
Foreign students abandon Western Australia

EXCLUSIVEBy **VICTORIA LAURIE**, SENIOR REPORTER7:30PM SEPTEMBER 10, 2019 •  97 COMMENTS

Foreign students are deserting Western Australia as a place to study, and education experts say the commonwealth's new incentive scheme for students to move to regional cities is likely to be the nail in the coffin for the industry.

Perth-based colleges and universities are reporting a substantial downturn in students opting to come to the state, with TAFE enrolments down nearly 60 per cent on 2015 and WA's intake of foreign fee-paying students dropping from 11 per cent of total market share to only 5 per cent.

Experts say the problem lies in the state's ineligibility to offer a new range of incentives under proposed changes to immigration and population policy changes, announced in March by Prime Minister Scott Morrison and due to be rolled out in November.

Under new federal measures for visa-holding students who may want to stay on after graduation, students can apply for a new post-study work visa if they complete their degree in all regional areas except Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, the Gold Coast and Perth.

The aim is to address congestion in major cities and redistribute fee-paying foreign students to less populated parts of Australia. Incentives include a \$15,000 scholarship, an extra year of work rights added to their visa, and the promise of fast-tracked visa processing.

Study Perth chief executive Phil Payne said WA's education industry suffered its first blow in 2017 when the Labor government asked the commonwealth to remove the state from the Regional Sponsored Migration Scheme, upholding an election promise to protect jobs for local workers.

The removal of regional status denied foreign students access to five extra visa points that could be claimed for studying in a regional area.

Perth was trailing other states in its international student intake, Mr Payne said. "This commonwealth measure gives a further disincentive to choose Perth and puts it at a further

competitive disadvantage,” he said.

Mr Payne said the state government launched an action plan in October last year to remedy the drop in student numbers, with an additional \$4.5m across three years for recruitment drives. “But without new policy settings, changing student expectations will be compromised,” he said.

Principal of English language training college Phoenix Academy Robynne Walsh said she has slashed staff numbers by 20 per cent. She warned that enrolments in pre-university and language tuition would decline further unless realistic incentives were offered to students to remain in Perth post-study.

“This state is no longer attractive to international students,” she said. “Studying in a region that provides a possibility of a migration pathway provides a great ‘buy before you try’ opportunity.”

Ms Walsh said Perth, which once had a healthy per capita share of foreign enrolments, still employed more than 12,000 people in foreign student-related education and produced \$1.8bn of income.

“But whole families are now packing up and leaving so students can study in places like Adelaide and Hobart,” she said. International student enrolments in WA up to June this year amount to only about 39,000 out of more than 700,000 nationally.

Ms Walsh said the decline in WA’s market share equated to a loss of \$2bn to the state economy.

In June, Premier Mr McGowan wrote to the commonwealth asking for Perth to be classed as regional for the purpose of being eligible to offer the new regional study incentives.

Education Minister Sue Ellery also urged the commonwealth to adopt “a more nuanced approach” to population and migration policy settings. She said WA, unlike other states, had few regional centres outside metropolitan Perth where international students could study.

“To exclude Perth from the incentive scheme for small and regional cities will be catastrophic, and a massive advantage is being handed to Adelaide, Hobart, Canberra and Darwin,” she said.

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