

## University of Sydney submission to the Council of International Education's Consultation Paper: Growing International Education in Regional Australia, December 2018

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**Consultation paper:** <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/News/Latest-News/Pages/Growing-International-Education-in-Regional-Australia.aspx>

**Submissions:** <https://www.education.gov.au/submissions-growing-international-education-regional-australia>

### Responses to consultation questions

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

Governments, education providers and regional communities can better promote the valuable and unique experiences of studying and living in regional Australia by working together more effectively and strategically to market the special strengths of regional education providers and communities to those international student cohorts most likely to be attracted by their offerings.

The Federal Government's [National Strategy for International Education 2025](#) includes promoting opportunities in regional Australia as a priority action under its **Goal 9: Embracing opportunities to grow international education**, which states: *"We will promote the positive benefits to the student and the wider community of education in regional Australia. We will also promote excellence in regional disciplines to attract international students and researchers. Australia will: attract more international students to regional communities by promoting internationally the excellence and the advantages of education, training and research in regional Australia."*<sup>1</sup>

Most State and Territory governments also have international education strategies in place that include dedicated efforts to promote opportunities in regional Australia. [StudyNSW](#) performs this role in NSW in consultation with education providers and other stakeholders. Another important element underpinning the success of international education in metropolitan areas is the keen interest and support offered by some local councils. In Sydney for example, the City of Sydney Council has built on previous initiatives recently by investing significant time and resources to develop a comprehensive new [International Education Action Plan](#) in consultation with education providers, local businesses and community representatives. We commend the City of Sydney's approach and the resulting evidence-based plan and suite of actions that are now being rolled out, focused around the themes of welcoming, wellbeing and work-integrated learning. The research and stakeholder-based approaches taken by the City of Sydney Council and others could potentially serve as guides for local councils in regional areas to follow.

We agree with the Federal Minister for Education, the Council for International Education and the various Federal, State and Territory government international education strategies – that regional communities have much to offer international students. The objective, however, must be to grow international education in regional areas over the long-term, but not at the expense of sustainable future growth in international student numbers in metropolitan areas due to the cultural, social and employment benefits that flow to Australia's cities and the economy more broadly from international education. Here we note Australia's international education exports directly accounted for 1¾ percent of GDP, and ¼ppt of GDP *growth*, in 2017, with substantial flow-on economic effects including education-related building construction and student-related demand for goods, housing and services. We are confident this outcome (sustainable future growth for both regional and metropolitan international education) can be achieved through better marketing and coordination between levels of government, education providers, businesses and communities.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Government, *National Strategy for International Education 2025*, p.30

<sup>2</sup> Macquarie Research, *Economics Brief, Oz Population Growth*, March 2018, p.3

The Federal Government has an important leadership role to play by investing strategically to support the achievement of the National Strategy's Goal 9. It could, for example, make funding available on a competitive basis to help local regional councils (or groups of councils) develop and implement international action plans tailored to the strengths and needs of their regions. It could provide funding support for regional education providers and councils to invest in staff professional development opportunities relevant to international education. It could also invest seed funding to provide further incentives for regional and metropolitan universities to collaborate with each other to develop mutually beneficial strategies to grow international education in regional areas.

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

Informed by our own research and experience as a significant international education provider, key barriers to regional destinations and educations include:

- limited awareness among some prospective international students and their families about the availability, value and benefits of studying regionally in Australia;
- a preference among some prospective students to study and live in major metropolitan areas, as this is their lived experience in their home countries;
- the generally lower profiles, international rankings and reputation of regional universities;
- perceptions of limited accommodation and employment opportunities in regional areas;
- concerns about transport issues to regional areas and the limited availability of public transport in some regional areas necessitating transport by car and all that entails; and
- perceptions of some cohorts of international students that regional communities may not be welcoming of international students, with limited first language, community and cultural support available compared to metropolitan centres.

