



Australian Strategy for International Education Consultation Paper 2021-2030

The Lygon Group submission



THE LYGON GROUP

Introduction

The Lygon Group welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation process on Australia's new international education Strategy, 2021-2030.

[The Lygon Group](#) is a specialist international education consultancy based in Melbourne and Canberra. We exist to support and sustain international education in Australia.

The pandemic presents the greatest challenge Australia's international education sector has ever faced. While we have been successful in containing the virus within our own borders, this has come at the cost of closed borders to international students, and onshore students facing real and unique hardship as they lived amongst us through lockdowns in 2020.

In addition to the impact of the pandemic, geo-political tensions complicate student mobility from some of our key source markets, and global competition for international students has seen some of our key competitor nations gain an edge over Australia.

The new Strategy, 2021-2030, must—for at the least the first three years—focus on recovering Australia's competitiveness, but must all look forward, beyond COVID-19.

We make seven suggestions for inclusion in the new Strategy:

- The student experience: implement a new consultative international student body to advise the National Council, Government and the sector on improving the student experience
- A forward-thinking Strategy: pandemic recovery as contextual rather than guiding principle
- Recognition of the diversity of student experiences and exposure to pandemic upheaval
- Onshore, online, offshore: international education in Australia should aspire to build all segments
- A big, bold approach to improve our competitiveness
- Protecting students and institutions: caution when integrating international education with the short-term needs of the Australian labour market
- Appoint an international education champion to build social licence for the sector.

Jeffrey Smart, Director & co-Founder
Dr Angela Lehmann, Head of Research
Varsha Balakrishnan, Education Analyst

The Lygon Group
May 2021

1. The student experience: implement a new consultative international student body to advise the National Council, Government and the sector on improving the student experience

The consultation paper emphasises the importance of international students, and their experience, being at the centre of the education Strategy. The Lygon Group believes that the best way to achieve this is to adopt a co-design approach and to create new structures to consult with international students at the national level on an ongoing basis.

Co-designing involves ongoing active collaboration with international students as opposed to tokenistic listening or gathering sporadic feedback from international students once the Strategy has been implemented.

The Lygon Group believes that international student voices should be at the forefront of shaping the Strategy, and that an ongoing consultative process will provide our sector with the unique insights to identify areas of improvement, new policy options, and insights into the features of the Australian education system that makes it truly unique.

We suggest that a new international student consultative body be formed to provide advice to the National Council, and Government, on ways in which we can continue to improve the international student experience. While we recognise that the National Council, the Education Visa Consultative Committee, and indeed state and territory ministerial advisory councils, include student representatives, we currently expect too much of these individuals. While these representatives do an outstanding job, we are putting an immense amount of pressure on these individuals to encapsulate the voices and experiences of hundreds of thousands of international students. As we argue, the international student experience is glorious in its diversity and heterogeneity.

A new consultative body will enable us to take into account the diversity of student experiences. Never has student experience [been so heterogenous](#). Students onshore, offshore, from different socio-economic groups, cultural backgrounds, relationships to diaspora, motivations and aims are varied and these variances are important for us to understand as we design strategy and policy in the coming years. Understanding and genuinely recognizing the differences between student motivations, expectations, academic competencies and connections to communities will be essential for all parts of the international education sector from recruitment, to student support, to curriculum design, to building work-ready graduates.

We suggest that a new international student consultative body be made up of a mix of students elected to representative bodies and associations, and students who are not elected representatives. We suggest the consultative body include international students from every sub-sector, and studying in all parts of Australia—from the regions, the outer metropolitan and peri-urban campuses, and from the major metropolitan centres. Students could be selected via an expression of interest process in which students are invited to outline their experiences, perspectives, and motivations for serving on the consultative body.

Australia has a reputation for delivering an outstanding international student experience. We should use this moment to take a refreshed student-centric approach into the 2020's.

2. A forward thinking Strategy: pandemic recovery as contextual rather than guiding principle

Australia's international education sector continues to face enormous hurdles as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The national success in controlling the virus has been accompanied by around a quarter of our international students remaining offshore since March 2020, increased deferrals and drops in commencements¹. Recovery will be long and will need to form the basis for the Strategy and its ambitions. Sustainable recovery means building back trust in Australia as a host country, improving coordinated messaging, adjusting policy settings and improving the social license in Australia for international education. These priorities should take a level of urgency.

However, the new Strategy should be guided by long-term principles that have been the foundation for Australia's success in this sector. Continued focus on building quality education, engaged and integrated community experiences, innovation in course delivery and student support, work integrated learning and building employable graduates should be at the core of the new Strategy. These pillars that have built Australia's international success story should not be forgotten as we rebuild.

