

## **Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030**

RMIT University Submission to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment

### **Key priorities for a new Australian strategy for international education**

While not always widely understood across the community, international education has allowed Australia to engage more effectively across borders and regions, strengthening our national positioning, our economy and our community within a rapidly changing and increasingly globalised world. In the increasingly competitive global education landscape shaped by COVID-19, a new Australian Strategy for International Education must be centred around driving a unified Australian education brand onshore and offshore.

Onshore, the Strategy must recognise and communicate the cultural significance and soft power of international education as enablers for Australia's regional and global success, shifting away from the view of international students as short-term economic assets. Offshore, through setting clear sector-level focus for geographic engagement and addressing barriers impacting Australian institutions across the education value chain, the Strategy has an opportunity to position Australian education for greater success in international markets to 2030 and beyond.

#### **Priority 1: A unified brand for Australian education**

The new Strategy needs to align the messaging around what Australian education stands for, consolidating and clarifying the sector's positioning to present a unified front in the international education market. While institutions such as RMIT will naturally market ourselves on our unique points of difference, creating a clearly defined Australian brand as a platform for institutions to build on will strengthen the overall value proposition of Australian education and the sector's reputation offshore. This single, clearly defined and Federally funded Australian brand must highlight and support the unique selling points of Australian education, ranging from the quality and relevance of the educational experience, to the lifestyle our onshore students experience, the strengths of our industry and research communities and the way Australian education is innovating to equip students for the future of work.

#### **Priority 2: Sector-level focus for geographic engagement**

The Strategy must define the geographic areas where Australian institutions are best positioned to cater to local needs and capitalise on opportunities. Moving into new markets requires a coordinated effort, whereby Australia can present a quality and vibrant education sector across many disciplines and levels of educational offerings. Through investing in market intelligence to identify and communicate strategic opportunities for sector-wide engagement, the Strategy will be able to ensure Australian institutions are focusing their resources where they can have the most combined impact. Fostering a collaborative path forward in this way, with both the sector and Government hand in hand, will be a powerful enabler that will challenge Australia's major competitors including the US, UK and Canada.

### **Priority 3: Addressing sector-wide barriers to international engagement**

The Strategy should also address sector-wide barriers to better support Australian institutions to succeed in the international education market. These barriers include geographic, technological, regulatory, language and financial challenges. Through actively working with institutions to overcome these blockers and create a more competitive and future-focused environment, the Strategy has the opportunity to empower Australian institutions to cater to the evolving needs of students, industries and regions. This approach will increase the relevance and reach of Australian international education, improving outcomes at both sector and institutional levels.

### **Delivering the best possible student experience now and in the future**

Students must be at the centre of the new Strategy. Australia's reputation for world-leading education is an invaluable asset. However, students' experiences comprise much more than their degree or field of research. International students seek immersion in Australian society, exposure to other students from Australia and around the world, and the opportunity to build networks and industry connections that they can draw on throughout their career. By the same token, the domestic student experience, and the broader community are enriched by their interactions with students from around the world.

Australian providers can **leverage the quantum leap in online and blended learning delivery** brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic to reach new cohorts of students who will undertake their study outside of Australia. While travel restrictions remain in place, students who commence online study with Australian providers will benefit from the opportunity to socialise and network with students in their own countries. Providers should also promote work-integrated learning opportunities with offshore industry, to complement their remote learning offerings. In addition, by investing in an offshore presence providers can bolster international alumni networks, allowing students to draw on their Australian education experience throughout their lives and careers. When travel restrictions ease in the future, this presence can sustain new offshore cohorts of students who would otherwise not undertake study with Australian institutions. The Strategy could outline a role for the Federal Government to lead the sector's work offshore, to deliver benefits at scale.

While offshore delivery of online and blended learning will no doubt have a more significant place in Australian international education going forward, RMIT strongly supports prioritising a safe return of international students to onshore campuses. **An important factor in the onshore international student experience is whether students feel welcomed and included in Australian society.** Providers must prioritise social and academic support for students when they arrive on campus. There is also a role for the Federal and State Governments to promote the social value that international students bring to the wider Australian community. Additionally, the Federal Government could also support onshore students by relaxing some restrictions on students' working rights to encourage work-integrated learning, in line with other popular destinations for international study.

