

Australian Catholic University

**Submission to the Joint Standing Committee
on Australia's Tourism and International
Education Sectors**

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Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Tourism and International Education Sectors
Submission from Australian Catholic University

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
2. CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE LOSS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.....	2
3. ONLINE INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION DELIVERY AND POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN THE SECTOR'S RESILIENCE	4
4. INITIATIVES TO ENSURE POSITIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND PATHWAYS TO BUILD THEIR SKILLS	6
5. OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION TO SUPPORT STRATEGIC AND FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES	7
ATTACHMENT A: PROFILE OF AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY	9

1. Executive Summary

Australian Catholic University (ACU) 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 inquiry).

This submission focuses on the following terms of reference (TOR) in relation to international education, with the following recommendations under each:

- 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 to Australia.

ACU Recommendation 1

Greater consistency across key government agencies, in particular, stronger alignment of Australia's strategies, funding, and practices to support the ongoing recovery, resilience and diversification of the higher education sector.

- Online innovations in education delivery and potential opportunities to strengthen the sector's resilience.

ACU Recommendation 2

Introduce additional targeted grants or initiative funds to enable universities to innovate and pilot new approaches to international education, particularly for online learning, microcredentials and short courses, whilst continuing to support the diversification of international students across Australian universities.

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

No recommendation.

- Opportunities for international education to support strategic and foreign policy objectives.

ACU recommendation 3:

- Ensure a consistent, long-lasting approach to international education through the ongoing support and funding for the New Colombo Plan and potentially reconfigure the program to expand into South and Central America, and*
- Include mechanisms to support mutual recognition of professional qualifications in future free trade agreements.*

In moving forward, ACU would appreciate further clarity on how the outcomes and findings of this inquiry may be used and implemented to support the recovery, resilience and diversification of international education.

2. Challenges associated with the loss of international students

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in unprecedented disruption to the global environment. It is estimated that this generation of students are at risk of losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14% of today's global gross domestic product, because of COVID-19 related school closures and economic shocks¹. Research activity and collaboration have been severely curtailed, student mobility had all but ceased in Australia, international student enrolments collapsed, and institutional endowments were severely impacted. The complete cessation of overseas migration and entry of persons on visas significantly limited Australia's current and future knowledge sharing and research discoveries, with estimates showing that more than 9,000 international research students will not resume their research in Australia². Research undertaken by IDP Connect also shows that countries that closed their borders during the pandemic have seen a decline in students' perception of international student welfare, with students equating open borders to a welcoming international student experience³. The impact of these changes varies across the world, as not all countries responded in the same manner, with the duration of restrictions or time needed to return to normal also differing between countries. As mentioned, student mobility virtually ceased in Australia, however, many countries were continuing to support student mobility throughout the pandemic in some capacity and/or were able to recover and stabilise far more quickly than Australia.

The number of international students in Australia for the January-July 2022 period was down by 4% compared to 2021, however, the number of international students declined by 20% between 2019 and 2022, from 421,145 students to 337,423⁴. Although the borders have now re-opened, it is estimated that it will take an additional 24 months for the international demand pipeline and market to recover⁵. As a result, the sector continues to experience long-lasting impacts on global recruitment markets, international enrolment demand and outbound global engagement opportunities. The university's recovery has also been further hampered by the operationalisation of disconnected policies at the government level, which has resulted in different and often conflicting objectives, strategies and priorities being articulated by key government agencies. It is almost impossible for universities to return to their pre-pandemic student numbers while these tensions and conflicts exist, and Australia is unable to effectively support student visa processing.

The level of competition has increased in the higher education sector with providers now competing for a significantly reduced pool of prospective students. This has resulted in a higher concentration of overseas students, with nine universities in Australia now accounting for 53% of commencing overseas students in 2020, compared to 2019 where a similar proportion of students was distributed across 15 universities⁶. This higher concentration of students is at odds with the Australian International Education Strategy 2021-2030, which emphasises the criticality of diversification in the sector's recovery and mitigation against market shocks and minimisation of risk. The challenge will be to find a way to balance the recovery of the sector with the Australian Government's desire for a more diverse sector in terms of providers, markets, revenue generation, courses, and student cohorts, as well as its commitment to widening participation. The critical question, however, is how universities do more with less, particularly with many universities now

¹ The State of the Global Education Crisis: A path to recovery, 2021, A Joint UNESCO, UNICEF and World Bank Report, [Website](#)

² State of Australia's Skills 2021: now and into the future – five-year employment projections, National Skills Commission, 2021, [Website](#)

³ 'How will Australia's border reopening impact other key study destinations?', IDP Connect, February 2022, [Website](#)

⁴ International Student Data, Austrade [Website](#)

⁵ International student numbers by country, by state and territory, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022, [Website](#)

⁶ Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2020 Student Data (Table 1.10 – Commencing students), Department of Education 2020, [Website](#)

experiencing another round of budget reductions, faculty/ college mergers, and staff cuts due to budgetary pressures⁷.

