

IRU submission: Growing international education across Australia

1. Overview

The Innovative Research Universities support the Government's objective that potential international students for Australia are alert to the value of studying at all of Australia's universities.

There is a risk that the larger cities are better known such that options for study elsewhere may not be given sufficient consideration. There is a need to make better use of the potential from the breadth of the country to reduce the pressure on the major cities and create positive outcomes for all current and future Australians.

To ensure this, the IRU supports actions that will improve knowledge of the breadth of Australian universities and to stimulate vibrant, educated communities around all of our universities. The focus should be the value of each option, not to offset perceived weakness.

Possible actions are:

- employing on-shore agent training and site visits to generate better knowledge of the education options available across the whole of Australia;
- stronger investment by Government in its coordinated national approach to promoting Australia, inclusive of all cities and institutions, as an education destination;
- stimulating research capability across all campuses as essential to vibrant effective universities in any location. In particular, ensure a wider geographical distribution of new research infrastructure to ensure a broader distribution of the positive spill-over effects of infrastructure.

There is no place for directing students to particular destinations, which would only have the negative impact of deterring students from coming to Australia at all. Amendments to the visa system to create incentives for students to study in particular locations could be considered but need to work with the broader immigration framework.

2. The IRU's presence outside of Australia's larger centres

One notable focus of IRU members is to support the communities in which we are based, addressing local issues with global application and teaching a broad range of degrees to Australian and international students.

We recognise the importance of our universities to creating vibrant, successful communities across Australia to provide an alternative to further concentration in Australia's few large metropolitan centres.

As shown in Tables One and Two IRU members teach nineteen percent of international students from campuses outside the five mainland State capitals and Canberra. However, only twelve percent of international students choose such campuses.

Table One - International Students by Campus Location, 2017 Students

University and Group	Perth, Adelaide, Canberra	Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane	Major Cities Total	Other centres	Overseas	Total
CDU		787	787	1,443		2,230
Flinders	3,191		3,191	0	1,525	4,718
Griffith		4,300	4,300	3,211	788	8,299
JCU		1,264	1,264	1,860	2,791	5,915
Latrobe		7,361	7,361	180	1,619	9,160
Murdoch	1,830		1,830	6	6,663	8,499
WSU		5,536	5,536		405	5,941
IRU	5,021	19,227	24,269	6,700	13,791	44,762
Go8	21,322	103,833	125,155	539	12,475	138,169
ATN	11,757	36,483	48,240	126	22,725	71,091
RUN	357	12,492	12,849	7,018	2,585	22,452
No group	4,960	47,718	52,678	21,814	21,772	96,264
Total	43,417	219,753	263,191	36,199	73,348	372,738

Source

Table Two- Proportion of International Students by Campus Location, 2017 Students

Peak Body	Perth, Adelaide, Canberra	Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane	Major Cities Total	Other centres	Overseas	Total
IRU	12%	9%	9%	19%	19%	12%
Go8	49%	47%	48%	1%	17%	37%
ATN	27%	17%	18%	0%	31%	19%
RUN	1%	6%	5%	19%	4%	6%
NG	11%	22%	20%	60%	30%	26%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source

3. Australia's visa system

Australia has an effective university system that supports the education of students from countries around the world. Our major role in international education strengthens understanding of Australia around the world and links Australian students to the opportunities the world holds for them.

Crucial to this is an effective visa system that both allows students to come to Australia and ensures they follow visa requirements. Those who breach visa requirements should be identified and action taken; those who adhere to the visa requirements should be permitted to take advantage of work visas tied to successful study and to aim at longer term residence.

Propositions to make visas easier for students willing to study in particular area do not make sense against the major effort over the past half-decade to ensure a tight yet responsive visa approval system. Tinkering with it, to attract a few more students to a given area would act against the strong focus on each individual having a clear education outcome to be achieved.

In contrast there are already incentives for prospective migrants to choose some parts of Australia. These could be re-examined.