The new Strategy should be forward thinking rather than reactive. It should position Australia as a safe and welcoming host country which will act nimbly and flexibly in times of crisis to protect the student and their ambitions.

3. Recognition of the diversity of student experiences and exposure to pandemic upheaval

A one-size-fits-all approach will not be suitable as an approach to recovery for the international education sector. The new Strategy needs to take into account the diversity of student experience. These variances are important for us to understand as we design strategy and policy in the coming years. Understanding and genuinely recognizing the differences between student motivations, expectations, academic competencies and connections to communities will be essential for all parts of the international education sector from recruitment, to support, to curriculum design to building work-ready graduates.

International students—regardless of where they have been throughout the height of the pandemic—have all been through a traumatic time. An empathetic recognition of this trauma needs to be at the heart of how this sector approaches recovery. This student-centric approach should inform what it means to have a “distinctly Australian²” international education experience. Through direct engagement with international students, we will be able to identify the facets of student experience that makes it “distinctly Australian”.

The key to achieving this is to actively collaborate with international students in designing and developing strategies, programs and policies in all areas that impact student lives from recruitment and pre-departure information, student support and community engagement to academic skills and advice. International students' “voices” should be an integrated part of the Strategy development, implementation and evaluation.

¹ DESE Research Snapshot, January 2021

² ASIE consultation paper p. 10

4. Onshore, online, offshore: international education in Australia should aspire to build all segments

The discussion paper suggests that the pandemic time has shown us that “Australian education, research and training are not dependent on students or research partners being in Australia³.” This time has indeed shown us that there is potential and real opportunity for Australian providers in delivering innovative education models offshore whether in partnerships, joint programs or in working directly with industry in delivering micro-credentials and lifelong learning.

However, it is vital that this should not be at the expense of recognizing and prioritizing the ongoing aspirations of international students to experience Australian campuses, culture and communities. TLG research has demonstrated that the international students who have chosen to study in Australia are [seeking these experiences](#) alongside their degree certification. Those that have been prevented from returning to Australia this year have felt that they are not receiving what they paid for. Part of what students are ‘purchasing’ when enrolling is an onshore, face-to-face community and learning experience and delivering quality, supported and immersive inter-cultural experiences will be essential in building a long-term sustainable international education Strategy for Australia.

We need to protect this by ensuring that prioritizing the development of online education and offshore delivery models does not mean a de-prioritising of improvements and innovation in onshore, face-to-face international education.

Australia should pursue growth in international enrolments onshore, offshore through TNE programs, and in purely online mode. The Strategy must recognise that each of these delivery modes play to different student segments, different study motivations, and deliver different levels of value to our services exports. In order to generate international student enrolments in purely online mode, at scale, the Strategy should place a major emphasis on advocating for full recognition of online programs by foreign governments.

5. A big, bold approach to improve our competitiveness

Australia cannot, indeed must not, take a “she’ll be right” attitude towards post-pandemic recovery. We cannot assume that when borders reopen international students will immediately flock back with pre-pandemic vigour.

Australia’s silence on border reopening during the first 18 months of the pandemic has [seriously damaged brand Australia](#). At the same time, [our major competitor destinations](#)—Canada, the UK, and now the USA—have been responding with policy nimbleness and messages of welcome to international students. Our research, during the pandemic, has revealed a level of ‘toxic word of mouth’, a sense that Australia is ‘playing’ international students by announcing and then un-announcing pilot programs, and by not allowing the ‘stranded offshore cohort’ to return. We have reached a point where international students are actively dissuading other students from continuing their studies, or commencing studies.

While there are good public health reasons for our silence on borders, international students are moving to our competitor nations in alarming numbers. We must ensure that when we announce a reopening of borders, international students are still listening.

³ ASIE consultation paper p. 11

Student-focussed messaging and cohesion across government

Throughout the pandemic our research has shown that students have had [trouble accessing clear and accurate information](#) and are confused about Australia's Federated system of government, the various government departments that have a role to play in international education and are unsure about where to seek advice and help with various issues.

This perceived lack of consistent, clear and student-centric messaging throughout the pandemic will have a real-life impact on student flows and the recovery of the sector as a whole as students increasingly feel frustration and a lack of overall trust in "brand Australia".

The new Strategy should take this into account and should outline ways state, territory and Federal government department's institutions and other stakeholders can work better together to deliver information more effectively and empathetically to both students and their families.

We will need to market Australia as an education destination, but we also need vastly improved and coordinated communications to ensure international students have access to clear and accurate information about the pandemic situation in our country, including on borders.

