

Organisation: Griffith University

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

Before responding to the specific questions raised in the Consultation Paper: Growing International Education in Regional Australia, we wish to address the definition of ‘regional’ for the purposes of this paper. The paper proposes attraction of international students to locations other than Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane and we consider it misguided to include Brisbane in this list, given that it accounts for under 11% of international student visa holders nationally, compared with almost 36% and 32% respectively for Sydney and Melbourne (over two thirds of international student visa holders combined) – a very substantial differential.

In addition, Nous, in its October 2018 paper for Trade and Investment Queensland, State of the Industry – International Education and Training, makes clear that growth in New South Wales and Victoria continues at a high rate which, based on scale, means their growth in numbers outstrips all others, and that Queensland, despite some growth, has a declining relative market share as a result.

We argue strongly that, for the purposes of this consultation paper, everywhere other than Sydney and Melbourne, the dominant destinations for international student visa holders, should be considered ‘regional’, including Brisbane and the Gold Coast where Griffith University has campuses.

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

Griffith is located in regions that are already investing significantly in education destination marketing, ranging from strategic planning and branding through to selected market activities and enhancing the student experience. These are being undertaken with support from the relevant city councils and local and state tourism bodies, in collaboration with state government through Study Queensland. What is lacking is a serious investment and coordinated national approach to promoting Australia, inclusive of all of its regions and institutions, as an education destination. It is easy to focus efforts on high brand awareness cities and institutions, and moving beyond this will require significant commitment and investment. There is a need to build awareness of all study destinations that make up Destination Australia and ensure that agents and other key channel partners, as well as prospective students, have an informed understanding of the benefits and advantages of studying in all parts of Australia.

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

Barriers to students choosing destinations other than Sydney and Melbourne may include:

- City/location brand awareness, i.e. student recognition of the city name, which accounts in part for the dominance of Sydney and Melbourne, both of which are highly recognised Australian cities internationally;
- Infrastructure, ranging from airport access and direct flights, accommodation, and public transport to access to a range of appropriate food, social and worship facilities;
- Campus life and a sense of vibrancy and activity on campus, which are particularly

important for students who have left their social and family networks to study in Australia;

- Perceived job opportunities, both during study and post-study;
- Incentives for choosing a regional location, e.g. migration opportunities;
- Strong diaspora communities in certain locations e.g. the large Indian community resident in Melbourne;
- Regional education providers tend to be smaller and have more limited capacity to host larger numbers of international students, especially if being mindful of the integration between domestic and international students and the mix thereof.

The barriers are many and complex. Therefore, the development of strategies must involve local government, tourism and destination marketing organisations – e.g. Study Gold Coast and Study Brisbane - together with education providers and other related organisations that make up the broader international education sector.

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?

This is extremely challenging in a constrained funding environment, with all public higher education institutions increasingly reliant on international student income to offset reduced government funding, and all competing for a slice of the same pie. Institutions which have both metropolitan and regional campuses, e.g. Deakin University, may be well placed to work on strategies to mobilise international students between their campuses, but there is no real incentive for other institutions to do so. However, a number of Australian universities are multi-campus, including Griffith which has a footprint in both the Gold Coast and Brisbane, with growing demand from international students to study at the Gold Coast campus. Internships and work integrated learning opportunities could be used to encourage students to spend time in a regional Australia destination, even if their primary place of study is a metropolitan area.

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

An example of this is the work of Study Gold Coast in collaboration with its institutional stakeholders, of which Griffith is one, to promote the destination as a place for study, lifestyle and post-study employability. Study Gold Coast is deliberately reaching out to local industry as part of an employability strategy to promote the benefits of international students to the local workforce, while also providing student-focussed activities and services such as the Student Hub and Gold Coast Student Ambassadors program. These are then used to promote the Gold Coast as an education destination to international education agents, students and schools in selected markets, as well as highlighting the significance and contribution of international education to the broader host community.

The paper addresses the opportunities for regional institutions to attract higher degree research (e.g. PhD) students, citing that 12% of international student visa holders in the regions were postgraduate research students, versus 6% in metropolitan institutions. This is a significant opportunity as research students are primarily attracted by potential supervisors and research expertise, rather than the location or even the institution itself. Recruitment of higher degree research students is dependent on the capacity of the research group and/or supervisor to take on more students, with many requiring a 1:1 staff:student ratio.

The paper also talks about some of the unique discipline strengths in the regions, such as agriculture, marine science and tropical medicine. Unfortunately, these are not disciplines that attract large numbers of international students or self-funded students and are unlikely to have much impact on shifting the huge discrepancy in numbers. If students are to be drawn to the regions, it will need to involve disciplines in high demand which, for higher education, includes business, engineering, IT and health (e.g. nursing).

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?

This can work for regional cities with a strong tourism economy, such as Gold Coast and Cairns. For example, Study Gold Coast is actively building on the city's reputation as an attractive tourism destination, but working to expand the city's brand and highlight the capabilities of its education sector. Similar activities in a range of places across the broader state of Queensland, supported by the state's International Education & Training strategy, which has a goal ensuring that regions across the wider state benefit from international education and a commitment to working with tourism counterparts. There are also a number of edutourism providers who directly benefit from the strong tourism brand awareness that the state enjoys, as do many English language providers. However, regional centres with little or no international tourism positioning or awareness, which is the majority, are unlikely to be able to build their education numbers on this basis.

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)?

There is a very complex interplay among factors such as tuition fees, scholarships, cost of living, institutional reputation, student experience etc. We are already experiencing a concerning race to the bottom in the international education sector, with discounting, scholarships that are essentially discounts (with no merit basis or transparency regarding their award), inflated agent commission payments and incentives, and other strategies that effectively devalue the Australian international education brand, as well as negatively impacting revenue even if they drive up numbers. Such activities are not unexpected in an increasingly and aggressively competitive environment. The most influential lever in relation to regional Australia is migration incentives and this is one within the government's control and has the potential to attract selected groups of students who are looking for migration pathways. Obviously the implementation of such policy changes would need to be considered within a broader immigration framework.

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 would undoubtedly be a benefit from additional market research and consideration of existing data regarding student choices and drivers for study outside Sydney and Melbourne, to inform marketing strategies and messaging.

Question 8. Any other comments?