4. Marketing focus

The consultation questions focus on marketing opportunities to increase the visibility of Regional Australia to prospective international students. Given the hard-fought nature of the competition for international students between Australia and its natural competitors, New Zealand, United Kingdom and Canada, universities are well versed in marketing strategies they can employ to attract more international students. Central to these strategies, is ensuring that all stages in the service chain from university to student are well informed.

IRU members, along with other universities, employ on-shore agent training and site visits, recognizing that these strategies can assist in generating enthusiasm for courses and locations. Further Government supported action along these lines involving national, state and regional bodies could be of value.

Such promotion needs to be clear about the objective but also the marketing challenge. Promoting areas of Australia as 'regional' to international (or indeed Australian) students could well prove counterproductive. Prospective students need to learn about the particular cities and institutions and what they offer. Any sense of encouragement to areas that are implied to be less attractive or interesting but needing a boost will not be effective.

5. Barriers to regional international education

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

1. city or location brand awareness such as 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;
2. infrastructure, ranging from airport access and direct flights, accommodation, and public transport to access to a range of appropriate food, social and worship facilities;
3. strong diaspora communities in certain locations e.g. the large Indian community resident in Melbourne.
4. perceived job opportunities, both during study and post-study; and
5. 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;

These can be addressed to different degrees as explored in the section that follow.

6. Study destination organisations

More could be done by Government to support further use of study-destination organisations, for example, Study Perth, Study Adelaide, Study Cairns to promote specific educational opportunities.

These bodies are collaborative international education clusters that can be the first point of contact for any prospective student and their desired institution. The organisations typically involve State Government Departments, Austrade, Local Government, local industry partners as well as higher education providers and are outstanding at communicating the specific benefits that particular region or city can provide.

The Queensland example shows what can happen if governments support and coordinate activities across all education sectors and industry as shown by the Queensland Study Clusters - <https://www.tiq.qld.gov.au/iet-strategy/about-iet-strategy/queensland-regional-study-clusters/>

In Victoria the Study Geelong initiative is also a good example, but there is only one across the whole State: <http://thinkgeelong.com/study-geelong>.

Despite these useful examples as a whole Australia lacks serious investment and coordinated national approach to promoting Australia, inclusive of all areas and institutions, as an education destination. 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.

7. The potential advantages from study in areas with distinct characteristics

Institutions which have campuses in both major metropolitan cities and in smaller cities and towns could be well placed to work on strategies to mobilise international students between their campuses.

Internships and work integrated learning opportunities could be used to encourage students to spend time in different parts of Australia as part of an explicit offer to experience several Australian cities.

These could emphasise aspects of courses concerning application in rural areas, areas of low population density or specific climates such as tropical environments. These could be of relevance to students returning to home countries will similar aspects.

8. The impact of research on university campuses

There is a need to make better use of the potential from the breadth of the country to reduce the pressure on the major cities and create positive outcomes for all current and future Australians.

The paper addresses the opportunities for regional institutions to attract higher degree research students, citing that 12% of international student visa holders outside the major cities 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, relevance to the research issue, rather than the location or even the institution itself.

The paper also talks about some of the unique discipline strengths in particular parts of Australia, such as agriculture, marine science and tropical medicine. These are not disciplines that attract large numbers of students but they do enhance the repute of the university that boasts them.

A research culture is useful in changing the nature of living in communities which has spill over effects for those communities one of which is to raise its potential attractiveness for students both Australian and international.

Universities' research and creation of graduates strengthens the social and economic prosperity of the regions they operate within. Whilst students are central to this equation, equal consideration of the geographic locations of educational resources should be employed.

In mid-2016 IRU analysed the geographical location of 27 NRCIS projects and 102 locations (nodes) were identified. The vast majority were based in Sydney Melbourne and Canberra.

Wider geographical distribution of national infrastructure would improve access for researchers outside major cities and ensure a broader distribution of the positive spill-over effects of infrastructure.