Adding to this complexity, Australia's traditional source countries for international students are becoming attractive study destinations themselves, while other competitor nations such as the United States of America (USA), United Kingdom (UK) and Canada are also moving more aggressively into the regions. Education technology or 'EdTech' is also flourishing, with global venture capital investment doubling between 2018 and 2020⁸. Linked-In Learning, EdX, Google and Amazon have also become fierce competition, offering professional accreditation that are touted as industry recognised. These alternatives provide students with the opportunity to receive a certificate from a well-known brand but are often more affordable (or even free in some cases), accessible from anywhere in the world and can be completed in a shorter amount of time. EdTech and universities are also competing to attract and retain high calibre staff, however, universities are becoming less and less attractive as they tend to be less agile, flexible and innovative. EdTech companies are extremely attractive options, with more students and staff seeking opportunities that fall outside of traditional higher education. The pandemic has shifted the power to staff and students, who now have far more decision-making power and choice than ever before.

As a result of the pandemic, it is estimated that the higher education sector alone lost over 7,500 staff (FTE) from the sector between 2019 and 2021, however, other figures suggest that close to 35,000 jobs from public universities have been cut⁹. In addition to this, Australia is also currently experiencing a workforce and skills shortage across the country, which is partly due to the closure of borders for two years until late 2021 and subsequent decline of international students studying in Australia. The 2022 Skills Priority List revealed shortages in 286 occupations (out of 914), compared to 153 in 2021, an 87% increase¹⁰. Employees that are in high demand are primarily health care professionals and teachers, however, the top 20 occupations (both current shortage and projected future employment growth) show there are also shortages in the information technology and construction sectors. The decline in international student numbers has also meant losing key resources for intercultural learning, opportunities to foster greater cultural awareness, and enabling long-term global partnerships at the student, community and provider levels.

Universities continue to operate in a highly regulated environment, with the direction, intent and requirements often differing between the Federal and State Governments, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act, and professional accreditation bodies, such as the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council, Victorian Initial Teacher Education (ITE), and NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA). In spite of this, universities are ready and able to produce graduates in areas with the largest skills shortages, such as information technology, education and health. As the largest provider of nurses and teachers in Australia, ACU, in particular, is well-placed to make a significant contribution to the country's workforce and skills shortages, however, a greater degree of flexibility, cohesion and coordination is required to ensure a stronger alignment between accreditation bodies, regulatory standards and government policy. Regulation must keep pace with and recognise the outcomes of new models rather than simply asserting prescriptive 'one size fits all' processes and requirements onto universities.

⁷ Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Staff Full-time Equivalence, Australian Department of Education, 2021, [Website](#)

⁸ Miles, J., 'Chasing unicorns: can universities shape the edtech space to their advantage?', 2022, [Website](#)

⁹ After two years of COVID, how bad has it really been for university finances and staff, Ian Marshman and Frank Larkins, 9 December 2021, [Website](#)

¹⁰ 2022 Skills Priority List released, National Skills Commission, October 2022, [Website](#)

While the Government is continuing to tackle the delays with visa processing and has taken various measures in this area, the onus is also being placed back onto the providers with advice from the Department of Education re-emphasising the sector's role in helping to reduce processing times by reviewing and adjusting recruitment practices. According to the Department, the current visa processing delays correspond to "a greater proportion of high-risk applications, particularly from India, Nepal and Pakistan"¹¹. This advice seems to conflict with the ongoing emphasis on diversification of source markets and student cohorts, as providers will need to broaden their scope, delivery and enrolments in order to diversify, recover and build resilience for themselves as well as the sector. The various Government departments, including the Department of Education, Department of Home Affairs, and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, must find a way to manage 'high-risk' students in a more efficient, timely and appropriate way to support the sector's recovery and resilience, reduce the impact on students experience, and ensure better alignment between the different Department's strategies, policies, advice and practices.

