



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

via: jscfadt@aph.gov.au

12 December 2022

Dear Secretary,

Re: Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors

University of Canberra is pleased to provide a submission to the Committee's *Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors*.

There are strong links between tourism, the visitor economy, and higher education, particularly through international students and their friends and family.

It is widely known the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent border closures had a devastating effect on international education in Australia.

Prior to the pandemic, 'international education services' was the largest export for the Australian Capital Territory, worth over \$1 billion a year directly to the local economy. By 2021 its value had halved.

There are lessons to be learnt for universities and the Government as the sector now looks to recover.

Attached is our submission offering broad comments on international education and the visitor economy, and specific comments against the terms of reference of the inquiry.

Please contact Ms Fiona Sutherland [REDACTED] if you have any questions regarding our submission.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Professor Paddy Nixon
Vice-Chancellor and President

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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors

Submission from the University of Canberra

December 2022

University of Canberra is pleased to provide a submission to the Committee's *Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sectors*.

University of Canberra academic, Dr Naomi Dale, Faculty of Business, Government and Law, is a board member of the Australian Tourism Industry Council and lends her expertise on these matters.

There are strong links between tourism, the visitor economy, and higher education, particularly through international students and their friends and family.

We are a university with a civic mission for Canberra and exist first and foremost for the uplift of our local community. However, a crucial part of this involves attracting others to take up their studies in Canberra, with a mutual benefit of cultural exchange for both international and domestic students. Although Canberra is our home, the impact and consequence of our teaching and research has impact beyond our regional and national borders. We have students from more than 120 countries and alumni all over the world. This diversity enriches us all.

Many will already recognise the economic benefit of international education. However, the importance of international education is much broader than economic contributions. International students bring new ideas and experiences, building our cross-cultural awareness and adding value to the learning experience at universities. They also allow our community and individual students to build global alumni networks.

The University of Canberra encourages the Committee to consider three broad themes that we see as a priority for reinvigorating the international education sector post-COVID.

- 1. Building the value proposition for international students in Australia** - a unique combination of:
 - the in-country immersive 'Australian experience', providing students' exposure to new understandings of society, culture, language, and place.
 - the strength of the relationships and networks they build while they are here, with their institutions, their peers, their employers and the with the broader Australian community.
 - the high-quality teaching and learning environment and the currency of Australian qualifications globally.
 - career readiness - including embedded work-integrated learning and industry experience as a core component of many university degrees; and
 - post-study work rights.
- 2. Career readiness and graduate outcomes** - an emerging need to recognise and strengthen career readiness and graduate outcomes as they relate to international students. There is a current focus on industry engagement and work-integrated learning for domestic higher education students in Australia and there is considerable scope to make this a more distinctive feature of the international student experience.
- 3. Mobility and cross-cultural exchange** as complementing international education. International education has long contributed to soft diplomacy in Australia and the benefits of exchange both within and without are enormous. Focusing on Australia's place within the broader Asia-Pacific also opens many opportunities to connect to education and research partners and industry beyond our borders. We welcome support from Government in expanding multilateral partnerships that connect international students in the broader region.

This submission offers broad comments on international education and the visitor economy, and specific comments on international education against the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

International education and the visitor economy

The pandemic and consequent border closures had a devastating effect on international education in Australia. In 2020 universities saw some drops in commencing international enrolments. In 2021 these were even more pronounced, sending economic shockwaves through a sector that had become dependent on fees from international students.

In 2018 and 2019, 'international education services' was the largest export for the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), worth over \$1 billion a year directly to the local economy. By 2021 its value had halved.

Like many in the sector, the University of Canberra saw a reduction in international student commencements (29% reduction between 2019 and 2021). Typically, the University of Canberra comfortably sits within a good balance of international student enrolments, between 20% and 25% of the student population. In 2021 however, this proportion had fallen to 16%.

It is well recognised that international students contribute significantly to tourism in Australia. According to International Visitor Survey (IVS) in the year ending June 2022, there were 77,736 international visitors to Australia who stated the main purpose for their visit was 'education'. In addition, visiting friends and relatives accounted for 55% or 613,000 of international visitors.

The University understands the important role it plays in relation to education and tourism in the ACT region and the Australian community more broadly. We emphasise our place in the community in our recently released strategy *Connected*, a decadal plan that sets out the long-term ambitions and objectives for our university. We are optimistic and working hard to facilitate a strong recovery post pandemic.

Challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers because of the significant disruption caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Although not specific to University of Canberra community, through various forums we have heard that international students felt they were unwelcomed in Australia during the time of the pandemic. Public messaging expressed that an international student's best option was to return to their home country and that there would be little financial support available. The University notes and appreciates recent efforts to reverse this, with positive ministerial messages to international students. We would like to see this messaging echoed more broadly and on an on-going basis across a range of initiatives.

International students are ordinarily required to demonstrate their ability to financial support themselves at the time of applying for their student visa. However, the pandemic affected communities globally, leading to increased and unforeseen financial pressures on students, their families, and support networks overseas. The University of Canberra recognised the significant impact on our international students and introduced a range of measures an International Return Subsidy (IRS) to provide some financial relief to our students who had been impacted by changing travel reservations, unanticipated quarantine expenses and testing requirements. We also provided other fee relief or payment plans applied on a case-by-case basis.

During the pandemic University of Canberra was quick to identify and respond to a range of mental health and wellbeing challenges for students. In response, the University provided a range of support practices:

- *University of Canberra Medical and Counselling* provides medical and psychological support to students
- 24/7 Crisis line support in collaboration with *Lifeline*

- The *UCX Food Pantry* provides free food to University of Canberra students, this service works with community partners to deliver additional support with the Multicultural Association of Canberra and Three Mills Bakery making regular, and generous, donations.
- Engaging with current and prospective students through online webinars, short films, Facebook live Q&As and regular liaison with students
- The development of reasonable adjustment plans and piloting of new technology for use by students with disability
- The *Student Empowerment Fund* provided financial assistance to students facing difficulty, hardship or crisis impacting their capacity to study successfully
- A *Student Equipment Loan Program* enables students to access suitable equipment to enable remote learning

Online innovations in education delivery and potential opportunities to strengthen the sector's resilience.

Online innovations

Like many other education providers, during the pandemic the University of Canberra had to quickly pivot to online teaching and learning. The Committee should understand that this is not entirely the same as the considered program of work around implementing online and digital solutions that many universities were already engaged in. The restrictions on face-to-face learning presented challenges for courses where there was a work placement component or practical element of instruction. The University had to innovate and think creatively about the way in which we deliver our courses.

A good example of this is our Faculty of Health, where many students gained immediate practical knowledge of telehealth.

The University's campus includes a health precinct, home to the University of Canberra Hospital, Icon Specialist Medical Centre, and the Faculty of Health Clinical Hub. The Health Hub is a significant supplier of health services to the Canberra region with student-led clinics across nine health disciplines. Student-led clinics provide over 21,000 visit occasions annually for members of the Canberra region community, including low-cost health services.

These clinics acted rapidly to comply with COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and transitioned to telehealth services. This was critical for student accreditation requirements and to maintain continuity of patient therapy. Our clinical educators and students were upskilled in service delivery and comprehensive compliance with Australian guidelines was conducted.

There are lessons to be learnt from the time during the pandemic as universities now look to recover. The University of Canberra recently released its decadal strategy *Connected*, that sets out the long-term ambitions and objectives for our university. This strategy includes further developing and delivering a dynamic, engaging digital offering, and developing impactful teaching partnerships that enhance academic excellence, research impact, and encourage campus participation.

Diversification key to resilience

The University of Canberra encourages the Committee to recognise the current *Australian Strategy for International Education 2021-2030*, available on the Department of Education website. The Strategy identifies four priority areas for the next decade: diversification; alignment with Australia's workforce and skills needs; students at the centre; and growth and global competitiveness.

Diversification is key to a thriving international education sector. University of Canberra intentionally has a balanced and diverse range of students studying onshore, with no more than 20% from any one source country. This assisted the University to remain resilient during the pandemic, particularly when border closures were more severe in some countries than in others. The University recognises the risk to both student experience and the sustainability of international student enrolments in overexposure to certain source countries. This risk is sector wide and existed prior to the pandemic.

Initiatives to ensure a positive international student experience and support pathways to build their skills and contribute to the Australia's prosperity.

Australian institutions such as the University of Canberra have been offering transnational education to students overseas for some time. These courses attract students who want a quality education but don't necessarily want to study in Australia. More broadly, Australia is growing its transnational footprint with many Australian institutions offering offshore programs or opening offshore campuses. There is also a digitisation of many courses with more students opting to study entirely online.

