

11 May 2021

Secretariat  
Department of Education, Skills and Employment  
GPO Box 9880  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via email: [education-ies@dese.gov.au](mailto:education-ies@dese.gov.au)

Dear Secretariat

### **Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030**

Swinburne University of Technology is pleased to make a submission to the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 consultation paper.

International students make valuable contributions to our society, both culturally and economically. Thus, it is vital that as a sector we position Australia as a desirable destination and provider of education. As such, we commend the government for the decision to create a new strategy, and for seeking input into its development. As market conditions, the needs and expectations of students, and the broader economy rapidly change, it is essential that we also update our strategy to remain competitive.

### **Background**

Historically, Australia has been very successful in the international education market, securing more students per capita than other comparable destination countries. As such, international education has become a major sector of our economy. According to Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates, its value reached \$40 billion prior to the pandemic. Of that, 57% was related to goods and services purchased, much more than the value generated by the educational products themselves<sup>1</sup>. As such, international education generates significant expenditure across the broader economy, and is not merely a source of revenue for the education sector.

However, the value of international students cannot be understood in purely economic terms. They also greatly enrich the cultural diversity of our tertiary institutions by exposing domestic students to people of different backgrounds and perspectives, and add to the tapestry of Australian social life through their interactions outside of educational settings.

Thus, Australia has a proud and productive history of providing international education, built on offering quality learning experiences, innovation in practice, and the hard work of institutions and governments in promoting Australian education abroad.

Unfortunately, circumstances created by the pandemic have impacted substantially on Australia's attractiveness to prospective students. Closed borders have led other countries with more relaxed immigration settings to become more favoured options. This is demonstrated by Navitas research which shows interest in Australia as a study destination is declining significantly, compared to Canada and the UK where interest is increasing<sup>2</sup>.

The substantial drop in new international commencements, and resulting decrease in overall international enrolments, is also causing major damage to the value of the sector. A recent report from the Mitchell Institute estimates that if there is a third academic year with no new international students able to enter, the value of international education will

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<sup>1</sup> Hurley, P, *2021 is the year Australia's international student crisis really bites*, 2021

<sup>2</sup> Chew, J, *Navitas Agent Perception Report*, 2021

decrease by almost 50% by the end of 2022<sup>3</sup>. Thus, there is a compelling case for urgent action to mitigate this damage before such a situation occurs.

We wish to flag at the outset that a core priority of the new international education strategy should be the development of a plan to return international students to Australia in substantial numbers. Other aspects of the strategy which relate to onshore study will be for naught if students are not able to return. Thus, this submission will include our suggestions for how this could occur in a manner that fuels the recovery of the Australian economy from the pandemic while also protecting our residents.

However, we also applaud the spirit of the paper, which rightly focuses on the need for innovation, quality, and active pursuit of new opportunities. Swinburne has considered views on how a new Strategy could incorporate and promote such objectives.

### **Growth through diversification**

As suggested by the consultation paper, as a sector we must demonstrate a diversity of offerings in our value proposition to the market. This is essential if we are to capitalize on new segments as they emerge.

#### *Micro-credentials and lifelong learning*

In addition to established AQF qualifications, Australian institutions should continue to develop and aggressively market micro-credentials, particularly as online offerings. These may succeed in attracting students who may not require full qualifications, and that may wish to undertake study from their home country. As the global economy transforms to one where people frequently change career and occupations evolve to require new skills, there will be an increased need for lifelong learning. As such, part of the Strategy should be directed to attracting people further along their career journey, in addition to the traditional market of school-leavers and postgraduates. Increasing international awareness of the availability of micro-credentials will also help position Australia as a holistic and modern provider of education.

Swinburne is already active in developing this market. We currently offer short courses through Swinburne Online, and will continue to create new products to meet emerging skills needs both domestically and globally.

#### *Expanding online offerings*

Like micro-credentials, the broader online sphere provides an opportunity to attract students who may not be captured by traditional onshore and offshore face-to-face offerings. While online capacity has been building for some years, our ability to transfer teaching and learning for many courses to online-only delivery during the pandemic demonstrates we have capability for further expansion. We must leverage the experience and expertise developed through this challenging period as other providers abroad will already be doing so.

However, to accelerate uptake of online courses, it is necessary to overcome the problem of inconsistent recognition across jurisdictions. People are less likely to enroll if they don't have confidence a qualification has currency. Therefore, the Commonwealth could assist in this area by leading lobbying efforts to boost the recognition of Australian courses delivered online. As a precursor to this, DFAT or Austrade could embark on a program of work to identify markets where Australian-delivered online qualifications are not recognised.

