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University of New England Submission to Department of Education, Skills and Employment consultation paper: *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*

INTRODUCTION

The University of New England (UNE) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of Australia's new international education strategy. Australia's international education sector is now reaching a critical juncture. Recent market intelligence suggests that Australia is now losing its lustre as a study destination due to the inability of international students to enter Australia and the ongoing uncertainty of when borders will open.¹ Loss of market share to traditional rivals of the US, UK and even Canada is occurring now.² The Government's new international education strategy will need to both aid the recovery of those parts of the sector devastated by COVID-19, and also help the sector grow and diversify in the longer term.

While UNE's international student community is small in comparison with our public university counterparts, it is nonetheless significant to UNE as a regional university and its associated regional communities. International students have been contributing to the culture and diversity on UNE's campuses and in our teaching and learning spaces for decades. Those international students we are privileged to host in our region also contribute economically. A Deloitte Access Economics report prepared for Austrade back in 2015 estimated that international students studying at UNE contributed a total of \$33 million to the local economy in 2014-15, equivalent to 2.5% of gross regional product.³ UNE's decadal strategic plan, *Future Fit 2021-2030* focuses on future fitting the lives of the University's students and communities. The Government's strategy needs to support the University to facilitate this future fitting.

Against this backdrop, UNE offers the following contribution to the consultation paper, *Connected, Creative, Caring: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*.

Our contribution is centred on seven key priorities:

1. Student-centred blended delivery
2. Future fitting Regional Australia via skilled migration
3. Changing community perceptions of international education
4. Two-way mobility
5. A cohesive approach to strategy
6. A focus on research
7. Future diversification

¹ Chew, J., *Navitas Agent Perception Report*, March 2021.

² IDP Connect *Monthly Scorecard April 2021*, p. 1.

³ Deloitte Access Economics, *The Value of International Education to Australia*, 2015, page 33.

PRIORITY 1 STUDENT-CENTRED BLENDED DELIVERY

As the first Australian university to offer distance/online education, UNE is heartened to see the consultation paper acknowledge that digital teaching and learning and research can have a legitimate place in the international education sector. To meet changing student expectations, learning models of the future will need to enable flexibility of movement between synchronous learning, whether that learning is delivered face-to-face or via a videoconferencing platform, or asynchronously.

Defining and enabling a future-focused international strategy with a **digitally enabled blended delivery model** at its core will enable the flexibility required to enable Australia to respond to changing student expectations and be competitive in global international education markets.

Whilst the attractiveness of online to international students in Australia's traditional onshore markets has been and continues to be limited, with constantly evolving student expectations, improvements in technology and a changing geo-political environment we cannot assume this will remain the case. We need to set the sector up to respond to change. Key to our future success will be delivering an outstanding international student experience regardless of the mode or location of study and defining and engaging a blended model of delivery that blurs the distinction between on-shore and off-shore delivery to provide Australia with a unique point of differentiation in a globally competitive market.

What would an Australian International Blended Delivery Model look like?

Australia's international student community is diverse. A new international education strategy that is fit for the future needs to recognise that a positive student experience means different things to different students. Any new strategy that will be in place for the next ten years, should consider that *onshore* students in Australia may wish to embrace more flexible ways of learning too.

An Australian international blended delivery policy approach would support students and education providers to deliver their learning and student support services in a way that best meets individual student needs at any given point in time, flexing between remote and in-person, off-shore or on-shore, with minimal impact on their rights as a student or as a potential future migrant of Australia.

Studying with an Australian university offshore, or transitioning between onshore and offshore, during the period of enrolment, must complement in-country Australian delivery for international students; not be seen as a replacement.

Embracing digital delivery as a central component of our approach to international education will position Australian education providers as being able to deliver teaching and learning and student services that provide students with the flexibility to study with an Australian university in the way that best suits their personal circumstances. It will also enable Australian providers to maximise their investment in educational technologies and new delivery models that support delivery domestic delivery.

What changes are required by Government to support this model?

Without legislative change, Australia's international education sector will remain wedded to the traditional business model of face-to-face teaching only and will miss the opportunity to embrace new technology and new ways of education delivery. Strategy will need to address restrictions on student choice.

