

Australian Strategy for International Education Consultation Paper

Submission from the Student Accommodation Association



About SAA

The [Student Accommodation Association](#) is a national body established in January 2018 which brings Australian education and student accommodation providers together to promote the value of quality accommodation for the exclusive use of students and the role student accommodation plays in enhancing the Australian education experience.

Under the definition of ‘student accommodation’ being ‘accommodation for the exclusive use of students’ SAA has successfully established five member categories –

- University Managed
- Residential Colleges
- Commercial purpose built student accommodation (PBSA)
- Student Hostels
- Commercial managed student housing portfolios

Our executive members (voting rights) are, education providers, commercial companies and organisations (as opposed to individuals) that either manage accommodation databases for students or operate large scale student accommodation businesses.

SAA currently have twenty eight executive [members](#), including universities, residential colleges and PBSA student accommodation providers.

Since establishment, SAA has been working on the implementation of a strategy to improve perception, clarity and consistency of the message promoted to students by Australian education stakeholders pertaining to accommodation in Australia.

The first step was to establish the definition “accommodation for the exclusive use of students” to work against the growing perception that student accommodation is all accommodation occupied by a student.

Over time, this perception has been perpetuated through an expanding number of unregulated social media and “peer to peer” online platforms, friends and family, booking portals and some education agents.

The second step was to define the categories of student accommodation providers in Australia.

The third step was to develop the [National Property Accreditation Scheme \(NPAS\)](#) which is a set of industry led minimum standards by which SAA executive member properties, which meet the NPAS standards, can receive accreditation and carry the NPAS stamp of quality for a two year period.

Despite the distraction caused by the pandemic, SAA pushed on and successfully launched NPAS in October 2020 and the first batch of NPAS accreditation applications are currently being assessed.

MOUs are in place between SAA and key international education agencies across the country reflecting the appetite for a clear and consistent student accommodation message.

The rigor behind the NPAS assessment criteria provides the protection Australian education providers and stakeholders have been missing and will enable them to confidently develop and actively promote an endorsed accommodation option, particularly to first year students.

SAA expects the NPAS stamp of quality to be an important element to the Australian International Education Strategy during the post pandemic recovery period.

1) What are the key priorities for a new Australian strategy for international students?

Take the opportunity during the post pandemic recovery period to reset the accommodation message for students in Australia by addressing the key findings of research contained in "[No Place like Home](#) (NSW)" and "[Living Precariously \(National\)](#)"

The research was conducted to investigate the exploitation of international students in accommodation, leading to circumstances of physical, emotional and financial harm and ultimately detracting from their international education experience in Australia.

The National Property Accreditation Scheme (NPAS) could be positioned as the clear and coherent accommodation message promoted across the sector as part of the Australia's future international education strategy to attract more students and enrich their education experience.

2) Students should be at the centre of the new Strategy. How can Australian education providers deliver the best possible student experience both now and in the future?

Education providers could look to align themselves with quality providers of the traditional ancillary services which are so important to international students to successfully establish themselves on arrival in Australia.

Education providers have traditionally been passive in their commitment to delivering the complete education experience to international students, leaving students to research and seek advice and assistance from third party providers in the areas of accommodation and casual employment, potentially leaving them open to exploitation.

Education stakeholders could be encouraged to do more to educate, prepare and transition international students successfully into their new study environment and despite some

aspects of this cycle not being considered “core business” the impact of a poor student experience ultimately impacts on the “core business”.

Student accommodation providers who meet the industry led standards required of NPAS accreditation look forward to closer dialogue and potential partnership with education providers to work collaboratively to deliver an improved international education offering and a better education experience.

3) What changes are needed to make Australia more globally competitive over the next decade?

Students can be offered a complete international education experience which not only considers the academic outcome but also the lifetime memories and ongoing connection that students develop with their chosen study destination.

In this context quality student accommodation can be packaged with the academic offer, becoming a highly ‘value add’ to the Australian education offering.

When students begin their international education experience in quality student accommodation, not only are they safe and secure but they are immersed in a student residential community where they form lifelong friendships, professional connections and develop the confidence to engage with the Australian way of living and culture.

Internationalisation has been an ongoing concern for many Australian education providers in the past. International students being drawn into the comfort of their own cultural communities and segregating themselves from the broader campus activities can be addressed by encouraging more students to consider quality student accommodation as their first year option.

Student accommodation properties are designed to encourage integration and cultural comfort with multi share apartment layouts, communal recreational and study spaces available to provide students with the opportunity to share their experiences and inspire one another to achieve their academic objectives.

This is a very different experience when reviewed through the eyes of a student who chooses unregulated share or private rental accommodation occupied by members of their cultural community or an arrangement usually facilitated through a same nationality peer to peer online platform or social media group.

Consideration can be given to expanding the obligations of an education provider to the ESOS Act by not only providing accommodation information to international students but also being required to provide secure access to quality student accommodation either controlled or through commercial partnership with a NPAS accredited provider.

The capacity required under this obligation could be a percentage of the total international students enrolled with that education provider.

