International Students: The Choice of Cairns as a Regional Destination

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Abstract:

Traditionally within Australia, international students have sought out the major Australian city locations of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. This major-city-based focus has continued to expand. However, the recognition and acceptance of other quality regional education destinations continues to grow. Both State and Federal Governments are focusing on this area as a rich source of foreign direct investment into Australia.

Regional destinations, especially those with a solid university presence, may offer a quality, positive mix to international students. By drawing their diverse educational players into a united, cohesive framework, a regional destination may pursue its educational strategies via a strong, cross-promoting, team-based approach.

Preliminary exploratory investigation of Cairns regional international student educational data, particularly at secondary levels, delivers new understanding of opportunities and focus areas for regional secondary and tertiary education participants. It also highlights the successes of the region’s international student marketing initiatives, and suggests a challenging business environment exists.

Key Words: regional, education, international, students, marketing, Australia, Cairns

1.0 Introduction:

Traditionally within Australia, international students planning to study in Australia have sought out the major Australian city locations of Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. Most international students participate in the University undergraduate programs, or the Vocational Education and Training (VET) or English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sectors. These international students are heavily concentrated in business–related and information technology courses (Nelson, 2003; 2002). This major, or capital-city-based international student focus, is driven by the city-based tertiary and secondary institutions. It continues to capture over 65% of Australian international student market. However, the recognition and acceptance of other quality regional education destinations continues to grow. Both State and Federal Governments are focusing on this area as a rich source of foreign direct investment into Australia (AEI, 2005), and the Federal Government’s Department of Education, Science and Training is releasing research funds to develop solutions for growing international student capacity within regional destinations and markets.

Regional destinations, especially those with a solid university presence, may offer a quality, positive mix to international students. By drawing their regional educational players into a united, cohesive framework, using an ‘educational cluster’ – like Study Cairns (www.StudyCairns.com), a regional destination may then use a strong, cross-promoting, team-based approach to pursue a shared educational strategy.

Successful regional clusters require all members to participate and cohesively align their products within an adopted international educational framework. Educational agents, and others bringing students to the region, may then be cohesively and cross-sector targeted. Responding educational
agents, prepared to promote regional destinations, may then be provided special treatment. This delivers new niche marketing, and international education sales opportunities to the region. Given that suitable educational outcomes are then delivered and maintained, the flow of international students to this targeted regional destination may steadily increase (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004).

All sections of the Australian international student market have grown steadily, but the VET and ELICOS sectors have grown slower than other sectors. The secondary, or high schools sector, has continued to experience a steady growth in international students, with enrolments in 2005 averaging around 30,000 per annum (IDP, 2005). However, this market expansion has been slower than for the higher education sector, with over 150,000 international students enrolling per annum. Both markets remain highly competitive, both within Australia and with other major international competitors including the US, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand.

In 2003, 303,324 international students were enrolled in Australia, generating over A$5.030 billion in export earnings (ABS, 2004). This education market is Australia’s third largest services export industry after Personal Tourism and Passenger Transportation, and is Australia’s seventh largest goods and services export product (IDP, 2004). This sector is growing at a combined overall rate of over 18% per annum (ABS, 2004) - the highest growth rate of all major commodities!

Queensland’s higher education international students totaled 20,402 in 2003. In other sectors of the international student market 12,961 students were in the VET area, 13,112 students in ELICOS programs, 8,268 students in Secondary schools, and 5,985 students in other educational training programs. The Australian educational market houses international students from a wide range of overseas countries. There is a variation in the growth of international student numbers from these various destinations. For example, the 2003 Queensland international student markets that showed most rapid growth included: India (27% growth), China (20% growth), and South Korea (19% growth) (AEI, 2003).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2005) has determined that University graduates in Australia are approximately twice as likely to be employed, than those leaving school with junior secondary qualifications. In 2003, 65% of the 202,200 university graduates were employed within four months of completing their qualifications (ABS, 2005). This job-uptake trend provides an added stimulus to students when they consider the option of pursuing tertiary qualifications.

