The second International Student Roundtable was convened in Canberra on 21-23 August 2011 under the auspices of the COAG International Students Strategy for Australia. The Roundtable included 30 international student participants from 18 countries undertaking higher education undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, vocational education and training diplomas, university foundation courses and English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students across the country.

International students highly value the educational opportunities that they are able to pursue in Australia. They also recognise that international education makes an important contribution to Australia’s social, cultural and economic development.

Roundtable participants therefore welcomed the opportunity to provide feedback and proposals on matters of importance to the international student community to Australian governments.

Policy progress for international students

The outcomes of the inaugural International Student Roundtable of 2009 were an important mechanism for enabling student input into the Australian Government’s significant reform program for international students. The 2011 International Student Roundtable acknowledged the significant policy progress that has been made since the 2009 Roundtable and welcomed the following initiatives to support their study experience:

- Input to the review of the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000 undertaken by the Hon Bruce Baird AM. Representatives of the 2009 Roundtable met with Mr Bruce Baird to share their recommendations from the Roundtable.
- Introduction of an Overseas Students Ombudsman.
- Improvements to the Study in Australia website, which is providing valuable information for international students in one location, although more effort is required to promote this website.
- Establishment of a new national representative voice for international students, the Council of International Students (CISA).
Actions to address on-going challenges

A 2010 survey of over 50,000 international students revealed that the vast majority of international students are satisfied with their living and study experiences in Australia. The Roundtable noted, however, that VET students were underrepresented in the survey which may have influenced the survey outcomes.

The Roundtable observed that there remain challenges that should be addressed to further improve international students' experience. The Roundtable would note that these actions will ensure that Australia's international education sector can remain internationally competitive with respect to the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada, which are extremely focused on student experience.

Proposed actions to address challenges can be grouped into five categories:

1. Education experience
2. Social inclusion
3. Cost of living pressures
4. Safety and welfare
5. Visa related matters.

These actions will greatly enhance the international student experience, ensure a more sustainable international education sector and contribute to the rich cultural and social fabric in Australia.

1. Education experience

A quality education experience is a core proposition for international students. The Roundtable welcomed the stricter regulatory measures for providers that have been implemented in response to the Baird Review to lift the quality of education for international students.

To further improve students' experience, the Roundtable proposed the following actions:

- **Encourage comprehensive orientation programs** – Effective orientation programs assist international students to adapt more readily to their new education and living environment. Four topics that were considered highly desirable as part of a quality international student orientation program include an overview of academic expectations, tips on living in Australia, integration with domestic students and cultural awareness. Staging a program of activity over consecutive days is valuable as it allows students to get across a greater breadth of important information.

- **Continue to support teaching quality** - The Roundtable welcomed on-going efforts to support quality teaching in the classroom. Developments such as the soon to be released MySkills and MyUniversity websites are eagerly anticipated for the transparency they will bring to the sector on issues such as teacher quality to help inform student choice about institutions. Exploring ways to acknowledge and celebrate teachers who excel in the classroom, particularly from the perspective of international students, was identified as valuable, complementary action.

- **Provide ongoing English language support** – The Roundtable recommended that institutions provide free, ongoing English language support throughout the academic year in addition to initial adjustment services. This support may include weekly ESL classes, informal and non-academic ESL events. While particular institutions often offer international students extra time
during exams and intensive one-off English language courses, the Roundtable agreed that ESL provisions could be better served in other ways.

- **Integrate work experience, internships and mentoring as part of the curriculum** – Gaining practical work experience is a key challenge for international students. Incorporating a practical component into the curriculum of many courses would be an attractive feature for many international students.

- **Improve the current practice regarding Recognition of Prior Learning** – International students have concerns regarding the discrepancies amongst institutions regarding Recognition of Prior Learning and recognition of life and work experience. The Roundtable recommended that international students be provided with information regarding the differences between standard Australian and home country levels of qualifications. The Roundtable supported a greater focus on working professional bodies and institutions to expand qualification recognition with other parts of the world.

- **Raise awareness of grievance processes** – Many international students are not aware of the student support services and grievance procedures available. Making relevant State and territory based information available on the Study in Australia website was recommended.

- **Increase scholarships** – The Roundtable recommended an increase in the number of scholarships available (both from government and institutions) and better access to information on scholarships for international students.

2. Social inclusion

Many international students can feel isolated and disconnected when they arrive. International students are eager to experience Australian culture, create Australian social networks, share cultural practices, and contribute to the Australian community. In addition to more effective orientation programs, the Roundtable recommended that the most effective social inclusion initiatives are student-led.

The Roundtable proposed the following actions:

- **Offer more student-led community activities and events** – The Roundtable expressed strong interest in student-led activities and community events, possibly through student representative bodies, with financial support from government. It supported the expansion of events and activities for international students to meet local students and participate in the wider community. While most universities offer good support services and events for international students, programs and events need to become more inclusive of the wider community. In the VET sector, many institutions do not provide the same social services and activities as major universities, despite sometimes greater concentrations of international students. The Curtin University Volunteer program is an exemplar of the type of program which engages international and domestic students with the wider community.

- **Share best practice social inclusion programs** – There are many examples of successful social inclusion programs that the Roundtable encouraged other jurisdictions and educational institutions to follow. Examples that were mentioned include the City of Melbourne Lord Mayor’s Student Welcome, Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) Information Day, and the University of Newcastle ‘Cultural Awakening’ week.

