



Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030: IRU response to consultation paper

Overview

International education and international research linkages are essential elements of a world standard university system for Australia. The Australian Government's 2016 *National Strategy for International Education 2025* was a major recognition of this and the Coalition Government's commitment to a whole of Government approach to supporting international education and research.

Halfway through the target period to 2025 the Government has rightly seen that it needs to rework its strategy to respond effectively to several significant changes since 2016. These include:

- continued development of digital based education that both strengthens the base for in person on campus education and greatly widens the notional set of people able to enrol online to a degree program offered from education providers around the world;
- the impact of Covid-19 on the capacity for people to move across national boundaries and, at times, within countries and cities, that will remain a factor for several years if not longer;
- greater debate within Australia about the number of temporary migrants that should be permitted, to ensure an effective socially cohesive society in which students are welcome not rejected; and
- Government argument that publicly established universities ought to give stronger priority to Australian students and their needs.

The consultation paper proposes the basis for a new decade long Strategy. The paper is high level to target the leading questions about why Australia should support international education and research and what the priority outcomes needed are before we can move to more action focussed discussions.

The discussion paper highlights several important issues that need resolution before the Strategy can develop further, whether it discusses these directly or equally importantly ignores them.

Government commitments to their resolution are central to a viable meaningful strategy.

1. The Strategy needs a clear base in a proposed post Covid-19 shape for international education and research. Government commitment to support workable entry protocols long term and the future scope for onshore education is crucial.
2. The whole of Government approach central to the 2016 Strategy requires effective recognition of the link between international education and migration. The discussion paper essentially ignores the viable, positive outcome for Australia's skilled workforce, that 16% of such students since early 2000s chose to become Australian residents through established migration programs.
3. As with the 2016 Strategy support for international research is badly presented through being dispersed throughout the document. There needs to be a clear research specific section in the Strategy to ensure the Australian Government gets behind the reality that research is international.

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4. The Government's commitment to a whole of Government approach to international education and research is badly stretched by its response to concerns about foreign interference in universities, the alignment of world linkages to the Government's ever changing foreign relations policies, and concerns that potential students from many countries that would be part of a more diverse international student body are not acceptable visa recipients.

These issues are the focus for considerable effort across universities, Government security and foreign affairs agencies and Government members. The strategy cannot ignore these questions.

Beyond these major issues to be resolved the strategy discussion paper raises two important areas.

- It seeks to influence the nature of future teaching for international students. Education delivery is a matter that affects all students. All students, Australian or foreign, deserve a high quality education using the best techniques and resources. To explore the changes' impact for international students requires the Strategy to engage with how these questions best interact with how education for all students is developed into the future.
- How to engage with the Australian community to improve public understanding of what international education means with an active effort to reduce hostility.

Recommendations

1. The Strategy should be open and clear that international education is a major value to the students themselves and sits with the role of universities to offer education to all those who wish to gain from it.
2. Working through the Covid-19 impact should be the lead priority action for the first two years of the strategy with flow on effects for the subsequent eight years.
3. There needs to be a clear research specific section in the Strategy.
4. The Strategy should openly endorse the potential for some international students to become residents through established migration programs, and identify actions to enhance this outcome.
5. The strategy should ensure that the student visa programs start from the assumption that recommended students are likely to be suitable.
6. The Strategy should address the conflicting pressures within Government priorities to support international education while ensuring effective response to foreign interference and alignment with foreign relations policy.
7. Government incentives for greater diversity should be designed to encourage ongoing diversity amongst providers and to support those providers with low student diversity to learn from others which are not.
8. The Strategy needs to be clear how its proposals for responding to changes in education delivery are linked to how the university (or provider) develops education delivery for all its students.
9. There needs to be a thorough consideration of where an emphasis on Australianness is important to future success and where emphasis on education quality should be the focus.
10. Actions under the Strategy need to ensure both:
 - that errors in understanding about international education are challenged and positively addressed; and
 - that the reasonable questions about its impact are taken seriously.

Detailed response

1. The vision, aims and key priorities for a new Australian Strategy for international education

Benefits from international education

The consultation paper sets out four benefits of international education that focus at the value to Australia and Australians. This makes sense to the domestic needs but severely limits a strategy that will be read more broadly.

The value for international students, and the potential impact for their home countries on return, should be stated as a real and important benefit. This would position the Strategy better for its international readers through displaying a welcoming and positive interest in students in their own right.

Recommendation 1

The Strategy should be open and clear that international education is a major value to the students themselves and sits with the role of universities to offer education to all those who wish to gain from it.

Vision, aims and priorities

The paper lists six possible aims as the vision for the Strategy along with seven strategic priorities. Both sets are high level and overlap. The priorities need a stronger focus on the leading actions required to achieve the aims, supported by detailed support activities.

The priority issues for the IRU, drawn from the issues with the consultation paper set out above are:

1. a clear post Covid-19 shape for international education and research;
2. effective recognition of the link between international education and migration to assist with 2020s workforce challenges;
3. stronger, more effective support for international research partnerships and translation; and
4. engagement with the Australian community to improve public understanding of what international education means.

