


# We need a new business plan to keep overseas students

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There is a real risk of the current decline in international education in Australia becoming permanent unless we boost Australia's appeal as an international education destination with a long-term, national, co-ordinated approach.

Without urgent action we will fall behind our key competitors. The UK has kept its borders open and Canada has allowed current international students to re-enter the country when online study is not possible. Both countries have also been much more generous in extending government support to universities and international students during the pandemic.

The Australian government, business and universities need to form a task force that seeks to enhance our competitiveness and address current changes in international student expectations and study patterns. Many of these changes were emerging before COVID-19 but have now been accelerated by the effects of the pandemic.

For a start, here are five suggested issues and opportunities for a task force to consider:

Australia must ensure it is meeting the expectations of students who are increasingly searching for and considering rankings based on the student experience rather than traditional measures like levels of university research. We need to draw on appropriate evidence to better promote positive perceptions of the quality of the student learning experience in Australia; perceptions which are already being challenged. This extends beyond the on-campus learning to the online learning experience. Many international students have started, continued or finished their international study online and their evaluations are increasingly influencing future students' choices on where to study.

We need to develop degrees that heighten the employment prospects of international students in their home, as well as Australian, job markets. This will require greater, more formalised collaboration with overseas employers and professional bodies. Courses must also include more structured internships, overseas experiences and face-to-face learning. Undergraduates generally require more structured learning than postgraduate students so online learning is likely to supplement, rather than replace, face-to-face undergraduate experiences.

Recent changes in post-study work rights need to become permanent. These work rights now take into account the time students spend studying Australian courses online as well as in-country. They are attractive to students seeking a different lifestyle and post-study work in Australia. The current arrangement could be extended to be ongoing into the future. At the same time, there needs to be a review of how these arrangements can be better aligned with anticipated skills shortages in Australia.

The rising popularity of online education run by universities and other entities means that universities need to be nimble in ensuring offerings are current, relevant, allow for flexibility between online and on-campus study, and leverage our strong international reputation. For example, a student could study an undergraduate degree with the first year online and the last two years at an Australian campus. Similarly, we need to look at how online micro-credentials can be pathways for international students wanting to study in Australia.

Consider whether international education fees need to match domestic fees for online postgraduate education. Charging international students what domestic students pay for online education may help Australian providers compete with lower priced, yet highly ranked, institutions around the world.

Taking a fresh, and frankly, somewhat overdue approach to planning for international education in Australia will offer an opportunity to build a strategic, long-term and sustainable model for international education that will benefit our higher education sector and economy.

It will take time to plan and implement this road map and it will require many stakeholders to think differently and agree to prosecute some challenging and, in some cases, potentially controversial changes. The changed thinking may also need accept that we cannot rely on international students to provide the income needed to invest in world-class educational infrastructure and research capability.

The Federal government is unlikely to make up much, if any, of the shortfall, which points to industry and philanthropic sources of income becoming more important.

Now is the time to hit the re-set button on international students and our higher education sector. The pandemic is irrevocably changing the way Australian universities operate. We urgently need a robust and practical plan to deal with those radical changes and ensure that Australia remains one of the most attractive places for international students to study.

*Professor David Grant is president of the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC). Associate Professor Peter Woods is deputy chair of the ABDC's International Education Network. ABDC members graduate just under half the international students in Australia.*

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