Is our vocational education ready to become a major export?

BY: FRANCESCA BEDDIE | The Australian

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CRAIG Emerson's energetic defence of the logic of his much expanded portfolio is a welcome respite from ALP back-stabbing. By melding trade and education, he says, Australia can look forward to more economic engagement with the region, including the export of vocational education services and new career opportunities for young Australians.

On this point, the minister will probably find little disagreement from the opposition. Certainly, one Liberal, Andrew Robb, was also salivating last October over the prospects of tapping into a vast Asian middle class (3.2 billion by 2030) who are hungry for quality education.

But is Australian vocational education ready to become a major export? And is there really mass demand for what we can offer? Can the middle class (defined on a World Bank measure as households having a range of $10 to $100 in purchasing power parity per capita per day) afford our services?

Certainly, there are successful Australian vocational education ventures overseas, particularly in China. This is thanks in no small part to the vigorous efforts of TAFE Directors Australia.

A start has also been made in India, though only on the margins of that country's staggering ambition to skill 500 million Indians by 2022.

While we only need a tiny piece of that action to help our trade balance, this is a completely different ball game.

A fundamental problem facing vocational education across the region is demand. Like everywhere, vocational education in Asia has an image problem. It's the option you take if you can't go to university.

Formal public systems are poorly resourced and produce negligible outcomes. They don't have good teachers, teaching materials are decades out of date and links with the labour market tenuous.

A push into Asia cannot be about a new mass market for Australian VET providers. It's much more about entering partnerships to meet structural weaknesses in skills development: creating demand for training in intermediate skills; aligning training and industry needs; upgrading outdated systems; producing excellent instructors; increasing industry participation and ownership.
Sound familiar? Aren't these the very things the Australian VET system is grappling with? Sure, our system may be better than many in the region, but a bit of humility would not go astray when marketing the Australian system overseas. As the Asian Century white paper (another Emerson responsibility) observes, Australia needs an Asia-capable workforce. That throws down two gauntlets to the VET sector. The first is to upskill its already stretched workforce to cope with any influx of Asian students on-shore or abroad or even with the work involved in advising on systems and policy.

The second is to grasp the opportunities the white paper has opened up for building Australia’s Asian language capability. It's a niche area in which VET providers should be able to compete with universities.

To reap benefits from vocational education exports, Australia needs to prepare the ground. There's plenty of scope for this. Our development assistance program could play a larger part in increasing the prestige and quality of vocational education, for example, through support for VET-in-schools, teacher training, and more scholarships.

We could ratchet up our policy dialogue across the region about qualifications frameworks that embrace a broad notion of competency; development of transnational curriculum and skills recognition; and harnessing technology for quality education.

And we must ensure we have strong quality controls and the best possible teaching approaches in place at home.

Business, too, has a role to play. More could follow the lead of companies like Leightons, which offers apprenticeship-type training and Australian qualifications to its Indian recruits. The enterprise gets the skilled labour it requires. The snowball effect would be the creation of a demand for better training and a more skilled Asian workforce to fuel economic development and meet global labour demands.

Without such efforts, many in Asia will find themselves unable to escape the middle-income trap and never able to afford high-end Australian vocational education.

Francesca M Beddie is a vocational education consultant.

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