globally competitive over the next decade.

The UK has a similar model in the role of the British Council, and recently appointed an International Education Champion to ensure the promotion of the UK as an international education destination. Similarly, New Zealand has its crown agency, Education NZ, which is charged with ensuring a cross-government and cross-sector approach to the support of all international education-related initiatives (including outbound and inbound student mobility).

Edu Canada has contributed significantly to the recent success of Canada's international education sector, bringing together previously disparate strategies and initiatives at the provincial and territory level under the one brand. While the Council for International Education is a step towards a cross-sector and cross-sector approach, there is the need to go further and ensure that the Strategy is strongly championed and supported by one government agency which is accountable for its implementation.

Immigration policy and the framework within which those policies are implemented is critical to the success of the international education sector, acting as both a quality check and a key factor in the attraction (or otherwise) of a diverse onshore international student cohort. Canada and the UK have both revised their relevant policies, with the UK's Post Study Work Visa (PSWV) eligibility now exceeding that offered by Australia in a number of cases, and Canada's student visa policy is directly linked to its overall migration strategy. While the Destination Australia policy contributes to regional Australia being better placed to compete with the policies of our key competitors, the timing of COVID-19 and subsequent impact on students' ability to travel here has meant that much of the marketing potential was lost. As part of a "relaunch" of onshore international education opportunities, a promotional campaign should be developed in order to clearly define and outline the benefits of studying in the regions, with a focus on the extended PSWV eligibility. Australia's longer term skilled migration strategy should also explicitly acknowledge the role that international students can play in meeting the future workforce needs in a range of occupational areas, and, in turn, support providers in the recruitment and retention of students into relevant program offerings.

4. How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities (for example of disciplines, source countries, study destinations and delivery models)?

International students are motivated by the perceived return on investment, in the form of a desired migration outcome, enhanced career opportunities, a 'portable' qualification that provides a stepping stone in their academic career or graduate employment. For students seeking to study in Australia, they are also motivated by the opportunity to learn more about life in Australia, make connections with Australians and develop their own global alumni network for the future. Diversification in terms of nationality and discipline mix is critical to ensuring they receive the experience they are seeking and ensuring that Australian students and the broader community benefit from hosting international students and sitting alongside them in the classroom. As global demand for international education is a reflection of domestic capacity, quality, affordability and the cultural importance placed on education, there will always be countries that dominate Australia's international education statistics. It is critical that investment at the national level by bodies such as Austrade in the promotion of education opportunities is strategically allocated across a range of markets, and providers are supported in the development of new and emerging markets. This support should not just be in the financial sense but requires a cohesive government commitment in the form of visa settings, diplomatic representation and support, and a communication regarding the quality and portability of Australia's education sector and qualifications.

Diversification can be encouraged and supported through:

- A. Expanding the reach of government funded scholarships by offering them to a broader range of countries and for a diverse range of disciplines. Government funded scholarships are a

fundamental tool in diversifying the international student community. The Colombo Plan provided the underpinning of bringing students from the region to Australia for education and building regional links, and this investment in future leaders has paid off. Since that time the international education sector has transformed but offering government-funded scholarships continues to send an important message regarding our investment in people to people links, capacity building, and diversity.

- B. Ensuring the student visa system works in alignment with the Government's strategic approach to international education and that it operates with flexibility, efficiency and transparency to support the sector's strategic interests and objectives. This requires investment in visa processing in emerging markets and working with the sector to ensure risk is managed in a way that supports growth rather than deterring it and enables Australian providers to compete with other destinations.

The Australian regulatory and quality assurance approach supports the provision of consistently high-quality education delivery in a consumer protection framework, but we need to ensure that this doesn't prevent an entrepreneurial approach to international education in different sectors. For example, Tuition Protection Service (TPS) Levy settings effectively limit the growth rate of English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) providers due to financial penalty for growing at a rate considered to be too rapid. Chinese students are able to study standalone ELICOS but the very low incidence of visa grants for what is potentially a large market means it's not a good business proposition for providers.

The creation of a centralised agency advocated for above would be critical in ensuring a consistent strategic approach to support diversification goals, as well as ensuring targeted and consistent messaging to potential international students across the globe.

5. What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for?

- i. How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

One of the attractions of the Australian higher education system is that it is committed at all levels to ensuring graduate attributes such as independent thought, critical thinking, oral and written communication skills, collaboration and, increasingly, entrepreneurship. Strong digital skills and capabilities are increasingly important and, again, Australia is perceived as a leader in this area.

The provision of work integrated learning (WIL) and other workplace-related activities in the curriculum is an important part of our value proposition for many international students, providing them with an opportunity to gain firsthand experience through the application of what they have learnt, as well as providing an introduction to the Australian workplace and much-valued interaction with the local community beyond their education provider. A policy and regulatory framework that supports the provision of WIL, compulsory and non-compulsory, as a component of academic studies is vitally important; under current student visa conditions, non-compulsory WIL counts towards the maximum hours available as international student work rights, discouraging participation in non-compulsory but valuable WIL opportunities. The recognition of work-integrated learning opportunities as part of the academic experience, rather than as a form of employment, would remove this barrier.

