

International Education Diversity Discussion Paper: UNSW response

Introduction

UNSW welcomes the opportunity to comment on the 'International Student Diversity at Australian Universities' discussion paper (Discussion Paper).

International education has helped develop long lasting cultural and diplomatic ties, and plays an important role in Australia's soft power profile, promoting Australia and our values to the world. The positive relationship students returning to their home country have with Australia has led to enormous benefits when those returning students have subsequently reached leadership positions in government and business. Interactions with international students have also ensured that graduating domestic students have developed more sophisticated international perspectives which not only assist them as individuals but also Australia's international trading activities. The economic benefits of international education are also significant, not only as Australia's fourth largest export industry pre-pandemic, but more importantly with the economic and social benefits extending well beyond the university sector to the wider community, including particularly regional Australia.

UNSW has a long and proud history of pioneering, and supporting the growth of, the international education sector. The ability of UNSW, and other leading Australian universities, to attract international students in a highly competitive global market is a reflection of the world class quality education we offer to students and the appeal of the Australian way of life. We understand the advantages of a diverse student body across all cohorts (both international and domestic) from both educational and risk management perspectives. As a result, UNSW has been proactive in trying to attract international students from a wide a range of countries. We currently have students from more than 130 countries enrolled at UNSW.

UNSW welcomes the steps the government has taken to help universities retain international students during the pandemic. As international students return to Australia, and we look forward to continuing to work with the government to identify new ways to attract international students from as many countries as possible.

In response to the issues raised in the Discussion Paper, UNSW offers the following observations:

- We acknowledge the importance of diversification of international student cohorts, and support efforts to achieve this. However, what that looks like for each individual university will be different depending on its size, educational focus areas, overall student profile and risk management approach. There is no one size fits all approach.
- Attempts to diversify international student markets are already well underway, but these will take a long time and concerted effort to change the profile of Australia's major source countries. Given its size and socio-economic profile, China will remain the predominant source

country for international students for the foreseeable future. It is also important to remember that China is a diverse nation, and for many universities part of the previous diversification strategy was to ensure students were drawn from the length and breadth of China.

- In acknowledging this, the Australian Government's strategy for diversification should focus on maintaining existing markets while seeking to identify and grow new target markets.
- Diversification of international student cohorts can only be achieved through the active involvement of state and Commonwealth governments as a partner of higher education providers. Government is well placed to develop dedicated strategies to identify and target new markets for international students, to provide increased investment in marketing and promotional activities in those markets, and critically to introduce innovative visa types which would be transformative in enabling diversification
- We have concerns about the proposal to include international student diversity questions in QILT SES surveys and would like to see further information on the proposed Diversification Index.
- We would have concerns with the introduction down the track of any simplistic measures which may have the effect of preventing or discouraging students from any particular country from coming to Australia to study. Any such measure would be counter-productive to promoting Australia as a world-class destination for international students.

Responding to the impact of covid on international education

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges for the education sector. One of the biggest challenges was the necessary rapid pivot to online learning, as domestic students were locked down and many international students were out of the country when Australia's borders closed.

UNSW appreciates the efforts the Australian Government made to alleviate some of these challenges, such as TEQSA relaxing online study restrictions, taking a proportionate approach to regulation, and Australian Government representations to authorities overseas to ensure recognition of Australian online courses. Measures such as the extension of the post-study work rights scheme and the increase of weekly working hours for international students also help to attract and retain international students. We note also that the government is considering ratifying the *Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education* which concerns global mobility, recognition of Australian qualifications and links international students to migration and addressing skills shortages.

As international students are now returning to our shores, it is a good time to consider how universities and the government can continue to work together to attract international students to Australia and to ensure that we are attracting them from an increasingly diverse range of countries.

The challenge of diversification of source countries

UNSW and other institutions have long recognised the need to source international students from as wide a range of countries as possible in order to contribute to the quality of students' education by exposing them to a diverse group of classmates as well as manage risks, build new markets. UNSW already hosts international students from more than 130 different countries and has exchange and engagement programs with a large number of universities around the world. Across Australia, international students already come from 140 different countries.

