

Roundtable on International Education

Department of Education and Training

28 August 2015



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Contents

Background.....	3
1 Support for a more ambitious and inclusive vision for international education.....	5
2 Promote the benefits of international education.....	6
3 Better information about student experience.....	7
4 More flexible approach to regulation to support innovation.....	8
5 More engagement between industry and providers.....	8
6 More focus on VET, schools and ELICOS.....	9
Concluding comments	10

Background

The Department of Education and Training (the Department) hosted the second of two Roundtables on International Education on 13 August 2015. The purpose of this forum was to discuss the Draft National Strategy for International Education. Robert Griew from the Nous Group (Nous) facilitated the roundtable which followed the agenda shown below in Table 1.

Participants at the first roundtable, held on 25 June 2015, were asked to reflect on the vision for Australian international education and on the scope for the strategy. The themes arising from the first roundtable included:

1. The vision, governance and success measures should be improved
2. There should be a stronger focus on the student experience and student choice
3. The strategy should comprehensively address employment and employability issues
4. There are some issues to resolve in higher education and research policy that affect Australia's place in the international education market
5. There is much more to say about the school, VET and English language sectors and new innovative frontiers in the Strategy

The second roundtable had a different group of participants and was structured to build on the outcomes from the first roundtable. To help drive the discussion, the design of the second roundtable focused on the key challenges and on prioritising specific actions to address these challenges. As a result, the discussions were more practical and less contextual.

The facilitator introduced the roundtable with the following problem statement:

Australia is a leader in international education but we need to maintain and grow this position. We need to better understand and prepare for the changes across all of the relevant sectors. And we need to respond proactively to changes in the international education market to maintain our leadership position.

This set the tone for the first session where the non-government members of the Coordinating Council for International Education led discussion on a new vision for international education.

Participants opted for a broader, forward looking and inclusive vision. For an overview of this session on the revised vision, see Section 1.

During the second session, the key challenges relevant to achieving the vision were broken down by sector and stakeholder group and presented to each table for discussion. Tables were given a particular type of challenge. For example 'making the most of the opportunities through our quality schools sector' was a challenge for the table with representatives from the schools and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sectors.

There was a noteworthy degree of consensus on the key issues that need to be addressed in the final strategy. At times tables reported on the importance of issues in other sectors. For example, the 'Schools and ELICOS' table highlighted the importance having of a strong research base in higher education.

The collaborative atmosphere among participants and their willingness to have a broad discussion led to identification of issues and solutions that 'cut across the sectors.' This was in fact a phrase that was used multiple times throughout the day.

The key challenges and priority actions can be summarised under four themes:

1. We need to better market Australian education offerings to ensure our continued position as leader
2. We need better coordination and strategic analysis of data on successes, trends, and the changing international market
3. We need to better understand and play to our strengths, across and within specific sectors
4. We need to better engage with employers across a number of sectors to improve the employability skills of our graduates.

This report summarises the discussion on the vision, key themes, and actions to address the key challenges. Participants also left written notes of their table discussions and individual feedback. These have been incorporated into this report. This report and the written feedback will assist in finalising the strategy, which is expected to be completed by the end of 2015.

Table 1: Roundtable agenda

Time	Session
9.30am	Arrival and coffee
10.00am	Welcome
10.05am	Opening plenary: Achieving our potential – Overview of key priorities and activities to support International Education – Ministers of the Coordinating Council
11.45am	Morning tea
11.00am	Session one: The vision for Australian international education
11.30pm	Session two: Key challenges arising from feedback to date
12.15pm	Session three: Measures to achieve our potential (part one)
1.00pm	Lunch
1.30pm	Session three: Measures to achieve our potential (part two)
2.05pm	Next steps
2.15pm	Close

1 Support for a more ambitious and inclusive vision for international education

The first roundtable and written submissions strongly stressed the need for the vision statement in the Draft National Strategy to be ambitious and inclusive of all sectors. There was a push for the vision to include the wider benefits international education brings to Australian culture, communities, cities, regional towns and employers. It was suggested the strategy needs not just an economic goal, but also social and international relations goals to showcase its potential to transform lives.

