

Australian Strategy for International Education 2021 – 2030

CONSULTATION PAPER SUBMISSION

May 2021



1.

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

The existing National Strategy for International Education 2025 focuses on the following: strengthening Australia's international reputation for education and training; driving research collaboration; and increasing opportunities for Australian providers and communities. The development of a revised plan should continue with these aims in mind. However, opportunity has arisen to go further and to re-imagine the future of Australia's international education sector.

The University of Tasmania acknowledges the value and importance of international education. We suggest that two features highlighted in the consultation paper should form the foundations of an international education strategy: placing students at the centre; and the contribution that international education makes to Australia's place in the world (soft power).

These two features are not distinct – they are in fact intertwined. By recognising the role of international education as a soft power asset in an increasingly connected and competitive world, the experience that we provide to both inbound and outbound students will inform how Australia is perceived globally. The impacts are wide-ranging, and include economic prosperity, diplomatic influence, social cohesion, and the safeguarding of our national security.

This strategic emphasis should be underpinned by a robust plan to foster a diverse and sustainable sector. The University appreciates the direction being taken to broaden the understanding of diversification to include diversity of country partners, student profiles, destinations, sectors, courses, student experiences and opportunities. In recognising that the world will be a different place as we emerge from COVID, we must adopt a different perspective on the offerings and courses that we provide to the world. The new strategy

should emphasise the need to develop skills for the future, and to deliver programs using best practice and innovative digital, blended and face-to-face delivery, both offshore and here in Australia.

To support the post-COVID market recovery, the strategy should be driven by two key principles. First, we need a coordinated and consistent national brand in international markets, that is driven by the Federal Government and adopted by all State Government entities and institutions. Second, we require nuanced policy responses at the State and Territory level. Skilled employment needs are not consistent across Australia. The talent required for Sydney's post-COVID recovery, for example, will not be the same as that required in North-West Tasmania. In response, differentiated policy settings around skilled occupations and preferred student cohorts are required.

The University strongly supports the promotion of regional destinations within Australia. This disbursement of international students across Australia provides enhanced experiences for students and equitable benefit to all States and Territories. It also minimises risk of over exposure of small pockets of the sector. We recommend developing expertise in matching regional offerings with overseas markets in a more nuanced manner.

We should also consider the United Nations Global Compact supporting the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. Australia can be bold in identifying its ability to contribute to addressing issues of sustainable development through its revised International Education Strategy.

1. Chew, Jonathan, Navitas-Agent-Perception-Report-March-2021_Part-1
insights.navitas.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Navitas-Agent-Perception-Report-March-2021_Part-1.pdf

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?

Over the past twelve months, there has been significant media discussion highlighting university funding models. The common narrative is that universities have used international education as a means to subsidise development and progress. The common perception is that international students are identified as revenue targets, and as such, little care has been taken to diversify cohorts or courses, or to place the student experience at the centre. The strategy should be encouraging a diversity of students across cohorts, courses and regions, supported by an exceptional learning experience.

The University of Tasmania offers a range of social, community, employability, and wellbeing services for all students. These are supported within the University and at a wider community level via StudyTasmania.

There are concerns from time to time regarding community sentiment towards international students. State Government entities

(StudyTasmania, StudyAdelaide) have made good inroads in addressing this issue, but there is opportunity to better build community awareness of the overall benefits that international education bring to the Australian economy (\$37 Billion) and to the community.

This lack of awareness has been identified by the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA) during the COVID impacts, and a public relations campaign is being commenced to raise awareness. Perhaps there is opportunity for TEAM Australia to support this type of campaign with funding, crafting messaging both within Australia but also globally around the value and support provided to students.

A common narrative throughout the strategy will be employability, of which details are provided re opportunities and support throughout this paper.

3.

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

Australia requires a strong national brand campaign that will mitigate any negative sentiment that has resulted from our robust response to the pandemic, and instead reorients that sentiment to create brand capital in acknowledgement of Australia as a safe and welcoming place to study.

A recent study by Navitas¹ highlights the unintended consequences of pandemic-related policy responses to the Australian education brand, yet we are confident that this can be overcome and converted into a net positive with a coordinated national effort, coupled with a series of coordinated policy amendments outlined below.

It is essential to any approach that Australia adopts a Team Australia coordinated approach to any activity in this area. Whilst the industry itself is somewhat collegial, there does exist a high level

of competition across all education sectors in the international marketplace. The real competitive threat to our positioning currently sits with the United Kingdom and North America. The emerging threat will be realised from Southeast and North Asia as those countries continue to invest in improving their own education sectors, attracting cohorts of students in the region that might have otherwise moved to Australia.

This Team Australia format could be steered by the Council of International Education with potential operational implementation via Austrade and relevant state-based destination marketing partners.

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?

