

24/12/2025

Study Melbourne
Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions

Submitted via email to info@studymelbourne.vic.gov.au

To the Study Melbourne team

RE: VTA Submission – Refreshing Victoria's strategy for international education

The Victorian TAFE Association (VTA) welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Department's refresh of *Victoria's International Education Recovery Plan 2025*, as Victoria's international education strategy (the 2025 Plan).

The VTA is the peak that informs, supports and represents the interests of the Victorian TAFE sector, comprising 12 standalone TAFE Institutes, four dual sector universities and AMES Australia. We proudly champion public VET with a focus on sustainability, quality, and outcomes for industry, community and learners.

As public institutions, TAFEs are required to provide education, training, student and community support and are driven not by profit but by a commitment to public good. This public responsibility and community perspective ensures that supporting students is at the heart of TAFE – with each TAFE offering extensive wraparound support services throughout the student journey.

Victoria's international student body, and alumni, make a vital contribution to Victorian communities, TAFEs and industries – culturally, socially and economically. They enrich our learning environments and often volunteer extensively in our communities, as recently recognised in Study Melbourne's Victorian International Education Awards.

There are currently eight Victorian standalone TAFE Institutes that provide education and training to international students, domestically and through transnational education (TNE), as well as four dual sector universities. This submission seeks to provide a TAFE sector¹ perspective on how the Government could support the TAFE Institutes already engaging in international education, and what more could be done to support more TAFEs to realise the opportunities of international education.

The refreshed strategy is crucial in continuing to support the Victorian sector's recovery from COVID-impacts, including setting targets to increase Victoria's market share vs. other states. Victoria is still recovering from the extended impact of Australia's longest and most severe restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with the impact of Ministerial Direction 107 which impacted on visa processing and Australia's appeal as an education destination.

¹ 'TAFE' and 'the TAFE Network' are used inclusively to refer to both Victoria's 12 TAFE Institutes and four dual-sector universities.

1. Overall approach of the Strategy

1.1 We endorse the intent of the 2025 Plan to facilitate and grow international education

Both onshore and offshore international education are vital for TAFE financial sustainability, while enriching our Institutes, communities and economies.

Onshore international students bring great benefits to the education sector, including helping to fund and improve education facilities and resources, supporting the delivery and quality of courses, and increasing affordability for domestic students. International students also contribute to Victoria's economic prosperity, through boosting local businesses, filling job vacancies, enhancing Victoria's global standing and fostering connection and partnership with global industries. International students themselves also contribute to our skilled workforce, driving innovation and filling skills gaps in various key industries.

Similarly, TNE pathways and partnerships provide a valuable pipeline of onshore international students who receive favourable visa processing, while building important international linkages and institutional partnerships and bringing high quality Victorian education offerings to a global audience.

The Victorian Government must continue to set ambitious frameworks, supported by investment where necessary, that ensure Victoria remains the 'Education State' and that public VET providers are able to benefit from, and grow, their international education offerings. This should include actively positioning the Victorian TAFE brand, and Victorian TAFE Network, in priority markets through continuing to deliver coordinated campaigns, facilitating offshore partnerships and expanding global networks.

1.2 Continue to showcase Victorian TAFE as an equal first choice to university pathways

The VTA supports the role of TAFE as set out in the 2025 Plan and reinforces that this must continue in the refreshed strategy. The Strategy must position Victorian TAFEs as the State's sovereign and trusted public providers, recognising the Network's strong track record of providing an excellent student experience, supporting student outcomes, delivering nationally recognised qualifications, and contributing to Victoria's economic growth.

The Plan provides a strong overview of the TAFE Network's role within Victoria's education landscape and its integration with industry and higher education, as well as its state-of-the-art infrastructure. This central role for TAFE must continue and be strengthened in the refreshed Strategy, reinforcing TAFE as an attractive, high-quality, trusted option for international students.

The Strategy should also position TAFE as an equal first choice to university for international students. In 2024, 80% of the qualifications for future jobs in Victoria are attainable via TAFE. Employment outcomes for TAFE graduates match university graduates with 78% of TAFE graduates finding employment after study. This figure raises to 94% for apprenticeships and traineeships. TAFE graduates with a Cert IV and above have median earnings that exceed university graduates. The Strategy should clearly communicate these benefits to international students, positioning TAFE as a credible, high-value and equal pathway to university study in Victoria.

