



Associated Christian Schools
Christian education for the common good

**An ACS Contribution to
Connected, Creative, Caring:
Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030**

Date: 6 / 04 / 2021

Associated Christian Schools welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation Paper March 2021. In providing comments, ACS stresses that it comments primarily from the perspective of the schooling sector, though it has one higher education, CRICOS-registered member, Christian Heritage College.

Comments below are numbered according to the **Discussion Questions on p17** in the Consultation Paper.

Associated Christian Schools is one of a number of organisations representing this sector of independent non-government schools.

ACS consists of 41 Queensland schools (but including one higher education provider, Christian Heritage College) serving 25 270 students; the size of ACS schools, all located in Queensland, ranges from 28 - 3 082.

A number of **ACS** schools, and Christian Heritage College, hold CRICOS registration.

All **ACS** schools are members of Independent Schools Queensland, and a number of **ACS** principals are members of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia.

ACS notes international education in Australia encompasses four sectors of education:

- Schools
- ELICOS colleges
- Vocational education institutions
- Universities and private higher education providers

It is source of regret to some of our member schools that the **Schools sector** of international education is frequently not given the attention or publicity that it merits. Indeed, the regulatory mechanism for schools also makes it exceedingly hard for schools that do not have CRICOS registration to show interest in applying for it. This means it is only schools that have maintained their long-term interest in international education that have maintained CRICOS registration.

ACS acknowledge the support given to **ACS** member schools with CRICOS registration by **Independent Schools Queensland**.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS – and ACS CONTRIBUTION

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

ACS philosophically holds to the notion of *an egalitarian meritocracy* as a meaningful goal for schools, indeed all, sectors of education.

If achieved, this would be a quintessentially Australian achievement. Why?

Countries active in international education generally believe in the notion of meritocracy. We cite the interest of USA, UK, Singapore and China in particular in international rankings for their institutions, especially of course their universities.

We believe the ingrained effect of this has had an influence on schooling that contains a number of difficulties.

As Australians, ACS notes the many occasions domestic and international families have commented to member schools about the negative effects of a *pressured* education/schooling system on their children.

Concern for the mental health of students has prompted ACS to encourage a different approach.

Egalitarian societies may be rare, but Australia exhibits to some degree the characteristics of egalitarianism.

A related characteristic of Australian society is a disdain for achievers who stand out from the crowd (*tall poppy syndrome*).

If the problem of a meritocracy is *pressure*, the problem of disdain for high achievers is *mediocrity*.

This is why ACS chooses to promote the notion of an *egalitarian meritocracy*, in hope of addressing both problems.

ACS therefore suggests two key priorities, which should be kept in balance,

- Egalitarianism
- Meritocracy

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?

ACS considers this a statement of the obvious if Australia is serious about maintaining its international ranking as the third most popular destination for international students.

A serious threat to the reputation of the Australian tertiary and vocational education sectors is posed by frequently-heard allegations that the standard of English of some international students is too poor for them to effectively study at that level in this country.

Poor language skills may be a contributing factor behind some instances of plagiarism and authorship by other-than-the-international-student.

ACS believes that thorough English language preparation will maximise the student experience, whether that preparation is conducted in the students' home countries or here in Australia.

ACS schools that are CRICOS-registered fully understand this, and that is why the schooling sector makes such a valuable contribution, by preparing students' English language skill before tertiary studies.

ACS cannot meaningfully comment on the contribution of the three other sectors, but recommends that the English language requirement for enrolment in university and vocational education be the subject of critical re-examination to ensure that students with inadequate language skills acquire those skills before further studies.

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?

ACS believes both previous and current accountability standards, while well-intentioned as a major quality-control mechanism, are onerous and merit critical re-examination.

ACS can only meaningfully comment on the schools sector.

Since ACS schools are independent, non-systemic, current standards and the accompanying paperwork confer a heavy workload on individual schools. While this may be unavoidable, draws attention to an apparent double-standard compared to systemic schools (primarily the government sector).

While individual school are the service providers, the head offices of systemic schools are largely responsible for their paper-work and presumably any (CRICOS) audits.

ACS considers this issue of double standards to be a serious deterrent to independent schools' participation in international education.

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

As previously noted, all ACS schools are members of Independent Schools Queensland, and value the support provided by ISQ to their CRICOS registered member schools.

Through ISQ, significant networking with the Catholic schooling sector (which comprises both independent and systemic schools) and the Government sector has already been achieved.

Collaboration with potential *competitors* for international enrolments is never going to be easy, but since ACS adheres firmly to the notion of education for the common good, it therefore supports such collaboration wholeheartedly.

ACS considers the burden of bringing providers (eg schools) agents and other interested groups into a collaborative model can effectively only be handled by government departments. In fact, ACS schools have had excellent experience of this in the past.

However, some ACS member schools have noted that problems sometimes emerge between government **departments** where their responsibilities overlap. Officers of government departments hold schools accountable for every aspect of service delivery, and never more so than when inter-departmental problems exist or arise.

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?

ACS believes the development of English language skills is the prime factor for both study and employment, and therefore **refers you to the comments made to this effect in 2 (above)**.

The only comment ACS could add to this is to suggest a review of the language skills required at intake (IELTS or equivalent) to ensure they are not skimpily adequate, but reflect the genuine needs of both study and ultimately employment.

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?

ACS refers you to the major point previously made in 1 (above), that an *egalitarian meritocracy* is a worthy goal for all Australian education providers.

ACS believes the notion of a meritocracy that is genuinely egalitarian would represent a quintessentially Australian value proposition.

Such a goal captures the very essence of *what it means to be Australian*, yet retains the *emphasis on merit* demanded by international competitiveness.

ACS is well aware that such a goal is not easy to achieve, on the contrary, it may prove elusive. However, ACS' own research suggests at least among the schooling sector, some evidence already exists where this has may be close to being achieved and ACS research is clarifying the characteristics required in moving towards this goal.

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?

ACS re-iterates it can only meaningfully speak for the schooling sector, where homestay or boarding programs complement students' education. These two features are not the same, they are intrinsically different, yet both confer social benefit.

Of the two, the experience of ACS member schools suggests *homestay programs* have the most potential to contribute to the development of social capital.

The benefits flow in both directions: to the international students, who gets to experience Australian home and family life (which may have both similarities and differences compared to their own family life) but also to the homestay parents and their Australian children.

Anecdotal experience suggests that what international students are looking for, in addition to furthering their education, is a quality in-country experience which introduces them to a different culture and meaningful relationships (friends).

ACS believes it is these very qualities that also prepare the international student for globalised employment opportunities.

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

ACS believes firmly in the virtue of encouraging a global education for Australians, and international education for overseas students who aspire to study here.

ACS schools that are CRICO-registered report greater success with the former when the latter is in place.

ACS therefore recommends that greater, and more careful attention be given to the school sector of international education.