1. The Australian education industry is extremely competitive, yet the work of the various State-based “Study” destination marketing programs is testament to the willingness to work collaboratively for the benefit of the whole sector. The current narrative and political dialogue around international education shows a critical need to reposition the sector both domestically and in international markets. An obvious mechanism is to review the role that Austrade plays in its engagement of these state bodies and institutions, acting as the operational champions of the current and future strategy. Under successive governments, funding and resourcing has been reduced, thus diminishing state bodies and institutions’ effectiveness

and ability to influence markets. We strongly recommended increasing funding to Austrade and reducing the ‘fee for service’ approach that has been prevalent in recent years. To remain competitive, we must remain consistently engaged with our target market. Australia must do this with a clear national brand message and stay on that message.

2. To provide certainty for students and institutions, regulatory review of the ESOS Act and the National Code regarding the requirements for face-to-face teaching will be required. We anticipate that the possibility of intermittent border closures may remain a feature of the landscape for years to come and policy must be updated to keep in step with

our new environment. As an example of good practice, the Tasmanian State Government has introduced flexibility in its State Nomination Migration Policy incorporating online to face-to-face models. This has reassured students that they may commence or continue their studies online and will not be precluded from applying for post-study opportunities. Any regulatory changes must also consider the shifting strategic focus to online delivery in offshore markets.

3. The Simplified Student Visa Framework (SSVF) was developed as a pre-COVID set of regulations. The SSVF applies a formula to allocate each country and institution to an Evidence Level. As total international student numbers have fallen, the formula will push up Evidence Levels for all providers. This could reduce the potential for students from diversity countries with lower Evidence Levels from studying in Australia (e.g., no EL3 countries available if all universities move to EL2 or EL3). This is further compounded if Chinese students are unavailable as this would

further reduce total international student numbers and push universities into higher Evidence Level categories. The University recommends a review of the SSFF evidence arrangements as part of the sector's recovery from the pandemic.

4. To encourage the development of Transnational Education (TNE) programs, the Government should work with universities to profile the risks to TNE arrangements across different country markets with respect to the Foreign Relations Act. There are risks associated with establishing offshore programs, including upfront "sunk costs" that can take years to recover. The ability for the Foreign Minister to veto or amend TNE arrangements at any point, without means for judicial review, and without compensation, significantly raises the risk profile of these endeavours. The Government should work with the sector to boost confidence to develop offshore partnerships that are in the national interest.

4.

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

1. The University of Tasmania is pursuing an international strategy based on diversity. The discussion points provided in previous questions are relevant here. Regional expertise should be identified and highlighted in national brand campaigns through Austrade. For example, the University of Tasmania's strengths in maritime studies might be linked to national brand campaigns in the Philippines. These distinctive strengths could be incorporated into holistic Australian approaches linking trade, investment and development to global markets.
2. The University of Tasmania supports the Asia Society's suggestion that Australia needs a new model for market entry into diversified markets that brings together the collective strengths of government, business and academia. We must play to our strengths and create country-sector strategies implemented through a "Team Australia" approach³. We recommend that education should form a key pillar of each country-sector strategy to ensure that appropriate in-country talent development supports market development.
3. Migration policy has driven high demand for courses in a small handful of disciplines where those courses have strong perceived graduate outcomes and links to migration through skilled occupations. An unintended consequence has been an uneven risk profile, leaving important disciplines vulnerable to shifting external circumstances. Visa reform to support diversification across disciplines should be an important outcome of the strategy. We recommend that, in consultation with State Governments and the Higher Education sector, State and Territory-specific skilled occupation lists are developed. This will recognise that skills needed in regional economies are broader and more diverse than in major cities. It will encourage students to select courses based on personal academic strengths, influenced by graduate outcomes in their chosen region. This approach will build more sustainable regional areas and more diverse student cohorts in those regions.
4. The University encourages the Government to explore the feasibility of a national online platform that can provide an array of distinctive Australian courses online to offshore markets. In a similar way that Open Universities Australia has opened up opportunities for students from across Australia to enrol in offerings that may not have been available to them in traditional on-campus settings, an online aggregator tied to the national brand, and aggressively promoted by Austrade, could open the Australian classroom to the world.
5. The Government should work with the sector to review existing scholarship schemes and co-design a new federally funded scholarship strategy that responds to the new priorities set out in the strategy, prioritising those countries that are strategically important to our diversification agenda, foreign relations, and soft power ambitions.

2. Asia Society Australia, A Second Chance: How Team Australia Can Succeed in Asia, April 2021

5.

What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for?

Students, now more than ever, need to balance the development of their technical skills with that of their soft skills. Emphasis could be focused on the technical skills required in both a COVID and post-COVID world. This, of course, would need to align with migration policy and trade development strategies.

