

Australian Catholic University

Feedback

Consultation: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030¹

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

Key priorities for the new Strategy are to ensure:

- i. Increased transparency and a whole of government approach to international education, recognising the connection between education, migration, and meeting Australia's skills gaps.
- ii. A robust but flexible regulatory framework.
- iii. Continued support for learning abroad and diversified study options.

i. Increased transparency and a whole of government approach

Under existing Department of Home Affairs (DHA) and Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) policy and rhetoric, there is a distinct separation of education and migration outcomes which does not accurately reflect the reality of the relationship between the two.

International students are motivated to study in Australia for many reasons, and the option to build long-term skills and experience in Australia post-study is one. There is, in reality, a link between migration and education. Rather than actively discouraging this link, Australia would benefit from building a strategy that aligns Australia's current and future skills needs with its student visa program.

A student's desire to remain in Australia post-graduation does not in itself make them a potential risk to Australia but a potential benefit. Currently, however, if a student visa applicant expresses this intent in DHA assessments, they risk having their visa application rejected and being defined as a Non-Genuine Temporary Entrant. The Simplified Student Visa Framework (SSVF) and Genuine Temporary Entrant (GTE) requirements, whilst strengthening the messaging around quality/genuine students, have completed their remit.

A new mode of student visa assessment should be introduced which would aid Australia to diversify program enrolments and remain competitive; recognising we should be proud of all students that have undertaken an Australian education (both within and outside Australia) and who wish to use their new skills and knowledge in Australia.

ii. Robust and flexible regulatory framework

The Consultation Paper advocates diversification of study modes and looking at other ways of exporting Australian education. To achieve these ends, the regulatory framework must be flexible and agile in application. Currently, students outside of Australia are not within the scope of the ESOS Act/National Code framework. Nor does it consider online or blended learning models. This precludes flexibility. If Australia is to move aggressively into new forms of Transnational Education or program delivery, the legislative and regulatory framework requires adjustment to ensure that Australia continues to deliver a high-quality experience no matter where our students are studying in the world and facilitate a more flexible blend of off-shore and on-shore enrolment opportunity.

iii. Continued support for learning abroad and diversified options

The Strategy should continue to advance, support, and consider expanding key global engagement initiatives such as the New Colombo Plan. Support is needed to diversify learning abroad opportunities for Australian students in the Asia-Pacific and to develop programs in emerging regions such as Africa, and Central and South America. Furthermore, best practice emerging during the pandemic, especially

¹ Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030: Consultation Paper*.

in virtual mobility and hybrid models of learning abroad should be recognised and further developed. This would also benefit Australian students in achieving global perspectives and experiences as part of their higher education experience.

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

Policy and regulatory frameworks are predominantly focussed on education being delivered in Australia and ensuring that any Australian education delivered overseas is directly comparable to that provided in Australia. If Australian higher education providers are to successfully advance new modes of delivery for international education - including models that blend onshore and offshore delivery - the policy and regulatory frameworks will need to be revised and updated to support flexibility in educational delivery.

For instance, the policy framework needs to give providers greater freedom to demonstrate how they meet Australian regulatory obligations around educational quality but also to recognise and permit providers to demonstrate how they facilitate this within the relevant local context(s).

Australia faces a competitive international education landscape where competitors such as Canada, the UK and the USA are open and transparent regarding the opportunities for international students to engage in employment and work, both during and post-study. To remain competitive, Australia needs to increase transparency around post-study work and visa options as well as continue to support part-time work opportunities for international students during their studies.

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

Australia's success in any efforts to diversify its international education opportunities rests not only on collaboration and coordination, but also on a demonstrable commitment to promoting emerging markets and new modes of educational delivery at the national level. Austrade, as a government trade agency, has a key role to play especially with respect to the latter.

In 2021, more than 50% of all international enrolments are in the Group of Eight universities. This skewed concentration of enrolments is a consequence of several factors including government policy and operational preferencing, resources, and brand.

Significantly, a major strength of Australian education is the diversity of its higher education sector – and the high-quality education and standards maintained nationally across all 41 Australian Universities. This needs to be better communicated and advocated in international settings and international education markets.

Austrade can facilitate and actively promote Australian higher education by supporting international education in the way it approaches other export industries in Australia, especially by:

- opening-up emerging markets;
- assisting with diversification efforts across all institutions and education providers; and
- building the “quality education” message across its entire stakeholder base.

Austrade needs to truly represent and support the diversity of education opportunities in Australia. The aim should be to grow opportunities for a more diverse range of institutions.

