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I congratulate you on the work being undertaken in relation to the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 and thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

The international education sector and students make a significant contribution to Tasmania – economically, socially and culturally. International education is Tasmania's fourth largest export earner and Tasmania's most valuable services export market. These benefits have a flow on effect on tourism, business linkages, trade, and population growth. International students also play an important part in filling skill shortages, bringing diversity and global connections to Tasmania and supporting regional development.

This strategy is the opportunity to articulate a path forward for recovery of the sector, which has experienced significant impacts as a result of COVID-19. Tasmania supports a national strategy which:

- places international students at the centre
- provides a clear approach for recovery of the sector, which prioritises the return of international students to Australia
- continues to invest in a strong national brand to target key markets and leverages global connections and networks
- gives consideration to the importance of migration pathways as a means to support student experience and skills needs across regions
- establishes effective governance structures to support the sector.

Students at the centre

The Tasmanian Government strongly supports development of a strategy which places caring for international students at the centre. Early in the onset of COVID-19, the Tasmanian Government announced a package of support for temporary visa holders to help address the impacts of COVID-19. International students were eligible for a number of supports under this initiative, including an immediate payment of \$250 per individual or up to \$1 000 per family for cases of genuine financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Other elements included support accessible through non-government organisations and travel advice and financial support to enable visa holders to return home if they wished to and it was safe to do so. International students, as well as other temporary visa holders were also eligible for up to \$2 000 in assistance under a COVID-19 Rent Relief Fund announced in May 2020.

It is important that the ongoing impact of COVID-19 to international students both onshore and offshore is clearly acknowledged and addressed under an initial recovery phase within the strategy and associated actions. Areas which continue to be identified by national surveys and communication from students include issues associated with international student returns, post study work rights and migration options, mental health and wellbeing, and employability.

Path to recovery

It is vital that the strategy articulate a clear plan to actively support the sector to recover from the significant impact of COVID-19. Australia has built an outstanding reputation as a destination for international students and the sector has conferred extraordinary benefits to our communities.

Supporting international students who are offshore to return to Australia should be a core priority under a national strategy. While Australian providers have pivoted towards online delivery in many cases where practicable, a recent survey from the Council of International Students Australia (CISA) highlighted some significant concerns with the delivery model. A total of 64 percent of international students studying with Australian institutions surveyed indicated that they were not satisfied with online delivery (May 2021).

International students clearly continue to value an onshore, on campus international education experience and are looking for options that will offer them certainty in relation to education and post-study pathways. Nonetheless, current trends and demands also point to the importance of blended, flexible experiences and options for students, incorporating digital technology and online learning. The strategy should consider how the sector can enhance delivery offerings to remain competitive in the global marketplace.

Nation brand and global networks

The collaborative work of Austrade, the Department of Education, Skills and Employment and states and territories in the development and promotion of a national brand have been significant in helping to establish Australia's reputation as a destination for international education. It is essential that continued investment is directed towards this area to support recovery for the sector. There is also significant value in a national umbrella brand and collaborative marketing practices to help support a break into new and emerging markets.

The strategy should include a framework for leveraging our global alumni community, which has significant value across economic, diplomatic and social spheres. This network can also play an important role in supporting those students who choose not to stay in Australia post-study to transition into employment in their home country, making Australia an attractive study destination.

Visas and migration pathways

There is an important relationship between international education and permanent migration. Tasmania benefits significantly from international students who choose to stay on in the state through the range of post study migration pathways.

COVID-19 has clearly highlighted that students are looking for greater certainty in respect of their pathway through from study to work and beyond. Current evidence shows that students are choosing destinations which offer generous and predictable options that will help them to plan for their future. In the short term, this will include destinations that are open to international student arrivals, have more efficient timeframes for visa processing, and good post-study work options.

Students currently considering Australia as a destination, or stuck overseas and already enrolled face uncertainty, even with the current concessions that have been granted for students offshore. The Department of Home Affairs has advised that there is currently a minimum four month processing time for student visas. However, students can only apply for a student visa within three months of a course commencement date. This acts as a deterrent to enrolment as students are having to commence courses without the assurance of whether a visa will be granted.

A clear, comprehensive approach to student visas and post study migration pathways unencumbered by ambiguity or significant or regular change would be of significant value to students and the sector in recovery.

There is also an opportunity to calibrate key migration levers relevant to international students to gain greater benefit from international education in helping to meet skills demand. The current approach to the development of national skills lists does not take into account the diverse needs and demand for skills across Australia. The Regional Occupation List (ROL) for example, which informs migration pathways for many international students, does not cater to the different skills needs of regions, which can be relatively different.

Acknowledging the role of the National Skills Commission and Department of Education, Skills and Employment in respect to this area, a more flexible framework, which accounts for regional demands and trends would have the added benefit of offering opportunities to a broader range of students. It would also help to link them to opportunities across the country which are best able to harness their skills should they wish to begin or continue their careers in Australia.

Governance

The Council for International Education, encompassing Ministers from key portfolios and expert members from the sector, is a valuable structure to enable Australia to tackle current and future issues impacting international education. Since the onset of COVID-19, the sector has benefitted from collaboration between Australian Government departments and states and territories through the Council and the former Global Reputation Taskforce.

Noting the significant work that will be required to support the sector and students in recovery, Tasmania advocates for a governance structure which allows issues to be escalated and addressed effectively through clear communication channels and strong cross-agency collaboration.

Again, thank you for undertaking this important work to support international education in Australia.

Yours sincerely



Kim Evans
Secretary

24 June 2021