As the world finds a new equilibrium in the wake of the pandemic, Australia is well-placed to provide exceptional experiences to its students, both onshore and offshore. The Strategy must take a long-term, holistic approach to enhancing student experiences, for the mutual benefit of our international cohort, and Australia at large.

## Increasing Australia's global competitiveness over the next decade

The new Australian Strategy for International Education should be supported by legislative changes enabling Australia to be a leader in international education. From immigration policies focused on study duration and mode rather than outcomes, to restrictions limiting opportunities for international students to participate in work integrated learning during their onshore student journeys, there is a need for more responsive policy reform that improves access to Australian education and sets our graduates up for success.

The Government should **assess the two-year Australian study requirement to acknowledge the innovation and creativity of Australian education regardless of the mode of delivery and location**. As the digital leap of COVID-19 shapes new digitally enhanced student journeys, it is critical that Australia's policy environment is responsive to evolving student needs. Visa policies that focus on learning outcomes over study mode and duration will give international students greater access to Australia's education experiences, improving overall participation and supporting future-focused approaches to learning and teaching. Similarly, the Strategy needs to drive competitive immigration offers that match the evolving value proposition of our competitors – for example the UK is now permitting those studying for less than 6 months to do so as a visitor, without the need to obtain a special short-term student visa. Reducing regulatory hurdles and disassociating education from permanent residency in this way will give students the flexibility to include Australia as a destination of choice in their own innovative student journeys, which may span multiple locations and modes of study.

The Government should consider further **regulatory reform around student employment opportunities during onshore study**. The 40-hour fortnight work limit is restricting opportunities for international students to participate in Australia's economy, both in a paid capacity and through study-related placements within industry. While it was encouraging to see the 40-hour limit temporarily waived for student visa holders working in the tourism and hospitality sectors in the 2021-22 Federal Budget, there is a need for permanent measures to overcome this barrier for students seeking employment and experience in all sectors. Decoupling work integrated learning hours from the 40-hour limit and making some form of work integrated learning an essential aspect of courses will improve employability outcomes for international students and enhance their capacity to engage in society. Further, relaxing legislative restrictions on economic participation during study will give international students the opportunity to bring even more benefits to the Australian economy, increasing both their value proposition to Australian society and Australia's value proposition to international students.

Finally, the Strategy needs to drive a policy and regulatory environment that considers and acknowledges that **international students who meet skills gaps or contribute to the economy are welcome additions to Australia's industry and community**. Through harnessing migration levers and clearly communicating the value of international students and graduates to Australia's current and future success, there is an opportunity for the Strategy to shape a more inclusive education environment that champions the diverse perspectives and capabilities international education brings to Australia.

By creating a more flexible regulatory environment that responds to the evolving needs of international students, the sector and broader Australian society, the Strategy will be able to increase Australia's competitiveness over the next decade and position the Australian education sector for ongoing success in a rapidly changing global context.

## Leading a collaborative approach to diversification

For a collaborative approach to be successful, there needs to be clear direction and Government-led support for diversification, empowering institutions to leverage existing relationships and opportunities to create new value offerings.

Current shifts in the geopolitical landscape are resulting in a growing need for Australia to diversify our market focus. Through establishing a coordinated, **Government-led approach to diversification across priority markets and source countries** that recognises the critical importance of regions such as Southeast Asia for Australia's future, there is an opportunity to drive cross-sectoral collaboration that will strengthen Australia's positioning in new markets. This approach will encourage Australian education providers and businesses to work together offshore, creating more applied learning experiences and student employment pathways that increase the local workforce capability available to Australian industry. It will also enable Australian researchers, educators, industry and Government to combine resources to positively influence local and regional public policy, cultivating more responsive regulatory environments that will enable greater long-term Australian engagement. RMIT's recent policy workshop series in Vietnam, 'Vietnam Leads', is a prime example of how this method of bringing together industry and government offshore around mutual areas of interest, such as online education, can reduce barriers to engagement in a priority market and drive positive impact within the region.

There is also an opportunity for **Government-led diversification to extend beyond markets to sector-specific areas of focus such as priority disciplines and modes of delivery**. A successful Strategy will need to acknowledge the value of discipline diversity in addressing domestic and international skills shortages, as well as the need for balance between diversification and the delivery of offerings that continue to be important areas of study for international students, such as business and management. Similarly, it will need to recognise the opportunity of diversification of delivery modes, in terms of digital and hybrid technologies in both traditional offerings and new forms of study such as "micro-credentials". Through encouraging Australian institutions to embrace digitally enhanced learning and teaching, the Strategy will be able to foster new opportunities in existing and prospective markets.

