International mobility of Australian university students

An annual survey of Australian universities found that students from 37 universities undertook 49,263 international study experiences in 2017 (Table 1). This was an 11.8% increase on the experiences reported by 35 universities in 2016. Around 60% of experiences were undertaken by domestic undergraduates, 11% by international undergraduates and remainder by postgraduates. The 29,428 international experiences undertaken by domestic undergraduates represented 22.4% of the 2017 graduating cohort. The equivalent figure for US undergraduates in 2016-17 was 16%.

Faculty-led study (26%) and student exchange programs (25%) were the most popular types of study experiences among undergraduates in 2017. Postgraduate research students most often travelled for research-related experiences (60%) followed by conferences or international competitions (37%) in 2017. Over half (58%) of study abroad experiences among all study levels were for non-compulsory academic credit. Almost three quarters (74.6%) of experiences were less than a semester, the remainder being exchange and other semester or longer programs. The majority of experiences for postgraduate coursework (87.4%) and research (92.1%) students were for less than a semester (Figure 1).

In 2017, over one third of all experiences (39.1%) were in the top five destination countries (China, USA, UK, Italy and Japan) (Table 2). Students in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields were more likely to study abroad (21% of all experiences) than students in other fields. Twenty-three universities reported 12 per cent of international experiences were undertaken by students from regional or remote areas. In 2017, 7,441 university students were funded to travel overseas under the New Colombo Plan, an increase of 36 per cent on 2016. The top destination was China. Nearly half of undergraduate domestic students (13,499) had experiences in Indo-Pacific countries. The top 5 Indo-Pacific destinations were China (17.4% of total), Japan (10.6%), India (9.5%), Indonesia (8.7%) and Cambodia (6.3%).

Australia’s Higher Education Statistics Collection shows there were 5,622 Australian students enrolled in offshore Australian higher education campuses in 2017, slightly less than in 2016 (5,685). It is likely that these students are also counted within the survey of Australian university students described above. The latest UNESCO data show 12,713 Australian students enrolled in tertiary courses in other countries in 2017. This is a slight (0.5%) decline since 2016. This statistic only count Australian students enrolled in a course of more than 2 years’ duration in another country. It is assumed that these students represent an additional cohort of Australians studying towards full qualifications in foreign institutions and who are hence not counted in the survey described above.

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1 'The ‘Learning Abroad 2017’ (2019) Australian Universities International Directors’ Forum (AUIDF) report by (unpublished). Data for earlier years were drawn from previous iterations of the AUIDF Research Agenda reports.
3 Information on New Colombo Plan Indo-Pacific host locations is available at: http://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan/about/Pages/about.aspx
4 UNESCO data used in this research snapshot is from http://data.uis.unesco.org/.
6 For further information about this research, Snapshot Series contact the International Research and Analysis Unit by email: @Research@education.gov.au.