



Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030

Submission by Deakin University

May 2021

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Introduction

On behalf of Deakin University and its diverse communities, we welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process for the Australian International Education Strategy 2021-2030.

Australia's international education sector continues to enrich our communities and for many years has been a vital component of Australia's economic prosperity and national security. We need a new strategy that responds to the challenges and opportunities of changed global circumstances – a strategy with clear direction and a robust, evidence-based policy foundation. This will give the sector the best opportunity to achieve a strong recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is Deakin's view that the strategy's success will rely on:

- acknowledging that recovery will be a multi-year endeavour
- establishing the political, administrative and policy environment to support both immediate action, and long-term sector recovery plans
- understanding that international education operates in a highly competitive market environment; and acknowledging the Australian higher education sector's success and expertise in establishing Australia as the market leader in international education
- urgently prioritising the return of international students to Australia (as health conditions permit) to stem the flow away from Australia to competitor countries (UK, USA, Canada)
- strengthening the links between international education and skilled migration through a revamp of the graduate visa program.

Australia's international education sector is being deeply disrupted by the COVID-19 related international border closure. While the full impact of the crisis will be better understood through 2021 and into 2022, it is now clear that the path back to a position of full competitive strength is a multi-year endeavour that depends on the implementation of key strategic elements as soon as possible.

In this context, the Australian International Education Strategy 2021-2030 and the policies and programs that flow from it, must place urgent priority on an initial COVID-19 recovery phase that will focus on re-establishing Australia's share of international student markets, while embracing the opportunities that the COVID-19 pandemic has either presented or accelerated.

Deakin's international profile has grown significantly in the last decade. With a carefully balanced international portfolio and deep global connections, the University is in a strong position to partner with the Federal Government to chart the optimal path back from the crisis while introducing a new era of Australian international higher education. We look forward to doing so.

Deakin's strategic goals align with Australia's international education objectives

The central theme of Deakin's 2021-2030 strategy is to build upon our strengths and provide tangible benefits to the communities we serve – taking our ideas to meaningful impact. The impact we create benefits our communities in Geelong, Melbourne, Warrnambool, Victoria and Australia more broadly. It is through this lens of community service that we view our globalisation program:

Our social contract with Australia extends to our ability to teach, learn from and collaborate with the best minds in the world. Our ability to influence at a local level is shaped by longstanding international networks and partnerships, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, giving us a globally informed perspective. We will sustain our networks and build new ones to remain an internationally connected university.

Deakin's internationalisation programs are important components of the outstanding education and student experience we provide

The Deakin domestic student experience is greatly enhanced by the University's diverse international cohort. In 2019 Deakin had approximately 14,000 international students onshore (23 per cent of the student body) with a diversity strategy that balanced three pillars of student recruitment: India (38 per cent), China (25 per cent) and the rest-of-the-world (37 per cent). Beyond nationality, the diversity profile includes students dispersing across level of study, discipline and campus (including approximately 4,000 students at Deakin's two Geelong campuses). This domestic-to-international student mix at Deakin is highly successful. It is conducive to a positive classroom and on-campus experience for domestic and international students alike that has been reflected in a decade of sector-leading student satisfaction results in both the Student Experience Survey (domestic and international students) and the i-Graduate international student benchmark survey.

Deakin supports its students to be globally connected and in 2019 we had one of the most internationally mobile student cohorts with 29 per cent of the undergraduate graduating cohort having undertaken an international learning abroad (ILA) experience (AUIDF Learning Abroad Benchmark Dec, 2020). Deakin has also been a leader in the Federal Government's flagship New Colombo Plan (NCP) mobility program spanning the Indo-Pacific region. As we innovate with new forms of virtual exchange that will remain as part of the model once borders reopen, we appreciate the flexibility of the NCP secretariat in allowing funded programs to shift to online mode, and we look forward to working with government to further refine ILA and the programs that support it.

Strategic Imperatives—Core Activity

Welcoming international students back to Australian campuses and re-establishing Australia's hard-won market leadership is first-order priority for the Government's International Education Strategy and post COVID-19 recovery plan. This challenge continues to grow in magnitude as Australia's prime competitor countries, United Kingdom, United States and Canada, have kept their borders open to international students. Recent sentiment surveys of both international students (QS and IDP) and agents (NAVITAS) show students originally bound for Australia are increasingly looking, and moving, elsewhere.