The Federal Government could greatly assist the development of international education strategies in both regional and metropolitan areas by supporting the ongoing production of high-quality market research that provides robust evidence about the key factors and trends influencing the study choices and graduation outcomes of different international student groups. The Council for International Education could lead the development of such research in consultation with key stakeholder groups like the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA).

## **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?**

There is significant potential for metropolitan and regional universities and other education providers to work together to create regional study opportunities for international students that benefit students (both domestic and international), communities (both regional and metropolitan) and education providers (both in the city and country). Excellent examples of such collaborations will already exist in Australia and internationally. Identifying these collaborative success stories and understanding why they have flourished should be a first step towards identifying the barriers and opportunities to achieving more in this area.

The University of Sydney would be very keen to be part of a discussion with the Council for International Education and other providers that explores creative opportunities for the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships between metropolitan and regional universities and other education providers. For example, metropolitan universities could enter into joint programs with regional universities whereby international students complete a share of their programs enrolled with a regional university.

Alternatively, regional and metropolitan universities, schools and vocational education providers could enter into formal 'pathway' arrangements, whereby international students who successfully complete an award with a regional provider gain guaranteed access to a program with the metropolitan partner institution. The same arrangement could work in reverse, with international students completing a first award in a metropolitan area, but with a clear pathway into a higher award offered by a regional provider. These are just some of the models that could be worth exploring further. There will be many others, including a wide range of options for expanding opportunities for international students to undertake work-integrated learning, social, cultural, tourism, sporting and other activities in regional areas that enhance their experiences while in Australia and deliver benefits for regional communities. See for example our comments under question six below regarding the potential to increase significantly the numbers of international health students who spend quality time in regional areas while completing compulsory clinical placements.

Australian universities are highly competitive and especially so in the area of international education where the market is relatively deregulated. The Federal Government has previously provided funding to support the development of [Collaborative Research Networks](#) to support mutually beneficial partnerships between universities in regional and metropolitan areas. The Federal Government could similarly help stimulate novel international education collaborations between regional and metropolitan universities, or networks of such universities by providing funding incentives to encourage cooperation.

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

See our response to question 1. The challenge is essentially one of marketing and coordination. The Federal Government is ideally placed to lead and support the development and implementation of a clear, long-term strategy to grow international education in both metropolitan and regional Australia sustainably. Austrade can work better with State international education departments bodies like StudyNSW and with local councils to better market the particular strengths and specialisations of regional universities, including their very important local linkages to their communities and surrounding industries.

The Government has a sound strategy clearly articulated through its [National Strategy for International Education 2025](#). The establishment of the Council for International Education, chaired by the Minister for Education and comprising the Ministers for Foreign Affairs; Trade, Tourism and Investment; Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs; Small and Family Business, Skills and Vocational Education; and Industry, Science and Technology has been a very positive development in terms of supporting a holistic, whole-of-government approach to international education.

A key missing element, however, is adequate funding for the Council for International Education and other bodies to support implementation of the various initiatives needed if the National Strategy's various ambitious goals are to be met. Of course, the Federal Government already invests significantly in Australia's education and research system. Without this investment and funding provided by State governments, Australia could not have achieved the successes in international education that have occurred since the late 1980s. Nevertheless, there is a need for a relatively small amount of stable funding to support strategic national initiatives designed to ensure Australia's international education sector remains well placed to capitalise on the continuing strong future global growth in demand for international education expected over the next 10-15 years.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Studyportals, *Envisioning Pathways to 2030, Megatrends shaping the future of higher education and international student mobility*, January 2018, p.6 predicts there will be some 2.3 million more international students globally in 2030, representing a 51 percent increase on the 4.5 million international students enrolled globally in 2015. <https://www.studyportals.com/2018-megatrends-higher-education-webinar/>

**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?**

The University of Sydney would be very keen to contribute ideas into a discussion about opportunities for leveraging mutually beneficial outcomes from the synergies that exist between international education and tourism in Australia. We see significant potential for win-win outcomes. International students already provide a significant tourism boost through their own travels in-country, through visitations by family members and friends, through social media and other networks both during and after their studies in Australia.

