

SUBMISSION TO EXPERT MEMBERS OF THE COUNCIL FOR INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CONSULTATION PAPER: GROWING INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

10 December 2018

Universities Australia welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Council for International Education's consultation paper on Growing International Education in Regional Australia. This submission represents a broad sectoral view of the issues.

INTRODUCTION

Australia has built an enviable reputation over six decades as a destination of choice for some of the brightest international students from around the world. Our success sees Australia poised to overtake the United Kingdom next year to become the second most popular destination for international students worldwide. These students bringing over \$32 billion each year into Australia's economy, supporting Australian jobs and wages. Australia's continued success in attracting international students and their economic contribution to our country has been in part due to the strong commitment by Government to nurturing this sector with careful and well-considered policy settings.

It is in all of our interests to ensure Australia remains their destination of choice. We wish to work closely with all stakeholders to ensure Australia's visa system continues to attract these talented students. Universities Australia welcomes any discussion on how to promote and develop opportunities for all students to engage with non-metropolitan institutions.

Years of knowledge and experience about what helps to attract international students to Australia confirms that any bid to limit international students' options for enrolment would carry inherent risk. Our universities across the country all value the opportunity to recruit international students, and caution is advised in implementing measures which have the potential to negatively impact on Australia's international education system.

The overarching principle in this exercise should be to do no harm.

QUESTION 1. HOW CAN GOVERNMENT, INSTITUTIONS AND COMMUNITIES BETTER PROMOTE THE VALUABLE AND UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF STUDYING AND LIVING IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA?

All universities play a critical role in contributing the cities, towns and communities they serve. This contribution is particularly significant for non-metropolitan universities. As well as providing higher education opportunities to regional Australians – producing a large proportion of the professionals working in regional communities – they undertake research in a range of fields relevant to the area, are major employers in the geographical regions they are based in, and provide community, sports and cultural facilities.

The focus of the discussion should be on the benefits of location, rather than focussing on a binary divide of “urban” versus “region”. The definition of regional Australia should reflect those already agreed and in use by government.

QUESTION 2. WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO REGIONAL DESTINATIONS AND THEIR EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS HOSTING MORE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

When considering the choices made by international students, one must consider what motivates students in choosing a study destination. International students come to Australia not only for the high-quality education experience, but also for the deepened cultural understanding, and people to people links.

A coordinated effort is required to ensure that agents, students and their parents, along with other interested parties are provided with detailed information highlighting the benefits and opportunities that come from studying in non-metropolitan areas. Being able to utilise alumni from regional institutions as well as the presence of representatives of various diasporas to promote these benefits would be valuable.

Engagement from communities and local government has a role to play in promoting and informing prospective students regarding the benefits of studying in their region.

QUESTION 3. HOW CAN METROPOLITAN AND REGIONAL EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE REGIONAL STUDY OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN WAYS THAT BENEFIT THE STUDENTS, THE REGIONAL COMMUNITIES AND THE INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS?

Universities Australia’s 39 member institutions currently have campuses spread across 229 locations in Australia, with a substantial proportion of these institutions being located outside of the major metropolitan areas. Whilst this devolved model makes the regional-metropolitan differentiation less pronounced, it is a model which allows ease of movement between campus locations depending upon the needs of the student. It allows students to choose the institution that best meets their academic needs, but then offers a range of options regarding location.

Whilst this model is driven primarily by larger metropolitan-based universities opening regional campuses, it could be extrapolated to partnership models between independent providers. Such partnership models have been explored in the past to provide smaller, less research-intensive universities with access to the research infrastructure held by larger research active institutions – thus removing barriers to greater engagement in research activity.

QUESTION 4. WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO COMMUNICATE THE BENEFITS OF SPENDING TIME IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA TO PROSPECTIVE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THEIR PARENTS?

The use of student testimonials is one of the primary tools utilised by university marketing to promote the quality and benefits of Australia education system. Universities can mobilise their alumni to great effect to engage with the next generation of potential international students.

Students are also attracted to post graduation employment opportunities. Whilst evidence suggests that most temporary visa holders return to their own country, the ability to stay and work in Australia appears to be very attractive to some international students. UA would not recommend major changes to the visa system, rather an overhaul of the current skilled migration program.