Ways the Government could support this change are outlined below.

- Innovative, flexible modes of delivery should be considered as options for student visa holders onshore in Australia. The current *Education Services for Overseas Students* (ESOS), National Code and student visa legislation discriminates against online teaching and learning by limiting the percentage of online studies permitted for student visa holders studying in Australia.
- Similarly, the strategy should allow students completing Australian studies offshore to count this study towards migration pathways in the same way that UK recognises such study as long as one study period is completed onshore.
- Visa options should also permit students to study in the location of their choice in any given study period, enabling them move between on-shore and off-shore study during the duration of their study period.
- Assist to establish and continue to support off-shore Australian learning hubs in key cities of target market countries.
- Recognise that TNE requires upfront investment in physical infrastructure and/or education technology in often risky, highly regulated in-country environments with a cost structure that is not conducive to attractive returns on investment. TNE/online offshore can be expensive and needs continuous improvement for a quality student experience. It is a longer term strategic option to supplement traditional modes of delivery.
- Appoint a “champion of international education” in Australia (along the lines of the UK’s champion, Sir Steve Smith). While advocating more generally for the sector, this champion could work with various government departments to identify and resolve barriers preventing the recognition of online and blended learning internationally. Many countries, including those moving further towards accepting online studies, are slow to embrace online delivery models. Regulatory barriers for online/TNE in various markets will be a significant hurdle for Australian universities to overcome without government assistance.
- Use Austrade and DFAT networks, to facilitate more offshore education activities by assisting institutions with efficient due diligence regarding potential overseas partners and in-country regulations governing education enterprises/research.
- Assist institutions to diversify their international student source countries as entry to new markets is costly and takes sustained investment. Some institutions will need financial support/incentives to diversify recruitment sources. One of the objectives of the Canadian Government’s strategy is to increase support for the Canadian education sector to help grow export services and explore new global opportunities. Canada has supported this objective with financial assistance over a sustained period. In addition to financial support, the Canadian Government has created a “Student Direct Stream” to streamline and expedite the visa application process for priority countries. Australia should look at including such measures in the new strategy.⁴
- Replicate the strategies of Australia’s UK and Canadian competitors who strongly advocate for significant increases in the number of international students arriving

⁴ Government of Canada, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019-2024*, 2019, p.9-11.

onshore to their countries. To meet demand from international students who predominantly want an onshore in Australia study experience.⁵

It is important to acknowledge that a transition to more offshore delivery will reduce the sector's significant positive economic benefits to the Australian economy. Students' spending on living costs in the Australian economy will lessen. This would be more keenly felt in regional communities where international students provide a much needed boost to regional economies.

PRIORITY 2 FUTURE FITTING REGIONAL AUSTRALIA VIA SKILLED MIGRATION

UNE's onshore international student community is evidence of the significant local economic contribution international students make to the regions that host them. The students studying at UNE contribute approximately \$35 million to the local economy.⁶ They add diversity to local communities. In addition to their contribution while they are studying, there is an opportunity to for our international students to become permanent skilled-workers in the regions. Prior to COVID-19, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) calculated that net overseas migration (NOM)⁷ was the largest contributor to Australia's annual population growth.⁸ ABS data show that temporary visa holders were the main contributors to NOM arrivals in 2016-17, accounting for 315,411 or 58.5 per cent of total NOM arrivals. Of these, the largest number were arrivals on higher education, VET or other student visas (150,317). The new strategy should consider the impact a shift to offshore online/TNE may have on the future of regional communities.

A new international education strategy needs to include a regional focus. The current *National Strategy for International Education 2025* includes an action to promote opportunities in regional Australia.⁹ A new strategy needs to be supported by a brand strategy for regional Australia that recognises its heterogeneity and is appropriate for "region" sensitive markets. Importantly, the strategy should consider linking the skill needs in regions to international education and migration pathway opportunities in order to "Future Fit" regional Australia. South Australia's "Live, Learn, Stay" is a pertinent example of this concept. The new Regional Education Commissioner, due to be appointed in 2021, should have a role in being an advocate for encouraging more international students to study at regional locations, and advise the Council on relevant policy and program settings.

