



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Response to the Consultation Paper on 'Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030'

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Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 400,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduates. We are comprised of 27 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

This paper responds to the discussion questions outlined in the Consultation Paper on ‘Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030’.

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

The most significant priorities for a new Australian Strategy for international education should be as follows:

- Strong international student representation at the university level. This is necessary for the effective co-designing of support services and programs for international students.
- Centrality of improving supports for international students. This can include the development of a national strategy for international student mental health and government-sanctioned research.
- Improve the quality of Australian university teaching staff by reducing the proportion of insecure work. This will have positive pedagogical ramifications for international students.

These points are elaborated throughout the subsequent answers.

2. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience both now and in the future?

For Australian education providers to deliver the best possible experiences for international students, they must first lay the groundwork to facilitate strong student representation at the university level. To achieve this, online student representation is paramount, as well as representation for onshore and offshore international students. This is the basis for the effective design of courses and programs, enhancing the international student experience. New forums must be created within university spaces so that these voices can be heard. This is all the more important when we consider that during the COVID-19 pandemic outbreaks in 2020 and the resultant university closures, international students struggled to find an active voice and were treated as objects to be observed, rather than human subjects with a voice.¹

It is of prime importance that universities improve mental health support on campus and online for international students. International students are more likely than domestic students to feel social isolation due to cultural and language barriers and are therefore more vulnerable to poor mental health conditions.² It is known that critically at-risk international students are significantly less likely to seek help than domestic students.³ It is necessary for universities to develop more effective means of support integrated into the online learning space. Across Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, support services are generally rated lower than other aspects of the university experience.⁴ Furthermore, international students are relatively less satisfied with opportunities to make friends with local students.⁵ It is evident that international students, like any domestic student, must be given the tools to thrive.

To help furnish these tools, the Federal Government must step in to help education providers. To facilitate effective mental health action, the Federal Government must provide support by creating research programs that investigate the mental health of international students and strategies to tackle these issues. This initiative has been endorsed by multiple healthcare professionals for years. For instance, experts have called for a national study into

¹ Sarah Hane D. Lipura, 'Adding an International Student's Voice to the Pandemic Discourse as Thinkers, not Subjects: Reflections on Power, Stillness and Humanness', *Journal of International Students* 11 (2021), 251-2.

² Catherine Gomes, 'Outside the Classroom: The Language of English and its Impact on International Student Mental Wellbeing in Australia', *Journal of International Students* 10 (2020), 934.

³ Xiao Yu Zhuang et al., 'Effectiveness of Mental Health First Aid for Chinese-Speaking International Students in Melbourne', *Research on Social Work Practice* 30 (2020), 275.

⁴ Ravichanran Ammigan, and Elspeth Jones, 'Improving the Student Experience: Learning from a Comparative Study of International Student Satisfaction', *Journal of Studies in International Education* 22 (2018), 295-6.

⁵ Ammigan and Jones, 'Improving the Student Experience', 296.

the mental health of international students.⁶ This is necessary to develop effective strategies and a plan to tackle this problem. A national strategy on international student mental health should be commissioned.

An often-forgotten aspect of the international student experience is the university teaching staff. The consultation paper seems to skim over this aspect. University teaching staff are increasingly insecure and casual, which has negative pedagogical implications on domestic and international students. However, the impact this has on international students is compounded by language and cultural barriers. Insecure teaching staff often have less time to devote to their students, and fewer skills to enhance their teaching. In order to improve the experience of international students, it is necessary to up-skill and provide more paths to permanency for university teaching staff and postgraduate students. It is essential to provide greater differentiation and specialisation between teaching staff and research/academic staff. It is important to do this in order to promote more outstanding teaching excellence. The old model of a teaching and research workload for university staff will be swamped by the increasing demands to offer blended learning.

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

The first step that Australia needs to take to be more competitive is to improve Australia's reputation as an education destination. It is necessary to increase Australia's attractiveness to international students. This requires the rebuilding of Australia's reputation as a safe destination for international students. In order to create a safe, welcoming environment where international students are treated with dignity, we suggest that support services for international students are improved. As indicated in the previous answer, mental health programs and supports for international students are among the most lacking aspects of the international student experience across the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia. To be competitive, Australia must differentiate itself from the other leading nations by providing improved support services for these international students.

⁶Stephen Bacchi et al., 'Addressing International Student Mental Health During COVID-19: An Imperative Overdue', *Australasian Psychiatry* 28 (2020), 469.