From a tourism perspective there are drawbacks but also opportunities with the growth of transnational and online learning. Students can graduate with an Australian university qualification without ever setting foot on our shores.

The University encourages the Australian Government to consider opportunities for offshore students to further connect with Australia. These might include

- visits to Australia on a short-term basis for study tours or Alumni events
- incentives for students and their families to come to Australia after their studies to attend graduation ceremonies, or
- extension of Post Study Work Rights (PSWR) to students who study Australian qualifications offshore.

All Australian universities deliver a range of initiatives and programs to support the international student experience both in the context of courses and campus life more broadly.

Part-time work is essential for the well-being of many international students. The University encourages the Australian Government to increase measures to support international students in the workplace, including communication around workplace rights. This might include information on rights and responsibilities in both paid and unpaid work which may form part of their studies.

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

Leveraging visa settings to attract the brightest students

During the pandemic education competitors such as Canada, the UK and the US opened their borders before Australia and offered several visa related incentives for international students to return. It would be beneficial for the Australian Government to consider how visa settings could be further leveraged to attract the brightest and talented students to our shores. These students not only make our institutions better by bringing new ideas, research excellence and talent but also provide Australia with the opportunity to develop a pipeline of highly educated and trained workers to respond to skills shortage and national security priorities.

Supporting accessibility and equity

In addressing disadvantage University of Canberra seeks to be sector-leading in equity, diversity, inclusion, and access. Times Higher Education ranks the University of Canberra in the top 300 universities worldwide and in the top 20 young universities under 50 years of age. It also ranks the University highly in its assessment against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG). In the *Times Higher Education Impact Ranking* the University has been named number one in the world for UNSDG 10 'Reduce Inequality' for the second year running.

In 2023 University of Canberra will offer scholarships to select international students who exhibit the University of Canberra's core values and demonstrate a commitment to social engagement, sustainability and reducing inequalities. We encouraged applications from students who:

- live in Latin America, Southeast Asia, Africa and South Asia.
- did not otherwise have the resources to finance international study.
- did not have access to other significant scholarships (example: Australia Awards)

With our commitment to accessibility, we strongly support the continuation and expansion of similar initiatives offered by Government such as the Australia Awards and New Colombo Plan programs. Not only do these programs increase participation by students who would not otherwise have the opportunity, but they also develop stronger links to regions of strategic importance to Australia such as Southeast Asia and the South Pacific.

Post study work and skilled migration

The University welcomes the Federal Government's recent announcement around the extension of Post Study Work Rights (PSWR) visa (subclass 485) for students graduating in higher education degrees linked to identified skills shortages. It is clear from these announcements that the Government is poised to boost the Australian workforce in areas of skills shortage through targeted migration pathways.

The University also recognises the importance of building streamlined approach to assist international students to transition from graduation to employment. Whether it be through streamlining visa application processes, recognition by professional organisations or by supporting these students to find employment in their field of study, there are a variety of levers that could be used to better support the transition from graduation to employment and essentially filling skills needs.

There is an emphasis from the Government on building stronger relationships in Southeast Asia. It would be beneficial for the university sector to have greater information about job vacancies and the skills needs in Southeast Asian countries to better focus their efforts. Centrally collated information on recognition of Australian professional qualification such as nursing and teaching in these countries would also be beneficial.

University of Canberra

The University is incorporated under the University of Canberra Act 1989 of the Australian Capital Territory.

We are committed to serving the people of Canberra and the region through professional education and applied research.

University of Canberra is ranked among top universities globally by both Times Higher Education (THE) and QS World University Rankings and appears in the 2020 THE rankings as one of the top 300 universities in the world and one of the top 20 young universities under the age of 50 years.

The University has released *Connected*, a decadal strategy that sets out the long-term ambitions and objectives for our university. It has at its core explicit commitment to our staff and students, to our place in Canberra and the region, and to the Ngunnawal people.

Our ambition for the coming 10 years is to be a global leader in driving equality of opportunity. A commitment that ensures we are the most accessible university in Australia; building an international identity for University of Canberra that celebrates, and is built upon, the importance of our place, one of national and international decision making. We proudly embrace our role as the university of the nation's capital.

The University of Canberra has had long-standing excellence in both teaching and mission-oriented problem-solving research and continues to be influential in a range of areas including health and wellbeing, nursing, education, information technology, communications, architecture and design, sport, and science.