According to AsiaSociety.org; via the Center for Global Education³, there are seven skills that students will need to succeed. From a soft skill development perspective, these skills are:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving
- Collaboration across networks and leading by influence
- Agility and adaptability
- Initiative and entrepreneurialism
- Effective oral and written communication
- Accessing and analysing information
- Curiosity and imagination

These skills need to be developed to even higher degrees in preparation for a workplace that will rely on highly technical and continuously evolving technologies.

Focus needs to be developed on the presentation, understanding, and use of data and technology that may be applied to global regions facing entrenched and emerging threats to the wellbeing of their communities. It behoves Providers, with support and engagement from industry and Government, to develop social and emotional intelligence in their student cohorts whether they be domestic or international.

The role of Government here is clear:

- The “Team Australia” approach should be marketed as a key pillar of Australia’s point of difference to competitors.
- Via Team Australia devolving down through various “Study” marketing partners, industry links a coordinated approach to policy can be established.

i. How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

1. The new international education strategy should position international education as the ‘front door’ for global talent that will drive Australia’s innovation and prosperity through our post-COVID recovery. This strategic positioning will help to positively shift perceptions of the education-migration link amongst students, providers and employers, recognising the important contribution that graduates make to our economy and community.
2. To support international students to enhance employability, institutions should provide opportunities for part-time work and work

experience. This not only supports students with income but also provides invaluable networking and cultural familiarity assets. At the University of Tasmania, we are trialling an employability program for commencing international students that scaffolds skills development through workshops and networking activities, culminating in a short-term paid work experience placement within the University. Over many years, the University of Tasmania, supported by the Tasmanian State Government, has developed an innovative and effective employability program for international students: the

³ Singmaster, Heather, ‘Seven Skills Students Need for Their Future’, <https://asiasociety.org/education/seven-skills-students-need-their-future>

iPrep Program. iPrep provides an immersive work preparation program for international students and humanitarian visa holders in their final year of study and delivers a range of experiences, culminating in an unpaid internship in a Tasmanian organisation, to prepare students for the workplace and graduate employment. These types of State Government and University partnerships, aimed at supporting international student employability, are a common feature across the Australian higher education sector. A consistent national approach, that is promoted via Austrade, will help to strengthen Australia's pull as an education destination of choice.

3. Through the National Priority Industry Linkage Fund, the Government should provide additional incentives for universities to design employability programs that provide tailored support for international students. This recognises that international students face unique barriers to employment in Australia and additional resources are required to support their transition from study to work.
4. Close alignment with Australian and global industry is invaluable in promoting Australia as an internationally engaged and opportune place to study. The Australian Government should work with the education sector to identify regional, institutional, and collective expertise, and provide support to institutions to develop trial programs with students aligned with best practice, evidence-based examples.
5. The sector recognises that employability outcomes are not solely related to stay rates and employment in Australia. Many students invest in an Australian study program in order to enhance their employment opportunities at home or in a third country. Our global alumni network, global diplomatic branches, and global industry connections should be leveraged to support employability outcomes for those students who choose to pursue a career outside of Australia.

6.

How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

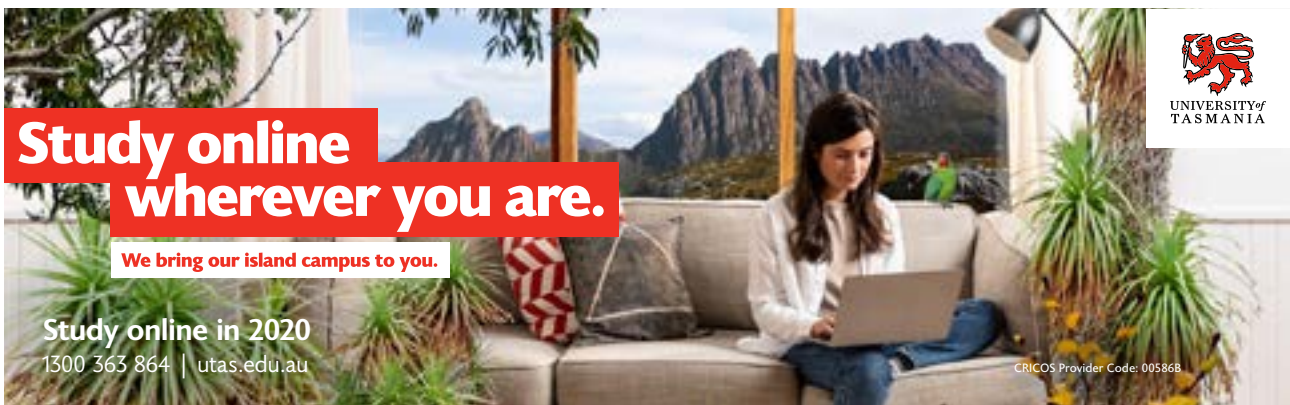
i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

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

The University of Tasmania's brand narrative centres on the idea of place-based distinctiveness. Over many years, we have defined our distinctiveness, informed by the nexus between our research and teaching expertise, our place, and the spirit of our community. Our students are provided opportunities to experience their studies in some of the most unique and oldest environments in the world, where our entire island is their campus. The same could be said for all of Australia, and this can be translated for online and offshore cohorts.

