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Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
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Go8 Submission to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP)

The Group of Eight (Go8) thanks the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties (JSCT) for the opportunity to submit to this review of the RCEP.

Please note that this submission represents the broad, collective views of the Go8, Australia's leading-research intensive universities with seven of its members ranked consistently among the world's top 100 leading universities. Each member Go8 university may submit its own related submission.

Also note that the Go8 approves this submission for public release and does not wish any of it to be treated as confidential.

The Go8 is the peak body representing Australia's leading research-intensive universities. Collectively, our members:

- Perform around 70% of the research conducted in the Australian university sector.
- Educate one in three international students who choose to study higher education onshore in Australia.
- Educate more than one quarter of all higher education students in Australia.
- Employ 65% of Australia's 2019 highly cited (HiCi) university researchers; and
- Attract industry research funding that is twice that of the rest of the sector combined.

As we noted in submission to the Regional Trade Agreements Division of DFAT when the RCEP was being negotiated, our members' success as high quality, research intensive universities partly rests on their capacity to engage extensively with international partners. This engagement brings Australia a number of benefits, including:

- The ability for the best minds in Australia to engage with, build on and learn from, the best minds residing elsewhere around the world;
- Ensures that Australia has a voice in the key global policy, innovation and research conversations;



- Connects Australia with cutting edge research and development occurring offshore, and allows us access to new and emerging industries;
- Promotes Australia as an attractive destination for highly talented individuals, especially in areas of skills needs; and
- Builds soft power by demonstrating our commitment to being an engaged and active regional partner, and by promoting Australian values and the Australian way of life.

The latter has long been one of Australia’s strengths. As noted in the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper: “Our commitment to education, training and research exchanges will remain central to Australia’s soft power. These exchanges build influence, and strengthen people-to-people links and mutual understanding”.¹

And this can create long term dividends. Former Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, noted as she travelled through the Indo-Pacific region how often she was met by Presidents, Vice Presidents, Cabinet Ministers and business leaders who were former participants of the Colombo Plan, which brought international students to study in Australia in the 1950s – 1980s.²

Given the current geopolitical context, this has arguably never been more important to Australia’s national interest, and to ongoing peace and stability. It is through strong, successful and stable partnerships that we can assist the ongoing prosperity and post-pandemic recovery of our region.

Agreements like the RCEP are an important pillar of this process. Mechanisms that enable and support the free trade of goods and services within a clear rules-based framework help to support and reinforce partnerships across regional neighbours. They also provide a strong signal of Australia’s willingness to engage as a responsible regional partner.

However, as we noted in our submission to DFAT, specific issues that would help to facilitate deeper engagement in the higher education and research sectors in future versions of the RCEP or other regional FTAs include:

- Streamlining visa processes to facilitate the mobility of the best and brightest minds in the region to study and research in Australia. For example, the 2017 Go8 report exploring options to increase two-way mobility of PhD students between India and Australia recommended the development of a special class of visa to enable the importation of high-quality researchers and PhD graduates. While India is not currently a signatory to the RCEP, similar arrangements with other nations could help to facilitate greater diversification of Australia’s international student cohorts, identified as a priority by Education Minister the Hon Alan Tudge.³

¹ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/publications/minisite/2017-foreign-policy-white-paper>

² <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/julie-bishop/speech/address-new-colombo-plan-launch-university-sydney>

³ <https://www.alantudge.com.au/latest-news/challenges-and-opportunities-in-international-education/>



- Addressing regulatory issues around mutual recognition of qualifications and promoting opportunities for joint qualification offerings. Such programmes can allow students with reduced financial capacity to access an Australian educational experience for a shorter duration than is required for a full degree, while strengthening academic and administrative ties between countries. This may be more important than ever if we are to rebuild Australia’s international education industry – previously valued at around \$40 billion – in a post pandemic era.

As always, I am happy to explore these issues in more detail if required. You can contact my office through the Chief Operating Officer, Ms Tracey Hinchley (e: tracey.hinchley@go8.edu.au, p: 02 5123 6701).

Yours sincerely



VICKI THOMSON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE