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

Tetra Tech International Development Submission

Submitted by

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Glossary

DFAT	Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade
GEDSI	Gender Equality, Disability, and Social Inclusion
HE	Higher Education
HRD	Human Resource Development
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
Tetra Tech	Tetra Tech International Development
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WIL	Work Integrated Learning

Overview of Tetra Tech's work and expertise relative to this consultation

Tetra Tech International Development (Tetra Tech) welcomes the development of a new Australian Strategy for International Education for 2021-2030. We thank the Department of Education, Skills and Employment for the opportunity to contribute to this Strategy through this consultation.

Tetra Tech partners with government and educational institutions in Australia and overseas to deliver high quality education, human resource development and workforce of the future programs across the Indo-Pacific region. We have an established in-house education, scholarships and human resources development (HRD) practice comprised of skilled professionals with experience supporting and enhancing Australian international education quality and brand.

Tetra Tech currently runs 11 scholarship and fellowship programs which annually supports around 700 scholars from across the Indo-Pacific region to complete an Australian qualification and return to their home country to resume professional careers. They return holding an internationally recognised qualification (predominantly postgraduate) together with lifelong, positive connections with Australia. With the support of our corporate Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (GEDSI) team, we safeguard equity and social inclusion in our programs through targeted strategies and affirmative activities. Doing so reduces barriers to participation and supports access of disadvantages or marginalised groups to high-quality Australian education opportunities.

We are the leading high-end development consultant firm for the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) Australia Awards portfolio. Our experience and the expertise of our respective teams, positions us as thought leaders in the international education space with a proven ability to adapt to changing circumstances and to promote Australian education internationally. In response to the emerging challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, our team has worked with our delivery partners to rethink how we conduct our education and scholarships programs, adapting to new modes of education delivery. Through this we have learned lessons and developed a deeper understanding about how to successfully deliver and enable student-centred education projects in an ever-evolving global climate.

Setting the scene

International students are incredibly resilient, and research undertaken throughout the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that there is still a significant appetite for overseas study. In 2020, 55 per cent of Australia-destined international students chose to defer their studies. However, with continued border closures in Australia in 2021, an increasing number of students are seeking study options in alternative countries (seven per cent Q2, 2020 to 15 per cent Q4, 2020).[1] Within this context and noting the nine-year proposed timeframe of the new Strategy, we offer the following observations and recommendations.

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

In our view, the key priorities for a new Strategy should be:

- Delivering and maintaining high quality educational products and a strong reputation.
- Contributing to the growth, development and stability of our region through competent and well-trained graduates who meet the HRD needs of their home countries.
- Focus on equity, accessibility and delivery of international education products that meet the diverse needs of international students.
- Building strong and lasting relationships and collaborations between Australian and regional institutions.
- Building Australia's soft power and influence across our region through a network of engaged and connected global alumni.

Tetra Tech strongly supports the idea that Australia's international education sector be student-centred and caring. We also support the position presented within the Consultation Paper, that our international education sector needs to consider new ways of educating students in response to changes in the global operating environment. Within the scholarships programs that we manage, we have seen significant disruption to the mobilisation of international students to Australia. Delays for many scholarship recipients already exceed 12 months, with no clear picture of when they may be able to commence.

We support the view put forward in the Consultation Paper that digital delivery should be considered as a means of overcoming the disruption caused by current border closures. We also understand the impact closures have had on Australian education institutions and ancillary industries. Online delivery offers a more affordable, and convenient means of accessing Australian education, and may support equity by opening study options to people who would typically be unable to travel to and live in Australia to complete an Australian qualification. While we support the introduction of online delivery, we also acknowledge that this modality may not meet the learning needs of all

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[1] IDP Connect, *International Student Crossroads I*, 2020

international students. To mitigate these risks, it will be essential that teaching staff are sufficiently resourced, trained and supported to deliver high quality, student-centred, engaging and interactive online educational products that are purpose designed for international markets.

