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The Hon Alan Tudge MP  
Minister for Education  
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<https://www.dese.gov.au/australian-strategy-international-education-2021-2030>

The University of Sydney welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of a new ten-year national strategy for international education. Our feedback is intended to complement the submissions provided by Universities Australia, the Group of Eight and the International Education Association of Australia, to which we have contributed.

In 1923, the University accepted its first international student - a young man who was studying to become a teacher when he returned home to China. The University has been educating international students for close to 100 years and Australia has been a global leader in the delivery of high-quality international education for well over 30 years. The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic for students, staff, education providers and businesses has been well-documented. While the full impact of the pandemic on the higher education and research sectors remains unknown, it appears increasingly likely that Australian international education will continue to face challenges for the foreseeable future. It is therefore extremely timely for the Australian Government, through the Council of International Education, to be leading a national discussion about what Australia's international education sector will look like in ten years and about the short- and long-term priorities and steps that are needed to ensure Australia continues to have a strong, albeit recalibrated, international education sector, capable of delivering significant and diverse benefits for the nation.

### **Clear vision**

The Government's previous International Education Strategy *National Strategy for International Education 2025* provided a clear mandate for the growth and development of the International Education sector in Australia. Australian universities were well placed to respond, and we are recognised as global leaders alongside the UK, Canada and the USA who are both competitors and allies. The UK and Canada have clear government strategies for the role higher education and research play in the development of an innovation society, with a commitment to the resources necessary to support that vision. It is acknowledged that Australian international education will need to be recalibrated for a post COVID reality but we argue that in order to deliver this, and the innovation agenda that Australia needs for its future prosperity, we need a clear vision that sets out the national culture and support required to continue to attract the talented students and researchers that Australia is dependent on to deliver on the Government's ambitions for a prosperous future.

### **Short-term priorities**

The pandemic and the closing of international borders has had a fundamental and negative impact on Australian universities. While all universities have been impacted by the loss of international students and the associated income, so far the brunt has been borne by regional universities and their communities. Australia needs a robust and diverse university sector to deliver on the needs of Australian society, government priorities and our region. As the vaccine is rolled out and the rest of the world begins to open up, Australia needs a clear plan

on how we will deliver this for our own nation and support universities so that they are best placed to respond to the challenges and opportunities available. Universities across Australia demonstrated flexibility and resourcefulness in the face of adversity; cutting costs, reinventing teaching models and offering elevated levels of support for students both in country and overseas. Universities are universally acknowledged as the engine rooms for a nation's prosperity and we can see this playing out in innovation-led economies in Israel, the US, Canada, the UK and Europe and in the unprecedented investment that China is making in its higher education system. Just as former Prime Minister Robert Menzies saw universities as key to post-war prosperity, Australia risks falling behind in its recovery from the pandemic unless governments, the sector and industry can work together to keep the engine running over the next few years. Without this focus our attractiveness, global relevance and competitiveness will diminish.

### **Longer-term priorities**

International education has delivered many benefits to Australia and Australians as well as our neighbours both local and regional. We have a collective responsibility to the nation to ensure that it continues to do this and that the value of this is broadly understood. We are in an increasingly competitive global context, not only from our competitors in the northern hemisphere but from the very countries where we have traditionally recruited international students. We need to stand united and clear on the value of an Australian education to all of our students, our communities, our economy and our ability to play a role on the world stage.

There are opportunities to recalibrate the Australian model and still take advantage of the unique qualities of an Australian higher education. Lessons of the pandemic have taught us how to be more creative in our pedagogy but also how variable appetites are across nations for onshore and offshore learning; any new approach will need to acknowledge that subtly across markets rather than a blanket approach, will be needed to fully realise the opportunities that educational innovation may offer. There are opportunities to diversify into new markets and new products, but these will need to be delivered in tandem with and not at the expense of our current partners and markets. However, in order to do this, we need to be better at delivering a collective and cohesive approach across all aspects of government and the sector. We will need government support to maintain old partnerships, facilitate new partnerships and ensure our legislative framework remains not only fit for purpose but positions us to compete on an increasingly crowded global stage.