Diversification of disciplines, delivery modes and markets will require regulatory reform to reduce barriers including streamlining of visas; strengthened post-study work rights; incentivising industry to offer internships for international students and graduates; and changes to the ESOS Act and Higher Education Standards to increase flexibility in online and joint program offerings. Through supporting responsive reform in these areas, the Strategy will increase the value proposition of Australia as a study destination to a more diverse array of students and countries.

## Equipping students with the necessary skills for the future

RMIT's mission is to empower our students to become ready for life and work, as lifelong learners. Today's students inherit a world of accelerated technological innovation, global trends towards decentralised power, increasing economic interdependence amongst nations, and the ongoing rise of Asia in global geopolitics. These forces demand more than subject matter knowledge — students require the capabilities that allow them to shape and respond to a changing world with agility and integrity. The workforce of tomorrow

requires global citizens who confidently combine digital skills with enduring human skills, in addition to specialist knowledge and skills.

Digital technologies are transforming the ways we live and work at increasing pace. In advanced and developing economies alike, many new, high-value employment opportunities require digital fluency. However, thriving in the digital age requires more than being able to use technology — though this is essential. As computers and artificial intelligence take over manual and routine cognitive tasks, humans' contribution to the workforce will continue to shift towards high-order analytical thinking and interpersonal skills. **One of the most important human skills for all students, is cross-cultural competency.** Being able to connect to people from different backgrounds, in life and work, is an essential skill that will differentiate graduates in the global job market. Welcoming international students into our classrooms and communities builds this skill for local and international students alike. Additionally, for our international students the opportunity to refine their English language skills amongst native speakers is crucial to their employment prospects.

**Employers need students who can couple their digital skills with these enduring human skills.** Education providers should prepare their students for this reality through all their offerings. However, when disruption is the norm, students will need to up-skill and re-skill often. Short, flexible “micro-credentials” for specific digital skills, such as those offered by RMIT Online, will empower students to tailor their skills education to the industry or job they require, throughout their entire careers.

International students that develop enduring human and digital skills, in addition to the specialist skills required by their chosen field, will be well-placed to succeed in the global job market. Australia can further influence the global ecosystem to give our international students the greatest chance of achieving the employment outcomes they desire, in Australia and overseas. From RMIT's perspective, **there are untapped opportunities to support graduate employment outside of Australia**, particularly within the Asia Pacific region. The Australian Strategy for International Education should consider the potential of partnering closely with international governments to facilitate global partnerships between Australian and international employers. Such partnerships should prioritise work-integrated learning arrangements, to give students insight into the world of work, while they learn.

## Creating a uniquely Australian education experience

We view a uniquely Australian education experience as a multicultural, safe and applied experience connecting students to Australia's Indigeneity, the Asia Pacific region and the world. While quality is a critical pillar of Australian education, the Australian value proposition for both international and domestic students must extend beyond pedagogical excellence to transformative experiences that equip students for a rapidly changing global future.

The **multiculturalism of Australia's education sector and broader community creates a unique learning environment** that positions students to cultivate global citizenship throughout their student journeys. From acknowledgements of country that connect students to Australia's Indigenous cultural identity, to in-class cross-cultural collaboration and industry projects linked across the Asia Pacific region and beyond, RMIT believes Australian education experiences are uniquely positioned to broaden students' cultural horizons and

connect them to the region and the world. This connectivity will empower students to collaboratively design solutions to global challenges, preparing our graduates for sustainable impact and success.

In the context of COVID-19, the **safety and lifestyle aspects of Australia's education experiences have also become unique differentiators** amidst an increasingly competitive global education landscape. As a sector, we should be both building on Australia's impressive handling of the pandemic and capitalising on the increased global focus on health and wellbeing to position Australia as the premium study destination for safe, clean and inclusive education experiences. Through amplifying the quality of our natural environment, health systems and safe communities, while also strengthening student support systems and networks, the Strategy has a unique opportunity to enhance Australia's value proposition as the leading destination for safe study experiences in a mid-pandemic and post-pandemic world.

