

Down under with the TAFEs!

by Julia Weedon, Head of International Development, Edinburgh's Telford College

Introduction

27,483 miles (44,230km), 12 flights, 17 days: sounds exhausting, yes but highly informative, interesting and enjoyable! Meeting international department staff in six Australian TAFE (Technical and Further Education) colleges, I visited Sydney, Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne and Perth.

There are 59 TAFE and technical institutes in Australia. I visited seven of these institutes and related organisations involved in vocational training for international students:

- Sydney Institute TAFE New South Wales
- Metropolitan South Institute of TAFE, Queensland
- GETI (Government Education and Training International) Tasmania
- University of Tasmania
- Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, Victoria
- Victoria University, Melbourne
- Central Institute of Technology, Western Australia

The main objectives of my visit was to focus on internationalisation strategy, employability and internships and the international learner experience whilst identifying good practice and support for international students studying in Australia and on TNE programmes.

Visit summary

A wonderful opportunity to visit a number of highly successful TAFE institutes and related organisations to gain an insight into their international operations. Historically TAFEs have been global leaders in international education; however this year has seen a dramatic drop in international student recruitment. Widely described as “the perfect storm”, institutes are now concentrating efforts to overcome these issues and on recovery and growth.

International staff generously shared information on international strategies, marketing and recruitment, models of on- and off-shore delivery and the structures and operation of student support. As a result of my visit, I identified a number of innovative initiatives and procedures which could be replicated in UK institutions.

Background

International education in Australia is a A\$18 billion industry. It is the third largest export industry (1st in State of Victoria at cA\$5/6 billion) and contributes 1% of Australia's GDP. In 2009 there were 632,000 on-shore international student enrolments and an estimated 130,000 off-shore enrolments with an overall growth rate of 16% (+32% in VET sector from previous year) and VET on-shore enrolments outnumbered HE sector.

A breakdown of these enrolments by State:

New South Wales (NSW)	38%
Victoria (VIC)	30%
Queensland QLD)	16%
Western Australia (WA)	8%
South Australia (SA)	5%
Australia Capital Territory (ACT)	2%
Tasmania (TAS)	1%

International operations at some Australian institutes contribute to around 38% of total revenue (around 15% in UK). And of the 232,000 VET international students, 86% were enrolled in privately-funded institutes.

TAFE is the Australian government vocational education system renowned for its high quality and excellent reputation in Australia and overseas. It is equivalent to the UK's FE college sector. Active in 50 countries around the world, some TAFE institutes were established over 100 years ago. Courses are up-to-date and designed by industry experts and often include work placements. TAFE institutes are state funded and offer vocational and higher education programmes with pathways to work, professional qualifications and university.

Australian TAFE institutes have an excellent and long history of international student recruitment and therefore afford excellent opportunities for UK colleges to benchmark their international operations and services and learn from their innovative practices.

Key Findings

As agreed with the institutes I visited, in the spirit of confidentiality, I will not identify individual institutes particularly when outlining commercially sensitive information.

Internationalisation strategies at Australian TAFE institutes are well developed. As an example, one institute's internationalisation plan identified rationale as: to enhance reputation; integrating global perspective to ensure graduates are job ready for the international marketplace and access jobs in international companies, locally and overseas and, to develop staff and enhance learning and teaching in intercultural classrooms.

International activities identified in institutes:

- inbound students
- transnational programmes
- offshore industry development
- systems development opportunities – working with government or key change agencies (including aid and development donors) to engage in large scale projects
- inbound study tours
- delegations
- exchange/study abroad programmes
- international staff and student mobility
- customised training products and services

The profile of institutes I visited was surprisingly similar to my own College, even down to niche areas of curriculum eg dental technology. It was just the scale that wasn't – some institutes with c.75,000 student enrolments, nine campuses, five colleges and around 8,000 international students!

Although there were similarities between many of the Australian institutes in their international aspirations and operations, the most significant difference was in the recruitment and admissions procedures for international students. Each state deals with this differently. Some States have centralised all marketing and administration of international student recruitment eg New South Wales and Western Australia, and in other states these operations are undertaken within the institute (similar to the UK model) eg Victoria State.

There are three models:

- centralised system: a one-stop shop for all international students eg TAFE New South Wales (NSW). They deal with agents and undertake recruitment and admissions for all TAFE NSW institutes
- combined system: Queensland (Brisbane)
- institute based/autonomous: Victoria (Melbourne)

The main recruitment markets for Australian international student recruitment were identified as:

Top onshore recruitment markets, Australia
India
China
Nepal
Thailand
Korea
Vietnam
Indonesia
Brazil
Pakistan
Bangladesh

Each Institute and State tended to have the same markets but variance in the order. This was due in part to partnerships with overseas institutes.