This initial research focuses on the Cairns region of Queensland Australia. This region houses around 240,000 people with approximately 130,000 people located around the regional hub city of Cairns. The Cairns region has many strategic advantages including: a cohesive cross-sector education cluster (CREDC, 2005); close location to major Asian markets with similar time zones, and linked by efficient, direct flight connections to Asia (Cairns Port Authority, 2005). In addition, a regional marketing approach (Advance Cairns, 2004), and a state focus (Clark, 2005; QETI, 2004) supports this educational expansion drive. Wide-ranging and highly creative marketing approaches are employed to deliver unique, differentiated, well-targeted, educational programs that offer regional solution pathways for international students. This coordinated, cross-sectorial marketing and promotional emphasis raises the international students’ awareness of this region, and increases awareness of other regional Australian educational opportunities.

The likelihood of international students replacing their traditional Australian Capital City destinations with regional educational solutions can be enhanced, particularly in the regions offering a wide range of appeal (both educational and non-educational) (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004). However, to maintain continued market growth, the international student supply chain must be cohesively developed into a value chain (Chaffey, 2004) that delivers a steady flow of highly-trained, highly-competent students with valuable employment skills. The balanced scorecard (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; 1992) approach incorporating appropriate financial, operational, customer targeting and information technology/information systems measures, offers a useful quality control tool to ensure that student targets are secured and maintained (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004a). This requires capital investment into a risk related venture, developing home-based capacity, and establishing diversity of product selection. The targeting of competent international students possessing adequate levels of English language proficiency, maintaining and improving the region’s competitive edge within targeted overseas markets, incorporating leading edge technologies and information flows, meeting recognised educational standards and responding to after-sales services, and delivering adequate...
skills training relevant to international requirements remain further areas where competence and unanimity is vital.

2.0 Data Collation and Analysis:

This initial exploratory study focuses primarily on the secondary schools sector. It is the precursor to a planned major regional study on international education. Previously, data capture concerning International Students in Regional Australia, especially at the secondary or high school level, has not been published (AEI, 2005). This initial study provides an international perspective on the pros and cons of the Cairns region, its international education infrastructure, and its delivery of suitably targeted educational offerings, along with pathways to higher education.

A series of surveys were used to capture data regarding international students in the Cairns region of Queensland Australia. Students in state and private secondary schools were surveyed to capture demographics, communications and selections, accommodation, choices, school ratings, and companionship. In all, 88 international secondary students were surveyed. This represented around 60% of the Cairns regions’ international secondary students. Respondent demographics included home country, school, gender, program, and year level. Communications included information sourcing via brochures, Internet, and agents and selection decision factors like cost, location and safety; accommodation included homestay factors; choices included desired targets like learning English, enjoying the lifestyle, and improving learning; school ratings included quality features like academic rigour, teaching standards, and facilities. Companionship was measured via overall assessment of the school, fellow students, the homestay family and the supporting educational environment. International educational agents, targeting private and government sectors, were also surveyed to determine their views on the regional destination of Cairns, when compared to the large population centres of southern Queensland. James Cook University, TNQ TAFE, private and government schools, EQI’s marketing department, Study Cairns, and ELICOS providers provided additional data sets including reasons why international students selected the Cairns region, what aspirations they held initially, and how their educational experience matched their expectations.

Table 1: Cairns International Secondary Student Future Educational Targets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Chinese, Thailand Students</th>
<th>South Korean Students</th>
<th>German, European Students</th>
<th>Japanese Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australian University / TAFE</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home country</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Combined Private and Government School surveys (Forbes & Hamilton, 2005)

