

Hon Martin Ferguson AM

Chair, Reimagining the Visitor Economy Expert Panel
Australian Trade and Investment Commission
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Dear Chair

I write on behalf of the Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN) and The University of Newcastle, and welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Expert Panel's work on reimagining the visitor economy. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss these issues with you one-on-one at our meeting on 11 June 2021.

ATN is the peak body representing Australia's five most innovative and enterprising universities: Curtin University, Deakin University, RMIT University, University of South Australia (UniSA), and University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The University of Newcastle is an important research-intensive anchor institution in the regional gateways of the Hunter and Central Coast.

Together, ATN Universities and The University of Newcastle teach nearly 100,000 international students who are an integral part of Australia's visitor economy.

They are all valuable members of our communities, enrich our campuses and improve the learning experience for Australian students, support local businesses (especially in the tourism and hospitality sectors), strengthen our economy, and improve our connections internationally.

Students spend several years studying in Australia and can apply to work here after graduating, so they have an abundant opportunity to travel across Australia and have friends and relatives visit them. They also advocate for Australia in their home country by encouraging others to visit and study here.

International visitors spent \$31.4 billion in Australia in 2019, including \$4.5 billion in regional areas (14 per cent).¹ International students are a significant driver of this market as \$12.4 billion was spent on education, \$10.4 billion was on holidays and \$4.1 billion was on visiting friends and relatives.

Every time we promote Australia as a destination for tourism, we promote Australia as an international education destination and vice versa. International education should be a priority in Australia's strategy for reimagining the visitor economy.

Below we make further comment under some of the headings outlined in the Reimagining the Visitor Economy discussion paper.

¹ International Visitor Survey (year ending December 2019)

Industry-led, government enabled recovery

Australia has been so successful in international education because of its quality education offerings, and because students can study at globally-recognised universities, gain work experience while they study and live in a safe and multicultural society, enjoy a high standard of living, and have the opportunity to work or do further study in Australia after they graduate.

The value proposition for Australian education combines:

- Teaching and learning (high quality, recognised qualifications)
- Experience (the environment, culture and connections students make whilst they are studying).

As technology develops and becomes more integrated in the way students learn, there will be greater acknowledgement of the opportunities that blended learning (combining online and on-campus teaching) provides. This must be balanced with international students' need and desire for experiences in Australia, both within the classroom and within Australia more broadly. The student experience must be at the centre of our unique Australian education.

If we embrace the opportunity to diversify education delivery models and reach new markets around the world, we need to ensure that these students still establish a lasting connection with Australia and are given the opportunity to do further study and work in Australia. This may mean that students start online from their home country and complete their studies in Australia, or complete their studies offshore and earn the right to work in Australia.

Government can assist providers by ensuring the regulatory and visa systems encourage and enable students to have experience in Australia. By doing this, the students can continue to benefit from a unique Australian experience, and they can continue contributing to Australia's visitor economy.

Diversifying our international customer base

ATN Universities have continually placed diversification at the forefront of our own international strategies, in recognition of the increased risk of relying too heavily on one particular cohort of students or one particular market.

We significantly expanded our international education intake from 68,000 students in 2015 to 86,000 in 2019 while being aware of the diversity of our cohort. In that time, ATN added over 8,000 additional Indian students (171% increase) and almost 2,000 additional Vietnamese students (25% increase).

When the federal government is seeking to make strategic decisions about new or expanding markets for international education, consulting with universities will help inform these decisions. In most instances the deep relationships universities have with particular markets and particular delivery modes mean that universities are better placed to make an assessment of future potential. Government should supplement and support existing international outreach by universities.

ATN recommends a greater integration of education in all bilateral and multilateral dialogues into the future – including transnational education and recognition of qualifications. One way of achieving this is to create a mechanism that brings together the sector in advance of agreements being pursued to agree to specific paths or activities to embrace in the agreements. Speaking with a clear voice representative of the views of the sector on agreements into the future is important to maintain a globally competitive edge.

Labour, skills and workforce

While primarily in Australia to study, international students also take the opportunity to work which provides them with further experience of Australian life and culture and assists them to support themselves. Many international students work in the visitor economy sector and other allied sectors, particularly in hospitality.