As noted earlier, the first roundtable focused on the scope and purpose of the national strategy and on a vision statement that would capture our shared purpose and ambition. At the second roundtable, participants were asked to provide feedback on three options put forward by the non-government members of the Coordinating Council. These options were:

Option 1. Australian international education is globally respected as a transformative force in realising the potential of individuals, communities and economies.

Option 2. Australia's world-leading international education, training and research are primary drivers of social advancement, global engagement and economic prosperity and are recognised globally for its outstanding student experience and graduate outcomes.

Option 3. To build a stronger Australia that delivers the highest quality international education support, provision and outcomes.

Participants expressed a preference for Option 1. They liked the reference to Australia's reputation globally and 'transformative' experiences. They felt the word 'global' highlights the actions of the strategy being implemented across the world, as well as within Australia, for example through transnational education or research partnerships. The reference to experiences was also well received, and many participants wanted to strengthen this further by replacing the word 'individual' with 'student' or 'learner'. The word 'learner' was well received by participants as it is more inclusive of adult learners and the concept of life-long learning.

Suggestions to enhance the vision included the addition of specific targets. The targets could be around world rankings or broader indicators like social advancement. Some participants felt that this would lead to a more focused vision.

Other feedback was that the vision could be more 'forward looking' and it was suggested that the words 'aspires to be', 'domestic economic prosperity' and 'global engagement' could be added to Option 1.

This feedback was collated following the session and a number of revised possible vision statements were presented later in the day. Participants agreed on the revised vision statement:

Australian international education is a transformative force in realising the potential of learners, communities and economies.

We turn now to the feedback from the roundtable regarding the key challenges and priority actions for inclusion in the final strategy.

2 Promote the benefits of international education

Communications strategy

Participants consistently recommended the final strategy include a communication strategy that promotes the different ways international education supports Australian businesses and jobs across a range of sectors, both in cities and regional Australia. The objective of a communication strategy would be to build understanding within Australian communities of the benefits of international education to Australian businesses, employers and the wider community.

Consistent with this, participants envisaged domestic messaging aimed at myth busting and promoting cultural awareness and understanding. They felt that the communication strategy will need to respond to ill-informed views in the community such as seeing international students as a threat to domestic jobs and education places.

Participants also want international education to be a primary mechanism for promoting cultural awareness and language learning so both domestic and international students can better understand and learn from each other. It was suggested that this could also be used to support messaging to an international audience.

A number of participants also want to see the sector project a strong national brand. Achieving balance is important when doing this as there is a strong desire of individual institutions to promote their brands as well as the need for a national approach. It also needs to recognise that there are different priorities between regions and institutions.

In implementing the communication strategy, participants saw the need for a better understanding of the long term objectives. In discussion, participants raised some fundamental questions in this regard. For example, one participant asked whether the university sector should be focussed on growing international student numbers or developing durable international alumni relationships.

The communication strategy could also help to diversify engagement in regional areas. Many participants wanted to see more opportunities for regional Australia as there are a number of regional centres in Australia that want to attract more international students.

Similarly, the strong leadership shown by a number of city councils, such as Melbourne and Brisbane were also highlighted. It is important that examples of this leadership are included as case studies and examples of best practice in the final strategy.

Measures of success

Some participants suggested that the final strategy should include some targets. At the start of the roundtable, Phil Honeywood highlighted New Zealand's inclusion of ambitious yet realistic targets in their highly successful international education campaign 'Think New'. Targets were mentioned again in Session 1 during conversations about the vision for the strategy with the point being that targets can strongly communicate intent to take action.

