

TAFE Leadership in International Education: *Enhancing our partnerships across regions*

Objective:

- 1. Removing discriminatory policy and regulation in regard to international student visas and post study work rights**
- 2. Increased support for TAFE to deliver international education services.**

The provision of international education services is Australia's #1 export in the services industry. These services include education and training for international students, capacity building projects offshore, and partnerships with industry both at home and abroad.

Australia's TAFE Institutes rank among the top three international technical, vocational education and training (TVET) providers in the world. TAFE Institute expertise is increasingly in demand from employers, government agencies, education institutions and donor organisations, particularly in the Asian region. Our expertise is sought to improve technical skills training in the region in order to increase both productivity and workforce participation.

Of equal importance is our role in supporting Australian students and businesses to engage with other countries through outbound mobility programs and industry-led training programs.

To enhance these services, TAFE needs a policy and regulatory environment which recognises the quality of our provision and actively supports our international engagement efforts. This includes streamlined student visa processing for our international students, post study work rights, and visa pricing equivalent to those currently offered to university graduates.

International students

Onshore provision

While well regarded internationally, TAFE has a relatively small market share in onshore course provision for international students. As at May 2013, there were 90,394 international students enrolled in TVET courses in Australia with approximately 20,000 of these studying at a TAFE institute. TAFE international student enrolments represent 22% of the TVET market and 5% of the total international student market. TAFE provision for these students is exemplified by small class sizes, intensive mentoring and pastoral care, and a very low domestic/international student ratio.

TAFE has been significantly impacted by the rapid decline in international student numbers since 2009. A major disincentive for international students has been the 'red tape' and discrimination in regulation and the profiling of TVET in Australia as being 'high risk' in some international markets. The high value of the Australian dollar and cost of living, concerns about quality following the high-profile collapse of some private training colleges in Australia, constant changes to visa regulations, and increasing competition from other countries, have contributed to this decline.

The Australian government's protection of the university sector, evidenced by the creation of streamlined visa processing exclusively for universities, is unacceptable. This is highly discriminatory to all other higher education providers including the 23 TAFEs registered to offer specialist higher education qualifications. The university sector is further advantaged through more favourable post study work rights and lower visa charges for extended study.

TDA calls for the Commonwealth government to immediately extend streamlined visa processing to all higher education courses offered by TAFE institutes and extend this service to all TAFE courses at Diploma and above levels within twelve months. Post study work rights and visa charges for TVET students should also be equal to those offered to university students.

As government-owned institutions with an exemplary track record in international student provision, the high quality and low risk provision of educational services by TAFE institutes must be recognised and protected.

Offshore provision

TAFE provision for international students is not limited to students studying in Australia. Our offshore provision is more than twice the size of the domestic market, with almost 50,000 students studying with TAFE in their own country, predominantly in partnership with local institutions where both local and Australian qualifications are delivered.

Significant growth in the export of our services to other countries has been realised with very limited government support. In most cases, TAFE institutes have invested their own funds to develop offshore partnerships and are heavily reliant on the expertise and networks developed through inbound student programs. It is critical that our domestic international student market remains strong and viable, providing a strong foundation for offshore provision.

Offshore provision also provides opportunities for other initiatives such as teacher and student exchange programs, workplace training for Australian and overseas companies and capacity building projects for government and non-government agencies.

Offshore Partnerships

Our overseas partnerships, which number over 250 across 42 countries, directly benefits Australia economically, socially and culturally. The 'soft diplomacy' aspect of our work creates significant goodwill and is often a conduit for enhanced relations with countries around the world.

These partnerships are not limited to the delivery of Australian qualifications. They also include leadership programs for senior college and industry managers, skill development programs for educators and trainers, curriculum and resource development projects and research into skill demands and engagement with industry.

To date, there has been limited Commonwealth financial support to assist in establishing or extending these offshore partnerships.

