

## National Strategy for International Education: IRU comment

The IRU supports the Government's wish to outline a clear, medium term Strategy for supporting and improving Australia's education and research sectors' engagement with the world around us.

The draft Strategy is built around three pillars:

1. Getting the fundamentals right, through ensuring a robust higher education and research system;
2. Reaching out to the world, the activities to improve international engagement; and
3. Staying competitive, a focus on improving achievement.

The three Pillars are a viable way to structure the Strategy, addressing first the base structure of a sound education and research system, then to reach out to ensure the optimum level of two-way engagement, and third to maintain a focus on improving what we do.

The focus for the IRU in this response is to target four areas highlighting issues the Strategy does not effectively address and outline three areas for improvement in its detail.

These are:

1. the application of the Strategy across all Government agencies to ensure coherence of purpose and the related challenge of alignment with State and Territory support for local institutions' international activity;
2. raising research engagement to be on an equal footing with student mobility, linking Australia's researchers with researchers and with research users around the world, particularly in Asia;
3. addressing the connection between international students who study in Australia and Australia's skilled immigration programmes;
4. countering ill-formed public assumptions about international education;
5. the use and meaning of international rankings;
6. rejuvenating language study; and
7. ensuring a coherent national quality framework for all students.

## Major areas for improvement

### 1. A comprehensive national Strategy

The intention is for the Strategy to provide a comprehensive guide to support international education and research driving the actions of all relevant agencies. The draft does much to set this up but there remain gaps concerning research and immigration, addressed below, and a tension with Austrade's parallel consultation with its focus on selling Australia's education services.

The Strategy reflects the emphasis of recent years on an effective balance between expanding the number of international students with other aspects of international education, in particular increasing the international experiences of Australian students.

Universities remain concerned that Austrade's focus on generating additional national income from international sources does not take full account of the broader goals. It needs to be alert to the strong focus now on promoting international opportunities for Australian students, most notably through the Government's New Colombo Plan initiative.

The Strategy must also work with the activities of the States and Territories. Each supports the international focus of its local universities and other education providers. The activities are practical such as taking delegations to countries, support for delegations from other countries and work with the providers on operational challenges. It is important that the national Strategy recognise the State level activity, providing a national context for it and supporting its outcomes.

## **2. The position of research**

The place of research in the Strategy is not yet fully realised. The use of “International education” in the title and in the goals that incorporate aspects of research highlight the problem. The Strategy needs to be clearer that it is about international education *and research* if the research element is to be effectively developed. As currently written research comes across as something added to the main student focussed structure.

Research would be better presented in the Strategy through amending the title to read “National Strategy for International Education and Research” and reworking of the goals in two areas.

Firstly, under Pillar 2 there should be a distinct Research focussed Goal to “Strengthen the integration of Australian research with world research and world research users”. The goal would encompass not just stronger researcher links internationally but take up the challenge to support businesses across the world find and use Australian originated research with due return to the creators.

Among the particular actions the potential for an Asian region cross Government network supporting research and innovation should be explored. The few substantive actions to support researchers under the current Goal 3, Fostering an international outlook, would be better covered in the new distinct research Goal.

Secondly, under Pillar 3, there should be a distinct goal, associated with the Government’s statement *Boosting the Commercial returns from research*, to “strengthen support for industry driven research that supports businesses internationally”.

## **3. The relationship with Australia’s immigration programme**

The comparable international strategies for New Zealand<sup>1</sup> and Canada<sup>2</sup> address the relationship of international education with the country’s immigration policies, reaching beyond the question of student visas and post-graduation work entitlements to consider the implications of international students for immigration and related policies. For example the Canadian international education Strategy addresses the potential for some international students to assist with skilled labour shortages and ageing population challenges.

The issue has been fraught in Australia, with the tendency to not discuss it. International education policy and meeting Australia’s longer term economic and social needs are allowed to operate distinctly.

We have had extensive discussion about ensuring that international students adhere to visa requirements to ensure that there are few notional students using the student visa to gain a minimal

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<sup>1</sup> The Business Growth Agenda, Leadership Statement for International Education, Progress Update, New Zealand Government 2014, see page 5 in particular

<sup>2</sup> Canada’s International Education Strategy – “Harnessing our knowledge advantage to drive innovation and prosperity” 2014, p9 in particular

qualification and then ongoing rights to work. The actions to address that have largely worked which permits us to consider the longer term opportunities.

