Vision 2020: Global Partnerships

Input to the Vision 2020 TAFE Directors Australia National Conference
Panel Session (1 September 2014, 3.30pm–4.25pm)

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Overarching theme
This paper takes as its starting point that Australian colleges, by and large, already make excellent global partners. The foundation for this was laid over a century ago by Australians’ strong belief that all para-professional and professional courses taught in this country should be at world best standard and should be accorded equality of respect. As other countries’ education and training systems have evolved they have not necessarily shared Australia’s perspective. In more recent times, Australian governments, from both sides of politics, have reduced direct funding of our colleges and expected a greater share of revenue to come from domestic and international student fees and fee for service activities. They have also opened the training market up to competitive market forces.

Despite the impacts and challenges that these ever evolving policy dictates have on the TVET sector, our colleges have to varying degrees become adaptable, entrepreneurial and ever more globally focussed. In equal measure, industry peak bodies, especially TAFE Directors Australia, have risen to the challenges presented and established strong off shore partnerships on the basis that Australian colleges can provide meaningful assistance with curricula development, train the trainer and advanced technical skills delivery. However, Australian governments must realise that they cannot maintain a “ball and chain” approach to their colleges while expecting them to meet economic targets, negotiate onshore and offshore pathway agreements and all the while contribute to the soft diplomacy benefits of meeting other countries’ up-skilling ambitions.
What makes an Australian college a global partner?

1. A common sense approach to partnering. Australian colleges have, in the main, learned a great deal about which overseas colleges NOT to partner with. The halcyon days of a Department Head signing an MOU with pretty much anybody over a drink in some foreign bar are now largely behind us. A ‘whole of institution’ strategic outlook on which overseas partners will be most suitable for long term mutual benefit is now the order of the day. Having been one of the first nations involved in internationalisation strategies, Australia’s colleges have therefore learned from previous mistakes. They make good potential partners because they are more realistic, than many of their competitor nations’ colleges, in who they want to partner with and what will be genuinely achievable from the partnership.

2. Australia offers a multi-skilled, flexible delivery, increasingly blended learning, and ‘hands-on’ approach to teaching and learning. There are still competitor nations that have no national training packages or remain fixed in the previous century with their focus on traditional craft based learning methodologies.

3. After years of experimenting with different staff ratio models, many Australian colleges now have their teaching staff mix attuned to both their student and their institution’s requirements. They ensure that there is an appropriate balance between permanent and sessional teachers who have up to date qualifications and course specialisations. They retain staff loyalty through measures such as investing in their professional development needs. With a good overseas partner college, they are even willing to implement staff exchanges and professional development to assist their partner’s teaching staff improve their qualifications.

4. Australian colleges have also often had the foresight to employ both administration staff and teachers who have had valuable experience working in other countries and are inter-culturally competent. If the majority of staff understand global citizenship challenges and the soft diplomacy and practical benefits that can accrue from championing multiculturalism then this will serve many global partners very well. A corollary to this is the ability to communicate effectively with students and staff in overseas partner institutions who come from a non-English speaking background.

5. The growing trend for Australian colleges to offer a mix of higher education and vocational course offerings. This can be an attractive model for potential overseas partners who may be more used to a rigid demarcation between systems both within their own countries and with their other overseas institution partners. In equal measure, the willingness of some Australian colleges to maintain an ongoing dialogue with industry and employers often translates into industry relevant courses.

Clearly, Australian colleges need to leverage off all of the above, real and potential strengths, when actively seeking out, and being approached by, global partners.
Should Australia have economic targets for the international education vocational and training partnerships?

1. If having agreed targets, sanctioned by government and other stakeholders, serves the purpose of raising the profile of a particular sector’s needs and aspirations then that may be a good thing. Conversely, history is littered with examples of national targets and five year plans that had wonderful public relations value at the time of their announcement but never really had genuine chance of success.

2. Australia’s international education sector remains subject to separate levels of government control and even separate government departments’ policy formulation and implementation. On this basis, targets cannot be realistic. This “silo” approach to governance of our sector creates real barriers to performance. Until such time as we have greater inter-governmental and cross departmental coordination of international education then achievement of targets will be constantly compromised. Happily, a Federal Government chaired International Education Coordinating Council will soon be announced.

