

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

I is pleased to submit the attached report to the Trade Subcommittee's inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors.

The report's author and credentials include:

Mr Simon Cole. Mr Cole worked in the international education sector for 30 years from 1988 to 2018, the last 9 years being in Brisbane at QUT's International College. Prior to QUT, he worked for 13 years at Japanese universities teaching English language, including several summer study abroad courses at England's Warwick University. In the early 1990s he taught at private language colleges in Brisbane and Melbourne. He is a graduate of; Birmingham's Aston University - Master of Science in Education (TESOL); New England University (NSW) – Graduate Diploma in Education (TESOL); South Australia Institute of Technology's Aboriginal Task Force (Ass. Dip. Aboriginal Community Administration); La Trobe University – Bachelor of Behavioural Science.

Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors

Author: Mr Simon Cole

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This submission is limited to the Inquiry's focus on the international education sector.

Challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers

- **challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers** as a result of the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and effective measures to attract and retain students to Australia; (**share experiences about transitioning into the post COVID-19 period**)

The COVID pandemic exposed Australia's vulnerabilities to international dependencies in many sectors, none more than its international education industry. The general consensus is that future pandemics should be factored into our planning. Therefore, the international education sector needs to temper its expectations. The Committee's exploration of online innovations to strengthen the sector's resilience is commendable. There are numerous reasons for adapting the delivery of education to overseas students from onshore and retention (migration) pathways to online, distance and temporary visitation modes. Not least of which is that the decline in student numbers could be reversed. However, there are compelling reasons for limiting the number of international students aiming for permanent residency to about 20% of university cohorts. In addition, greater separation between international education delivery and migration will improve the integrity of both. [The calls for immigration to better refine its visa integrity are long-standing](#) (2010).

This submission will explore these reasons and offer suggestions that strike a beneficial balance of face-to-face contact with the flexibility of online study for students resident overseas. These suggestions benefit the students and teachers themselves, their countries, Australia's tourism, research and industry sectors, our environment and public finances.

This submission seeks to complement and augment the Australia Universities Accord **Key Area 6. Quality and sustainability**. *Examine the challenges faced by domestic and international students and staff due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary and permanent impacts on the way the higher education sector works. Support a competitive and resilient international education sector, reflecting the important role international students play in our society and economy, and Australia's interest in deepening partnerships abroad.* [Media release](#).

Online innovations in education delivery

- **online innovations** in education delivery and potential opportunities to **strengthen the sector's resilience**;

I will advise firstly in regard to English language education delivery, as that is my area of expertise, but my suggestions can be extrapolated to other disciplines, of which I have some experience.

In response to COVID, the technical delivery of online courses has improved. Exploiting these improvements will contribute to Key Area 7 of the [Australian Universities Accord](#), which is to 'reduce costs for universities and schools' infrastructure', as well as an off-shore delivery model.

Study-tour type courses have been popular in the past, but they have been limited to short-term in-between semesters for vacationing students. Students who are focussed on improving their English language skills for general purpose or tertiary level studies in specialist disciplines require curricula designed to support their goals of being gainfully employable in their own country or wherever their skills are in greatest demand. Courses that combine distance delivery with tourist visa immersion experiences and tutor visitations meetings at or from off shore educational bases (which already exist) focus the students' attention on their study goals. It has been my experience that students whose goal of permanent residency is as important, if not more so, than their studies are poor achievers academically. They should be able to gain an internationally recognised qualification that allows them to choose from any institution around the world. When students and their parents are heavily invested in both their education and migration, universities tend to pass under-achievers become cash-cows. A way to help break this cycle is to, as [Thomson \(2009\)](#) stated "Require overseas students to return to their country of origin and complete a two-year cooling off period before being eligible to apply for permanent residence." ([Address by Kelvin Thomson](#), MP for Wills, 10 February 2009.)

Initiatives to ensure positive international student experience

- **initiatives to ensure positive international student experience and support pathways to build their skills**

Government can facilitate supporting pathways to building skills by creating a study visa category for the above mode of delivery. By limiting international students to off-shore study and short-term on-shore study tours (no work), revenue is brought in at less expense to the universities and the nation. Schools can be more certain students are on board to study. These courses should ensure multi-lingual and multicultural cohorts. This is essential to successful post-beginner English language classes. Before COVID, the university-based International Colleges offering English language courses became almost completely dependent on a single ethnic group that was most able and willing to pay the high fees. Having taught in these monolingual cohorts, I can testify to the limited progress that students make when they have a common non-English language to fall back on.

The integrity of the student visa system is essential to ensuring a positive international student experience.

[Sustainable Population Australia stated in its August 2020 submission to the temporary migration parliamentary inquiry](#): “The university sector has become increasingly reliant on income from international student fees, particularly so over the last decade. This privatisation of the tertiary sector and reliance on overseas placements has resulted in some undesirable consequences. These include: diminishing placements and support for domestic students; a shift in focus of tuition and service delivery to accommodate international students; academic research geared towards appealing to prospective international students; conflict of interest leading to diminishing quality of education; dependency on a narrow range of source countries for student enrolment leaving many universities vulnerable (particularly so for the Go8 group of universities). SPA recommends that the federal government works with universities to reprioritize domestic placements in universities. This may be achieved by policies to assist universities returning to public service institutions serving the domestic populace as opposed to the privatised enterprises they have now become. There would still be scope for a limited amount of international placements or study exchange opportunities.”

