UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

UOW Submission in response to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's Tourism and International Education Sectors
December 2022

INTRODUCTION

The University of Wollongong (UOW) welcomes the opportunity to provide input in response to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's Tourism and International Education Sectors. This Submission broadly addresses the Inquiry Terms of Reference relating to international education.

BACKGROUND

Internalisation has long been a feature of the modern university promoting knowledge acquisition, collaboration and economic growth. As a young, agile and dynamic university, the University of Wollongong (UOW) has a unique position on the global stage. UOW supports the diversification of the international student profile and encourages the Federal Government to deliver policy initiatives, which motivate universities to work towards achieving a more diverse international student base, to deliver programs relevant to Australia's skills shortages and regional demands, as well as initiatives which encourage international students to undertake study with Australian universities.

DIVERSITY OF THE UOW INTERNATIONAL STUDENT PROFILE

In addition to its Australian metropolitan and regional campuses, UOW delivers world-class teaching to students in the United Arab Emirates, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia and Singapore. UOW has formal agreements with more than 400 overseas institutions in 46 countries spanning research collaborations, teaching collaborations, credit arrangements, articulation arrangements, study abroad, exchange programs, and offshore program delivery.

UOW has pursued a deliberate strategy of diversification in onshore international student enrolments and offshore growth to avoid over exposure to any single market, i.e. China. The University has increasingly deepened its connection with Central Asian countries, particularly India, Sri Lanka and Nepal via research agreements, transformative projects, education exchanges and academic partnerships. Some 115 nations are represented in UOW's onshore student community, with India now our largest source international students.

This diversification has occurred alongside a steady expansion in UOW's offshore presence in recent years. In 2015 UOW Global Enterprises took custodianship of the community college of Hong Kong's City University, which became UOW College Hong Kong in 2017, and in November 2019 launched UOW Malaysia KDU, having acquired the four campuses of KDU University College from Malaysian private education provider Paramount Corporation Berhad (PCB) in 2018. There are now approximately 18,000 UOW and UOW College students studying across these campuses and at UOW in Dubai, which has been operating for 28 years and moved into a new purpose-built campus in 2020. Our growth internationally has been strong and UOW is one of only four Australian universities with more offshore than onshore international students.

In mid-2022, UOW announced plans to establish a presence in India. Within this context, work is continuing to commence teaching and research in Gujarat Iinternational Fin Tech City by September 2023.

UOW attracts a large number of international onshore students who contribute significant export earnings to the economy at the regional, state and national levels. In 2019, UOW had close to 11,000 international onshore students of which almost half (48%) originated from Central South Asia including India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. We also have deep academic collaborations and networks in North America and Europe with a strategic intent to deepen these relationships.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AUSTRALIA'S INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENROLMENTS

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant decline in the number of international onshore student enrolments at Australian universities outside the G08. At UOW, the impact of COVID-19 on commencing international student numbers was seen more evidently than with re-enrolling international students, however it continued to impact both groups. This has impacted workforce shortages in regional Australia. Commencing international student numbers for UOW peaked in 2019, but fell by 50% per cent between 2020 and 2021. Our current international on-shore enrolments now total around 6,300. This is consistent with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across Australia's higher education international student enrolment numbers sector wide.

GOVERNMENT POLICY TO SUPORT DIVERSIFICATION AND GROWTH OF THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MARKET

Effective government policy is needed to support the rebuilding and diversity of Australia's important international education sector from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Key issues of importance, and suggested initiatives which may assist achieve this include:

- Providing highly skilled and qualified international student graduates of Australian universities priority to skilled migration opportunities. International student graduates would thereby form a strategic component of Ausralia's skilled migration program re-build post COVID-19. Moreover, priority be given to students who are seeking a post-study work rights visa and that at least 50% of permanent residences places be allocated annually to students who studied onshore.

- Extend post-study work rights visa to students studying offshore at an overseas campus fully owned by an Australian university.

