

Victorian TAFE Association

A Response to Draft National Strategy for International Education

This submission is made by the Victorian TAFE Association (VTA). The VTA is the peak body for Victoria's public vocational education and training (VET) providers. VTA members include four dual sector Universities, twelve stand-alone public TAFE Institutes and an Associate Member, AMES. Services provided by VTA to members include public policy advocacy, workforce relations advice, education projects, research, government liaison and representation, and professional development. VTA members may make submissions individually on matters of particular interest to them.

VTA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper 'Draft National Strategy for International Education' (the Draft Strategy). The scope of VTA activities includes a long term role in public policy in international education within the State of Victoria and nationally. As such, we believe the Association is well placed to respond to the paper.

VTA members offer an extremely diverse range of programs and services relevant to the Draft Strategy; secondary school programs, vocational education and training, English language and higher education courses, institute-to-institute, on behalf of governments and on behalf of industry. Offerings are onshore and, increasingly through offshore partnerships. Many aspects of the proposed strategy will touch on the activities of our members. However, this submission will focus on the context of vocational education and training, and in particular, transnational education.

Introduction

VTA supports the vision in the Draft Strategy that international education is a core element of Australia's economic prosperity, social advancement and international standing.

The Victorian Government has identified international education as one of six sectors positioned to contribute substantially to the State's growth. As noted in the Draft Strategy, Victoria has prepared a comprehensive international education strategy in consultation with stakeholders. VTA has found this to be a most valuable approach, strengthening stakeholder engagement and providing a clear line of sight to goals and strategic activities. The Draft Strategy will complement the Victorian International Education Strategy 2013-2018 most closely in building export markets, contributing to stability in the international education sector, and capitalising on the broader cultural and economic benefits of international education. A co-ordinated approach to Australia's international education sector is necessary to ensure Australia remains competitive in this market.

VTA proposes the following priorities/policy actions in the first year of the implementation of the strategy:

1. Reform of streamlined visa processing (SVP) to ensure the system is sustainable, features equitable access and fair selection processes.
2. Agree benchmarking between Australian Government, State and Territories including consultation with key stakeholders in international education.
3. Transparent, free data access for stakeholders planning engagement in international education.
4. Reduction of red tape without compromising quality outcomes in offshore and onshore international education.

5. Create an interdepartmental taskforce (Department of Education, Department of Trade and Department of Immigration and Border Protection) to ensure Australia's student visa program does not inhibit competition between CRICOS providers.
6. Establish in conjunction with states, territories and peak bodies, a plan of offshore market development activities.

Pillar 1: Getting the fundamentals right

VTA agrees that a strong high-quality education and research system is fundamental to maintaining Australia's international reputation. The Draft Strategy paper rightly acknowledges the importance of school education performance in literacy, problem solving and numeracy as an attraction to international students. While there may be no international comparisons that benchmark VET systems, VET should not be overlooked as a place for strategy actions by the Australian Government in conjunction with states and territories to improve access to literacy, language and numeracy in VET programs for the many international students that choose a pathway into the Australian education system via VET rather than schools. Australia's schools and tertiary institutions all need to be recognised as providing the literacy and numeracy competencies for future work or education pathways.

The Australian and Victorian Governments have acted to address recent criticisms of the quality of VET and the students' experiences. The enrolments in VET by international students are currently on the ascent.

Better information on quality performance is noted as part of getting the fundamentals right (strategic action 1.3). The proposed actions of the Australian Government include 'provide up-to-date information on training courses for school leavers, students, apprentices and employers through the *My Skills* directory.' This action is not sufficient. Informed choice in VET is underpinned by consumer advice that uses language easily understood by the users, easy to access on providers' websites and allows for meaningful comparisons. Providing up-to-date information on training courses is only part of the story. These matters were discussed by an industry forum on VET consumer information convened by Senator the Hon Simon Birmingham, Assistant Minister for Education and Training, as part of the meeting of commonwealth and state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for skills on May 8, 2015. The outcomes of these discussions should be factored into the final Australian strategy on international education.

VTA and its members encourage the Australian Government to:

- Build into the Draft Strategies actions that will mitigate against the market activities that jeopardised the integrity of Australian VET qualifications in recent years.
- Carefully consider actions perceived to reduce red tape that may have the unanticipated consequence of opening up the Australian international education sector to further criticism.
- Imbed into the Draft Strategy the outcomes of the meeting of commonwealth and state and territory ministers with portfolio responsibility for skills on May 8, 2015.

Pillar 2: Reaching out to the world

VTA provides in-principle support to the Draft Strategy actions to strengthen and diversify institutional partnerships, invest in high quality international research collaborations and building confidence in Australia's international education sector through government-to-government engagement.

VTA consultations support that most providers see a role for Government in facilitating linkages, particularly in new markets and in markets with centralised decision-making and/or planned economies. Providers also see a valuable role for government in connecting them to companies with offshore operations, especially Australian companies that may have local (offshore) training needs. In a federated model such as we have in Australia, there are additional challenges to co-ordinate this effort to secure international education opportunities but a concerted effort is needed to meet our major competitors such as Germany, UK and USA head-on. VTA and its members encourage the Australian Government to identify and facilitate introductions between Australian institutions and governments of other nations to provide transnational education and training.

