OVERSEAS STUDENTS AT REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES AND MIGRATION TO REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Studies at a regional university may help overseas students to obtain a permanent skilled visa. If they subsequently settle and find employment in regions, this may support the goals of the Australian regional migration policy. This policy directs skilled and business migrants to regional areas to support their demographic and economic growth. This article examines overseas student enrolments at selected regional universities and uses immigration statistics to discuss former overseas students' support for the goals of this policy. Strategies to continue attracting overseas students to regional institutions in a climate of a recent overall downturn in overseas enrolments are suggested.

SETTING THE SCENE

Regional universities play an important role in the economic development and social and cultural life of their respective regions. The presence of overseas students may not only bolster the university but also the region in which it is located.

Since the late 1990s, through staged policy modifications and official statements, the Federal Government has been encouraging overseas graduates from Australian tertiary institutions to become permanent skilled migrants (Koleth, 2010). Additional points on the general skilled migration points test have been introduced for this purpose. Since 1996–97, Australia has also been pursuing a regional migration policy for skilled and business migrants (formally the State-Specific and Regional Migration (SSRM) initiatives). This policy, and the extension of an invitation for overseas students to become permanent skilled migrants, became aligned in 2003–04, when students who have studied and lived in regional or low population growth metropolitan areas (in this article they are jointly referred to as 'regional areas')[1] became eligible for bonus points on the general skilled migration points test (DIMIA 2004, 37,41). Former students could use these points to apply for any points-tested skilled visa, including, but not restricted to regional visas.

Regional migration policy has sought to disperse skilled and business migrants away from the largest cities and into regional areas, in the hope that their settlement would support demographic and economic growth there (DIMIA 2004, 37,38). Encouraging overseas students to choose regional universities and then remain in the regions to put their skills to use has been an auxiliary government strategy. Regional visas offer certain concessional selection criteria in comparison to independent visas, but they carry a fixed-term residency and employment requirement (usually two years) to encourage a longer-term retention.

This article focuses on South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory (NT). These three jurisdictions have been considered entirely regional (including their capital cities) for the purposes of the Australian regional migration policy. Hence, they can readily serve as examples of regional areas and their public universities as examples of regional universities. These are: University of Adelaide, University of South Australia and Flinders University in South Australia, University of Tasmania in Tasmania and Charles Darwin University in the NT. This article looks particularly at the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors because they have recently dominated the student visa grants.[2] Initially, recent trends in education and skilled migration of former overseas students in Australia are reviewed. Then, overseas students in the three jurisdictions under review here are characterised. Statistical evidence allows for a discussion on the economic and demographic contribution to regions

by former overseas students who formally held selected regional skilled visas.[3] The article concludes by identifying potential obstacles to attracting overseas students to regional universities in the future and suggests strategies that may assist in overcoming them.

THE RISE AND FALL OF OVERSEAS STUDENT MIGRATION

In Australia, since 2001–02, former overseas students could submit their permanent skilled visa applications onshore and obtain a waiver of skilled work experience, which was a requirement for any offshore skilled visa applicant. These criteria, in combination with a suite of bonus points, triggered an increase in visa grants to overseas students, which have grown from 119,103 (1999–2000) to 320,368 (2008–09) (DIMIA 2002,18,44,46; DIAC 2010a,60).[4] The majority of overseas students in Australia originate from Asia. International education has become a major industry estimated to have contributed $13.7bn to Australia's exports in 2007–08 and $15.8bn in 2008–09 (DFAT, 2008,23; DIAC 2010c,60). But these figures have recently become a source of debate (see account for example in Trounson, 2010).

Permanent skilled visa grants to former students and their dependants have come to drive the growth in the number of permanent skilled independent visas offered. By 2006–07, there were 22,858 such visa grants, which represented 42.2% of all skilled independent visa grants (DIAC 2008,25,41). The majority of these migrants had accounting and information technology (IT) qualifications (Birrell et al., 2007).