International education has been a remarkable success story for Australia. If we are complacent about the role the contribution this makes in underpinning our national prosperity, we risk losing the financial and social benefits of this not just for the next two years but for the foreseeable future.

Our attached submission answers the Council's consultation questions and includes recommended actions we believe will help ensure Australia continues to have a strong and competitive international education sector over the next decade.

Yours sincerely,

(signature removed)

Professor Stephen Garton AM  
Vice-Chancellor and Principal

### **Attachment**

The University of Sydney, submission in response to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment consultation paper for the new Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-30, May 2021



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

- A clear and ambitious vision for the contribution that international education will make to Australia's society and economy by 2030, supported by the well-defined priorities and actions needed to realise the vision. Supplemented by a plan for the short-term that addresses the immediate crisis that threatens the viability and diversity of parts of the sector.

- The new vision should emphasise:

***For a recalibrated Australian international higher education sector***

- The distinctive competitive advantage that Australian tertiary education qualifications deliver for all students, providing strong graduate outcomes, preparing them well for the jobs of the future and as effective local and global citizens.
- The positive contribution that international education makes to Australia's local and strategic interests - beyond the economic benefits.
- Utilising international education more strategically to address Australia's national skills and economic development priorities, while also helping to meet the changing needs of the global workforce.
- Government support to work in partnership with education providers to diversify source countries and the fields in which international students enrol.
- A consistent and coherent model for the promotion of Australian international education both at home and overseas.

***For students***

- High-quality, relevant and globally recognised qualifications with access to work-integrated learning to maximise their employability opportunities after graduation.
  - The development of global citizens and a recognition of the value to Australian students of learning alongside students from around the world in developing cultural understanding and global networks.
  - The opportunities for international students, whether enrolled onshore or offshore, to forge life-long friendships and networks with Australians, to experience our workplaces, connect with local communities (including First Nations) and experience our unique natural environments.
  - Confidence that the well-being of international students while studying in Australia (or with Australian providers if enrolled offshore) is a priority and the availability of support services.
- Specifically, the new strategy should prioritise:
    - The development of a single 'Australian High School Certificate' as the recognised national qualification for students completing secondary school to Year 12 and the role this would play in enhancing student diversity. Students would continue to study under the HSC, VCE, SACE but when they graduate, they receive the 'AHSC', which is globally recognised and positioned alongside A Levels and the International Baccalaureate.
    - Government leadership to facilitate growth in international students in areas of current and predicted skills shortage in Australia (including health and teaching) where

graduate numbers are constrained by the availability of mandatory work-integrated learning placements.

- The setting of national targets and strategy for international higher education students to complete high-quality work-integrated learning experiences during their studies.
- The introduction of national targets for higher education students to have a global experience as part of their study.
- An enhanced role for Austrade, Study Australia and Australian trade missions to work with Australian education providers to market Australian education, foster international alumni networks and connections with employers during study and after graduation.