- Capping working hours for international students post 30 June 2023 who are studying to 24 hours per week. This will strike the right balance between work and study.

- Providing discounts to visa applicants who have studied onshore at an Australian higher education institution or at a fully owned offshore campus and who meet the skilled labour shortages.

- To ensure student diversity and sustainability, consideration be given to the introduction of market specific government scholarships.

- Support a more transparent visa process and encourage more high quality students to consider Australia as their first choice of an international study destination. Within this context, it is proposed that the government reconsider continuing with the current process of SSVF (Simplified Student

- Visa Framework). SSVF and its associate risk assessment of universities sends a very strong message of a complicated visa process for interested international students. This tends to further dent the interest from high quality students as the definition around a student who meets the GTE (Genuine Temporary Entrant) criteria is not clear. The sector continuously witnesses inconsistent visa outcome rates. This impacts a student's experience as well as hinders a sustainable planning process for universities. One solution to better control the quality of applicants coming to study to Australia would be to tighten the onshore movement of international students by restricting university transfers.

- Ensuring Australia's skills shortage list is kept consistent and it reflects the needs of existing and emerging industries and business to support Australia's job landscape post COVID-19. Alignment of post-pandemic skills shortages to specific discipline areas, and the linking of these to visa incentives of suitability qualified graduands would be benficial.

- Engaging in strategic workforce planning to meet skills shortages in rural, regional and remote Australia through targeted approaches. For example, more rural students study medicine at UOW than any other medical school in NSW, and an average of 61 per cent of graduates are currently training or working in rural or regional settings. It is the only medical program in Australia to provide all students the opportunity to undertake a 12-month longitudinal clinical placement in a regional or rural setting.

- Promoting a workforce strategy to address Australia's job shortages with skilled professionals through supporting organisations aimed at helping foreign education professionals to find relevant work in their field. An example of such organisation is CGFNS International (https://www.cgfns.org/), an immigration neutral non-profit organisation which helps foreign educated healthcare professionals live and work in their country of choice by assessing and validating their academic and professional credentials. CGFNS International provides foreign students and healthcare professionals with an assessment of their academic records to help them gain admission to schools in the US and other countries. It helps protect migrating healthcare professionals by advocating for ethical recruitment practices and continuously monitoring the global landscape for developing trends in employment recruitment and workplace norms.

- Increasing the focus on harmonisation and recognition of international qualifications through a competency assessment framework. It is suggested that the Federal Government seek to recognise foreign qualifications, particularly in areas of skills shortages. The Government should seek to clearly anticipate, identify and communicate projected skills shortages in Australia's labour market, and deliver incentives to Australian universities to offer these programs. Foreign students who undertake courses of study at Australian universities in these areas should benefit from access to enhanced visa entitlements, such as study visas, and post-study work rights.

- Promoting opportunities to position Australia as a global knowledge economy. The Federal Government has an international opportunity to continue to support the development of a stronger, more harmonious international qualifications framework to allow students to more easily transfer their study across teaching locations, and for greater recognition of their qualifications here in Australia.

- UOW is also supportive of initiatives such as the Bologna Process, and continued efforts of government to strengthen the alignment of Australia's Qualification Framework and its international counterparts, such as the European Qualifications Framework, which are aimed at harmonising higher education qualifications internationally.

- Encouraging more government funded joint research centres across the world that could facilitate knowledge exchange and thereby leading to growth in higher degree research international students.

- A national and consistent approach be adopted towards public transport concessions for all international students. At present, these vary across the various states across Australia. For example in NSW, international students are only entitled to concession fares when their study is fully funded by specified Australian Government scholarships. International students on an Endeavour Scholarship, an Australian Awards Scholarship, or an International Postgraduate Research Scholarship, are also eligible. All other full-fee paying international students are not.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The University would welcome further opportunities to elaborate upon, or further clarify, the matters raised within this submission. To do so, please do not hesitate to contact the UOW Director, Government and Community Relations (Mr Canio Fierravanti) on 0411 244491 or via email at caniof@uow.edu.au