4. What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for? How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

Students will benefit from holistic education and training encompassing not only subject-mastery but also world-integrated learning (WIL), career and other soft skills such as critical-thinking and ethics, and digital literacy and technological skills.

Industry experience

WIL is heavily promoted at ACU and in many cases is mandated, whether as a result of professional accreditation or university course policy. ACU uses its broad, multi-jurisdictional footprint, across states/territories and internationally, to develop opportunities for students.

For example, in Health Sciences, ACU is deeply engaged with industry, government, and the community in the education of its students. This involves organising clinical placements for approximately 8,000 nursing and midwifery students annually. Course curricula are also developed and refined in conjunction with industry leaders to ensure they reflect local and international knowledge, rapid changes in the health environment, and advances in student learning. In Teacher Education, ACU organises professional experience placements for approximately 7,000 students annually. School partnership programs also develop students who are specifically suited to work in particular settings e.g. disadvantaged communities. Furthermore, industry partnerships provide bespoke professional learning opportunities and workforce development e.g. embedded models of leadership formation.

Meanwhile in Law, students take part in pro bono legal services as part of their legal studies. ACU law students have delivered more than 20,000 hours of pro bono service through the program. ACU connects with government, private and community organisations and partners to facilitate placements e.g. community legal centres, law firms, and courts.

Soft skills

All students would benefit from career skills that will help them navigate through the modern realities of a global, interconnected world – where they will experience continuous change, unplanned disruptive events, and career shocks during their lifetime. This entails developing their skills and mindset to: be ready to embrace uncertainty and leverage it to their advantage; have career persistence, resilience and flexibility; and plan effectively/successfully with agility.

These and other “soft skills” are essential to student success in the global labour market. Notably, at ACU, as a matter of mission the University is explicit in its commitment to ethics as an area of study, reflection, debate and practice for all students – as our future leaders and workers across all facets of society. The University’s mission focuses on the pursuit of truth, acknowledgement of universal human dignity and service of the common good. Thus ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. Significantly, ACU is ranked first in Australia when it comes to graduate employment outcomes (QILT 2020 Graduate Outcomes).

Digital literacy/technological skills

Online education is increasingly popular as a quality education option, especially during the pandemic, and is intrinsically an important tool for the development of students’ digital skills and adaptability to new forms of learning. These are essential skills for employability, supported by significant gains in program quality and sophistication, and technological developments such as virtual reality. For instance, many programs now emulate core campus experiences such as tutor groups and one-on-one teacher feedback sessions.

5. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience? What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students? How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

A uniquely Australian experience must be a *global* experience. International students choose Australia based on our unique destination characteristics including: our natural environment; the quality of our programs; and the language of instruction. However, they also choose Australia because of our diverse, multi-cultural population.

Australia needs to better highlight the strengths and diversity of its higher education landscape alongside its high quality, world leading program offerings and disciplines. This means promoting the diverse array of study options available - including in health, humanities, social sciences, and education, as well as in business and STEM. It also entails highlighting the unique profiles and individual strengths and features of Australian universities and other higher education providers.

A focus on the application and impact of what an Australian education delivers could also support the redevelopment of the national brand to an educational brand. This could help drive the recovery of the international education sector and support the new Strategy's delivery in the longer term.

6. 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?

Fundamentally, the discourse around international students in Australia needs to change.

In general, Australia talks about international students in economic terms, referring to the dollar value to the economy, the jobs that are reliant on the sector, and more recently, the over-reliance and economic impact of not having international students arrive in Australia.

Our international student community contributes much more than just financial benefits to the nation. They provide cultural enrichment and different perspectives in the "classroom", broadening the educational experience for all students, both domestic and international. Most international students return home and become important advocates for Australia and open-up opportunities for business and government-level collaboration. Others play a significant role in the social fabric of Australia. They are our current and future nurses, social workers, business analysts and cybersecurity specialists that will care for, nurture, and support our society.

These impacts on the daily lives of Australians and the broader benefits to our society through having these global citizens should be communicated across all sectors. Changing the narrative around international education would better inform the general public and foster greater understanding amongst the wider community of the benefits international students bring to Australia. These benefits need to be communicated and celebrated across government and the business community, as well as the education sector.

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

In developing the new Strategy, the Council needs to ensure there is a balance between supporting and diversifying onshore enrolments whilst also encouraging trans-national, online, and blended delivery models. There are significant benefits that Australia derives from onshore international enrolments, however these benefits need to be shared, aligned with national priorities, and communicated clearly.