

Australian Strategy for International Education 2021 - 2030 Consultation Paper

Discussion Questions:

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

OpenLearning is supportive of the strategic priorities identified in the consultation paper as being reflective of the needs of learners, the sector, and the economy. It is suggested that the Council establish short, medium and long term priorities that assist in making the strategy more feasible and effective.

To deliver on the priorities identified, it is also recommended that connecting communities should specify that this includes the robust and market-leading education technology ecosystem and student service providers that are there to support the sector in achieving these goals.

Lastly, across all of the priorities listed, it is important to be able to articulate the necessary skills for the future that employees across all facets of the student lifecycle will need to be able to deliver on the strategy; and then to support the regulators and providers alike to enable that skill development to occur.

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?

- **Unlearning commonly believed characteristics of international students**

For many education providers working in the international education space in Australia, the continued growth pre-COVID-19 and an established curriculum model resulted in a lower threshold for innovation and change. With that in mind, many long held understandings and notions about the learning environments of international students in their home countries are outdated.

Similarly, consumer practices and priorities have evolved, meaning that education providers need to have a clearer value proposition to attract and retain students.

- **Diversifying education delivery approach through improving student online learning experience**

Teaching and learning is at the centre of a student experience. COVID-19 has seen the acceleration of online learning adoption. More importantly, this short-term change is expected to drive the long-term structural change in how we deliver

education. Although unlikely to entirely replace face-to-face delivery, online learning will become more prevalent in students' learning journey going forward.

To embrace this trend, education providers should better understand "online learning" and enhance their online delivery capabilities. Online learning is more than delivering a lecture through Zoom, uploading PowerPoint slides and video online and creating quizzes after each class. A good online learning experience should encapsulate many key elements of face-to-face learning, such as engagement, interaction and sociability. This requires that education providers embed a sound learning design and leverage quality online education delivery tools to thoughtfully develop courses and arrange learning & teaching activities to maximise student engagement, motivation and promote an active online learning environment.

Furthermore, education providers need to consider whether their assessment practices are fit for purpose. This goes beyond looking at which online exam/proctoring tools are available, but to reflect upon the learning outcomes, learning experiences, and skills that students need throughout their studies as well as into the workplace. This not only impacts the learning experience, appeal of programs, but also whether providers are going to make progress in closing the gap between study and graduate employability.

- **Creating a diverse student cohort through flexible delivery model**

Australia is known as a country for its cultural diversity. A diverse student cohort provides a unique student experience studying in Australia. Australia has been largely reliant on a number of source countries. A flexible education delivery model will help education providers open up more opportunities from other emerging markets. For example, if education providers can ensure the quality of online education to a high standard, attractive opportunities exist for students who choose to complete part of their studies from their home countries and come to Australia to complete the remaining.

- **Enhancing employment opportunities whilst in country/studying**

The contribution of international students to the Australian economy is far reaching. Whilst the most recent changes to working hours for students in hospitality and tourism are welcomed, more can be done to set incoming students up for success pre-arrival so that they understand:

- Their regulatory rights and responsibilities
- Popular and upcoming career opportunities whilst studying
- Resume and application process practices
- Interviewing skills and practices

There is an opportunity to open up more employment opportunities to international students in sectors and jobs that are more closely aligned to their field of study. Restrictions on working hours for international students are a significant impediment for science, engineering and technology students to secure part-time jobs in the digital economy, resulting in otherwise highly skilled international students working in low-skill low-wage jobs while they are studying.

- **Enhancing employment outcome by adapting course curriculum to rapidly-changing future skill requirements and improving career support**

The ability to directly link teaching and learning outcomes to future employment / career benefits will give students a great level of motivation and confidence. This requires education providers to have a deep understanding of industry needs and constantly adapt their course curriculum to future skill requirements.

Providing good career support also plays a critical role in enhancing student experience, particularly for international students who are likely to be disadvantaged in job recruitment from both Australian labour market (due to requirement of permanent residency from employers) and their home markets (due to lack of local connections).

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?

- Australia should maintain its policy framework as welcoming international students. This includes favourable and greater consistency in regulations on student visas and post-study working rights in attaining international students.
- Embracing multiculturalism among the wider community and consistently working to reinforce the value/contribution of international students. The current pandemic has surfaced a degree of exclusion and racism towards certain ethnic groups, in which international students have been impacted. Australia should consider increasing its effort in integrating international students to the wider community and better communicate to the public the contributions that international students have made to this country from both economic and cultural perspectives.
- Adopting innovative delivery methods to increase the breadth of Australian education globally. This goes beyond the use of different education technology (although a key point of difference in the learning experience), but also

encapsulates taster programs, unbundling of current programs, partnership models, and purpose-built dual-country programs where students enroll knowing that a specific proportion of their program has been designed to study at home versus in country.

- A regulatory framework that supports student pathways (non-accredited/stacking of micro-credentials), as well as partnerships that extend beyond the traditional TNE model.
- A regulatory framework that does not set different standards for international students in-country from their domestic peers regarding the proportion of classes that must be attended face-to-face.
- Pricing policies that acknowledge that pricing differentiation can be done without negatively impacting domestic students; whilst enabling Australian education providers to have a tangible impact on education globally, differentiate between support and delivery models, and to enable choices that are based on the needs of the learner.

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

The impact of COVID-19 has resulted in many education providers to take a step back and reflect upon the efficiency and effectiveness of their approach to market and operations; both holistically, and particular components of the student lifecycle. Long-term, this change in business practices will pay off for the sector.

