

Australia's International Education Strategy 2021-2030

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There has never been a more important time to update Australia's strategy for international education. Australia's strategy for 2021-30 must focus on two phases – recovery and growth. This acknowledges that Australia's international sector will be focused initially on recovery from the unprecedented disruption caused by COVID-19. This phase will extend to five years at a minimum and Government measures targeting provider and student support will be critical. In the second phase of the strategy flexible measures that ensure Australia's global competitiveness will need to be embraced.

Broad principles

- International students are an important contributor to Australia. They bridge cultures and countries, enrich our experience through cultural exchange, deepen our understanding of our Indo-Pacific neighbours and their rich history, and contribute to the university teaching and learning experience of all students.
- Policy settings that allow providers to diversify their offerings now and into the future will allow for much needed flexibility to adapt to new circumstances, as we adjust to the disruption caused by COVID-19.
- Guaranteeing post-study work rights to make Australia globally competitive.
- Government needs to remain open to multiple forms of delivery of teaching and learning.
- Balancing the levers of government control with regard to diversification, online delivery and transnational education with appropriate government investment and support.
- In a globally developed marketplace international students seek a desirable student experience that incorporates elements of face-to-face and blended learning in both onshore and offshore delivery.
- Continuing government to government dialogues that can lead to:
 - overseas recognition of Australian qualifications
 - overseas recognition of online teaching and learning (necessitated by COVID-19)
 - greater integration of transnational education within multilateral and bilateral agreements.

ATN Footprint

ATN Universities in collaboration with The University of Newcastle teach nearly 100,000 international students. Our students come from China, Vietnam, India, Singapore and Malaysia and are all valuable members of our communities. They enrich our campuses and improve the learning experience for Australian students, support local businesses (especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors), strengthen our economy, and improve our connections internationally.

We look forward to welcoming international students back to our shores as soon as practical to do so and have been working hard on this since Australia's borders closed in 2020.

ATN is already a leader in innovative international education through digital delivery and transnational education - 28 per cent of ATN international students study offshore (Curtin 51 per cent and RMIT 48 per cent), which the Minister foreshadowed as growing opportunities for Australian universities.

What are the key priorities for a new International Strategy for international education?

COVID-19 is the most significant disruption to the international education sector since the opening up of international education places in 1989. Ensuring that there is adequate government support for providers and students throughout the recovery phase of the strategy will need to be a key priority.

This means putting students, both domestic and international, at the heart of any measures aimed at recalibrating the scope of international education in Australia.

As ATN's submission to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Skilled Migration highlighted, Australia is an enticing and high quality destination for international students. They can study at globally-recognised universities, gain work experience while they study, live and study in a safe and multicultural society, enjoy a high standard of living, and have the opportunity to work or do further study in Australia after they graduate. These are guiding principles that should remain at the forefront of Australia's strategy for international education.

The strategy needs to build on lessons learned from the rollout of the 2015 Strategy for International Education and make every effort to embrace measures advocated by a sector that has had to be agile and innovative in order to compete globally. We need to foster a wider understanding of the crucial role that international students play as a part of Australia's community, soft diplomacy and future security.

Policy settings that allow providers to diversify their offerings now and into the future will allow for much needed flexibility to adapt to the disruption caused by COVID-19. The increased flexibility needs to apply to all components of the international education sector.

ATN recommends the Government increase the post-study work rights for international students to a standard three years for two years study (presuming a resumption of onshore course delivery) and allow two years for one and one and a half year Masters. Historically, Australia has had very low rates of graduates progressing from graduate visas to skilled migration which is a lost opportunity for Australia to reap the rewards of its success in teaching these students. Overhauling the administrative process for skilled sponsorship is welcome, by both students and Australian businesses.

The strategy needs to provide clarity about the roles and responsibilities of both government and providers to make strategic decisions within efforts made for the sector, particularly in determining new or expanding markets. In most instances the deeper the relationship providers have with particular markets and particular delivery modes mean that the provider is better placed to make an assessment of future activity. Government should supplement and support this activity. ATN would caution, if the government seeks to take more control in the name of diversification / online delivery / transnational education, there will be an expectation of significant further investment for provider activity.

In order for the strategy to be successful, it needs to account for the significant contribution international students provide to Australia's research workforce, particularly in STEM areas. These students all make valuable contributions in government priority areas, which is the key mechanism to address the talent and skills shortage in the domestic talent pool. Specifically, Australia has too few graduates in key STEM areas, including IT and mathematics and international HDR students have enabled Australian universities to continue to build research capacity and underpin research despite such shortages.

