

Flinders University submission: Response to Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021 – 2030

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Introduction

Flinders University is an active participant and contributor to Australia's international education sector. The University has achieved a strong growth trajectory over the last 7 years (winner of the Education SA Business SA Export awards in 2018). The University delivers exemplar international student services (SA Governors Multicultural Awards finalist in 2019). The University operates one of the largest Australia Awards programs in the country, is an active participant in DFAT's Colombo Plan program, and celebrated 20 years of TNE delivery in China last year with our prestigious partner Nankai University in Tianjin. International education is a corner piece in the University's ambitious strategy *Making a Difference - Agenda 2025*.

Flinders University recognises the importance of International education and research into the future, and welcomes the opportunity to make a submission in response to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and the Council for International Education's consultation paper on the development of a new Australian Strategy for International Education 2020-31.

The following is Flinders University's response to the eight consultation questions:

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

A new international strategy 2021 – 2030 must recognise that there is an immediate need for a recovery and re-build phase for the sector requiring clear plans for how this phase can be activated and executed. It is essential that the recovery and re-build phase is supported by a whole of government effort that ensures policy and practice are aligned to avoid any further and ongoing confusion across key markets, and continual changes that reduces confidence in Australian education and its perceived value.

Paramount, is the priority *International Student Arrival Plan* with clearly articulated dates that tackles the logistical volume challenge to:

- a) Bring back continuing international students and students who currently follow courses online from offshore.
- b) Bring in new commencing international students to enable the re-build of international education in Australia.

The Consultation emphasises a focus on new hybrid, online and TNE delivery models. Flinders University embraces the opportunity to further explore international online delivery and TNE (noting we already have 20 years' experience in TNE delivery), but caution against seeing online as a replacement strategy to traditional forms of international education. The fundamental principles of success for international education has been based on the combined value proposition of educational product, experience, opportunity, and soft skill development in a destination country. The strategy must acknowledge that what we have learnt from improved online delivery (with current international student uptake, is mainly because no other alternative exists) is not a future replacement strategy, but a complementary strategy that can provide additional growth and some risk mitigation.

It is also important to recognise that challenges such as regulatory environment, time zone differences, return on investment and profitability in online, hybrid and TNE delivery in source country presents significantly higher risk to providers than educating students onshore in Australia.

International students studying online, also vastly reduces the total financial (and non-financial) value they bring as they don't spend on accommodation, living costs and tourism in our communities.

Furthermore, it is not only the international students who have been impacted by COVID-19 and border closures. Australian students have not been able to pursue international study experiences and a priority in the new strategy should be for the Commonwealth to send a strong signal and emphasis of re-commenced and expanded outbound learning programs. Flinders University would welcome a broadened New Colombo Program in terms of more destination

countries and eligibility for post graduate students to participate, which is increasingly matching the Flinders Australian student enrolment profile.

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 student experience is paramount to the ongoing success of Australia's international education sector. In the last year during the pandemic we saw firsthand the complex broad range of factors influencing a student's positive (or negative) experience.

A positive student experience requires a collective effort and focus from all aspects of the community in which the international students live and contribute, therefore the consultation question ought to be posed more broadly, and not only focus on what Australian education providers can do.

Collective efforts and initiatives across education providers, Commonwealth and State/Territory Governments, industry and the community should be considered in the strategy (and more specifically in a subsequent plan) including:

- Much more explicit advocacy for the contributions international students bring to Australia and debunk myths. Their value is not understood or appreciated, and the general public appears at times directly hostile to the idea of international education. This has a profound impact on international students and negatively impacts on the experience of their studies and life in general in Australia.
- Delivery of courses that meet international student demand and outcome expectations.
- Expand work integrated learning opportunities.
- Develop programs that facilitate better involvement of international students in the community and in the classroom.
- Facilitate the student involvement and co-creation of student facing services in education providers, and elsewhere.

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

- a. 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?**

Robust, yet attractive and responsive visa policy settings and post study work rights settings are two of the key levers for a healthy, attractive and competitive international education environment. We must acknowledge that global citizens of today seek educational opportunities that deliver a long-term return on their educational investment, often expressed as job and residency opportunities in the country where they have studied (or a third country).

Australia could seek to align visa settings much more clearly with post study work settings, and with skills shortages, on a state and territory basis. In an ideal scenario a University in collaboration with State and Territory governments, should identify and develop educational offerings that meet anticipated future skills demand and offer those to international students with associated visas and work rights as pathways to migration that fulfils those skills and needs of the State/Territory.

Furthermore, the regulatory framework is key to innovation and development of the sector. It must keep pace or provide the flexibility for providers to remain competitive through multiple lenses including mode of delivery, student experience and student outcomes. Flinders welcomes the flexibility demonstrated by TEQSA during the pandemic and recommends that consideration is given for what the regulatory framework ought to look like in the context of the desires for a stronger focus on hybrid, online and TNE delivery.

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 is key to any organisation and industry, and in the case of Flinders University (and many other providers) diversification in source country and enrolment profile has been a priority for a long time. It is important that the strategy acknowledges that by and large Australian Universities have run diversification strategies, but are operating in a market driven environment.

