

## Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors – IRU Response

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the post COVID-19 recovery of Australia's tourism and international education sectors.

The IRU is a group of seven Australian universities committed to inclusive education and innovative research that advances our communities. Since their founding, our universities have also had a strong commitment to international education and to engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. This is reflected in our recently-released 2022-27 strategy ([link](#)). Our members were pioneers in establishing Asia-Pacific studies, with the Griffith University and La Trobe University establishing Asia institutes in the 1970s. More recent examples include Murdoch University's Indo-Pacific Research Centre and James Cook University's The Cairns Institute that has a focus on Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

We have a strong track record of working collaboratively on international engagement including in a current project with our members in Pakistan and a recent MOU between the IRU and the Malaysia Research Universities Network on research collaboration. Over the next five years, we will be building on that with partnership opportunities identified for India and Pacific Island nations.

The IRU has fewer international students overall than the sector average (22% average across IRU, compared to the sector average of 28%), with lower levels of concentration across leading source countries than the rest of the sector. We have high rates of offshore delivery compared to other parts of the system (42% average across IRU) and above-average rates of satisfaction among our international students.

We believe that there are important, long-term opportunities for Australian international education to continue to grow and diversify. In this, we support submissions made by individual IRU members and Universities Australia. The long-term opportunities in international education were also reflected in our recent submissions to the then-Department of Education, Skills and Employment discussion paper on international student diversity at Australian universities ([link](#)), and in our submission to the review into the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) ([link](#)). Many of the questions raised in this inquiry are answered in those two previous IRU submissions.

In particular, our previous submissions have focused on the importance of joined-up approaches across government; the need to make international students feel welcome and have a positive Australian experience; the recognition of international education as soft diplomacy; and that diversity should include geographic, field and level of study as well as institutional diversity within Australia.

### Key points and recommendations

- Strong international student demand and improved student experience is achieved through a more joined-up approach across government. This is essential to avoid complicating the

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student, and prospective student, experience both before and after they commence their studies. Clear and consistent information about the measures in place to safeguard the quality of their education and their experience in Australia is necessary if Australia is to continue to be a destination of choice for international students.

- The loss of capacity and expertise within the Department of Home Affairs during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to ongoing challenges and reputational issues for the necessary recovery of international education in Australia. Significant delays for visa processing have prevented students from commencing their studies in Australia, and IRU members reported seeing an increase in unexplained visa refusals from agents and countries with previously strong track records of genuine temporary entrant (GTE) applications. We thank the Government for the additional resources that were contributed to address these delays and the unusual number of rejections, however the ongoing reputational issue remains a challenge that needs to be resolved to ensure Australia remains a desirable destination for tertiary education.
- Greater clarity is needed about the GTE requirement and how it relates to international students helping to address national skills gaps. In respect to student visas, there should be consideration of a more refined “genuine student” approach.
- Feedback from international students indicates that their preference is for face-to-face, on-campus delivery. On-campus engagement is a valued part of the Australian education experience for international students: it should continue to be so and it largely remains the focus of Australian institutions. We also recognise the value that international students also enrich the university experience for domestic students and contribute to international networking both during their studies and into their careers. This should not be undervalued.
- Transnational education opportunities should be available for students who want an Australian education but wish to remain in their home country, or a third country, for all, or part of, their studies. The regulatory environment needs to consider this as a part of Australia’s international education offering, including eligibility for post-study work rights visas.
- International education is more than incoming students. Domestic students also engage with outbound international education experiences – such as through the New Colombo Plan – that enhances their university experience and Australia’s international reputation. Our members believe this is an under-utilised space for the Australian Government to showcase how domestic students make an impact, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region, as part of outbound international education.
- An opportunity to build on the success of the UFIT model for a forward-looking, proactive approach across universities and government to strengthening 21<sup>st</sup> century partnerships across our region through education and research
- Social license is important both for international reputation and domestic sentiment. International students must not be seen as profit-making ventures nor solutions to labour shortages. They must be viewed as valuable contributions to universities and the communities in which they live.

- A relationship exists between international education and tourism where international students are visited by their friends and family during their studies and they act as ambassadors for Australia as a tourism destination after graduation. Similarly, tourists visiting Australia may decide to return to study. Therefore, the government must recognise that reputational damage to one of these industries damages both of them.

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