A pandemic recovery post-study work rights bonus

Regulatory settings and frameworks will need to be flexible and forward looking during the coming years. Extending Temporary Graduate Visas (subclass 485) to all international graduates for an additional 12 months will assist Australia in regaining some competitive advantage as the borders reopen. Australia has achieved success in responding to the pandemic and its safe environment and leading health care system will be attractive to students in the post-pandemic era. However, Australia's key competitor nations—the UK, Canada, USA and New Zealand—have each been participating in [competitive policy-setting](#) since the beginning of the pandemic. These competitor nations now have a massive competitive advantage over Australia.

Post-study work rights have been proven to be [key to attracting international students](#) and Australia's forward Strategy should utilise this lever to remain competitive in coming years. This policy change would attract attention back to Australia during a time of declining student numbers and would go some way to re-addressing reputational damage that was done while borders were closed.

We must ensure that when we are in a position to re-open borders to international students, we provide them with a major incentive to look our way once again.

6. Protecting students and institutions: caution when integrating international education with the short-term needs of the Australian labour market

Throughout COVID-19 international students have been vulnerable to job losses in industries hit by the pandemic closures such as in the hospitality and tourism sectors. Pandemic surges in home countries increased financial difficulties for many creating a vulnerable cohort of young people in our country facing [potential for workplace and accommodation exploitation](#). These students were not eligible for various government support packages including Job Keeper.

The decision to extend the list of essential industries to include hospitality and tourism allows students to increase their working hours in these sectors and supports students to increase their earnings while in Australia. However, this policy change does not take into account the real-life implications for this group of people who may face pressure to give up or postpone their studies to

work in a casual job outside their field of study or to continue studies with increased work schedules. The policy may also inhibit ability to identify Genuine Temporary Entrants and will potentially increase the risk shouldered by institutions.

The new Strategy should ensure that policies aimed to integrate international education with the [short-term needs of the Australian labour market](#) do not have adverse effects on both students and institutions. We must ensure that efforts to support and protect international students recognise that they are in Australia to build knowledge and skills that they can take home to build successful careers and that our institutions are facilitated to assist students achieve these goals.

7. Appoint an international education champion to build the social licence

The Strategy should have at its centre a renewed emphasis on public diplomacy and the broader functions the sector plays in our [national development and security](#). A comprehensive, long-term public diplomacy strategy for international higher education in Australia would include leadership and focus on ‘domestic diplomacy’. That is, ensuring that the Australian public—both inside and outside of educational institutions—are aware of the wider international relations role of education and the contribution of international students [outside of university coffers](#). The reputation of the nation and its people sits behind all solid trade and security relationships, and international students are that bridge between one country and another.

Building a successful domestic diplomacy strategy will rely on bringing together the sectors and stakeholders that are impacted by, or impact, international student lives. This means bringing tourism, community organisations, sporting groups, local councils and local industries into the conversation about international education and student engagement. The pandemic time has offered up an opportunity to begin these conversations as the decline in international students and tourists has been felt across broader segments of Australian society.

Removing the ‘silos’ around international education and bringing the sector into policy and program discussions around civic engagement and community development will improve the awareness and acceptance of international students in local and national narratives.

A thriving international education sector can only operate effectively if it has a social licence—public support—to operate. Our sector has wrestled with the complex task of ensuring Australian citizens and communities truly understand the unique value international students deliver for all of us.

Australians understand that international education generates billions of dollars of export income. But this macro benefit undersells the real benefits we derive from having international students living alongside us, as part of our communities, and as vital contributors to economic growth at the micro level.

International students are far more than just walking wallets, paying tuition fees to their providers. The pandemic has demonstrated just how important international students are as employees in our hospitality sector. International students live in communities. They join local sporting clubs. They become fans of professional sports teams and sportspeople—from AFL and NRL, to cricket and tennis. They volunteer in community organisations. They visit our major tourist attractions: one state’s international student is another state’s tourist. Their family and friends visit them making a significant contribution to the tourism sector.

We suggest that the Strategy create a role of international education champion, to be held by a distinguished Australian, tasked with educating Australians, communities, and other business sectors

about the value international students deliver to all of us. This idea is modelled on the UK government's appointment of an international education champion—Professor Sir Steve Smith, retired Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter—in June 2020, although our suggestion differs in one important way. The UK international education champion is externally focussed, promoting UK education around the world.

An Australian international education champion should play a key role in building the social licence to ensure that Australian communities appreciate at a human-scale the contributions international students make as they live among us.



www.thelyongroup.com



552 Victoria St, North Melbourne
VIC 3051



jeffrey@thelyongroup.com

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ABN 17 622 163 213