The international secondary students in the Cairns region differ in their aspirations for educational achievement in Australia. Table 1 indicates the breakdown of key Cairns based international secondary student groups, and their future reasons for studying in Australia. Considering the Cairns region, Chinese, Thai and South Korean secondary international students in 2004 and 2005 are each targeting higher education goals, and each aims to complete a tertiary qualification. This group represents approximately 35% of the secondary school market. However the vast majority of secondary students in the region are here to improve their English, experience a new culture, and to absorb a unique environmentally sensitive lifestyle. Secondary students from China are focused on pursuing a tertiary program, and most (85%) are targeting a Queensland University; Japanese secondary students scan the nation in pursuit of their desired tertiary options; whilst German students are more focused on acquiring language skills, experiencing the local culture and enjoying the pristine environment. Many German students plan to return to home to undertake their tertiary studies. Hence, Chinese, Thai and South Korean students attending Cairns secondary schools should be targeted by regional tertiary institutions as potential future undergraduate students.
Table 2: Queensland and Cairns International Student Numbers in Key Sectors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University &amp; TAFE (Tertiary)</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Secondary versus Total (Tertiary &amp; Secondary)</th>
<th>ELICOS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>33363</td>
<td>5985</td>
<td>39348</td>
<td>15.2% 13122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairns</td>
<td>370 (1.1%)</td>
<td>150 (2.5%)</td>
<td>520 (1.3%)</td>
<td>28.8% 982* (FTE’s)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS, 2005 & Cummings, 2005

* 982 is the Cairns full time equivalents figure for the ELICOS sector

Comparing the Cairns region to the data for the State of Queensland for the 2003 – 2004 year, a different mix of international students was observed. This information is displayed in Table 2. VET and university international students totaled 370, secondary school international students totaled 150, and ELICOS international students totaled 5,000 (or 982 FTE’s). The Cairns region trains significant numbers of ELICOS students, but data recording is not student VISA based, and hence cannot be directly compared with AEI data. However, university students and secondary school international students are directly comparable, contributing only 1.3% to the State of Queensland’s international student market. Across Queensland, international secondary students account for 15.2% of the secondary and tertiary (university and TAFE) market, yet in Cairns secondary schools accounts for 28.9% of the local market. When long term international student programs are considered, several explanations arise including: the tertiary sector may be lacking in its international student attractive ability, or the tertiary sector may be directing its international students to other locations, or the secondary sector may be marketing itself more effectively.

The Cairns region also hosts a large number of secondary student study tours for international destinations. The Cairns region, with a population of just over 240,000 (Whyte, 2004), hosts a similar number of international secondary student study tours as does Brisbane – the Queensland State Capital City. In short, the Cairns region provides an unusual mix of international student study opportunities and capacities, and warrants investigation.

Table 3: International Secondary Student Perceptions of Cairns as a Regional Destination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilities (%)</th>
<th>Companionship (%)</th>
<th>Infrastructure (%)</th>
<th>Experience (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Schools differentiated (70%)</td>
<td>Students friendly (50%)</td>
<td>Orientation programs (12%)</td>
<td>Enjoy locality (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good facilities (40%)</td>
<td>Teachers helpful (20%)</td>
<td>Guidance very good (50%)</td>
<td>Feel welcome (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good computing (20%)</td>
<td>Homestay excellent (60%)</td>
<td>Academically not tough enough (10%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun place to be (15%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Would encourage others to attend (68%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Combined Survey Data Private and Government School Surveys, 2005

Table 3 summarizes unsolicited comments of 50 secondary international students, and their overall perception of studying in this region. International students indicate they enjoy having choice of schools, each with good facilities, and at least one with quality Information technology programs. They believed orientation programs were important, especially the initial contact where a feeling of being ‘wanted’ and ‘accepted’ was important. They liked their student peers to be both friendly and accepting, and their teachers to be both helpful and demanding. At times when assistance was
required a quality support network of guidance and administration was valued. This region was seen by international students from across the world as accommodating, with little bullying, and was a region that they would encourage other international students to choose as their destination of choice.

Secondary students attending schools in the Cairns region tend to be drawn from China (31%), Japan (17%), Korea (15%), Germany (13%), Thailand (5%) and other destinations including PNG. Tertiary students at university are predominantly from the USA (50%), Norway (8%), Germany (9%), Netherlands (4%) and Japan (4%), and tertiary students from TAFE are predominantly from Asia (42%) – mainly Japan (27%), Europe (33%), UK/Ireland (12%) and PNG (11%). This variation is due to the differing targeting strategies employed by the various marketing teams. This mix suggests individual institutions pursue their own marketing agenda rather than adopting cohesive, supportive, same target market approaches. Thus although each institution is a member of the regional educational cluster it appears that their marketing arms do not work as a united cross-sectorial team in positioning the region to maximise their discovered markets. Nevertheless, specific markets for one educational sector may not be suitable for another. For example, the ELICOS sector does not target Chinese students because of tough VISA requirements.

