Group of Eight (Go8) response to the Draft National Strategy for International Education

The Go8 welcomes the opportunity to respond to the “Draft National Strategy for International Education” [“the Draft Strategy”]. The Go8 comprises Australia’s eight leading research universities. Their distinguishing features are the intensity and breadth of the research they perform, the research-informed nature of the education they offer, and the leadership they bring to community debate and consideration of complex issues.

The performance and reputation of Go8 universities as research institutions is vital to the international reputation of Australian higher education as a whole. Importantly their international reputation and their high position in the global ranking of universities, play a critical role in establishing Australia as an attractive destination for international students.

- In 2013, the Go8 universities enrolled almost 350,000 higher education students. These included over 73,000 international higher education students, which is around one in every three international higher education students in Australia. The total figure for enrolled international students rises to over 90,000 when offshore students are included.
- The Go8 universities enrolled 48 per cent of all HDR students in Australia (domestic and international) and accounted for 49 per cent of international HDR completions in 2013.
- Students from 212 nations came to study at a Go8 university in 2013.

Introduction

The Draft Strategy and its vision acknowledges that international education is an important economic driver. International education is one of Australia’s leading export industries, and Australia’s biggest services export. In addition, international education provides an important and essential support for soft diplomacy, including through the development of lifelong international connections.

The Draft Strategy acknowledges that the global market for international education is highly competitive.

The Draft Strategy’s endorsement of all the findings of the Chaney Report (Australia—Educating Globally), particularly that supporting the establishment of a Ministerial Coordinating Council for International Education, is significant and welcome.
The Go8 strongly supports acceptance of the Chaney report recommendations, particularly the establishment of a Ministerial Coordinating Council of International Education to ensure a ‘whole of government’ approach.

The Government shows it understands there is consensus at the strategic level in our sector about the need for coordination and policy consistency across State and Federal Government and the relevant departmental portfolios.

Such coordination has been lacking, and is long overdue in view of the significance and value to Australia of the international education industry. A greater level of coordination by Government and policy consistency is required to facilitate the sustainable growth of international education in Australia.

In particular, the Go8 would recommend stronger policy coordination and cooperation between the departments responsible for Education, Border Protection and Immigration, and Trade. While the proposed Ministerial Council would go some way towards achieving this, genuine reform would need to go beyond high level meetings. There is also a need for the Commonwealth to work more closely with the States and Territories to ensure better support for international students in the areas of health, accommodation and public transport.

Unfortunately, this support for whole of government action on international education has been dealt an early challenge with cuts to sustainable research excellence (SRE) funding in the Federal Budget 2015-16.

The effects of those cuts should not be underestimated. They will affect our international reputation. Not immediately, because of the data time lag of at least two years, but there will be a subsequent and ongoing decline of Australian universities in global rankings (which are largely based on research metrics) that will affect the attractiveness of Australia as a destination for international students.

Put simply, Go8 world rankings are a major “brand health” tool. They are what attract international students to our Universities. A decline in rankings equals a decline in international students. Reduced world class performance resulting from reduced funding will also affect the ability of research universities to attract international research partnerships.

The flow-on effects of the Federal Budget 2015–2016 must be taken into consideration as consultation moves forward on the Draft Strategy.

As it stands, the Draft Strategy is very high level and as such does not set out specific actions the sector can assess in this round of consultation. If the strategy is to be effective, it will be necessary to translate its goals and strategic actions into concrete initiatives. This is why it is disappointing and disturbing to see that the Budget, although endorsing the strategy and the importance of international education, has at the same time cut the research funding that sustains the international reputation of Australian universities.
Different views within the sector as they relate to the Draft Strategy will not be about high level principles, but to the missing detail in the Draft Strategy on new actions, and implementation of any actions supporting the stated goals will affect stakeholders such as education providers.

That stated, the Go8 agrees that the Draft Strategy is comprehensive and includes the most important overarching factors that need to be addressed.

At the most basic level, it is important to acknowledge that while it is the third largest export earner for Australia, international education is not a commodity like coal and iron. The full potential for providing international education and research can be unleashed only by maintaining and striving to increase the quality of the education services we provide, and by improving the international reputation of Australia’s education providers.

The Go8 emphasises that the full potential for international education is not achieved through an unfettered increase in the volume of students via the uniform relaxation of requirements. The full potential can only be realised by maintaining an equilibrium between international student growth and the provision of a world class student experience that depends on quality support services and infrastructure, such as student accommodation and teaching facilities, including laboratories.

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<th>Goal 1: Creating a world-class education system</th>
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<td>To be globally competitive, Australia will continue to work to create an education system that stands out as the best in the world, with some of our institutions ranked among the very best.</td>
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| Strategic action 1.1 Embracing the freedom to achieve excellence |
| Stratgeic action 1.2 Investing in world-class research and research infrastructure |
| Strategic action 1.3 Supporting better information on quality performance |
| Strategic action 1.4 Provide quality assurance while reducing red tape |

- The Go8 believes that to be globally competitive in attracting international students and research partnerships, Australia must have an education system that stands out as among the best in the world as assessed by peer organisations and international ranking schemes.
- The Go8 notes that the draft strategy, which was released in April 2015 after the defeat of the HERRA Bill for the second time, presupposes the eventual passage of the structural reforms. Without the reforms necessary to produce a robust and sustainable higher education system, the longevity of the strategy and its potential success remain at risk.
- In particular, major reform and a sustainable funding system are needed to ensure adequate and predictable funding for research. Research quality and reputation are the key drivers in international
markets. Recent cuts to SRE show that the current dysfunctional funding system exposes research funding to particular risk.