Despite the opportunity inherent in the online sphere, market intelligence demonstrates it should be viewed as supplementary to face-to-face options, not as a wholesale replacement. The most recent IDP Connect survey shows that only 10% of prospective students surveyed were willing to study online if there was no possibility of transitioning to

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<sup>3</sup> Hurley, P, *Stuck in transit: International student update*, 2021

on-campus classes<sup>4</sup>. Hence, while students may expect a digital component to their courses and the flexibility of blended learning options, they still overwhelmingly desire an on-campus international experience.

### *Offshore offerings*

Pursuing further international partners to facilitate offshore delivery is another avenue to diversify our offering to prospective students. Swinburne is active in this regard, having opened Swinburne Vietnam in partnership with FPT University in late 2019, while also operating our Malaysian campus in Sarawak since 2000. These options enable students who want or need to remain in their home countries to experience an Australian learning style.

The Commonwealth is right to suggest this should be a priority area for further growth. However, the new Foreign Arrangements Act makes it more difficult for foreign institutions and businesses to enter agreements with Australian institutions in confidence. Thus, there would appear to be a lack of alignment in government policy that might work against the achievement of this goal. Therefore, the Commonwealth should develop a strategy to reassure our international partners, both current and prospective, that they can collaborate with Australian institutions without fear of their relationships being terminated.

### **Innovating in teaching and learning to meet the needs of the future**

Australian institutions must ensure they offer students an education that prepares them to enter a workforce in a rapidly changing global economy. We must predict the skills that will be required and embrace change, while also providing students with practical experience that enhances their appeal to prospective employers. As a sector, it also vital that we are successful in communicating our capability in these areas to the international market, as one of the chief reasons that students will undertake study is a desire to gain employment upon completion.

### *Digital Skills*

It is the responsibility of Australian providers to develop the digital skills of international students as part of their educational program. Digitisation across industries is occurring at breakneck speed, and there is likely to be increasing demand for digital skills in Australia's key international education markets. For example, recent AlphaBeta research predicts that in India the digital skill trainings required will increase by 69% between 2020 and 2025<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, there is great opportunity to position Australia as a major deliverer of such courses.

Australia has a number of institutions at the forefront of research and commercialisation of digital technologies, including Swinburne. We provide students with practical Industry 4.0 training and work experiences through our Factory of the Future and are committed to creating a tech-enriched learning experience for all students, as demonstrated by our position as Australia's first Adobe Creative Campus. Therefore, a crucial part of the Strategy should be promotion of best practice initiatives such as these, and to highlight the technological expertise of Australian institutions.

To support this, we must also continue to innovate in digitally-enhanced learning as a sector-wide priority.

### *Work-integrated learning*

In addition to digital skills, we must increase our capability to provide work-integrated learning opportunities to our students. This is one of Swinburne's strategic priorities and a 'moonshot' goal of our Horizon 2025 Strategy, where we have committed to providing every Swinburne student with a work experience. Not only does this enrich education, it also increases the employability of graduates as industry desires staff who have practical skills. Therefore, providing adequate support towards graduate employability is vital to sustaining long-term confidence in the Australian system.

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<sup>4</sup> Duffin, J, *Press Release Crossroads IV: International students remain willing to quarantine and get vaccinated for in-country experience*, 2021

<sup>5</sup> AlphaBeta, *Unlocking APAC's Digital Potential: Changing Digital Skill Needs and Policy Approaches*, 2021

Work-integrated learning is also part of creating the 'Australian experience' identified as a priority in the consultation paper. Linking students with industry exposes them to wider Australian life and our business culture. It would also be possible to provide this for students studying online or offshore in the form of 'virtual work experience'. As the pandemic has normalised working remotely, there is potential to innovate in this area and provide flexibility of arrangements. Developing opportunities such as these could establish a point of difference for Australian providers.

As with digital skills, developing and promoting Australian capability in providing work-integrated learning should be part of the Strategy.

#### *Research with commercial applications*

The future development of the Commonwealth's University Research Commercialisation Scheme presents a new opportunity to position Australia as a hub for practical research. This can form a core part of the employability value proposition of Australian education, as successful implementation will assist in attracting students who may have previously chosen countries and institutions with more widely-known track records in this area.

Swinburne is active in this space through many initiatives such as our industry-PhDs, our Factory of the Future, and the new joint CSIRO-Swinburne Industry 4.0 TestLab. Further commercialisation of research is one of our core priorities, as it should be for the sector at large.

#### **Policy settings to maximise appeal of the Australian international education sector**

The Commonwealth can increase the effectiveness of the sector's efforts to attract students by using the policy levers at its disposal. There are many past initiatives that have done this admirably, however, we have some suggestions for further improvements.

#### *Streamlining eligibility*

Currently, some students that see Australia as a preferred destination may not apply to our institutions as they are unsure whether their past qualifications make them eligible for admission. It is also time-consuming for providers to assess student eligibility. Therefore, an uplift in the capacity of the Australian government to assess the equivalency of overseas qualifications would result in substantial sector wide productivity gains.