ACU Recommendation 1

Greater consistency across key government agencies, in particular, stronger alignment of Australia's strategies, funding, and practices to support the ongoing recovery, resilience and diversification of the higher education sector.

3. Online innovations in education delivery and potential opportunities to strengthen the sector's resilience

Prior to the pandemic, there had been very little innovation in the delivery models for international students. Under the ESOS Act, students were required to attend classes in-person and would relocate to Australia. Only a limited number of Australian universities were able to afford the significant investment in the delivery of higher education in other countries. The pandemic has highlighted the need for further policy review and reform to ensure the alignment of regulatory standards and codes with the expectations of the community, students, industry, universities and government. The ongoing tension between the National Code and the Threshold Standards, the new paradigm for online learning, and how both regulatory standards encapsulate this paradigm remains unclear. While the Australian International Education Strategy highlights the importance of microcredentials, short courses and work integrated learning for overseas students and markets, most of the Government's initiatives, pilots and funding introduced in these areas has continued to focus on the domestic market. There continues to be a tension or conflict between the strategies and the subsequent allocation of funding which will, over time, undermine the intent and importance of the strategy.

As a result of COVID-19, universities were forced to pivot and quickly shifted to new models of offshore and online education. Now, in this 'post-COVID' environment, the focus must be on how the sector transitions from the emergency online provided during the pandemic to high quality, pedagogically sound online learning experience and seeking to create a more holistic student experience that engages students, fosters a sense of belonging, and provides more impactful support in the online environment. However, the sector is still grappling with the struggle between short-term savings and long-term resilience, with Victoria University merging and reducing the number of colleges¹², Federation University planning to cut its Bachelor of Arts degree due to

¹¹ Department of Education, Student visas, 2022, [Website](#)

¹² Job cuts loom as Victoria University merges six colleges into two, The Age, 16 November 2022, [Website](#)

declining enrolments¹³, and even the University of Melbourne announcing a deficit of \$194 million in 2022¹⁴.

While we continue to operate in relatively uncertain times, the pandemic has shown that Australian universities are able to pivot and transition when given the opportunity. Most universities were able to rapidly move into the online space, showing they have the capability, capacity and willingness to adapt, innovate and transform. These last few years have been equally regulated, if not more so, than previous years with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency publishing 11 reports, good practice guides and resources in the last two years that focused entirely on online learning, online delivery platforms and online student experience. TEQSA has also recognised the need for providers to grow, change and learn from the pandemic rather than seeking to return to normal, as it would be a lost opportunity if providers tried to return to the status quo of two years ago¹⁵.

The introduction and implementation of new pilot programs, innovation-focused initiatives and funding by the Federal and State Governments has increased in Australia, for example, the recent National Priorities and Industry Linkage Fund, Microcredentials Pilot, and Victorian International Education Resilience Fund. However, these programs have tended to focus on the domestic market, even the Microcredentials Pilot earmarked a relatively small proportion of the promised \$32.5 million for offshore delivery¹⁶. More grants, initiatives and programs need to be introduced as a way for providers to innovate and pilot new approaches, modes and offerings but within a tightly regulated environment, with ongoing touchpoints with the Government and measurable performance targets. These would enable providers to pilot new offerings, modes of delivery, new source markets, different student cohorts or study areas, building their own capacity and resilience but also supporting the recovery, diversification and resilience of Australia's higher education sector as a whole. The concentration of domestic, international or online students across a small number of providers is not beneficial, nor does it protect the country or sector from market shocks or mitigate against risks. Without the appropriate support and ability to take measured risks, the online market will again be concentrated within a few providers.

ACU Recommendation 2

Introduce additional targeted grants or initiative funds to enable universities to innovate and pilot new approaches to international education, particularly for online learning, microcredentials and short courses, whilst continuing to support the diversification of international students across Australian universities.