During the opening plenary, Parliamentary Secretary Ciobo also highlighted Austrade's market development plan targets to have 1 million students onshore and 10 million students offshore by 2025. Key to this, of course, is gathering the right statistics on international education. For further detail on the issue of data see Section 3.

International Students' Day

A number of participants recommended the introduction of an annual International Students' Day. This suggestion was also raised in the first roundtable. The objective of the day would be to raise awareness

of the importance of international education in Australia and reaffirm Australia as a welcoming country that celebrates international students and their relationships with local Australian communities.

This could assist to advocate for student safety and equitable treatment in healthcare and transport concessions, and clear standards for service providers (i.e. homestay and accommodation).

Participants suggested that an annual International Students' Day would provide students, institutions, local communities, and all levels of government with the opportunity to share good news stories. It could also help to communicate a message that international students are welcomed in Australia.

High level coordination

A number of participants suggested the establishment of a more autonomous body to lead Australia's international education strategy. It might be named something like 'Education Australia' and be modelled on bodies such as the British Council, noting the British Council has a wider role.

This organisation would not necessarily be a government body, and could have joint support from industry, government and others. The role of this body would be to reinforce the idea that employers, education providers, the community and the State and Commonwealth Government share the same goals. It could perform functions currently undertaken by the International Education Division of the Department of Education and Training. It could also share good practices and common learnings.

3 Better information about student experience

Participants were pleased with the Strategy's focus on student experience but wanted to take this further and called for greater support to deliver it. Several tables of delegates called for comprehensive survey data that they could use for planning and quality improvement of services and activities. Two initiatives were proposed to address this. One is to broaden the range of existing surveys to capture more data about inbound and outbound students, as well as students studying wholly offshore. The second is to extend the coverage and utility of existing information resources, such as the International Student Barometer which is used routinely by many Australian universities and (with Australian Government assistance) has been extended out to VET and English language providers. The Australian Government also facilitates an equivalent survey of international school students.

Better data capture with improved surveys

The objective of this idea is to improve student experience and share good practices from across Australia. Participants proposed that more data could be collected from international students in Australia and recipients of Australian education services overseas. The type of data would be similar to a highly detailed alumni survey which is regularly sent out to track student progress and outcomes. This could also help to assess the extent to which students (or other governments) get a return on their investment of studying in Australia.

International Student Barometer

Participants saw a need for a central pool of ideas and learnings on what works to improve student experiences and create better outcomes for international students whether they remain in Australia for a period after graduation or return to their home country. It was suggested that the existing data collected through the International Student Barometer (or equivalent mechanisms) could be developed to allow stakeholders from all sectors to see the characteristics and experiences of international students in their university, city, region, and or state. This would build a greater awareness of the scale of international education domestically and help people to consider local issues within a broader national framework.

4 More flexible approach to regulation to support innovation

Many participants recognised the opportunity that lies in new frontiers for international education and recommended that these be embraced strategically. This means leveraging the areas where Australia has a strong track record or unique advantage e.g. ELICOS, curriculum development, high quality research and cultural diversity to build a sustainable competitive advantage. Three suggestions were proposed in this approach.

Unlock intellectual property

Some participants stated they believed that while Australia is a leader in curriculum development, there is a danger of our curricula becoming stale or not being responsive or effectively tailored to particular market urged government and regulators to consider a flexible approach to allow for innovations such as borderless accreditation. Australia has access to vast amount of intellectual property that could be applied to deliver tailored curricula for different countries and skills needs. One participant provided the example that a graduate from an Australian nursing course could be equipped to work in Australia or the Middle East. To implement this idea, there would need to be support through bilateral government agreements and relationships with industry on qualification and professional recognition.

Streamline innovation in curriculum development

Participants also suggested that we need to speed up the length of time that is taken to develop and accredit curriculum. This includes more flexibility to unbundle qualifications and offer tailored skills content, especially for international markets, where there is more work with third party partners.

