

Study Cairns submission – *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030* Consultation Paper

1. What are the key priorities for a new Australian Strategy for International Education

Overall, Study Cairns supports the strategic priorities set out in the consultation paper, particularly that students should be at the centre of a coordinated approach.

It is the Study Cairns position that students completing their studies on-shore with a strong face-to-face component has the greatest benefits for all students. International students participating in our education sector enriches the experience for Australian students, exposing them to new and different cultures and way of thinking. This in turn contributes to meeting the future workforce needs of Australia and builds strong and soft diplomatic connections.

Notwithstanding the priority on face-to-face engagement, ensuring a quality student experience for all students undertaking study with an Australian provider regardless of their location or study mode should be a focus, including online and offshore.

As more providers have pivoted to online and offshore delivery, particularly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, establishing frameworks to ensure quality Australian education and training experiences will be key in maintaining Australia's reputation as an international leader. Accordingly, the priority to set the standard is supported. Building capacity into Australia's system to enable a fast and seamless response to future pandemic or unforeseen circumstances is critical to enable a quality student educational and training experience (such as multiple delivery modes).

Ensuring that students are at the centre of a national framework requires consideration of the current visa and accreditation policies and procedures. The flexibility demonstrated during the COVID-19 response is acknowledged. However, further action is required. For example, the visa application (including subsequent applications for additional study visas and the visa costs involved) remains complex and hard to navigate. Equal work right opportunities should be provided for students studying at vocational institutions as well as universities, as should flexibility around delivery models to ensure that students can fill critical work shortages (particularly in regional areas) while still ensuring study requirements are met.

In the immediate and short term, it is important that Australia is perceived by current and prospective students as a safe and welcoming destination. Study Cairns acknowledges the importance of maintaining Australia's health security and managing the risks around future COVID-19 outbreaks within the community. However, the current narrative is one of protectionist policies and, if ongoing, this has the potential of making international students (including those onshore) feel unwelcome and could have long lasting and unintended impacts on the sector.

Study Cairns supports the priority to strengthen sustainability and build a resilient sector through the diversification of country partners, student profiles, destinations, sectors, courses, and student experiences and opportunities. This will require investment and will take time, and successful implementation will require business development and marketing activity at a range of levels from national, state, and regional. Sustainable financial support to enable this to be undertaken should be provided to regional study clusters, such as Study Cairns, to enable them to work with member organisations to target niche markets and contribute to the broader state/territory and national strategic frameworks.

Finally, a distinctly Australian education is supported as a priority, and Study Cairns recommends building into this priority recognition and promotion of the importance regional Australia provides international students.

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 that delivers the best possible student experience now and into the future is the responsibility of more than just individual education providers. The COVID-19 pandemic has acutely highlighted this. While the primary responsibility for supporting students should rest with the education or training provider, there is a need for support for downstream providers to ensure a more seamless and quality experience is provided.

A quality student experience comprises of a quality education and training experience. However, it also comprises of immersion into the local community, access to quality infrastructure from transport to public libraries and even quality internet connection. It comprises the opportunity to undertake employment placements, developing friendships with other international and Australian students, access to enriching social experiences and enjoying Australia's multicultural cuisine.

Study Cairns has worked with all of the key providers, the Cairns Regional Council, Study Queensland and other stakeholders to successfully achieve this in the Cairns region. Recent examples include the Study Hub aimed at nurturing the international student wellbeing (including mental health, education, lifestyle, employability) through to campaigns such as #CairnsCares which provided meals and support to students at the height of the pandemic. The study cluster model has the potential to support a connected student support framework that is nuanced to meet the needs of students in the region. However, this requires ongoing longer-term funding as opposed to project-based / annual funding. More secure, long term funding allows for a more strategic approach and capacity to implement services on an ongoing basis rather than chasing and acquitting shorter term project funding with less long-term benefits.

In regional Australia, international students play an even more significant role in our communities: they augment our workforce (from tourism and hospitality, retail, agriculture and also our important health and medical workforce), they provide a potential pipeline of skilled workforce to maintain and grow our economies into the future, boost the economy through international student spending on goods and services, generate additional tourism expenditure through the visiting friends and relative market, contribute to cultural diversity, and provide a unique perspective in and out of our classrooms to broaden the horizons of our local community.

The current policy frameworks make it difficult for these benefits to be fully realised in a way that would enhance regional economies and the student experience. For example, international students are only able to study at a CRICOS registered institution, including for short courses. This means that a university student wanting to gain a qualification to work in tourism or hospitality (Responsible Service of Alcohol, First Aid, Barista courses etc) would need to complete their qualification at a CRICOS registered face to face course under a CRICOS registered course number while their Australian counterparts can complete many of these courses for a fraction of the cost, often online. Additionally, in regional areas where there are not the economies of scale, these courses are often run in batches due to a minimum number of students required for the course to be financially viable, creating delays in upskilling a much needed workforce. The renewed strategy and associated implementation plan should consider how this red-tape and barriers to employment might be addressed to achieve better outcomes for Australian businesses and international students and, ultimately, the Australian economy.

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's international education and training sector and current policy frameworks acknowledge to a large extent that on-shore international students provide an important pipeline of skilled workers to contribute to Australia's economic growth. However, Australia's visa and border security framework require that an international student is a 'genuine temporary entrant' to be able to enter Australia to complete their studies. Consideration could be given to how Australia uses our international education and training sector to build our future workforce and create regulatory and visa mechanisms that promote this outside of the skilled worker pathways.

While further work is required, the changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as allowing students to commence their studies online before arriving in Australia, go some of the way to building the flexibility needed to create a more responsive and student-centred model.

Ensuring that providers are able to pursue market opportunities and students are able to access the education offering of their choice remains important and will in many ways drive innovation through natural market forces. Nevertheless, government policy and regulation can stimulate new markets and provide increased access to markets that we desire to grow as a nation.

A student-centred approach to our policy and regulatory frameworks remains critically important: we do not want to restrict where a student studies or what they study so long as it fits within the visa requirements. That being said, there are regions that are better placed to meet the needs of certain markets that could be grown through incentivisation in-line with Australia's national priorities.

By way of example, the Cairns region boasts significant social and education ties with the Pacific region, with over ten percent of international student enrolments coming from countries in the Pacific, compared to 0.3 percent of national enrolments and 1 per cent of Queensland enrolments¹. A significant barrier for students from the Pacific undertaking studies in Australia is the financial investment required. There are some scholarship programs available to students from the Pacific, however it is fragmented and could be used more strategically in a way that would grow the market in and be mutually beneficial for the Pacific region and Australia. Consideration could be given to how we strategically grow regional international education and training by aligning policy, such as additional scholarships for study in the Cairns region in disciplines of study that align to areas of need (health workforce, food production etc).

¹ Australian Government Australian Trade and Investment Commission International education and training data (2020) – [regional dashboards](#) and [Basic Pivot Tables](#)

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

A long-term approach to market development is required to ensure that Australia has a diversified risk profile from an economic perspective as well as a diverse in-classroom experience. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the risks that overreliance on key markets can have to Australia's national economy and, although the pandemic has not discriminated by source market, it does present an opportunity to reset the current imbalance such as an over-reliance on China as a source market.

Achieving diversification and a more equitable spread across study destinations is an important factor that should be built into the renewed national strategy and associated frameworks. For example, the inclusion of the Gold Coast, Perth and other capital cities as 'regions' for the purpose of visa offerings is counterproductive to attracting students to regional areas such as the Cairns region and far north Queensland.

There will likely remain a tension in marketing Australia's diverse international education experiences so that cities, regions and institutions are not undercutting one another's markets. However, it is important that the national strategy provide a platform for a more coordinated approach to positioning Australia, our cities and regions and our institutions in a more structured fashion to ensure that our international education and training brand is not eroded. This, and ensuring the right policy tools are in place, such as visa frameworks incentivising regions, will be key in achieving equitable growth in regional areas.

It is particularly important to look at the economic benefit of international education and training in regional areas where there are not the same economies of scale or support services and infrastructure as offered in metropolitan areas and large cities. There is significant economic benefit in investing in infrastructure and service delivery to attract international students through funding study clusters, institutions or other providers. Further, this increases the available infrastructure within communities which benefits the region more broadly.