Considered a leading country for the international education export sector, Australia's international student recruitment has for the past eighteen months been under extreme pressure and enrolments for the previous and current academic session (January – December) are significantly lower.

There were 619,119 international student enrolments in Australia in 2010. This represented a 1.8% decline from 2009 and contrasted with average annual growth of 10.7% since 2002. And there were 329,352 commencements in 2010, representing a 9.6% decline on 2009 figures. The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector ranked second by volume of enrolments and first by volume of commencements. This however represented declines of 0.7% and 8.9% respectively. The two largest markets were of no surprise! India (36.6% of

enrolments and 32.3% of commencements) and China (10.7% of enrolments and 11.3% of commencements); however this represented a significant decline in both of these markets. Study areas were again predictable – Business and Commerce (around 45% with 23% growth in new starts) and Food, Hospitality and Personal Services (decline of 35% in new starts).

In the English Language sector, ranked third by volume of enrolments and commencements (18% and 25% shares respectively), there was again a decline in enrolments of around 17%. China was the number one market (31% of share) but China and the rest of the top ten markets all showed a decline in enrolments.

Some economists refer to this decline in the international education sector as “*The Perfect Storm*” (or a “*Constellation of Issues*”?)

The contributing components are:

- strong Australian dollar
- significant changes to student visa rules and skilled migration (removal of automatic link between international recruitment in skill shortage programmes and access to permanent residency visa)
- high visa refusal rates, delays in visa processing, inconsistent assessments, increase in finance requirements
- agents and students choosing other countries where visas are quicker and easier to obtain (USA, NZ, Canada)
- reputational damage caused by highly published attacks on international students
- impact of the global financial crisis on demand for places
- increased competition, in particular USA
- collapse of many private colleges (185 VET providers in Victoria cancelled)
- ongoing political discussion about immigration and population issues
- issues in overseas markets eg Middle East
- global financial crisis affecting recruitment from Europe and Japan
- bureaucracy and lack of political interest!

This has led to decreased international student enrolments at TAFE colleges and for some recruitment is down by as much as 50% (although some institutes I visited were bucking the trend with slight growth). National forecasts predict that the contraction could continue for at least another three years.

Re-emergence of skills shortages eg 160,000 mine workers required in next two years will support the recovery plan. To support growth, TAFE strategic plans outline continuation of market diversification, programme diversification in skill shortage areas, growth of exchange programmes, developing more partnerships and feeder programmes especially targeting China, developing more degrees and increasing capacity in HE programmes and to continue to improve student services and retain agent loyalty.

As an example of provision, at one of the largest providers of international education, the most popular courses were:

- Business 25% (+5% from previous session)
- English 23% (-5%)
- Arts, Design and Health Studies 20% (+3%)
- Hospitality and Tourism 18% (+7%)
- Building and Engineering 11% (+88%)

At this institute international students make up 34% of total enrolments and revenue generated A\$44 million (A\$14.7 million profit). Targets are with faculties and they are rewarded for international students eg additional equipment, CPD, improvements to faculty etc.

Offshore (TNE) delivery

Offshore (TNE) delivery is a significant part of many Australian TAFE international strategies. These operations involve assisting foreign colleges and universities to deliver accredited Australian vocational programmes. Many of these programmes are well established and developed with significant student enrolment (c.1,500). The model used tends to be 100% of delivery taught overseas.

The delivery tends to be that 33% of the course is delivered by Australian institute staff that travel to country once a year. Very few of the students who participate in these programmes progress onto on-shore programmes (around 5%). In the institutes I visited the majority of these partnerships are in China. Other countries include India, Philippines, Mauritius, South Korea, Kuwait and Uganda.

Whilst some institutes have decided to reduce or cancel their offshore delivery (HR constraints and servicing difficulties coupled with marginal profit margins, some institutes now feel effort would be better spent in other activities), other larger providers are set to expand significantly. Raising the brand tends to be one of the main reasons for offshore operations but often profitability tends to be low and in some cases just “washes its face”!

Employability

Internships and vocational placements are built into most programmes but tend to be unpaid. Courses are designed by industry, and in some cases assessed by industry personnel, and links and opportunities for employment are strong.

Most internships are transitional courses (professional year) for graduate students. Working entitlement on student visas is similar to the UK – 20 hours per week in term-time and unlimited during vacations (40 hours per week in UK).

