

COVID-19 Response Inquiry

15 December 2023

The Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the COVID-19 Response Inquiry.

Australian universities, through Australia's international education sector, provide a critical pillar that supports Australia's economy, skills base, development, and diplomatic, trade and investment effort. Never has this been felt more acutely than during the pandemic when students overseas could not come to Australia to begin or continue their studies and those already here were excluded from Commonwealth support and urged to go home.

A common misconception was, and continues to be, that the disruption in international education would only be felt in Australia's education industry. This could not be further from the truth. Prior to the pandemic, international education was Australia's fourth largest export and its economic enabling effect for secondary and allied industries was long established particularly in tourism, hospitality, and retail, both through students' expenditure and their workforce participation. International education's economic and social impact should not have been underestimated or deprioritised to the extent it was in the response to COVID-19.

There has been and remains a deep and growing relationship between international education, temporary migration and pathways to permanent residency to meet skills shortages in priority sectors. It is important to remember international education's ongoing relationship with the imperative to produce skilled graduates and boost research activity to underpin Australia's economic development both in terms of short-term workforce needs and over the longer-term. The response to COVID-19 disrupted the links between international education and Australia's workforce needs in ways that took more than two years to repair for many sectors of the economy, noting that some have not yet recovered.

These fundamental features of the international education sector must be clearly articulated to the Australian community at large. The sector needs their support now and will need their support in event of another crisis..

Recommendations

In preparation for a future crisis, the Government should lead coordinated and combined efforts to:

1. **Ensure government and community support for temporary migrants, recognising our mutual commitment to each other, the importance of social cohesion and the value they bring to Australia**
2. **Ensure that there is cooperation across all levels of government and industry and advocacy groups, especially when assessing the economic, social and community impact of measures such as border closures and the provision of welfare and support**
3. **Create an international education ambassador to ensure there is a dedicated, high profile government spokesperson to continually advocate for the sector both domestically and internationally**
4. **Build a broad coalition to maintain the social licence for international education and other industries that rely on migrants and visitors to Australia.**

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COVID-19 has been the most significant disruptor to Australia's international education sector in recent memory. There has never been a more important time to build a resilient international education sector.

Throughout the depths of the pandemic, ATN consistently sought to rally allies and supporters of international education across all levels of government and from various industries. There is no better example of this than ATN's International Education Summit in September 2020.

A coordinated plan with the backing and support of a broad coalition will help insure us against the next crisis.

The Government and universities have worked hard over the last three decades to build up a substantial international education system that generates many economic, diplomatic, social, and cultural benefits for Australia. It is important that we protect the position, desirability, and competitiveness of Australia in the international student market.

ATN International Education Summit

ATN ran the [International Education Summit](#) on 21-23 September 2020 to explore international education's impact and discuss its future.

It was an example of our recommendations in action – support for international students, bringing together government and industry allies, and maintaining the social licence for international education.

The online Summit brought together university leaders, current and former political leaders, international students, and representatives from industries such as tourism, rural and regional development, and small business.

All of these groups benefit immensely from international education in Australia, be it through students working in hard-to-fill jobs in regional areas, the cultural and intellectual diversity international students bring to classrooms and workplaces, or the diplomatic benefit they provide as advocates for Australia when back in their home countries.

At the Summit, all groups present were united in their call for a safe, responsible return for international students in Australia, once Australians return from abroad and community COVID-safety can be assured.

Key quotes from the Summit

"I doubt that the new normal will be like the old normal. The way we relied on a large number of international students may need to be rethought... we're going to have to do better than telling international students to go home."

Senator the Hon Penny Wong

Former Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs

“International education is a long-term investment. Yes, it brings money. But it also brings cultural interchange and new relationships.”

Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham

Former Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment

“International students are integral to every aspect of our city... we are their family and should be looking after these students. They need to be officially recognised.”

Sally Capp

Lord Mayor of Melbourne

“We shouldn’t just be a market. We should be a magnet. We should not just be merchants of education, we should be masters of education.”

Hon Ted Baillieu AO

Former Premier of Victoria

“We’ve got to play this right, reopening [borders] and bringing the sector and international student support back so that students come back, seeing us as a trusted place to study and live.”

John Hart

Board member, Tourism Australia

“Our universities are a huge part of our soft power. A degree from an Australian university is really worth something.”

Hon Alexander Downer AC

Former Foreign Minister

“There’s no reason why Australia can’t be welcoming... I want to be able to open international borders to international students to quarantine before the general traveller... how we’ve managed COVID presents Australia a great opportunity to do this.”

Hon Stuart Ayers

Former NSW Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney

Further information

Value of international education

The value of international education is often viewed through an economic lens. There is a much broader value to Australia's community, that should have been communicated, that has been lacking in representation and leadership from government.

The sector's success is dependent on connecting the Australian public to the value of international education through an appreciation of both the direct and indirect benefits the sector provides to the wider Australian community.

Safe pathways to Australia

During COVID-19, universities adapted by providing offshore international students with the opportunity to continue their studies online, but we still needed a pathway to welcome students back to Australia (especially those that needed to undertake lab work, fieldwork, and ongoing research).

Support for students

The United Kingdom and Canada gained a temporary advantage through their initial approach to the challenges the pandemic presented. Neither country closed their international borders for significant periods to the rest of the world. Canada offered international students access to financial assistance through the pandemic.

This starkly contrasts with the approach taken by the Morrison Government. Student sentiment on the challenges presented by the pandemic set out in the IEAA paper [Student voices: international students' experiences during COVID-19](#) directly referenced the Prime Minister's message that temporary residents experiencing hardship should return home.

In addition, student financial hardship was not addressed by the Federal Government, with State and Territory Governments, as well as universities, addressing this shortfall through direct financial assistance. ATN universities spent over \$100 million on support for students undergoing hardship over the last three years.

This was significant because:

- Two thirds of international students who had been working in Australia prior to the pandemic lost their jobs – compared with only 17 per cent of domestic students
- 28 per cent of international students had to change their accommodation due to financial pressures and the need to move into more affordable accommodation.

Further enquiries should be addressed to:

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