TDA calls on State and Commonwealth governments to directly support new and expanded offshore partnerships through a dedicated and competitive grants program, aligned to government and industry priorities.

Regional capacity building through TVET aid and development projects

The Australian government has made a limited investment in assisting other countries to improve the capabilities and capacity of their TVET sectors. Aid and development funding has focused almost exclusively on schools and higher education, with only a small number of federally funded projects contributing to regional TVET capacity building such as the development of a network of East Asia TVET providers led by TDA.

In contrast, countries such as Germany, the UK and Canada commit significant aid and development investments for TVET in Asia and Africa. The demand from countries in these regions for direct support in improving their TVET sectors far outweighs the demand for enhanced university provision and yet Australia's focus is on the latter.

TDA calls on the Commonwealth government to re-dress the balance.

Skills Centres of Excellence in India, China and Indonesia

A first step advocated by TDA is a commitment by the Commonwealth government to fund the establishment of Skill Centres of Excellence in India, China and Indonesia. These Centres would offer training for technical teachers in specified industry areas, cooperative research into industry skill needs and priorities, and leadership training for senior industry and college managers. The Centres would also invite industry and non-government agencies to commission specific training programs and associated services, with the intention that the Centres become self funding within three years.

International Networks

To assist in building regional capacity, TDA has established a number of international networks including formal agreements and associations with PR China, Canada, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, USA and the UK. TDA was commissioned by the Australian government, in conjunction with the Republic of Korea, to lead the development of a network of TVET providers in the 18-nation East Asia Region. TDA is also the coordinating centre for UNESCO UNEVOC in Australia and a Board member of the World Federation of Colleges and Polytechnics (www.wfcp.org).

Individually, our TAFE institutes have strong international networks including membership of RC2020, the Global Education Network and the International Labour Organisation.

TDA works closely with government agencies such as Austrade, Australian Education International, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship. We also contribute to the work of the Council for International Students Australia and the International Education Association of Australia, and regularly engage with other peak education bodies such as ACPET, English Australia and Universities Australia.

TDA holds that a coordinated approach to supporting and enhancing international networks is best achieved through the immediate establishment of a Ministerial Council on International Education, as recommended by the Chaney Report on international education, 'Australia-Educating Globally' (February, 2013).

Student mobility

TDA strongly supports Australian students studying overseas as part of their studies in Australia. Our TAFE institutes actively support and encourage student mobility through their own resources and also through government funded mobility programs, such as the Endeavour Awards, the AsiaBound Scholarships and the VET Outbound Mobility program.

TDA acknowledges the Coalition's commitment to outbound mobility but argues strongly that the 'New Colombo Plan' must encourage and support TVET students as well as university students. The 'best and the brightest' should not be exclusive to those studying at university. Our businesses and companies working offshore desperately need internationally experienced trade and para professional expertise with the capability to work in international contexts.

Our Case

Improving TVET is a high priority for many countries around the world, particularly in the Asian region. TAFE is an internationally recognised leader in providing education services to many countries to support their own development and also to assist Australian business and companies.

To further enhance our international profile and our capacity to deliver, we argue for a higher level of support from the Australian government and a greater public recognition of our role. This includes more favourable visa policies for inbound international students, direct government investment in supporting offshore partnerships, a more equitable allocation of funds for VET student mobility programs, and a whole-of government approach to supporting international networks.

Recommendations

TDA recommends that the Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments:

- 1** Immediately extend streamlined visa processing to all higher education courses offered by TAFE institutes and, within twelve months, extend this to all TAFE TVET courses at Diploma and above levels. Post study work rights and visa charges should also be equal to those offered to university students;
- 2** Directly support new or expanded offshore partnerships through a dedicated and competitive grants program, aligned to government and industry priorities;
- 3** Commit to providing establishment costs for TVET Skills Centres of Excellence in India, China and Indonesia;
- 4** Immediately establish a Ministerial Council on International Education; and
- 5** Ensure a more equitable allocation of funds for VET student mobility programs.