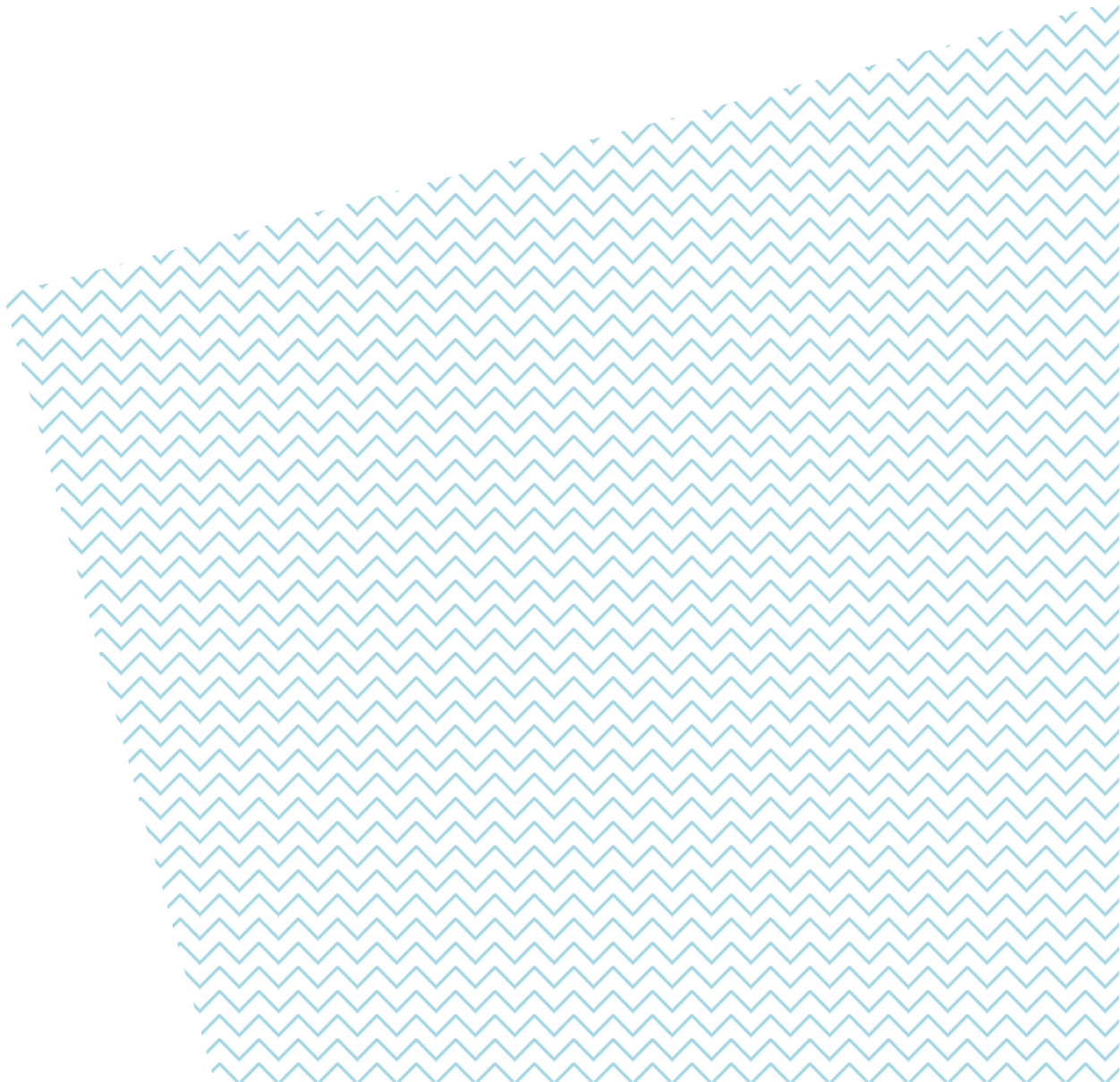




A longer-term international education recovery plan for Victoria

Submission to Global Victoria

March 2022



Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the development of the Victorian Government's longer-term international education recovery plan.

