



Charles Sturt
University

Charles Sturt University
Submission – Australian
Strategy for International
Education 2021-2030

May 2021





14 May 2021

The Hon Alan Tudge MP
Minister for Education and Youth
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600
By email: alan.tudge.mp@aph.gov.au

Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030

Dear Minister

Charles Sturt University welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on your Department's consultation paper on international education.

Charles Sturt offers international students a range of flexible learning options including study online, on campus, or at one of our many partner institutions. Our quality courses are supplemented by the services available to all Charles Sturt students, including study, equity, disability and spiritual support, careers advice, and English language skills support, all of which add to the student's experience, leading to strong education and employment outcomes.

While Charles Sturt is less dependent on revenues from international students than many other Australian universities, we are nonetheless looking forward to a time when we can welcome new international students back to our campuses. International students make an important contribution to the regional communities the University serves. Their presence enhances the university experience of local students. While studying they provide an economic boost through their use of local shops and services, and through their employment in a range of industries. After they graduate, many international students go on to work in regional areas, often in industries where there is a chronic workforce shortage, such as nursing and IT. In so doing they make an invaluable contribution to employers' capabilities and skills.

International students' work options, and their ability to plan for future careers, are underpinned by Australia's visa and immigration policies. These policies have helped make Australia a global leader in the international education market for more than a decade. Other countries are now learning from our example, in many cases emulating or extending on Australian policies.

Charles Sturt University suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing global competition make this the ideal time for a strategic reset to our approach to international student marketing, recruitment, visa arrangements and, most particularly, post-graduation work rights. A concerted effort to rebuild Australia's international education sector – one of our largest export industries – would complement other Australian Government initiatives to drive economic recovery.

This can be achieved through a mix of short- and long-term actions. As a first step, the Australian Government can build on the pre-Budget announcement of more flexible working options for international students by extending these arrangements to more industries, especially in regional areas. The Government could also ensure that internships or work-integrated learning placements do not count toward any working hours cap.



Charles Sturt
University

Australia can achieve more successful, cost-effective and better-targeted recruitment, especially in new markets through better coordination between higher education providers and State and Federal Government agencies. By adopting a more coordinated approach, we can align recruitment of students – and their post-graduation work rights – to broader national workforce needs and priorities, making Australia’s international education industry part of national efforts to address critical capability gaps and provide for future growth and economic diversification. Nowhere is this more vital than in regional areas, which are dealing with chronic problems in attracting and retaining skilled workers.

Charles Sturt looks forward to engaging with your Department in the development and implementation of the new Australian Strategy for International Education, and to developing a coordinated national approach that maintains Australia’s leading position as a provider of quality education for international students, and offers a richer experience for domestic students.

Yours sincerely

Professor John Germov
Interim Vice-Chancellor

Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 consultation paper – Charles Sturt University response

RESPONSES TO DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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

Charles Sturt University suggests that the Strategy should include five priorities:

- rebuilding the international education sector,
- policy continuity,
- strategic marketing,
- adapting to increased competition in international student markets, and
- integrating international student policies and strategies with broader national, state and regional goals, especially in relation to skilled migration.

The uncertainties created by the COVID-19 pandemic underscore the need for a concerted effort to rebuild the international education sector in Australia. This would require a mix of short- and long-term actions.

In the short term, Australia can maintain some advantage in an increasingly competitive market by ensuring some continuity in international education policies. Current and future students will need to know that the visa conditions (including working rights) under which they enrol will persist long enough for them to conclude their studies and, in some cases, embark on their post-graduation career in Australia.

In particular, policy settings should continue to encourage international students to study and work in regional areas, especially after they graduate. An expanded and more effective Destination Australia scholarships program would support this aim.

International student recruitment will need to be supported by strategic marketing, including expansion into new markets. One issue that needs to be taken into consideration in marketing is competition between different providers and regions within Australia. A unified and strategic 'Team Australia' approach, possibly involving DFAT or Austrade and focused on Australia as a study destination, would be more cost-effective and reduce prospective students' confusion about visas, working rights and other complexities.

A first step would be the development of a more holistic view of international education: one that encompasses employability, offers customised support (including community integration), and helps students identify pathways to a career either upon returning home or via a residency pathway in Australia. Residency pathways could be linked to study and employment prospects in areas of national or regional strategic need (see recent Canadian policy).

A more holistic and better integrated approach would also allow for more effective competition with the growing presence of New Zealand, Canada, the UK and the US in the international student market, and allow Australia to adapt to the emergence of new competitors (including China), and support expansion into new markets for Australia.

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?

The trend towards work-integrated learning provides avenues for improving student experience of international education as well as meeting national and regional needs. Students could be provided with options for employment while studying, ideally embedded within study in the form of extended work-integrated learning placements or shorter-term internships. Effective engagement with employers by universities would increase the likelihood of placements leading to post-graduation employment, a result Charles Sturt has seen with our own work-integrated learning programs.

