



12 May 2017

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Treaties
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

jsct@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Secretary,

Re: Agreement to Amend the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA)

As the peak body representing the university sector, Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Agreement to Amend the Singapore-Australia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA).

Singapore and Australia share a special relationship built on long-standing ties. The strength of this relationship is on display in the university sector, highlighted by the 131 formal agreements in place between Singaporean institutions and Australian universities. In addition to these extensive collaborative linkages that facilitate student exchanges, study abroad arrangements, staff exchanges and academic/research collaboration, a number of Australian universities also have well established offshore operations in Singapore.

Indeed, Australian universities are popular with Singaporean students, with many graduates returning to Singapore and becoming prominent figures playing important roles in the public and private sectors. According to Australian Alumni Singapore, more than 140,000 Singaporeans have graduated from Australian universities, including His Excellency Dr Tony Tan, President of the Republic of Singapore.

Similarly, Singapore is a popular destination for Australian students undertaking study abroad, and was one of four pilot locations for the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan Scholarship Program, supporting young Australian undergraduate students to undertake study and internships in the Indo Pacific region. Singapore has been a strong supporter of the initiative and in the first four years of the New Colombo Plan, more than 1000 Australian undergraduates have been supported to undertake study and internships in Singapore.

Building on this initiative, Universities Australia is working together with the Australian Government Department of Education and Training to support a pilot program to provide Singaporean students studying in Australia with an internship opportunity at leading Australian companies during 2017.

Clearly engagement with Singapore is a priority for Australian universities, and a closer relationship between our governments will bolster our already significant links.

As such, Universities Australia is encouraged by an agreement that offers to enhance opportunities for Australia's world-class education exports through increased recognition of Australian tertiary qualifications. However, future amendments to SAFTA should seek further expansion of qualifications recognition with an emphasis on broader recognition of Australia's Qualifications Framework.

The recently completed Third SAFTA Review and its adopted recommendations achieves recognition for postgraduate medical degrees from two Australian universities and the Juris Doctor degrees of Australian universities currently listed in SAFTA. It also recognises 15 allied health degrees from a number of Australian universities under a unilateral offer applying to degrees in physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

While these measures undoubtedly provide a number of Australian universities with a real comparative advantage (as they will represent a significant proportion of the foreign universities offering professional degrees to Singaporean students that will be recognised back in their own country) Universities Australia would ultimately like to see this recognition extended to the entire sector.

As all Australian degrees are nationally recognised and meet stringent quality requirements of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, the Australian Qualifications Framework, and the range of professional bodies which accredit professional qualifications in fields such as health and law, the Singaporean Government can be confident of the quality of graduates being produced through these degrees across the entire sector.

In addition to the Agreement to Amend SAFTA, Universities Australia is also encouraged by important commitments contained in concluded side-letters, including a commitment to take forward mutual recognition arrangements for accountants and engineers, and a commitment to develop a process for future requests by Australian universities to use the term "university" for a campus located in Singapore, and to consider feedback on regulatory processes.

Again, these initiatives potentially provide Australian universities with a real advantage when attracting Singaporean students to our world-class institutions. Furthermore, mutual recognition of qualifications will facilitate greater workforce mobility between our regions, helping to meet workforce needs and promoting even stronger ties between our nations. Universities Australia looks forward to further progress being made in this space.

Universities Australia also acknowledges complementary initiatives embarked on following the 2015 Joint Declaration on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, in particular the commitment to accelerate our collaboration in innovation, science, research and technology.

The 2016 Memorandum of Understanding on innovation and science engagement between Australia and Singapore will build stronger links and support learning and economic growth in both countries, however it's noteworthy that Singapore has dedicated funding of about S\$25 million over five years, while Australia has committed to provide 'matching funding from a variety of government and non-government sources'. Universities Australia encourages the Australian Government to match funding by the Singaporean Government in its own right, rather than relying on an undisclosed amount from non-government sources.

As part of this commitment to build stronger innovation linkages and provide significant potential for mutual learning, Universities Australia was pleased to see the recent Singapore opening of the final 'landing pad' for market-ready Australian start-ups, completing an exciting initiative by the Australian Government. Australian universities are developing the

next generation of entrepreneurs and these landing pads will help them to identify partners, customers and investors, and find opportunities to reach global markets.

These are truly exciting times for the Australia-Singapore relationship and Australia's universities look forward to continuing to make their contribution to what is one of Australia's most important bilateral arrangements.

If you would like any further information, please contact Universities Australia's Policy Director International, Dr John Wellard, at j.wellard@unias.edu.au or (02) 6285 81365.

Yours sincerely,

Catriona Jackson
Deputy Chief Executive