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A SUSTAINABLE AND EQUITABLE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT BENEFITS ALL AUSTRALIANS

A JOINT STATEMENT BY THE INNOVATIVE RESEARCH UNIVERSITIES (IRU) AND THE REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES NETWORK (RUN)

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) and the Regional Universities Network (RUN) – together representing 14 world-class Australian universities – have joined together to call for a positive and principles-based approach to securing the future of Australia’s international education system.

The IRU and RUN believe that it is in the national interest that all universities and communities across Australia can contribute to, and benefit from, a sustainable and high-quality international education system. We welcome the appointment of a dedicated Minister for International Education and look forward to working constructively with the Albanese government to put in place policy and strategy that will support a fairer international education system that delivers sustainable growth.

Five point plan for international education

1. Managed, sustainable and equitable growth

The IRU and RUN support a more managed and sustainable approach to international student numbers and the quality and integrity of the international education system. We recognise the role of government in managing Australia’s overall migration program and international student numbers.

Both IRU and RUN universities are characterised by more diverse student cohorts than the sector as a whole. While international students comprise 26% of all students studying at Australian universities at the national level, international students make up just 22% of total IRU student numbers, and 16% of total RUN student numbers. Any changes to government policy and the subsequent allocation of student places should support greater diversification of both student numbers and source countries, and address areas of persistent concentration.

Changes to student visa processing in 2024 (under Ministerial Direction 107) disproportionately impacted our students and universities, and undermined equity and diversification. While international student commencements increased across the sector as a whole in 2024, they were down 28% across the IRU, and more than 30% across RUN. Ministerial Direction 107 led to further concentration of international student numbers at large metropolitan universities, while shrinking the diversity of Australia’s international student markets. These distortions have made life harder for the institutions that will play the most critical roles in delivering on the government’s domestic participation and equity targets as outlined in the Australian Universities Accord. They also damaged the contribution of international students to the workforce and regional development.

Into the future, we support international student places being set by the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) as part of comprehensive university mission-based compacts. However in the immediate term, our universities need clarity as soon as possible on international student allocations for 2026. We do not support any re-allocation of places away from outer metropolitan and regional campuses until institutions have recovered fully from the damage done by Ministerial Direction 107, and all institutions are on a pathway to sustainable growth.

2. Action on the cost of student visas

Both the IRU and RUN have consistently advocated against recent increases in student visa fees. Australia now has the highest student visa fees of any comparable country, and there is evidence that the cost of a visa is impacting long-standing international partnerships, with partner universities saying that they will direct exchange students elsewhere due to cost. This reduces opportunities for Australian students to study abroad and further undermines diversification. Ongoing high visa fees will privilege high-income students and exacerbate concentration. Visa fees should be immediately reduced for students coming to Australia for 12 months or less, in line with the exemptions already implemented by government for students from Pacific Island Nations. This will better support individual students and support system diversification.

3. Renewed focus on quality and integrity

We support the re-introduction of integrity measures that were intended under the ESOS Amendment Bill in 2024, to support Australia's global reputation for a high-quality international education system. The IRU and RUN each made constructive suggestions to improve the draft Bill in 2024 – these should be reconsidered, incorporated and built upon to further strengthen integrity. Unethical practices and “course-hopping” continue to be of concern, and both the IRU and RUN support the government intervening to strengthen integrity across the system. Possible responses could include extending the 6-month prohibition period to 12 months (with appropriate protection for students with genuine reasons to transfer) or introducing a requirement for a new visa when a student moves to a new provider.

Neither the IRU or RUN supports a Minister having power to intervene in university enrolments of international students at the level of individual courses. Integrity measures should be finalised in close consultation with international education providers, given the potential for further unintended policy consequences.

4. Improved data and transparency

The IRU and RUN support increased transparency and the accessibility of real-time data regarding international student numbers and visa processing. Improved data would support better decision-making about international student numbers and diversification, giving the community more confidence in the system as a whole. Given the elevated cost of Australia's (non-refundable) visa fees, prospective international students would also benefit from greater transparency from the Department of Home Affairs about visa processing decisions and timelines.

5. A positive long-term strategy for international education

The IRU and RUN call for a collaborative approach to a proactive, long-term strategy for international education. 2024 was a year of upheaval in our international education system, and the Draft International Education and Skills Strategic Framework released by government has not yet been finalised. There is an opportunity in this term of government to set a more positive vision for the future.

A new long-term strategy must be based upon genuine cooperation between government and all international education providers, and should seek to distribute the tremendous benefits of international education more equitably across Australia's many world-class universities and the communities they serve. This should include an equitable and sustainable distribution of international student numbers onshore, supported by differentiated student visa and post-study migration settings where required.

Such a strategy should also include a comprehensive plan for outbound mobility by Australian students, including post-graduate and PhD students. The IRU and RUN call for replacement programs to address the termination of the Endeavour Scholarships and Destination Australia, and further consultation on changes to the New Colombo Plan, to ensure that Australian students from less privileged backgrounds are not being excluded.

A longer-term strategy should also clarify the respective roles of universities and government in pursuing new opportunities in transnational education (TNE), recognising the significant long-term investment involved in successful offshore campuses. It should lock in the exemption for TNE students from international students allocations, while reviewing the existing definitions of twinning and TNE arrangements to better reflect student choice and experience. The strategy should also include the role of universities in strengthening partnerships in the Indo-Pacific region through education and research, in line with Australia's foreign policy priorities.

Both the IRU and RUN are ready to work constructively with government on this positive vision to ensure that all Australians share in the benefits of international education.

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