Overseas students made up 37 per cent of postgraduate research (HDR) students in 2019¹, including:

- 61 per cent of engineering HDR students,
- 55 per cent of IT HDR students,
- 46 per cent of agriculture HDR students and
- 42 per cent of natural and physical sciences HDR students

Students should be at the centre of the new Strategy. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience?

Australian universities put students at the centre of their activities, evident by the number of international students keen to study in Australia. ATN universities have always put students at the centre of their international offerings.

ATN advocates that an “ideal” student experience achieves a balance between the needs and requirements of international students, which have typically targeted on-campus, face-to-face learning and engagement, with the needs of domestic students that have typically targeted a more blended model of online learning and face-to-face learning and engagement.

ATN examples of best practice aimed at student experience:

CURTIN UNIVERSITY - Academic student support

Design Your Degree: Choose your Major webinar series and major selection campaign

- sessions were hosted via Blackboard Collaborate to guide BCom and BBA students through their degree structure, every major/specialisation available in the Faculty, and instructions on how to choose their study plan for Semester 2, 2021 and beyond
- students engaged through live appointments and virtual consultations with Curtin staff

Student Consultative Committee (SCC)

- comprising 70 students from the Faculty of Business and Law to provide students with a voice to give feedback on their course and overall student experience

Lunch & Learn webinar series

- A different topic each week, the workshops aimed to bring inspiration, knowledge and motivation to students and highlight key resources, tools and mindsets related to employability
- Every session was creditable to the Career Passport for the Business core unit, MGMT1003 Strategic Career Design unit for all teaching locations
- Hosted online via Blackboard Collaborate there were a total of 261 students engaged (including from all offshore locations) with all recordings made available

Virtual Mobility International Experience sessions with options in France, Norway, Netherlands, China, Finland and Denmark

Academic Communication Development Team workshops

- Post-Entry Language Assessment (PELA) for articulation students from China
- Get Ahead workshop which helps students who are travel-restricted and off-shore

RMIT UNIVERSITY

International student mental health and wellbeing support

RMIT provides a suite of physical and virtual mental health and wellbeing offerings to all students, helping to create positive and transformative student experiences that cater to the diverse needs of international and domestic students. These services include counselling, peer-to-peer social mentoring, multifaith facilities and targeted support for specific cohorts such as women in STEM.

RMIT has over 100 academic, cultural and social clubs, providing a diverse platform for international students to connect to other international students and domestic students alike.

Pre-departure information

RMIT has representative offices offshore to provide students with pre-departure information and support. RMIT has strong partnerships with international education agents, ensuring prospective students understand RMIT's offerings, value proposition and available support.

Integrating international students into wider university community (using Study Groups like StudyAdelaide, StudyPerth, StudyMelbourne)

RMIT chaired a City of Melbourne Knowledge City and International Education Sub-Committee in 2020, working with other tertiary education providers and stakeholders to design a collaborative approach to increasing international students' connectivity and strengthening the university community. Recommendations from this Sub-Committee placed students at the centre, designing more holistic support systems from pre-departure through to alumni and lifelong connectivity.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Student Wellbeing Call Campaign

- In June 2020, as South Australia went into lockdown and the universities transitioned to online delivery, student support staff commenced a student wellbeing call campaign to check in with all students (domestic and international) and, where necessary, refer students on to relevant support services.
- As part of this campaign, International Student Advisors and International Student Ambassadors made calls to over 5,000 commencing and continuing international students.
- From these, 293 students (19 per cent) were referred to one or more support services, including financial assistance, counselling support, learning advice, job assistance, and academic assistance, with financial assistance being the most common assistance required (86 per cent of all assistance requested).

Academic

- As teaching moved online, UniSA offered a census grace period. Instead of the usual census date of 31 March, students had to 1 May to withdraw from courses, allowing them time to adjust to online learning and to feel confident that it was right for them.
- Students were also given the opportunity to convert lower grades to Non-Graded Passes and Fail grades to Withdrawals so that their GPAs would be unaffected if their performance was less strong than usual. This was to acknowledge both the adjustment to online learning and online exams as well as the stresses and personal challenges students might be facing because of COVID-19.

- In Study Period 5 (semester 2) 2020, for the first time, orientation for new students was entirely online so that both students who were starting on campus and those commencing their studies could participate, as well as to the events were COVID-safe.