Outbound mobility programs play an important role in building soft diplomatic ties through the formation of personal relationships and alumni networks in new markets. Increased and targeted funding for outward mobility programs as part of a broader strategy to access new markets should be considered, including a focus to ensure that these opportunities are available to students in regional and remote areas.

In regional areas, local government organisations also play an important role in establishing these soft diplomatic ties such as through sister city arrangements. Study clusters are well placed to work across the different stakeholders, including regional councils, to facilitate and leverage such relationships through marketing and familiarisation programs. A national strategy that provides a framework for this type of coordinated approach, including through funding priorities, would strongly benefit regional international education and training study destinations.

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?

Soft skills remain important to employability in the global context and therefore, the opportunity to develop these skills in and outside of the classroom is an imperative. For many onshore international students, the opportunity to work in the Australian context provides a platform for developing valuable cultural and employment experience while earning an income to augment their cost of living. Continuing to ensure that international students can engage in meaningful employment opportunities should remain a priority.

In terms of priority study areas clusters and organisations such as Study Queensland and Austrade need to remain engaged with industry and source countries to help ensure the most up-to-date information is provided to the education sector and relative courses are provided ensuring graduates have globally relevant skills. Government plays a critical role in supporting new market development through bilateral and unilateral discussions with government in source countries, and in maintaining an overarching feedback loop on the quality of our offerings in meeting the source country's workforce needs.

Wherever possible and where appropriate, internships and industry-based placements should be integrated into international education offerings. This enables students to develop industry relevant skills as part of their broader studies. Embedding employability skills for international students into our education and training sector will develop the employability of Australian students, including through the shared experiences and perspectives that they gain through having a multi-cultural classroom.

Understanding the opportunities and challenges for work placements and employability skill development when delivering online and transnational education will be an important focus under the new strategy, particularly as it will potentially require strong industry links and an understanding of in-country legislative frameworks (such as employment laws and work health and safety).

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

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

Australia is recognised internationally for having a quality education sector and producing highly skilled graduates. Many international destinations boast a similar offering and therefore the education/training product alone is not Australia's point of difference.

At present, Australia offers a safe living environment with an enviable health system. International students are required to purchase overseas health insurance and have access to a comparatively affordable and accessible healthcare system, with lower risks of contagious infections than in many other destinations – as demonstrated during COVID.

Australia's lifestyle and working conditions are, in many cases, enviable when compared to those overseas. In completing their studies in Australia, students are able to work while studying. Further, and on completion of their qualifications, some students are able to pursue a pathway to permanent residency. In comparison to other leading education destinations, such as the USA, Australia has much more attractive prospects on this front.

For students who study onshore, the most defining component of their Australia experience will likely be the parts that are quintessentially Australian – their interactions in our community, their experiences in our regions, the friendships they make with their Australian counterparts in the classroom. It is also important to note that the student experience needs to align with what they are promised before they arrive in Australia.

Research has consistently shown that students desire social interactions with their Australian counterparts and members of the broader community, opportunities for work experience, and knowledge and access about support services.

Induction programs and arrival experiences can vary greatly depending on the provider, the study destination and even the courses the student is enrolled in. There is an opportunity to look at induction programs for international students when they arrive in Australia. For example, contextualised to their regions and potentially delivered through study clusters, such as Study Cairns. This could include an introduction to our Indigenous cultures, an overview of things to see and do in the region and in Australia, employability and volunteering opportunities, information on local events and celebrations, and help accessing services and supports. Individual providers and study clusters should be encouraged to work within their local communities to provide a network of support for international students, as well as access to programs such as mentoring or ‘study buddy’ systems. Through a more coordinated approach, there would be increased consistency across student experiences, regardless of provider. However, consideration would need to be given as to how such a program would be sustainably funded.

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

Delivering content online heightens the need for a value proposition that stands out in a highly competitive market and, it also increases the complexity in doing so. There is much research and literature that relates to providing quality online learning experiences however, there is less contextualised research when it comes to the delivery of online education that crosses international borders.