International education is a crucial industry for Victoria. In 2019, it was the State's single largest export sector, worth \$13.7 billion. International students contribute greatly to the vibrancy of our campuses and our broader economy and society. Our graduates form a strong global network of alumni and partners. The sector also represents an important aspect of university revenue, providing crucial funding for research, teaching, and university infrastructure.

The pandemic has significantly impacted the international education sector. Uncertainty about borders led to weakening student demand, which will have flow-on effects over the coming years. At the same time, universities have responded with creativity and innovation to ensure quality teaching and learning continued throughout the pandemic. The Victorian Government's suite of initiatives, including the International Education Resilience Fund, have provided crucial support to the sector during a challenging time.

Engagement on this new, longer-term plan is timely as Australia's borders reopen fully to international students for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic. This plan provides Victoria with an opportunity to consider how it might not only restore its international education sector but increase its long-term resilience within the new global environment.

The international education sector contains many different facets. While many think of the sector as primarily international undergraduate students studying at our campuses, it extends far beyond that. It will be crucial for a longer-term plan to consider how we recover the entire sector, including in the research and development sector. The plan will also need to consider ways to protect Victoria's reputation, including through initiatives to enhance student safety and wellbeing.

The University acknowledges the Victorian Government's intention to embrace opportunities for both onshore and offshore growth. Throughout the pandemic, universities have displayed their ability to provide high-quality education online and offshore. While it is important that we capitalise on these innovations, the plan should nevertheless recognise that for some universities, campus-based education will remain the cornerstone, and universities should be supported to pursue their individual missions and strategies in this regard.

There is great potential to increase the number of students enrolling from less-established source countries, but this must be based on the principle of additionality and the market-driven nature of the sector must be recognised. The University has been pursuing diversification for many years through targeted scholarships and other recruitment initiatives and is keen to see strategically expanded government support for these efforts.

To that end, the University supports the Victorian Government's proposals to leverage the successful Study Melbourne Hubs, Study Melbourne Brand and Global Education Network. Increased services to international students both onshore and overseas are very welcome. This will help to support our current students, while also encouraging future students to apply, and will assist the maintenance of a strong alumni network offshore. The Global Education Network and overseas Student Hubs provide a vital offshore presence for the sector, filling a gap for individual institutions that may not have the resources to maintain offices in all regions, and providing a notable positioning for Victoria.

The University encourages the Victorian Government to consider other ways it could enhance the experience of international students, including incentivising businesses to offer more work integrated learning opportunities and placements for these students during study and following graduation. This will improve international students' employability and provide a richer experience during their time in Victoria. The Victorian Government could also consider ways in which it could prevent work exploitation of international students and enhance community engagement, including through the provision of grants.

The University would welcome the opportunity to further discuss these matters with the Government.

For further information or to discuss the submission, Professor Michael Wesley, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) can be contacted at dvc-international@unimelb.edu.au.

Recommendations

1. Maintaining Victoria's reputation as a world-class study destination

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- Reflect on the experience of the pandemic, with a view to ensuring resilience within the sector against future outbreaks.
- Capture the breadth of international education in its longer-term plan and include support for international graduate researchers and international research collaboration.
- Implement additional measures to ensure student safety in Melbourne and Victoria more broadly.
- Support universities in their own individual strategies, whether that be expanding offshore enrolments or retaining onshore delivery as the cornerstone.

2. Seizing opportunities for onshore and offshore growth through collaboration with global partners

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- Continue to expand Study Melbourne Hubs into new locations.
- Provide greater investment for blended teaching and learning facilities.
- Continue to expand the Global Education Network into new countries, to foster new partnerships and provide intelligence and advice to the sector, while maintaining support for existing partner countries.
- Establish a grants or targeted scholarships program to support high achieving international students from emerging markets to study in Victoria.
- Reinforce relationships with trusted, high-performing education agents offshore, including through training and capacity-building through the Study Melbourne Hubs.

3. Enhancing the student experience for international students studying in Victoria

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- Incentivise local industry and business to partner with institutions and provide more work experience and internship opportunities for international students during their degrees.
- Establish a talent-based initiative to match international graduates with appropriate, degree-related work opportunities after study, and encourage companies with a presence overseas to employ Victorian graduates when they return home.
- Find local solutions to work exploitation of international students, working with local employers, city councils and other agencies to address the problem, and providing additional information to students on their rights and protections.
- Expand the community engagement grants offered through the International Student Welfare Program.