Regulatory arrangements are a barrier at present, leading at the very least to long delays. Processes as well as the structures built in to standards may need to be revised. Not only would this enable the development of the 'borderless courses' described above, but it could also help to 'un-shelve' Australian curriculum to support greater use in overseas universities or industries.

Strengthen research

Participants also wanted the final strategy to reflect and strengthen the role that research plays in developing intellectual capital in education. The point was made at a number of tables that the current draft strategy, and indeed too much of the current thinking, sees research collaboration as a separate endeavour to international education. More focus is needed on the excellent long term outcomes from both research collaborations and research training. These include novel IP development, educational opportunity in other countries and Australia's relationship with a highly mobile class of technologists, researchers and innovators internationally.

5 More engagement between industry and providers

Another theme that was repeated from the first to the second roundtable was the need for greater collaboration between industry and education providers to build employability skills. Participants suggested this could be supported in the curriculum and by increasing awareness of international student work entitlements among employers. The development of quality work integrated learning in the Australian tertiary education system was also highlighted as an underdeveloped strength.

One participant referenced the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade portal for the New Colombo Plan's internship component. This was hailed as a successful initiative by Minister Bishop at the start of the roundtable. Participants wanted to see this platform rolled out across the sector as an international interface of opportunities for employers. There is, they pointed out, one employer community but many opportunities to interface in the current environment.

Two further points are worth highlighting from the second roundtable.

The existence of a mobile professional population was raised. The Australian international education sector should not just be thinking in terms of international students who come to Australia to study and possibly to take advantage of some post study employment. There are others who will go on to employment in a third country, possibly becoming a genuinely mobile international professional. The point was made that for these students, employment opportunities and work integrated learning are especially important.

One table raised the possibility of Australian universities partnering with multinational employers. This could build a mobile class of professionals and orchestrate a new international education offering that includes work integrated learning and post study employment opportunities.

The second suggestion was for a renewed focus on research training in Australia, which is presently becoming anachronistic in the view of those who raised it. If research training were more genuinely aligned with industry then greater opportunities for work integrated research training would follow. This would attract a new cohort of postgraduate students who could become innovation professionals and leaders for Australian and regional business. They called for stronger ties with industry modelled on the Canadian Mitacs scheme, and for the New Colombo Plan to be expanded to encompass post-graduate research training.

6 More focus on schools, ELICOS and VET

Participants at the second roundtable reinforced a strong point from the first roundtable, that understanding and playing to our strengths in school education is essential achieving this in international education more broadly. To enhance our strength and potential in the schools and ELICOS sectors, a number of participants called for the final strategy to have a distinct focus on the schools sector. This idea is based on the premise that the schools sector is distinct from the tertiary education sectors and starts from a different stage of development.

Some suggested a separate Schools and ELICOS sub-strategy. This strategy could establish goals and have a focus that is solely for the school sector and would maximise the potential of schools to engage in international education. Participants suggested that this will allow schools to collaborate without the threat of internal competition. A sub-strategy could also advocate for amendment of regulation that is currently deterring non-government schools from meaningfully engaging in international education. Participants felt that a sub-strategy might also work better for employers.

Others suggested there should instead be a priority to put concerted effort into amending the national strategy to be more inclusive of the schools and ELICOS sectors.

There were also calls for the final strategy to include more content on VET. A number of participants acknowledged the growth potential for the VET, particularly offshore. Participants again called for greater recognition of and actions to support these opportunities in the final strategy.

Concluding comments

At the end of the roundtable participants were encouraged to leave comments on tables and to take the opportunity to contribute further by email.

As has already been noted, the roundtable was characterised by a collaborative spirit. It strongly reinforced the message that the final strategy needed to be more ambitious, more inclusive of all education sectors and supported by leadership from the industry and the sector.

The discussion at the second roundtable on the vision and key challenges built on the outcomes of the first roundtable. This report captures the discussion and outcomes arising from the second roundtable on a new vision for international education and the priority actions to be included in the final strategy.