

Submission:

Australian Strategy for
International Education

2021-2030

Consultation paper



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Introduction

English Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the consultation paper that forms part of developing the new Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030.

The disruption of Covid-19 has undoubtedly served as a catalyst for reflection and innovation within the international education sector. This reflection makes the timing of any new International Education strategy both apt and problematic.

Many ELICOS providers are facing closure and measuring their strategic outlook in months rather than the 10-year period that the new Strategy is looking to. Any creation of a new Australian Strategy for International Education must sit alongside a more immediate plan to return international students in a safe and responsible manner.

English Australia continues to seek support for reopening Australia's borders and positive messaging from National Cabinet that Australia is a safe and welcoming study destination.

Innovation often appears at the forefront of sector recovery plans, and English Australia has continually promoted using innovative ways to reopen Australia's borders through managed travel. Supported through technology enabled solutions, managed travel programs will allow international visitors to return at scale, moving beyond models involving high-cost quarantine. Until we move beyond these models, key areas of international education, like the ELICOS sector, cannot begin their recovery process or consider longer-term strategies.

The value of positive messaging from the National Cabinet, or the Prime Minister and Heads of States/ Territories cannot be underestimated in aiding the recovery process of the international education sector. Australia is a safe and welcoming study destination, but this message has been lost in the pandemic. Hearing these messages from National Cabinet is vital in order to repair the reputational damage that Australia's international education sector has suffered during the pandemic.

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

We commend the International Education Council for wanting to place students at the centre of Australia's Strategy for International Education. The student experience has always been a key focus for the ELICOS sector, and our sector has consistently delivered outstanding results in student satisfaction. In 2019/2020, the English Language Barometer (ELB) surveyed over 16,000 ELICOS students, showing that 91 per cent were satisfied with their Australian study experience¹. Utilising data-driven approaches to understanding the student experience, such as the ELB, must be a key priority in any Strategy for International Education.

¹ 2019-2020 English Language Barometer Survey

If we are to focus on the student experience, the new Australian Strategy for International Education must recognise the critical role that English language acquisition and development plays. Empirical evidence has validated onshore English language study as key in the pathway to further academic study, leading to higher rates of retention and improvements in academic performance.

Embedding English language learning throughout a student's journey is essential in any successful Australian Strategy for International Education. The value of ongoing instruction in Post-Entry Academic Language (PEAL) is vital in enriching the student experience and should be mandated as part of any higher education or vocational courses.

The ability to communicate effectively in English is a cornerstone of Australia's education value proposition and recognition of this is vital to understanding the student experience. While many students begin their education experience with an ELICOS course before moving to further studies, not all students undertake this journey. Many students choose to focus purely on developing their English through ELICOS-only studies given the global importance of English. Acknowledging this diversity of learning journeys is vital in any International Education Strategy.

Elevating the importance of English-language learning with the Strategy will also enhance the student experience. The student experience extends beyond the classroom and the more effectively students command English, the more positive their experience will be. Closer links between providers and industry can build a student's English, and the new Strategy must provide a path for this collaboration.

Recognising that a student's interactions within the broader Australian community shapes their experience is vital for the new Strategy. Significantly more work needs to be done on communicating the benefits that international education brings to Australia beyond its economic value. International students are integral members of our community and should be valued as colleagues, classmates, neighbours and friends. However, bringing this recognition to international education requires a deliberate strategy.

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?

The Covid pandemic has demanded that Australian providers innovate as shifts to online delivery have been required. For the ELICOS sector, an incredible transformation took place as providers moved from a legislated environment requiring face-to-face delivery to wholly online course provision. This transformation took place within weeks rather than the many years that it would typically require.

As online delivery becomes increasingly important in a post-Covid world, providers will need direct and indirect support to refine their online offerings. The Government's recently announced

Innovation Fund for ELICOS providers begins this process but further support will be needed as best practice in online delivery is increasingly prioritised.

Australia's well-established reputation in delivering quality education courses from quality providers will be paramount in supporting further online delivery. A new Strategy must build on the unique experience that comes with studying in Australia so that its key elements - quality of course and provider – are not lost.

We must also be aware of what the student experience looks like in our competitor countries. International education is becoming increasingly competitive with many new players entering the English-language teaching market, such as the Philippines. Understanding what competitors are doing requires increased monitoring and should form a core capacity of our sector to inform our innovation agenda.

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

Australia has worked hard to build a solid reputation in international education. Maintaining this reputation as online and offshore delivery increases is essential. This reputation can also serve us in differentiating our online offerings from those of competitor countries. At present, there is little to distinguish an Australian online course from a US or British course. We have a unique reputation for quality and our Strategy must build on this.

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?

We commend the policy and regulatory flexibility that providers have been shown during the pandemic. This flexibility has allowed many providers to continue to deliver quality education outcomes without compromising the student experience. The new Strategy has the opportunity to embed this flexibility as a permanent feature of Australia's international education sector.

Australia's regulatory environment is a positive from a quality assurance perspective but can prevent an entrepreneurial approach and limit the flow of students. It should be possible for providers to tap into markets seeking the international education experience that Australia can offer without being prevented from doing so by, for example, adverse visa decisions where there is no pattern of risk.