- The Go8 is a vocal supporter of maintaining NCRIS funding. However, the Go8 is concerned that continued funding for NCRIS comes at the expense of SRE. This is a contradictory policy that threatens our high research standards, and consequently threatens the international reputation of Australia’s universities.
- The Go8 strongly supports improved coordination of government policy and programs for international education and mechanisms that provide better consultative opportunities for stakeholders. These can lead to the optimisation of government support for the international education sector.

### Goal 2: Building on strong and emerging international partnerships

To raise Australia’s profile as a world leader in education, we will build on our strong education and research partnerships and broaden engagement in international education.

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<th>Strategic action 2.1 Strengthening and diversifying institutional partnerships</th>
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<td>Strategic action 2.2 Investing in high-quality international research collaborations</td>
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<td>Strategic action 2.4 Broadening engagement to create new opportunities</td>
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- Building strategic partnerships with high calibre international partners for higher education, research and research translation is of paramount importance. It is also timely and appropriate given the successful completion or near-completion of economic agreements (FTA’s) with China, Japan, Korea and India. These nations will seek evidence that Australia values such agreements and backs this up through investment and actions.
- Increased Government investment - through the Australia-India Strategic Research Fund (AISRF); the Australia-China Science and Research Fund (ACSRF); the Australian Research Council’s Linkage and Industrial Transformation Research schemes and Centres of Excellence; and Austrade’s promotion of Australia’s innovation system - is essential to build partnerships for higher education and research.
- Building and strengthening collaboration with high-quality international partners, including with industry, for research and higher education, is at the heart of the Go8 international strategy.
- Policy and funding settings that support world-class research quality are vital to fostering international research collaboration. If Australian universities are to continue to collaborate with the best in the world, they need to be at that standard themselves, and have access to world leading equipment and facilities.
Goal 3: Fostering an international outlook

Australia will foster an international outlook to better prepare Australian students and researchers for global engagement.

Strategic action 3.1 Preparing students for global engagement
Strategic action 3.2 Rejuvenating language study

- The Go8 supports fostering an international outlook across the education pipeline, commencing in primary school and culminating in the provision of international mobility scholarships (for both students and staff) that strengthen capacity to build higher education and research partnerships.
- The New Colombo Plan (NCP) is a genuine success story for the Government, and the growing numbers of Australian students and participant countries is highly desirable. Participation in the NCP is a sign of close cooperation with Australia. The Go8 strongly supports the continuation and measured expansion of the NCP.

Goal 4: Attracting international talent

To enhance Australia’s global reputation, Australia will attract more of the world’s talented students and researchers and promote Australia as a quality destination for international students.

Strategic action 4.1 Attracting students from around the world
Strategic action 4.2 Marketing Australia as a high-quality education destination
Strategic action 4.3 Building lasting connections with alumni

- The government should use its government-to-government and multinational dialogues to progress international recognition of Australian qualifications and the effectiveness of Australia’s quality assurance mechanisms.
- There is the potential to make better use of international alumni networks in the building of global partnerships across a greater range of countries.
Goal 5: Ensuring a positive and rewarding student experience

To build on Australia’s competitive advantages, we will continue to improve the quality of the educational and living experience for international students.

Strategic action 5.1 Maintaining competitive visas and strong consumer protections
Strategic action 5.2 Identifying work experience opportunities
Strategic action 5.3 Improving English language proficiency
Strategic action 5.4 Improving access to public transport and health services
Strategic action 5.5 Improving access to suitable and affordable accommodation
Strategic action 5.6 Increasing community engagement

- An effective, coordinated and comprehensive student support program would ensure community engagement opportunities, student wellbeing, affordable accommodation, diversification, transport concessions, access to medical services, international education quality, consumer protection and targeted information. This should be a focus of improved Commonwealth-State cooperation, with the aim of placing domestic and international students on an equivalent basis in their ability to access student concessions.
- Go8 universities are investing in improving international student accommodation and further improvements are possible with greater government support and a more coherent sector strategy. The strategy should explore the best ways of achieving this.
- The Go8 supports a role for Australian employers in recruiting graduates, both domestic and international, as well as in providing work experience opportunities and Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities that assist students to develop employability skills.

Goal 6: Embracing opportunities to grow international education

Australia will grow international education services, by embracing new technologies and responding to demand for offshore education and training services.

Strategic action 6.1 Leading good practice in new modes of delivery, including online
Strategic action 6.2 Enhancing opportunities to provide education services overseas
Strategic action 6.3 Understanding the opportunities
• The Go8 cautions against the too rapid expansion of international education enrolments because of the risks this could pose to Australia’s international reputation as a provider of high quality education services. Expansion must be backed by quality support services and infrastructure. Australia should consider higher international enrolments only when measurement mechanisms indicate student satisfaction and employment outcomes are positive.

• The Go8 supports a proportionate regulatory approach with regard to student visas, especially for SVP, where a small number of large, established, reputable institutions should be under a ‘lighter touch’ review than a large number of new and small-capitalised private providers. Such an approach should recognise the reputational risk to all providers of inappropriate behaviour at the bottom of the market.

• The Go8 supports developing effective relationships with appropriate partners to generate opportunities for growth offshore. Education is a government-controlled sector in most of Australia’s major markets. A coordinated Government program and expert offshore education counsellors can open up opportunities. However, there is a need to maintain world’s best standards and academic values at offshore campuses and in international partnerships.

• Online education has a place but should not become a central feature of Australian university education in overseas markets, to the extent it would diminish our reputation for quality relative to competing global education hubs. We should not become a ‘bulk exporter’ of international education but should promote globally Australia’s position as a provider of highest quality international education.