

12 May 2021

The Hon Alan Tudge MP
Minister for Education and Youth
Commonwealth Government
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Tudge,

REF: Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute ideas for the Federal Government's *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*.

Committee for Melbourne (the Committee) welcomes the government's consultation paper, *Connected, Creative Caring: An Australian Strategy for International Education*, and its commitment to helping consolidate Australia as preferred global destination of choice for international education, training and research.

The Committee is an apolitical, not-for-profit, member-based organisation that brings together over 140 organisations from Greater Melbourne's business, academic and civic sectors whose common purpose is to shape a better future for Melbourne.

As an independent organisation, the Committee represents no single interest group or political position but seeks to challenge conventional thinking and to develop innovative ideas to continue to enhance Melbourne's position as an economically prosperous and highly liveable global city.

The Committee has an agenda based on four key policy platforms: Future Economy, Liveability, Urban Optimisation and Infrastructure. In response to COVID-19, a series of *Road to Recovery* working groups were convened to identify and address areas of our economy and society most impacted.

One working group established was the International Student Action Group (ISAN), chaired by Professor Michael Wesley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor International, The University of Melbourne. Comprising members with expertise in international education, ISAN advocates for policies and initiatives to strengthen the sector, including for the swift and safe return of international students.

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

Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to the international education sector. Thousands of international students enrolled in an Australian tertiary institution have been unable to return, impacting the vibrancy of our cities and regions, and various economic sectors.

The cities and countries that recover most quickly and successfully from COVID-19, and which can offer a quality education in a safe and welcoming environment for international students following the crisis, will increase market share.

Australia is well-positioned. It has controlled the spread of the pandemic well within its borders and its inherent strengths have not changed; it offers a world-class education system, an enviable lifestyle, a multicultural society, and lies in proximity to burgeoning Asia. A key priority must be the efficient, orderly and safe return of international students to Australia. Failure to achieve this objective will be devastating for our cities and regions.

Establishing a robust, dedicated national quarantine system for all international travellers, including students, should be prioritised. The Victorian Government proposals to establish a dedicated quarantine hotel for international students, as well as a 500-bed quarantine accommodation hub in Mickleham for all inbound travellers, are welcome. Cooperation between the Federal and State Governments on these proposals is necessary for timely implementation.

Greater certainty for the international student cohort with respect to post-study work rights would be welcome. While Australia's borders remain closed, continued recognition of online study towards post-study work rights could be considered to encourage international students to continue, or commence, their Australian studies offshore.

Educating the community on the importance of Australia's international education sector should be prioritised. This education program could highlight the contribution international students make to the community, the need to encourage inclusion and to provide a safe and welcoming environment. This point will be addressed further under question seven.

A strategy should address the need for all Australian governments to work with the education sector, industry and relevant stakeholders, to provide international students with an experience which is better than that experienced by students before the pandemic. Policies and initiatives that help reduce living costs or incentivise greater participation in social activities, could be considered. This point will be addressed further under question two.

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?

As international students transition from full-time studies to professional employment, demonstrating strong links between students' studies and employment outcomes, both in Australia and in students' home countries, would enhance Australia's competitive value proposition.

Maintaining and building internship and graduate programs for international students, within large Australian-based organisations, as well as creating pathways into foreign-based organisations, is needed to achieve this objective. It will require collaboration, coordination and support from governments and industry. Incentives to encourage international students to launch a start-up or work for one could also be considered.

While education providers are predominantly responsible for delivering the best possible educational experience, policymakers can play a role in ensuring international students have the best possible experience outside of their studies. International students want to experience new things and see amazing places. The high cost of living in Australia can inhibit their capacity to do this.

Policymakers should consider all policy options to help drive down living costs. Rental costs in Melbourne have soared over the last two decades. There is a role for the Federal Government, working alongside the Victorian Government, to ensure there is enough housing stock to keep housing rents affordable. Transportation discounts for international students could also be considered. Australia cannot afford to be comparatively more expensive than competitor countries.

The maximisation of domestic visits will not occur if local major events, attractions and organisations are competing for footfall and revenues. An integrated events and activities calendar that reflects a coordinated response between all areas of the visitor economy, and which considers international students, would be welcome. An oversight body could bring industry players together to create broad-based incentives to help drive visits and participation.

4. How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities (for example of disciplines, source countries, study destinations and delivery models)?

There should be a clear understanding between Australia's governments, education providers and industry, of Australia's competitive advantages and the priority sectors that will play an outsized role in growing the economy over the coming decades. Such understanding would help align interests across the relevant entities and sectors, and allow those same industry players to plan strategically with greater confidence.

Workforce training that considers the needs of emergent industries, including supply and value chains, is not well-understood and supported across Australia. If rectified, industry, governments and education providers should collaborate to understand the skills required to grow the emergent industries. Coursework could be refined to ensure students are developing the necessary skills, with employment pathways for students that complete the coursework created in the process. Such a collaborative, continuous undertaking would provide industry with greater investment confidence, knowing there is a pipeline of individuals being prepared with the skills that they require.