What is lacking though is the long-term foresight and tracking of return on investment for government initiatives, such as the Study with Australia project. Anecdotal feedback to-date is that the project did not have a tangible impact on student enrolments, completion rates were low, existing students were frustrated that focus was diverted into free courses whilst they were studying in a “just-in-time” delivery environment, and that the project was university heavy in its approach.

Overlaid with this, smaller/private providers who have attempted to shift their business model to domestic opportunities have struggled to compete with free short courses and accredited programs available via TAFEs; as well as regulatory bodies who are not equipped for the pace in changes to funding allocations, qualification types, and approval turnaround times for new courses for non-self accrediting institutions.

With this in mind, a more structured approach needs to be taken to support innovation and research of best practices in the sector, to ensure fair and transparent funding/grant

processes, to foster partnerships across providers and with industry, and to measure and report on return on investment.

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?

In addition to develop specialised and technical skills in the field of study, students need to develop four core fundamental skills, including critical thinking, creativity, communication and collaboration.

Industry 4.0 and continuous technological advancement are accelerating the shifts in skills that the workforce needs. People skills, including leadership, adaptability, social and emotional intelligence, become increasingly important in the digital future.

The world is changing at an unprecedented pace, skills required to be successful in today's workforce might be substantially different from what is required in the future. Students will also need to develop a growth mindset and a mentality of lifelong learning.

From a policy perspective, Australian government should provide greater consistency in post-study working rights, which gives international students the certainty to gain meaningful employment opportunities in the country.

Employers should aim to create an equal playing field for all students when it comes to internship and graduate job opportunities. Except for those sensitive industries (e.g. Defence industry), students should be assessed based on their merits and competencies, instead of their residency status.

Employers should also work more collaboratively with education providers to provide input on skills required for the workforce to the curriculum development.

Education providers should aim to bridge the gap between course curriculums and skills requirements. This requires education providers to:

- Work closely with the industries and employers to monitor the shift in skills requirements, map out the course learning outcomes to skills requirements and ensure that course curriculums stay relevant and up-to-date.
- Include work-integrated learning in course curriculums.
- Retrain and upskill their own staff to understand the evolving nature of work, or to have a greater balance of pracademics in their organisations.
- Shift their approach to education and assessment, so that the whole student is developed, feedback and reflection practices are core, and high stakes assessments enable students to demonstrate their ability to transfer knowledge, skills, and understanding into relevant and real world contexts.

Education providers should also improve career support services for international students, from career information sharing, networking, to job application support.

Education providers do not have to do all of these by themselves. There are EdTech companies dedicated to solving student employment / career challenges. We should encourage more collaboration in the sector.

Strong alumni networks are also critical in improving employability outcomes for international students, especially for those considering returning back to their home country after graduation. A strong alumni network not only benefits existing students, but also brand awareness and future enrolments of students in years to come.

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?

Culturally, “resilience” and “flexibility” are two values that are associated with Australia’s character. In practice though, accredited education providers and our regulatory practices are adverse to change. Institutionally, education providers are keen to innovate only as long as it doesn’t impact or blur the lines with their current product offering.

If we consider the potential of enabling Australian education, globally, then prospects are multiplied. To do so successfully though requires:

- Understanding that there are different student profiles, drivers, and life cycles at play
- That purpose-built student experiences are required
- Enabling ease of movement between accredited and non-accredited offerings is required
- Pathways need to be clearly mapped and articulated
- Channels to market need to be broadened

Within the learning experiences offered, greater effort needs to be placed on showcasing Australian insights, research, and strengths, whilst also demonstrating awareness of global trends and practices, and leveraging the wealth of knowledge and experiences that the learners themselves bring to the table.

Providers that are able to demonstrate and meet the needs outlined above are going to have a tangible advantage over their competitors.

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?

We need a more coordinated, targeted and active communication strategy, and more consistent positioning and messaging at national level on how the international education sector and international students benefit the country as whole. This includes:

- Economic contribution this sector directly contributes to Australia economy, e.g. revenue and GDP contribution, number of jobs created
- Economic impact during COVID-19 when international education sectors are heavily impacted, e.g. loss in revenue to the country, number of jobs lost
- Specify other industries and sectors that benefit from a prosperous international education sector
- International students help narrow down skilled worker shortage, not here to take away jobs from locals
- International students contribute to the diversity and multiculturalism in Australia

Education providers should run regular community outreach programs to better integrate international students to the wider community.

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

Whilst we are conscious that this is a strategy document that is focused on the outputs of the international education sector and its future, we feel that it would be remiss not to call out that there is a clear gap between where the sector needs to get to and its current capability. This is not a criticism of the passionate and highly experienced individuals who have spent their lives supporting the growth and delivery of the broad range of programs for international students. However, COVID-19 has also highlighted the depth of upskilling and retraining that a large proportion of staff working in international education will need to undertake in order to deliver upon the strategy outlined.

As a starting point, this would include:

- Change management and communication management
- Reskilling on the characteristics of modern learners
- Assessment practices for 2021 and beyond
- Training in online learning (with an online first approach rather than a “keeping the doors open” model)
- Building and fostering communities of practice
- Emerging marketing practices
- Shifting models of attracting students and stepping outside of the traditional recruitment channels

- Student lifecycle mapping, communication management, and continuous improvement