

Organisation: Deakin University

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

The Federal Government, through Austrade and Australia Education International, can take the lead in bringing federal, state and local government together with regional institutions in an effort to define a compelling value proposition for international students to select regional campuses. From there, both organisations have extensive networks, channels, on and offline marketing tools and events schedules through which regionally oriented market segments can be engaged.

Deakin's submission to the Federal government's 2016 consultation on the Strategy for International Education stressed the urgent need for a refresh of the flagship international education 'Future Unlimited' brand, and the related value proposition, and upscaling of the promotion of the brand. –

Deakin is concerned that the current Brand Australia and associated value proposition is not as compelling as it should be. An urgent overhaul is overdue. Along with this, Deakin would like to see government support and investment commensurate of a \$17 billion p.a. industry into positioning the brand in international markets.

The need for this work remains and is a necessary precondition for the creation of a strong 'regional education' sub-brand and activation program. With a new regional brand defined, Austrade should work with the institutions to identify a select range of target markets and develop concentrated campaigns where impact can be measured.

The stunning success of Australia's international education enterprise is based on attracting students to world-class universities in our major cities. This path will remain dominant and success in growing the regional cohort will be dependent on successfully identifying those cohorts more open to looking further afield, and then targeting them and addressing their specific needs.

The experience at Deakin, where international students at the Geelong campuses have more than doubled to approximately 3,000 in the last four years, is that the regional offering needs to be carefully defined in order to attract students who would otherwise either default to city campuses or not choose Australia at all. What this has meant for Deakin is indicative of the scope of the challenge when looking to grow the regional cohort. Initiatives to encourage students include: –

- offers of bursaries for price sensitive students from South Asia
- presentation of affordable accommodation options
- the offering of specific programs determined to be attractive to this cohort, and providing them exclusively at the Geelong campuses
- utilising agents that are well informed of the advantages of studying at regional campuses, without detracting from the core metropolitan offerings
- the establishment and maintenance of articulation pathways with international partners specific to the regional campuses
- connections to local industry and employers through their study programs and the Deakin Talent employment program

- connections to community and to local part-time jobs as well as work rights post graduation.

Building a program takes considerable perseverance and resources. Incentivisation from Federal Government can help institutions to build the momentum. Just as the Export Market Development Grant (EMDG) Scheme assisted the international education enterprise in its infancy, a program offering funds for marketing and recruitment projects for regional campuses would be of great assistance. It would also be an opportunity to keep institutions well aligned to Austrade's campaigns.

Early work in building a cohesive regional education brand nation-wide should be informed through researching the cohort of international students currently studying in regions, from both an economic participation and a social inclusion perspective. The results would provide a nation-wide map of international students and community profiles.

Regional differences in results would help national, state and local governments to understand and define the value propositions of their regions, develop and share best practice and benchmark industry performance against similar areas.

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

The most significant barrier to growing the international cohort in regional Australia is a lack of understanding: students who might be suited by the distinct regional offering are unaware of it, and regional host communities lack understanding of what international students can contribute and also what they need to thrive in smaller communities.

Bringing together students and community is difficult and is frustrated by entrenched misconceptions of international students. Over many years, Deakin University has worked with our local communities in Geelong and Warrnambool to bridge these misconceptions, and is active in connecting international students with those communities.

Governments have an important public advocacy role in better informing Australian communities, including employers, about who international students are, their diversity, their ambitions and motivations, and the economic and social benefits they confer.

Students choosing regional destinations are often cost sensitive and attracted by the lower cost of living in the regions. For these students, an extension of the part-time work allowance from the current 20 hours per week to 30-hours per week would be a significant attractor.

The expectation of international students and their families that they will have access to good jobs in Australian and global labour markets upon graduation sits at the core of the Australian international higher education value proposition. Failure to deliver on this and the promise of the post study work rights regime will feed directly back to source markets and slow growth of the international student program. This is relevant to all states and regions.

Deakin University has the employability challenge as a high strategic priority and is investing significantly in solutions. Government has an important role to play in developing settings where international students have better access to internships and in ensuring that industry in Australia and beyond is better informed as to the availability of students and the knowledge, skills and experience that they offer.

Access to affordable accommodation and part-time work opportunities are critical to attracting international students to the regions. International students would benefit from amendment of National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) regulations. NRAS currently requires premises receiving funding from the scheme to be made available to low SES domestic students first, meaning an international student can only access this accommodation if there is a vacancy a domestic student has not taken up. To stimulate international demand at regional campuses, it would be beneficial and equitable to remove this stipulation.

Beyond that, government grants to promote and enable development of student accommodation at or near regional campuses would be welcome. Although private sector developers are building student accommodation at scale in capital cities, they are not doing so in regional areas due to less commercially attractive rentals. This leaves universities operating in regional areas with no option but to self-fund student accommodation developments, balanced with other investment priorities.

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?