A clear understanding of Australia's growth industries would allow education providers to further develop, market and promote courses to prospective students where the links between skill acquisition and employment outcomes are strongest. The Federal Government could offer diplomatic support in target markets or make policy reforms to incentivise local and international student uptake as well, whether in the form of course subsidies, tax incentives or visa program restructuring.

Ensuring a better balance of international students from various countries and regions is a challenge requiring attention. A diversified international student cohort would improve the learning experience for all students and reduce the financial risk of education providers. How this is achieved requires careful deliberation, recognising that multiple options are available and that Australia needs to remain responsive to demand. Consultation with relevant stakeholders to determine the most suitable option is required.

A strong brand, backed by the experience that we would like international students to have, is needed to ensure Australia remains an attractive destination for international education and research. While Australia's universities will compete to attract and retain international students, they should work with Australian governments and stakeholders on ways to enhance Australia's brand and determine the basic expectations of what international students will receive and experience in Australia, regardless of the education institution they attend.

Federal and State Government collaboration on all major issues related to the international education sector is required. In our pre-budget submission provided to the Victorian Government in April 2021, the Committee emphasised the importance of international education to Victoria and encouraged the Victorian Government to work with the Commonwealth on the development and delivery of the proposed *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*, to ensure it meets the needs of Melbourne and Victoria.

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?

Technological advancements are disrupting the nature of work, with the necessary skills for the *new economy* wide-ranging. Proficiency in STEM skills will be necessary, as will non-technical skills including critical thinking, emotional intelligence, interpersonal communication, creativity, and enterprise.

To improve the employability outcomes for international students, Australian education providers will need to equip them with these skills. Restructuring coursework, including the weighting of assessment criteria in some units, could be considered by self-accrediting providers, which enrol the highest proportion of international students.

As a learning development program integrated into the curriculum and which counts towards final qualification, Work Integrated Learning (WIL) units enable students to gain invaluable workplace experience and apply what they have learnt in their studies. Valuable networks are created in the process. Making WIL units mandatory across all disciplines could be considered.

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?

All stakeholders need to relentlessly position Australia well in the minds of prospective international students and their families. Maintaining global competitiveness hinges on our capacity to provide a safe environment, as well as a quality education and experience.

Part of this challenge is to ensure the Australian public is aware of the importance of international education to our society and economy. Prior to the pandemic, international students made up more than one-third (38 per cent) of residents in Melbourne's CBD. The city risks lasting social and economic damage if Australia is no longer viewed as a hospitable destination.

Australian political leaders should articulate to the public the long-term strategic benefits gained by welcoming international students to this country and encourage the community to remain hospitable. A consistent public message from authorities and stakeholders is needed: that international students matter, that they are welcome here and should be treated well.

Shifting the emphasis of what benefits accrue from hosting international students could be considered. Messaging from political leaders of the financial benefits that flow from welcoming international students is readily apparent. However, international students bring more than short-term financial benefits. They conduct essential research which benefits Australia and Australians, provide key social, community and hospitality services and bring a vibrancy to our cities and regions, helping ensure there is an *energy* and excitement that makes these places highly liveable and attractive for businesses.

Furthermore, international education enhances Australia's soft power. Deep and long-lasting global ties are developed thanks to international education, with relationships forged in business, society and government helping ensure Australia remains globally connected and influential. Ongoing commitment to the Australia Awards, which enhances Australia's soft power, would be welcome.

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

Australian leaders have handled the pandemic relatively well. With that, the messaging towards, and treatment of, the international student cohort in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, requires reflection. It was a period when welcoming and empathetic language was required, which was supported through actions.

Australia's stance towards international students as the crisis unfolded was in stark contrast to competitor countries, which sent strong signals to their respective international student cohorts that they were welcome

and remained a priority. For example, Canada, New Zealand and the UK made their wage subsidy schemes available to international students, while JobKeeper was not made available to Australian-based students. Learnings are needed to ensure Australia responds appropriately the next time it is confronted with a major challenge.

The importance of reciprocal student mobility should be considered in developing the new strategy. Young Australian students studying abroad helps develop their knowledge, experience and networks. These experiences not only enhance the individuals' capacity to build meaningful careers, they provide strategic value to Australia over the long-term.

The New Colombo Plan (NCP) has made a significant contribution to outbound student mobility to the Indo-Pacific region. Funding and policy support for NCP has been welcome and well-utilised by students and tertiary institutions. The Committee supports the continuation of the NCP as a key public diplomacy initiative that benefits Australia in developing stronger relationships with our region, which will help build influence and help drive Australia's future prosperity.

As beneficial as the NCP is, Australia could be more ambitious. Australia sent just over 58,000 students abroad as part of their university experience in 2019, representing approximately 19 per cent of the total student cohort. The participation rate of domestic undergraduate students was 23 per cent. Stronger policy in this area may set a national target for participation, alongside initiatives to support access by student cohorts with low participation rates. Political and educational leaders could aspire for all students having access to an internationalised student experience as part of their Australian degree.

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The Committee thanks the Federal Government for providing the opportunity to offer feedback on its consultation paper.

Yours sincerely,



Martine Letts
CEO