## **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?**

- According to the latest [International Graduate Outcomes Survey](#), students' choices of courses and institutions are predominantly influenced by reputation factors, closely followed by factors related to their personal experience and career prospects. The quality and reputation of our institutions and a strong record in providing a supportive student environment have contributed to the success of Australian international education. These qualities must be sustained into the future or Australia risks losing students to competitor countries. While online and offshore education will become increasingly important, we firmly believe that international students greatly value the academic and life experience that is only possible through onshore delivery.
- A blended model that maximises the impact of in-person activities and remote learning can positively impact student experience in some disciplines. This must be supported by fit-for-purpose infrastructure and a global network of partners to facilitate experiential learning that supports student experience and graduate employability outcomes. There is a role for government agencies like Austrade and Study Australia to work alongside providers and facilitate connection to employers and partners around the globe.
- International students bring pedagogical and social benefits into our classrooms and onto our campuses and add to the globalised experience of domestic students. International students are multilingual, resilient and globally mobile. Our curricular and co-curricular programs could be enriched by better harnessing the pedagogical and social benefits that international students bring to the educational experience of all students and also the culture of our universities. For providers to do this effectively, it requires government and community support and recognition of the value of international students.
- Linkages between international students and their domestic peers, teachers and the broader community have deep benefits for all students and for our country. For students, it allows for the development of social capital and cultural competence to complement their practical skills, which are increasingly important for the future of work and sought after by employers. Our focus should be on facilitating meaningful interactions and life-long bonds, so that each international graduate boasts enduring ties to Australia. Providers will need support from the government to ensure that linkages are established beyond classrooms and campuses, and to put in place mechanisms of forging consistent connections to communities, professional networks and industry.
- A national standard for internships, including paid and protected unpaid internships and work experience could make Australia competitive with countries like the United States. Modernised and globally competitive provisions around part-time work and

internships for international students, specifically those connected to their principal course, can benefit students and community and industry organisations that accommodate placements, while reinforcing the people-to-people links.

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

- The emphasis on student experience in the Consultation Paper is welcomed and must be at the core of defining and developing a blended model. Regulatory controls on maximum online delivery pre-COVID helped to ensure a consistent approach to face-to-face learning, such as a minimum number of contact hours. A clear definition of 'blended' and a regulatory position around face-to-face requirements would assist to maintain students at the centre of such a model.
  - In order to continue to attract the highest-quality international students we need to continue to make them feel valued and welcome. Other countries do this through a welcoming government narrative, a competitive visa regime and a sector-wide consistent approach to marketing both the country and the education system. We need to acknowledge that this behaviour from others will erode our competitive advantage if we do not respond in a similar manner.
  - Accordingly, the visa regime needs to provide a stronger link between international education and the permanent skilled migration program. This gives prospective students the assurance that in addition to receiving a world-class education, that Australia would also welcome them as potential citizens. This would require the Government to revise post-study work rights to challenge the attractiveness of the UK and Canadian models and highlight appealing temporary and permanent skilled migration paths; business and industry to enhance their sponsorship frameworks, and Government to engage with expert future work and immigration policy researchers to assist with the policy scaffolding, all within a strategy which is readily supported by the Australian community - especially the diaspora cohorts who will assist in welcoming the students.
  - Once the visa pathways are revamped, the operational settings should be optimised to pursue immediate advantageous outcomes. For example, as research is so crucial to our innovation and knowledge economy, Postgraduate Research Sector student visa processing should be fast-tracked, or the Skilled Occupation List could be more regularly updated to correspond with labour market need.
  - We need to expand our appeal (and accessibility) to developing nations through strategic actions, for example, through subsidising study in Australia to develop our connections with emerging economies and advancing in-country educational infrastructures and resources.
  - However, if there is to be a permanent (non-COVID/border related) change to delivery models and a focus on developing offshore education, the Government will need to support the sector - through its overseas missions – to obtain accreditation of Australian higher education qualifications earned predominantly or exclusively offshore.
- 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?**

