



Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024

Public hearing 26 August 2024

Opening statement – Paul Harris, IRU Executive Director

Thankyou for the opportunity to be here on behalf of the Innovative Research Universities. The IRU is a group of seven universities across the country committed to expanding opportunity for Australian students and to research that benefits our communities. International engagement, particularly with our region, has always been a core part of our mission. IRU universities were the first in the country to teach Asia-Pacific studies.

Across the IRU, 21% of our students are international students. We have more diverse international student cohorts than the sector average. We also have higher than average rates of offshore delivery, with successful international campuses.

The context for our consideration of this Bill is the government's changes to visa processing for international students, which were announced as part of its Migration Strategy in December. These have had disproportionate and unfair impacts on our students and universities. While commencements by new international students this year are up across the higher education sector, they are well down across the IRU. The number of new commencements this year by Indian students in our universities has been cut in half. And our universities are wearing a disproportionately high share of the total financial impact reported by Universities Australia for 2024.

We support measures to improve quality and integrity across the international education system, but we do not support this Bill as drafted. For example, we do not support the Minister having legislated powers to control or cancel individual courses within universities.

It is not unreasonable for government to want to have a discussion with universities about the optimal balance of student numbers across the system and we are committed to working constructively with government for a more managed and equitable system, with sustainable growth.

Our first priority is the removal of Ministerial Direction 107, which is unfairly targeting some students and institutions, and actively undermining equity and diversification. We agree with the Minister's statement last week that we need a better way of managing international education.

We believe that it should be the job of the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission to work with universities to set sustainable growth plans for domestic and international students. We support the government's plans for establishing the ATEC and the new "managed growth" funding model.

If government requires additional control over international student numbers before the ATEC is up and running, we believe that this should be done through further amendments to this Bill and the removal of Ministerial Direction 107 at the same time.

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We have proposed a number of amendments to the Bill and recommended that a sunset clause be included so that Ministerial powers are removed as soon as the ATEC is operational.

One particular amendment that I would like to highlight is exemptions for certain groups of students. We believe that the Bill should make it clear that postgraduate research students, exchange students, and students on mobility and transnational education programs (such as 2+2 degree programs) are not included in any limits on overall student numbers.

To conclude on a personal note, I have done two postings as an education counsellor in Australian Embassies overseas and I have seen first-hand the enormous benefits that international education brings for students and for Australia. I am very worried that the way we are talking about international education is harmful to students and damaging Australia's global reputation.

For example, I recently heard from partner universities in Japan that because of student caps in Canada, they are now not able to send exchange students there. They were hoping to send more to Australia but are now worried that that won't be possible either. We run the risk of losing long-term partnerships which will further undermine diversification and reduce opportunities for Australian students to study abroad.

However the Bill proceeds, we need carefully coordinated and targeted communication from government to reassure students and partners that Australia remains committed to international education.