

Organisation: Charles Sturt University

Question 1. How can government, institutions and communities better promote the valuable and unique experience of studying and living in regional Australia?

Australia has hundreds of regional communities. Each one is unique. Often when people talk about regional Australia, they have one type of community in mind – small, isolated and rural. While there are many communities like this in regional Australia, the majority of people living in regional Australia live in larger centres. The Regional Australia Institute identifies four groups of regional communities that capture both the diversity and the common challenges faced by regional Australians. -

<http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/what-is-regional-australia/> . Most Regional University cities fit within the ‘Regional Cities’ and ‘Connected Lifestyle Regions’ areas - <http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au/home/2015/09/foundations-of-regional-australia/>. These areas usually offer services comparable with our larger cities, but mostly at lower living costs.

Improved marketing strategies and investment are required to highlight the benefits of studying, working and living in regional Australia compared with metropolitan areas. Showcasing the positive experiences of international students studying in regional Australia can be an effective way of demonstrating the unique experience obtainable in regional Australia.

For students who do move to study in regional Australia, it is imperative the institution and the local community support them to ensure their experience is positive, so their experience can be promoted. Many, if not all regional universities put significant work and resources into supporting their international students. For example, , the 2018 NSW International Student of the Year 9 (higher education category), Ms Forough Ataollahi is a Charles Sturt University PhD student. Ms Ataollahi was recognised for her work as the inaugural Women’s Officer for the Council of International Students Australia, the national peak body for international students, and for helping refugees settle into her community in Wagga Wagga in southern NSW. More deliberate and targeted programs such as this are needed.

Government delegations and events profiling regional study experience should be used to promote the regional study experience. Often such delegations and events are city centric, focussing on visiting or showcasing the larger metropolitan providers. Regional providers often see little value in participating in such events as they feel ‘swamped’ by metropolitan providers.

Additionally, exploratory marketing in countries where ‘regional’ destinations might have more traction could be developed. This might include supporting agent familiarisation activities to regional locations within Australia. For example, students from major Asian cities are usually focused on a city destination, however, the emerging markets in Africa, the UAE and even the Philippines and Vietnam are more likely to have students interested in studying in the regions often choosing courses that have a practical application in their own countries. The regional universities are unlikely to have the resources to significantly invest in new markets to raise the profile of regional Australia as a major destination for international students from these markets; additional funding support would be required. This investment would, however, also help build the reputation of Australia in these countries as an international student destination in general. It would also help diversify the current international student source markets to future proof against increasing competition for international students in Asian university programs taught in English.

Question 2. What are the barriers to regional destinations and their education institutions hosting more international students?

The biggest barrier is lack of awareness of the educational opportunities available in regional Australia – international students are usually aware of Australia’s major cities and the Go8 universities, but most are unaware of the regional study option. Their choices are often influenced by existing international student communities. For potential students who are aware of the regional option, they may be hesitant to come and live in regional destinations which they may perceive as remote and isolated and with less cultural diversity. Improved marketing of regional locations is required to change this perception.

Limited casual /part-time employment opportunities in regional locations is often perceived to be a barrier, although this is highly dependent on the specific region, with some regional locations having strong opportunities for employment.

A lack of reliable and affordable public transport to and within regional locations can be a significant barrier for some locations. However, if demand grew, many providers of these services would expand services. This means the often lower fees cost or cost of living is not always seen as “worth it” when balanced against increased transport costs to reach the destination from initial landfall (usually a capitol city); in particular if students (or their partners) struggle to find and secure employment to cover their cost of living.

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?

There is likely little value for metropolitan institutions in encouraging students to study with regional universities under a partnership arrangement. Any proposal for “compulsory” time in regions for international students would be counter-productive, as it continues to profile regional universities as “second choice” and living in the regions as not an attractive choice. The solution rests in partnerships between regional universities and all levels of government for promotion and endorsement, as well as favourable policies that support regional institutions to promote study opportunities.

Partnerships could be explored in delivering study tours/short programs where part of the program involves a regional institution. This would be targeted at raising awareness of the regional study opportunity and the benefits of living regionally. Opportunities for workplace learning and associated subjects to be undertaken in regional areas could also be explored, although this would require strong local industry support.

Question 4. What are the best ways to communicate the benefits of spending time in regional Australia to prospective international students and their parents?

In addition to the strategies outlined above (e.g. dedicated government support for regionally focussed universities, dedicated agent familiarisation tours etc.), a showcase of regional study and campus life would be beneficial. Quite often the focus is on the similarities in course offerings with metropolitan universities, however, graduate employment outcomes at some regional universities is superior to some of their metropolitan counterparts. Content that profiles the positive student experiences (student ambassadors) of studying in the regions, as well as their integration in the local community, will also be helpful. It is our experience across all our campuses that when students transition to study in regional Australia (including finding suitable employment and accommodation and integration with the local community) they really appreciate and benefit from the experience. Utilising such students as

ambassadors for regional study in Australia, for example through alumni networks and participation in roadshows with Austrade in their home country, could be a very powerful method of directly communicating the benefits.

The change of Study NSW to Study Sydney did not assist with raising the profile of regional universities in NSW. Study NSW should be a better promotional tool with clear information on study options and the benefits of studying at a regional university.

Consideration should also be given as to whether the term 'regional' should be used in marketing – in some markets (for example China and India), the term regional can be associated with poverty and a lower quality of education. Promoting the broad range of options for higher education in Australia, and highlighting the unique benefits of studying in locations outside of the capital cities (including any incentives as listed under 7), is likely to be more effective than promoting regional options in isolation

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?