Deakin, which has invested heavily over a long period in order to grow not only the size but also the diversity of its international cohort (by source country, by campus location and by discipline), is well positioned to recover market share when the decision is taken to bring international students back. However, supportive Federal Government policy and programs will be essential to the recovery.

Federal Government policy, starting with the enabling legislation in the late 1980s, has facilitated the success of Australia's international higher education offering. As the international cohort has grown, government policy has evolved, guided by important reviews most notably the Baird review of the ESOS Act (2010) and the Knight Strategic Review of the Student Visa Program (2011). The successful policy frameworks resulting from these reviews remain important mechanisms for the recovery and must be maintained. They include:

- ongoing flexibility in the administration of the ESOS Act in relation to students who remain studying online offshore at less than a full-time load
- ongoing guarantee that Post Study Work Rights remain available to students stranded studying online offshore
- the same guarantee being extended to students who have been studying offshore/online during the COVID-19 pandemic while holding a valid eCOE, but have not yet been issued a valid study visa
- ensuring strong continuity in timely student visa processing under the Streamlined Student Visa Program.

These are pre-conditions to recovery in international student markets. In addition, Deakin strongly recommends the Government consider raising the graduate visa to three years for graduates with an equivalent to minimum two years on-campus study; and to two years for post-graduate students with an equivalent to minimum of one year on-campus study. These adjustments would bring Australia into line with our major competitor countries and be the single most impactful change Government could make to assist with Australia's international education market recovery. It would also address the lost opportunity as a result of so few international graduates progressing through the skilled migration program. An extra year of post-study work would support both students and employers: students to find meaningful work and establish themselves with employers of choice; and employers to gain confidence in the international graduates they employ and increase their willingness to sponsor skill visas.

Strategic Opportunities–New Activity

As governments world-wide have made concessions in relation to the recognition of online higher education in response to the COVID-19 crisis, Deakin is embracing opportunities to leverage our strength in online distance education. While interesting models of online and blended learning are emerging in some international markets, they remain at the market exploration/entry stage with sustainable business models difficult to identify. Deakin will continue to work on these options and to partner with the Federal Government to advocate for ongoing access to foreign markets, and for recognition of the quality of Australia's online higher education as flexible arrangements offered in response to the crisis are reviewed.

Deakin is establishing new models for blended transnational education (TNE) that build on decades of successful online and on-campus delivery. We support the high standards set by TEQSA for TNE which protect the Australian education brand internationally as it sets our offering apart from competitors operating high volume, low value programs that are lightly regulated.

Deakin will test application of the National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students to new modes of learning and remain keen to work with TEQSA on the use of blended learning in international education and alternative credentials.

The area of online innovation that is showing most immediate promise is through articulation partnership arrangements where blended online/offshore and on-campus (when the time comes) study is becoming a more prominent source of students. Government advocacy for foreign recognition of online teaching will be critical to new forms of Australian TNE taking hold and should be a priority for DESE and DFAT international networks over the

Deakin University makes the following recommendations to the Committee:

Recommendation 1: The Australian International Education Strategy 2021-2030 must place urgent priority on an initial COVID-19 recovery phase that will focus on re-establishing Australia's share of international student markets for premium on-campus programs (once borders re-open).

Recommendation 2: Review the post study work graduate visa program and how it connects with the skilled migration program in order to address national skills needs and assist with the post COVID-19 recovery for international education.

Recommendation 3: Recognise the strengths of Australia's international higher education regulatory framework and how it adapts in response to opportunities and challenges presented by the pandemic and beyond. Continue to improve the coherency between DHA, DESE and DFAT in relation to international higher education and how they communicate with the sector.

Deakin University Specific Comments to the Discussion Questions

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

Post-COVID-19 recovery: Much of the 10-year duration of the strategy will see the sector in recovery phase. Re-establishing Australia's market competitiveness will rely on consistent, student-friendly policy settings. The graduate work visa program will play a critical role in the recovery of Australia's international competitiveness. The eligibility for students stranded offshore should be ongoing, with the length of the visa reviewed to best accelerate recovery while also strengthening Australia's human capital development.

Beyond the revival of core activity, the development of new and emerging markets and products will also rely on whole-of-government support from Home Affairs, Education and Austrade. The marketing image of Australian education is not consistent in different markets, especially given the fact that Australian universities' ranking performances have been improving year after year. The image of the quality aspect of Australian higher education, a welcoming society and potential employment experiences/opportunities will promote Australia as a preferred destination.

