



Holmesglen Institute response to

***Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for
International Education 2021-2030*** consultation paper

May 2021

Holmesglen Institute is one of Victoria's leading public TAFE institutes, especially in the provision of international education to onshore and offshore students. Our programs span Senior Secondary, Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education. As with all other providers, the COVID pandemic has had a significant impact on our international education activity.

Holmesglen welcomes the Australian Government's plan to develop a strategy for international education, and the opportunity to contribute through this consultation process.

Discussion questions

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

Focus on Vocational Education and Training (VET)

The Australian Government's international education strategy must include a key focus and specific strategies for technical and vocational education and training. Our key demographic students come from developing nations where skills shortages are highly acute. Government to government relations can support regional capability development and play a strategic role in Australia's diplomatic endeavour.

The Department of Home Affairs must become more informed on the public VET sector. TAFEs are subject to regular and rigorous additional quality assurance and regulatory oversight through their state and territory owners as well as national regulators. This quality assurance ensures high quality standards in program delivery within public VET providers and should be a differentiator that Government (Department of Home Affairs) leverages in determining the flow of international students to undertake VET courses.

The integrity and long-term viability of Australia's student visa program is one of its most valuable assets, which should be used more advantageously to welcome genuine international students into high level qualifications that provide industry relevant skills and enhance their career aspirations. International students that aspire for an Australian VET qualification as a means to build a purposeful career should not be disadvantaged in getting a student visa to Australia. Rather, the student visa program should be able to protect them from poor student recruitment practices that target them. Closing the leakage possibilities by removing the right to transfer between providers within the first 12 months of arrival in Australia is one way to plug this point of exploitation.

Focus on ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas)

Most developing countries in the world have a high proportion of their population below the minimum English language proficiency levels set as threshold requirements for Australia's student visa program. However, we know that English language proficiency by itself is not an indicator of risk. High quality language developmental programs are available in Australia and such applicants would benefit from language development in Australia rather than in cram programs in their home country.

The use of language proficiency as a threshold criterion for the student visa program has a negative impact and is a deterrent to genuine high quality students seeking an overseas education.

Education providers that offer high quality language development programs as a package to further study at higher levels should be rated as high quality, low risk providers for the wrap around education model they have in place.

The Australian brand depends on quality and quality exists in all sectors of international education – ELICOS, Schools, VET and Higher Education and all sectors are intrinsic to building a sustainable international education sector.

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?

Supporting our international students

Larger providers such as Holmesglen were strongly positioned to support international students during the COVID crisis and did so. It should not be a student's good fortune to be at a supportive institution, and capacity for care under extraordinary circumstances should be mandated for all providers of international education in Australia.

Strengthening the requirements to become a CRICOS-registered provider (whereby providers have to demonstrate their investment into relevant support services they have in place for the previous 3-5 years prior to gaining CRICOS registration) is a means to ensuring that education providers approved to receive international students have high quality and sustainable support services in place for international students.

International students and wage theft

Government must ensure that international students are protected from wage theft. Our international students are often highly financially reliant on their limited work opportunities and are particularly vulnerable within some industries where the risk of exploitation is significant.

Social Media and other digital platforms can inform and raise awareness amongst international students of state and national laws that have come into force recently – e.g. relevant state Wage Theft Bills, by providing information in plain English and other language translations on protections afforded and how students can access these.

International students – building cohesion and social inclusion in our communities

The fundamental human values of tolerance and respect for diversity in our society must become our foremost focus in our recovery and rebuild phases in international education. International students and their families engaging with the Australian education system enrich the learning experiences of Australian students, internationalise the study environment and curriculum, contribute to richly diverse human capital both here in Australia and overseas, and advance Australia's social and cultural development through deep cultural connections, innovation advancements and diversity to our communities. Whilst international education for long has been acknowledged for the economic benefits it delivers to education providers and our wider community, the benefits that Australia has drawn from the globalisation of its economy through international education cannot be underestimated.

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

Linking education to skilled migration

The Australian Government must recognise, link and leverage Australia's world class educational system to enhance skilled migration. Other countries, such as Canada, do not shy away from making this link and will outstrip Australia in being a favoured destination. We are failing to grasp the reality of the connection between education and residency in Australia for some international students. This acknowledgement might also assist in weeding out low quality providers.

Bringing back international students

Returning students to study in Australia is critical to the survival of the largest service export industry in Victoria. Many providers and agents have successfully migrated recruitment processes to online and virtual media. However, our prospective students are overwhelmingly clear that online and blended options, while a good stop gap measure, are not long term solutions: they miss the in-country experience which they value so much. While politically difficult, the safe return of students to studying as soon as possible is essential. Australia is losing market share to other countries unless solutions are found.

International education providers and stakeholders are happy to work with governments to explore potential solutions to quarantine challenges.

