

12 May 2021

By email: education-ies@dese.gov.au

Dear Expert Members of the Council for International Education and Department of Education, Skills and Employment,

Re: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030

The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposed new Australian strategy for international education. The ABDC supports the overall approach the strategy takes to strengthen Australia's presence in the international education market. In particular, the ABDC welcomes the commitment to develop a strategy and long-term planning to ensure that education providers both meet anticipated student demand and work collaboratively with government and industry.

The ABDC represents 38 university business faculties and schools, which graduate one-third of all university students and more than half the international university students who study in Australia. To implement the new strategy for international education our member business schools are well-positioned to contribute to innovations in flexible study options, whether online, in-person, or offshore. The experience and expertise of business schools in building Australia's reputation as a quality provider of international education can benefit the expansion of the sector into new geographical markets and across disciplines.

The ABDC looks forward to the finalisation of the Strategy in mid-2021 and is willing to provide any further assistance as required. Requests for further information may be made to the ABDC c/o Caroline Falshaw, Executive Officer: office@abdc.edu.au.

Regards,



Professor David Grant
President, Australian Business Deans Council

Responses to discussion questions

QUESTION 1: What are the key priorities for a new Australian strategy for international education?

To achieve the aims of a new Australian strategy for international education the Council should establish a dedicated taskforce responsible for implementing policies that enhance Australia's competitiveness in the international education market. The taskforce should include education providers, government, employers and other key stakeholders.

The ABDC recommends the following immediate-term priorities for the strategy:

- Implementing a mechanism to open borders to international students, where state, territory and federal governments collaborate with universities and accommodation providers. Modelling by the Mitchell Institute predicts an annual reduction in spending across the broader economy of \$11.4 billion if borders remain closed to international students until July 2021.¹
- Ensuring that student expectations of a high-quality learning experience, whether in-person or online, in a country regarded for its safety and multiculturalism are being met.
- Making recent changes in post-study work rights, which account for online study completed offshore, permanent. Failure to do so will reduce our competitiveness with markets like the UK and Canada and risks leading to a permanent decline in demand for Australian education.
- Offering greater flexibility in courses, with options for online and on-campus study, micro-credentials, short courses and internships.
- Reviewing fees for international students, having regard to their competitiveness with lower-priced, yet highly ranked, institutions around the world.

Over the long-term, the ABDC recommends the taskforce implements a strategy to:

- Align programs with Australian and global skills and employment demand, with the taskforce providing guidance on what is required over two-, five- and 10-year time horizons.
- Build a significant Australian presence in online education with a reputation for quality, innovation and responsiveness to student needs.

¹ <https://theconversation.com/2021-is-the-year-australias-international-student-crisis-really-bites-153180>

- Promote Australia's reputation and presence in new geographical markets. This will require a coordinated effort to present our advantages as a quality, vibrant educational hub for all levels of education.
- Deliver on the strategy's immediate priorities, including those involving work and visa policies, to competitively position the Australian education sector.

QUESTION 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 'caring' and 'connected' aspects of the proposed international strategy must take priority if we are to meet the immediate and future needs of students. This could incorporate the following:

- Developing degrees that heighten the employment prospects of international students in their home and Australian job markets. These should include structured internships, overseas experiences and face-to-face learning developed through collaborations between education providers, industry, and professional bodies in Australia and overseas.
- Strengthening support infrastructure for international students including programs and resources in learning and teaching, health and wellbeing, and orientation and induction. This infrastructure should include a mix of online and in-person supports to enhance the student experience and strengthen social integration.
- Strengthening the position of online offerings, in-country opportunities and related student support for students that may not have the means to relocate to Australia. This could be achieved through a strong digital and physical presence of Australian education providers in countries of origin.
- A strong and integrated Australian alumni network, where students can connect with alumni internationally. This can provide the broad benefits of soft diplomacy to bolster regional security and benefit students through programs such as work-integrated learning to develop employability skills.

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

A successful and sustainable international education strategy needs to reflect a cultural shift, and recognise the significant social and diplomatic benefits, beyond the obvious financial benefits, from a strong and competitive international education system.

Long-term initiatives needed to improve Australia's global competitiveness in international education include:

- Promoting a national dialogue about the economic, social and cultural benefits of international education to Australia.
- Furthering innovation in degree offerings and delivery, allowing for flexible study options online, onshore and through blended study. For example, allowing students to mix online (offshore) and onshore study during their programs.
- A strategic plan for Australian education providers to offer programs of study that respond to projected future skills and employment demands.
- Increased policy flexibility to promote the development of innovative course offerings, like micro-credentials and partner-developed programs (e.g., with overseas universities, employers, and professional bodies).
- Developing more attractive visa and work rights opportunities for international students, particularly in areas of skills shortages.
- Easing regulatory restrictions on international student employment, internships, and work-integrated learning. This is critical particularly for professional programs with accreditation requirements.