1. Maintaining Victoria's reputation as a world-class study destination

What are the most significant risks and opportunities with respect to Victoria's reputation as a desirable international study destination?

Victoria has long held a reputation globally as a high-quality study destination. This is due to the status of its institutions, its courses and the reputation of Melbourne and Victoria as great places to live. Yet, this has been significantly impacted by the effects of the pandemic and Australia's closed borders.

The borders are now open once again for international students, presenting an opportune time to develop a longer-term plan that protects our reputation and proactively regenerates our international education sector. In doing so, the University would encourage the Victorian Government to reflect on the experience of the pandemic and consider how we can ensure resilience against future outbreaks. This might include considering which measures worked, what could have been done differently, and future contingencies, including the role the Victorian quarantine hub in Mickleham could play.

Additionally, there is a risk that this longer-term plan fails to capture the full breadth of the sector. Many think of international education in terms of undergraduate enrolments, without recognising its importance to our research and development sector. International students, including at the postgraduate level, are critical to our leading research institutions and make up a key pipeline for Victoria's highly skilled research and innovation workforce. International research students' importance has only grown in recent years as a higher proportion of Australian researchers seek training overseas.

As part of its new \$10 million international education initiative, the Australian Government recently announced \$2.2 million to support post-doctoral placements for international students. There is an opportunity for the Victorian Government to bolster this support, prioritising international graduate researchers' continued pathways to research training in Victoria. The Victorian Government could also provide support for research engagement in neighbouring countries in our region. This could include offering grants for partnerships between research institutes in Victoria and the Asia-Pacific focused on Victoria's research priorities, such as medical technology and sustainability. This will ensure Victoria's reputation as a premier research partner and destination continues.

Another significant risk for Victoria's reputation relates to international students' mental and physical safety. International students regularly report personal safety and security as a top reason for choosing to study in Australia.¹ However, the recently released National Student Safety Survey also highlighted concerning rates of sexual harassment and assault, including among international students. To respond to this, the Victorian Government could pursue additional measures to ensure student safety, such as those outlined in Orygen's report to the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment on international student safety.

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- **Reflect on the experience of the pandemic, with a view to ensuring resilience within the sector against future outbreaks.**
- **Capture the breadth of international education in its longer-term plan and include support for international graduate researchers and international research collaboration.**
- **Implement additional measures to ensure student safety in Melbourne and Victoria more broadly.**

¹ Orygen, International Students and their Mental Health and Physical Safety, June 2020
<https://internationaleducation.gov.au/International-network/Australia/InternationalStrategy/EGIPProjects/Documents/ORYGEN%20-%20International%20Student%20Mental%20Health%20and%20Physical%20Safety%20June%202020.pdf>

How can government work with stakeholders to best manage the sector's reputation in response to the protracted impacts of COVID-19?

The pandemic has proven the sector's ability to deliver high-quality education offshore and online. It has accelerated innovation in education delivery models and shown the many benefits of hybrid models. These alternative modes of delivery will no doubt continue, and some universities will look to expand these offerings. However, for many universities, the focus will remain on onshore delivery, noting that the majority of international students in Victoria are studying onshore in 2022.²

The reputation of our qualifications and institutions plays a large role in international students' decision to complete their studies here, but so too does the opportunity to experience a new culture and lifestyle.³ The physical presence of international students in Victoria adds diversity and vibrancy to our campuses, society, and economy. This strengthens efforts to deliver an internationalised, culturally capable education to domestic students and provides Victoria with a more competitive workforce pipeline. To this end, the University has set out the goal of developing a vibrant, diverse, and inclusive community with a rich campus life in its *Advancing Melbourne* Strategy. The new longer-term plan should therefore support both onshore and offshore growth post-pandemic, allowing universities to pursue their own individual missions.