In response to concerns around English language skills and employability of these skilled migrants (Birrell and Rapson, 2005; Birrell 2006), commencing in September 2007, a series of enhancements have been made to these and other skilled migration criteria. Minimum English language skills have been increased and a work experience criterion introduced for former overseas students, likely contributing to a decline in the number of permanent skilled visa grants made to them to 21,421 in 2007–08 (DIAC 2009b,32,57). Reforms continued in 2009 and 2010 to disconnect education in Australia from a nearly guaranteed permanent skilled visa outcome, which until recently could be easily obtained by completing VET qualifications as they attracted bonus points (Birrell et al., 2009; 2007; Koleth 2010). Bonus points for studies and residence in regional areas have been retained. Reforms in 2009 and 2010 were part of the Government's response to the global economic downturn. Employer-linked and State/Territory-Government nominated visas have become the priority categories and the annual intakes of independent skilled migrants were reduced twice (Koleth 2010; DIAC 2009a). Though aimed at former students, all these reforms have affected the ability of all potential applicants to apply for skilled visas.

Once the incentive of permanent residency was removed, student visa grants decreased from 320,368 (2008–09) to 269,828 (2009–10). Other contributing factors have included enhanced integrity measures in the student visa program, increased minimum funds for living expenses in Australia, strong Australian currency, concerns around student safety (triggered by attacks on Indian students in large cities) and increased international competition for students (DIAC 2010a,60; Koleth 2010,12,13,15). Questionable practices of some private colleges have also played a role. These developments have led to instituting a review of international education in Australia (the Baird Review 2010), release of international students strategy in October 2010 (COAG 2010) and tightening of the regulatory environment for education providers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS AT REGIONAL UNIVERSITIES

On an Australia scale, universities located in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT have increased their joint annual share of overseas student enrolments in higher education from 5.5% or 6,404 students (2002) to 8.2% or 16,666 students (2009). Contrastingly, the proportionate shares held by each remaining State/Territory were either lower in 2009 than they were in 2002 or they remained stagnant. In these three jurisdictions, the growth has been driven by South Australia, where annual enrolments have more than doubled between 2002 (5,018) and 2009 (13,511). The overseas student enrolments in the VET sector in these three jurisdictions have jointly grown slower from 3.2% or 1,718 enrolments (2002) to 4.1%, or 9,555 enrolments (2009). Their growth has also been driven by South Australia, where annual enrolments have grown more than six-fold from 1,381 (2002) to 8,919 (2009) (DEEWR 2007; 2009b).

The growth in South Australia has been driven by work undertaken by StudyAdelaide – a State Government initiative to promote and coordinate international education in the state (von Wald 2010). Adelaide is also a much larger city than the capital cities of Tasmania and the NT (1.2m in 2009, ABS 2010), which may add to its appeal as a place to study.

In 2009, the top three nationalities of students enrolled in higher education and VET courses (considered jointly) in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT were similar to other jurisdictions in Australia and all were from Asia (DEEWR 2009a). Broad fields of study of the overseas students in these three jurisdictions were also similar to broad fields of study of overseas students in all other jurisdictions. For example, without exception, in 2002

and 2008, management and commerce was the top broad field of study in all Australian States/Territories. In 2002, IT was among the top three fields of study across Australia but in 2008 it moved down the list in all States/Territories except Tasmania, where it ranked third. Immigration-linked growth in VET courses, particularly Food, Hospitality and Personal Services was evident in 2008 in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, where it ranked second. In the three jurisdictions discussed, it became the second top choice in the NT (the absolute number of students was merely a fraction of numbers in larger jurisdictions). In South Australia and Tasmania it did not make it to the top three broad fields of study (AEI 2009).

BENEFITS FROM REGIONAL LOCATION OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS DURING AND AFTER STUDIES

Overseas students may benefit regional universities and regions in which they are located in several ways. First, some of them may be working on topics relevant to the economic or social development of the region. Second, universities collect overseas student fees. Snapshot data from 2007 suggests that until the global economic downturn, universities located in the three jurisdictions under review in this article have been deriving moderate to average proportions of their total revenues from these fees: they ranged from 3% (Charles Darwin University) to 17% (University of South Australia). These were well below universities heavily dependent on overseas student fee revenues: Central Queensland University (44%) and University of Ballarat (31%). The average proportion for all Australian universities was 15% (Bradley et al., 2008,92).