QUESTION 3.1: 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?

As stated above, it is critical to formalise engagement between education providers, government, industry and other stakeholders through a taskforce. The taskforce should be responsible for overseeing the development and implementation of the international education strategy. It should report directly to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the federal Education Minister. In response to Question One, the ABDC outlines immediate and long-term priorities for the taskforce.

Bringing together interested stakeholders will allow the taskforce to recommend policies and regulations that are responsive and reflect best international practice. This approach will ensure Australia's competitiveness and attractiveness as an online and on-campus education provider.

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

A strategy focused on diversification across disciplines and source countries will require a range of initiatives facilitated by providers, governments and stakeholders. The best way to ensure that these groups work together is to formalise their interactions through a taskforce that oversees the international education strategy and reports to the Department.

Diversification can be achieved by growing the international student market across all disciplines and across online and on-campus modes of delivery. This approach can benefit Australia and economies in the region in areas of skills shortage like STEM, education, and health. Australian business schools, which have led innovative online international education, are well-positioned to facilitate diversification and to lead the development and expansion of further online offerings in new offshore markets.

The new Australian strategy for international education should consider sector investment and incentives to expand online offerings in the international education market.

Diversification of disciplines and markets will require streamlining of visas; strengthened post-study work rights; incentivising industry to offer internships and to take on international students and graduates; changes to the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act* (ESOS Act) and *Higher Education Standards* to increase flexibility in online and joint programs; and volume learning for postgraduate qualifications. These will make an Australian education more affordable and internationally competitive.

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

A recent report by PWC provides some valuable insights into the skills that Australian education providers will need to consider.² Automation of lower-level tasks will see a shift in demand to ‘human skills’ like critical analysis, collaboration, problem solving, and leadership. The technical skills of science, engineering and IT will be important, but graduates must also demonstrate independence, business acumen, entrepreneurial mindsets and communication skills. This means that the demand for humanities, social sciences and business education will remain high.

In a global economy, increasingly driven by digital transformation, there will be a high demand from international students for business leadership and entrepreneurship, governance and analytics — all skills developed through business programs. These skills are

² <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en/services/people-organisation/workforce-of-the-future/workforce-of-the-future-the-competing-forces-shaping-2030-pwc.pdf>

key for the development of enterprises in developing markets as they emphasise uniquely human attributes that are less vulnerable to automation.

Australia has a well-established track record for quality business education, evidenced by the discipline's popularity among international students. The higher education sector, however, also has strengths in teaching a range of other skills relevant to international students, like education and health sciences.

The strategy should develop the sector's strength in equipping students with skills of emerging importance like data and technological literacy, social and environmental responsibility, and the ability to engage with artificial intelligence. These areas, which are vital for graduate employability, will require innovative and flexible program development.

QUESTION 5.1: How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring students have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

Employability outcomes for both international and domestic students will need industry investment and collaboration. This requires a combination of visas and inducements for industry to take international students as interns and global virtual internships.

Collaborative, work-integrated, learning partnerships with international industry and university partners should also feature in a revised strategy. This will strengthen the international engagement and reputation of Australian education.

Engendering an industry culture of providing opportunities for, and working with, domestic and international students is a long-term effort. A taskforce for international education will be a vital resource for promoting cooperation and cultural change among education providers and industry.

Beyond internships, governments could consider mechanisms such as grants, tax breaks or differential pay rates to increase engagement between industry and the higher education sector. These mechanisms may prove valuable in meeting long-term strategic goals for the Australian economy, like addressing the challenges of population ageing and climate change. A focus on collaboration between industry, government and the higher education sector will strengthen the domestic workforce through research, innovation and commercialisation.

Maintaining contact with our international graduates and keeping data about their employment outcomes is vital for making data-informed decisions and evaluating our

effectiveness. This could be achieved through coordination between established alumni networks.

QUESTION 6: How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

Providing an authentic Australian learning and living experience should be the foundation of the international education strategy. International students should be reassured that they are a valued part of the community as they contribute to social, cultural and economic exchange that enriches Australia. The focus of the education experience should address global challenges with a social responsibility approach that emphasises the value of lifelong learning.