The Federal and State Migration Lists are linked to the student visa route (there are plans now to try and de-couple in the future). This has supported strong growth for the sector and the main reason for high recruitment numbers; however it can cause difficulties for institutions. Some jobs are semi-permanently on these lists eg nursing, and can easily be planned for but others on the list change. An example of this is the Community Services and Hospitality sectors. For the past few years these sectors have been included on the lists and TAFEs saw dramatic increases in student applications. Both have now been removed from

the lists, applications have stopped and institutes are challenged with changes in resources, the logistics of curriculum planning and re- alignment of staff. New sectors added recently eg construction crafts, have seen significant increases in international student recruitment; at one TAFE there was an increase of 88% in Building and Engineering enrolments.

Reflections

There is much to envy with “Team Australia”. The joined-up approach of various government departments is a powerful and influential tool that maximises effort and funding. This partnership approach often involves the tourism, education, training, economic and business development sectors working together to promote Australia, the brand, overseas.

I was very impressed with the comprehensive internationalisation strategies and support mechanisms in place for international students in the institutes I visited. There was much good practice and, if not already in place, could be considered by some to implement in their institutes. I hope that colleagues will find something of interest in the following list:

- Outsourcing, eg printing and distribution of marketing materials
- central International Team assessing applications for offers of place
- creating an attendance and conduct contract
- student safety programme – building relationships with community and safety week events with presentations from community groups, eg police, emergency services, transportation etc. This was a particular focus for all institutes in Australia, government and legislation driven
- induction: the orientation programmes I was shown displayed many similarities but some interesting features included for example Trivial Pursuits (subject: Australian culture) a quiz with prizes; “Being Beach Safe” – maybe not something we need to include in UK student induction programmes!
- Students at Risk programme (personal and academic) – advocacy and intervention strategy to get student back on path
- Learning Centre: assistance with writing assignments, learning & research skills; computing; study skills and exam preparation; reading & writing skills; maths skills; optional English sessions at pre-assessment period
- in some TAFE colleges the accommodation service is outsourced to a university or an external company
- employability: Diploma of Sustainability (employability) added into main course programme; recruitment agencies sessions
- social and cultural programme: morning teas – international students and staff event; BBQs on campus for domestic and international students; global citizenship events eg, “Hope Remains” raising profile of, and money for, combating human trafficking in Nepal
- student Self-Serve: student able to log onto college system to update their personal details, check results, finances etc.
- International Student Consultation Council
- learning support based in library drop-in service to support CV writing, study skills, writing assignments, pronunciation groups etc. Study groups.
- students linked up with relevant sporting bodies

- campus open seven days a week
- City Council organising free events for international students eg, “Brisbane Welcomes International Students” event supplying information on everything from accommodation to employment, banking to transport. With live music, wildlife displays. Around 3,000 students attend these events. This is part of the strategy for encouraging more students to come and study in Brisbane as there has been a considerable drop in student visas since the “episodes” in Melbourne
- Aussie Culture brochure with information about Australian culture, etiquette and personal safety.
- farewell programme “Your next steps”
- student alumni

It was noted that the focus on additional support for international students has now, in some Australian TAFEs, resulted in them out-performing domestic students.

And future opportunities for investigation?

New immigration rules are imminent with expectations that it will be a challenging time for international education in the UK. By observing how Australian TAFEs deal with “the perfect storm”, this may support UK FE colleges in their ambitions to grow.

The safety of international students is a major driver in Australia. In the present climate of unrest in certain countries and growing attitudes to increases in international students in the UK, it will be increasingly important to develop activities to help international students integrate into local communities.

It may also be of interest to the sector to undertake more research on the Australian TAFE sector. This might involve identifying the work carried out by TAFE Directors Australia, Australian Education International and other “Team Australia” organisations and their partnership approach.

And finally...

My overall impression of international operations and services for international students in Australian TAFEs and university TAFE divisions – excellent!

I would like to thank UKCISA, with funding from PMI2, for supporting my application and providing me with the opportunity to visit these institutions. I would particularly like to thank colleagues in all the Australia TAFE institutes and associated organisations I visited for being so welcoming and helpful. Their enthusiasm and willingness to share information about their international activities and perspectives on the Australian vocational and HE education system was much appreciated, particularly at such a busy time of the year. I would also like to thank Edinburgh’s Telford College for affording me this opportunity.

I do hope that UK colleagues will find this report of interest and for more information please contact Julia Weedon (Julia.weedon@ed-coll.ac.uk).