Secondary and tertiary marketing approaches vary widely, and potential international students gather their information from a wide variety of sources. In regional Australia word of mouth (from friends, family and relatives) remains an important deciding factor. International educational agents make significant contributions to international student numbers in Cairns. Links between the educational providers and such agents must be maintained, developed and shared if their contributions are to be maximised. The Internet is a growing source of international students, and educational websites must be of high quality, informative and interactive. Roadshows, and other external exposure events - where educational providers display and elucidate their offerings to the global market, remain important sources of international student recruitment for the university, whilst word of mouth, agents and the Internet are key recruitment tools for TAFE.

Table 4: Cairns International Student Regional Education Information Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How International Students Heard About Cairns Region Educational Offerings</th>
<th>Secondary (%)</th>
<th>University &amp; TAFE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friend/Family/Relative</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agent Recommendation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College, Uni or Educational Event</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Article</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (incl agent’s website)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Combined Survey Data JCU & Private and Government School Surveys, 2005

International students source information regarding Australian educational offerings via a diverse range of sources. This information is captured in Table 4. Overall international secondary students and their families still seek high levels of personal educational guidance and counselling before they choose a country, locality and suitable school that meets their study requirements. Most families consider several countries before they make a decision. For Cairns, international secondary students typically evaluate Canada, New Zealand and the USA against Australian offerings. In addition they typically consider Queensland schools against New South Wales schools and private schools against government schools. Hence the clientele is generally well informed of the educational choices and products that are on offer within a region, a state and a country.

After assessing the options the quality of the educational programs available at school level is investigated. Typically this involves regional brochures, school website visits, and a battery of emails to check on a raft of educational accommodation and safety factors. The Cairns region surveys show that 62% of international students believe the education offerings are very good compared to their home country, and that 48% rate their individual course programs as very good (and 81% as good).
Course offerings and program robustness is an area in which schools targeting the international student market must deliver, and constant attention is necessary to improving and displaying (on their website and promotional materials) the schools enhanced educational mix.

Associated with the educational product is the school support infrastructure – administrators, international student managers, coordinators, homestay coordinators, guidance officers, mentor teachers, ESL teachers, specialist teachers, and school staff. International students value such items as additional homework and teacher support. This helps keeps them on-task and maintaining academic achievement as required by the Department of Immigration Multi-cultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA). International students in the Cairns region are generally well satisfied with their schools with 72% rating them as very good. Their evaluations are thorough - they even comment on toilet facilities, access to a microwave and extra curricular activities. Most popular activities include sport (30%), music (16%), science and new technologies (14%), and 81% participate in at least one extra curricular activity. Hence a school targeting international students must deliver on all fronts, and it must heavily promote its offerings. The winning of international students to regional destinations remains a challenge. Some preliminary information offered to the researchers indicated that only 3% to 10% of international student enquiries actually lead to the student selecting Cairns as their place of study.

Table 5: International Student Selection of Cairns as their Place of Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Cairns Selected As Place Of Study</th>
<th>Secondary (%)</th>
<th>Tertiary &amp; TAFE (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location / Environment</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses / Classes / Quality of Education</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Living Environment</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations / Friends Live in Region</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low Cost of Education</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheap Cost of Living</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Combined Survey Data JCU & Private and Government School Surveys, 2005

Table 5 suggests the Cairns region’s environment remains a key drawcard amongst many students. Europeans are particularly imbued with the iconic natural attraction of the ‘Great Barrier Reef’ and the tropical rainforests, and many Asians indicate it is amongst the factors they consider. Safety is also important to many students. University students also consider factors like adventure, interesting environment, small friendly place to study, and even SCUBA diving. Educational courses, and the cost of education, whilst important, are not the sole objective of students planning to access this region. The region has been strongly marketed as an international tourism destination, and students are often knowledgeable and well informed, seeking these options with their chosen educational package. Hence, when preparing an international education sales pitch for the Cairns regional factors like the environment, climate, safety, low cost living, and other added value items should be included.