We note that satisfaction and engagement levels of online students are typically lower than those of on-campus students. For many international students, the cultural immersion experience of living in Australia and building relationships beyond the classroom is a life-changing component of their Australian experience, and of equal importance to the qualification they receive. It will be very challenging to create a 'distinctly Australian' experience and lasting interpersonal connections through an entirely online delivery modality.

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?

Our many years' experience of initiating, managing and coordinating a range of opportunities for students from developing countries to study in Australian and regional institutions as well as in their own countries, has highlighted the critical importance that first-hand information plays in student and family decisions to enrol in an overseas institution. Consideration should be given to reviewing current efforts and, if necessary, adjusting regulatory frameworks, to ensure that whatever form of education a student undertakes, the experience is a positive one, and that Australian education providers build a reputation of care and quality in the delivery of that experience. While the needs of secondary, vocational education and training (VET), and higher education (HE) students vary greatly, all international students need some degree of structured and broad-spectrum support (beyond just academic) to succeed. To maximise the likelihood that students will successfully complete whatever course of study they undertake, Australian providers must ensure that support is tailored to the social and cultural context of the student and does not apply a *one size fits all* approach.

Some new or enhanced student-centred approaches to be considered could include:

- Ensuring that providers support their teaching academic staff to understand and accommodate the unique needs and circumstances of international students from diverse cultural, linguistic and epistemological backgrounds, particularly in an online delivery context.
- Providing meaningful experiences for all students that create opportunities for genuine connection. This can be enhanced through brokering and incentivizing partnerships that provide targeted support and facilitate communities of learning where students feel engaged and connected.
- Design of strategies to mitigate potentially lower levels of engagement in online learning environment and the risk of higher dropouts. International students (particularly undergraduates) may need support and coaching to ensure they stay engaged, motivated and enrolled. Our experience in managing international scholarships positions us well for this.
- Expanded selection/ approval of students for study which steps beyond academic performance and seeks to identify learning capabilities and social characteristics that would provide "pointers" towards personal resilience and successful achievement of the course outcomes.
- Monitoring student welfare and early detection of serious issues as part of a provider's service offering. Consultations indicate that factors such as parental expectations, homesickness and social isolation can negatively impact on student success in their studies and on their perception of their time in Australia.

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

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?

Traditionally, international students have had a positive and important impact on Australia's economic growth and meeting our skills requirements through migration. Since 2013 Australia has experienced significant growth in international student enrolments.[2] However, over the same period, a demand-driven approach to workforce development and skills shortages has seen a smaller number of internationals students transitioning to permanent residence. Within COVID-19 recovery plans, it is important for Australia to position ourselves as an ongoing centre of research and education excellence.

Tetra Tech's experience in delivering international education programs in the Indo-Pacific throughout the pandemic has shown that the disruption due to COVID-19 has accelerated the development of online and innovative models of blended delivery for international education in the school, HE and VET sectors. However, this online modality

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[2]Australian Department of Home Affairs, Shaping a Nation (treasury.gov.au), 2018

may only be effective in certain sectors and with certain communities. For many international students, social, cultural, professional, and reputational drivers remain a priority consideration for overseas studies.

With Australia's ongoing border restrictions, international student cohorts are increasingly seeking face-to-face study options in alternative countries that are 'open to international student traffic', namely Canada, Singapore and even the UK and USA, (both significantly impacted by COVID-19). In February 2021, HE enrolments in Australian institutions were down 13 per cent on 2020.[3] Prior to COVID-19, only 18 per cent of the 19.4 million university educated migrants listed Australia as their preferred destination. In 2021, early indications are that this figure is declining further as students seek alternatives where they are guaranteed entry for an in-country experience and where there are stronger migration pathways for employment, or permanent residency. In February 2021, the Australian government announced an inquiry into its skilled migration program to examine "*Australia's international competitiveness in attracting entrepreneurs, venture capital, start-ups, and the best and brightest skilled migrants with cutting edge skills*".[4] An embedded and whole of government approach to international education, which also considers migration, is key to Australia's successful post-pandemic economic recovery.