Perhaps it is time to take a radical approach to policy and regulatory development and centralize all aspects of international education within one government department. This centralization would have a single vision and oversight encompassing policy, regulation, promotion, monitoring and other related areas. It would also facilitate consistency and agility, eliminating the many interdependencies and barriers that currently exist. These interdependencies and barriers often inhibit change or at the very least make it a lengthy and disjointed process.

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

Australia's ELICOS sector already offers a strong example of diversity. Students from more than 150 countries studied at ELICOS centres in 2019. The challenge that the new Strategy needs to address is how to bring diversity to scale. Again, the ELICOS sector can offer a deeper understanding of how this is possible.

Deep dives into individual countries to understand broad sociological, economic and demographic drivers within emerging market segments could form an integral part of the Strategy. Looking at examples such as Colombia from the ELICOS sector, a country that moved from the 18th most important source market in 2005 to the second most important in 2019, could serve as useful examples.

While focusing on diversity holds value, the new Strategy should not lose sight of the importance of key source countries, such as China and India. There is little evidence that other markets will overtake the two largest exporters of international students and our competitor countries specifically target these key markets. A Strategy that ignores this will be to the detriment of Australia's international education sector.

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

English language proficiency is vital for the success of international students. Australia is uniquely positioned in being able to offer quality education in English at Australian institutions. The importance of English language instruction does not end with a student's ELICOS course but must continue throughout any further study. International students risk struggling academically and integrating into life in Australia without strong English skills, and continual instruction can eliminate this.

Soft skills for employability in a global work environment should be embedded in courses at all levels of study, including English language programs. Strengthening core competencies such as communication skills, critical thinking, group work and other skills that increase employability underpin a successful study experience for many students, regardless of whether they progress to further study, and this should be overt in the promotion of Australian education.

Schemes at the national, state or local level that focus on providing meaningful employment or volunteering experiences for international students while they are studying could form an integral part of the Strategy. These schemes could provide students with opportunities to put their developing employability skills into practice, greatly assisting in enabling them to be competitive when they are seeking full-time employment. Utilising the skills and knowledge that students develop as part of their Australian education experience must be a key focus of any Strategy.

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

The new strategy could encourage providers to increase the level of English language support offered to their international students over the life of their studies. This would instil greater confidence in employers when considering employing international students. This approach would be particularly effective when combined with encouraging Australian employers to take on international students. The Government's reach and industry connections would work particularly well in dispelling some of the myths around employing international students.

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

A uniquely Australian education experience in the broadest sense relies on international students being onshore. Although the pedagogical approaches and curricula designs of Australian courses are somewhat transferable from an in-person to an online model, there are aspects of the Australian education experience that are not replicable through virtual delivery. To truly build lasting connections with Australia, students need to be in Australia and on-campus and it is vital that the new Strategy recognizes this.

Although Australian providers have had to deliver programs online to students outside Australia during the Covid-19 pandemic, and enormous effort and resource has supported this, student feedback has clearly indicated that the experience is perceived as being less than a campus-based education. For these students, online study is an interim measure at best, not a long-term choice.

Onshore students can learn how Australian people operate in the workplace through the ability to work for 40 hours per fortnight and full-time during breaks, which can be a valuable way in which to develop core competencies. They are better positioned for a uniquely Australian experience as they can connect with their local communities across Australia. From sports clubs to churches to volunteer organisations, onshore students can develop greater intercultural competencies and benefit from the full unique experience of study and life in Australia, becoming enthusiastic ambassadors for Australia.

There is a cohort that is seeking an online, offshore education experience, but the value proposition and marketing approach are different from those applicable to the cohort that wants to be onshore, on-campus.

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

While ELICOS students may not study alongside domestic students if they are standalone ELICOS, the value proposition is the high-quality educational experience and demonstrated ability to successfully live, study and potentially work in Australia. This contributes towards the value proposition for domestic students in that they can leverage the international perspective and broaden the community in which they operate.

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

It is vital that we listen to the student voice when deciding how best to complement an Australian education experience with offshore and online education. Most students prefer studying onshore, particularly so when studying English.

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?

The messaging to the broader community needs to highlight the cultural, social and long-term benefits of international education, not just the financial benefits, and at the same time debunk the negative and simplistic perceptions of the proportion of the Australian community that has probably never even met an international student or has very little understanding of the context of international education and its broad reach across society beyond the immediately visible stakeholders, e.g. to accommodation providers and local businesses that rely on international students as either customers or part-time employees.

The strategy should facilitate innovative campaigns framing international students as a win-win for the Australian community and domestic students in order to rebuild social licence and goodwill, e.g. students assisting with issues in our community like loneliness in the elderly.

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

If students are truly to be at the centre of the new Strategy, we need to stop foregrounding the financial benefit that international education brings and start promoting all the other benefits. International students do not decide to come to Australia, or to undertake an Australian education experience online or offshore, in order to boost the Australian economy. Focusing on the financial benefit reinforces the negative perception of students being “cash cows”. This is detrimental to Australia’s reputation and needs to cease as it detracts from the many other benefits that exist for all stakeholders. The Australian government with support from the Council for International Education must ensure a student-centred narrative is central to the messaging of the new strategy and can be easily conveyed and shared by the sector.