The Australian education sector provides a complete education ecosystem from secondary education to vocational education and training (VET), higher education and world class research in a diverse, multicultural setting. Many Australian universities also have a presence or partnerships offshore, particularly across South East Asia. These provide the opportunity for students to benefit from a global, as distinct from an Australian-centric, experience. Any strategy should leverage and build on Australia's educational strength from its global and strong connections.

Education providers should also explore developing their approach to orientation and induction programs and international student support services with possible coordination across universities.

We note that lifestyle is not emphasised in the Consultation Paper. We acknowledge the importance of building intellectual capital, the focus on skills, and Australia as a knowledge economy with an opportunity for students to engage globally and attract strong employment opportunities. However, we know many students are attracted to Australia, for both short-term mobility and full-degree programs, because we are a safe country that values multiculturalism and offers a quality lifestyle. We should promote the quality of the lifestyle experience here, not just education and employment outcomes, as all elements are complementary.

QUESTION 6.1: What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

A vibrant international education sector, with diverse relationships in established and emerging partner countries and strong enrolments across all disciplines, is valuable for both international and domestic students. Our value proposition for both cohorts is a quality education experience that Australian education providers deliver in a multicultural

environment. Australian education providers are responsive and adaptive to student requirements, with innovative online and face-to-face programs informed by high quality research, innovation and industry needs, both in Australia and globally.

Domestic students benefit from a vibrant international education sector through connections to global education partners, and opportunities to study abroad under the New Colombo Plan and similar programs that promote cross-cultural exchange. Multicultural perspectives also equip domestic students to be mobile internationally.

QUESTION 6.2: How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

We welcome the proposed vision to enable a mix of educational experiences – on campus, overseas and online. This will allow education providers to offer more programs that provide an initial period of online, offshore study with completion of programs in Australia. Opportunities for short-term and long-term study across Australian universities and global network partners provides cultural immersion, work-integrated learning and industry collaboration.

Leveraging these opportunities will require changes to the ESOS Act, visas and post-study work rights so that they recognise online, offshore, and on-campus study. Facilitating dual/joint awards with international partners and the supportive regulatory mechanisms described above will be essential to increase flexibility and innovation in program delivery.

Collaborative approaches to international student orientation and induction programs, and support services, will help education providers to offer a distinctly Australian education experience regardless of the mode of study. However, the strategy should recognise that there are distinct and immediate economic and social benefits from international students studying online, along with sizeable opportunities to tap into students who wish to study wholly online.

QUESTION 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 the wider community?

There is a need to clarify and communicate the direct and indirect benefits of Australian international education.

The sector makes a sizeable contribution to Australia’s economy and social fabric. Explaining these benefits is an opportunity for education providers, government and the business community to work collaboratively — for example, through campaigns that profile sector collaborations in research, engagement and social impact that tackle global issues and challenges.

Community support for the sector can also be raised by highlighting the connections of the wider Australian community with international students. Some 57% of the economic value of the international education sector is in the goods and services that students purchase while studying in Australia.³ Highlighting these benefits is vital to demonstrating how the sector increases, rather than replaces, domestic employment.

Beyond these material impacts, education providers, governments and the business community need to work to promote our graduates as ambassadors who can bridge cultures and be future leaders equipped to address social, environmental and economic challenges.

Connecting the community to the students directly is vital for building support for the international education sector. The taskforce should consider the introduction of an International Students Day at the start of the academic year in February or March, which is supported by education providers, industry and government. This initiative could mirror the International Students Day that marks the new education year in northern hemisphere countries and draw on the example of the former International Students Welcome Day held in Brisbane with support of the Lord Mayor.

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

We encourage the Council to balance the need for a global or outward-facing focus in tandem with an inward focus on Australian jobs and the social, cultural and economic benefits of a vibrant and competitive international education sector. A quality, well-regarded international education industry sets Australia on the world stage. Making student experience the strategic focal point cements Australia’s role in training the next generation of global actors — both Australian students looking to make a difference in the world and international students who can advance Australia’s interests internationally.

To achieve the aims of the international education strategy, the Council should consider the formation of a dedicated Education Australia body tasked with implementing policies to enhance Australia’s competitiveness in the international education market. This would

³ ABS, *International Trade: Supplementary Information, Calendar Year, 2019*

replace the current arrangement, where education is a single element of the wider Austrade portfolio. A separate body responsible for developing links, promoting Australian education, supporting recruitment and advocating on the part of all higher education providers would provide significant benefits.