Desktop research on attractors (and detractors) to regional living and study locations for international students would help determine the best way to capitalise on this opportunity. While there is a strong interplay between tourism and education, it is likely that tourism benefits would flow from education in the regions, rather than education benefits flowing from tourism. As such, a focus on attracting longer-term visitors to the regions via higher education, will be a strong leverage point to grow the tourism experience associated with regions (visiting family members etc).

Formation of partnerships between education providers, community, tourism providers and industry to design and promote opportunities that are attractive to international students could be powerful. For example, providing integrated experiences that afford international students with regional cultural/tourism experiences along with work opportunities to complement their education would provide a strong value proposition for studying in the regions.

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)?

cost (sometimes by way of scholarships), better employment or migration opportunities are required to attract students. A new, innovative and effective approach to the recruitment of international students to regional Australia is required. There are several ways in which government support/policy could greatly enhance the attractiveness of regional universities for International students, including:

- Extend the permitted working hours of international students who study in regional Australia
 - o For example, the permitted working hours per fortnight could be increased from 40 hrs to 50 hrs if studying in a regional location.
- Extend Post Study Work (PSWR) rights of international students who study in regional Australia.
 - o For example, an international student studying at a regional location could receive an additional one or two years PSWR.

This could potentially also be used to incentivise commencing employment in regional Australia.

- o For example: An international student studying at a regional university AND subsequently

undertaking PSWR employment in a regional area could receive an additional two years PSWR. This could be increased further in areas of known skills shortages in the regions.

- Reduce duration requirement for PSWR in regional areas
 - o As noted above, extending PSWR if studying on a regional campus would bring significant economic and cultural value. While extending PSWR for regional international students would require an amendment to the current Visa or the introduction of a new 'Regional' Visa class which would come with additional administrative workload, the benefits would far outweigh the cost.
 - o For example, an international student enrolled through a regional university and who has predominantly completed a Bachelors/Masters/PhD offshore, independently or through an offshore partnership model, could be required to study full time in Australia (on shore at a regional campus) for 1 year to be eligible for PSWR. This would cater for not only online/offshore Bachelors/Masters students but also for the numerous PhD students based offshore with a partner institution. Providing some PSWR if they came onshore for one year would be extremely attractive and would enable Australia and the regions to benefit from a postgraduate/post-doctoral workforce, especially in areas of known skills shortages.
- Provide additional bonus points for graduates towards Australian residency for attending regional campuses, particularly for those studying in areas of regional skills shortages
 - o For example
 - a) an international student who completes their degree at a regional university could receive 'X' extra points towards residency; while
 - b) an international student who completes their degree at a regional university AND who subsequently undertakes PSWR employment in a regional area could receive 'Y' extra points towards residency; and
 - c) an international student who completes their degree at a regional university AND who subsequently enters full time employment in a recognised skill shortage area, in a regional town/city could receive 'Z' extra points towards residency.
- Provide designated employment opportunities, including internships, for international students in Government offices within the regions.
 - o For example, international students studying e.g. Accounting or Business at a campus in Albury could undertake an internship at the Australian Taxation Office in Albury, providing the student with workplace experience and a reference for potential future employers while diversifying the workplace.
- Provide scholarships to encourage international students to study in regional Australia.
 - o The most successful method of student recruitment is word-of-mouth, however, this needs to grow in regional Australia from a very low base. Investment in international student scholarships, for example, would be an initial step in significantly growing international student enrolments in regional Australia. Such scholarships could be targeted at fee, accommodation or transport costs.
- Expanding transport concessions, a state issue, to regional students
 - o International students studying in regional areas bear the additional cost of getting from port of entry to destination campus. Assistance in meeting those costs would make regional Australia a much more attractive destination; especially given the subsequent cheaper living costs in the regions. There is limited use of, for example, OPAL cards in regional Australia and travel concessions of any kind are always problematic. It is more likely that provision of a travel scholarship (per year of study) would be more easily managed and useful.
- Provide free (public) school for children of international students in regional areas
 - o While international PhD students in NSW currently have access to free schooling for their children, this is not available for students enrolled in Undergraduate, Honours or Masters level programs (<http://www.detinternational.nsw.edu.au/media-assets/trp/fees.pdf>). Many

international students at regional campuses chose the site for economic and family reasons as many are mature age students. Encouraging the children of international students to enrol in local schools would have the added benefit of bringing diverse perspectives to the School classroom while facilitating and enriching cultural development of regional Australia and providing a clear benefit to mature international students.

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?

Yes, we need to better understand the value and uniqueness of regional study for international students (based on past student experiences), and their motivations and expectations. This should go beyond simple surveys and use more sophisticated qualitative approaches. This research should extend to students in other international settings, such as Canada, where the government has recently introduced new policy measures aimed at increasing regional international student numbers.

Question 8. Any other comments?

Encouraging and facilitating international students to undertake their degree studies in regional Australia would provide significant advantages to all students, to the regional communities and to the regional universities, which extend far beyond economics and simplistic diversity statistics.

Regional Australia is an untapped resource for international education and innovative approaches must be undertaken to support growth in this market.

Attracting more international students to the regions has the potential to showcase Australia as leading the way in supporting regional sustainability and economic development while continuing to build Australia's brand as a world class higher education destination.