

**Study Gold Coast Submission: Response to the Australian Strategy for International Education
(April 2021 – DRAFT)**

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

Key priorities include:

The safe return of international students: Prioritisation of returning Australians is understood, however in parallel to this, allowing international students to enter Australia to complete/commence their studies should be actioned immediately. Fully vaccinated students who are willing to self-fund their return and comply with quarantine requirements could be entering Australia in a controlled and safe way in fit for purpose quarantine facilities. These students will also help to address skill shortages needed to support COVID recovery.

Consideration of the whole sector: The Strategy needs to address opportunities and challenges for all parts of the sector, not just Higher Education. The School, ELICOS and VET sectors all need to be considered as key feeders to the Higher Education sector.

National approach to communication and student support: At present, communication to students and education agents with regards to whether students are welcome, status of borders etc is disparate and confusing. The States and Territories need to be aligned to portray a 'Team Australia' approach. The nature of support provided to international students should be agreed at a Federal level and should be commensurate with the commitment and contribution students make to our economy and communities (and comparable to that offered by competitor countries).

Support of regional locations: Regional destinations in Australia such as the Gold Coast offer a unique student experience with specialist education and training offerings and affordable cost of living. Specific incentives to attract students to regional locations such as additional post study work rights, dedicated regional places, and priority visa processing are beneficial for students and industry alike.

Responsive regulatory systems: Regulatory systems need to be structured in such a way that they drive quality outcomes and adapt to changing external forces.

Aligned migration goals: There needs to be a connection between visa policy and migration goals to ensure that students are coming to Australia for the right outcomes. Genuine students gaining Australian qualifications, investing in our economy and communities, and contributing skills in occupations and locations where there are skill shortages should be given the opportunity of a migration pathway (assuming zero net migration is not the goal).

Shift in public perception: A welcoming community that appreciates the value of international students is critical to the success of the industry. The strategy needs to include actions to initiate a positive shift in public perception regarding the international education sector and how our communities, our economy and our domestic students seek to benefit.

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?

We agree that students, 'the customer' should be at the centre of the new Strategy and believe that students have a much stronger preference for face-to-face delivery as opposed to online.

Based on survey findings published by Council of International Students Australia (CISA): *Stranded Students Survey Preliminary Report – April 2021*, two-thirds of offshore international student respondents reported that they are very unsatisfied (42%) or unsatisfied (26%) with their online study experience. The two main factors that affected 70% of respondents negatively were lack of interaction with peer and teaching staff, and time zone differences where many reported having to attend classes in the middle of the night. Half of the respondents also reported that their courses have practical components that cannot be replicated online, and that they experienced technical difficulties from their end.

A best practice student experience should include:

Flexibility: The majority of international students want an on campus, face to face learning experience, however it is important that providers have the capability of offering different modes of learning including online.

Student support: Prioritising the welfare and well-being of all international students, whether studying face to face or online offshore is paramount, ie. one on one support and counselling as well as emergency funding for students suffering extreme hardship.

Links to employability: Access to part-time paid work and courses that are designed with employability goals in mind, with strong links to industry and multiple opportunities for students to gain hands-on work experience. Work rights for international students need to be such that they have the opportunity to access paid or unpaid work experience or internships without it impacting the hours they are able to work, ie. same opportunity as domestic students.

Inclusivity: To have access to a wide range of social, cultural, and sporting activities offered by their provider and government organisations that facilitate community integration and promote health and well-being.

Quality education: An education system driven by regulations geared towards quality, and curriculum delivered by world class educators.

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?

Tactics to enhance global competitiveness include:

Access to data: Sector decision makers require access to timely and rich data relating to commencements, visa applications, granting of visas, source countries and competition countries' performance. This data is required down to a Statistical Area Level and needs to be analysed for trends to give us the ability to make predictions and plan for them.

Consistent policies: Policy development across Federal and State bodies needs to be consistent, especially regarding health advice, quarantine, vaccine roll-out, national and international COVID restrictions. Decision makers need to value the peak bodies and engage with them for advice that serves the best interests of the sector as a whole. This would also reduce the duplication of effort.

Aligned policies: More weighting towards skills shortage that are identified down to a regional level. Align international student attraction and visa approval processes closely with skills gaps and migration targets.

Strong connection with industry: The education sector needs to adopt new methods for connecting and integrating with industry. These connections will enhance the content of academic programs, boost employability skills for students and lead to the commercialisation of research.

Administrative excellence: Robust, consistent, and efficient visa processing facilities that ensure student applicants are treated as first class customers even in the predeparture stage of the process. This will also assist with managing expectations of students and education agents.