To enable this, the University of Melbourne supports an expansion of Study Melbourne Hubs into new locations. These Hubs are world-leading in terms of both visibility and support, providing an invaluable service to students and institutions alike. Once a greater number of students return onshore, it will be crucial for the Hubs to pivot rapidly, moving their focus from offshore student support to global partnerships, student recruitment and alumni networks.

Victoria's reputation for both onshore and offshore delivery could be enhanced through greater investment in blended teaching and learning, as was done under the Victorian Government's International Education Resilience Fund. By updating infrastructure to facilitate enhanced dual delivery and Blended Synchronous Learning, institutions can provide a better experience for students both in the lecture halls and classrooms and online.

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- **Support universities in their own individual missions, whether that be expanding offshore enrolments or retaining onshore delivery as the cornerstone.**
- **Continue to expand Study Melbourne Hubs into new locations.**
- **Provide greater investment for blended teaching and learning facilities.**

2. Seizing opportunities for onshore and offshore growth through collaboration with global partners

What international education markets are the most prospective for Victoria in the medium- to long-term, both established and emerging?

The University supports efforts to increase the number of students enrolling from less-established source countries, provided this is based on the principle of additionality and recognises the market-driven nature of the sector (as articulated in the [University's submission](#) to the Australian Government's diversification paper). To this end, the University supports Global Victoria's expansion of the Global Education Network into Vietnam, Brazil, and Kenya. This will provide valuable support and in-country intelligence for institutions that may not have a presence in those regions and also for those wishing to grow their presence.

² Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Location of enrolled international students (either in or outside Australia), 10 February 2022 <https://www.dese.gov.au/international-data/data-visualisation-location-enrolled-international-student>

³ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Student Experience Survey 2020 [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses))

In building diversity, we should not overlook Victoria's existing areas of strength. Victoria outperforms in countries such as Indonesia and has the potential to further build from that base. Similarly, the importance of relationships with traditional markets such as India and China will continue in the medium to long-term, given their huge populations and the numerous opportunities for collaboration. Noting this, the University has developed engagement plans for [India](#), [China](#) and [Indonesia](#). The University would encourage continued support in these countries, while building a foundation for Victoria's presence in select new markets.

Many international students' families offshore have been impacted financially by country-wide shutdowns, making scholarships more critical than ever to a larger number of students. This is particularly true in some price-sensitive markets in South East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. To address this, the Victorian Government could assist universities' recruitment strategies by establishing a program that offers small grants or targeted scholarships to high achievers in emerging markets. This could be a local version of the Australian Government's [Destination Australia](#) program. In addition, the Victorian Government could support greater connections with the diasporas that live in Victoria - a valuable resource that has not been fully deployed.

Education agents are a significant channel for Victorian universities, with most international students (86%) using their services when coming to Australia.⁴ However, following the extensive border closures and lockdowns in Australia, some agents shifted their priority markets to Canada or the United Kingdom. The Victorian Government could counter this by reinforcing relationships with trusted, high-performing agents, including in emerging markets. The Government could use Hubs to provide training and build capacity among smaller offshore education agents. This would support universities' engagement and strengthen Victoria's brand with the agent network.

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- **Continue to expand the Global Education Network into new countries, to foster new partnerships and provide intelligence and advice to the sector, while maintaining support for existing partner countries.**
- **Establish a grants or targeted scholarships program to support high achieving international students from emerging markets to study in Victoria.**
- **Reinforce relationships with trusted, high-performing education agents offshore, including through training and capacity-building through the Study Melbourne Hubs.**

3. Enhancing the student experience for international students studying in Victoria

What are the most significant barriers to a positive end-to-end experience with Victoria and how can they be addressed?

A positive student experience should be a key priority of any plans to recover our international education sector. To date, Victoria's student support services have been an area of strength, valued by both the University and our students. Study Melbourne has established itself as a trusted source and the Study Centres have become a critical part of the international education infrastructure in Melbourne. They offer an opportunity for students to break out of their institutional bubbles and strengthen students' identification with Victoria. We encourage continued investment and expansion of these services to provide students with ongoing face-to-face connection and care.