- **Expand awards for international students** – The Roundtable proposed the introduction of awards that recognise the academic or community contribution of outstanding international students from all sectors to acknowledge their role in enhancing the diversity of Australian
culture. The South Australian and New South Wales Government’s International Student Awards were identified as a good practice example that could be adopted by other state and territory governments. The Roundtable also recommended that winners of state and territory awards go on to be nominated for a national award. This relatively simple gesture would be an important symbol for the international student community.

3. Safety and welfare

Governments have made it clear that the safety and welfare of all international students is of the utmost importance. While the Roundtable recognised the work of governments to address safety and welfare issues since the previous Roundtable in 2009, this work needs to continue.

The Roundtable proposed the following actions:

- **Promote student safety and support services and expand successful approaches** – The Roundtable recognised that a number of good support services already exist for international students. The Roundtable highlighted examples such as the Victorian Government’s International Student Care Services (ISCS), International Student Legal Advice Clinic (ISLAC), and the George ‘Think Before’ campaign. The Roundtable supported the promotion of these successful initiatives and would like them to serve as a model for other state and territory governments.

- **Uphold workplace rights and OHS&W practices** – The Roundtable expressed concern at the exploitation of international students in the workplace. The Roundtable agreed that international students must understand their workplace rights around topics such as the minimum wage and safe work environments under the Fair Work Act.

- **Provide clear, plain English advice on health coverage requirements** – The Roundtable agreed that information about where and how to access health care services (GP versus hospitals) in Australia should be part of all orientation programs.

- **Promote sound Overseas Health Cover practices** – The Roundtable expressed concerns about a lack of information available on international students’ rights and responsibilities under Overseas Health Cover. The Roundtable recommends this information be made available in plain English on Study in Australia and education institution websites and should also be supplied at the time of receipt of visa documents.

4. Cost of living pressures

The strength of the Australian dollar, the obligation to pay high international student tuition fees often with weaker currencies, combined with constraints on earning capacity (20 hours per week maximum for paid work) is placing considerable pressures on international students’ living costs.

The Roundtable proposed the following actions:

- **Increase affordable student accommodation** – The Roundtable recognised that affordable student accommodation is not an easy problem to solve. However, urgent initiatives to increase the supply of affordable student accommodation were strongly supported. These initiatives may include consideration of new models such as public-private partnerships, more active promotion of home-stay or home-share arrangements to local residents and increased allocation of reasonably priced on-campus accommodation with newly arrived international students.
Expand transport concessions to NSW and Victoria — The Roundtable proposes that transport concessions for international students should be available across the country. The added cost of paying full fare fees for transport in NSW and Victoria makes studying in these states a less attractive option. Further, the costs are adding to safety issues for students, as many are walking to save on costs, even late at night. By allowing international students a concession card, it would encourage them to use public transport more frequently.

Average the 20 hour time restrictions on paid work — The Roundtable would like the Australian Government to consider implementing a more flexible policy on work hour limitations for international students, such as giving students an average of 20 hours of paid work per week over a period of 28 days. This would benefit not only the students but also the employers, with more flexibility available to them in the workforce. In addition, international students would like the 20 hours paid work to be separated from any volunteer or internship work they undertake.

Ensure consistent support for students with dependent children — There should be consistency in arrangements across states and better support for dependent children of international post-graduate students, especially given the increase in the number of these students coming to Australia.

5. Visa related matters

Education and migration issues should be better managed by the Commonwealth Government and considered as closely related issues when formulating policy in relation to international students. International students are calling for greater flexibility and opportunity in relation to the student visa program, as well as consistency in policy implementation.

The Roundtable proposed the following actions:

Ensure visa policy consistency for international students — The Roundtable agreed that grandfathering arrangements should apply to student visa policy changes. This legislation would ensure international students who have been granted with student visas are under the same entitlements for their entire study period. Changes of policy should only affect those students who enter on or after the implementation date of a new policy.

Review English standard testing — The Roundtable noted that the Knight Review is still being considered by Government. The Roundtable recommended the Government:

- Look into making IELTS tests more affordable for international students onshore and offshore
- Take into account overall results of IELTS tests where students do not need to meet a specific band for each individual test
- Adopt multiple pathways in assessing international students’ English language abilities.

Review the six month compulsory stay with first educational provider — The Roundtable acknowledged that the Baird Review recommendations are still being implemented. The Roundtable recommended that the Australian Government consider the issue of student transfer in the first six months of study.

Remove the degree assessment process — Given the efforts of the Australian Government, state and territory governments and institutions to ensure the quality of Australia qualifications, graduation from all CRICOS-registered institutions should be treated as equivalent to recognition by a professional body or for the purpose of permanent residency.
• **Revise the cost and requirements of visa application procedures** – The Roundtable recommended a review of the cost of a visa extension to ensure fees charged for students are proportional to the length of study.

• **Provide greater flexibility in relation to work rights for international students** - Temporary residency offered to international graduates should be extended. The Roundtable welcomed the proposal from states and territories for an evaluation of the scope for a three-year working visa for graduates with university or higher level vocational qualifications where a skills shortage exists.

The Roundtable looks forward to a continued dialogue with all levels of government on opportunities to continue to improve the international student experience.