Finally, the Strategy should be **encouraging Australian education to build on its applied nature** to ensure all students graduate with the experience, capabilities and networks to succeed in a rapidly changing global context. Australia's value proposition for international and domestic students needs to extend beyond qualifications, providing industry-engaged learning experiences that prepare students for the future of work. This must go beyond traditional offerings, to encourage applied lifelong learning journeys that improve the skills-mix and employability of the workforce. While institutions such as RMIT have industry experience as part of our DNA, there is work that could be done at a sector-level to strengthen the applied nature of Australia's international education reputation and brand.

We have a history delivering multicultural, safe and applied education experiences onshore, at our offshore campuses and through our network of education partners across the Asia Pacific region, as well as via our online and hybrid modes of study. However, as the Strategy sets the direction for the sector to 2030, there is an opportunity at the Federal level to anchor Australian education around these unique characteristics to differentiate the Australian experience and international education brand. A coordinated approach will create a stronger platform for regional and global engagement, creating new opportunities for uniquely Australian education experiences that transcend borders across the region and the world.

## Translating the value of international education to the wider community

The value of international education is often viewed through an economic lens. While international students are a significant economic contributor for not only the education sector but also the wider economy, there is a much broader value to Australia's community that is lacking in representation and leadership from Government. Connecting the Australian public to the value of international education beyond dollar figures is vital to cultivate a greater understanding and appreciation of the direct and indirect benefits the sector provides to the wider Australian community.

International students are **two-way ambassadors, bridging cultures and countries to drive diversity, connectedness and engagement in the region**. Through creating opportunities for cultural exchange, international students deepen our understanding of other cultures and contribute to the richness of Australia's multicultural society. This cultural engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, positions Australia to engage more effectively across borders and regions, strengthening our positioning within a rapidly changing and increasingly globalised world.

International students and alumni also **directly connect our domestic students, businesses, governments and communities to new countries and markets**. Through bridging the cultural distance between Australia and our neighbours in the Asia Pacific region, the international education sector provides pathways for ongoing social and economic engagement. It also cultivates a future generation of regional leaders that are culturally and socially connected, deepening the links between Australia and the Asia Pacific. This connectivity is vital for Australia, as our future success will be dependent on our ability to understand and engage in the region.

**Recognising and communicating the cultural significance and soft power of international education** as enablers for Australia's regional and global success will help shift away from the view of international students as short-term economic assets. Through clearly communicating long-term benefits and opportunities, rather than focusing on immediate economic gains, the Strategy has an opportunity to connect the wider community to the holistic value proposition of international education for Australia's future, building greater understanding and support.

Broadcasting the importance of culturally and linguistically diverse workers, volunteers, placement students, consumers and community members will help remove barriers to engagement outside the classroom. This, in turn, will provide new pathways for positive social, cultural and economic participation, broadening the overall value international students contribute to Australia's society and communicating this value more widely within the community.

### **Furthering considerations for the new Strategy**

RMIT is also in the process of developing our next enterprise-level strategy. A key learning that has emerged through extensive consultation during this process is **the need for a strategy to simultaneously look inward and outward**. For RMIT, this means setting strategic directions that speak to our unique DNA as an applied university of technology, design and enterprise, while also understanding and responding to the communities and ecosystems in which we conduct our operations across Australia, the Asia Pacific region and the world. For the Council for International Education and the Australian Government, this means developing a Strategy that delivers value to the Australian sector and community, while also actively working to meet the needs of the broader regional and global communities Australian education exists within.

We are shifting our thinking away from viewing student journeys as predominantly onshore or offshore, and instead **creating regional and customisable student pathways** that leverage locations alongside digital and hybrid learning technologies to prepare students for an increasingly connected and evolving future of life and work. At the sector level, we believe there is an opportunity for the Strategy to empower institutions to engage more closely in the region and expand the value proposition of the Australian international education through enabling and supporting new and innovative student pathways that place the evolving needs of international and domestic students at the centre.

Our strategy process has also highlighted the **growing importance of strategic partnerships as enablers for impactful local, regional and global engagement**. There is a clear opportunity for the Strategy to guide Government-level discussions to cultivate bilateral and multilateral strategic partnerships that will facilitate

greater and more impactful market engagement at both the sector and institutional levels. Through creating strong platforms for strategic partnership and engagement in this way, the Strategy will help Australian international education providers navigate the geopolitical complexities of current and future global contexts, positioning Australia for greater international education outcomes to 2030 and beyond.