The long term Covid-19 impact

It is difficult to predict the long term impact of Covid-19 on cross country education throughout the world and for Australia in particular. It is clear that the impact will be significant for several years if not substantially longer.

It is crucial to engage with this for the Strategy to have meaning over the coming decade.

Fundamental is a Government commitment with action to viable functioning mechanisms for a safe flow of international students in and out of Australia.

Decisions about the long term freedom of movement, the number of students that will be permitted and long term adjustments to the risk of infection all need thorough discussion and clear Government parameters that education providers understand and can then work with.

Recommendation 2

Working through the Covid-19 impact should be the lead priority action for the first two years of the strategy with flow on effects for the subsequent eight years.

Supporting research

The place of research in the Government's international vision has always been uncertain.

The 2016 Strategy and the current discussion paper both suffer from being unsure how to address it and associated issues of take up of research outcomes by business, Government and other bodies across the world.

The strategy's approach to research and its translation should be clearly marked, grouped together and supported with an effective suite of actions.

Research is universities' leading international activity with a wide ranging web of connections linking researchers in Australia to those around the world. More than three quarters (77%) of all Australian Research Council grants in 2020 involved international collaboration, having grown steadily from 42% of grants in 2002. Across the entire research sector, 59% of all Australian publications in 2020 had international collaborators, up from 40% in 2010. This is well above the OECD total (34%) and larger research countries, such as USA (38%), Japan (32%) and China (23%), and comparable to other leading research countries, such as Germany (53%), Canada (56%) and the UK (59%). This is despite Australian universities' geographical distance from collaborators. Australia has half of the world's top-20 universities for the proportion of research that is long distance collaboration (>5,000km between collaborators) in the Leiden Ranking (minimum 5,000 publications).

Australia's academic workforce and research training is also highly international. More than one quarter of academics obtained their PhDs overseas (29% in 2017). In 2019, 40% of all doctorates by research were awarded to overseas students.

The research connections extend to the take up of research outcomes with commercial bodies drawing on research from around the world. Australia's relative strength in research draws back a return from commercial enterprise across the globe.

There is a major role for Government to support these activities, to promote the value of research from Australia and assist universities and researchers to find the best partners. In examining these links for fit with its foreign policy the Government should, in return, invest in links that align with foreign policy.

Recommendation 3

There needs to be a clear research specific section in the Strategy.

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

International students: a migration opportunity

Having a better understanding of what students do in Australia and subsequently is fundamental to a constructive discussion about international students.

Unlike countries such as New Zealand and Canada, Australia keeps a rigorous separation between its international education policy and its migration policy. The issue has been fraught in Australia, with international education mostly operating distinctly from other policies aimed at meeting Australia's longer-term economic and social needs.

The lack of explicit linking of the two policy areas feeds the distrust about international education, which has become evident in many public comments about the program and its perceived impact on universities. It is common to read assertions that international education is simply a route to easier immigration.

Being a student in Australia is a good basis to become a citizen if the person so wishes, following the correct and due pathways such as obtaining a post-study work visa or as a skilled migrant able to work in a relevant area.

The Treasury and Home Affairs report [*Shaping a Nation: Population growth and immigration over time*](#) states that: "Of the 1.6 million [international students] examined between 2000-01 and 2013-14, 16% eventually transitioned to permanent residence". This is a very important number that should be better known. It confirms the vast majority of students do indeed leave Australia and pursue their lives in their home country or elsewhere. It also validates the primarily educational value that universities and other education providers offer to international students.

What is needed is for the Australian Government to articulate that there is a valuable link between an education service for many thousands of students from other countries and a proportion of them subsequently being accepted to stay in Australia as migrants.

Recommendation 4

The Strategy should openly endorse the potential for some international students to become residents through established migration programs, and identify actions to enhance this outcome.

Visas – a way to support international outcomes or to hinder?

The visa programs are specific Government decisions that underpin students' access to Australia and the basis on which they can continue to reside in Australia for work post-graduation.

The streamlined visa processes have largely worked to improve the speed of the system, balancing provider judgement and risk with the broader needs to ensure all visa holders adhere to expectations.

The challenge is that the system rewards enrolment of students from countries whose students are most likely to adhere to rules, notably China at a time when the Government is explicitly concerned about over reliance on China putting universities at risk of undue influence on their operations. To spread the range of student home countries is a worthy goal, particularly if focussed at increased

number of students from many countries – yet many of the likely countries to achieve greater diversity of students are those regarded as the more risky from a visa program perspective.

This is a major, whole of Government, challenge. One mechanism to improve outcomes would be to appoint a whole of Government International Education and Research advisor similar to the position being created to coordinate activity on regional education.

There are several issues about the efficiency of the regulatory system that would be addressed according to the Government's low red tape preferences. Most notably is the question of why a formal distinct CRICOS approval is needed rather than it being a means to list and track the programs available to international students from each education provider. Providers and programs which are registered and accredited through standard quality assurance processes of TEQSA and providers.