The reality is that international education is largely demand driven – and despite diversification strategies, over the course of the last few years, demand from two main markets has dominated, creating a perception of a non-diversified international education sector. As has been pointed out in an analysis by the Innovative Research Universities, “many industries considered essential to our economy depend on China at a much higher rate than education – yet do not attract anything like the same level of rhetoric and concern”¹.

It is also known that the diversification challenge is not the same for all Universities.

In this context, the case could be made that to actively diversify, it can only be achieved by actively preventing high demand. It would be highly undesirable to introduce any such quota or control mechanisms through levers such as issuing visas within the Commonwealth Governments control.

The consultation paper stresses diversification of delivery mode to online as the next big opportunity, including direction to providers in ‘ensuring international students receive a world-class experience studying with Australia regardless of their location and/or mode of study’ and that this will be managed through a new framework. Adherence in compliance/QA requirements will come at an increased cost to institutions when the reality of online/offshore delivery is typically at a reduced revenue rate for institutions through lower tuition fee revenue. This raises real concerns of financial viability in the context of diversification. In addition, as discussed elsewhere, through online delivery there are none of the financial and non-financial benefits gained by States/Territories through spend on accommodation, living costs and tourism.

Noting these challenges, the Commonwealth Government can consider the following as direct strategies to drive diversification of either source country, destination, discipline, or mode of delivery through:

- scholarship programs targeting nationalities, disciplines, destinations, or mode of delivery
- visa settings – targeted PSW and pathways to skilled migration as discussed elsewhere in the submission
- differentiate through development of specific sectoral road maps or strategies to drive growth into certain disciplines that delivering towards industry skills shortages
- re-establish a focused, targeted, and re-imagined national organisation much more aligned with State/Territory/Regional approaches to marketing and servicing of Australia’s international education sector

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

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

The core for employability outcomes for both international and domestic students, is a quality education offering including practical experience that is aligned to industry demand.

In addition to ongoing enhancement and renewal of educational offerings and work experience opportunities, providers can focus on strategies to facilitate the inclusion of international students in the Australian community, online engagement and collaboration skills development and confidence building activities such as mock business meetings.

¹ <https://www.iru.edu.au/news/are-universities-over-reliant-on-china/>

Opportunities exist to develop specific programs that provide opportunities for onshore or online international students to build vital networks and gain access to practical work experience in their home country or a third country. This would then facilitate their return and success in their own home country, or a third country.

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

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

The value proposition for engaging in an Australian educational experience is the prospect of gaining a high-quality qualification, coupled with the opportunity to live and learn and maybe stay in Australia. Whilst not new, it is acknowledged that online, hybrid and TNE will offer some newfound flexibility and versatility to both providers and students, however they cannot replace a traditional in-country face-to-face learning experience. International students want to enjoy and explore Australia, our lifestyle, and become a part of our community. For domestic students, the value proposition is also based on being able to gain the same high quality qualification, but together with a large and diverse international student population, fostering improved understanding of the world in which Australian students will interact and contribute and forge valuable connections that can last a life time.

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

As outlined above, the core value proposition is a combination of education quality and destination. If you take away the destination, you have the quality of the educational product remaining. That must be the focus for online delivery (noting the challenges around price-point vs the delivery of the same educational product face to face).

However, as argued elsewhere, whilst online, hybrid and TNE offerings is likely to form a larger part of the total Australian international education sector in the future, it will only be an additional offering to the traditional in-country study opportunities. Online and offshore delivery will give prospective international students more options and increase reach and visibility of Australian education.

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?

This is a challenge for the sector that has existed for some time, but has accelerated throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Flinders would welcome a genuine, and whole of Government effort, together with States and Territories, in clearly and directly communicating and demonstrating to the Australian public, the broad benefits of international students in addition to debunking common myths about international students. As indicated in the response to question two, the current international student experience is negatively impacted by negative community sentiments.

It is incumbent on all parts of Government and education providers to consider the narrative we use when discussing or commenting on international education. We are in an era of commercialisation and commodification of 'educational products' whereas the public largely sees education for the greater good. The economic benefits of international education have dominated the conversation and taken precedence over other meaningful contributions made by international students to both the sector and the broader community.

Flinders University would support a well-considered PR and communication campaign which utilises well known and relatable, non-Government or sector spokes people, to advocate for the tangible values that international education brings to Australia. This should include the balance between financial benefits and non-financial benefits, and a view to reframe the conversation/narrative to focus on the broad social benefit that education brings, and not just to individual students but to their own communities and nations.

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

- Both Canada and the UK have recently released or updated their international education strategies. Both strategies include plans to deal with issues that are equally relevant to the Australian international education sector and they identify a number of clear and measurable actions which support the ambitions of both those countries. The new Australian strategy ought to have a clear implementation plan that also includes actions, milestones and identified reporting back intervals.
- International higher degree by research (HDR) students contribute greatly to the research efforts of any University and helps attract global talent into Australia. A focus on HDR students and research collaboration should therefore also form part of a new international education (and research) strategy.

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