4. How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities?

The consultation paper refers to multiple types of diversification, from student flows to student experiences and opportunities. Regarding the diversification of student flows: Australia is not the only nation that has referred to the need to diversify international student flows. Other Anglo-sphere countries have also partaken in this discussion.⁷ While diversification is financially important for universities, it is worth pointing out the possible contradiction in the consultation paper on this point. This diversification discourse implies the continuation of a view that sees international students as commodities to be traded. This view conflicts with the centrality that the consultation paper places on the students themselves. This discourse can be harmful to those students from those countries that we are reliant on and may be in opposition to an ethical standpoint for education. This rhetoric may signal an unwelcoming stance to certain groups of international students. Caution is urged here.

Not only is this rhetoric potentially damaging to Australia's reputation, and the mental health of some international students, it might also be useless. According to Wei Liu, the issue is not the source countries of these students flows, as they are mostly beyond the control of education providers in Australia and the Australian government. The issue is focusing on the 'pull' factors – what makes Australia attractive to international students.⁸ There is perhaps little that education providers, the Australian government, and other stakeholders can do to produce more international students from other source countries.

Moving on, the discussions on broadening the diversity of student experiences and opportunities are welcome, and are productive. It may be necessary for education providers to coordinate with a wide array of industries, from STEM to the Arts, to diversify student opportunities. It may also be necessary to build relationships with home country's secondary schooling sectors and to provide a diverse range of subject-specific scholarships in order to ensure diversity of student profiles.

⁷ Wei Liu, 'Diversification of International Student Base: A Misplaced Effort', *Journal of International Student Base* 11 (2021), 240.

⁸ Wei Liu, 'Diversification of International Student Base: A Misplaced Effort', *Journal of International Students* 11 (2021): 246-7.

5. What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for? How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

The Fourth Industrial Revolution refers to as rapidly changing society, economy, technological landscape, and world of work. Thinkers on the topic are unanimous in that the future world of work will be difficult to predict. The education system now struggles to provide skills for current jobs. A Deloitte survey of young people said that seventy-nine percent of respondents had look outside of ‘formal school’ to get the skills for the job they want. It also said that one third of respondents believes that tertiary education did not prepare them with the skills for the job they wanted.⁹

Despite this unpredictability, some studies have shown that work-integrated learning may have a positive influence on employability outcomes for international students. This work-integrated learning will help to develop links between universities and industry which can help to fill any skill gaps.¹⁰

The difficulty, and concern, here is ensuring that this is not, or does not become, an exploitative arrangement where businesses sign up to work-integrated learning schemes to obtain free labour from international students. This must be avoided. The workplace exploitation of international students is well known, such as ‘cash-in-hand’ jobs, and is a mark of shame on our industrial system and laws.¹¹

⁹ Deloitte, *Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce for the Fourth Industrial Revolution* (Johannesburg: Deloitte, 2018), 13.

¹⁰ Denise Jackson and Ruth Bridgstock, ‘What actually works to enhance graduate employability? The relative value of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular learning and paid work’, *Higher Education* 81 (2021), 726.

¹¹ Michael Vincent, “International Students Facing ‘Perfect Storm’ of Exploitation and Coronavirus Could Make It Worse”, ABC News, 30 June 2020.

6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience? What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

The underlying idea behind this particular question is: what should Australia's reputation be when it comes to international students? Australia's reputation in the eyes of international students has deteriorated over the last year. The Prime Minister's comment on 3 April 2020 when he said that 'at times like this, if you are a visitor to this country, it's time to make your way home' exemplified this. This comment signaled to international students in Australia that they cannot and should not expect support from the Federal Government. The need to restore Australia's reputation has become increasingly urgent. The successful vaccine rollout in the United Kingdom has transformed that country into an attractive study destination for many international students, to Australia's detriment.

As indicated in a previous answer, we must present Australia as a safe, welcoming environment for international students. We must differentiate ourselves by providing superior mental health programs, and co-design of education resources and programs with international students.

Our great strength here, and another point of differentiation, is our proximity to Asia. The flow of students from Asia needing university education will not abate any time soon. Australia could model itself as a 'home away from home' destination for international students.

7. Community support for the international education sector is important for the sector's social licence. How can the benefits that this sector provides to Australia be better understood by the wider community?

The contributions that international students make to Australia are a public good, in multiple ways. First, they provide a considerable economic gain for Australia in the form of spending. Second, their research contributions spawn positive economic ramifications. International students make up a large proportion of Australia's postgraduate research, this can be a substantial gain to Australia. Third, international students may also become future citizens. It is evident that the international education sector is a public good and must be protected and promoted. It warrants a public awareness and education campaign.

A rebuilt international education sector needs to be done through a holistic approach. This includes with the help of allied industries such as tourism, growth industries, and the secondary education sector.

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