Regional Post Study Work Right (PSWR) incentives already exist but they are dependent on international students finding meaningful, career relevant employment in the regions. Regional incentives for students are critical – the Government must maintain the PSWR extensions for the regions. However, more needs to be done with linking students studying courses linked to permanent skilled migration outcomes that will directly benefit and grow particular regions. The strategy, along with potential changes in Australia's permanent skilled migration program, needs to support long term growth in the regions. How can the strategy facilitate students finding employment in the regions so that they can contribute to the growth of the regions? How can the federal and state governments collaborate to help regional Australia attract and retain skilled migrants? Given the value that international students place on industry experience, the Government's strategy should consider ways the Government could support stronger connections

⁵ IDP Connect, *International Student Crossroads IV: International Student Perceptions, Choices and Motivations During COVID-19*, May 2021.

⁶ Deloitte Access Economics, *The Value of International Education to Australia*, 2015, page 33.

⁷ ABS defines net overseas migration as 'the net gain or loss of population through immigration to Australia or emigration from Australia'.

⁸ ABS, <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/D3310114.nsf/home/25+Million+Population+Milestone>.

⁹ Australian Government, *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, 2016.

with industry. Educating employers about employing international graduates and providing incentives should be considered.

The UK's strategy includes a very attractive, globally competitive immigration offer for international students.¹⁰ This offer extends post study work and migration pathways to students who have studied offshore online or via TNE with only one study period undertaken in the UK. Australia should consider its competitiveness by offering similar migration pathways to attract prospective international students, including those that study an Australian qualification offshore.

PRIORITY 3 CHANGING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The overall perception of the international education industry among the Australian community has become progressively negative over the past decade or so. The new strategy should clearly and strongly acknowledge the contribution of international education to Australia's cultural development and prosperity over many decades.

The perception among some parts of the Australian community is that international students take the place of domestic students at universities. In truth, many postgraduate courses would probably not continue if their financial viability was not supported through international student enrolments. Domestic student choice would suffer as a result of the rationalisation of some courses.

The international education sector could also find allies in industries such as hospitality that rely on international students for skilled labour, to more effectively promote the need for and the benefits of international education.¹¹ Student visa holders in Australia typically take up employment in food service, retail, healthcare and agriculture. With the loss of international students, many of these industries are and will continue to face skills shortages.

"Connected, Creative, Caring" - while institutions are responsible for providing a quality education experience, international students live among the wider Australian community. The "it takes a village" concept is apt here. The Government, alongside providers, needs to do more to provide a caring environment for international students in Australia. The Australian community needs to be genuinely educated of the varied positive benefits international students bring to the wider Australian society. Humanising international students through their stories of community contribution could help the overall perception of the international education industry.

The international education sector would benefit greatly from having a dedicated Minister for International Education **and** an appointed international education champion to advocate on behalf of the sector. The champion needs to be someone well-respected by the Australian public to:

- Genuinely educate the Australian community through a sustained campaign, of the benefits of hosting international students in Australia, particularly the regions, to change the perceptions of the industry. This focus needs to be on community benefits, not those flowing to universities.

¹⁰ Department of Education, Department for International Trade, *International Education Strategy: 2021 update*, 2021, pp. 16-17.

¹¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-11-14/hospitality-jobs-go-unfilled-as-covid-19-backpacker-exodus-bites/12879918>

- Help to humanise international students through the stories of individual students who contribute to Australian society (for example, stories of international students who helped the community during droughts, bushfires, and floods).

PRIORITY 4 TWO WAY MOBILITY

The two way nature of international education in Australia is often forgotten. Often the focus is on the incoming international students at the expense of the increasing numbers of outgoing domestic Australian students who benefit immensely from an overseas study experience.¹² The sector has always had a focus (although secondary) on the education of Australian students overseas. International education is two way. The new international education strategy needs to include outbound student mobility as a clearly articulated strategic objective. Canada’s strategy articulates this. Australia’s strategy should reflect the integral part outbound mobility plays in the overall internationalisation of Australian institutions. The plan to diversify source countries and options for incoming students, should also be reflected in the New Colombo Plan.