The benefits of regional universities can be demonstrated by showcasing the plethora of collaborative research partnerships between regional institutions and international partners. In addition to the valuable research regional universities undertake in a range of fields relevant to the area, Australia's regional institutions maintain strong international partnerships in areas such as agriculture, health science, environmental science, digital health and marine science. In addition to benefits at both the individual and national levels, such partnerships boost the image of Australia as a productive collaborator and contributor to the broader region.

QUESTION 5. GIVEN THE STRONG INTERPLAY BETWEEN TOURISM AND EDUCATION, PARTICULARLY IN REGIONAL SETTINGS, HOW CAN GOVERNMENT, INSTITUTIONS AND THE COMMUNITY CAPITALISE ON THE RELATIONSHIP, MAP ITS VALUE AND PROMOTE REGIONAL STRENGTHS?

The Australian Government goes to great lengths to promote Australia as an education destination and is currently going through a major redevelopment of its brand strategy which will greatly assist these efforts in the future. Whilst there have been efforts in the past to link education and tourism, the outcomes of these initiatives have been inconsistent with questions asked as to whether the return warrants the investment.

Consideration could be given to ensuring that enough information is provided to interested parties to ensure a complete understanding of the options open to tourists who come to Australia about their ability to engage in education opportunities.

QUESTION 6. WHAT ROLE COULD FEE STRUCTURES AND SCHOLARSHIPS, EDUCATION AGENT PROMOTIONS, AND CHANGES TO GOVERNMENT POLICY SETTINGS PLAY TO ENCOURAGE MORE STUDENTS TO STUDY IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA (E.G. MIGRATION INCENTIVES)?

Australia's future prosperity will depend on our ability to attract talented and motivated students, researchers and university staff from around the world. Any changes to Australia's visa system must carefully balance national security considerations with the large economic and social benefits that flow from maximising the ease by which people can enter and leave the country. Australia should be presented as a country welcoming of international students, our messaging should be consistent with our national agenda to build a globally engaged university sector.

The current student visa system serves Australia well and UA would not be advocating for changes to the system that lowers the bar regarding the current visa requirements. There are incentives in place to attract migrants to particular parts of Australia and they should be revisited in the context of this discussion. UA has previously advocated for a regional student visa subclass for study and residence in regional Australia as a way of providing a major impetus to the Commonwealth regional development agenda, *Regions 2030: Unlocking Opportunity*. However, the complexities of policing such a visa subclass combined with the potential for it to impact on the mobility of students may limit its utility.

Australia has recently seen changes to State and Territory-based visa regimes that have been announced with insufficient regard given to the impact the changes will have on people who are already in Australia, or who have applied based on the previous set of rules. Much of the complexity of our current visa system comes from repeated incremental change which has distorted the effectiveness of the system. Changes should be made without a fine-grained assessment of impact in relation to policy intent and overall system integrity.

QUESTION 7. IS THERE A NEED FOR GREATER INSIGHTS INTO THE MOTIVATIONS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN REGIONAL AREAS RELATIVE TO METROPOLITAN AREAS, USING INSTRUMENTS SUCH AS THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BAROMETER AND/OR OTHER TARGETED RESEARCH?

There are a number of existing data gathering exercises which collect data on the international student experience and these could be easily augmented to develop a more comprehensive knowledge base.

International students are great ambassadors for the Australian education sector and are willing to work with education institutes to tell personal stories and provide frank feedback on their experiences in Australia. Over the period of 2013-2016 Universities Australia delivered a comprehensive, multi-faceted strategy that sought to address the opportunities to increased participation in outbound mobility programs, improve policy settings and increase awareness of outbound mobility opportunities. The strategy, branded World Class, included activities and projects designed for specific target audiences. From direct marketing via online mechanisms, to policy workshops for the university and vocational education and training sector, each part of the strategy has been important in shaping the way in which outbound mobility programs are offered and promoted to students within government, institutions, industry and business.

Whilst this initiative was focused on outward bound mobility for undergraduate students, the program template could be reimaged to focus on inward bound students, centred around the personal narratives provided by current and past international students – with special emphasis on students who have studied in non-metropolitan areas.

QUESTION 8. ANY OTHER COMMENTS?

Universities Australia would welcome further consultation with the International Education Council on these issues.