What form will vocational education and training partnerships take?

1. Obviously, partnerships must meet the needs of both the parties to them and their respective clients. Affordability will continue to be a major challenge for Australian colleges’ partnering opportunities with many countries’ TVET systems. Official and unofficial barriers to entry all too often serve to compromise the genuine goodwill that might exist between cross border partners.

2. By 2020 we should be optimistic that the skill needs of many countries will require both their governments and their major corporates to take action to override barriers to entry that currently neuter many effective education and training partnerships. In equal measure, Australian governments and our corporate sector must be more willing to engage in meaningful dialogue with overseas nations. For example Free Trade Agreements should not just focus on the transfer of goods but should also emphasise education as a key service export. Recent regional agreements such as APEC’s Vladivostok communique on the free flow of education services between the 21 APEC country members are a step in the right direction.

3. Australian colleges may need to be more willing to form partnerships with a range of private provider, government and corporate interests both overseas and domestically as well. An example here is the recent merger of CQ University with a public TAFE Institute at the same time that the university entered into an equity partnership with a private health training RTO. In equal measure, Australian governments may need to be less rigid in their financial control mechanisms. Notwithstanding this, Australian governments must still maintain control over quality assurance and education regulation. Otherwise, the potential damage to “brand Australia” could be enormous.
Will vocational education and training partnerships contribute to meeting the skills requirements of other countries?

1. Countries such as the UK and Germany have already signed agreements with other nations to assist them with build, own, operate campuses; curriculum development; train the trainer and direct delivery education course provision. Australia has come relatively late to such whole of government agreements. Ironically, because of Australia’s success over many years in attracting full fee paying overseas students to “study here and go home” then we have not had the impetus to go the way of countries such as the UK.

2. Much will depend in the future on the willingness of overseas governments to adopt common curricula platforms. Such “internationalisation of the curriculum” initiatives as MOOCS and Moodle are already assisting in this area.

What visa arrangements will assist in most improving global partnerships?

1. Unfortunately, Australia and the UK overreacted in recent years to the growth in overseas student visas particularly for TVET students. Given Australia’s traditional “equality of respect” for para-professional and professional courses of study, as detailed in this paper’s introduction, then this has been doubly unfortunate. It has sent messages abroad that our nation undervalues TVET courses and advanced technical skills compared to higher education courses and professional qualifications. Much of the problem in both the UK and Australia resulted from overseas students hoping to migrate to both countries. Once the nexus between education and on-shore migration was broken in Australia this issue largely dissipated. Australian governments should by now be confident that the quality assurance and regulatory framework systems that they have put in place will ensure that only genuine students will come to study here. On this basis, the time has come to permit the new student visa category of Post Study Work Rights to be made available to TVET students. By allowing any overseas student who graduates from an approved TVET course to live and work in Australia for up to two years post-graduation we will surely assist other countries’ students to gain the practical skills that they can then take back to assist their countries’ capacity building.

2. In equal measure, Australia also needs to provide streamlined student visa (SVP) accreditation to quality TVET education course providers. The door was recently pushed partly ajar in this regard when a number of public TAFE and private colleges, with Advanced Diploma course accreditation, were invited to apply for streamlined visa status. However, until such time as other student visa barriers to entry, such as Genuine Temporary Entrance Tests, are liberalised then the message that our nation is sending overseas is that we remain suspicious of international students who wish to enhance their advanced technical skills via study in Australia.
3. At some point in the future, the Australian Government and our corporate sector, may need to agree to new bi-lateral arrangements that make it less complicated for international students to study, enter into course related internships and work in our country. The impetus for this is already apparent. The New Colombo Plan is predicated on thousands of young Australians being permitted to both study and engage in course related internships in the Asia-Pacific region. A number of nations in our region are now raising questions about what “work right” and genuine job opportunity reciprocity we are willing to provide their students who are studying in Australia if they are expected to provide such opportunities to young Australians studying in their countries?