

Organisation: Regional Universities Network

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

Better promotion of the valuable and unique experience of studying and living in regional Australia for international students could be achieved through better policy settings, including incorporating relevant initiatives in the new National Regional, Rural and Remote Higher Education Strategy, city and regional deals, and in the promotion of case studies of international students' regional experience.

To facilitate greater interest in studying in the regions, messages should be communicated to prospective students and their families about the advantages of studying at regional campuses. These include: that international students studying in the regions have high levels of satisfaction with their learning experience; exposure to the attractions of an authentic Australian regional lifestyle; a lower cost of living, less congestion and smaller campuses and class sizes than in major cities; a friendly and supportive environment which gives more opportunity to network with domestic students, lecturers and local communities to build English, career and life skills; practical degrees; regional work experience in partnership with regional industry; flexible mode of study; good quality of life; high quality teaching; excellent research in key areas of strength, including agriculture, health science, environmental science, digital health and marine science etc.; a conducive environment for study; and speciality courses.

Regional universities provide a rich lived experience for international students, with opportunities for close connections with Australian people and communities, as well as high quality education. Government can do more to promote this message. One-off campaigns, such as the #gobeyond initiative developed earlier this year by Austrade in partnership with states and territories, are welcome but what is needed is an ongoing strategic approach. Austrade should be funded to deliver an "always on" campaign that promotes destinations outside the major cities as destinations of educational excellence and authentic Australian experience. There needs to be improved representation of all that Australia has to offer on the Study in Australia website and in other promotional activities. Greater use of digital marketing forums and social media should be considered. The new "nation brand" that is being rolled out in 2019 could provide a suitable vehicle.

Promotional strategies should be developed and delivered in partnership with universities, state and territory governments, local business and industry groups and civic authorities, to achieve common understanding of the importance of international education to regional economies and ensure that international students are welcomed and supported as members of local communities.

Government could promote place-based destinations. International education should be part of City Deals – eg the Darwin City Deal includes funding for a city campus of Charles Darwin University, which will be attractive to international students, and future city and regional deals will provide new opportunities.

Promotion needs to be targeted to the specific value that particular regional universities offer and the types of students they attract. Personal stories and word of mouth are important.

There is already much valuable content developed by the ABC in conjunction with Study NSW and Study Queensland which shows international students in regional communities. This could be shared more widely and other content developed. The use of digital influencers and social media should also be considered. Funding could be provided to regional universities for participation in offshore campaigns, for visits by influencers from targeted markets and to build community, government and institutional connections.

The source countries for regional universities are varied and while student numbers from some countries might be small, they are still of value to the university and the regional economy. Growth in student numbers in the regions is needed but it should be sustainable, and it is an issue of value over volume. A significant number of universities have both metropolitan and regional campuses.

More data is needed on markets within source countries to support targeted promotion. While students from very large cities such as Beijing or Mumbai may not be attracted to studying in small Australian cities, students from 3rd or 4th tier cities in China and India may be more amenable to doing this.

Government could provide and promote incentives for international students to study in regional destinations including priority for visa processing, advantageous post study work rights, advantageous permanent residency points (e.g. an increase from the current 5 to 10-15), scholarships, transport concessions, assistance with housing and medical costs, and assistance with settling in.

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

A significant barrier to international students wishing to study at regional campuses is the mindset and cultural understanding of “regions” and “cities”. In many developing countries, such as China, India and Nepal, “region” = “countryside” = “poorly developed”. It is important to promote the message that the educational experience at regional campuses is as good academically as in city universities with the added benefits of the rich lived experience in regional destinations. The word “destination” rather than “regional” should be used.

There is a perception that there are limited employment opportunities in regional centres. This varies widely between labour markets. In many instances, students can access jobs in the regions that are linked to their areas of study and are highly relevant to their future careers. Partners of students may have difficulty in finding work in some regions.

Government support for a partnership approach between universities, local and state/territory governments and local business groups – e.g. through study clusters and city deals – would potentially help address employment issues.

The capacity of the local infrastructure in some regional towns to accommodate a large cohort of overseas students is another potential barrier. In some instances, funding is needed to provide modern accommodation suitable for self-catering, with en-suite facilities. Again, this could be provided as part of regional or city deals (as per the Darwin City deal), or on a one-off basis.

