

Organisation: University of New England

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

It is essential that government unambiguously set a clear policy agenda for International student growth in the regions. Regionally located institutions do their best to promote the regional experience they provide to students. However, it is not easy to cut through the general lack of awareness of regional Australia and to correct the stereotypical “outback” perception of the regions. Government could assist in better promoting not just the tourism aspects of the regions but also the education prospects and capacity as well.

It is essential that institutions make it clear to our international partners that there is no disadvantage in living in regional areas in Australia. In fact, there are many benefits in living in regional cities like Armidale, where they have good access to school education, medical care, music and arts, and national parks. Regional centres are often easily accessible to major cities, for instance flights between Armidale and Sydney are very frequent and only take 50 minutes.

Closely aligned to this is the need to educate regional communities about the value of international education to regional Australia in terms of direct economic benefits as well as the sociocultural opportunities it presents.

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

The most obvious barrier to regional destinations and institutions hosting more international students is the lack of awareness of regional Australia both domestically and internationally. Confusion over the definition of “regional” in Australia, and overseas, means that it is very hard for study and lifestyle opportunities to be articulated. Similarly, the perception that regional equates to lesser quality institutions, is misleading. Public information which shows the benefits of regional universities, such as the QILT survey data needs to be better targeted for international students. A concerted effort must be made by our governments, agencies and universities to clarify that there is little country-city divide in Australia. The educational experience will be the same that they expect from any other institution in a large city.

The second barrier is availability of part-time jobs and other employment opportunities in regional centres. This is particularly important for Higher Degree by Research students who often come to Australia with their partners. Related to this is the lack of part-time and long-term post-graduation employment in regional Australia. Any strategy which aims to attract international students to regional areas must include support for the enhancement of regional employment prospects.

The third barrier is the choice of on-campus accommodation. For many regional universities, reconfiguring residential colleges to make them more attractive to international students is an urgent strategic challenge which is difficult to address on an already constrained funding base.

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?

In the first instance, regional universities need to be seen as valuable in their own right, and should not need to rely on metropolitan institutions for a share of their international students. However, there are areas in which cross-institutional arrangements would be beneficial for the international student experience, such as agriculture, public health studies, environmental sciences and education.

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 need to have a broader marketing campaign that educates potential international students what regional Australia is, what it really looks like (not stereotypes) and articulates the benefits of studying in a region. Individual universities promote their own offerings and experiences but we need something overarching that is above the level of individual promotion only. It may be that in collaboration with government we can offer “taster/try before you buy” experiences for potential students/parents to experience the region, regional community and regional university as a combined experience. Prior to any marketing, all stakeholders will need to define what the “package” is that we are promoting. Employment is such an important aspect to attracting international students. It should be emphasised that regional areas retain the quintessential Australian hospitality combined with pristine nature, lower costs of living, and greater opportunities to mingle with Australians in a welcoming and safe environment.

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 could be addressed by developing a multi-agency strategy that can benefit regional locations, both in terms of tourism and education. It is essential that these things are not done in isolation. Austrade and the Education Offices in Embassies overseas could hold specific events that focus on regional universities. Furthermore, a well targeted mapping of regional tourism will be of great value for RUN universities to attract more international students.

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)?

Regional universities already provide (on average) a more affordable learning and living experience than metropolitan institutions and for some markets this is helpful. For others, where price is seen as a quality indicator, this way of promotion may not be the best option but may reinforce the perception that regional equals lesser quality. A fee structure that supports price and quality sensitive markets would be most helpful.

Education agents play a valuable role in promoting a regional destination. From UNE’s experience, when we have actively engaged with an agent and invested in them as promoters of UNE and the unique experience we offer, the agent becomes a champion of regional destinations. However, for many agents, it is far easier to promote well known city study destinations. Regional institutions can often not afford to compete with the commission

incentives that many larger institutions offer.

UNE would welcome a review of current immigration strategies that provided a reasonable incentive to further attract international students to regional Australia. However, it must be a well thought out strategy that is reasonable and considers regional infrastructure capacity and does not become the sole reason for students selecting to come to the regions. The “regional points” strategy would have to be reconciled with institutional obligations to recruit international students who meet Genuine Temporary Entrant (GTE) requirements. Regional universities want to attract students who are a good fit for their institution and community environment, not just because we are a good immigration outcome for individual students. It is essential that any migration incentive scheme look at the availability of employment in regional destinations. It is already difficult to attract some international students to the regions because there is often very limited part-time employment available. Linking jobs to students is not a core business of universities and often there are not many jobs and these are being sought by locals as well. Additionally, if we want sustainable growth in our regional areas, we have to provide internships for students while they study and have jobs available in the area when they graduate as incentives to stay 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?

It is well documented that regionally located universities provide a more positive overall experience for international student compared with metropolitan universities. For example, the long running International Student Barometer (ISB survey) clearly shows that regional universities are better at providing students with a positive well-rounded Australian living and learning experience. Before further work is commissioned in this space, a thorough assessment should be made of what is already on offer.

Question 8. Any other comments?

Introduction to the University of New England

Located in Armidale, in the heart of northern inland New South Wales, the University of New England (UNE) was the first Australian university established outside a capital city. With a history extending back to the 1920s, UNE has a well-earned reputation as one of Australia's leading universities.

Through its pioneering role in the provision of distance education, UNE has contributed to the nation's development over more than half a century — while enhancing the lives of thousands of people who would otherwise have been unable to pursue university studies. Today, UNE is extending its reach through the adoption of the latest technologies, and is recognised as an innovator in flexible online education.

Feedback on the Consultation Paper: Growing International Education in Regional Australia

The University of New England (UNE) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Department of Education’s (herein referred to as the Department) Consultation Paper: Growing International Education in Regional Australia. We would like to point out that the

definition of Regional Australia adopted by the authors of the paper, being those areas other than Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, is too broad and non-specific. Consideration should be given to further refining this in terms of population and services. True regional areas have a population of 300,000 or less, and are often characterised by having smaller scale public transport, health services, infrastructure, and constrained employment markets.