1.3 Strengthen the link between international education and Victoria's workforce needs

Victoria's economy is growing and the Government has several major priorities that are driving a sustained demand for skilled workers – like accelerating housing supply, building data centres, and transitioning to renewable energy. Victoria is projected to require more

than 1.4 million new jobs by 2034. The Strategy should clearly spotlight the opportunities that international VET pathways create for international students and for the Victorian economy. Studying in Victoria can support the transition into secure, meaningful employment where visa settings allow (especially prioritising state-nominated visas), while growing the Victorian economy and supporting workforce gaps.

The Strategy should actively spotlight in-demand pathways through TAFE to ensure international education is aligned with Victoria's current and future skills needs. In monitoring the success of the Strategy, economic return could be considered a measure of success.

1.4 The Strategy should highlight opportunities in regional Victoria

While we understand the brand appeal of Melbourne for international markets, and the rationale for its use in the "Study Melbourne" brand, the Strategy should consider how to highlight opportunities across the whole State – including in regional Victoria, and beyond just regional cities – to ensure that the economic benefits of international education are shared across the State.

Regional components in the 2025 Plan centred on leveraging the 2026 Commonwealth Games for international education promotion across Regional Victoria, noting that this centred on specific regional cities. A new approach will be needed in the refreshed Strategy.

International education is highly concentrated in Melbourne, so promoting regional study destinations will also support a more diversified and sustainable growth for the sector and ensure that the benefits of international education are shared across the State. The Strategy should highlight the unique benefits from studying in regional Victoria. This includes lower living costs, smaller class sizes, greater interaction with teachers, employment opportunities for part-time and graduate work with less competition, and opportunities for community immersion within a uniquely Australian setting.

The Strategy should consider the following initiatives:

- Targeted campaigns that increase awareness of the range of destinations available in Victoria, and tie the Melbourne brand to regional areas, while also highlighting the benefits to studying regionally and the visa pathways in Regional Victoria.
- Support for regional visits beyond just regional cities.
- Ensuring the Global Education Network have knowledge and understanding of regional destinations and providers, and their unique offering to international students, so they are equipped to promote opportunities outside of Melbourne.

2. Priority activities

2.1 Provide more explicit support for TAFE TNE partnerships

The Strategy provides the opportunity to strengthen TAFE's international and TNE partnerships by sending a clear signal that Victorian TAFEs are open, engaged and actively supportive of international education. A strong, government-endorsed Strategy allows the Victorian Government to clearly communicate to overseas governments, education institutions and international industry partners that high-quality international VET opportunities exist in Victoria, via the Government-owned TAFE Network, and that TNE partnerships are a priority for the Victorian Government.

Melbourne's established global education brand and international reputation provide a strong competitive advantage, and the Strategy should explicitly leverage this to position Victoria, and its TAFE Network, as a destination of choice. TAFEs can use the Strategy to underpin and expand their onshore and offshore international delivery to clearly demonstrate that Victoria welcomes international students including those from specific key markets.

The Strategy should include a specific TNE Expansion Plan, setting out a pathway for expanded TAFE TNE pathways in Victoria's public system. This should include expanded financial support for TAFEs to develop TNE pathways – like the Yes to International Students Fund – to support the development costs associated with establishing these pathways and designing programs for this purpose (e.g. bespoke appealing Bachelor-level programs or micro-credentials that would not otherwise be developed). The Strategy could also include specific statements for priority markets, which can be used to show international partners the level of priority the Government is giving to their partnership.

This approach will support TAFEs to diversify and strengthen their international education markets while also managing their tightly constrained budgetary environment and more limited capacity to pro-actively develop programs tailored to the international market, beyond their existing course portfolio.

2.2 Consider how to support TAFE applicants to receive timely visas that reflect TAFE's trusted provider status

The Strategy must commit to creating a genuinely pro-international student policy environment for international TAFE students. While we note that immigration policy sits at the federal level, there are actions that the Victorian Government could take to help facilitate the timely passage of international student visa applications for TAFE Institutes, where appropriate. Broader advocacy on federal immigration settings is discussed in Section 3.

Victorian TAFE Institutes report that while their applications are prioritised for processing, they do not always feel that they are being viewed as an appropriately trusted, low-risk provider when applications are being assessed. This may stem from the range of names used for TAFEs across Victoria, which those involved in visa processing may not recognise as Government entities.