Nurture diplomatic relationships: Federal government and private sector should be working hand in hand to strengthen relationships with key trade markets as well as emerging destinations. This will also support the growth of transnational education.

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

Diversification can be achieved through:

Diversifying source markets: The IET sector on the Gold Coast has strived for diversification both in terms of offerings and source markets. It is only natural that certain markets, based on their cultural influences, language ability and population size will be more or less attracted to different destinations, eg. Brazil being the key source market for the Gold Coast. A proportion of student recruitment budgets of providers and study destinations could be redirected into adjacent and emerging markets, with appropriate government funding, incentives, and support to improve diversification.

Marketing key differentiators: All destinations should undertake the research and consultation to ensure deep understanding of their key differentiators and then capitalise on these, with government support.

Diversifying disciplines: Government to work with providers to align visa and migration policies with skills gaps, apply discipline caps and/or providing scholarships or fee reductions to attract students into certain disciplines.

New delivery models: Grant funding to promote partnerships between public and private companies that lead to innovative new modes of delivery combining onshore, offshore, face to face and online.

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?

As per the World Economic Forum's list of 21st Century Skills for the Future of Work, the below skills valued by employers are most likely to translate into employment outcomes:

Emotionally Aware: Being emotionally aware is the ability to recognise and understand your emotions, and how they affect people around you.

Digitally Effective: Being digitally effective means you know how to engage with multi-media and digital technologies to participate in society, communicate with others and create and consume digital content in an ethical and safe way.

Collaborative: Being collaborative means you can communicate and work in teams effectively and productively to achieve desired outcomes.

Innovative: Being innovative means demonstrating a capacity to execute ideas to create value.

Culturally Conscious: Being culturally conscious is the ability to apply skills such as emotional awareness and collaboration skills to understand, traverse and engage with diverse cultures and broader social issues.

Self-Management: Self-management is fundamental to maintaining a healthy, happy, and meaningful life and career.

We need to support international students to gain these skills through volunteering, part-time or casual employment, work experience and internships. Further, inclusion in community, sporting, cultural groups, or clubs can also assist in skill building.

Communities and employers need to be educated through large scale and on the ground campaigns about the social and cultural value that international students can contribute to their communities and places of work. Community integration is also a key contributor to talent retention.

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?

A uniquely Australian experience is critical:

Value proposition: A welcoming and safe destination offering world class education across a range of diverse locations.

Uniquely Australian experience: Deliver on the value proposition, combined with transparent policies with regards to migration pathways so that student expectations are sufficiently managed. Promote the Australian lifestyle, share examples to illustrate our robust economy, show connection to industry, community integration, and develop a society that truly values the contribution of international students. Establish programs that encourage community integration prior to a student's arrival onshore.

Online offering: Offering education online is not a sound strategy for international education. To do so is to focus solely on the profit of individual organisations at the expense of the range of benefits communities and students receive as a result of onshore face to face education. Flexibility and online options should indeed complement the strategy but should not be considered a reasonable replacement – this is not putting the student at the centre of the strategy.

Offshore offering: For regional destinations, there is limited capacity for all parts of the sector to engage in transnational education due to capacity issues. On the Gold Coast, apart from the three Higher Education institutions and TAFE Queensland, the industry is made up of long standing small to medium family business enterprise who are uniquely equipped to offer an authentic Australian experience, but do not necessarily have the financial backing or expertise to establish operations offshore.

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?

Managing domestic sentiment towards international students should be a key priority of the Australian Strategy for International Education. The first step towards shifting public sentiment is a clear understanding of what underpins stakeholder sentiments and behaviours. This will require detailed qualitative and quantitative research to understand the current sentiments and the underlying reasons as to why people think this way.

Armed with this knowledge the sector can then work together to determine the kinds of actions that can be taken to positively influence the views of the public.

The path towards change will require a shift in the narratives used by politicians, the media and other key stakeholders to eliminate negative and inaccurate comments that erode public support, diminishing the sector's capacity to contribute to economic recovery and long-term sustainability. The narratives need to move beyond the economics of the sector and move more towards the benefits including diplomacy, nation building, closing skills gaps and complementing the domestic education sector.

A shift in perception will take many years to achieve and will need a large-scale public education campaign with strong support from government.

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

Consider specifically how regional destinations can be promoted as offering a unique experience, as well as non-Higher Education providers, noting that not all providers are well placed to establish online/transnational business models.

Continued growth and sustainability of the sector is critical, and this can be achieved at the same time as providing incentives and establishing caps to generate greater diversity in source markets and disciplines of study.

Strong partnerships are integral to the delivery of globally competitive outcomes and the government has an important role in establishing and encouraging meaningful collaborations.