The approach should be that those who breach visa requirements should be identified and action taken; those who do not, but operate within legal parameters, should be permitted to aim at longer term residence.

Currently the test of being a legitimate student can err in rejecting a potential student who indicates longer term residence aspirations. An effective Australian Strategy should be clear that international students are a legitimate source of applicants for skilled migration places consistent with Government immigration targets year by year.

We should affirm that attaining a qualification from an Australian university or other provider is a positive outcome for a person in demonstrating their relative standing for skilled immigration visas. These students have shown a capacity to live in Australia for the period of study and understand well the country they are applying to live in.

Hence there should be a pathway that allows international students to apply for residence and citizenship, with decisions based on national policy and the relative standing of applicants at the time. This would not create the right for places but the legitimate potential to apply.

#### **4. Countering ill-formed public assumptions**

The Strategy understates the need for greater public understanding of the reality of, and rationale for, large numbers of international students being in Australia.

The recent furore generated by the release of an ill-considered NSW ICAC report and the related Four Corners program highlight the ignorance and fear which international students generate, with concerns about:

- reducing opportunities for Australian students to enrol. This should be lessened since universities were subject to demand driven funding for local students;
- the impact on the education for Australian students. Outlining the benefits of greater numbers to maintaining study options and broadening the education experience; and
- student status turning into residency status. This requires addressing the benefits for immigrants to be taken from those who have experience of Australia and a desire to stay balanced with the evidence that most international student act consistent with their visas and that the large majority do not seek residence.

The statement at p8

“It is also important that we continue to communicate the significant benefits of Australian international education, not simply to prospective students overseas but also to Australian students and the broader Australian community”

should underpin a commitment to action to bridge the gulf between the understandings of those involved in international education and public perceptions.

### **Areas for refinement**

#### **5. The use and meaning of international rankings**

The draft Strategy relies on international rankings as a leading indicator of the success of the Australian system, most notably in Goal 1 which states:

Australia will work to create an education system that stands out as the best in the world, with some of our institutions ranked among the very best.

The emphasis should be on measures about the capability of graduates and their professional competence which the more detailed parts of the Strategy set out. The various world rankings will influence perceptions about Australia and its education providers but the effort of Government should focus on the substantive achievements.

The stated goal is confused in that over half the Australian university system are ranked in the current suite of ranking lists, which identify the leading 500 to 700 universities from a world pool of well over 10,000. That is, a listing equals a top 5-10% positioning, similar to an ATAR of 90 or more.

The outcome shows that Australia sits well ahead of any plausible benchmark with a percentage of world GDP of just over one percent and a proportion of world population at under half of one percent. On that basis to have more than 1 or 2 universities in the first 100 is a major achievement and more than ten in the top 400 to 500 equally significant.

Hence currently we meet the goal. The question is whether it is meaningful or sensible to retain it since it is inconsistent with the Government's broader ambition to link Australia's economic development to the economic growth in the Asian region. This recognises that Australia's success goes with the success of other countries.

We are not harmed by Asian economic growth but advantaged. Part of that growth will be reflected in stronger university systems and individual institutions. This will put pressure on those currently ranked, not because they have reduced in quality but because they are part of a better world wide education and research system.

## **6. Rejuvenating language study**

This strategic action focusses primarily at school student acquisition of languages, an important need. The challenge for universities is to maintain language teaching, with many programmes enrolling fewer students than generate the funding needed to sustain the programme. The IRU members are committed to retaining their current range of Asian languages. As a first step to ensure this the IRU is developing a cross IRU approach to Indonesian to make best use of available staff to create effective future focused courses. This and similar initiatives requires investment which the Australian Government should support.

## **7. A coherent national quality framework**

Strategic Action 1.4 is to provide quality assurance while reducing red tape, consistent with the Government's overall commitment to do so. However the Strategy does not address the redundancy of having a full parallel set of standards for international students that now extensively overlaps with the protections for all students and the requirements for quality educational outcomes.

The creation of the general Higher Education Standards Framework and other quality arrangements means that it is time to integrate the provisions for international students such that there is a common set of expectations for all students. Specific additional protections or requirements for international students should be used only where needed to meet the distinct needs of international students.

The IRU sets this argument out in full in its response to the ESOS discussion paper at <http://www.iru.edu.au/policy/2014.aspx>.

29 May 2015