- Australian universities already host a significant number of students from North American universities on Study Abroad (non-award) programs, clearly demonstrating that a short-term Australian educational experience is beneficial to their degree and career outcomes. One policy challenge will be to successfully convert the interest in these predominantly semester-long placements into full course enrolments, which may require some diplomatic intervention. Any development of bilateral schemes could be extended to other countries in Latin America, Europe or South Asia.
- Australia faces significant workforce shortages in many important industries and professions (for example, in health and teaching), with the challenges already especially acute in rural, regional and remote communities. These are areas where Australia's tertiary education sector is very highly regarded internationally for the quality of their education programs. They are also fields for which there is strong demand from international students because of the growing employment opportunities in their home countries. However, current regulatory settings limit the sector's capacity to increase international student enrolments in these fields. All health and teacher education students must complete professional placement requirements before they can graduate and register to practise. The bulk of student placements are provided by public health services and the public education sector and there has been enormous growth in demand from domestic students over the last decade.
- We see great potential for Australia to help address its own skill shortages, diversify its international student intake and make a positive contribution to economic and social development in the region by educating its future health and education professionals. To do this, however, will require leadership and coordination from the Australian Government's departments of health and education, working with the states, territories, industry and the tertiary education sector to develop innovative and sustainable 'win-win' models to expand placements in the public and private health and school education sectors, and particularly in regional, rural and remote settings.

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

- An expansion of Government-supported scholarships targeting specific source countries or regions, would be an effective way of achieving diversification targets. This can be supported by Australia's overseas diplomatic and trade missions, where government to government alliances have already examined where Australia might be able to contribute to skills development and education realisation. While Austrade and DFAT already market Australian education, there may be room for more creativity and consistency in linking our national strengths in the community and industry (e.g. ocean research, Indigenous land management) with education opportunities, and for these government agencies (with Home Affairs) to promote uniquely Australian education opportunities to other countries.
- Government facilitation to develop articulations between institutions and countries to increase mobility between countries, would greatly increase the opportunity for domestic students to also have an overseas education experience. This will be particularly helpful, for example, for students undertaking Industry and Community Project Units (where groups of interdisciplinary students work on authentic problems set by industry, community or government organisations) and in securing New Colombo Plan Mobility Program funding to further their individual academic interests.
- As noted in our response to Question 3, we could, as a nation, take far more health, medical, nursing and dental students than we currently do but we are limited by

government placements policies. Education providers and governments would be able to diversify the discipline offerings if international students could be placed in remote and rural communities with appropriate government support. This would hopefully expand the pool of medical and health graduates choosing to join the regional workforce.

- The development of a single 'Australian High School Certificate' as the recognised national qualification for students completing secondary school to Year 12 would guarantee the quality of an Australian high school qualification. If this certificate was attainable from international schools in other countries, this would contribute to the diversification of source countries of international students. While Australian international schools deliver the curriculum/s for Australian state-based certificates, others focus on the SAT, IB and A Levels. Australian governments would need to negotiate the inclusion of this 'Australian High School Certificate'.

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

- Employers in Australia and overseas tell us that to contribute effectively in the industries and workplaces of the future, university graduates will need to combine strong disciplinary and technical knowledge with well-developed skills for critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork.
- They will also need the capabilities for independent research and lifelong learning for updating their knowledge, and digital skills for information literacy. Moreover, they will benefit from foreign language acquisition and from developing the flexibility and breadth of perspective necessary to interact productively and creatively across cultural, disciplinary and professional boundaries. They will need, too, the personal resilience to deal with uncertainty and failure, and the sureness of personal values and clarity of social purpose to make ethical responses to whatever challenges confront them in their workplaces and communities.
- Recent debates in Australia about the future of work and skills have focused on and promoted the nation's need for more graduates from the STEM fields; science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Strengthening national capacity in these fields will be important. However, graduates in the STEM disciplines will also require the strong generic skills and qualities outlined above and the best way for them to achieve many of these may be to combine their STEM studies with exposure to disciplines in the arts, humanities and social sciences.
- Australia has enormous educational strengths and growing needs in fields such as health (including aged and disability care), education, social work, finance, economics, public policy, law and business, while many countries in our region have enormous and growing needs for graduates with these skills. The development of a new national international education strategy presents an excellent opportunity for Australia to capitalise on its areas of educational strength to address its future skills and workforce challenges, while strengthening people-to-people, diplomatic and trade relations with countries in the Asia Pacific and beyond.

