

ISANA SUBMISSION TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE

SOFT POWER REVIEW

The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper committed the Australian Government to conducting a review of the nation's unique soft power strengths and capabilities. The review will be informed by a broad range of views in Australia and overseas. Interested parties are invited to provide a written submission by Friday 28 September 2018.

About ISANA: International Education Association

ISANA: International Education Association is the national professional association that represents people working with international students in Australia. It is a well-respected membership body that has provided services to international students and the professional staff who work with them since 1989. ISANA is a voluntary organisation, comprising a National Council, State and Territory branches and a general membership, with all office bearers elected by members. The association plays a key role in contributing to improving international student experience through policy and practice.

ISANA members work in universities, colleges and schools as well as with public and private organisations, making it unique as a cross-sectoral body engaging effectively with people working directly with students. Members are employed in administration, student support, compliance, policy, teaching and teaching support, in management and international education leadership roles.

ISANA has a dynamic relationship with groups whose responsibilities connect with international students' experience. It has a demonstrated record of collaboration with relevant organisations such as student representative organisations, government agencies, accommodation providers, police, fire, health, insurance, emergency services, community organisations and guardians. It is therefore responsive to issues that arise such as cultural adjustment, academic progress, health and wellbeing, safety and security, as well as the needs of younger students.

ISANA has always taken an active interest in the development of government and institutional policy, and the impact of policy on international students. ISANA was granted a 2018 Enabling Growth and Innovations grant to develop an updated instructional Tutorial on the 2018 National Code. It has engaged with government through a number of taskforce and consultative groups, contributing to dialogue relating to international student matters.

ISANA's submission is made with a focus on international students studying in Australia on a student visa.

(Add context of the sector in terms of scale – number of currently enrolled students and not just the financial value. Important to consider where they come from and the different levels of study from English pathways to post graduate research as well as short term study and research exchange. The number of current students and graduates should be noted for the influence of this group in Australia's soft power strategies. Australia has over the years educated Presidents (e.g. Singapore's Ong Teng Cheong, , Entrepreneurs such as Jack Ma and numerous University lecturers and researchers as well as business leaders)

At the same time, it is important to note that international students pay tuition fees to the education provider and not to the any level of government. Their contribution to the community comes through other expenses which include health, living, discretionary purchases and taxes. International students while being transient migrants have become integrated into the local community and as such have greater engagement than tourists with Australia. Third largest export earner cannot be ignored – the broad contribution is outlined in the recent Australian Government Department of Education and Training commissioned Deloitte Access Economics report 'The value of international education to Australia'.

ISANA's submission is based on the review which will explore options for the Government to maximise soft power,

particularly in the Indo-Pacific region under four broad areas:

1. Exploring the nature of attraction and influence in the changing global context, particularly in the face of rapid globalization and unprecedented technological change

Comment on social media and the use of non-government sites for information by potential international students. These sites can include news sites, closed groups, Twitter. We live in a world where vloggers and Instagram sites are major influencers with followers that can make or break a brand. Every international student with a social media account is a potential influencer. Students currently enrolling in Australia are typically considered to be 'digital natives' meaning they spend their whole life in an environment in which they engage and expect digital communication. Good news spreads fast, bad news spreads faster.

3.2. Identifying Australia's soft power objectives and Australia's key soft power assets and challenges

To maintain the goal of 'a stable and prosperous Indo-Pacific' the engagement with international students during their studies and as alumni, can be harnessed as a critical soft power asset. International students arrive in Australia to undertake a quality education and leave with a wide array of additional experiences, networks, friendships and attributes. During their studies students are exposed to subtle and lasting influences both cultural and social, including those gained from friends, employers, accommodation providers, clubs and associations, networks and community members. Students who have a positive experience while studying in Australia may be predisposed to Australian overtures in industry or leadership in their region or home country, and may feel confident when engaging or listening as they have an understanding of what Australian values are.

The challenge is to ensure international students receive a positive experience. Valuable work has been done in this space by eg. Educational institutions, police services and City Study Centres. However, it can take just one incident to turn an otherwise rewarding experience into a nightmare as evidenced by attacks on students which are reported as targeted and racist both in Australia and overseas. More work is required around community education on the benefits international students bring to Australia and, students require ongoing, practical and timely advice related to living in Australia.

4.3. Examining policy options to build and leverage soft power assets to promote Australia's security and prosperity, and strengthen Australia's reputation in an increasingly networked world

Students studying in Australia have an expectation that their visa conditions will apply for the length of their visa's validity. They understand should they fail to meet their visa conditions this may change, however they proceed to plan their studies and destination choice based on their visa grant. Policies that determine changes to visa conditions including post-study rights, should be reviewed to ensure students are fully aware of the circumstances under which they accept a visa. The Government could consider introducing grandfather clauses, so that those already undertaking their studies are not disadvantaged when changes to visas and associated policies are introduced. International students will be ambassadors for Australia in their home country, thus their experience under our visa laws can heavily influence their inclination to be a soft power asset.

International students translate Australia's security and prosperity to mean safety and opportunity. As long as international students state that they feel safe and welcomed in Australia in student experience surveys, Australia's security strengths will be promoted.
Workplace exploitation of international students negatively affects the image of Australia's prosperity. Where possible, Government should strengthen the prosecutorial abilities of agencies such as the Fair Work Ombudsman and the Fair Work Act.

Ensure policies related to the quality of international student education remain subject to publically available quality audits to demonstrate within and outside of Australia the value and quality of graduates.

Add comment that post-study work rights is an important policy that should not be diluted or changed

Greater resources to the Australia Awards– more scholarships, fellowships and short term study tours. The 2018 QS Applicant Survey Report, looked not only at preferred destinations but also at a range of other factors important to applicants to higher education programmes. One research area was determining the extent to which funding matters to students. With 70% of PhD applicants, 60% of master’s applicants and 57% of undergraduates saying that the availability of funding attached to a programme is the leading factor in their choice of institution, it follows that the presence of financial aid/scholarships plays a major role in overall mobility trends. One only has to look at the amount of funding set by China towards educational scholarships to African students to study in China to realise that that China understands the value of soft power of education. Facilitate alumni visits back to Australia

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5.4. Considering new and more effective partnerships with other governments, the private sector, development partners and civil society, drawing on examples of best practice

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The New Colombo Plan facilitates the student mobility of Australian students. This is an important program that can and should be expanded. The inclusion of internships and joint projects with multinational companies would facilitate a deeper understanding of the host country and region by Australian students. Where possible, linking the Alumni of the Australia Awards with New Colombo Plan scholars in-country would develop valuable support networks and long lasting relationships.

Conclusion

ISANA as an active professional network, is in a privileged position to observe problems, evaluate programs and initiate solutions, particularly in relation to the experiences of international students. Our collective historical knowledge and capabilities can be used to develop and facilitate the conditions needed to better understand the issues our international students face and the opportunities they afford and, as many of our members operate in organisations other than education institutions we are well equipped to advise on these matters. We look forward to contributing further in this area.