The Victorian Government could provide a letter of support that public TAFEs can provide to prospective international students to include in their visa applications. This letter would reiterate that the individual TAFE is a high-quality, low-risk and trusted public provider. This may improve clarity in visa processing where it may not be clear to reviewers that the Institute is a public TAFE, and ensure these students are assessed as seeking to study at "genuine" providers. These letters could also reiterate if a student has completed a TNE program with the TAFE prior to applying for a subsequent international student visa.

2.3 Continue to support international students in Australia and showcase this support

The Strategy must continue to commit to strong and welcoming infrastructure that enhances the experience of international students and strengthens Victoria's competitiveness. Investing in student-centric services and accommodation will ensure Victoria stands out and is perceived as an attractive destination.

The Strategy should continue to support investing in Study Melbourne Hubs and support programs to deliver a high-quality student experience that differentiates Victoria globally as a destination of choice. Study Melbourne should also consider how to address cost of living pressures, in ensuring that Melbourne and Victoria remain appealing destinations.

2.4 Consider how Government can cut red tape for public providers to deliver international education

While the Strategy may prioritise international education, it must also consider how to create an appropriate regulatory environment for TAFEs as Government entities. TAFE procurement domestically is constrained by State Purchasing Guidelines. TAFE offshore projects have to adhere to these extensive procurement requirements, which limit TAFE competitiveness and responsiveness in international markets.

In supporting TNE expansion as part of the refreshed plan, the Victorian Government could provide clarification that procurement expenses relating to generation of export revenue (such as transnational education and international student revenue) are out of scope for standard government procurement requirements, so that TAFEs can be confident that they are not expected to apply the extensive domestic service guidelines to their international activities.

The Strategy must clarify for risk-averse TAFEs that Buying for Victoria and shared services procurement requirements do not need to be used where they impede a TAFE's international activity, providing they can justify the direct use of commercial revenues to fund international procurement (e.g. international agents, representative offices, strategic partners etc.).

2.5 Build workforce and institutional capability in international recruitment and TNE

The TAFE Network has lost significant international education expertise since COVID. To expand the number of TAFEs delivering international education, the Strategy should consider how to build the workforce that facilitates this. The TAFE international education workforce is small with limited opportunities for professional development or to build institutional capability. While international education may generate revenue, not all TAFE consistently have the resources to invest in the required 'start up' activities ahead of time, without Government support.

Initiatives could include supporting shared expertise across the TAFE Network (e.g. funding to develop Diploma and Bachelor programs for the international market). Study Melbourne could work with the Office of TAFE Coordination and Delivery to provide funding to initiatives that upskill the TAFE Network in international education (e.g. shared services, leveraging shared policies and standards, sharing training resources, or commissioning bespoke training).

3. Federal advocacy

Grant rates for international onshore VET students seeking to study at Victorian TAFEs are still very low. The Victorian Government should continue to advocate for visa settings that make it easier for international students to choose and study at a trusted public TAFE and to go on to work in associated industries in Victoria, supporting Victoria's broader economic prosperity. The Victorian Government should also continue to advocate for clear, consistent immigration policies and highlight the role of VET in meeting state and national skills needs, while reinforcing student support services to maintain a welcoming environment.

The VTA encourages advocacy on:

- Influencing national policy makers (e.g. Department of Home Affairs, federal Ministers) to further recognise the value of TAFE and reflect this in visa settings and policy frameworks that support international students to choose public TAFEs. This could include through training and resources for federal staff (e.g. visa processing staff) on the value of TAFE, its status as a low-risk and quality provider, and the

names of all Australian TAFEs so they do not mistake them for private RTOs. This should increase visa grant rates for TAFE.

- Supporting reforms to the risk regime to recognise TAFEs as government-owned, low-risk providers, enabling TAFE to gain a greater share of VET international students and linking visa settings to state and national skills priorities.
- Creating a unique visa pathway for TAFE applicants, to resolve the above issues.
- Ensuring that TAFE graduates receive the same post-study work entitlements as higher education graduates, particularly in occupations linked to skills shortages.

We look forward to working with you further to finalise and implement the new Strategy.

Yours sincerely,

Alex White

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Victorian TAFE Association