There may be innovative opportunities for international students and graduates to play more formal roles as ambassadors for Australian education and tourism in their home countries. Similarly, there may be creative ways by which tourists can play roles directly or indirectly as advocates for international education in Australia's regional and metropolitan areas.

For international students and tourists from major source countries, there may be potential to achieve excellent outcomes for both groups, education and tourism providers, through the establishment of innovative partnerships. For example, international students increasingly desire quality work-integrated learning and internship opportunities while in Australia, but these are difficult to secure for all students. Meanwhile, levels of foreign language proficiency in Australia and its tourism sector are low. Could there be potential, for example, for the Council for International Education to work with Tourism Australia, Australian tourism companies and education providers to develop and grow quality structured WIL and/or paid internship opportunities in regional areas for international students? Students would gain valuable skills, experience Australia's regions and earn income. Employers would benefit from the foreign language and cultural competence of the international students. Long-term, there would be many other flow-on benefits if such a program was managed well and adopted by other industry sectors.

**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)?**

The extraordinary growth and success in international education achieved by Australia's universities since the late 1980s stems largely from four key factors.

First, the deliberate policy decision to create a genuinely deregulated fee-market for international education, which has fostered the development of a dynamic sector through competition, innovation and diversification of product offerings.

Second, a strong regulatory focus on quality assurance and tuition protection, combined with relatively stable and supportive visa and migration policies.

Third, long-term strategic collaboration between Australian governments and providers to promote Australia's education system internationally as market opportunities have emerged and matured.

Fourth, the substantial efforts and investments of education providers individually and collectively over many years to develop educational courses that meet the needs of different international student cohorts.

The University of Sydney is supportive of carefully designed initiatives being developed to help grow international education in regional Australia. This includes strategies to expand opportunities for overseas students studying in metropolitan areas to experience regional Australia and vice versa. However, we would be very concerned if the Government were to pursue initiatives that simply had the effect of artificially increasing demand from international students in regional areas at the expense of demand for programs offered by providers in metropolitan areas. The risk is real that any benefits that may flow to regional providers and communities from such measures will be far outweighed by the long-term negative economic and other impacts if poorly designed policy interventions change prospective international students' perceptions of Australia as welcoming and desirable study destination.

We therefore urge the expert members of the Council to take great care when considering any potential policy changes the Federal Government could make to grow international education in regional Australia.

That said, one area where the Federal Government could help to increase levels of international education in regional Australia greatly through some relatively easy steps is in the field of rural, regional and remote health education. The Federal Department of Health's [Rural Health Multidisciplinary Training](#) (RHMT) program and related schemes give many thousands of domestic medical, dental and other health students access to short- and longer-term clinical placement opportunities embedded in regional health services and communities each year. However, funding under the RHMT may only be used to support domestic students.

This makes it very challenging for metropolitan-based universities participating in the RMHT to provide extended clinical placements for international students in rural, regional and remote locations. Some twenty metropolitan and regionally-based universities (including the University of Sydney) deliver rural clinical education with support from the RHMT, typically from medical and/or multidisciplinary clinical schools, hubs and health service sites located in regional communities. This represents a massive network of existing educational infrastructure and potential opportunities for more international students to gain exposure to rural, regional and remote Australia as part of their studies in health disciplines.

We recommend that the expert members of the Council examine, with the Federal Department of Health and State and Territory ministries of health, the potential for the RHMT program and the national rural, regional and remote health education network it supports, to be leveraged to increase regional clinical placement opportunities for international students.

**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 survey instruments and other targeted research?**

Yes. As stated in our response to question 2 above: "The Federal Government could greatly assist the development of international education strategies in both regional and metropolitan areas by supporting the ongoing production of high-quality market research that provides robust evidence about the key factors and trends influencing the study choices of different international student groups. The Council for International Education could lead the development of such research in consultation with key stakeholder groups like the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA)."

Before moving in this direction, however, there would be value in the Council and IEAA conducting a stocktake of existing research and data sets, to identify current strengths and information gaps.

6 December 2018