We provide examples of our place-based and distinctive marketing campaigns to demonstrate how this can be done.

The University of Tasmania recommends that the Government convenes a series of workshops that brings together Government and university stakeholders to define what makes Australian education distinctive, informed by the three pillars of excellence, people, and place.




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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?

StudyAdelaide has long been held as a leading destination marketing organisation in Australia. The success of this organisation is predicated in part on the fact that they have, as part of their charter, a mandate to provide support for international students. A large part of this involves community engagement and public relations on the benefits of international education to the local economy. These activities involve programs such as editorial support, public relations and employment programs. We would welcome the delivery of similar strategies at a national level by Austrade.

Catriona Jackson of Universities Australia captured the benefits of the international education sector beautifully when she wrote;

“We know that when international students choose to study in Australia during their formative years, and are warmly welcomed into our communities, they join a global network of alumni with knowledge and affection for our country.

When locals study alongside peers from Singapore, Shanghai and South Africa, it deepens their understanding of how other countries and cultures see the issues they are studying. The visiting students kindle important friendships while they are here — and maintain those connections when they return home.

Those lifelong ties enrich the cultural life of our communities. They also open doors for Australia and Australians in the future...

When international students go home — as 86 per cent do when they finish their degrees — they go on to become leaders in government, business and the community, international ambassadors for our nation, and invaluable contacts for Australian students.

And those who do stay in Australia, after meeting strict government conditions, are exactly the highly educated and highly skilled workers needed to power our national economy and prosperity. International education creates a better Australia for all Australians — and a world of global opportunity.”⁴

It is this sentiment that needs to be shared across Australia via a range of Government-led communications activities.

The University of Tasmania recommends that the Australian Government support universities to trial community-based initiatives aimed at connecting international students more deeply to their communities, thereby increasing integration, employability skills, and helping to positively shift community perspectives.

An example of such a program is the Connector Community Program⁵, which has been successful in regional and remote communities in Canada. Under this model, international students would be introduced to a highly networked community member (a ‘connector’). The connector and the international student meet, and following that meeting, the connector introduces the student to three more members of the community. In this way, the program supports international students to build a local network, whilst also helping to shift community perceptions of the sector by building people-to-people links. To build a cohesive national education brand, we recommend that the Government supports the sector to develop a consistent and evidence-based approach to connecting international students to their community, whilst allowing space for the nuance required for different regional locations.

4. Jackson, Catriona, 'Our expanding international sector is the envy of the world', The Australian 27 March 2019

8.

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

1. A framework for navigating international research training collaborations in the national interest.

International research training collaborations have formed a key pillar of the Australian university sector and have contributed significantly to Australia's innovation sector. As a small nation with limited human and resource R&D capital, international collaborations are important for Australia's continued economic growth and global competitiveness. Yet as our region becomes more contested, the University sector in partnership with the Australian Government must find the right framework for ensuring that international research training collaborations contribute positively to Australia's future and safeguard our national interests.

2. Reciprocity in international education.

The strategy must strike the right balance between emphasising the inbound and offshore markets and encouraging outbound experiences for Australian students. Strategies to achieve this could include:

- a. Reconfirming an ongoing commitment to the New Colombo Plan and diversified funding to ensure that virtual mobility opportunities are supported into the future. Consider expanding the New Colombo Plan to provide reciprocal exchange programs, prioritising inbound cohorts from diversity markets.

- b. Reimagining and reviving funding opportunities for outbound student mobility to countries outside of the Indo Pacific, recognising that the Americas, Africa and Europe offer considerable opportunity for market diversification.

- c. Recognising that Asia literacy and language ability is a sovereign capability that must be supported through the right policy settings. The Government should adequately support the education sector to develop the next generation of Asia-capable leaders.

3. Global alumni engagement strategy.

The strategy should include a framework for leveraging our global alumni community. This community is an important soft power asset that, if nurtured appropriately, can provide economic, diplomatic, and social advantages for Australia. This network can also play an important role in supporting those students who choose not to stay in Australia post-study to transition into employment in their home country.

We might better engage our alumni through a mentoring program that connects our global alumni with commencing international students, networking events that connect global alumni with the graduating cohort, and inviting alumni to host overseas work-integrated learning placements. education destination of choice.

5. National Connector Program <https://connectorprogram.ca/>