

Report to the Future Melbourne Committee

Agenda item 6.3

Advocacy and support for the International education sector (part of Major Initiative 3)

7 September 2021

Presenter: Andrew Wear, Director Economic Development and International

Purpose and background

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the return of international students to Melbourne.
2. International students contribute to much of what makes Melbourne an exciting, vibrant and globally-engaged city. They are employees, business operators, tenants, consumers, volunteers and neighbours. Before COVID-19, international students made up 39 per cent of Carlton residents, 38 per cent of CBD residents, 15 per cent of Southbank residents and 14 per cent of Docklands residents.
3. The return of international students is critical for the city's recovery in the short to medium term. Melbourne's economy will benefit from international students returning: not just directly in the higher education sector, which has had massive job losses since Australia closed its borders, but also from the flow-on economic benefits of student spending in areas such as housing, food and services.
4. The lack of international students (along with working holiday-makers and skilled visa holders) is also contributing to a significant critical shortage of workers in the hospitality sector. This will impede the pace of business recovery following lockdown.

Key issues

5. According to student visa data from the Department of Home Affairs, there were approximately 89,618 international students in Victoria as at 19 July 2021. This represents around 40% fewer students than at the end of March 2020.
6. As onshore students are completing their courses and returning home, students who would otherwise replace them are unable to arrive. Hence the number of students in Melbourne continues to decrease.
7. International students (onshore and offshore) continue to suffer from compromised education quality and outcomes, financial difficulties, and mental anguish as a result of international border closures.
8. The recent focus of the international education sector – and of council – has been on securing the return of a small number of international students during 2021.
9. All plans for the 2021 arrival of international students (in New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria) have not yet progressed. While arrivals in the short term are still preferable, given recent COVID-19 outbreaks and the impending end of the academic year, a 2021 program of international student arrivals appears increasingly unlikely.
10. National Cabinet's 'Plan to Transition Australia's COVID-19 Response' indicates that once 80 per cent of eligible Australians are vaccinated, Australia will transition to 'Phase C'. This phase will involve: removal of restrictions for vaccinated residents; abolition of caps on the number of returning Australians; an increase in the number of entries by student visa holders; travel bubbles allowing unrestricted travel extended to new candidate countries (eg Singapore); and proportionate/reduced quarantine for fully vaccinated inbound travellers.
11. The Federal Government has indicated that 80 per cent vaccination – and hence Phase C – could be reached by the end of 2021.
12. With quarantine continuing to be a critical part of the Australian response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Victorian and Australian Governments have commenced construction of a purpose-built quarantine accommodation hub in Mickleham. The first phase of the facility – offering 500 beds – is expected to be open by the end of the year.

13. Phase C arrangements should permit a substantial return of international students for the start of the 2022 academic year. It will be important that international student arrivals are able to commence without delay once Australia reaches Phase C.
14. Given the uncertainty that has characterised Australia's experience of COVID-19, Australian governments have adopted a generally conservative approach to planning for international student arrivals.
15. Council's advocacy efforts should now be aimed at ensuring planning commences immediately on a national approach to support a strong start to the 2022 academic year. Border and quarantine settings should ideally support student arrivals up to pre-pandemic levels, should there be sufficient demand.
16. A bold, national approach to re-booting Australia's international education sector in 2022 will require strong leadership from the Federal Government. It will be important that the government develops – and articulates ahead of time – a clear plan that considers factors such as: modified quarantine arrangements for vaccinated arrivals and arrivals from low-risk countries; the establishment of additional travel bubbles with low-risk countries; and a substantial increase in the number of entries by student visa holders.
17. To strengthen Melbourne's brand as a city that cares about its international students, management has progressed significant work on 'Experience Melbourne,' a program to offer onshore students (both local and international) experiences of the best that Melbourne has to offer.
18. The program includes free ticketing offers to key attractions and events, free curated activities and group outings, free bespoke activities hosted by City of Melbourne and a range of activities at The Couch – International Student Centre (run in partnership with the Salvation Army 614).
19. As COVID-19 has had a distressing impact on many parts of the visitor economy, the program aims to deliver benefits to the entertainment sector and international students, and encourage the general student population back to the city. This program has met with an enthusiastic response from partner organisations.
20. Students currently onshore are brand ambassadors for Melbourne's international education sector. Further enhancing the experience of this cohort will strengthen Melbourne's global reputation as a student city. Nine international students (from Colombia, India, China, Philippines, Malaysia, Nepal and Saudi Arabia) have been recruited as Experience Melbourne ambassadors (EMbassadors) to help promote the program and Melbourne as a high-quality study destination.
21. Once restriction levels permit, there will be an opportunity to recommence the program.

Recommendations from management

22. That the Future Melbourne Committee:
 - 22.1 Requests that management liaise with international education sector stakeholders to ensure a coordinated sector-wide advocacy effort in support of a strong return of international students to Melbourne in time for the 2022 academic year.
 - 22.2 Endorses the Lord Mayor signing a letter to the Federal Government, jointly with international education stakeholders as appropriate, requesting that the government immediately commence planning for a strong return of international students in early 2022.
 - 22.3 Endorses the Lord Mayor pursuing through the Council of Capital City Lord Mayors a joint advocacy effort aimed at securing a national plan for the return of international students in time for the 2022 academic year.
 - 22.4 Requests that management continue to pursue initiatives through the 'Experience Melbourne' program to strengthen Melbourne's reputation as a city that welcomes and supports international students.

Attachments:

1. Supporting Attachment (Page 3 of 3)

Supporting Attachment

Legal

1. There are no legal issues arising from the recommendation from management.

Finance

2. No significant implications arise from the recommendations contained in this report.

Conflict of interest

3. No member of Council staff, or other person engaged under a contract, involved in advising on or preparing this report has declared a material or general conflict of interest in relation to the matter of the report

Health and Safety

4. In developing this proposal, no Occupational Health and Safety issues or opportunities have been identified.

Stakeholder consultation

5. Management has had discussions with a range of stakeholders, including representatives from the universities, student groups, and government.

Relation to Council policy

6. This proposal is consistent with *Melbourne's Thriving Economic Future: Economic Development Strategy 2031*.

Environmental sustainability

7. In developing this paper, environmental sustainability issues have been considered and no direct issues were identified.