The lower fees at regional universities are a cost advantage. However, it can mean that the

commission paid to recruitment agents is lower – it is in the agent’s interest to promote higher fee paying courses to students so as to receive a higher commission payment. The setting of commissions is a matter for individual universities. However, this could be ameliorated by providing other incentives for study in a regional campus: quicker, easier and lower cost visa processing, scholarships and other financial assistance to help with living costs, particularly in areas where employment opportunities are less. If studying in a regional campus is packaged in this way, it becomes more attractive and easier to sell.

Other potential barriers include the level of understanding and awareness of regional destinations in offshore markets, transport in small towns, and provision of support services.

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?

Partnerships between metropolitan and regional universities to create regional study opportunities for international students could include: dual degrees; joint programs offered at reduced prices; students undertaking some units at regional campuses; access to work placements or internships with regional companies/organisations/local government including in agriculture, regional health, education etc; provision of scholarships and higher degree by research grants to students studying in regional campuses; free schooling for the children of international students; joint study tours and research projects; development of a strong entrepreneurship and innovation ecosystem in regional study centres.

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 most effective ways to communicate with prospective students and their parents are by using digital campaigning, social media and key influencers, as well as support for offshore tours and visits by key stakeholders from relevant markets.

Personal stories are very powerful and can help overcome any concerns potential students or their parents might have about study at a regional university. These could be the stories of current students and alumni, including those who have stayed on in Australia and those who have returned home.

Government could more actively work with education agents to promote the excellence of education at regional universities and the benefits of living in regional destinations – including quality of education, quality of life, raising a family in a safe and healthy environment, opportunities to settle in regional areas and develop a career.

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?

Governments, institution and communities need to recognise the importance of welcoming international students and tourists to their communities, and the economic, social and cultural value of education and tourism. In this context, a more joined-up and place-based approach to international education is needed in the regions. Integration of international student policy with tourism and regional development is needed.

Greater effort should be made to promote Australia as an education destination, as well as a tourist destination. Austrade should be funded to do this.

There are opportunities to promote study in Australia to people who are already in regional destinations on tourist or working holiday visas, or are studying English or participating on a Study Abroad program.

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)?

Price and quality are important factors for students and parents when making choices about universities and study programs. Parents in particular need to feel they will get a good return on their investment. RUN universities charge lower fees on average than other Australian universities (22% lower for Bachelor and Masters by coursework degrees). When added to the lower cost of living in many regional destinations, this makes study at a regional university very good value.

Perceptions that lower cost means lower quality and that employment can be more difficult to find outside the big cities also affect these choices. It could be useful to analyse full costs, perhaps on a case study basis: identify living costs + fees, and the amount of money that an international student would need to earn from part-time work to live comfortably, for regional campuses and metropolitan campuses. The results could be persuasive.

Options to encourage more international students to study at regional campuses include:

- scholarships to cover the cost of tuition and/or accommodation;
- priority processing of student visas for students wishing to study at regional campuses;
- migration incentives for people to work in regional Australia and for graduates from regional universities to achieve a permanent migration outcome (increasing points for permanent residency for those who study in a regional location from 5 to 10-15);
- better promotion to education agents, including through regional university tours;
- tax deductions for tuition fees paid for study at a regional campus;
- lower fees at regional campuses for particular courses (some universities already offer this);
- promotion of dual degrees with overseas universities;
- Study Abroad options for students at overseas universities with part of the course undertaken at a regional campus of an Australian university.

In considering how it might implement measures to encourage more international students to study at regional universities, such as migration incentives, Government should give consideration to the different circumstances of different regions. For example, the situation of a university in Adelaide or Hobart is very different from one in Lismore, Ballarat or Rockhampton. A more refined definition of regionality may be required to determine best use of resources. It may be appropriate to consider a tiered approach that considers factors such as degree of remoteness. Reviewing the postcodes defined as regional would be useful. Ongoing commitment is needed to regional universities in Government policy settings to facilitate the growth of regional campuses, including via the new National Rural and Regional Higher Education Strategy.

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?

Better data would be useful in a number of areas:

- identifying the cities or regions within source countries that international students in regional universities come from to assist with targeted promotions;
- identifying post-study outcomes for international students in regional universities and regional campuses. A survey of participants in post-study work rights could be conducted;
- a survey of alumni, including those returned and those living in Australia;
- information on migration outcomes for international graduates from regional universities.

Question 8. Any other comments?