¹³ Federation University's decision to axe arts program draws criticism from critical thinkers, ABC News, 6 August 2022, [Website](#)

¹⁴ University of Melbourne faces \$600m budget collapse in 2022, The Australian, 18 October 2022, [Website](#)

¹⁵ How do universities survive and thrive into the future? Panel Discussion with Andrew Norton, Claire Field and Dr Helen Gniel, 29 March 2022, [Website](#)

¹⁶ Microcredentials Pilot in Higher Education Factsheet, Department of Education, 9 November 2022, [Website](#)

4. Initiatives to ensure positive international student experience and pathways to build their skills

During their first year, commencing students not only establish the basis for their future academic performance, but the first-year experience is also crucial time to enable student engagement, success and retention¹⁷. As a result, ACU has placed particular emphasis on the first-year experience, focusing on addressing the causes leading to disengagement and the potential decision to withdraw. The university is implementing a new holistic approach, which introduces a distinctive and specific pedagogical approach and correlated co-curricular engagement. As part of this, ACU's Connect2Uni program supports first year students to successfully and seamlessly transition into university life. The program is a combination of support services, programs and activities that are designed to foster a student's sense of belonging and ease the transition at ACU from the point of offer until the end of their first year. Focusing on transition and retention, Connect2Uni includes diverse and creative ways to facilitate students early engagement with ACU and increase their awareness of the support framework through virtual welcome sessions, a gamified virtual 'Get to Know ACU' quest, social and academic transition and orientation programs, student mentoring programs, and peer-to-peer study sessions.

This year, the university piloted a new Student Transition Program for international students based at the Melbourne and Ballarat campuses, which was made possible by funding from the Victorian Government through Study Melbourne. The Student Transition Program leveraged specifically designed and built virtual reality e-learning platform, mentoring tools and pre-existing pedagogical strengths to create an engaging end-to-end student experience for offshore and onshore international students. It focused on creating a strong sense of belonging for students, with a series of offshore and onshore virtual and face-to-face events and activities being delivered, including:

- Online and face-to-face offshore pre-departure sessions to increase students' readiness to travel to Australia;
- Diverse academic guest lectures from ACU staff, industry groups and alumni, which aligned with the students programs of study; and
- A sequence of interconnected social engagement activities to help students transition into onshore campus life in Victoria.

In addition the focus on the first-year experience, ACU was able to proactively respond to the pandemic by re-orienting its marketing and recruitment strategies to meet the evolving market environment, providing practical and emotional support to our students, and delivering a program of virtual global learning abroad opportunities. The university's Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) transitioned to online classes with the necessary amendments being made and, despite the impact of COVID-19, was able to exceed its enrolment targets in 2020. In 2020, ACU was also able to deliver the Foundation Studies program for the first time. As per the Foundation Studies standards, the program focuses on equipping students with the knowledge and skills required for entry into undergraduate programs. ACU's Foundation Studies is designed to build students meta-learning skills and their confidence to ensure they are able to succeed at university.

International students can also access and utilise the university's suite of success and retention-focused programs, in particular, the Student Mentoring Program and Peer Assisted Study Sessions, as well as the academic skills-based services provided by the Academic Skills Unit and an online academic support platform, Studiosity. All ACU students can access career development

¹⁷ Nelson and Clarke, 2014; Tinto, 1993

and employability programs, events and support services to enhance their employability, together with other opportunities, such as professional placements, internships, volunteer work or community service throughout the course of their studies at ACU.

With the world becoming increasingly digital, the university launched its Consultancy Hub in 2020 as a proactive response to this challenge and the growing need for new skills to meet the demands of new business models. The Hub enables information technology, business and law students to work remotely with ACU's partner organisations, providing much needed advice while developing students' employability skills.

5. Opportunities for international education to support strategic and foreign policy objectives

As outlined in the Australian International Education Strategy, international education can strengthen Australia's reputation and profile globally as well as foster greater cultural awareness, create influential alumni networks, and provide pathways for highly skilled graduates. The New Colombo Plan (NCP) has been critical and continues to support Australia's social and economic development, soft diplomacy and connection with the region. It is estimated that the number of Australian students who benefitted from the NCP through study and internships reached over 31,000 in 2018 and 40,000 in 2020¹⁸. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade anticipates that the NCP alumni will play an increasingly important role, becoming an influential and diverse network of Australians in the years ahead¹⁹. While the importance of the NCP is widely known, the Government must commit to ensuring a consistent approach and ongoing funding to support this program and consider potential to extend it into Central and South America in support of Australia's regional focus and initiatives.