As part of the national strategy, a primary consideration will be the quality of offshore and online offerings and ensuring they are of the same standard as expected in Australia (while meeting any international standards and regulatory standards that apply).

There are a range of complexities that need to be considered when delivering online:

- Are international students engaging in the same online content as domestic students? If content is live, how do time zones translate? If content is pre-recorded, how does it remain interactive and relevant? How are language and cultural barriers address in a ‘one size fits all’ model?
- Are additional supports offered? How are these structured?
- Are students expecting / should they expect relationships with their Australian counterparts? How would these be fostered?

Given the step-change taken during the COVID-19 pandemic, Study Cairns recommends that a priority under the new strategy should be research into the market opportunity and what the Australian experience transnationally and online looks like - including for different 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 COVID-19 pandemic presented both an opportunity and a challenge for the international education and training sector in Australia. There was much support for international students evident across the nation, including the Study Cairns led #CairnsCares initiative which saw our local community donate and support international students in need. Further, many of our local businesses have highlighted the importance of international students in augmenting our regional workforce and adding to the social fabric of our community.

At the same time, there have been strong protectionist sentiments that have been projected by different members of our local, state and national community that have advocated for keeping borders closed.

While ensuring the safety of Australian's is and should be a national priority, there is an opportunity for an ongoing dialogue and promotion of the role of international education and training with our local communities more generally. For example, in the Cairns and far north Queensland region, without international students there has been a significant shortfall of workers across key economic sectors. Notably, tourism, hospitality, retail and farming/agriculture.

It is essential that we build an understanding withing our local communities that international students benefit our communities through enriching our classrooms, contributing to our economy, working for our local businesses and contributing to the social fabric of our society. Study clusters have a pivotal role to play in this through working with key stakeholders: providers, relevant industry groups, local council and other stakeholders. However, funding is required to undertake the types of activities and engagement that gains momentum within the community – from cultural events with local councils to sharing student stories at a grass roots level and through different media platforms within the community.

It is vitally important that these messages about the value of international students is consistent at all levels: from grass roots, to regional, state and to federal. There is a need for the dialogue to acknowledge the broader soft diplomacy and social benefits of both inbound and outbound international education.

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

International education and training is a complex and multi-faceted sector and represents more than just the number of visas issued or the economic value that is brought into our society. Ensuring that the social, reciprocal and cultural benefits are also reported in a national strategy will assist in increasing community support and understanding of this valuable sector.

Further, while far more difficult to measure, it is the position of Study Cairns that the edu-tourism sector and non-student visa education visitors are an important subsector of the international education and training sector. These students represent important alumni networks that can lead to further study in Australia and the promotion of opportunities to study with an Australian provider. As such, it is recommended that the strategy reflect the value and strategic importance of these visitors and how we can continue to invest and grow this sub-sector as a part of the broader strategy and associated action plan.

As is reflected throughout the responses to the previous discussion points, employment opportunities are a cornerstone of the student experience and provide a platform for students to engage in our society, build meaningful relations and experiences and, grow their employability alongside their studies. Accordingly, it is recommended that consideration be given to providing more equitable work rights for vocational education and training students in line with the work rights afforded to higher education students and graduates, including post-study work rights. This is of particular importance in regional areas such as Cairns and far north Queensland where vocational education and training graduates hold skills valuable to our local economy and would fill important skill gaps.

In the changing context presented by COVID-19, there are significant opportunities to grow Australia's international education footprint through innovative and more flexible delivery models, including online and transnational education. These models can increase reach through being more affordable and flexible for the student and potentially be used as a pathway for onshore international education in the longer term. When pursuing these and other offshore and online models (including partnerships), a key consideration will be quality education and ensuring that it build on rather than compromises Australia's education and training sector.

The Cairns region is well placed to grow online, transnational and onshore international education and training delivery, including in the Pacific region. In developing *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*, funding and policy mechanisms to support new market development should be a key priority. For Study Cairns to support the Cairns and far north Queensland region to grow, access to ongoing funding will remain a priority to ensure the organisation can pursue longer term strategic objectives.