UNSW has already taken the following measures to expand and diversify the range of source countries for international students:



- developed an India 10-Year Strategy for Growth (2016-2025) – noting the percentage of Indian students studying at UNSW and other Go8 institutions is relatively small compared to the national average
- introduced the International Student Award (Term 1 2022 Pilot) – offering students from eligible countries a 15% tuition fee discount for the duration of program to increase international student diversity
- award of International Student Merit-based Scholarships – to support high-quality students by providing greater opportunities to study at a world-class Go8 university
- offering study abroad and exchange programs – that attract a large number of students from Europe, the Americas and other emerging markets who have a positive impact on the diversity of students studying at UNSW.

UNSW Global, UNSW's pathway program provider, has also introduced a number of new initiatives to non-visa-holders to enhance diversification including:

- expanding offshore delivery of Foundation programs to South Asia, South-East Asia and potentially Africa and the Middle East;
- development of a new online transition program to be delivered across several time-zones across the globe;
- and development of new online English language programs.

Despite the efforts of the universities and the Australian Government, through agencies like Austrade, to build broader relationships and markets for Australian education, China will continue to be the largest source country for Australia for at least the next decade or two, given its population size and socio-economic profile.

The economic reality of the Indo-Pacific is a stark reminder of this situation. Given the relative GDP of China compared to other potential markets such as Indonesia and India, and the relative cost of tuition fees in Australia, China is and will remain the main source country for Australia and other international education destination countries.

Australia is also a popular destination for Chinese students given China's deep cultural commitment to formal educational credentials from globally ranked institutions and Australia's long-history of Chinese immigration dating back to the gold rush. Australia is also more accessible to Chinese international students than Europe or North America because it is closer geographically with a time zone which aligns with China making it easier for students keep in touch with their families back home.

As a result, the discussion of diversification of students should begin by focussing on maintaining existing markets while seeking to grow new target markets in tandem. That is, taking a 'China AND' instead of a 'China OR' approach to source countries for international students, to use terminology from a recent Asia Society report.

In fact, given the relative size of the China and India markets and the dispersed nature of the populations in those countries, any international education diversity discussion should also include promotion of diversification of students from provinces and regions, and minority populations from within our large existing markets. We should also consider attracting international students to non-traditional study areas as well as targeting students from new markets to promote diversity.

The challenge of diversification of course offerings



The Discussion Paper also raises the issue of diversification through expanding the available online or offshore course offerings. Online courses are going to become increasingly important in the international education sector but, similar to the situation for in-Australia study, potential markets beyond China and India are still relatively small and the impact of increasing diversification is not likely to be realised in the short term.

The Government also needs to consider that not all Australian universities are going to be able to develop significant offshore and online courses. The presumed demand for online courses from Australian institutions may not be as strong as predicted and the policy intended to promote diversity could have the unintended consequence of increasing fragility rather than building market resilience.

Additional government support for the sector

Notwithstanding the challenges outlined above, UNSW is very excited about the opportunities to grow a significant enhancement of our international education industry providing high quality education globally. Opportunities exist for the government to work in partnership with universities to implement nuanced measures that could make a real difference to improving international student diversity locally and building demand for a significant offshore or partial offshore education market.

One of the key measures required is sustained commitment to, and investment in building or rebuilding, 'Brand Australia' as a trusted, welcoming and inclusive student destination in current and emerging source countries and within Australia.

Steps the government could take to support diversification include:

- develop a strategy which sets out which under-represented or emerging markets it seeks to target to achieve greater international student diversity
- develop and deliver a creative marketing campaign to support that strategy to promote Australian education to those new and emerging markets, and invest in enhanced recruitment efforts in those markets
- place additional Education Counsellors in embassies or consulates in new and emerging markets, not just traditional source countries
- government support to increase online course offerings and promote them to a wide range of international markets
- development of innovative visa types to allow short onshore "study tours" or intensives, flexible work rights
- where necessary undertake diplomatic engagement to ensure that Australian online study is accredited in the home country of international students
- Build a national credentials system, leveraging the existing international reputation for AQF, that could provide the backbone of a globally recognised quality assurance platform.
- provide incentives to upgrade digital technologies to improve provision of online courses
- better align visa processing decisions and incentives with targeted under-represented or emerging markets.