Product segmentation between city and regional campuses where a number of programs are only offered at the regional campuses has proven effective for Deakin University in growing cohorts of engineers (Geelong Warrnambool Campus) and architects (Geelong Waterfront Campus). A similar project involving agri-business at Warrnambool is showing some promise at an early stage. In each of these cases much work is done to ensure the programs are linked to local communities and offer unique opportunities including work placements.

Deakin University also leverages its international institutional partnership network into offerings unique to the regional campuses. Examples include tailoring an offering at the Warrnambool Campus for nurses progressing from pathways with Sri Lankan and Vietnamese partners, and for environmental science programs to Geelong Warrnambool Campus for students progressing from a Chinese partner.

Deakin has had success in offering intensive short course programs at the Warrnambool Campus that attract international students from metropolitan campuses and students directly from the major European, North American and North East Asian short course markets.

For smaller regional providers operating at a lower scale than city based campuses the range of courses, majors and electives are often limited. This problem of choice could be somewhat alleviated by extending the amount of a program that can be taken online for international students at regional campuses from the current 33 per cent to 40 per cent.

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

There is a great story to tell prospective international students and their students and advisors (agents being key) about the attractions of regional campuses. However, with the market firmly fixed on an Australian proposition known for world-class offerings at major urban capitals, getting the regional message out remains a great challenge.

In terms of content, the success stories of alumni (career success) and current students (on a clear career path and well integrated into local communities) are most powerful. Investment is now needed to develop the regional sub-brand under the 'Future Unlimited' or its successor brand, and an action plan to take the proposition to select markets, complimenting with and giving rise to what the regional providers do themselves.

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?

Building the link between international education and tourism should be a priority, starting with sharing research, aligning projects and creating working groups to achieve joint goals.

For example, Study Geelong (members include providers higher education, VET and school providers, as well as Tourism Greater Geelong and the Bellarine) have undertaken the REMPLAN research study into economic impact and jobs creation in the region, and received State Government funding for a local Visiting Family and Friends (VFF) promotional initiative.

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)?

Setting up differential fees for the same course between city and regional areas runs the risk of damaging the brand value of regional courses, but providing enabling bursaries and merit based scholarships has been very productive for Deakin University.

A government scholarship scheme for study at regional campuses would compliment the preferential pricing strategies offered by institutions and be a powerful vehicle for the promotion of the regional offering.

Given the critical importance of accommodation, the policy change to amend the NRAS scheme as suggested above, or some form of government support in providing affordable, good quality accommodation is critical to encouraging students to regional campuses.

Government migration policy settings have long been a driver for attracting students to Australia and further preferencing regionally based international students in the migration program would be attractive. There are two programs that would make a positive difference for international students:

1. Post study work rights:

An additional 12 months post study work rights if a student has completed a qualification (lived and studied) in a regional area. An additional 12 months post study work rights (total three years) means students will qualify for an additional five points for 'skilled employment' experience. Employers will benefit from longer job security for employees. Communities will benefit from applicants and their families remaining in the regions for longer periods of time.

2. Skilled migration permanent/temporary visas:

Increasing the value of the five regional bonus point to 10 points if the applicant has a higher demonstrated English capacity. Applicants with experience living in regional communities

who have specific skills to support communities and new migrants/visitors to the regions. Priority visa processing for applicants who have completed a qualification (lived and studied) in a regional area. Prioritising regional applicants will lead to an increase in visa grants, offering the regions faster skilled employment solutions. More student success stories will lead to greater interest in study in the regions.

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?

Collecting information about student experience (both positive and negative) is essential in order to address the key issues facing international students and forming a deeper understanding of their study, work and life preferences and how these may be addressed in the regional setting. It will also inform how the regional value proposition is promoted through the multitude of channels that prospective students rely on in their search and validation process when considering studying abroad.

Question 8. Any other comments?

Deakin University Recommendations:

1. Direct Austrade and Australia Education International to take the lead in bringing federal, state and local government together with the regional institutions to conduct market research and define a compelling value proposition for international students to choose a regional destination.
2. Direct Austrade to complete a comprehensive refresh of the 'Future Unlimited' brand including the development of a compelling regional sub-brand.
3. Establish a market development fund against which institutions can make submissions for marketing and recruitment projects that are specific to growing the international cohort at regional campuses.
4. Develop a public advocacy program aimed at informing Australian communities, including employers, about who international students are, their diversity, their ambitions and motivations, and the economic and social benefits they confer.
5. Amend the National Rental Affordability Scheme (NRAS) regulations to incentivise investment in and ensure regionally-located students have access to quality and affordable accommodation.
6. Extend the part-time work allowance for international students from the current 20 hours per week to 30 hours per week for students at regional campuses.
7. Extend to 40 per cent the proportion of a program that can be taken online for international students at regional campuses.
8. Develop a national scholarship scheme for study at regional campuses as part of the regional international education brand program.
9. Provide an additional 12 months post study work rights if a student has completed a qualification (lived and studied) in a regional area.
10. Increase the value of the five regional bonus points to 10 points if the applicant has demonstrated a higher English capacity.
11. Provide priority visa processing for applicants who have completed a qualification (lived and studied) in a regional area.