A third benefit is that overseas students create demand for jobs both at their universities and beyond. For example, in 2007–08, they were estimated to have created a demand for employing 196 full-time workers in the NT; 1,086 in Tasmania and 6,594 in South Australia (Access Economics 2009,8).[5] They also spend money locally on goods and services, while visitors from home produce spin-off effects for the local economies. Finally, regional universities may be helping to alleviate skill shortages in the region if their overseas-born graduates decide to remain there.

MIGRATION OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS TO REGIONS

To illustrate migration of former overseas students to regions, we use aggregate statistics of three types of regional visas, which they have obtained to live and work in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT. Specifically, we use two categories of State/Territory Government-nominated skilled visas (none mandates a job offer) and a Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme (RSMS) visa, which requires a job offer. In September 2007, the State/Territory Government-nominated skilled visas and regional family-linked visas (not discussed in this article) were collapsed into a new temporary Skilled-Regional Sponsored visa. This visa is points-tested and retains State/Territory Government and family nomination options. The statistics from the post-September 2007 period used below reflects only visas nominated by the Governments of South Australia, Tasmania and the NT.

Relatively few former overseas students might have chosen to settle in regions. For example, in 2006–07, the aggregate number of State/Territory-Government nominated and RSMS visa grants to former students and their dependants in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT here was 350 (DIAC unpublished data). By contrast, in the same year, in the whole of Australia, 22,858 permanent independent skilled visas were granted to former overseas students and their dependants (DIAC 2008,41). The 350 regional visa grants would correspond to 1.5% of the permanent skilled independent visas.

The aggregate annual number of these regional visa grants to former overseas students and their dependants in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT has ranged from 141 (2004–05) to 792 (2009–10) and has been driven by the South Australian applicants (DIAC unpublished data). But only the principal RSMS visa holders could be expected to immediately move into skilled jobs. In these three jurisdictions jointly there were 30 such individuals in 2004–05 and 179 in 2009–10. Such numbers would translate into negligible contribution to the size of their respective workforces, but without a doubt, individual employers would benefit by having found a suitably skilled employee.

The contribution of these former students and their families to population growth would also be minimal. For example, in 2006–07, the absolute population growth in South Australia was 17,906 (ABS 2010,12) and this state welcomed 312 former overseas students and their families under State/Territory nominated and RSMS visa categories (DIAC unpublished data). This translates to 1.7% contribution to South Australia's population growth this year. In the two remaining jurisdictions, these migrants would contribute less than 1% to their respective population growth figures in 2006–07.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

The recently tightened skilled migration criteria have been largely aimed at disconnecting VET education from migration (Universities Australia 2010) but concerns have been raised that universities might have been caught in 'collateral damage' and some genuine overseas students discouraged from applying to Australian universities (Lane and Akerman 2010; Trounson and Healy 2010). In the context of the recent decrease in numbers of overseas

students and the external and domestic causes holding true, regional universities could find it more difficult to attract them in the near future.

Even if overseas student numbers increase, their economic contribution may be lower. For example, at the University of Tasmania the number of overseas students has grown from 2,894 (2008) to 2,941 (2009), but they have generated less income for the university in 2009 than in 2008 (UTAS 2009; 2010).[6] Revenues from overseas student fees are believed to be used by many universities to cross-subsidise services to domestic students and support research infrastructure (Bradley et al. 2008). A prolonged stagnation in the overseas student enrolments might come to affect the budgets of universities and the viability of some regional universities to continue contributing to the economic and social development of their regions.

A new skilled migration test expected to commence in July 2011 could assist in channelling more overseas students into regional universities. It assigns most points for doctoral rather than VET qualifications and for superior English language proficiency (DIAC 2010b). The proposed distribution of points may encourage overseas students with lower command of the English language to consider education at regional universities. Completing studies at a regional university continues to attract bonus points and in combination with other points, for example for State/Territory Government nomination, points for partner skills, and for fluency in a community language, a student could obtain the same amount of points they would be eligible for if they had superior English language skills. Alternatively, students may seek permanent residency under RSMS, which has been points-free. If this test directs more overseas students to regional areas, their universities and some regional employers could benefit. But to avoid delivering regional skilled migrants with lower English language skills, some regional universities may need to dedicate more resources to academic literacy support services. They could assist such students in fully benefiting from their education and in turn better prepare them for the labour market.

