

COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENTS

# International Students Strategy for Australia

2010 – 2014

## Foreword

All Australian governments acknowledge and value the contribution to Australian life of international students who come here from all over the world to study, live and work. International students enrich Australian communities, bringing energy, diversity and new ways of seeing things. They expand Australia's global networks and link us to the world. Their high-quality life experiences in Australia contribute to our regional and global standing.

The international education sector is also very important economically. It is Australia's third largest source of export income. International students supplement and diversify our labour force in the longer term if they meet Australia's skills needs and choose to stay in or return to Australia.

Governments want to ensure that international students have high-quality education, training and social experiences in Australia, and research shows that most do. In conducting a review of the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000* (the ESOS review), the Hon Bruce Baird AM found that support for international education in Australia remains strong. Mr Baird said there was overwhelming acknowledgment of Australia's long-standing reputation for quality education and training. International students are, by and large, satisfied with their Australian education experience.

There are, however, a number of issues affecting international students that have become apparent and need to be addressed. Students have identified issues such as education quality, health and wellbeing, and the quality and accessibility of information as particularly important.

Further, assaults on some international students have led to a perception that Australia is not a safe place for visitors. Governments take these assaults very seriously and are committed to ensuring Australia remains a safe and welcoming country. All Australian governments will continue to act to protect the safety and wellbeing of international students.

The international education sector has also undergone significant change in recent decades. The number of students has grown substantially, driving significant growth in the sector. There are now more than 1200 education providers offering education services to international students in Australia, and international competition is increasing. These and other changes have had a substantial impact on the sector, and governments recognise the need to continue to ensure that policy and service delivery evolves alongside the sector.

Reflecting their desire that international students have a positive and rewarding experience, and recognising the importance of international education for Australia, governments have agreed that the purpose of the *International Students Strategy for Australia* is:

**to support a high-quality experience for international students, in order to ensure a sustainable future for quality international education in Australia.**

This strategy has been developed collaboratively by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), recognising that all governments are responsible for aspects of the international student experience. Given the enormous changes to the international education sector in the last 20 years, it is important that governments continually improve and better coordinate existing programs, as well as develop new initiatives.

This strategy is the result of, and will be implemented by, governments, international students and the international education sector working together.

International students have offered valuable advice and input on issues related to studying, living and working in Australia. Governments have listened to the September 2009 International Student Roundtable, which called for better pre-arrival information about visas and studying, improved facilities, teaching quality, and better access to basic services.

Equally, governments have recognised the need for better mechanisms for consultation with international students; an issue addressed by this strategy.

Governments have also listened to others concerned about international education. For example, the ESOS review and the 2009 Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students identified the need for an official body for international student representation and access to an independent complaints and appeals mechanism.

Other issues identified through the ESOS review consultative processes and Senate Inquiry—including better information for students about studying, living and working in Australia, tougher requirements for new education providers entering the market and improved safety measures to ensure the wellbeing of international students—have also been noted and addressed in this strategy.

Industry bodies were consulted in developing this strategy. This builds on their past leadership and commitment to international students, expressed through policies and programs to improve students' experiences, particularly their personal safety and consumer rights. The sector's ongoing support and commitment to international students' wellbeing will be critical to the success of this strategy and ensuring the ongoing sustainability of a quality education sector.

The strategy will be reviewed during its five-year timeframe to determine how effectively its initiatives are delivering the desired outcomes and how well the strategy is achieving its purpose.

# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1. Why having a strategy is important.....	5
1.2. The challenges of change.....	5
1.3. Responses to change .....	6
1.4. International Students Strategy for Australia .....	8
<b>2. Student wellbeing</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1. Introduction .....	9
2.2. Personal Safety.....	10
2.3. Good physical and mental health .....	12
2.4. Community engagement.....	13
2.5. Representation.....	14
<b>3. Quality of education</b> .....	<b>16</b>
3.1. Introduction .....	16
3.2. Improved quality assurance .....	17
<b>4. Consumer Protection</b> .....	<b>20</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	20
4.2. Tuition and financial assurance .....	21
4.3. Provider closure support.....	21
4.4. Complaint and dispute resolution .....	22
<b>5. Better information</b> .....	<b>24</b>
5.1. Introduction .....	24
5.2. Improving the accessibility and quality of information .....	25
<b>6. Governance and implementation</b> .....	<b>27</b>
6.1. Governance .....	27
6.2. Implementation schedule .....	27

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Why having a strategy is important

International students enrich Australian communities, bringing energy, diversity and new ways of seeing things. Many international students have gone on to become highly successful permanent migrants, creating a more diverse skills base, stronger international links and increasing the diversity of Australian society.

International students educated in Australia have also returned home to assume leadership positions in government and industry. Australia's relationship with international students deepens our understanding of the world and the world's understanding of Australia, contributing to our regional and global reputation.

Education is now Australia's third biggest export sector, generating \$18.6 billion in 2009 and supporting approximately 125 000 jobs across Australia. In addition, international students supplement and diversify our labour force in the longer term if they meet Australia's skills needs and choose to stay in or return to Australia.

International students also benefit from studying in Australia. Surveys show students have high levels of satisfaction with their experience in Australia, and achieve excellent employment outcomes and further study opportunities after they graduate with an Australian qualification. As well, Australian and overseas employers are highly satisfied with international student graduates. Students' home countries also benefit by having a more internationalised population and greater global connections.

While students choose to study in Australia for a range of reasons, our reputation for quality education and for being a safe, welcoming, and culturally diverse country is particularly important. Governments want to protect this reputation and ensure that international students continue to have high-quality experiences in Australia. This will continue to see social and economic benefits flowing to international students, to their home countries and to Australia.

## 1.2. The challenges of change

International education in Australia has its origins in the 1950 Colombo Plan, which is best remembered for sponsoring thousands of Asian students to study or train in Australian tertiary institutions.

From these beginnings, international education grew steadily. In the 1980s and 1990s it became a diverse sector with more providers catering for increasing numbers of fee-paying international students. The sector was characterised by responsive, innovative providers, effective regulation and students who appreciated Australia's unique position at the interface of Western and Asian economies.

The international education sector has continued to evolve enormously in the last two decades. In 1990, Australia welcomed 47 000 international students. By 2000, this number had grown to 188 000. In 2009, nearly 500 000 students were studying in Australia with more than 360 000 just starting their courses in that year. International students now come from more than 190 countries—from major cities to remote rural villages.

The education sectors in which students choose to study have also changed. In 1990, 31 per cent of international students were enrolled in higher education courses and 15 per cent in vocational education and training courses. By 2009, higher education and vocational education and training sectors together accounted for about 60 per cent of international students, with the remainder enrolled in English language courses and schools.

International students are far more integrated in everyday Australian life than they were 20 years ago. They live in metropolitan and regional areas and the diversity of their living arrangements reflects those of domestic students. They live in urban, suburban and regional areas in shared houses, apartments, home-stay arrangements, on-campus accommodation and rooming houses.

Like other major countries that welcome international students, Australia allows student visa holders to do limited part-time work. While the purpose of a student visa is to undertake study in Australia, student visa holders are permitted to work 20 hours per week while their course is in session, and can work unlimited hours during scheduled course breaks. This concession provides students with an opportunity to interact with the local community, improve their language skills and develop professional expertise. The work rights provided to international students in Australia are comparable to, or more generous than, work rights provided to international students in other major countries providing international education (the United Kingdom, for example, permits only 10 hours employment per week for students below degree level).

The education market has also changed greatly. The increase in student numbers has resulted in growing numbers of international education providers. As with the student population, providers are more diverse, from large universities and vocational training institutions with a variety of courses to small training organisations. Some of these institutions provide courses that focus on specific occupations and, in some cases, migration outcomes. However, recent changes to Australia's General Skilled Migration program will help students and providers focus on a quality education experience rather than permanent migration outcomes. Education agents and accommodation providers have also become part of the international education landscape.

International competitive pressure is also increasing. Competitor countries and institutions are investing in facilities and implementing policies to attract more international students. Source countries for students in our own region are investing in education and providing more alternatives to overseas study for their people.

### 1.3. Responses to change

These rapid changes in the number and characteristics of international students and international education providers call for constant adjustment to, and integration of, government policies and programs to ensure high-quality study, living and work experiences for students and hence the sustainability of the international education sector.

#### *Quality and integrity of the international education sector*

International education services are governed by the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000*<sup>1</sup>. It has been amended several times to provide an integrated regulatory framework including consumer protection, education quality and student support services. ESOS is widely recognised as among the best frameworks for international education regulation in the world, especially for tuition fee protection.

---

<sup>1</sup> Also by the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students ('the National Code') under the Act, the Act's Regulations and two associated Acts.

Improvements continue to be made. Amendments to the ESOS Act made in 2010 require all international education providers to re-register under tighter new regulatory criteria by December 2010, and to publish a publicly available list of agents operating on their behalf, to ensure greater transparency and accountability of education agents on and off-shore.

In 2009, the Commonwealth Government also brought forward a review of the ESOS Act and its associated Acts and Regulations. On 9 March 2010, the Commonwealth Government released the ESOS Act review report, *Stronger, simpler, smarter ESOS: supporting international students*, and agreed to begin work to implement some of the recommendations immediately.

The report made a number of recommendations with two central themes:

- ensuring students are better supported through improved information, management of education agents, stronger consumer protection mechanisms and enhanced support to study and live in Australia, including having somewhere to go when problems arise, and
- improving regulation of Australia’s international education sector and ways to streamline ESOS to ensure Australia maintains its reputation as a high-quality study destination.

In June 2010, the Commonwealth Government introduced legislation to amend the ESOS Act to strengthen the quality and integrity of the international education sector (refer to Part 3: *Quality of education* for details) as well as amendments to the *Ombudsman Act 1976* to improve access by overseas students to a robust complaints and appeals process. These amendments lapsed when the Federal Election 2010 was called and were re-introduced in October 2010. The Commonwealth Government will also consult widely with the international education sector and States and Territories on other recommendations in the ESOS review intended to provide better support, information and consumer protection for international students.

The ESOS review was undertaken in parallel with the development of this strategy.

In 2009, Australian governments also:

- undertook rapid quality and financial viability audits of international education providers to address quality standards in the sector, and
- improved the quality of education agent services by working with overseas governments to better regulate agents operating in their countries, controlling access to the eVisa system and supporting agents to undertake the Education Agents Training Course.

In addition, governments are developing new standards for the English language sector that build on Australia’s world-leading industry accreditation scheme.

#### *Changes to Australia’s General Skilled Migration program*

Australia’s General Skilled Migration program has strongly influenced how the international education sector has developed by offering migration options to qualified international students. While this arrangement has the potential to assist in meeting Australia’s skills needs, there have also been concerns that some providers and agents have put migration outcomes before a quality education for students.

As economic conditions vary, so do the skills and qualifications Australia seeks in skilled migrants. Migration policy will always change to best meet Australia’s contemporary needs. In 2010, the Commonwealth Government announced changes to the General Skilled Migration program to ensure it operates as a demand-driven, rather than supply-driven, system that delivers the skills most needed in the economy into the future.

## 1.4. International Students Strategy for Australia

The support provided to international students has also increased over time. However, with the growth in enrolments in Australia in recent years, more needs to be done to ensure students are prepared to live and study in Australia and are well supported while they are here.

This strategy aims to support a high-quality experience for international students by improving student wellbeing, assuring the quality of education, strengthening consumer protection for international students and providing better information to current and future students.

The strategy comprises:

- a statement of purpose for the future of international education in Australia
- intended outcomes for international students and the international education sector
- four action areas across which efforts will be targeted, and where governments have already undertaken a range of measures to support international students
- twelve initiatives that governments and the sector have agreed to implement to help meet the intended outcomes<sup>2</sup>.

These elements are shown in the figure below.

<b>PURPOSE</b>	<b>To support a high-quality experience for international students to ensure a sustainable future for quality international education in Australia</b>			
<b>OUTCOMES</b>	<p><b>International students:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• are able to make informed choices about studying and living in Australia</li> <li>• have a positive study and life experience in Australia</li> <li>• acquire skills that equip them for a successful future.</li> </ul> <p><b>Australia has:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• an international education sector positioned for a sustainable future</li> <li>• a reputation for high-quality education</li> <li>• a regulatory framework that assures quality education.</li> </ul>			
<b>ACTION AREAS</b>	<b>STUDENT WELLBEING</b>	<b>QUALITY OF EDUCATION</b>	<b>CONSUMER PROTECTION</b>	<b>BETTER INFORMATION</b>
<b>INITIATIVES</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student personal safety guide</li> <li>• Provider student safety plans</li> <li>• Stronger health cover arrangements</li> <li>• National community engagement strategy</li> <li>• International student consultative committee</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A stronger Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)</li> <li>• A stronger ESOS Act</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provider closure taskforces</li> <li>• Stronger complaints handling and dispute resolution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study in Australia portal</li> <li>• Information on government services, fees and concessions</li> <li>• International student surveys</li> </ul>

This strategy is complemented by work undertaken by the Ministerial Council on Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) and other Commonwealth, State and Territory government-based initiatives to improve the experience of international students in Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Other initiatives may also be added during the life of the Strategy.

## 2. Student wellbeing

### 2.1. Introduction

A sense of wellbeing is integral to a high-quality experience for international students and is supported by personal safety, secure accommodation, meaningful local community engagement, having a say in decision-making and good health.

International students face particular challenges and may require some specialised services to support their wellbeing. They may be living independently and for the first time in a foreign country with an unfamiliar culture. They may be far from their families and with few friends or people who can support them. Their English skills may be limited in some cases, and their everyday financial situation uncertain. Any of these factors can be very stressful.

An international student's experience is determined not only by their education experience but by their home life, job, relationships and security. Governments and providers must consider the broader issues that can impact on student wellbeing, such as accommodation, work-related matters, and health and safety issues. Wellbeing is central to a positive study and life experience for international students and to ensuring the sustainability of the education sector.

#### **Key actions to date**

- An International Student Roundtable convened by the Deputy Prime Minister, in Canberra on 14–15 September 2009 agreed to work with student representative bodies to establish an ongoing voice for international students to communicate with government.
- The Victorian Government set up a special hotline in 2009 for international students to contact police for community safety information and also established a 24-hour, multilingual care service providing advice to international students on legal, welfare, accommodation, financial and other issues.
- Two reference groups have been established by Victorian police to identify, implement and monitor strategies for police, Indian communities and international students to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of violent crime.
- The New South Wales Premier's Council on International Education is investigating strategies to assist international students with travel in NSW (including access to discounted, prepaid public transport tickets); promoting greater engagement between the NSW Police Force and education, consular and student organisations, and exploring social initiatives such as an international student festival.
- Governments have taken steps to improve international students' safety, including increasing police surveillance of known danger spots and providing targeted safety information; and law enforcement agencies are making progress by bringing perpetrators of attacks to justice.
- The Australian Human Rights Commission will facilitate local partnerships with education providers, police, local councils and other networks that will help international students respond to discrimination and violence by educating and connecting people to legal and community support and complaints processes.

## 2.2. Personal Safety

Australia is, by international standards, a safe country with low levels of crime, although violent and non-violent crime does occur. Australia has a law-abiding culture, and crime against any person—particularly against international students, who are our guests—is unacceptable to most Australians and certainly to all Australian governments.

International students may be at risk from criminal behaviour, as are all people living in Australia or anywhere in the world. Students may, however, be at greater risk than most Australians if they are unfamiliar with local danger spots and ways to minimise the risk of being assaulted; if they have to travel alone late at night because of work and study commitments; and if they need to travel through high-risk areas.

Governments cannot guarantee that international students will not be victims of crime. But governments are developing initiatives involving police, education providers, local communities and international students to minimise the extra risks students may face. They also ensure that international students receive the full support of law enforcement agencies and the justice system if they become victims of crime.

A research project is being undertaken in 2010 by the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) to determine the extent to which international students are victims of crime compared to the broader population. This will improve understanding of the nature of attacks against international students and will inform government policy and law enforcement's response to attacks on students.

Australian Police Commissioners have also agreed that, through the Australian and New Zealand Policing Advisory Agency (ANZPAA), police will share best-practice safety initiatives for international students. ANZPAA will also work with stakeholders to share this information as appropriate and continue to support the wellbeing of international students in Australia.

### 2.2.1. Student personal safety guide

All governments currently provide safety information and advice to current and future international students through various channels including education, police and consumer affairs agencies. Governments have agreed to build on this work by developing the student personal safety guide, an authoritative, high-profile, national statement about student safety and how to minimise safety risks.

<b>Student personal safety guide</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>The student personal safety guide will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• raise awareness of safety issues and risks among students and providers</li><li>• provide information and practical advice about how to minimise safety risks</li><li>• encourage providers to take action to minimise safety risks.</li></ul> <p>The guide will be an authoritative, high-profile, national statement endorsed by governments. The student personal safety guide will be an electronic document on the Study in Australia student portal (refer Part 5: <i>Better information</i>). It will be in a form that can be easily printed by students and providers and available in several languages.</p> <p>Providers will be encouraged to publicise the guide to international students at orientation events.</p>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	<p>The guide will provide international students with better information and practical advice about studying and living in Australia. It will be available to students before they arrive in Australia, help them minimise risks to their personal safety and respond to a range of emergencies.</p>

<p><b>Who will be responsible?</b></p>	<p><b>Governments</b> will develop the guide and ensure it remains current.</p> <p><b>Governments</b> will review the information and advice they currently provide about student safety to ensure it is consistent with the guide.</p> <p><b>State and Territory governments</b> will make available more detailed and specific information relevant to their jurisdictions to supplement the advice in the guide.</p>	<p><b>Students</b> should read and act on the information and advice in the guide to minimise personal safety risks.</p> <p><b>Students</b> will also provide input to inform future editions of the guide.</p>	<p>The <b>sector</b> will work with governments to develop the guide and ensure students are aware of and can access it.</p>
<p><b>When will it be implemented?</b></p>	<p>The guide was available on the Study in Australia web portal in mid-2010 (refer Part 5: <i>Better information</i>).</p>		

### 2.2.2. Provider student safety plans

Many providers place great importance on student safety, and have safety programs and run inductions for international students. COAG has agreed that every provider will now be required to develop and implement a provider student safety plan. Plans will detail arrangements for safety on and around campuses and facilities, and explain how providers are increasing student understanding of how to improve personal safety. This will make campuses safer places for all students.

<b>Provider student safety plans</b>	
<p><b>How will it work?</b></p>	<p>All education providers will develop and implement a provider student safety plan that details:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the provider's arrangements to minimise safety risks (including the risks of sexual and other assault, injury, robbery and harassment) on and around campuses and facilities</li> <li>• how the provider will increase student awareness of safety and how to minimise safety risks.</li> </ul> <p>Depending on the particular circumstances of the provider a plan might include details about:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• campus security and security monitoring</li> <li>• security escort services</li> <li>• emergency telephones</li> <li>• how to contact police</li> <li>• data collection and monitoring</li> <li>• specific information for students under the age of 18</li> <li>• safety committees</li> <li>• public transport options</li> <li>• support services in the event of a crime taking place.</li> </ul> <p>Plans will complement providers' current occupational health and safety, fire and emergency management policies, plans and procedures.</p>

	Plans will be easily accessible and could be used for safety seminars during orientation programs. Providers will review their plans annually and update them as required.	
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	Students can take precautions to protect their safety if providers are clear about how they will minimise safety risks on and around campuses and facilities. International students will be more aware of safety risks and how to minimise these risks.	
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<b>The Commonwealth Government</b> will amend the National Code to require providers to develop student safety plans. <b>Governments</b> will work with the sector and provide guidance on the development of safety plans.	<b>Providers</b> will develop a student safety plan (which can build on an existing safety plan). <b>Peak sector bodies</b> will help groups of providers work with local police to develop their plans. Providers might also choose to involve local governments.
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	The Commonwealth Government will amend the National Code in 2011.	

## 2.3. Good physical and mental health

Good physical and mental health is vital to a person's wellbeing. While the particular challenges that international students face as a result of living in a foreign country with an unfamiliar culture are well understood, there is much less understanding of health issues affecting international students.

Many of the initiatives in this strategy (such as increased community engagement and better information) may contribute to better health—both mental and physical—for international students.

International students are not eligible for Medicare and—as a visa condition—are required to have overseas student health cover while in Australia. However, some international students cancel or allow their health cover to lapse after they arrive in Australia, leaving them at risk of being severely out of pocket if they need to access medical services.

### 2.3.1. Strengthened health cover arrangements

As part of this strategy, COAG has agreed that all students will be required to provide evidence of health cover for the duration of their visa, and health insurance providers or education providers will help governments to monitor whether students are maintaining their health cover. This will ensure that students comply with their visa requirements and are protected against potentially high medical costs in the event of major illness or injury.

<b>Strengthened health cover arrangements</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	To get a student visa, international students will be required to show evidence of health cover for the duration of their visa. Governments will examine how data sharing with health insurance providers could help to identify students who breach their student visa conditions. If data sharing does not occur, governments will consult with education providers about requiring them to validate student health cover each year.

<b>How will it help international students?</b>	Currently, an uninsured international student could be personally liable for considerable medical expenses in the event of major sickness or injury. The stronger health cover arrangements will eliminate this risk and will ensure that students do not breach this visa condition, which puts them at additional risk of visa cancellation and deportation.	
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will amend its policy to require evidence of health cover for the duration of a student visa.</p> <p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will work with the sector to examine data sharing arrangements about health cover.</p> <p>If data sharing arrangements are not established, <b>governments</b> will consult with education providers about requiring them to validate students' health cover each year.</p>	<p><b>Students</b> will be required to show evidence of health cover for the duration of their visa.</p> <p><b>Students</b> will be responsible for ensuring their health cover is maintained for the full duration of their visa.</p>
<b>What will it cost?</b>	<b>Governments</b> will incur administrative costs implementing this initiative.	<b>Students</b> will be required to pay for health cover for the full duration of their visa, upfront.
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	From mid-2010, students are now required to show evidence of health cover for the duration of their visa.	

## 2.4. Community engagement

Both international students and local communities benefit when students engage with, and become part of, the community. One survey indicates that 80 per cent of international students want more Australian students as friends. The ESOS review noted that many students expressed a desire for more opportunities to become involved in the broader community. Such involvement helps them adjust to the new society and culture, as well as providing the usual benefits of friendship.

There is also Australian and overseas evidence that better engagement is likely to reduce negative attitudes towards international students (where these exist) and to build social cohesion, particularly in communities with high numbers of international students.

### 2.4.1. Community engagement strategy

Through a national community engagement strategy, Australian governments will support activities that involve international students in community life, promote best practice in community engagement and help develop local partnerships. Stronger community engagement will make students' experiences in Australia more fulfilling by making them feel welcome and a valued part of their local communities, while also addressing their safety, health and wellbeing needs.

<b>Community engagement strategy</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>The national community engagement strategy will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• promote best practice in community engagement</li> <li>• develop local partnerships for involving students with the broader Australian community.</li> </ul>

	<p>The strategy will support projects that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• help international students engage with local communities and community groups</li> <li>• develop local partnerships between international students and local communities and community groups</li> <li>• raise awareness of international students' rights</li> <li>• promote social cohesion.</li> </ul> <p>Funding will support high-priority projects in agreed locations.</p>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	The community engagement strategy will encourage and support local efforts to involve international students in community life. Students' experiences in Australia will be more rewarding if they feel welcome and part of their local communities.
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	Governments will provide funding for projects in high-priority locations.
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	From early 2011 to June 2012.

## 2.5. Representation

International students are affected by many government and sector policies and activities about, for example, immigration, education, welfare and welfare services. However, they currently have minimal representation in public decision-making processes. This lack of a voice disempowers international students in decision-making forums and is a barrier to the development and implementation of government policy affecting them. Governments and international students would both benefit from a more effective means of exchanging information and advice.

### 2.5.1. International student consultative committee

As part of this strategy, governments will work with students and the sector to establish an international student consultative committee whose activities will include annual roundtable discussions with government representatives and senior officials.

<b>International student consultative committee</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>The international student consultative committee will advise governments on behalf of international students. Forums in each State and Territory (including existing international student forums) will support the committee and will give all international students the opportunity to be heard by governments.</p> <p>The committee will hold an annual roundtable discussion with representatives of governments and senior officials.</p> <p>Representation will reflect the diversity of the international student population in Australia—in terms of education sectors, student locations and nationalities. The role of the committee will be to provide advice on behalf of Australia's diverse international student population.</p>

<b>How will it help international students?</b>	The committee will give international students a national forum to put forward their views on issues affecting their study and living experience in Australia.		
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<p><b>Governments</b> will be jointly responsible for establishing the committee.</p> <p><b>Governments</b> will also support an annual roundtable between the committee, representatives of governments and senior officials.</p>	<p><b>Students</b> will make up the committee. The committee will manage its work program and work with governments to organise the annual roundtable.</p> <p>The committee will also provide advice to sector peak bodies.</p>	<p>The <b>sector</b> will help governments to establish the committee.</p> <p><b>Sector</b> peak bodies will also facilitate the forums in each State and Territory.</p>
<b>When will it be established?</b>	The committee will be established and the first roundtable held in the first half of 2011.		

## 3. Quality of education

### 3.1. Introduction

Australia's education sectors have a reputation for high-quality education delivery.

Our higher education sector is well regarded for the depth and diversity of its research, teaching and knowledge transfer activities, not only in traditional academic areas but increasingly in vocational and applied areas as well. Several Australian universities are consistently ranked at the top of international tables.

Australia's training system is recognised around the world for its high levels of flexibility, quality and engagement with industry. Industries and governments have outlined the skills people need to work effectively in all major industries. Registered training organisations provide the training that enterprises want—when and where they want it. The quality of training and assessment services is monitored through the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), an internationally recognised quality assurance model.

Internationally, Australia's schools are recognised for high quality. While schools have small numbers of international students, they make an important contribution to perceptions of Australia's broader educational capability, and lay the foundations for many international students to move on to other education sectors.

Australia's English language sector is a world leader in the teaching of English language courses. The sector established world-first industry standards for courses and providers and has continued to be a world leader in this field.

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) covers the higher education, vocational education and training (VET) and schools sectors to provide a unified system for recognising educational achievements and giving students pathways within and between sectors. The ESOS Act addresses the particular needs of international students in all sectors, including consumer rights and visa issues.

#### Key actions to date

- States and Territories have undertaken a series of rapid quality and financial viability audits of international education providers to address quality standards in the sector.
- In 2010 the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2000 (the ESOS Act)* was amended to strengthen requirements for new providers and to require all existing providers to be re-registered under tighter new requirements by the end of 2010.
- Another amendment to the ESOS Act requires providers to publicly list the education agents they use to improve transparency and accountability across the sector from July 2010.
- National regulatory bodies for higher education and vocational education and training will be established from 2011.
- The Victorian Government has made amendments to the *Education and Training Reform Act 2006*, giving the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority the ability to inform the public, notably students, about action taken against substandard providers.

## 3.2 Improved quality assurance

Quality of education is rated highly by students when deciding where to study, and it largely determines student satisfaction with study experience and post-study opportunities. The higher the quality of education, the better equipped the student is for the future. The reputation of Australia's international education sector also relies primarily on the quality of education.

Rapid and ongoing change in the international education sector, especially the extraordinary growth in the numbers of providers and students seeking VET qualifications, continues to present quality issues leading to the need for frequent refinements to Australia's quality assurance standards and regulatory frameworks.

### 3.2.1. Strengthening the Australian Quality Training Framework

The regulatory and quality assurance arrangements supporting Australia's vocational education and training system are outlined in the AQTF. As part of this strategy, COAG has agreed to strengthen the AQTF to ensure regulators have the necessary tools to protect the interests of all students undertaking vocational education and training in Australia.

This will require organisations to clearly demonstrate they can provide high-quality services and increase staff development and training requirements. Fee-protection requirements will also be strengthened to protect international students in the event of a provider closure.

<b>Strengthening the Australian Quality Training Framework</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>Changes to the AQTF:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• require the senior officers, directors and substantial shareholders of registered training organisations to satisfy 'fit and proper person' requirements</li> <li>• strengthen financial capacity requirements to ensure the ongoing financial viability and sustainability of registered training organisations</li> <li>• strengthen fee-protection requirements to give students greater consumer protection if a provider closes</li> <li>• increase requirements for new registered training organisations to demonstrate they can provide high-quality, sustainable services to international students in line with sector requirements</li> <li>• increase requirements for registered training organisations to provide staff development and training so they continuously improve the delivery of services to students.</li> </ul>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	The changes to the AQTF aim to deter low-quality providers from registering as training organisations and to increase consumer protection for international students.
<b>Who will be responsible for implementing it?</b>	<b>Governments, the sector and regulators</b> will work together to implement the revisions to the AQTF.
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	The revised AQTF was implemented in July 2010.

### 3.2.2 Strengthening the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000*

The review of the *Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000* found that the registration gateway for education providers to the international education industry should be strengthened with a particular focus on ensuring providers have the financial resources and business model to operate successfully and for better risk management. The ESOS review noted that addressing these issues first would help to relieve pressures on industry tuition protection mechanisms further down the track.

The Commonwealth Government has agreed in principle to recommendations related to registration and risk management as part of the first-phase implementation response to the ESOS review, building on recent changes to the ESOS Act to strengthen registration on the Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students (CRICOS). Amendments in response to a number of the review recommendations were introduced in Parliament in October 2010.

The Commonwealth Government will lead the implementation of the Government's response to the remaining recommendations of the ESOS review in consultation with States, Territories and the sector. These include improved information and support for students, resourcing compliance activities and a single tuition protection service.

<b>Strengthening the <i>Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000</i></b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>The Commonwealth Government will amend the ESOS Act to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• only allow providers to be registered and to maintain registration if they have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- access to the financial resources to meet the objectives of ESOS</li> <li>- a sustainable business model</li> <li>- the capacity, capability, governance structures and management to uphold Australia's reputation for quality education and training to international students.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• enable regulators to apply a consistent comprehensive risk management approach to education provider registration—developed and maintained in consultation with stakeholders and experts to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- assess education providers at entry to determine the level of scrutiny, evidence, tests and costs that apply at registration and through the period of registration; and</li> <li>- update every education providers' profile on a regular basis to reassess the level of scrutiny and tests that should apply.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• support better risk management in the international education sector by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- allowing specific conditions on initial registration and throughout the registration period so a provider can be subject to additional scrutiny and tests as their risk profile demands</li> <li>- limiting the period of registration for each provider</li> </ul> </li> <li>• introduce financial penalties for a broader range of non-compliant behaviour.</li> </ul>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	<p>Amendments to the ESOS Act to introduce greater barriers and risk management practices on entry to the sector will further strengthen the quality and integrity of international education in Australia and reduce the likelihood of provider closures affecting students in the future.</p>

<b>Who will be responsible for implementing it?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Commonwealth Government will amend the ESOS Act to include new requirements.</li></ul>
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	From 2011.

## 4. Consumer Protection

### 4.1. Introduction

While most international students pay large amounts for education, accommodation and other services, they occasionally do not receive what they have paid for: service providers do not always deliver the goods and services for which international students have paid.

States and Territories have consumer protection legislation and regulations to protect the rights of all consumers. However, in some cases this may not address the needs of international students who can face information, language and cultural barriers to claiming their rights.

#### **Key actions to date**

- The Victorian Government has given an extra \$250 000 to the Federation of Community Legal Services to ensure increased legal assistance is available to international students.
- COAG has strengthened student fee-protection requirements under changes to the Australian Qualifications and Training Framework, agreed in 2009.
- The Commonwealth Government has also introduced changes so that international students affected by the closure of their education provider are able to lodge a new, fee-free student visa application, if they need to extend their stay to complete their studies.
- The Western Australian Government appointed International Education Conciliator which provides an independent mechanism for mediating and assisting with the resolution of grievances of international students. The Conciliator also plays a wider role in working with the education sector and broader community in matters regarding the rights, obligations and general well-being of international students in Western Australia.
- The South Australian Office of the Training Advocate, an independent statutory authority, is unique in the Australian education sector. It can act as an advocate to resolve student issues or carry out external appeals into disputes or independent investigations, similar to the way an ombudsman works. The hands-on approach of the Training Advocate helps to ensure that issues faced by students can be settled before they escalate.
- The Queensland Government Brisbane City Council International Student Accommodation Taskforce has reviewed Queensland's existing regulations on rooming-style accommodation, compliance and international student information needs.
- The NSW Government (Office of Fair Trading) has published a Consumer Guide for International Students. The publication aims to help international students understand their rights and responsibilities in NSW and includes information on shopping and refunds, mobile phones, buying a car and renting.

## 4.2. Tuition and financial assurance

Consumer protection is a strength of the Australian education sector focussing on educational services. For example, under the ESOS Act, international students have the right to:

- receive the tuition they have paid for, or receive a refund
- have access to appropriate education facilities
- be taught by appropriately qualified teachers.

Tuition fees are currently protected under the ESOS Act, which requires a provider to join a Tuition Assurance Scheme or make other acceptable arrangements. However, the ESOS review report made a series of recommendations on how the tuition protection arrangements could be improved, including the creation of a new single tuition protection service.

## 4.3. Provider closure support

When a provider closes—as a result of a regulator’s decision or for business reasons by the provider—it can be highly distressing for international students, affecting not just their education but also their visa to stay in Australia. If the provider arranged the students’ accommodation, their living arrangements can also be threatened.

Arrangements to protect tuition fees generally mean that students are not disadvantaged in the medium term. However, closures can be very confusing and stressful for students while they are happening.

The Commonwealth Government’s Consumer Protection Team leads arrangements for managing the response to a closure. State and Territory governments have a range of services to help students if a provider in their jurisdiction closes. In the event of a provider closure, these arrangements ensure students have quick and easy access to information and support.

Recent provider closures have highlighted the need for rapid and cohesive responses by governments. In particular, although provider closures affect students under 18 only in limited circumstances, the welfare and placement of such students must be top priority.

### 4.3.1. Provider closure taskforces

As part of this strategy, COAG has agreed that State governments will be jointly responsible with the Commonwealth Government for establishing and managing provider closure taskforces. Each taskforce will manage support for all international students affected by the closure of an education provider. This will ensure that governments and industry (through tuition assurance scheme representatives) cooperate closely should a provider close and students are unable to complete their studies with that provider.

Provider closure taskforces	
How will it work?	<p>State governments will be jointly responsible with the Commonwealth Government for establishing and managing provider closure taskforces in each jurisdiction. The taskforce will manage support for all international students affected by the closure of their provider.</p> <p>All governments undertake to involve relevant departments and each taskforce will work closely with the Commonwealth Government (including with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship), with industry organisations (such as the relevant tuition assurance scheme operators) and with administrators as appropriate.</p>

<b>How will it help international students?</b>	When providers have closed in the past, students have often been confused about who to contact and the process to follow. The taskforce will identify the first point of contact for international students in that jurisdiction to advise and support all affected students.	
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<p><b>State governments</b> will be jointly responsible with the Commonwealth Government for establishing and managing provider closure taskforces in each jurisdiction.</p> <p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will coordinate national aspects of closures and ensure that legislated consumer protections and visa integrity obligations are met.</p>	<p><b>Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET)</b> and <b>English Australia</b> will have representatives on taskforces as required and provide relevant support in the event of a provider closure.</p>
<b>When will it be established?</b>	All taskforces were established and ready to manage closures by June 2010.	

#### 4.4. Complaint and dispute resolution

Australian providers of international education are required to have a formal process for dealing with complaints and resolving disputes. First, the student makes their complaint to the provider, which handles it according to its formal process. If the student considers the provider's response to be unsatisfactory, they can elevate their complaint to an external body nominated by the provider.

While these arrangements have generally been effective, both the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students and the ESOS review reported that stronger and more efficient complaints handling mechanisms are needed.

##### 4.4.1. Improved complaints handling and dispute resolution arrangements

COAG has agreed that all providers will be required to use an independent statutory external complaints body as the external complaints and appeals process. The jurisdiction of the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman will be expanded to include providers or complaints that do not fall within the jurisdiction of a statutorily independent complaints mechanism. This will ensure that international students will be able to take their complaint to their State or Commonwealth Government authority if they consider the provider's response to the complaint is unsatisfactory, and that students' complaints are handled by respected complaints-handling organisations.

<b>Improved complaints handling and dispute resolution arrangements</b>	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>International students who are dissatisfied with their provider's response will be able to take their complaint to an ombudsman or other state statutory authority. Where a complaint or education provider is not covered by an existing State or Territory independent statutory complaints mechanism, the Office of the Commonwealth Ombudsman will act as the external complaints mechanism.</p> <p>For example, if the complaint is about a private provider that does not fall within the jurisdiction of an existing independent statutory complaints mechanism, the Commonwealth Ombudsman will:</p>

<b>Improved complaints handling and dispute resolution arrangements</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• investigate and resolve disputes and, if necessary, make recommendations</li> <li>• advise providers about best practice complaints handling.</li> </ul> <p>If the complaint is in relation to a public provider (i.e. public universities, TAFEs and schools), the Commonwealth Ombudsman will refer the matter to the relevant State or Territory authority.</p> <p>State and Territory authorities will handle complaints about public providers in their jurisdictions where the complaint is made directly by an international student or referred from the Commonwealth Ombudsman.</p> <p>The Commonwealth Ombudsman and existing State and Territory complaints handling authorities will work together as necessary.</p> <p>If the complaint involves bodies other than an education provider, relevant authorities will be able to refer the student to the appropriate complaints handling agency (for example, the Fair Work Ombudsman or state consumer affairs bodies).</p>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	International students will be able to access an independent and expert complaints handling mechanism should the provider's response not satisfy them.
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will amend the relevant legislation. The <b>Commonwealth Ombudsman</b> and existing <b>State and Territory</b> authorities will establish protocols for the new arrangements.</p> <p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will consult with the sector about complaints handling procedures, future fee structures, timeframes for complaints and other aspects of the new arrangements.</p>
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	From 2011.

## 5. Better information

### 5.1. Introduction

Prospective international students need accurate, comprehensive and up-to-date information to understand and assess their options for studying, living and working in Australia; to make informed choices about those options; to have accurate and realistic expectations about their forthcoming experience in Australia; and to be adequately prepared for that experience.

There is a lot of information in circulation about studying, living and working in Australia. Governments, sector groups, education providers, education agents and community organisations provide written and online material. More information is available through word-of-mouth from family, friends and other students or past students, and from specialist and mass media. Prospective students might also attend information sessions and hear directly from public sector agencies (for example, about visas) or providers.

The ESOS review addressed the need for clear and accurate information for international students before coming to Australia and during their stay. It recommended strengthened requirements for providing information about learning and living in Australia by both providers and governments, as well as increased emphasis on providers to take responsibility for their overseas education agents' actions.

#### Key actions to date

- The Victorian Government has invested \$1 million in redeveloping the Study Melbourne website to provide increased information to overseas students.
- The Victorian Government has established an International Student Welcome Booth at Melbourne Airport, operating at peak international student arrival times, to provide incoming international students with information and contact details for the International Student Care Service.
- The Australian Government had produced hard copies of the *Guide to Studying and Living in Australia* for distribution to new international students prior to their arrival in Australia.
- The NSW Government has distributed 65 000 copies of the *Guide to New South Wales Services for International Students* to over 250 education providers. Development of the second edition of the guide is underway.
- The NSW Government has established a web portal at [www.internationalstudents.nsw.gov.au](http://www.internationalstudents.nsw.gov.au), which includes information for international students about coming to NSW, living and studying in NSW and on community organisations and support.

## 5.2. Improving the accessibility and quality of information

Finding and assessing the quality of available information is a bigger task than it should be. Some information can be hard to find and use because it is not well targeted.

There needs to be a single, authoritative source of comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate information about international education in Australia and it should be online. Many students make their most important decisions about studying, living and working in Australia before they arrive and need this information to be available and accessible wherever they may be. Better information will also help education providers, accommodation providers and public agencies understand and respond to the needs of international students.

While much of the information in circulation is reliable, some is inaccurate or misleading, creating unrealistic expectations. For example, many education agents are a valuable source of information for many prospective students and most agents provide quality information to providers and students<sup>3</sup>. However, some do not: they may lack adequate knowledge or understanding of providers and the Australian education system or they may seek to deliberately deceive or mislead.

### 5.2.1. Study in Australia portal

Under this strategy, the Study in Australia portal will provide a single, authoritative source of comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate information for international students, including information about personal safety, support services and employment rights and responsibilities. All information will be translated into several languages.

Study in Australia portal	
<b>How will it work?</b>	<p>The Study in Australia portal will provide a single authoritative source of thorough, up-to-date and accurate information for international students including information about personal safety, support services and employment rights and responsibilities. All information will be translated into several languages.</p> <p>The portal will direct students to more detailed information available on other Commonwealth Government, State and Territory public sector agency websites and portals.</p>
<b>How will it help international students?</b>	<p>The portal will provide comprehensive, up-to-date and accurate information in a variety of languages about studying, living and working in Australia. The information will be accessible to anyone in the world with a computer and internet connection. This will make it faster and easier for potential students to identify and assess their options, counter the spread of inaccurate information, and help students understand what their life will be like as a student.</p>
<b>Who will be responsible for it?</b>	<p>The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will coordinate the project and develop the high-level information on the portal.</p> <p><b>State and Territory government</b> websites and portals will be linked to the Study in Australia portal.</p>
<b>When will it be implemented?</b>	<p>The portal was available online from 30 June 2010.</p>

<sup>3</sup> In turn, under the National Code, providers must work only with reputable agents and ensure that they make comprehensive, accurate, usable information available to agents.

## 5.2.2. Information about government services

All governments have agreed to publish comparative information on the Study in Australia portal, outlining government services, fees and concessions relating to international students including, as a minimum, transport concessions and school fees for dependants, to ensure students are able to make informed choices about where to study.

The information gathered would allow users of the Study in Australia portal to compare services in different study destinations quickly and easily.

Information about government services	
How will it work?	All governments will compile comparative information on the Study in Australia portal, outlining relevant government services to ensure students are able to make informed choices about where to study.
How will it help international students?	International students will be able to search and compare government services. The information available online could include fees and concessions available to international students, including transport concessions and school fees for dependants.
Who will be responsible for it?	The <b>Commonwealth Government</b> will coordinate the information to become part of the Study in Australia portal. <b>State and Territory governments</b> will provide the relevant information on services in their jurisdiction.
When will it be implemented?	The comparative information will be available online in the first half of 2011.

## 5.2.3. International student surveys

An international student survey will be undertaken in 2010 and 2012 by the Commonwealth Government on behalf of all governments to better understand international students' experience of living and studying in Australia. It will examine why they chose to study in Australia, level of satisfaction with their education, pastoral and support services, social integration, and the general experience of living in Australia. It will also examine international students' future plans and aspirations.

The findings of each survey will help monitor the sector over the life of this strategy and inform reporting and future policy making for international students.

## 6. Governance and implementation

### 6.1. Governance

The Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) will assume responsibility for overseeing and implementing this strategy—in consultation with education ministers to ensure all education sectors are covered—and will report annually to COAG at the end of each calendar year.

Australian Education International (AEI) is part of the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, and has responsibility for Commonwealth international education policy. AEI will lead oversight and monitoring of all Commonwealth Government delivery of the strategy. States and Territories will be responsible for supervising and monitoring implementation of the strategy in their jurisdiction.

### 6.2. Implementation schedule

2010		
Action area	Initiative	Responsible party
Student wellbeing	Finalise student personal safety guide	All governments
Student wellbeing	Australian Institute of Criminology study	Commonwealth Government
Student wellbeing	Revised health insurance cover arrangements implemented	Commonwealth Government
Quality of education	AQTF amendments implemented	All governments
Consumer protection	Provider closure taskforces established	All governments
Better information	Study in Australia portal launched	All governments
Better information	2010 International Student Survey	Commonwealth Government

2011		
Action area	Initiative	Responsible party
Student wellbeing	International student consultative committee established and first roundtable convened	All governments
Student wellbeing	Amend the National Code to require provider student safety plans	Commonwealth Government

Student wellbeing	Community engagement strategy to commence	All governments
Student wellbeing	Work with sector to examine data-sharing arrangements for health cover	Commonwealth Government
Quality of education	ESOS amendments	Commonwealth Government
Consumer protection	All providers required to use an independent statutory complaints handling mechanism	Education providers
Consumer protection	Commonwealth Ombudsman operating under expanded legislative arrangements to include providers not covered by a State or Territory existing independent statutory complaints mechanism	Commonwealth Ombudsman
Consumer protection	Amend legislation to strengthen complaints handling	Commonwealth Government
Better information	Comparative information on government services published and publicly available	All governments
Governance and implementation	Annual progress report to COAG	MCTEE

2012-14		
Action area	Initiative	Responsible party
Better information	2012 International Student Survey	Commonwealth Government
Governance and implementation	Annual progress report to COAG in 2012, 2013 and 2014	MCTEE