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Australia prospers

It was a good year for tertiary providers in Australia in 2007, with annual growth in international enrolments of nine per cent. **AMY BAKER** finds out why international recruitment has continued to prosper.

Overall our international enrolments have increased every year," says Jorge Baron, Regional Team Leader (South East Asia, Europe, North and South America) for Tafe NSW, which represents many college campuses. Tafe institutes are government-run colleges providing vocational syllabuses that offer technical and further education (hence the name, Tafe).

Baron underlines the reason for this success across the institutions he represents – targeted professional training that can lead to permanent migration is a pivotal factor in Australia's continued ascendancy as an international student recruiter. "We have noticed growth in the main international markets with many students focusing on courses that allow them to apply for Australian migration," Baron explains, adding, "Numbers have increased due to the changes to immigration rules as well as to demand for higher education from many key markets."

Other education providers have an equally positive business experience to recount. "Over the past few months [of 2008], numbers have increased dramatically compared with the start of the year," reports Shane Mackintosh, Chief Executive Officer of Mackintosh College in Palm Beach, QLD, who points to vocational programming as the main incentive to study. Hospitality management, cookery, hairdressing and business are the most popular programmes with internationals, he says.

However, this is not Australia's only appeal, according to Benjamin Breeds of the Australasian College of Natural Therapies (ACNT) in Sydney, NSW, which is part of the Think Education Group. In his experience, as well as programmes that lead to permanent residency or other visa benefits, well priced, flexible programmes that allow students to work outside of their studies also catch students' attention.

"Currently, our fitness programmes are very popular with the South American – particularly Brazilian – and East European students," he says. "These students are primarily price motivated, and this programme is our cheapest. It does still offer a good mixture of practical skills, price, and relevance, both in Australia and abroad, where comparable fitness qualifications are often taught to a standard below the Australian system."

He adds, "Having a qualification in English is also a great advantage for [students], especially if it's related to their qualifications back home."

Baron refers to changes in immigration policy this year, but this has brought some negative effects as well as advantages in certain countries. Breeds highlights the example of Colombia: with the country's official assessment level increasing from two to three for vocational education and training (VET) – which means stronger stipulations for visa applicants – the market has dried up for that sector. "It's now impractical if not impossible for Colombians to take up positions at ACNT, whereas since September 2007, ACNT had been experiencing significant growth in the market," he says.

In general, however, Breeds also reports a general hike in numbers although he paints a different picture for the Asian market, which is the strongest source market for higher and further education in Australia. "We've noticed a general decline in Asia, but a general increase in most other regions," he says.

The official figures released by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, comparing statistics for 2006 and 2007, however, show a 9.5 per cent growth in Asian enrolments in that period. At other education providers, Asian students remain at the forefront of enrolment trends. Janet Holen, International Marketing Coordinator for Wollongong College Australia in Wollongong, NSW, reports that Vietnamese and Indonesian intake has increased significantly.

Overall, top nationalities at Wollongong College Australia – part of the University of Wollongong in NSW – are Chinese, Thai, Saudi, Japanese and Korean.

On a national level, top nationalities in 2007 were primarily Asian, with China taking the lion's share of international student intake, followed by Singapore, Malaysia and India. India's market share has declined while Singapore has seen gains since 2005 when we last reported on tertiary trends (see ETM, March 2007, page 55). Outside of Asia, significant student source countries in 2007 were UAE, USA and Germany.

Baron comments that in his experience, "China and India are driving international education in Australia as many students seek migration pathways". In order to further tap this demand, Tafe NSW has introduced a new course in fashion that allows students to apply for migration and a diploma-to-degree option for a community welfare course.

As well as positioning courses to have the most impact, in terms of marketing internationally, many providers point to using agencies and fair participation as essential recruitment tactics. "Marketing staff attend exhibitions or agent interview sessions throughout the year," says Holen. "We also have in-country representatives who recruit on our behalf, and changes [to this strategy] include further commitment to newer markets such as Vietnam."

With global financial turmoil, educators are understandably cautious in their prognosis for the future, but given Australia's track record in growth and helpful (in the main) immigration and migration framework, there is also quiet confidence from some quarters. "All indications are that enrolments from both domestic and international students will continue to increase," says Maxine Hawker at The Hotel School Sydney, NSW.

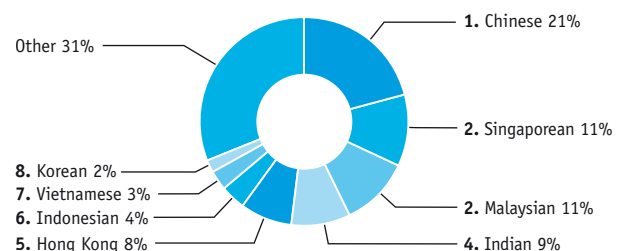
Mackintosh notes that he had expected international numbers to double in 2009, prior to economic uncertainty, but is reluctant to know what to expect now. And Baron observes, "I think the current financial crisis will have an impact on enrolments with many students holding off on education until conditions improve. The exchange rate will also have an impact on our enrolments so we are working closely with agents on this." But he sums up, "Even with all these barriers, I think enrolments will continue to grow." ■



PHOTOGRAPH: TAFE NSW

"Top nationalities in 2007 were primarily Asian, with China taking the lion's share, followed by Singapore, Malaysia and India"

Top nationalities in Australian tertiary institutions, 2007



Source: Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. Figures rounded to nearest whole.