StudyAdelaide – Summer in Adelaide

- In partnership between StudyAdelaide, education institutions and over 30 Adelaide organisations, a range of activities and events providing support and connection for students were offered over the 2020-2021 Summer study break.
- Different programs were developed for school students and tertiary students, aligned to their interests.
- 220 events were delivered with 4,000 students participating. Themes covered: social connection, employability, academic, seasonal celebrations, community linkages and tourism activities.
- UniSA supported this initiative through participation in the Taskforce, promoting the program and also providing our own additional program and activities for international students.

UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

International Students Unit

UTS has an established International Students Unit as part of our support services within which we have a dedicated team working towards continued improvements to supporting our international students. In addition to this, there is a range of services embedded within the university support infrastructure available to all students, and these services are particularly beneficial to students from overseas.

Club International

Club International offers a community to practice English and explore other cultures. Club International celebrates diversity, with the aim of providing social and academic support to UTS international and local students through events and referral to Higher Education Language and Presentation Support (HELPS).

Network Café

Network Café is a free program that brings new students from overseas together with experienced UTS students (Peer Networkers) to help them settle into Sydney and the UTS community. During main teaching sessions weekly catchups with free coffee are held at an on campus café. Besides making new friends, students practise their English skills, learn more about the Australian culture and find answers to their questions about student life at UTS.

Essential International Advice

All international students must attend the Essential International Advice session as part of Orientation. Students receive key information they need as an international student at UTS and meet the student advisors.

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

ATN recommends the strategy be open to multiple forms of delivery including, face to face, online, blended and transnational. This ensures that Australia's international education sector has the chance to remain a global leader. The Government needs to provide adequate financial support for all forms of delivery to ensure continued quality.

ATN recommends a greater integration of transnational education in all bilateral and multilateral dialogues into the future. One way of achieving this is to create a mechanism that brings together the sector in advance of agreements being pursued to agree to specific paths or activities to embrace in the agreements. Speaking with a clear voice representative of the views of the sector on agreements into the future is important to maintain a globally competitive edge.

Skilled migration

ATN's submission to the Joint Parliamentary Inquiry into Skilled Migration², advises that post-graduation work and study rights are important features of our current system of temporary migration, as they are in other countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom. International students receive an opportunity to practise and develop their skills in the workforce, or contribute through post-graduate research. This as an opportunity for us to diversify, broaden and extend our economy through greater flexibility and comparable approaches.

Educating international students allows our universities to offer a fuller range of world-class education to Australian students. International education has benefits beyond the education sector – tourism, retail, hospitality and accommodation also benefit from these students and their families visiting Australia.

The possibility of staying in (or returning to) Australia for skilled work is an important factor for international students choosing to study here. Australia must consider its competitiveness and openness, especially if other countries are perceived to be more welcoming. Australia's key competitors (such as the United Kingdom and Canada) are currently seen as more welcoming by international students and during the COVID-19 crisis are ahead of Australia in relation to the return of international students. During 2021 this will significantly impact Australia's competitive position.

The vast majority of international students return home after studying in Australia³ – this is an expected outcome, though it is important to recognise that this is still a loss of skills for Australia. Students returning home multiply the global connections with Australia, benefiting Australian businesses operating internationally, our standing in the international community and our research network. However, a balance is needed to ensure that Australia can retain and grow knowledge and skills in Australia as well.

Having a balanced and measured approach to skilled migration that Australians support is key to reactivating a sustainable international education market in the medium to long term. While international student arrivals are rightly on hold for now until health and welfare concerns permit their return, we need to plan for the future of skilled migration now.

² Degree graduates from an Australian institution can apply for two to four year visa to live, work and study in Australia - Temporary Graduate visa (subclass 485) (Post-Study Work stream).

³ Only 16 per cent of student migrants move to a permanent visa after 20 years. (CEDA 2019, Effects of temporary migration, CEDA, Melbourne, p. 16).

How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities?

A common criticism of Australia's international education sector is that market diversification needs to be embraced more actively by providers and supported by government policies.

ATN recommends that the strategy clearly articulate the diversification requirements of the government, through the form of a principles framework so that providers can take all and necessary steps to embrace market diversification in a meaningful and engaged way. This framework can form the basis for provider and department compact discussions that would ensure all providers embrace market diversification in a way that resembles an Australian approach to this issue. A second regulatory approach remains open to Government - to use the ESOS registration process required for all providers.

ATN Universities have continually placed diversification at the forefront of their own international strategies, in recognition of the increase in risk of relying too heavily on one particular cohort of students or one particular market.