I have first hand experience of the diminishing support for domestic students. A description given by a young friend goes like this: ‘Being one of 4 domestic students in a class with 16 foreign students, we domestic students were recruited by the teacher and divided into 4 project groups of foreign students to assist them as unpaid tutors.’ [AUA](#) Key area 4 is *Explore the contribution that higher education makes to the Australian community, national security, and sovereign capability*. The international education sector should not undermine, but complement and support the AU Accord. Classes of majority non-native English speakers who are relatively unfamiliar with Australian educational norms hold back local students. Getting international student numbers down to 20% in classes other than English language is an important way to ensure international students have a positive experience here building their skill set up. [Gwilym Croucher](#) (2022) states, “Real challenges [that] lie ahead and are growing more urgent [include] an [over reliance](#) by the universities on international fee revenue” ([The Conversation](#)).

An off-shore model provides flexibility for both students and teachers in terms of work/study location.

International students are not an ‘export industry’ if they are on track to migrate here. The domestic experience of an international course should be a short component of the curriculum and applicants should be required to have a return travel ticket. This model of study visa ensures the visa holders patronize the local tourist industry. Currently some student and working holiday visa holders spend little time enjoying the domestic tourist industry and the recent increase in allowed working hours has exacerbated the problem. They willingly submit to below-standard working conditions and pay, which they are culturally disinclined to object to, even if they were doing it in their own countries, in order to support themselves until they get permanent residency. This also undermines the working conditions and wages of resident Australians. Demographer, Abdul Risvi echoes this in an article (2022) titled [Student visas: Little more than unsponsored work permits. ‘Industrial scale’ visa scams creating underclass of workers open to exploitation](#). Claims of widespread rorting of the system are long-standing. Birrell and Healy (2014) from the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University issued a report called *Immigration and Unemployment*. In it, they claimed that the Department Of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) had ... [issued a record number of student visas to people who may not be considered genuine students](#).

This off-shore model will ensure the regions will continue to benefit from international student visitations. There will also be a reduction in the demand for facilities, services, infrastructure and

accommodation that is hampering efforts to reduce public debt, improve city planning and ward off climate change and environmental degradation. [Hamish Burns](#) (2020) cites Dr Jane O'Sullivan's work on the cost of every new resident: "Analysis has shown that each additional person costs \$500,000, of which a huge chunk is borne by the taxpayer."

Contribute to Australia's prosperity

Australia is already a prosperous country. Most students come from less prosperous countries. By patronizing our education system and acquiring new skills to contribute to the prosperity of their countries, international students provide benefits to Australia in the short and long term. Australia's prosperity lies in careful stewardship of its natural environment and human well-being, which is not measured by national GDP growth, but by per capita GDP.

The Australian Universities Accord Key area 4. **Governance, accountability and community** contains admirable goals to train and skill up Australians. *Enhance regulatory and workplace relations settings to support universities to meet their obligations to both staff and students.* These goals should be complemented by the international education sector – not undermined – to ensure Australia's prosperity.

Concentrating on national GDP growth as an indication of all things good leads to short-sighted ambitions. In [2010, Universities Australia](#) endorsed "the Government's proposed migration reforms to encourage the best and brightest – people with advanced skills and qualifications – to migrate to Australia." This undermines the universities' own market! If job opportunities are taken by new arrivals, it undermines the purpose of training the best and brightest 'home-grown' people. Australian graduates are experiencing increasing difficulty finding jobs that use their qualifications.

Opportunities for international education to support strategic and foreign policy objectives.

Australian international education, done well, improves our reputation abroad.

What are our strategic and foreign policy objectives? This inquiry does not state them, so I will consider the area I'm more familiar with – English language delivery.

It must be understood that the English language is a cultural legacy and we are fortunate that it is an international lingua franca. It has become so due to a colonial past of which we are both a product and beneficiary. That it remains in demand is a sign of international good will. Over-commercialising its delivery risks undermining that good will.

It has to be understood that exploiting a cultural legacy such as English as an income earner has its limitations - by its very nature. Attempting to reap significant profits undermines its role as a conduit in international relations. Graddol (1996) predicted that if English language learning is too expensive financially, those from major language groups will naturally do all they can to turn the tide toward away from English.

With this in mind, government should regulate the education sector to ensure there is integrity in its international delivery, as mentioned already. A Migrant Education style delivery of language skills, not connected to any lure of residency, delivered at bases overseas or through distance, online with

curriculum designs that include temporary tourist visitations for immersion purposes, would establish a stable and sustainable basis for an on-going enterprise. For those unable to afford English language education, it can be provided through our foreign aid budget.

References

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[SPA submission to the temporary migration parliamentary inquiry.](#)

SPA [The calls for immigration to better refine its visa integrity are long-standing.](#) (2010)

Sydney Morning Herald [‘Industrial scale’ visa scams creating underclass of workers open to exploitation](#)