

Review of the Foreign Arrangements Scheme - Charles Darwin University consultation

Introduction

Charles Darwin University (CDU) appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the operation of the Foreign Relations Act (2020).

We support the intention of the Foreign Arrangements Scheme in protecting and managing risk associated with foreign relations.

Our feedback largely relates to the administration of the Act, rather than the Act itself

1. Prolonged decision-making on more complicated matters

In March 2024, we directly raised a potential foreign arrangement directly with DFAT and through the portal. Resolving this matter took several meetings (with CDU often required to repeat the same information) and subsequent follow-ups by the university to understand the status and progress.

The time frame for a response from DFAT was over three months. The prolonged decision-making led to the university having to make excuses and apologies to the foreign entity for not being able to provide a response, which is unprofessional and embarrassing for the university.

2. Multiple visits from DFAT representatives, repeating the same information

There may be an opportunity to streamline visits to the Northern Territory and the University from DFAF representatives who repeat information that has already been delivered and received.

On the last occasion, three representatives visited with a PowerPoint presentation of information that we already had and knew. While we appreciate the in-person sharing of any new information, there seems to be an opportunity to reduce visits repeating basic information.

3. The Portal

There are significant opportunities to improve the user experience in the portal. As the mechanism for reporting Foreign Arrangements, it is not user-friendly.

Suggested improvements include:

- Clear status tracking for submitted agreements. Introducing a status bar or tracking mechanism would significantly improve transparency and allow us to monitor the review of our arrangements.
- Simplifying notification processes for an intended agreement.

CDU Recommends

1. **Streamlining Notification Processes:** Simplifying the notification requirements, particularly for non-core arrangements, would significantly reduce the administrative load on universities. A tiered approach, where low-risk agreements are subject to less stringent requirements, could be beneficial.
2. **Pre-Submission Consultation Process:** Implementing a formal process for entities to consult with DFAT before the submission of potentially sensitive foreign arrangements would provide clarity and ensure better compliance with Australia's foreign policy.
3. **Enhanced Communication Channels:** Developing a dedicated helpline or fast-track email response system for urgent inquiries would help address time-sensitive issues more efficiently.
4. **Status Tracking Mechanism:** Introducing a status tracking system within the online portal would provide real-time updates on the progress of submitted arrangements.