

Internationalising Regional Australia: A Case for Change

ACPET submission to StudyNSW

September 2016

Introduction

Established in 1992, ACPET is the national industry association for private providers of tertiary education and training in Australia. ACPET has around 1,000 members nationally who deliver a range of vocational education and training (VET), higher education, and English language programs across all states and territories, as well as globally, to domestic and international students.

ACPET's mission is to enhance quality and choice in Australian tertiary education and training. Its members include commercial and not-for-profit entities, community and industry providers and enterprise-based training organisations. ACPET works with governments, industries and other stakeholders to ensure VET, higher education, English language and international education programs are well targeted, accessible and delivered to a high standard.

State governments around Australia have established overt strategies and a clear focus on attracting international students, including dedicated marketing divisions. In some cases in addition to State/Territory level agencies local initiatives, such as Study Sydney and StudyNSW, have been created.

Statistically, international students typically choose to study in metropolitan centres. While students are often more comfortable in such urban environments, tremendous opportunities to try and broaden Australia's brand to include high quality, regional tertiary education providers exist.

The case for living and studying regionally

Studying Higher Education or VET at an ACPET regional member's campus can offer an international student high quality outcomes, including:

- Better opportunities to engage with and integrate into local communities, instead of living and socialising in groups of students or friends of the same ethnicity
- Improved chance to test and develop English language proficiency through integration
- High quality education through smaller class sizes and access to support
- More affordable and higher quality accommodation
- A more affordable cost of living, and
- Increased time for engaging with campus life and shorter travelling times.

Recommendations made by Heather Cavanagh

Professor Cavanagh's paper was circulated to ACPET's CRICOS approved NSW members located outside of the Sydney metropolitan area. While it is noted that the paper was written from a higher education perspective, the size and growth of Australia's international vocational education and training (VET) sector appears to be a missed opportunity in the identified strategies.

ACPET's response to the recommendations is as follows:

- **EXTEND THE PERMITTED WORKING HOURS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHO STUDY IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**
- **EXTEND POST STUDY WORK (PSWR) RIGHTS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS WHO STUDY IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA**
- **REDUCE DURATION REQUIREMENT FOR PSWR IN REGIONAL AREAS**

These concepts are supported. Strategies that make studying in regional areas both more attractive and economically viable have merit. However, it will be important to ensure that only those communities within regional NSW that have the support necessary for international students are targeted. Some regional towns may not have sufficient providers or local support to accommodate students. Additionally, targeting tourism hot spots may send the wrong signals to potential students and their parents (come for a holiday not to study) and may not

ultimately be less expensive than city living. The capacity of communities to provide appropriate work is also a factor, as is the type of student. That is, there may be an advantage to target students from regional communities overseas for study regionally in NSW, rather than those from metropolitan areas.

While the consensus is that these incentives would be attractive to international students, caution still needs to be exercised. Given that regional communities tend to experience higher unemployment rates than cities, there is a risk that international students would secure increased employment opportunities at the expense of citizens.

- PROVIDE ADDITIONAL BONUS POINTS FOR GRADUATES TOWARDS AUSTRALIAN RESIDENCY FOR ATTENDING REGIONAL CAMPUSES, PARTICULARLY FOR THOSE STUDYING IN AREAS OF REGIONAL SKILLS SHORTAGES
- PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR EXPLORATORY MARKETING IN COUNTRIES WHERE 'REGIONAL' DESTINATIONS WOULD HAVE TRACTION INCLUDING SUPPORTING AGENT FAMILIARISATION ACTIVITIES

There is a risk of confusing international education with immigration policies. The focus should therefore be on attracting genuine students and not those looking for expedited residency. Marketing targeted at international regional locations to identify students who may be more comfortable in regional settings does, however, have significant advantages.

Some international students do use education as a pathway to attaining Australian residency, and ultimately citizenship. In that regard clear guidelines on the advantages for studying regionally would be beneficial.

A whole-of-government, industry and community strategy would be needed to underpin any initiative, to ensure student support, student accommodation, public transport and other support requirements were in place and supported by the community.

- PROVIDE DESIGNATED EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES INCLUDING INTERNSHIPS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GOVERNMENT OFFICES WITHIN THE REGION
- PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS TO ENCOURAGE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO STUDY IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA
- EXPANDING TRANSPORT CONCESSIONS, A STATE ISSUE, TO REGIONAL STUDENTS
- PROVIDE FREE (PUBLIC) SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN REGIONAL AREAS

All of the initiatives identified have merit. The proposals can offer both an immediate incentive and benefit. The initiatives also ensure a coordinated approach to the attraction of international students.

The encouragement of students with families to regional areas could add much value to those communities. These benefits could take cultural, social and economic forms. Educational support for a student's own children would be a considerable incentive.

Newcastle and Wollongong – metropolitan or regional

ACPET supports the view that for the purpose of international students, both Newcastle/Hunter and Wollongong/Illawarra are regional centres, despite their relatively close proximity to metropolitan Sydney. Further, ACPET recommends that the Central Coast area also be considered regional for international students.

ACPET's position is further qualified by the view that an international student would only be entitled regional study incentives should they physically study at a regional location. The incentive must be aligned with the place of study and not the provider. Where a college is based in the Newcastle/Hunter or Wollongong/Illawarra areas, but also operates a Sydney campus, those students studying in Sydney would be ineligible for benefits of any regional enrolment incentive scheme. Failure to apply this philosophy would be disadvantageous because colleges based in these two locations would not gain the benefits associated with being Sydney or regionally located.

The Two Pronged approach

ACPET concurs with the perceived unlikelihood of regional NSW education providers attracting international students to study on campus to a level that Sydney can. This therefore means that their non-domestic growth business plan must be robust, and its implementation strategies innovative and include significant community and government support.

The proximity of Australia to the world's most populous region, Asia, means that providers here are well placed to optimise their business vision. Professor Cavanagh's advocacy that Australia's regional providers market their online delivery model has merit. It's logical that the problems of overcrowded cities and regional population retention are not unique to Australia. The caution with which countries such as China approach on-line delivery presents opportunities. A reluctance to embrace the potential that the internet/online offers business, as opposed to Australia's commitment and expertise, does present an opportunity.

That said, for international students visiting Australia, physical attendance on campus is critical to success.

It is agreed that government support by way of facilitated introduction and promotion of what's been achieved by a decentralised education model will be pivotal to the success of a second element – one that may prove just as beneficial for students, providers and communities. The premise of relatable circumstances ie: a population highly centralised to a nominal number of centres despite a large land mass – as distinct from a country like the USA which has several major cities throughout its territory – will bode Australia well in negotiations.