

RUN Response to Australian Strategy for International Education Consultation

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) provides the following response to discussion questions in the Australian Strategy for International Education Consultation paper.

Discussion questions

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

The new Australian Strategy for international education should play a fundamental role in resetting Australia's approach for a post-COVID world through:

- promoting diversification of
 - market destinations in Australia, with a particular focus on non-metropolitan areas,
 - source countries, and
 - disciplinesvia a major marketing campaign from Austrade;
- ensuring that international education policy works in an integrated way with regional economic development, skills and migration strategy and policy, at both Federal and State/Territory levels;
- resetting of regulatory levers to drive outcomes;
- greater collaboration with industry to facilitate improved learning outcomes at both undergraduate and graduate levels;
- funding support for Strategy implementation.

Diversification of international student destinations

Pre-COVID, about 80% of onshore international students studied in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Place-based incentives are needed to encourage more international students to study elsewhere in Australia.

Education, migration and regional development policy are fundamentally linked. Growth in international student numbers in non-metropolitan Australia would benefit the nation as a whole by working to ease congestion and drive down the cost of housing in our capitals, and facilitate international links outside major cities.

Boosting international student numbers at regional universities will grow regional economies. There are professional skills needs in the regions and a requirement to diversify industry. International education is a significant way to address these issues.

Notionally, we propose that a target of 5-10 per cent growth in international student numbers should be set for non-metropolitan locations over the life of the Strategy.

A campaign should be undertaken by Austrade to promote non-metropolitan destinations for international students.

Joined-up approach to policy and programs

Given that education, migration and industry policy should work in a joined-up way across jurisdictions to maximise impact, we suggest that the government and the Council for International Education keep a watching brief on developments and advocate to maximise the positive impact of policies and programs.

The new Regional Education Commissioner, due to be appointed in 2021, should have a role as an advocate for encouraging more international students to study at regional locations, and advise the Council on relevant policy and program settings.

Regulatory framework

Some positive changes to the regulatory framework to encourage more international students to go to non-metropolitan locations would include:

- priority processing of student visas for students wishing to study at regional campuses;
- waiving visa fees for international students to go to non-metropolitan locations;
- more flexibility around post-study work rights for online students;
- migration incentives for people to work in regional Australia and for graduates from regional universities to achieve a permanent migration outcome via increasing points for permanent residency for those who study in a regional location from 5 to 10-15.

More ideas are given in response to question 3.

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?

Universities are committed to giving students the best student experience now and into the future. Australia is currently ranked 3rd in the world for international student experience, and a continuous improvement approach should be applied to ensure that this performance continues.

Regional universities provide a rich lived experience for international students, with opportunities for close connections with Australian people and communities, as well as high quality education.

International students studying at regional campuses generally have high levels of satisfaction with their learning experience. Other positive aspects include:

- exposure to the attractions of an authentic Australian regional lifestyle;
- a lower cost of living, less congestion and smaller campuses and class sizes than in major cities;
- a friendly and supportive environment which gives more opportunity to network with domestic students, lecturers and local communities to build English, career and life skills;

- practical degrees;
- regional work experience in partnership with regional industry;
- flexible mode of study;
- good quality of life;
- high quality teaching;
- excellent research in key areas of strength, including agriculture, health science, environmental science, digital health and marine science etc.;
- a conducive environment for study; and
- speciality courses.

With respect to online learning, many RUN members are the most experienced in the sector, and students are, in general, highly satisfied with the 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?**

Promotion of the Australian university sector as a whole, including increased promotion of destinations for international students in non-metropolitan Australia, will make Australia more globally competitive and potentially increase market share for the nation as a whole.

The Australian university system excels in teaching and learning and research. Regionally-headquartered universities excel in research in a range of fields from agriculture, environmental science to regional health, and are in a strong position to grow international research student numbers.

Blended learning options should be supported, with some study offshore, followed up by onshore study, and post-study work.

RUN proposes the following adjustments to the regulatory framework and other measures to facilitate the attractiveness of non-metropolitan settings for international students:

- priority processing of student visas for students wishing to study at regional campuses;
- waiving visa fees for international students going to non-metropolitan locations;
- more flexibility around post-study work rights for online students;
- migration incentives for people to work in regional Australia and for graduates from regional universities to achieve a permanent migration outcome via increasing points for permanent residency for those who study in a regional location from 5 to 10-15;
- better promotion to education agents, including through regional university tours;
- tax deductions for tuition fees paid for study at a regional campus;
- lower fees at regional campuses for particular courses (some universities already offer this);
- promotion of dual degrees with overseas universities;
- Study Abroad options for students at overseas universities with part of the course undertaken at a non-metropolitan campus of an Australian university.

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

Austrade should lead a promotional campaign working with providers and other stakeholders to promote diversification in destinations for international students in Australia. RUN supports a campaign to encourage international students to study at non-metropolitan destinations.

The Government could assist with entry costs for providers to move into new markets.

Linking institutions with visas would help stop attrition by international students once they are in Australia e.g. enrolling with one provider and moving to another once in country.

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?

The Government is looking to develop new industries, and it should work with the HE sector and industry to develop cutting edge courses in relevant areas.

Industry has a fundamental role engaging with higher education providers to provide WIL/internship options for international students and enhance employability outcomes.

An education campaign by government for industry should be undertaken to articulate the benefits, including access to skilled workers, overseas markets and commercialisation of research, of employing international students.

SMEs may need some financial assistance to take on international students in a WIL/internship or research context.

6. How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?
i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students?
ii. How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

i. The value add proposition for both international and domestic students in Australia is quality and safety (including low risk with respect to community violence and a healthy, COVID-safe environment).

For both international and domestic students, university education in Australia transforms lives. The value add is the development in students of the ability to think for themselves – how to be flexible, how to engage with new people, and be exposed and respond to diverse ideas and ways of thinking.

There are different value propositions in different locations, including with respect to coastal or mountain settings. Non-metropolitan communities provide a personable/welcoming community experience for international students.

ii. While online and offshore education has a place and is complementary to face-to-face learning, it can never wholly replace the latter. The lived experience transforms lives – online study cannot completely substitute for this.

Australia's strength is in the onshore experience, with our environment and lifestyle. We would struggle to make a living exclusively with online delivery.

Other barriers to online education include that:

- it is seen as inferior education in Asia and the Middle East and is not recognised for some jobs (e.g. public sector) in some countries;
- Australia needs agreements with other countries to recognise the value of online e.g. as with China;
- the time difference between Australia and other continents for live tutorials etc.

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?

Governments need to sell the importance of international education to the economy and the nation more broadly to the electorate. A communications campaign is needed to champion the importance of international students to the nation.

The myriad of ways international students contribute to Australia needs to be articulated to support the sector's social licence.

Humanising stories of individual international students and their contributions to Australia should be publicised. There are some great stories from regional Australia of students being accepted by and enriching regional communities.

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

The Government should put money into implementing the Strategy, including for a promotional campaign delivered by Austrade, and lobbying foreign governments to accept online learning.

Advice should be sought from the new Regional Education Commissioner on promotion of non-metropolitan Australia as a destination for international students.