Currently there are some notable tools in place for this, including those administered by the National Office for Overseas Skills Recognition (NOOSR). However, a centralised, well-resourced, technologically-driven and up-to-date platform which could consolidate qualification recognition information would be highly advantageous to the international education sector.

#### *Increasing post-study work rights*

It is well-known that the availability of post-study work rights influences student choices. Recent UK policy history serves as a good example of this, as after limiting access to these in 2012 they experienced an immediate fall in international student numbers. On the other hand, New Zealand has earned a more favourable perception among prospective students after implementing a 3-year post-study work rights visa<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, keeping pace with competitors' offerings in this area is essential. As such, we recommend that the Commonwealth consider increasing availability of these rights to match or exceed those offered by other major destination countries.

There is also need to increase transparency around visa eligibility. While there is relative clarity regarding Student (Subclass 500) and Temporary Graduate (Subclass 485) visas, subsequent access to working and skilled visas is less

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<sup>6</sup> Chew, J, *Economic Opportunities and Outcomes of Post-Study Work Rights in Australia*, 2019

clear. We suggest that the Commonwealth provide more accessible information regarding availability and requirements for these programs.

### A plan to reopen Australia to international students

While we appreciate that the Commonwealth is taking strong measures to protect Australia from further Covid-outbreaks, we are concerned by the implication in the consultation paper that international students will not return in significant numbers for several years.

We believe it is possible to safeguard the nation's public health, while still allowing international students onshore in more substantial numbers than what has currently been suggested. Thus, we suggest that the Commonwealth, in collaboration with state governments, develop and circulate a plan to bring back students safely.

There are a few measures we strongly suggest the Commonwealth consider as components of this plan.

Firstly, access to Australia could be limited to students who could show proof of vaccination. While the extent to which vaccines limit transmission is yet to be established, this could provide a first layer of protection.

Secondly, the Commonwealth and states could create dedicated quarantine facilities for processing international students. This would increase capacity and develop Australia's ability to respond to any future pandemics. Purpose built facilities would also have the merit of providing safer quarantine conditions with reduced likelihood of breaches. Additionally, they could have a second life for military or other use once they were no longer required for international students.

Finally, the Commonwealth could permit the use of chartered flights to bring students into the country. This would mean that returning Australian residents were not disadvantaged, and it would also support the recovery of the aviation sector. Flights such as these have already been undertaken by universities in the UK.

If some form of plan is not implemented quickly, Australia risks losing substantial ground in the international student market. As mentioned previously, very few students are willing to study purely online, so students will simply choose universities in nations where they are permitted to enter. There is already a sense abroad that students won't be able to return to Australia in the near future, as shown by a recent Navitas survey of international education agents. It found they believed that students are less likely to be able to return to Australia than any of its main competitors, with the exception of New Zealand<sup>7</sup>. Thus, it is crucial that action is taken to change this perception.

#### Recommendations

1. The Strategy should include a goal of expansion into the lifelong learning market through increasing the offering of micro-credentials, and also include a plan to increase Australia's market profile in this area.
2. The Strategy should include a goal of increasing online offerings, but also of increasing international acceptance of Australian online courses.
3. The Strategy should include the goal of expanding offshore partnerships and offerings, but also a plan to reassure current and potential partners that the Foreign Arrangements Act will not jeopardise agreements.
4. The Strategy should include a goal to ensure future relevancy of Australian qualifications, and improve employment outcomes for international students, by increasing provision of digital skills, work-integrated learning, and commercial research opportunities.
5. The Strategy should include a plan to uplift Commonwealth capacity to assess equivalency of overseas qualifications, in order to streamline application processes for international students.

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<sup>7</sup> Chew, J, *Navitas Agent Perception Report*, 2021

6. The Strategy should include a plan to improve availability and transparency of post-work study rights in order to match or exceed that offered by competitors.
7. The Strategy should include a plan for returning international students to Australia in substantial numbers, which could include a 'vaccination passport', dedicated quarantine facilities, and permission for the use of chartered flights.

Australia must present a modern, flexible, digitally-enriched educational sector that has the capability to appeal to a wide range of international students. While the new Strategy should look to expand and diversify what Australian institutions offer, it should be grounded in enhancing the availability and quality of onshore study experiences, as this is where the strongest demand lies. As such, creating and implementing a plan to bring back international students to Australia in a safe manner must be a core aspect of the Strategy.

Thank you for your consideration of this submission, and if you have further questions please contact Mr. Tom Bradbury, Government Relations Manager at [tbradbury@swin.edu.au](mailto:tbradbury@swin.edu.au)

Yours sincerely



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