More broadly, post-graduation work and study rights are important features of our current system of international education, as they are in other countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom. International students receive an opportunity to practise and develop their skills in the workforce, or contribute through post-graduate research. This as an opportunity for us to diversify, broaden and extend our economy through greater flexibility and comparable approaches.

The possibility of staying in (or returning to) Australia for skilled work is an important component of a student's educational experience in Australia and a significant factor for international students choosing to study here. Australia must consider its competitiveness and openness, especially if other countries are perceived to be more welcoming. Australia's key competitors (such as the United Kingdom and Canada) are currently seen as more welcoming by international students and during the COVID-19 crisis are ahead of Australia in relation to the return of international students.

Remaining competitive internationally by offering post-study work rights will continue to pay dividends for the visitor economy as international students travel around Australia (including regional areas) and encourage friends and relatives to visit them.

While universities have no legal obligation to provide information about work rights to international students, they see it as part of their duty of care to their students. We would welcome support from the Government to provide these valuable services and encourage international students to have a fair and safe experience while working in Australia. See example of assistance provided by UTS attached.

We also welcome the flexibility with working hours the Government has offered international students during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, allowing international students to work for more than 40 hours a fortnight if they are employed in the tourism and hospitality sector is a recognition of how important that workforce is to Australia's economy. The COVID-19 Pandemic (subclass 408) visa also allows welcome flexibility for students who have finished their course.

Resilience, sustainability and social license

To maintain the social licence for international education and its contribution to Australia's visitor economy, we need to foster a wider understanding of the crucial role that international students play as a part of Australia's community, soft diplomacy and future security.

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 the 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.

International students bridge cultures and countries, drive diversity, connectedness and engagement in the region. This occurs through a deepening of cultural exchange and through a deepening of engagement with communities. This richness of experience ensures that Australia is well placed to engage more effectively with its neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

Prior to COVID-19, international education's value to the Australian economy was worth \$40 billion and it was widely lauded as Australia's primary export service industry. As a sector we have not celebrated the importance of international education to secondary industries, nor have we been direct about the integral contributions of international students to our communities and learning environments.

Our universities have significant expertise relevant to the visitor economy, including in the areas of economics, tourism, marketing, aviation, and logistics. We can better support businesses in the visitor economy (especially small-to-medium enterprises) by creating opportunities for knowledge transfer. If you wish to access any of our expertise to assist in your work, please contact ATN – we would be happy to connect you with our universities.

Thank you for the work you and the Expert Panel are doing to help ensure the growth and sustainability of Australia's visitor economy. I look forward to continuing to engage with you and the Government on this important work.

Yours sincerely,

Luke Sheehy
ATN Executive Director

Attachment: Examples of support provided by UTS to help international students understand their rights at work

1. **Presentation at the Essential International Advice session during orientation for all commencing international students**
 - Information on working in Australia
 - How to apply for a Tax File Number (TFN)
 - Fair Work Ombudsman resources
 - Employee rights under Australian law
 - Minimum rights and conditions at work
 - How to contact the Fair Work Infoline
2. **Including material in the welcome packs for new international students**
 - Fair Work Ombudsman postcard
 - NSW Fair Training Consumer Guide
3. **Provision of follow-up information in regular communications to international students**
 - UTS International eNewsletter which announced the new minimum wage
 - Another example from the eNewsletter is a quiz that was held to test students' knowledge of workplace rights
4. **Some initiatives the Student Service team runs for international students**
 - [Website for international students](#) – regularly updated to include programs, services, resources and referrals specific for international students including FWO resources
 - Career tips for international students – workshop held in orientation
 - International Organisation for Migration runs sessions for students
 - Networking event called 'It's Who You Know' connecting international students with international alumni
 - In the student community on the UTS Microsoft Teams platform there is a dedicated channel for international students
 - Key messages from FWO Australia are included in the student newsletter and social media
 - With ATN colleagues, an online program called 'WIL to Work' was developed to help international students with Work Integrated Learning (WIL)
 - Semi-regular 'career chats' – small group conversations about typical career challenges facing international students
 - Individual guidance – 15- and 45-minute appointments students can book to discuss their concerns