The Student Accommodation Association understands that similar obligations of education providers are mandated in the UK and not only serves to improve and enrich the student experience but also serves to sustain and support the student accommodation sector.

i) Policy and regulatory flexibility are important in enabling providers to innovate. How can we utilise these settings to pursue opportunities, and in what other ways can we work together to ensure Australia remains globally competitive.

Student accommodation residential communities can be used to connect offshore learners into onshore student learning environments. During the pandemic student accommodation providers developed online virtual communities which served to help those students stuck offshore to maintain daily engagement (24/7) and connection with friends in their student accommodation community to feel supported and to enable a smooth transition upon their return.

This concept could be developed further with commitment from education providers to enrich the education experience by looking more broadly than the on campus experience.

4) How can providers, governments and stakeholders work together to achieve diversification opportunities (for example of disciplines, source countries, study destinations and delivery models)

Leveraging from a collective understanding that international education is important to the nation, stakeholders could develop the Strategy on the basis of two key elements:

- A portfolio of international education offerings, incorporating both the learning and living experience
- Develop a set of pre-enrolment (pre-departure) materials that are consistently distributed by providers, governments and stakeholders to international students while offshore to set quality experience expectations and prepare each student to have their expectations met.

5) What are the necessary skills for the future that students should be prepared for?

Life skills – one of the attractive elements to the international education experience is the opportunity to leave the family home, experience another country and culture and by doing so, develop the personal skills required to prosper in life and in the student's chosen career.

Student accommodation environments provide students with a supported platform from which they can transition from the close care of their family on to a pathway to personal growth.

This can be intimidating to some but with the close care of the professionally trained student accommodation management team, students can be carefully exposed to the residential student community, supervised as they establish comfort with their allocated housemates and later thrive as they communicate and engage with in-house friendship groups to live together and establish a balanced approach to university life.

The personal strength, confidence and resilience developed in a comfortable and supported student accommodation environment complements the learning experience delivered by Australian education providers and serves to develop a well-rounded, academically qualified individual with the skills and experience to make the most of their professional opportunities wherever those opportunities may take them.

i) How can Australia improve employability outcomes for international students, ensuring they have the necessary skills to compete in a globally competitive labour market?

Student accommodation environments provide Australian students with exposure to a variety of languages, food and culture, an experience and opportunity that may not be derived from their learning experience alone.

Conversely, international students who immerse themselves in a student accommodation residential community are carefully exposed to other international cultures and provided with the opportunity to live like a local through planned community activities or friendships they form with Australian students.

Cultural comfort is an important attribute for graduates to acquire as part of their education experience in a globally competitive labour market.

6) How do we create a uniquely Australian education experience?

Shape and promote the Australian education offering around both the learning and living experience.

Promote our country's strengths:

- First class education
- Access to quality student accommodation to support the learning and living experience
- A safe, secure and attractive study destination.

i) What is the value proposition for both international and domestic students?

The post pandemic period will provide an opportunity for education and student accommodation providers to contemplate the packaging of NPAS accredited student accommodation properties as part of the education offering.

Student accommodation occupancy levels across the country have been decimated as a result of the pandemic and when the international travel restrictions are lifted the industry will be focused on restoring occupancy.

Members of the Student Accommodation Association have demonstrated their willingness to support the Australian international education sector during the pandemic by offering access to beds at a significant discount to support programs such as the [NSW Government temporary crisis accommodation scheme](#).

Working in partnership with Australian international education stakeholders to develop competitive packages and possibly scholarships would be a strategy to rebuilding sustainable occupancy and a key recruitment tool for the Australian International Education Sector.

A key element to furthering this concept would be the education sectors support for the NPAS stamp of quality and those properties that have met the standard.

The Student Accommodation Association would be willing to lead concept planning discussions in this regard.

ii) How do we offer an Australian education experience while complementing the value of Australian offshore and online education?

Student accommodation residential communities can be used to connect offshore learners into onshore student learning environments. During the pandemic student accommodation providers developed online virtual communities to help students stuck offshore to maintain daily engagement (24/7) and connection with friends in their student accommodation community to enable them to feel supported and set a platform for their smooth transition upon their return.

This concept could be developed further with commitment from education providers to enrich the education experience by looking more broadly than the on campus experience.

7) Community support for the international education sector is important for the sector's social licence. How can the benefits this sector provides to Australia be better understood by wider community?

Working harder to set international students up for success is an important element to changing the perceptions of the wider community.

One consistent set of pre-enrolment (pre-departure) information disseminated consistently by all Australian international education stakeholders, designed to provide better guidance for international students prior to departure on matters relating to:

- Accommodation – student accommodation and other
- Employment – casual and career opportunities
- Support options when onshore

A commitment by the industry to provide a clear pathway for students to follow pre and post arrival onshore will mitigate the risk of students facing exploitation or isolating themselves (impacting on their language and personal development) and thereby improving their capacity to become confident and engaged members of the wider community.

8) What else should the Council for International Education and the Australian Government consider in developing the new Strategy?

Endorse the National Property Accreditation Scheme (NPAS) as part of the Australian international education post pandemic strategy.

Broaden the focus to improve the Australian living experience for international students.

Consider how student accommodation can add value to the education offering (including the potential for discounted beds or scholarships) and engage with the Student Accommodation Association to begin preliminary concept planning.