However, barriers to positive student experiences still exist, including access to work integrated learning and employment opportunities following graduation. In the Australian Government's 2020 Student Experience Survey, international undergraduate students rated work experience as one of the least positive aspects of their living experience in Australia, with only 64% rating it positively. This is much lower than the percentage who reported positive experiences in improving English skills (91%), transport (80%) and personal safety on campus (97%).⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Some of the causes are beyond the scope of the Victorian Government, including visa conditions for international students. These issues, as well as post-study work rights, could be taken up with the Australian Government. Nevertheless, the Victorian Government has the opportunity to drive improvements by incentivising local industry and businesses to partner with institutions and provide work experience and internship opportunities to international students. Additionally, the Victorian Government could establish a leading talent-based initiative that matches graduates with appropriate, degree-related work opportunities after study. This could encourage Victorian organisations to hire international students in meaningful roles, contributing to the post-COVID recovery of the State.

Additionally, the same could be done offshore by encouraging companies in Victoria that have head offices or major presences in other countries to employ Victorian graduates once they return to their home countries. This would boost the employability of Victoria's international student population, noting that a large portion of international students do not remain in Australia after completing their studies.

Similarly, the State Government could play a critical role in preventing work exploitation of international students. Surveys have found that as many as three-quarters of international students in Australia were paid below the minimum casual hourly wage.⁶ The Victorian Government could find local solutions to this problem, working with local employers and building advocacy with city councils and other agencies. Actions could include, for example, creating a badge that highlights ethical employers so that consumers can choose to support those businesses that support their workers and providing additional information to students on their rights and protections.

For students in Victoria, a world-class student experience is dependent on the inclusion of international students into their local community and ensuring each student feels welcomed and valued, with access to appropriate support mechanisms where needed. The Victorian Government could do more in this area by expanding the community engagement grants offered through the International Student Welfare Program and facilitating the engagement of diaspora communities.

Recommendations

The University of Melbourne recommends that the Victorian Government:

- **Incentivise local industry and business to partner with institutions and provide more work experience and internship opportunities for international students during their degrees.**
- **Establish a talent-based initiative to match international graduates with appropriate, degree-related work opportunities after study, and encourage companies with a presence overseas to employ Victorian graduates when they return home.**
- **Find local solutions to work exploitation of international students, working with local employers, city councils and other agencies to address the problem, and providing additional information to students on their rights and protections.**
- **Expand the community engagement grants offered through the International Student Welfare Program.**

4. Positioning Victoria as a world-leader in education technology (EdTech) and innovation

What are the barriers currently preventing Victoria's international education sector from increasing its volume of international students studying online?

The University recognises the many benefits of digital education. We offer a number of specialist certificates, graduate certificates and masters degrees entirely online. These courses provide rich content and a stimulating online learning experience, underpinned by cutting-edge research, and developed in close consultation with leading industry partners.

⁶ Migrant Worker Justice Initiative, International Students and Wage Theft in Australia, June 2020
<https://www.migrantjustice.org/iswagetheft#:~:text=Based%20on%20a%20survey%20of,theft%20and%20poor%20employment%20conditions.>

Yet, the global online education sector is increasingly crowded, and Australian institutions are constrained by the legislative and regulatory frameworks that govern our international education sector. The Australian Government recently released a discussion paper for the 2022 Review of the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000* (ESOS Act). The Government noted that the existing framework is silent on online and overseas delivery, except for a Standard within the National Code that explicitly limits online study by international student visa holders.⁷ While this Standard was relaxed temporarily during the COVID-19 pandemic, this may pose an ongoing barrier to online education post-pandemic.

Similarly, there are a range of challenges for meeting the requirements set out in the Higher Education Standards Framework while delivering technology-enhanced learning (TEL). For example, as TEQSA points out in its guidance note, the TEL environment may pose particular challenges for students operating across very different time zones or for providers seeking to maintain academic integrity, including during online assessments.⁸ These Standards ensure quality delivery in an online environment, but they present a barrier for providers wishing to increase the volume of online teaching and learning.

⁷ Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Review 2022 <https://www.dese.gov.au/esos-framework/resources/education-services-overseas-students-esos-review-2022-discussion-paper>

⁸ TEQSA, Guidance Note: Technology-Enhanced Learning, 11 April 2019 <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/guidance-note-technology-enhanced-learning>