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

- The latest available national survey data suggest that international graduates from Australian universities achieve strong employment outcomes, which are comparable with those achieved by Australian students. For example, the most recent International Graduate Outcomes Survey (IGOS) found that almost 90 per cent of international graduates who completed their studies between 2013 and 2018 were employed, with 84 per cent employed in their preferred industries.  
<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/Pages/Data-and-Research.aspx>
- To maintain strong employment outcomes for international students we need to ensure that all graduates of Australian universities have the discipline/profession specific and generic skills discussed above. Critically, this includes skills in creativity, independent thinking, communication, teamwork and cultural competence, which are very difficult to achieve in wholly offshore or online learning environments.
- The Government and the sector would benefit greatly from having access to better and more regular (minimum every two years and longitudinal) data about the employment outcomes of international graduates of Australian universities. Here we note that the [International education data gaps: sector perspectives](#) report completed by IEAA in 2018 identified improving student outcomes data, especially data on employment outcomes as a key priority for action. The permanent establishment of such datasets, building on the IGOS, would empower the Government and providers to make evidence-based decisions to target policy and interventions to address areas of national or institutional weakness as they arise.
- All students benefit enormously from completing work-integrated learning during their studies. However, securing high quality internships for international students continues to be difficult, with the pandemic creating unprecedented challenge securing placements for students whether onshore or offshore. The **Career Success Package** recommended by IEAA in its submission is therefore strongly supported. This would see the new strategy include a commitment to offer every international student a work-integrated learning experience.

Other interventions worthy of consideration include:

- The Group of Eight's recommendations to align Australia's approach to international education, temporary and permanent migration, more strategically to strengthening our sovereign research and skills capability in key areas of national strategic priority.
- A much greater role for Austrade, Study Australia, Australian embassies and consulates working with Australian education providers to market Australian education, foster international alumni networks and connections with employers. Australia's overseas missions can help more by hosting sector-wide events for international alumni and by supporting country specific strategies to assist new graduates of Australian higher education programs to secure quality jobs in their home countries.
- Enhanced Australian Government leadership to facilitate growth in international students in areas of current and predicted skills shortage in Australia (including health and teaching) where graduate numbers are constrained by the availability of mandatory work-integrated learning placements in public health services and schools operated by state and territory governments (see Question 3i).
- National recognition of the importance of cultural competence in all graduates and the development of a national standard and measure for cultural competence that demonstrates Australian education providers' commitment to ensuring their graduates can communicate effectively and work cross-culturally.

## 6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

- Our geographic position and demographic profile offer students a unique experience and competencies that enables them to compete in the global employment market and become truly global citizens. The uniqueness of the Australian experience comes from our cultural diversity, our distinctive and unspoilt flora and fauna and Australia's First Nations culture. By appropriately reflecting Indigenous culture and teachings in our curricular and non-curricular activities, we can give students an extraordinarily unique experience that couples the enduring sense of place, identity and sustainability central to Indigenous practices with contemporary and cutting-edge teaching and learning.
- Australia's education system is world-renowned. The careful government regulation and quality assurance has maintained a high standard of education, and a number of our institutions are recognised in all major international rankings for their research and teaching excellence. Alongside technical depth, our education system focuses on developing well-rounded individuals with attributes like curiosity and resilience that employers increasingly value. This is in addition to the graduate qualities noted above in Question 5 (*depth of disciplinary expertise; critical thinking and problem solving; oral and written communication; information and digital literacy; inventiveness; cultural competence; interdisciplinary effectiveness; integrated professional, ethical and personal identity, and influence*).

