



Asian Studies Association of Australia

Submission to the Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030 consultation on behalf of the Asian Studies Association of Australia

Submitted to: education-ies@dese.gov.au

Submitted by: President, Associate Professor Kate McGregor (University of Melbourne) and Vice-President, Professor Melissa Crouch (University of New South Wales), Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA)

May 2021

The Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) is the peak body of university experts and educators on Asia in Australia. Established in 1976, we promote and support the study of Asia in Australian universities and knowledge of Asia among the broader community. Our membership is drawn mainly from academics and students, but also includes industry and government Asia experts. We take a strong interest in promoting knowledge about Asia in schools and in contributing to state and Commonwealth government policies related to Asia.

1. Key priorities for a new Australian Strategy for international education

Australia has long-standing connections to the Indo-Pacific region and needs a new strategy to welcome back international students to Australian universities, as well as enhance opportunities for Australian students to study in the Indo-Pacific. The key priorities for a new Australian strategy for international education should include:

a. Prioritising Asian languages

The government should commit to a new Asian Languages Strategy which incorporates both primary and secondary schools and universities to ensure a strong pipeline of students enrolling in advanced language studies. This would require sufficient funding (at least at a level similar to the New Colombo Plan of \$50 million p/a) over the long term. This language strategy would ensure that Australian graduates are equipped with high-level language skills to engage with the Indo-Pacific.

International students studying in Australia have also shown strong interest in language programs in the past. Prior to covid, it was PRC students who helped support the viability of

many Chinese language and Japanese language programs at Australian universities.¹ The return of international students to Australian campuses is therefore vital to the viability of some Asian language programs. This need is particularly acute given that, in 2020, we have already seen the closure of some language programs at Australian universities, including at La Trobe University, Western Sydney University and Swinburne.

b. Prioritising longer term outbound study opportunities in the Indo-Pacific

The government should increase the New Colombo Plan funding (\$50 million pa) in order to promote longer term study in the Indo-Pacific by Australian domestic undergraduates.² The closure of the Endeavour Awards Program and the Endeavour Leadership Program means there is now no federal funding for Australian postgraduate students seeking to study in the Indo-Pacific. New funding should be provided to support Australian postgraduate students to conduct research and study in the Indo-Pacific as part of their degree.

c. Prioritising the return of international students

Covid-19 and the lack of government support for international students, as well as the rise in instances of racism against Asian Australians, has significantly affected Australia's reputation as an attractive and welcoming place for international students.

The return of international students to study in Australia must be a high priority. While many international students are still applying to Australian universities and are being accepted, they are holding off from starting their programs until they can physically travel to Australia. This suggests a strong preference for in-country, on campus study. The government must work with state and territory governments to ensure the physical return of international students to Australian campuses. The return of international students to campus is also beneficial to local students, who gain a greater appreciation for the diversity and culture of the region by interacting with international students on campus.

d. Prioritising HASS disciplines, including Asian Studies

The Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) are a key attraction for international students, while Australian graduates of HASS disciplines are among some of Australia's best and brightest leaders. Students who study an Asian language should be encouraged to also choose to study Asian studies subjects, across a diverse range of disciplines, in order to develop deep appreciation and knowledge of Asian history, economy, law, politics and society. Many international students return home and use their skills for the benefit of their country. It is not only important for students to be trained in the STEM disciplines, but high-quality graduates in HASS disciplines ensures students are equipped to deal with the many and complex challenges facing the region.

2. Students should be at the centre of the new Strategy. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience both now and in the future?

The student experience in Australia is enhanced by:

¹ For more information, see <https://asaa.asn.au/chinese-studies-in-australian-universities-a-problem-of-balance/>

² For more information see here: <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/why-new-colombo-plan-has-struggled-increase-study-abroad-liam-prince/>

- Face-to-face learning, that enables friendships to be formed and networks established that may extend beyond their degree into their career and working lives;
- On campus learning, that enables students to access high-quality facilities and libraries, which they might not otherwise have access to in their home country;
- Opportunities to be involved with the diverse range of student groups, including groups such as regional or country-based student groups (eg Indonesian Students Association) on campus.
- Opportunities to be involved with academic associations, such as postgraduate support opportunities through the Asian Studies Association of Australia

Asian studies programs taught by leading scholars of Asian studies and high-quality language programs are a key attraction for students from the Indo-Pacific. The existence of these programs reinforces the value and importance of learning about this part of the world. This is extremely important in creating a welcoming environment and signalling that universities care not only about the money that Asian students bring in but also about creating opportunities for all students to understand this part of the world. These programs create a community of students on campus who know about Asia and will seek links with students of Asian backgrounds on campus thereby reducing the isolation some international students feel. Many international students, both those from Asia but also from Europe and America, choose to learn Asian languages while in Australia because our location means they are more acutely aware of the importance of the region.