This may require review of some of the employment conditions attached to students' visas, to ensure that industry placements during study do not count toward any cap on working time. There is also scope to introduce more creative visa and migration options, such as providing residency pathways for students who pursue employment in an area of strategic workforce need (e.g. aged care), through other civic/community contributions, or who are developing new ideas or inventions with potential commercial benefit.

To ensure sufficient take-up of industry placement opportunities in regional areas, governments at all levels may need to consider providing incentives for transport, community integration and accommodation, all of which would also enhance student experience.

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

- (i) Policy and regulatory flexibility are important in enabling providers to innovate. How can we utilise these settings to pursue opportunities, and in what other ways can we work together to ensure Australia remains globally competitive?

Australia can maintain its leading position in international education through:

- explicit links between study and residency pathways, and allowing providers to promote those pathways,
- recognition of study commenced abroad with Australian providers as counting towards Australian residency pathways if the student continues the course onshore in Australia,
- amending employment conditions in visas to ensure work-integrated learning or industry placements do not count toward paid employment limits,
- broader post study work rights – a key tactic by competitors including the UK and Canada,
- maintaining robust yet competitive visa and regulatory settings comparable to those of our competitors, and
- much better coordination between providers, state based international education organisations (e.g. Study NSW), and Australian Government agencies (e.g. Austrade) to reduce duplication, provide clearer information to students, providers and employers, and ensure integration with workforce needs.

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

As noted above, closer collaboration between providers and government agencies is essential, especially in relation to diversification of opportunities. Achieving greater diversification in the

disciplines attracting or prioritised for international students would also benefit from active involvement of employers in identifying workforce and skills gaps or needs.

Expanding the range of incentives for international students as outlined above (especially in relation to employment) would give providers more scope for diversity in course offerings and source markets. This would be complemented by expanding scholarship programs, such as Australia Awards or Destination Australia. In particular, the current geopolitical climate indicates it would be beneficial to work with Quad partners through these programs.

Using online modes of delivery and integrating with industry on a global scale would allow Australian providers to tap into new markets and create new opportunities in established markets. This would require extensive analysis, facilitated by Austrade through its global networks and the knowledge of locally-engaged staff, which would help connect international employers and education institutions with Australian providers, leading to the development of new pathways and collaborations.

Austrade and DFAT also have a role in expanding opportunities for Australian providers to establish and deliver qualifications internationally, through new or revised trade agreements (with a particular focus on trade in services).

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?

As outlined above under Question 3, more flexible arrangements for international students' employment while studying would not only make Australia a more attractive destination for students, maintaining our global lead, but also ensure those students develop the skills that Australian employers are looking for.

The new National Priorities and Industry Linkages Fund creates greater incentives for providers and students to make use of the opportunities offered by work-integrated learning, internships and other forms of work experience embedded within course work. Similar incentives for international students would be useful.

The Australian Government could also explore incentives for universities and employers to develop strategic partnerships that expand opportunities for domestic and international students and encourage firms to capitalise on this labour force (for example, via recruitment agencies with dedicated platforms).

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

- (i) What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?

Australia can maintain and enhance its reputation as an education destination and provide a uniquely Australian education experience by focusing on three key messages:

- Australian institutions are of world's highest standard, with first-rate facilities
- Unparalleled lifestyle and career opportunities
- Long-term opportunities in a country with a robust economy, world class education and health care, safe communities and so on.

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

As suggested above, under Question 3, we can offer an Australian education experience and enhance the appeal and value of online and onshore education by adopting a more flexible approach to residency pathways, specifically by recognising study conducted offshore and online, in anticipation of a future transition to onshore education in Australia.

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?

There are clear economic benefits of having international students in Australia, and especially in regional areas. These benefits are easily measurable, and substantial. Even so, promoting the economic benefits of international education appears to have little impact on community sentiment. For example, the idea that international students are 'taking away' places from domestic students is persistent, though this is in part a consequence of limited public understanding of the way universities are funded, combined with unhelpful and ill-informed public comment by prominent critics of universities.

Charles Sturt University suggests that this challenge could be addressed by clearer messaging from the Australian Government on the economic and other benefits of international education, and the role of international students in a modern and relevant education and training system. Universities themselves have an important role in promulgating this message, the core of which is that international education:

- creates jobs and helps to meet workforce needs in critical areas,
- leads to significant economic benefits through international students' spending on local goods and services,
- broadens education opportunities and experience for Australians,
- enables Australia to build international relationships that support national goals, and
- allows Australia to draw on world-best knowledge and ideas.

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

Charles Sturt University suggests that the Strategy should include stronger alignment and partnerships with industries that have a similar agenda – for example tourism, accommodation providers, real estate developers, and others facing persistent challenges with finding and retaining sufficient employees.

The University also suggests that the Department consider organising a summit of relevant industries and employer groups, universities and other higher education providers, and other Australian Government stakeholders to discuss opportunities for a more unified, integrated approach to international student recruitment – one that delivers substantial and clear benefits to Australia and the Australian Government.