Recommendation 5

The Strategy should ensure that the student visa programs start from the assumption that recommended students are likely to be suitable.

Recommendation 6

The Strategy should address the conflicting pressures within Government priorities to support international education while ensuring effective response to foreign interference and alignment with foreign relations policy.

3. How to improve the diversity of international education and research

IRU members draw students from a wide range of countries and have a relatively low proportion of international students in the student body. In 2019, 17% of all onshore students at IRU members were international, compared to 37% at the Group of Eight and 26% for the sector. IRU members are also not highly dependent on international students from any single country. The main source country for international students, India, comprised just over one quarter of IRU international students (28%), followed by China (19%) and Nepal (7%). China is the main country for only two IRU members, with India the main country for four members and Nepal for another. The IRU's top-3 source countries, combined, comprise less than the proportion of international students at Group of Eight universities coming from China alone (59%).

It is wrong to assume the challenge and problem is the same for all universities or for all course levels. In 2019, China was the main citizenship for international students on postgraduate research visas, but it comprised only 17% of international postgraduate research students, followed by Saudi Arabia (8%), Bangladesh (7%), India (6%), Vietnam (6%) and Iran (6%). It is important to understand this to avoid letting the reality that some education providers are heavily dependent on students from one or two major source countries drive Government policy responses. It is important to work with those providers to reduce risk but that cannot be the major response.

With the extent of current diversity recognised, the question of diversity becomes much more nuanced. The Strategy should look to encourage those providers, like IRU members, with a diverse set of students to continue their practice and ensure that the system supports this. The previous section on visa schemes highlighted one major impediment within Government policy. Where a

Government policy discourages if not penalizes drawing students from some countries diversity involving them will be very difficult to achieve.

Diversity is not the best angle to consider changes in education delivery and the level of qualification being offered. These ought to be driven by education need, whether in Australia or for people from other countries.

Recommendation 7

Government incentives for greater diversity should be designed to encourage ongoing diversity amongst providers and to support those providers with low student diversity to learn from others which are not.

4. How to deliver the best possible student outcomes

The discussion paper makes much of how education delivery may change or need to change over the coming decade.

The issue is relevant to all students. It may be more intense for international students who have choice of education offerings from around the world but ultimately the questions are about how the whole university operates to deliver good quality education to all its students, with limited regard to where those students are from.

In addressing the likely changes in delivery and the need to ensure education remains contemporary, the Strategy engages with the whole education enterprise. It will need to consider how to do from the perspective of international students while recognising that the main issues about education delivery are generic to the whole education enterprise. The actions that ultimately are set in the Strategy will need to be alert to this challenge.

IRU members recognise the potential from the world market for online education while being alert to the many variations in interest for it according to country and different sets of people in target countries. The opportunity to expand is important as an addition to the strong in country success to date and the Covid-19 impact on it.

The discussion paper is largely silent about transnational education where universities provide on campus based education in other countries. This is a significant delivery option that several IRU members are actively engaged with.

Recommendation 8

The Strategy needs to be clear how its proposals for responding to changes in education delivery are linked to how the university (or provider) develops education delivery for all its students.

5. How to create a uniquely Australian education experience

The discussion paper provides little guidance to what a uniquely Australian education experience is or should be. The word 'create' implies that it does not yet exist, which would suggest that its importance to international education is modest.

The section appears overwhelmed by marketing considerations ahead of a harder consideration of the different sets of students who would either come to Australia or choose an Australian provider for online learning.

The quality and relevance of the education outcome seems paramount. Distinctly Australian approaches could be relevant where these link to positive experiences during study or better outcomes on graduation.

The variety of needs possible cover:

- students studying in Australia with a strong interest in future Australian residence. Australianness of the degree could be important; to
- students studying in Australia as the basis for a future in their home country or elsewhere in the world. Australianness of the degree may enhance students' future in some cases, with the soundness and quality of the education outcome likely the more important; to
- students studying on line from their home country – the degree needs to be useful in the home context. Overly distinctive Australian elements might be counter productive for this group.

Recommendation 9

There needs to be a thorough consideration of where an emphasis on Australianness is important to future success and where emphasis on education quality should be the focus.

6. How can the benefits this sector provides be better understood by wider community?

It is easy for those of us deep in the education world to assume that its value is understood.

The experience of Covid-19 added to the extent of concern about temporary migrant numbers in Australia. As access and cost of education for Australian students waxes and wanes there is often concern that international students limit access or diminish education outcomes for Australian students.

The extent of temporary residents is a factor for any country to consider. Covid showed up the limits to support systems that assume that temporary residents can support themselves and be able to leave at the due time. These concerns require more than information and publicity material. They require a sound discussion of the broader impact of international students and actions to avoid negative impacts.

It is very important for the Strategy to recognise the breadth of responses to international education.

Recommendation 10

Actions under the Strategy need to ensure both:

- that errors in understanding about international education are challenged and positively addressed; and
- that the reasonable questions about its impact are taken seriously.

as at 10 May 2021