To maximise success, the new international education strategy should be supported by all the relevant Government departments (DESE, DHA and Austrade). The policies and associated legislation of various government departments will need to be aligned to support the strategy so that it can be effectively implemented. There are examples in the sector where different Government departments’ business as usual activities have a negative impact on institutions attempt to achieve strategic outcomes such as increasing market share outlined in the current *National Strategy for International Education 2025*. Once such example is in the area of the student visa framework. To increase market share, Australia needs to have competitive and streamlined student visa options that are aligned with the strategy of increasing market share and diversification. Long student visa processing times often put Australia at a disadvantage as a study destination compared to our UK and Canadian competitors. Student visa outcomes (i.e. rejections) often appear to be made by misapplying Genuine Temporary Entrant criteria to “cool down” “hot” markets where student visa application growth is significant (for example, the Indian market in the last two months).

In addition, Canada’s international education strategy which was developed in collaboration with trade, employment, social development and immigration government agencies, is designed to support and complement various levels of government.¹³ Australia’s new strategy should ensure alignment of Federal Government departments and also alignment with the states’ education strategies. A strategy that is developed in collaboration with DESE, Austrade, DHA and other relevant agencies would assist with this alignment.

PRIORITY 5 COHESIVE APPROACH TO STRATEGY

To maximise success, the new international education strategy should be supported by all the relevant Government departments (DESE, DHA and Austrade). The policies and associated legislation of various government departments will need to be aligned to support the strategy so that it can be effectively implemented. There are examples in the sector where different Government departments’ business as usual activities have a negative impact on institutions attempt to achieve strategic outcomes such as increasing market share outlined in the current *National Strategy for International Education 2025*. Once such example is in the area of the student visa framework. To increase market share, Australia needs to have competitive and

¹² ICEF Monitor, *Australian students studying abroad more than ever before*, 2019, <https://monitor.icef.com/2019/12/australian-students-studying-abroad-more-than-ever-before/>

¹³ Government of Canada, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019-2024*, 2019, p.6.

streamlined student visa options that are aligned with the strategy of increasing market share and diversification. Long student visa processing times often put Australia at a disadvantage as a study destination compared to our UK and Canadian competitors. Student visa outcomes (i.e. rejections) often appear to be made by misapplying Genuine Temporary Entrant criteria to “cool down” “hot” markets where student visa application growth is significant (for example, the Indian market in the last two months).

How will the new strategy at the federal level intersect and align with various state level higher education strategies to help the sector recover and then grow? Canada’s international education strategy which was developed in collaboration with trade, employment, social development and immigration government agencies, is designed to support and complement various levels of government.¹⁴ Australia’s new strategy should ensure alignment of Federal Government departments and also alignment with the states’ education strategies. A strategy that is developed in collaboration with DESE, Austrade, DHA and other relevant agencies would assist with this alignment.

PRIORITY 6 FOCUS ON RESEARCH

A focus on higher degree by research students and research collaboration (both onshore and offshore with overseas partners) could also be considered in the proposed new strategy. Research excellence is an essential component of a university’s international reputation and contributes to teaching capabilities. Unlike the significant growth of coursework international students over the past ten years, growth in the postgraduate research sector has been small. Given postgraduate research students make a huge contribution to research activities, the strategy may consider focusing on attracting high quality students to undertake their research degrees in Australia, or offshore through quality partnerships with overseas partners or via online virtual laboratories/research environments.

PRIORITY 7 FUTURE DIVERSIFICATION

That the majority of Australian institutions need to diversify their international student source countries is well publicised. However, it should be acknowledged that entry to new markets is costly and takes time to achieve. Some institutions will need financial support/incentives to diversify recruitment sources. One of the objectives of the Canadian Government’s strategy is to increase support for the Canadian education sector to help grow export services and explore new global opportunities. They have supported this objective with financial assistance over a sustained period. In addition to financial support, the Canadian Government has created a “Student Direct Stream” to streamline and expedite the visa application process for priority countries. Australia should look at including such measures in the new strategy.¹⁵

¹⁴ Government of Canada, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019-2024*, 2019, p.6.

¹⁵ Government of Canada, *Building on Success: International Education Strategy 2019-2024*, 2019, p.9-11.