Australia also needs to further improve its post study work rights regime to more closely match those in competing jurisdictions such as the UK, US and Canada. This will improve the attractiveness of Australia as a higher education destination and assist with workforce shortages in crucial sectors.

Feedback on the Government's proposed actions in the Discussion Paper

Amending the QILT SES survey

UNSW is concerned about the suggestion of including questions surrounding diversity in the Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) Student Experience Surveys. The QILT SES is a student survey and it is not clear students in any given class will be able to determine the background of all of their class members for a range of reasons. Additionally, some classes, by their nature, may have lower levels of diversity but this may not be recognised by through a standardised survey.

We note that the Discussion Paper focuses on the economic diversification of the international student market. Classroom diversification should be about more than just perceptions of cultural background. Any efforts to effectively measure diversity across a university should be done more broadly with consideration for all under-represented cohorts (such as regional and remote students, low SES, Indigenous, people with disabilities, gender, sexuality etc) and through a more appropriate tool than a student experience survey.

Diversification Index

The Discussion Paper provides a very broad overview of the proposed Diversification Index but leaves a lot of the key questions surrounding the Index unanswered. On face value, it is difficult to see the usefulness of an index which does not provide further context for why certain universities will naturally have higher levels of international students (for example because their ranking, reputation and quality of their course offerings attracts higher numbers of international students which should be a positive in a globalised education market or because they are in a remote regional location which may be less attractive for international students).

UNSW would like to see a more detailed discussion on the index regarding issues such as:

- Is there a target/optimal index that the government is trying to promote?
- How are market and wider economic risk and geopolitical factors accounted for?
- What are the policy consequences of the Diversification Index?
- How will the Index be presented and promoted to domestic and international students?

A Diversification Index risks creating cumbersome reporting requirements that divert resources away from teaching and research activities, and also risks significant damage to Australia's reputation as a preferred destination for international education. While the goal of diversifying the international student cohort in Australia is supported, this measure risks harming Australian universities, without achieving the desired policy goal.

Diversity Action Plans

As noted above, many Australian universities such as UNSW are already taking significant positive steps to diversity their student profiles across a range of cohorts, including international students. While the standardised Diversity Action Plan may be useful for those universities which have not yet turned their attention to this issue (or given their current mix of students have not needed to), for others it adds an additional administrative burden at a time when we should be seeking to minimise additional red tape, to avoid resources being directed away from teaching and research activities.

The Discussion Paper does not elaborate on the policy implications that may follow the possible introduction of a Diversification Index or Diversity Action Plans. We are concerned that these policy



measures may be intended as the first steps in a process that leads to the introduction of diversity targets against which universities are assessed. Any further measures may potentially damage Australia's reputation as an attractive place to study, potentially damaging one of Australia's largest export industries and reducing the resources available to universities to invest in domestic education and cutting-edge research.

Conclusion

UNSW is proud of our global engagement, and our record as a leader in international education. Our ability to attract international students from more than 130 countries is a reflection of the world class quality education we offer to all of our students.

We acknowledge the importance of managing risks in relation to international student cohorts and understand the Australian Government's efforts to increase the diversity of international students. We support policies and measures which ease the ability of Australian universities to identify and grow new markets for international students, whilst maintaining our current position in the international education market. However, UNSW would be concerned with the introduction down the track of any policies or measures which may be discriminatory or distort the current free market operations of the international education sector and which may have the effect of preventing or discouraging students from a particular country from coming to Australia to study.

Any such measures would be counter-productive to promoting Australia as a world- leading destination for international students.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to comment on this discussion paper. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact our Head of Government Relations, Mr Robin Schuck, on r.schuck@unsw.edu.au or 0411 124 258.