In 2017, Australia's education-related travel services exports were worth \$30 billion, with exports to Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership countries accounting for 14.1% of the total (valued at \$4.3 billion). At the time, Malaysia and Vietnam were Australia's third and fifth largest education services export markets²⁰. International education should sit at the heart of Australia's policy objectives as a way to foster stronger partnerships and alliances, strengthen Australia's standing globally, and build a more resilient economy. Free trade agreements present an opportunity for Australia and universities to diversify student cohorts and source countries as well as ensure smoother facilitation of international research projects. The inclusion of mutual recognition of professional qualifications in free trade agreements will further support the internationalisation of Australia's professional services sector, support industry associations and regulators, and help make it easier for professionals to practise overseas.

Education is a powerful driver of development and one of the strongest instruments for reducing poverty and improving health, gender equality, peace and stability. Although the disparity between countries has declined, the level of inequality within countries has increased significantly, with the gap between the average incomes of the top 10% and bottom 50% of individuals almost doubling in some regions²¹. Globally, the poor are being left behind across a critical mass of indicators.

¹⁸ New Colombo Plan: A review of research and implications for practice, Tran, L. and Rahimi, M., page 4, 2018, [Website](#)

¹⁹ McConachie, B., The New Colombo Plan: Addressing the barriers to scholarship recipients' contributing to Australia's public diplomacy goals in China, 2020, [Website](#)

²⁰ CPTPP outcomes: Services, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019, [Website](#)

²¹ World Inequality Report, World Inequality Lab, United Nations, 2021, [Website](#)

The world is at a turning point but remains full of critical dichotomies – higher living standards coexist with gaping inequalities, while rapid technological changes are transforming lives but are not adequately directed at equity, inclusion and democratic participation²². The heavy reliance on online learning during the pandemic has also exacerbated the existing unequal distribution of support for education. Many governments did not have the policies, resources, or infrastructure to roll-out online learning in a way that ensured all children could participate on an equal basis²³.

In the 21st century, population growth and environmental degradation are significant threats to humanity. Unprecedented growth of the population and economic growth is placing significant pressure on our environments and ecosystems. Climate change is the defining issue of our time, and no country today is immune from the impacts. By 2050, it is estimated that 216 million people will be forced to migrate within their own countries²⁴. According to the World Bank, an investment of around US\$90 trillion is needed in infrastructure by 2030, however, this would be recouped in transitioning to a green economy as, on average, every \$1 invested would yield \$4 in benefits²⁵.

ACU Recommendation 3

- i) Ensure a consistent, long-lasting approach to international education through the ongoing support and funding for the New Colombo Plan and potentially reconfigure the program to expand into South and Central America, and*
- ii) Include mechanisms to support mutual recognition of professional qualifications in future free trade agreements.*

²² Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, 2021, [Website](#)

²³ Human Rights Watch, Pandemic's Dire Global Impact on Education, 2021, [Website](#)

²⁴ Climate Change, The World Bank, 2022, [Website](#)

²⁵ Financing Climate Action, United Nations, 2020, [Website](#)

Attachment A: Profile of Australian Catholic University

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all people and faiths, and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition. As is common with great Catholic institutions the world over, the University is inclusive and supportive of everyone, regardless of their faith or tradition.

An ACU education builds on the Catholic understanding of faith and reason working together in pursuit of knowledge and promotion of human dignity and the common good. An ACU education seeks to transform lives and communities. Students are challenged to look beyond the classroom, solve real world problems, develop their own search for meaning, and cultivate strong professional ethics. They are invited to stand up for people in need and causes that matter.

Opportunities for personal and professional growth are critical to ACU. This is a university of service – so much so that it is built into the curricula – with all ACU courses offering work placements, internships, or volunteering opportunities.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with seven campuses across three states and one territory. The university's campuses are located in Ballarat, Blacktown, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne, North Sydney and Strathfield. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is a young university making a serious impact. Ranked in the top two per cent of universities worldwide²⁶ and in the top 10 Catholic universities²⁷, ACU is also first in Australia for graduate employment²⁸.

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia²⁹ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. ACU has four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world. In 2020, ACU had over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.³⁰

²⁶ *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2021. Percentage calculated as ACU's world rank as a proportion of the total number of universities in the world: *International Handbook of Universities 2019*, Palgrave MacMillan.

²⁷ International Federation of Catholic Universities members ranked on *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2021.

²⁸ Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal 2020, full-time employment

²⁹ Department of Education and Training, *2019 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses*. Section 8, table 8.3

³⁰ ACU *Pocket Statistics 2022*.