CONCLUSIONS

Australian immigration and education policies have recently been in a state of flux and time needs to pass before the effects of changes to these policies can be rigorously evaluated. This article has illustrated that regional public universities, exemplified by institutions in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT (2002–09), can successfully attract a share of overseas students in the higher education sector away from universities located elsewhere in the country. But these regional universities have only minimally contributed to the growth in their enrolments in the VET sector. Such a track record suggests that the greatest opportunities for these regional universities to attract overseas students lie in the higher education courses on offer. The recent decline in overall enrolments, dominated thus far by Asian students, points to diversification of the countries of origin and fields of study as potential strategies to mitigate the likely soft demand in the near future and its impact on university revenue.

Universities in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT have each some unique areas of research expertise and their locations represent some convenient gateways for field research. Smaller centres with fewer big players may also offer opportunities for direct or more frequent interactions with industries – the end users of such research. Promoting these areas of expertise in combination with opportunities for research and interactions with the industry could form part of the diversification measures to attract motivated postgraduate overseas research students. If the new points test increases the numbers of overseas students at these and other regional universities, better resourcing of infrastructure for academic literacy support services will need to be considered.

Thus far, few overseas students and their dependants seem to have settled in South Australia, Tasmania and the NT on regional visas. This has translated into a negligible contribution to the workforce size and population growth in these jurisdictions. A holistic approach to dispersal and retention, with the inclusion of the key groups such as other skilled and business migrants, would enable a more accurate evaluation of the outcomes of the regional migration policy. If periodical statistics of retention and mobility of skilled and business migrants dispersed to regions were available (broken down by visa categories and showing immediate past visas such as student visas), this could indicate whether any cumulative demographic benefits have been reaped and how different groups of migrants have behaved. Merging certain immigration and Census data files has been already trialled in Australia (Golebiowska et al., forthcoming). If these datasets were further enriched with selected occupational information, they could elucidate also the nature and dynamics over time of the economic contribution of various visa holder groups in regions, including former overseas students.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Low population growth metropolitan areas – those that in the last intercensal period posted population growth less than 50% of national average population growth. Regions – Statistical Divisions with fewer than 0.2m inhabitants. DIMIA 2004,41. For a list of areas eligible for settlement of regional migrants see for example Hugo 2008, 556.

[2] VET courses are chiefly delivered by Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions and private colleges but some universities, for example Charles Darwin University, are dual providers offering higher education and VET courses.

[3] Anecdotally, former overseas students rarely seek business visas, hence this article focuses on skilled visas.

[4] These figures reflect contribution made jointly by all education sectors not only higher education and VET.

[5] These outcomes reflect the demand created by all overseas students, rather than overseas students at universities only.

[6] These figures represent all overseas students and include for example those, undertaking intensive English language program in preparation for entry into degree courses.

Canadian Issues

Immigrant Mental Health

The Metropolis Project, in collaboration with the Association for Canadian Studies, has recently published our most recent volume of Canadian Issues /Thèmes canadiens focusing on refugee and immigrant mental health.

This collection of articles brings together perspectives from academe and community based research that focus on improving the mental health capacities and competencies of the Canadian health systems, settlement provision organizations and government policy related to the settlement and integration of immigrant and refugees in Canada.

The articles address a wide range of policy and community health issues including conceptual, methodological and measurement issues as well as key data and research gaps. By addressing the complexities of defining and operationalizing key concepts in mental health and service delivery such as access to care, cultural diversity, and cultural competence the research put forth in this collection of articles engages the reader in an important and required discussion of how best to serve and treat the mental health of immigrants and refugees in Canada.



Many of the articles focus specifically on subpopulations of immigrant groups, such as those identified by gender, age/life stage (children and youth for example), immigration category, country of origin, ethnic minority groups, and survivors of war, torture and organized violence. Examinations of these populations provide a better understanding of the mental health needs of these groups while also explaining their capacities for improving their mental health and well being. The reader is reminded of the need to acknowledge the resilience and strength of our immigrant and refugee communities and their own goals of social well being and the betterment of their health and livelihoods.

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