3.0 Discussion:

This preliminary research suggests a challenging business environment exists, particularly at the secondary level. Within the Cairns region, secondary international students from Asia generally seek high quality educational programs, a safe, non-threatening, yet competitive environment, and a feeling of acceptance within the local community. They come to Australia to learn English and experience a western culture at a relatively cheap price. These Asian secondary students seek strong educational support from their teachers and often seek additional homework to improve their academic opportunities. Asian students generally target university, or TAFE options. European secondary students generally have a different agenda. They come to Cairns to experience a lifestyle, to be immersed in the English language, or to study specific niche subject like marine science.
Another significant secondary market is those attending English Language Colleges, coming initially for short periods to develop English language skills. Some of these students then articulate into the private and government secondary school systems, and some then progress to tertiary institutions. This market needs to be nurtured and drawn into the regional educational net.

Higher education students again come with a variety of agendas – to learn English, to make money, to gain a tertiary qualification, to move from a home culture into a new cultural environment, to enjoy a lifestyle, to improve overall qualifications, and to qualify for permanent residence in Australia. This category of tertiary international students understands their expectations well. Hence, open and regular communication channels must be operationalised.

International student education displays similar motivators to those applicable in the student tourism sector. Both exhibit similar reasons to move from the home country to another country. It is suggested by Shoham, et al. (Shoham, Schrage & Van Eeden, 2004) that marketers should not consider students as a single market segment worldwide. They suggest that nationality, age, school type, leisure preferences and travel options all affect student choices. Moreover, standardised, country-wide marketing strategies do not necessarily meet target markets. They conclude that adaptation to niche groups is a more appropriate strategy. For example, tailored offerings like promoting sport to Israeli students would be misguided because they prefer nature-related activities, while South African students tend to travel to places where they can stay with friends or relatives. Similarly, offering performing arts to Chinese students is equally unattractive. Hence appropriate market intelligence is a vital ingredient for success. Benchmarking lean sustainable practices is one mechanism to deliver such intelligence (Comm & Mathaisel, 2005). Regular agent interaction remains another key success ingredient, especially when marketing secondary educational products. Here, constant monitoring and updating of options, and maintaining quality programs, and quality homestay environments, and student support initiatives should be delivered.

The Cairns community has embraced international students as a means of broadening the region’s cultural awareness and understanding of Asia. European students have easy access to pursue their desired studies in tropical Australia, and often complement their education with environmental experiences. Latin American students seek a friendly, enjoyable, learning experience, with adventure – based opportunities, embedded within a wonderfully warm and sunny climate. Thus, the expectations of the various student sectors, needs to be strategically targeted, and aspects of the educational product may at times, be ’customerised’ (Hamilton and Selen, 2003) to appeal to specific international students and their interests.

4.0 Conclusion:

Marketing regional educational packages to international students requires the matching of provider market deliverables to those of prospective student expectations. It suggests that regional perspectives (like safety; environment; extra curricular options), educational product differentiation and initiatives (like robotics; diving; environmental/marine studies), agent relationships, and quality educational programs and courses (like international accreditation; Level 4 Certificate courses; tertiary pathways; exemplar music and science) may act as international student drawcards to regional Australian destinations. Regions wishing to develop international student programs at the schools level will likely require a regional manager. The regional manager will drive the strategic, operational and marketing processes (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004). Working key regional strategic reference groups, and then implementing: smart regional cluster strategies; quality communication technologies; solid government, international business and targeted marketing partnerships; and tertiary-secondary cross-sectorial collaboration, may further promote growth in regional international student numbers.

This research articulates levels of understanding regarding international student choice for regional Australian destinations – particularly Cairns. This opens pathways for a broader regional understanding of the regional international education market. It also highlights the successes of the region’s secondary international student marketing initiatives. In addition, it demonstrates that appropriately packaged educational programs that specifically target relevant markets for the regional destination successfully capture, and satisfy, individual international students.
5.0 References:


