

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

9 December 2022

Charles Darwin University Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's tourism and international education sector

Charles Darwin University (CDU) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. In doing so, CDU has reflected on some of the challenges presented by COVID-19 and the lessons learnt for international education in Australia. However, CDU remains optimistic about the recovery of international education. We are proud of our collaboration with the NT Government to lift the NT as a study and training destination of choice for international students.

Australia's most connected university

Charles Darwin University's vision is to be Australia's most connected university by being courageous and making a difference in the Northern Territory (NT), Australia and beyond.

Being a dual sector university (vocational and higher education) allows CDU to meet the education needs of Territorians in campuses in Darwin, Alice Springs, Palmerston and Katherine and in study centres in Nhulunbuy, Jabiru and Tennant Creek. CDU has a proud history of delivering on country in some of the NT's most remote locations.

We embrace the vitality and resilience of the Northern Territory, which is the focus of the nation's most ambitious plans for future development – to unlock the vast potential of Northern Australia and to engage with our neighbours in the Asia Pacific. CDU supports the NT Government's ambitious goal of reaching a \$40 billion economy by 2030 by leveraging the strengths of the NT and its people.

International education and training

International education and training (IET) is a valued contributor to Australian and NT economies, with IET contributing around \$40 billion a year to the Australian economy pre-COVID. For the NT, in 2019-20 it supported nearly 800 Territory jobs.

Study NT's International Education and Training Strategy has a goal to increase the number of international students choosing to study in the NT to 10,000 by 2025. In parallel, CDU's plan for international student growth would see the current 2,000 international students grow to 4,000 in 2025 and then 8,000 in 2027. CDU will continue to build its IET from a diverse range of source countries.

International students provide an important contribution to the population of the NT and the benefits are wide-reaching. International students contribute to the NT as a source of part-time employment whilst studying, and contribute towards our skilled workforce upon graduation by obtaining employment in a broad range of occupations in demand in regional areas, such as chefs, teachers, nurses, accountants, social workers and more. International students are also active volunteers in the NT, supporting the local community via a range of initiatives and not-for-profit organisations including the Red Cross, the Melaleuca Refugee Centre, and the Kindness Shake.

Challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers as a result of the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and effective measures to attract and retain students to Australia

COVID-19 brought with it a set of challenges for IET, namely:

- instability of international student numbers;
- a loss of campus-based learning and activity for international students who were already in Australia;
- loss of contribution to the local economy while students studied online in their country of origin; and
- loss of employment for students who then could not sustain their stay in Australia.

CDU mitigated these challenges by implementing additional support services for students.

In addition, through the support of the NT and Australian government, CDU became the first university to successfully bring a pilot of 63 international students to Australia in November of 2020. Students travelled from mainland China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Japan. The group included new and continuing students studying in a range of vocational education training (VET) and undergraduate programs in Law, Nursing, IT, Teaching, Accounting, Engineering, Environmental Science, Social Work and Commercial Cookery.

The students were well supported through the process with care packages during the flight and upon arrival at the Howard Springs Quarantine Facility, they received daily welfare check phone calls and a schedule of virtual events for participation. We received significant feedback, which in return increased the number of international students interested in studying with us.

Building from our recovery from COVID-19, CDU's international student numbers for 2022 recovered beyond pre-COVID levels. The NT was the only jurisdiction in Australia to have received beyond pre-pandemic levels of international students in Semester 1, 2022.

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

At CDU, we pride ourselves as leaders in E-Learning and teaching distance education, primarily to meet the needs of our remote population within the Territory. Our leadership in online learning received recognition as the winner of the Blackboard Hall of Fame Award for Providing Thought Leadership and Innovation in Education (July 2020). CDU was one of the seven clients worldwide of the Blackboard online learning management system selected for this award and the only client in the Asia-Pacific region.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, in line with national and NT requirements for social distancing, CDU transitioned all higher education programs to online-only delivery from 23 March 2020. Given around 70 per cent of CDU's higher education students were already studying online, the transition was a relatively smooth process. Supports for students played an integral role and the following provides a summary of key achievements as CDU embraced online innovations in education delivery.

Supporting Students

1. *Learning support:*

In order to fully support our students in Australia and offshore we offered online academic and language learning support, including 24/7 online tutoring, Peer Assisted Study Sessions and virtual learning support consultations. Even if our students were located offshore, they were able to get the support they needed from lecturers who were readily available.

2. *Virtual Activities*

In order to keep our students occupied we had activities such as Virtual Coffee catchups where students were able to chat with different departments of the university. In addition, CDU hosted Yoga classes, dancing classes and career development programs all offered online.

3. *Virtual graduation*

CDU held a virtual graduation in June 2020 where 2200 students were recognised of their academic achievements. This allowed students to celebrate their milestones of graduation, including formal addresses, graduating student speeches and messages of congratulations into homes all over Australia and the world.

4. *Virtual Open Day*

CDU's first-ever virtual Open Day was held entirely online. People wanting to explore study opportunities at Charles Darwin University had their questions answered from the comfort of their own homes. Visitors were able to access a virtual exhibition hall housing an array of stalls, as well as educational videos, webinars, course information and a virtual campus.

5. *Online Buddy Program*

To ensure our international students who were located overseas received support, an online buddy program was introduced with senior students mentoring junior students through online engagement and social activities. This program helps prepare international students transition into university life and the Northern Territory community once they have arrived. The program was so successful, similar peer-to-peer supports have since been implemented as students transition to Australia.

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

International students gain valuable training and education to inform their professional careers and consistently rate Australia favourably for our high-quality education and training and the student lifestyle. CDU is ranked second in Australia for international graduate outcomes, in part because of the welcoming approach to employing migrants in the NT community.

As outline above, it is important to acknowledge that students also contribute to the Australian workforce while they're studying. Many students after graduating from their studies go on to work in our regional areas, often in industries where there are severe workforce shortages

Before being granted a student visa, the Genuine Temporary Entrant criteria require students to describe a range of personal circumstances including that they have significant incentives to return home. While preserving the objective of students visas, the Genuine Temporary Entrant criteria could be reviewed so that it is not a disincentive to attracting students open to staying to Australia post-study.

CDU supports the recently announced extension of post-visa work rights for international students, which is presently six years in the NT. However, CDU argues that consideration should be given to easing further the migration pathways for international students, who can spend around 10 years participating in their Australian communities with no guaranteed pathway to citizenship.

CDU is progressing these issues in a submission to the Review of Australia's Migration System, initiated by the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon Clare O'Neil MP on 2 September 2022.

Opportunities for international education to support strategic and foreign policy objectives

For the NT, 'looking toward the North' is an imperative, both as a geopolitical and economic priority. International education plays an important role in building relationships with our near neighbours, and the soft power available through connections with source countries is immeasurable.

With construction of the \$250 million Education and Community Precinct in Darwin CBD underway and on track to be completed in 2024, this presents the Northern Territory with the opportunity to attract more international students to Darwin to study in a campus with world-class infrastructure. The Commonwealth Minister for Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government, the Hon Catherine King MP recently said, "Already well positioned as the gateway to Asia, this project will turn Darwin into an educational and economic powerhouse on the international stage, a place to build networks, collaborate and connect – a sophisticated cultural centre and a thriving world city for the benefit of locals and the national economy alike."

If CDU can elaborate further on any of these issues, please feel free to contact me directly, or via Ms Bree Willsmore, Director Government Relations on bree.willsmore@cdu.edu.au.

Yours sincerely

Professor Scott Bowman AO
Vice-Chancellor and President