At a macro level, the Australian tertiary education sector could consider a review of regulatory requirements and quality assurance frameworks to provide adequate protection and opportunities to international students including:

- Industry supported Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) programs across all industry sectors.
- Enhanced employment and research outcomes to leverage international expertise and intercultural understanding.
- Strengthened welfare and engagement policies for international students to ensure support and retention throughout Australia.
- Continued effort to develop and streamline recognition of prior learning (RPL) of international students whereby offshore qualifications or experience may be recognised by an institute through a third party or nationally accredited validation process.

At an individual level, institutions can consider their engagement approaches with international students by:

- The development and delivery of stackable, short courses that can incrementally add to a student's learning outcomes without requiring students to commit to a long, multi-year program during COVID-19 recovery periods
- Delivery of micro-credentialled qualifications that are innovative, sector-specific and contextualised for international student and research cohorts.

4 How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification?

Recent geopolitical developments in Australia's relationships with China and India, which currently account for 45 per cent of all international students in Australia,[5] highlights the risks of a heavy reliance on a small number of markets. Diversification is essential to ensure we are cushioned from such shocks. Australia should continue to promote our world class education products in the smaller but growing markets of middle- and low-income countries across our region – noting that this includes some of the fastest growing economies in the world. Tetra Tech supports the proposed introduction of new ways of educating international students and the creation of new partnerships to support these changes. We offer the following observations and recommendations based on our experience supporting international education programs in developing country contexts across the Indo-Pacific region:

- Online delivery needs to be approached in a way that is sensitive to the needs and learning styles of diverse student cohorts. The Quality Indicators in Teaching and Learning 2020 Student Satisfaction Survey shows a significant drop in student engagement for online delivery across both domestic and international students.[6] Models of online delivery that have been applied for domestic students are unlikely to work for international students. Those responsible for teaching and online content delivery for international students will need to be supported with training to ensure the pedagogy is appropriate, engaging and student-centric, and that quality of the experience is maintained.
- Outside of the current COVID-19 context, full online delivery is only likely to appeal to a relatively small group of potential students. Our management of Australia Awards Scholarships has shown that students from some regions – including the Pacific and Southeast Asia – have a strong cultural preference for face-to-face delivery and value the opportunity to build personal relationships with instructors and peers. A recent IDP Education study of more than 6000 prospective international students found that only seven per cent of respondents were willing to study an Australian qualification entirely online.[7] A desire for 'international exposure' and perceptions about value for money were cited as the main reasons.

[3] Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *International Student Data monthly summary, February 2021*
[4] Parliament of Australia, *Media Release: Skilled Migration in a Post-COVID Australia*, 3 February 2021
[5] Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Connected, Creative, Caring: An Australia Strategy for International Education*, Consultation Paper, March 2021, p. 6.
[6] Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching, *2020 Student Experience Report*, March 2021, p. 58.
[7] IDP Connect, *International Student Crossroads IV*, p. 3.

- Blended delivery and co-delivery with in-country partners should be considered as more appropriate modes of delivery in some contexts. This would mean students may still have the option of meeting face-to-face with peers and a local facilitator, and that they would also have an opportunity to have an immersive 'Australian experience' through a shorter, structured period of in-country study.
- Scholarships should continue as an important tool that contributes to the HRD needs of our region, promotes Australian education and provides an instrument for building diplomatic and social capital. The Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility[8] has provided many examples of the long-term and broad reaching impact of Australian Government-sponsored scholarships for our region.

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

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

Employability outcomes increasingly depend on enterprise, transferable soft (interpersonal/ social) skills as much as technical expertise. Historically, many Australian universities have focused on developing research skills and technical expertise, without a structured or systematic focus on the development of enterprise and transferable skills. We are pleased to note this has begun to change with the introduction of industry linked teaching, a focus on WIL and more industry-relevant forms of teaching and assessment. However there remains much that can be done, particularly for international students. In close collaboration and partnership with industry, consideration should be given to the following approaches:

- The broader use of applied learning methodologies, incorporating some of the practices used in professional development that promote the contextual application of learning into the workplace.
- Facilitating globally oriented networking, intercultural understanding and relationship-building opportunities that support adaption to rapid changes and harness technology. International students represent a significantly under-utilised resource for Australian industry seeking assistance with building relationships, intercultural awareness and understanding how to do business in the region.
- A greater focus on course diversification and development pathways such as micro-credentials and stackable short courses, particularly at the post-graduate level.
- Institutions should ensure that wherever possible, the content is global in outlook, considerate and inclusive of the lived experience of the international students within their classes.