VET professionals bring to the table vocational qualifications across a plethora of industries and occupational areas. Many VET professionals already have international experience in their chosen vocation. The economic and social contributions of the VET sector are not widely understood. VTA looks forward to opportunities for the Draft Strategy to focus on their professionalism as educators and enable opportunities for VET sector researchers to showcase their talents to an international audience, students and staff to participate in scholarship programs and professional development activities that will widen their horizons to develop an international outlook. Connecting VET staff and students to international experiences has the benefits of promoting Australia's world-class VET system and forging long term relationships with individuals as they move into diverse careers.

Pillar 3: Staying competitive

Intersect between Australian Government and State Government policy

For Australia's public providers of international VET to be competitive in international education they must be able to present, with absolute confidence to the world, a picture of having a solid financial footing, a degree of stability in offerings and breadth/depth of services to students. If public providers of international education cannot be competitive in the domestic market, their competitiveness in international markets may be compromised. The Australian Government and governments of states and territories must be mindful of the impact of domestic policy on international education enrolments in Australia. Changes to governments' domestic VET funding policies to manage government expenditure can impact on the scope of offerings of public providers. We have seen in Victoria a rationalisation of domestic high quality course offerings where courses are not viable due to reduced government subsidies and an unwillingness of the student to pay higher fees. Many of these courses have been popular with international students where the delivery methodology includes classes with both domestic and international students. Rationalisation of courses for domestic students limits opportunities for international students in those courses and impacts on the public providers' contribution to the international education market. Prospective international students, their parents and agents are able to access news of the Australian VET system. Australia does not want to be communicating an impression of instability and uncertainty in the domestic VET market.

In the context of the VET sector, a positive student experience includes opportunities for international students to learn in an environment that includes domestic students and international students. An immersion in the Australian culture is facilitated by building friendship with locals. VTA endorses the importance of ensuring a positive and rewarding student experience. The Draft Strategy targets areas for inclusion that have been priorities among our members including:

- Identifying work experience opportunities,
- Improving English language proficiency,
- Improving access to public transport and health services,
- Improving access to suitable and affordable accommodation, and

- Increasing community engagement.

In relation to maintaining competitive visas and strong consumer protections, VTA invites deeper consideration of the policy impacts of decisions in this area. VTA supports a continuous improvement approach to the quality of the educational and living experiences for international students. Of critical importance to VTA members is access to streamlined visa processing (SVP). There are inequities in the current arrangements for selecting providers to access where large, experienced, respected public providers of international education in Victoria have not been able to access SVP. The system also discriminates against the different governance arrangements between state and territories whereby one entity, covering the entire state of NSW, can gain access to SVP for a multiple of TAFEs under one umbrella application yet the same option cannot be provided in Victoria. The outcome has been to create a non-competitive environment for Victorian TAFE providers. The SVP is being viewed by prospective students, rightly or wrongly, as an indicator of quality and sustainability.

VTA and its members encourage the Australian Government to:

- Strengthen the actions to include establishing advisory arrangements and testing of proposed policy changes with CRICOS providers before finalising visa arrangements to ensure there are no unintended consequences of the policy that would be deemed as creating competitive advantages for any providers.
- Create an interdepartmental taskforce (Department of Education, Department of Trade and Department of Immigration and Border Protection) to ensure Australia's student visa program does not inhibit competition between CRICOS providers.

Demand for offshore education and training services

The Draft National Strategy Australia's VET sector has also played an important role in building long-standing, successful offshore partnerships with governments, industry and employees. Australian Education International (AEI) data shows that in 2011, 58,516 students enrolled in offshore campuses of Australian public VET institutions, which is more than double the onshore international enrolments in public VET institutions. The real value for Australian institutions is, in many cases, not in the revenue returned from offshore delivery of Australian programs, but in the opportunities it provides to further internationalise institutions and develop collaborative partnerships. Transnational education activities also include utilising Australian expertise to provide consultancy services, curriculum development and professional development advice.¹

Victoria has led the expansion of Australia's international education opportunities offshore. The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) estimates suggested that, in 2011, Victorian TAFE Institutes generated around \$42 million through offshore delivery representing 25 per cent of revenue derived from international students.² VTA refers to *Vocational Education and Training, Transnational Education Case Studies – Industry Engagement 2013*³ and *Government owned Vocational and Technical Education in the State of Victoria, Australia (VTI, 2013)*⁴ describing transnational education case studies and examples of the breadth of international projects.

¹ Australia – Educating Globally Advice from the International Education Advisory Council February 2013

² International Education Strategy for Victoria - 2013-2018 (page 7)

³ See <http://www.vti.edu.au/images/stories/documents/2014/Government%20Reports/VTI-B2B-Case-Studies.pdf>

⁴ http://www.vti.edu.au/images/stories/documents/archive-2013/VTI_Publications/capability_statements/VTI_Capability_Statements.pdf

We feel the Draft Strategy does not sufficiently recognise the importance of offshore opportunities.

VTA and its members encourage the Australian Government to:

- Strengthen the strategy actions to enable Australia's high quality public VET providers to increase the commercialisation of their intellectual property and highly regarded training 'know how' in traditional and emerging markets.
- Facilitate the offshore provision of education and training by Australian providers through participating in Australian Government foreign aid programs.
- Establish in conjunction with states, territories and peak bodies, a plan of offshore market development activities.
- Identify and facilitate links between Australian institutions and partners in providing offshore education and training.

Key contact:

Andrew Williamson, Executive Director, VTA (awilliamson@vta.vic.edu.au)

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