Messaging to employers regarding the benefits to be had from having international students in the workplace, and encouraging the offering of internships and other WIL opportunities, as well as paid employment, would enable the wider community to benefit from hosting international students, as well as adding to the value of an Australian education.

6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

- i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?
- ii. How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

While many leaders from across the international education sector were involved in the development of “Brand Australia”, it is difficult to clearly articulate what is meant by “a uniquely Australian education experience” when there is such a variety of experiences across Australia. While Australia has traditionally been seen as a study destination, and the destination itself has been a critical part of the offering, there is increasing recognition by the sector of the value of delivering offshore. For many higher education providers, this has been part of their diversification and market expansion strategies, delivering pathway and enabling qualifications through to the establishment of offshore campuses offering a range of academic programs. What is important is that the quality of the international education offering is not diluted and that the needs of the specific market segment are met. It is not impossible to offer a uniquely Australian experience to a student who never comes to Australia to study, but it is clearly a different experience to the one they would have if they were to study onshore, where the host community and the physical destination itself play an important role.

In terms of the value proposition for domestic students, we owe it to them to ensure that they are culturally competent and globally literate, supported and prepared for a future which will see them interacting in a multicultural society and often, interacting on a regular basis with counterparts around the world. The attraction of onshore international students, and their integration into our classrooms, is therefore an important contributor to the internationalisation of Australian students, in addition to the revenue earned by education providers and reinvested into the educational opportunities on offer to domestic students.

The recruitment of international cohorts who will study wholly or even partly offshore through transnational education (TNE) programs delivered by Australian providers is a very different proposition to the recruitment and admission of student visa holders who will come onshore and whose support is regulated by both visa policy requirements and the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000.

Defining what is meant by an “Australian” education experience and how that might be translated and promoted in different markets, who are seeking onshore and offshore offerings, and promotional campaigns and messaging to be developed that clearly articulates that experience. That messaging should reinforce the quality provision and the graduate attributes that apply regardless of the mode of delivery. Online and in-market delivery requires particular expertise and capacity and, while not necessarily at odds with the strategic objectives of providers, will not be something that all providers see themselves undertaking. Government support will be needed to ensure the flexibility of relevant frameworks and policy settings that recognises the very

different cohorts of students attracted to the different delivery options. Support and investment would also be required at the national level to build new markets and enable Australian providers to navigate the relevant legislative frameworks overseas within which TNE is required to operate, as well as implications for the repatriation of revenue and employment of staff.

7. Community support for the international education sector is important for the sector's social licence. How can the benefits this sector provides to Australia be better understood by wider community?

Well before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals and organisations across the international education sector were aware of the need to ensure and shore up the social licence for international education. Campaigns had been run by a number of groups, including Universities Australia (UA) and the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA), reinforcing the contribution international students make to Australian communities every day. While the economic significance of the international education sector as an export earner was often highlighted, there was a lack of awareness and understanding of the broader contribution made. Similarly, studies undertaken by the sector reinforced that those most involved in the sector were, not surprisingly, most positive about the benefits, and that perception weakened and became more negative the further one moved out into the community.

It is critical that there is clear and positive messaging regarding the importance international students make to the community. Ongoing border restrictions are starting to show the role many students play in the provision of hospitality and tourism services, as well as in the agricultural sector. Similarly, retail and other services that international students are primary consumers of, and the wider community also accesses, are now closing as the number of onshore students continues to decline, in turn adversely impacting the provision of services and amenities to the local community.

With the pandemic has come an increase in racist attacks and, the longer that COVID cases are seen as a by-product of international arrivals, the harder it will be to ensure international students are welcomed and valued by their host community. A critical part of the recovery of the sector, and the longer term success of this Strategy, will be an investment by the government, in partnership with the sector, in a positive narrative around the social, cultural and economic benefits international students provide. That, in turn, will help rebuild Australia's reputation as a welcoming destination, and a leading provider of international education globally.

8. What else should the Council for International Education and the Australian Government consider in developing the new Strategy?

While the draft Strategy reinforces the role that online and other modes of offshore delivery will play in the future of Australia's international education sector, there is little explicit linking to other initiatives and strategies in this area. For example, Austrade's roadmap through to 2025 set ambitious goals regarding the number of individuals globally who would be "touched" by Australia's providers of educational services. Similarly, the role that global network of Australian alumni can and could play, and how that intersects with DFAT's global alumni strategy, is not well articulated. The contribution that international graduates make to our domestic workforce,

particularly in specific occupational areas of need, and how that intersects with the attraction of skilled migrants, is worthy of further attention. Migration, as have sectors such as tourism and international education, has been affected by border restrictions, and a cohesive and integrated strategic approach is critical to ensure that all the relevant sectors are working together in a way that contributes to Australia's future economic and social security.