3. Globally competitive education: What changes are needed to make Australia more globally competitive over the next decade? Policy and regulatory flexibility are important in enabling providers to innovate. How can we utilise these settings to pursue opportunities, and in what other ways can we work together to ensure Australia remains globally competitive?

Australian universities and Australian-based academics are known globally for their expertise and leadership in Asian studies. The ASAA is one example of this collective strength and reputation for Asia engagement. The government must ensure Australian universities can retain and enhance this competitive edge through additional funding for Asian language programs, support for permanent academic positions (rather than casual positions) and incentives for students to study Asian studies programs to enhance cultural literacy.

4. How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities (for example of disciplines, source countries, study destinations and delivery models)?

The concept of diversity in regards to international education should be broadly construed to include both a diversity in the backgrounds of students but also in the knowledge bases of students.

Exposure to Asian studies and languages opens up for students alternative world views and knowledge of rich cultures. This could be applied to international students from Europe and America who study Asian studies and languages in Australia as part of our regional advantage.

5. What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for? How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

The 21st century is the Asian Century. It is essential that students develop high levels of competence in Asian languages and deep knowledge of Asia in terms of its history, politics, economics, law, society and culture. Competence in one or more Asian language gives students a competitive edge and is sought after in government placements such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and across the business sector.

6. A uniquely Australian education experience? i. What is our value proposition for both international and domestic students? ii. How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

Australian universities are best placed to offer high quality education on the study of Asia.

Higher degree research opportunities: Students from the region often choose to undertake higher degree research in Australia. For many civil servants in the region, pursuing higher education through a masters or PhD program is essential for promotion. Many countries in the region have a very large civil service (which often includes a broad range of sectors beyond administrators in government departments to judges and academics). Many governments in the region also now offer higher degree scholarship programs for students to study abroad, such as the Indonesian government's LPDP program (Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan), among many other examples.

Australian universities are well-placed to welcome high-quality masters' students and PhD students from the region into their programs, especially at universities where there is academic expertise in area studies. Supervisors with specific country expertise are well-suited and sought after by students from the region. The comparative experience of learning and studying in Australia is highly sought after, and the educational experience in Australian is a significant benefit to students' future careers and to equipping them to be the leaders of tomorrow in the region more broadly.

8. What else should the Council for International Education and the Australian Government consider in developing the new Strategy?

The government must provide long-term support to ensure strong engagement by Australian students in the study of Asia, and a supportive environment to welcome back international students from the region.

Any efforts to expand online learning opportunities should not be at the expense of face-to-face learning. If anything, the experience across the sector indicates that while many international students are still applying for entry into Australian universities, many are holding off on enrolling until they can arrive back in country. That is, there is a strong preference for in country, on campus learning experience and the strategy must reflect this preference.

The Council should promote our regional location as a major selling point for international students which means stressing our proximity to Asia as something unique and at the same time promote the opportunity while studying in Australia to learn more about the region.

The Council needs to advise the government and universities to squarely address the issue of how international students are cared for once in Australia. In the last year and a half in particular, students from Asia have experienced unacceptable racism and messages that they are not welcome, as well as suffered from a lack of government support. The signal from the highest levels of government is extremely damaging in terms of student mental health and negatively impacts their perceptions about their experience in Australia.

Instead, there needs to be more positive messaging about these students and their contributions beyond the financial contribution in terms of the diversity and knowledge they add to the classroom and also communities of Australia. The Council needs to devise ways to better connect international and local students. Asian studies and language programs offer one important bridge here in terms of creating a community of students that knows and cares about the people of Asia. This community could be better harnessed through university-based programs to bring these students together. Support for on campus student groups that help to bridge this gap between international and local students is also important.

International graduates are our best ambassadors to promote the Australian educational experience. Showing genuine care, respect and support for the well-being of our international students is essential, and is a small way that the Australian government can show its appreciation and priority for our regional connections.