

Bond University welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade - *Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors*.

The submission focuses on the following terms of reference in relation to international education.

Challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers as a result of the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and effective measures to attract and retain students in Australia

Much has been written about the challenges associated with the loss of international students during the coronavirus pandemic. The biggest impact for higher education providers was the loss of tuition fee revenue, as most students were not able to travel to Australia to commence or complete their studies and were therefore required to commit to studying virtually. For many students this was not their preferred method of study, but they were willing to commit given the circumstances, however some student markets were not as willing to study via this mode of delivery. Challenges around studying remotely for international students included:

- time zone differences and difficulties accessing class materials and digital tools;
 - lack of infrastructure (Internet), which made it hard to balance other commitments
 - being in a different time zone negatively affecting students' connectedness to their professors and classmates
- country sponsorship restrictions (especially Norwegian students who are funded by the government and not approved to use these funds to study online); and
- registration requirements (e.g., Canadian students studying law are required to complete at least a third of their studies face-to-face, which meant some students had to pause their online studies during the pandemic).

While the number of student visas being processed has significantly increased since Australia's borders reopened, visa delays have left many students having to defer a semester while awaiting their visa approvals. Delays have started to ease in some markets however, the onboarding of new Department of Home Affairs (DHA) staff has presented challenges in visa assessments, with what appear to be random student visa rejections which cannot be tracked to a specific reason for refusal. Bond has seen this on a small scale with a small number of recent China visa rejections with no explanation including that of a Bond alumnus. Discussion more broadly within the industry has shown that providers at all levels have moved from experiencing the delays in visa processing to a small number of unexplained visa rejections, which could be attributed to new DHA staff onboarded during a peak period.

With the reopening of Australia's borders there are still challenges around international students' perception of Australia. The reputation of being a friendly, welcoming, quality student destination of choice will take some time to rebuild, in some markets more than others. Australia's affordability is also in question, with significant rises in the cost of living but also in the availability of housing for international students. If we are to continue to attract a high-quality international student market, these challenges must be addressed and industry, government and the higher education sector must commit to working together to tackle these challenges.

Moreover, the government's decision to extend unlimited working rights for international students until July 2023, has made Australian education an easy target for non-genuine students. Students who are working significant hours tend to engage less with their university, and often do not progress to the following semester or, in some cases do not complete their studies. Moreover, this policy may inflict long term damage on our reputation as a quality focused destination. The return to a more balanced work and study offering (perhaps 24 hours a week) will be welcomed by the sector.

Effective measures to attract and retain students in Australia

To attract and retain the best students in Australia, we must align our institutional and national policies with international student success. We need to assist international students in their career ambitions, including opportunities to stay in Australia to contribute, integrate and thrive in the community post-graduation.

Initiatives to ensure positive international student experience and support pathways to build their skills and contribute to Australia's prosperity

- Stronger efforts at integration into Australian life – all of the work done previously to initiate international students around everything from work rights to safety on our beaches needs a re-examination post COVID. The resources we called upon previously seem dated and unreliable.
- Acknowledgement that students may be coming from a very different COVID experience to what we had here in Australia. We need much stronger systems of wellbeing support and easier connection to communities on campus and through student organisations.
- Health care provision – easier access to mental health plans and clinical diagnoses as needed. Many students are arriving with either medical/accessibility plans that cannot be honoured here or needing a clinical psychologist to diagnose a previously undetected or undisclosed condition. Wait times and costs for these are prohibitive and costs students' unnecessary anxiety.
- More opportunities for industry-related experiences – this includes an education piece for potential employers, so they understand the value of international students as a workforce and move away from a xenophobic response to diverse cultures.

Initiatives Bond University is currently working on

- Less reliance on online or non-touch connection and more focus on real people in support roles, when and as needed – another key element of re-introduction to Australia post COVID.
- Closer retention initiatives that allow for a tighter monitoring of student progression and assimilation from the earliest possible stages to cover them through key phases of their study.
- An orientation process that is informative without being overwhelming – work towards covering all of the ESOS requirements in a gradual fashion that will allow students access to information as needed, not frontload with more than they can assimilate.
- Referral systems that include all of university community, as well as general public in order to ensure feedback on any problematic issues of concern are received – also allows for parents and family to report from afar should they feel support is required.

Opportunities for international education to support strategic and foreign policy objectives

The funding and support of programs such as the New Colombo Plan (NCP) are a critical activity supporting Australia's diplomacy efforts and foreign policy objectives, while providing exceptional Australian students an experience for study, internship, mentorship and leadership in the Indo-Pacific. Bond University supports staff in developing NCP short term programs for students across our undergraduate programs, as well as assisting students to apply for the NCP scholarship program and values the contribution that this provides to the wider Australian international diplomacy strategy.

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