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

- The vast majority of graduates (more than 80 per cent) indicate that they see the world differently after studying in Australia ([International Graduate Outcomes Survey](#)). Our liberal education system, supported by principles of academic freedom and freedom of speech, creates a cultural environment where people can have robust discussions and where students from a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures are empowered to express their individual views. Our student population brings a multitude of views and experiences through which they learn to embrace diversity, welcome the views of others and act in an inclusive way – skills that will stand them in good stead to productively participate in globalised and multicultural organisations and societies. And we know that international students recognise and value this.
- Australia is at the forefront of innovation, new technologies and discoveries, making it an appealing destination for students who have entrepreneurial ambitions or those who want to take advantage of the technology and resources that we have available.
- Australia's geographic and economic proximity to Asia, which accounts for more than a third of the world's economy and over half of the world's population, adds to its attractiveness as an education destination. As one of the region's strongest economies and most developed countries, we are well placed to serve the education needs of the region and continue to play a leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. As the industrial and economic centre of the world continues to shift to Asia, Australia is well positioned to be the place where the biggest global economic, social, industrial and technological problems are being tackled, with its universities leading the way. It is a compelling reason to study and research in Australia, not only for students from Asia but from students from all over the globe.

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

- Students are attracted to the most relevant programs of study at institutions with the most supportive learning environment and offering the greatest value-add. The

distance of Australia from Northern Hemisphere contexts provides opportunities for affording criticality and reframing of habitual ways of grasping the world. At the same time, the immediacy and ease of the kinds of digital encounters we are able to provide support sophisticated engagement and exchange. The key is in the movement between these polarities as students develop a sense of what it is to move between the local and the global.

**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?**

- Public discourse on the contribution of international education has focused on the positive contribution that international students make to the economy. While the economic value of international education is significant and should not be disregarded, we need to collectively acknowledge and articulate the broader benefits of international education for Australia.
- As Australia continues to navigate a changing and challenging geo-political context, we must acknowledge that international education is an amplifier of Australian values and an important contributor to our influence both in the region and further afield. Our alumni go on to leadership roles in foreign governments and business while maintaining alliances with Australia. These leaders understand, respect and advocate for Australian culture and values through their soft diplomacy and are our natural allies and collaborators. Other jurisdictions, when faced with a similar challenge, have worked collectively and collaboratively across their institutions to consistently articulate the value that international education brings to deliver better community understanding.
- We should be more assertive in our acknowledgement of the contribution international students bring to our classrooms and the ways in which they enrich the learning of their domestic peers. International students contribute to Australia's multicultural society and reinforce our values of inclusion while broadening our cultural understanding. All students are better global citizens for studying in an international context.
- International students and in particular research students play an important role in driving Australia's innovation and productivity. The reputation for excellence held by our university sector and our global rankings mean that we attract top PhD talent who advance innovation and contribute to the cutting-edge research taking place in Australia, developing new technologies, theories and knowledge that make us competitive on the global stage but also contribute to better outcomes and lives for Australian citizens. Together, the Government and the sector should proudly and proactively showcase the contribution international post-graduate and research students make to Australia's innovation landscape in a way that resonates with the community. This should include areas such as medicine, population health, agriculture, sustainability and the environment as well as the STEM disciplines that are often associated with innovation.
- To achieve this at a national level we will need consistent messaging and collaborative delivery of these stories from all levels of government, sector groups and universities themselves. International education has been a huge success story for Australian society; the fact that this is not better understood by the wider community is a failing on all our parts that can only be rectified collectively.

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

- Engage international and domestic alumni groups to consult on proposed initiatives related to student experience and community support.
- Revise and reform a program similar to the Endeavour Leadership Program to fund two-way academic exchanges that focus on talent above source market drivers.
- Work with the sector and philanthropists to establish a large-scale scholarship program to attract the highest calibre students from the Asia Pacific region; an Australian Fulbright or Rhodes Scholarship program.
- As suggested in our response to Question 1, invest in giving Australian international education the marketing and graduate support capacity provided by the British Council, either through Study Australia or Austrade.
- Recognition (acceptance) that online (and offshore) learning post-COVID might not be the future for all institutions/sectors. For example, the intrinsic value of ELICOS study is in being onshore and face-to-face.