6   How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

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

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

The value proposition offered by a strong international education sector in Australia is realisation of a high quality and globally informed education for all students. For many international students, the attraction of experiencing the Australian way of life is strong. For domestic students, a diverse cohort of international students on campus adds to the richness of student life, creates opportunities to build global linkages and potentially contributes to a reflective understanding of culture.

There are many benefits to be had from more concerted efforts being made to help international students feel they have experienced something uniquely Australian and have made genuine connections in the Australian community. This is an even greater challenge when students may not ever physically be in the country.

One way forward is that providers offer all students opportunity to appreciate the uniqueness of Australia by engaging with Australian Indigenous peoples, history and cultures as a core component of study – not as a tokenistic "add on" but as an integrated part of a study experience and the context of learning that they share with all students.

Providers should also be encouraged, or even required, to support active participation by students in the life of the institution at which they are studying and in the wider community through creation of business, cultural, civic, sporting or faith-based linkages. This can be done either directly or through partnerships with business and community organisations. There are some excellent examples of this model already being employed by organisations like Study Adelaide and Study Melbourne. Facilitating WIL opportunities for linkages with community and business even at a minimal level can facilitate networks for life with ongoing connection to Australia beyond the study experience.

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[8] Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Australia Awards Global Tracer Facility*

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?

Disruptions to the international student market during the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent impact on educational institutions and ancillary industries that provide services to the international student market, highlighted how little the Australian public knows about the value of international education and the contribution international students and their families make to the Australian economy. It also revealed how this lack of knowledge and understanding feeds the creation of negative attitudes and stereotyping.

For the sector to flourish and for students to take away positive attitudes about their Australian experience, the Australian community needs to be brought onside through better understanding of the sector, greater intercultural awareness and the value proposition delivered through international education. A Whole of Government approach is needed to improve communication for public diplomacy around the sector's importance to the economy and to demonstrate the intangible benefits a multicultural international student community brings to the social fabric of Australia and our place in the region.

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

Tetra Tech recommend that equity and social inclusion be a central platform of the Strategy. The pivot of educational institutions to increased use of online and remote learning brings both potential advantages and challenges for equity and social inclusion. Although online and remote education can reduce practical barriers and enable students from lower socio-economic groups, remote geographical locations and those with limited mobility to access quality education, we also know this is dependent on access to reliable internet services and suitable IT both of which vary considerably across the developing Indo-Pacific. We believe that the Strategy must identify this as an opportunity and a challenge, with the intention of creating educational opportunity to those in disadvantaged and marginalized communities. To do so is consistent with Australian democratic and egalitarian values, has the potential to make a positive contribution to social development in the Indo-Pacific region including bringing marginalised voices into professional and leadership contexts.

As development specialists, we have observed the difficulties that international students from developing and lower income countries can face as they transition into the Australian educational system. This is particularly noticeable when prior educational experience has not equipped scholars with the knowledge and critical learning skills that they need to succeed. To ensure that the Strategy drives strong educational outcomes, institutions may need to re-think how they provide support to scholars at they enter the Australian education system, and how this support may be effectively delivered remotely.

Lastly, as managers of Australia Awards Scholarships programs on behalf of DFAT, we acknowledge the value and the challenges of engaging alumni. In the context of this Strategy, we believe that effective engagement of alumni is a means of improving visibility and measurement of impact across work and career outcomes supported by Australian education. Access to alumni opens opportunity for longitudinal tracer studies to help drive policy and strategy adaptation and improvement and provides access to information to promote the benefits of Australia education and drive the supply of future scholars. We also know that alumni are a valuable source of inspiration and potential support for scholars from disadvantaged groups, and that ongoing, beneficial engagement of alumni contributes to lasting public diplomacy outcomes.