Use of Statement of Purpose in visa application process to drive decision making processes

There is a need to recognise that career change is a choice people are entitled to make – genuine applicants making a career change choice and a decision to undertake further education, training and up skilling in an overseas country should not be viewed as a high risk. High quality providers should have the autonomy to make decisions regarding entry standards including language proficiency.

Evidentiary requirements to demonstrate financial capacity

The current system for use of evidence to demonstrate financial capacity, lends itself to misuse and higher risk of fraudulent documentation. It also deters genuine applicants with sound financial capacity, as it fails to consider that demonstrating financial capacity is linked to the family / student having sound financial plans and investments outside of standard financial institutions such as banks. For example, current settings do not recognise:

- Investments in share portfolios,
- Investment in property, or
- Evidence of employment and a regular income, which supports loan repayments.

The current student visa program mechanism to establish international student financial capacity is outdated and onerous when compared to other like type education destinations (e.g. Canada).

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

Centralised, accessible market research analytics about Australia's offshore target markets would enable our international education sector:

- To better understand local industry skills needs, and
- Economic and social needs in a global context.

This will generate valuable insights for education providers enabling them to focus their resources on building appropriate courses and curriculum that are responsive to current and future global demands.

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

Our international students express a desire to secure employment either in Australia or in their home country. Analysis of skill shortage data here and in our target markets should inform our education products and the learning experiences we offer to help our students achieve their goals. Often, the skills that increase employability outcomes for international students are common across a globally competitive labour market, including digital literacy, critical thinking, project management and communication skills. Within disciplines, many technical skills are also common.

TAFE institutes have extensive relationships with Australian (and often, international) businesses and are well-connected to industry. These connections inform our VET and Higher Education programs and provide a host of work-integrated learning opportunities.

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

Strong employability outcomes

Australian TAFEs have expansive business and community networks and industry-informed VET and Higher Education products, increasing employability outcomes for local and international graduates.

Quality prospective students are discerning consumers and will likewise seek quality education options that offer genuine outcomes. We need to achieve, measure and promote the attractive outcome success measures of a strong, quality-driven, industry relevant and innovative education system.

Fundamental to lifting Australia's competitiveness would require the right students choosing the right courses and the right places of study whether onshore, online or offshore. International students should be able to identify high quality Australian international education providers. Some characteristics of such providers include:

- Established Schools of Excellence/Centres of Excellence that have internationalised curricula in skilled shortage areas and have established relevant industry connections;
- At least 60% established delivery in domestic market over the last 3-5 years;
- Established industry relevant connections and innovative education models that have been in place for 3-5 years;
- Proven internationalisation of curricula at both VET and Higher Education;
- Bespoke international student engagement and support services to cater to students from diverse source countries.

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?

Community Support

Many Australian municipalities recognise the enriching contribution international students (and skilled migration) to their communities. In partnership with other community institutions, TAFEs weave their students and education programs through local businesses and local communities. Economic and social data acknowledging and celebrating the historic and contemporary composition of and contribution to diverse migration to each region, would assist providers share this narrative.

Preparing guides for and connections to local services for international students living our communities will increase engagement with these services. Education providers can facilitate international education evaluation and co-design input to services, to help ensure that services are fit for purpose for our international students.

The acknowledgement and celebration of international students in their local government areas will help build better awareness and inclusion in the wider community.

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

Alumni

Support for the recognition of our international education alumni is critical at a national government level. International students may not always identify strongly with their chosen institution for a variety of reasons but will always distinguish themselves as Australian graduates. In Mongolia, for example, Australian educated graduates, which includes a number of senior government officials, identify as “Mozzies” – Mongolian Aussies – and regularly meet, supported by the Australian Embassy. This has had undoubted flow on affects for Australian companies, advisors and consultants in the Mongolia. Australian Government support for alumni will aid in having graduates as identifying strongly with Australia to build brand, reputation and recognition.

Mobility programs for VET

There are currently no mobility scholarship programs specifically designed for vocational education. TAFEs and other VET providers are not eligible to apply for the New Colombo Scholarship Plan program. The Endeavour Scholarship Program (which saw TAFEs competing against universities for funded mobility places) was closed in the 2019-2020 budget. We identify this as a major gap in a broad, equitable international education sector.

Building customised offshore training solutions

Australian accredited vocational qualifications are designed to be fit for purpose for the Australian environment but a different product may be more suitable for the international market. The shift to micro-credentials or Institute-accredited programs may offer customised education and training solutions to meet specific skills needs. Australian Government recognition of these high quality training products would support international credibility and portability.

Holmesglen Institute would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission if requested.
Please contact:

Andrew Williamson

Executive Director – International Education & Enterprise Solutions

HOLMESGLEN INSTITUTE

Email: andrew.williamson@holmesglen.edu.au

Phone: +61 3 9564 1501

Mobile: +61 400 403 755