

6 August 2024

Senate Education and Employment Legislation Committee inquiry into the Education Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Quality and Integrity) Bill 2024 [Provisions].

Opening Statement from Alec Webb, Chief Executive Officer, Regional Universities Network.

[check against delivery]

Thank you Chair.

The Regional Universities Network cannot support the introduction of caps targeting Australia's high quality, low risk universities and public vocational education providers.

This Bill, if unchanged, will have profound consequences for regional universities.

Regional Australians welcome international students for the vibrant social, cultural, and economic contributions they make to our communities.

International students and graduates who settle in regional communities play an important role in addressing key skill shortages, and boosting global perspectives within regional classrooms and workforces.

It is important to note that most international students leave Australia after their studies, taking with them a world-class qualification, and an affinity for our culture and way of life.

In my travels I am lucky enough to meet former international students who act as enthusiastic ambassadors and advocates for Australia.

International education is Australia's most successful service export industry. It was responsible for more than half of all GDP growth in 2023.

Australia achieves this in an intensely competitive global market for international students.

If our global competitors were to design a Bill that undermines the jobs, reputation, competitiveness, and the global market share built up by Australia's higher education sector, it would be this Bill.

This Bill accompanies a suite of Government measures that collectively damage Australia's reputation as a destination of choice for international students.

This Bill is a short-term political solution that will cause long-term economic damage.

Ministerial Direction 107 has essentially shut Australia's international education industry to all but a handful of providers and has resulted in a further concentration of students from perceived low risk countries.

The doubling of the non-refundable student visa fee has left Australia as the most expensive destination in the English-speaking world.

For some international students, the non-refundable visa fee is now more expensive than their course, with the outcome of their visa assessment becoming a casino-like gamble.

Competitor nations offer far more certainty at a far lower price, exposing Australia as a high-risk study proposition.

Combined these policy decisions are ill conceived, poorly implemented, and will result in ongoing damage to Australia.

Bluntly, these measures are an act of economic and reputational self-sabotage.

To use an Olympic analogy, it is equivalent to laying down in a rowing race with 500 metres to go, and we all know how that turned out, even 20 years later.

In our submission to this Committee RUN advocates for the following amendments to the Bill:

First, recognise the low-risk nature of public institutions in the international education market and exempt these providers from the course level caps outlined in this Bill.

Second, ensure that regionally-delivered courses, by regionally-headquartered universities, are exempt from total enrolment limits, or at the very least set caps that allow regional universities to return to at least pre-Covid levels.

Third, ensure any caps are negotiated with universities through mission-based compacts by an apolitical entity – not the Minister of the day.

Fourth, remove the ability of a Minister to suspend or cancel course offerings deemed outside of Australia's skills needs, acknowledging that approximately 80 per cent of international students leave Australia after graduation.

And finally, amend the definition of an agent in the Bill. It is far too broad, and unnecessarily blurs the lines between genuine agents and those who simply advocate for the sector.

Thank you.