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?

A student-centred approach requires a comprehensive support framework for international students through the complete cycle, starting with the decision-making process and all the way through to their ambassadorial role as alumni. Australian universities do much of this well, but improvements can be made through better coordination with State and Federal Governments, particularly in terms of connecting international students with local communities and employers.

Better identifying and delivering extra-curricular opportunities that help international students make the most out of their Australian education and prepare them to put into practice the skills learnt in the degree here in their home country or around the world is critical. Access to experiential opportunities off campus, to networks, internships and graduate opportunities are critical elements to the student experience.

Intercultural experience and immersion in the host country's culture and language is an integral part of the international education experience and its attractiveness to most students. For instance, 85 per cent of prospective South Asian students consider real time, onshore experiences to be critical to their international education experience and thus to their decision making on choice of study destination.

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

Key to enabling Australian institutions to attract international students away from our main competitors will be:

- access to post-study work-rights
- predictable and consistently applied immigration policy
- removal of the two-year minimum course duration for Masters graduates to access post study work opportunities, recognising that some Masters degrees are 1 or 1.5 years and graduates should have equal access to opportunities to put their skills into practice
- extended post study opportunities for all students will give students a greater chance of progressing to the skilled migration program and enhance Australia's human capital development.

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

Home Affairs, Education and Austrade must collaborate to ensure institutions are supported and prospective students can readily access an Australian education through informed immigration assessment, updated country education profiles, and the budget to put Destination Australia in the prospective student consideration set. Identification of priority markets must be done in collaboration with industry to ensure government and providers are working towards the same diversity goals.

5. 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?

Employability is more than just having the right skills. Sought after skills are critical, so universities need to ensure what is taught is relevant and current and promote courses aligned to skills gaps purposefully. The other component for securing employment that is often the key barrier is work experience.

Application of university learning in a workplace or industry commissioned project links to real-world situations and encourages students to determine how their skills can be transferable. It is well understood that students who have industry experience are more likely to secure employment, with the added value of being able to draw on industry/community supervisors as referees and mentors.

One of the ongoing barriers to this is lack of awareness by employers of the different visas that students and graduates are entitled to and the exceptional skills international graduates bring. Many employers assume that an international graduate can't work full-time. Many also assume that international graduates have poor communication skills. The Victorian Government won't employ international graduates (New South Wales and Queensland do), so how can we expect Victorian employers to? Governments must set an example and play a role in facilitating employment.

There are many studies that determine lists of skills in-demand for future work (e.g. Foundation for Young Australians series) which are based on employer surveys, job-market analysis and graduate feedback. The core list of desirable skills usually includes:

- technical skills – although many employers say they retrain their graduate recruits
- enterprise/workplace skills – communication, teamwork, self-management, literacies
- thinking skills – analysis, critical thinking, problem-solving)
- affective domain dispositions – curiosity, creativity.

Digital fluency is increasingly expected.

6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

The Australian education value proposition for international students is a combination of elements including high-quality institutional providers, excellent teaching and learning facilities, an English language environment, multicultural living setting, proximity to home country (and time zone) for Asian students, perceived safety and low crime rate, visa and migration opportunities, lifestyle and equality. These are the things which will continue to be valued by international students, and their parents and sponsors.

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ii. How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

A blended online (offshore) and offline (onshore) combination will be a more popular and feasible pathway for international students. Fully online offshore will not be possible for many key markets such as China due to regulatory frameworks and perceptions among regulators and consumers as to the quality of a fully online program relative to the on-campus experience. However, partial online offshore or blended offshore offer a more accessible and viable option for international students and cohort-based recruitment with partner institutions in key markets.

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?

The sector needs broad range of initiatives that highlight the value international education brings to our students, their families, and the broader community. Key stakeholders include:

- community and Industry leaders
- past students who are prominent in the community and in industry
- politicians from all sides and levels supporting international education and engaging in discourse that is both evidence based and sensitive to cultural nuances and sensitivities that affect the sector.

Universities must better engage directly with industry representative groups, chambers of commerce, as well as local government authorities to be active and vocal supporters of the sector and to be an additional voice to articulate the benefits the sector brings to the wider community. More positive media stories of international students and the international sector, possible initiatives include business engagement activities, celebrity endorsement, international education sector awards.