ATN universities significantly expanded our international education intake from 68,000 in 2015 to 86,000 in 2019 while being aware of the diversity of our cohort. In that time, ATN added over 8,000 additional Indian students (171% increase)⁴ and almost 2,000 additional Vietnamese students (25% increase). This diversification is not replicated by all providers in our sector.

Uniquely Australian experience

Australia has been so successful in international education because of its quality education offerings, and because students can study at globally-recognised universities, gain work experience while they study and live in a safe and multicultural society, enjoy a high standard of living, and have the opportunity to work or do further study in Australia after they graduate.

As technology develops and becomes more integrated in the way students learn, a greater acknowledgement of the opportunities that blended learning provides while balancing international students' needs for human interaction must be at the centre of what will make up a unique Australian experience.

The value proposition for Australian education is made up of two things:

- Teaching and learning – high quality, recognised qualifications; and
- Experience – the environment, culture and connections students make whilst they are studying.

This value proposition is offered to all students who come into contact with an Australian provider, whether that is face to face in Australia, in the online space offered by an Australian provider or in a transnational location offered by an Australian provider.

If we embrace the opportunity to diversify education delivery models and reach new markets around the world, we need to ensure the continued quality of these offerings and that these qualifications will be recognised around the world. This will mean not only adequate financial support from government, but also continued efforts from government to advocate for the recognition of qualifications delivered partially or wholly online.

⁴ DESE 2019 data

Integration of community support

As RMIT note in their submission, the value of international education is often viewed through an economic lens. There is a much broader value to Australia's community, that should have been communicated, that has been lacking in representation and leadership from government. It is important to remember that communicating the broader value of international education was a significant pillar of the 2015 International Strategy. The sector does not need further empty rhetoric, rather the sector's success is dependent on connecting the Australian public to the value of international education through an appreciation of both the direct and indirect benefits the sector provides to the wider Australian community.

International students bridge cultures and countries, drive diversity, connectedness and engagement in the region. This occurs through a deepening of cultural exchange and through a deepening of engagement with communities. This richness of experience ensures that Australia is well placed to engage more effectively with its neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Prior to COVID-19, international education's value to the Australian economy was worth \$40 billion and it was widely lauded as Australia's primary service industry. As a sector we have not celebrated the importance of international education to secondary industries, nor have we been direct about the integral contributions of international students to our communities and learning environments.

Quick facts on Australia's international education sector

- Supports more than 250,000 jobs across the Australian economy⁵
- Contributes significantly to other sectors, particularly tourism, hospitality and retail, both through students' expenditure and their workforce participation
- In June 2020, Victoria University's Mitchell Institute produced an issues paper, "International students vital to coronavirus recovery"⁶ which showed:
 - every year international students spend \$5.5 billion on property and another \$5.5 billion on retail and hospitality

A common misconception is that the disruption in international education will only be felt in Australia's education industry. Beyond the immediate loss of income to the university sector, the downturn in international education has broader implications for Australia's economy. This is due to the interplay between international education and temporary migration and the imperative to produce skilled graduates and boost research activity to underpin Australia's economic recovery.

International education contributes significantly to other sectors, particularly tourism, hospitality and retail, both through students' expenditure and their workforce participation. It is integral that these fundamental features of the international education sector are clearly articulated to the Australian community at large. The sector needs their support.

The international education and tourism sectors are intertwined and together make up \$77 billion (pre-COVID) in annual income, representing 80 per cent of our services exports. Every time we promote Australia as a destination for tourism, we promote Australia as an international education destination and vice versa. Every student that studies in Australia is visited by friends and family – 30 per cent of international visitors to Australia are visiting friends and relatives. Tourism also needs the international students to work in their businesses. This benefits the business but also benefits the students as they gain experience and language skills and absorb the culture of Australian tourism.

⁵ DESE 2019 data

⁶ <https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/issues-brief-international-students-covid.pdf>.

International students are also critical to supporting our broader trade and investment and other objectives.

Regional areas have to be conscious of integrating international students into their communities, potentially strengthening ties with specific national groups. The sheer lack of numbers (total and across country of origin) compared to metro universities means in some cases, the regionally based students are more adaptable to circumstance through necessity.

Student employment is leveraged through the university integration across and with the business sector. This is not to suggest business groups are an employment service, but they are a vital conduit for information and facilitation. The new value proposition of a university connected with its business community cuts through far more effectively to an international student, as it promises greater employment opportunities through far fewer degrees of separation from business.

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