

Encouraging outbound student mobility: An update from Australian Education International

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Abstract

Recognising the numerous benefits of an overseas study experience, the Australian Government encourages young Australians to immerse themselves in social and academic cultures of other countries by undertaking an international study experience. Outbound student mobility can: help address skill shortages through improved global skills and knowledge; ensure that Australia keeps pace with global industry trends and competitiveness; and help to build human capital and capacity to contribute to productivity gains.

A number of Australian Government funded projects and programs currently being undertaken seek to support Australian tertiary education providers in further developing and diversifying their linkages with counterpart institutions overseas and also facilitate student and staff mobility. Among these projects have been studies on the current practices of outbound mobility in Australian tertiary institutions. These studies have acknowledged that the outbound mobility of Australian students is gathering momentum.

Keywords

Outbound student Mobility, Australian Government, Australian Education International.

Introduction

In Australia the benefits and value of an international study experience to individual students, institutions, the community and economy have long been acknowledged. This acknowledgement has been matched with a substantial will by the Australian Government, institutions and the education sector in general to increase the mobility of Australian students. This has led to the profile and level of resourcing of outbound mobility being raised within institutions and a number of Australian Government funded projects and programs being undertaken. Among these projects have been studies on the current practices of outbound student mobility in Australian tertiary institutions.

This paper draws on a variety of sources to give an overview of the current trends in outbound mobility in Australia. First, it provides insights into the Australian Government's perspective of outbound mobility. Second, it looks at the key findings of the 2008 institutional survey of outbound mobility practices at Australian universities, which was a Government funded initiative. It then explores the growth in outbound mobility within the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) sectors. A discussion of the challenges that face the sector in expanding current outbound mobility initiatives and developing new and innovative approaches follows. The paper concludes with the 'where to from here' for outbound mobility in Australia and the Australian Government's commitment to the further encouragement of outbound student mobility.

The Australian Government perspective

International education has been high on the agenda at both the state and federal level for decades. The Australian Government is committed to continuing to improve the quality of education that Australian graduates receive so that Australian business remains internationally competitive into the future. Outbound mobility contributes to this goal by providing students with

intercultural competence as well as unique skills and knowledge that only comes when an individual is immersed in another society. Outbound mobility gives Australian students the opportunity to become global citizens, exposing them to different and unfamiliar situations, different approaches to problem solving and different ways of relating to others. The Australian Government supports outbound mobility because as the cohort of Australian graduates with an international study experience grows so too does Australia's competitiveness. The nation's ability to be a leading knowledge economy, to have the skilled people that are needed to compete globally and to deal with the challenges of the future from security to climate change will depend on how well our citizens can communicate and collaborate on the world stage.

These sentiments are reflected in one of the key themes that emerged from the Australia 2020 Summit. The Summit's final report¹ cites a '*concerted campaign to develop regional literacy in Australia (including the development of language, skills and cultural awareness)*' as a priority. This was a recurring topic across a number of the 2020 discussions on the importance of encouraging Australians to 'live, study and work in Asia', which would in turn foster 'international good citizens' with increased diplomacy skills and the ability to 'promote a culture of peace locally, nationally and internationally'.

The Australian Government's commitment to outbound mobility was articulated by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education the Hon Julia Gillard MP at the AEI Industry Forum in April 2008, when she emphasised the importance of Australians studying overseas as part of the larger Education Revolution agenda:

People connections ... are vital to the future prosperity of our country – constituting part of what's known as the 'global supply chain' and ensuring that Australia is truly 'globally connected' going into the future.... Many benefits flow our way, as our own students study overseas in greater numbers and are exposed to other cultures and education systems. Such exchanges deepen and improve our own education system and I look forward to seeing a real growth in numbers of Australian students taking the opportunity to study overseas. (The Hon Julia Gillard MP, 2008)

The Australian Government is contributing support and in some cases funding, for a number of ongoing programs and also recent benchmarking studies conducted by AIM Overseas, the Australian Universities International Directors' Forum (AUIDF) and the International Education Association of Australia (IEAA). This body of research has provided:

- more accurate statistical data than has been available to date;
- a snapshot of the demographic make-up and nature of outbound mobility in Australia; and
- an overview of the current outbound student mobility practices at Australian universities.

The findings of these studies will help inform Australian Government policy directions and program delivery to support the sector to increase the level of outbound mobility by Australian students.

Key findings of the 2008 institutional survey of outbound mobility practices at Australian universities

In early 2008, the Australian Government through AIM Overseas surveyed Australian universities to map the current trends and practices in student mobility across the country. Findings from the survey suggest a growing commitment to outbound mobility across the sector, as staff and students become more aware of the value of an outbound mobility experience.

According to the survey results universities are interested in providing more and varied overseas study experiences for their students. Ninety seven percent of institutions promote the importance of outbound mobility opportunities for students via their international strategies and, in 80 percent of institutions, responsibility for the development and implementation of international strategy is at the Pro-Vice Chancellor or Deputy-Vice Chancellor levels. This demonstrates that senior management is increasingly driving the development of formal strategies and policies supporting and promoting outbound mobility initiatives.

Many universities are seeking to make their programs more internationalised through increased opportunities to study overseas. Some institutions are even including mandatory overseas study experiences in their undergraduate courses. Overall, study opportunities are expanding into new areas such as: short-term programs; study tours; international summer schools; internships; volunteer activities; and clinical placements.

The survey figures indicate that despite the barriers and challenges identified, the overall approach of Australian universities to outbound student mobility is being given significant emphasis. There is an increasing level of interest in outbound mobility programs at both the academic and upper management levels. In a positive step towards addressing numerous challenges to outbound mobility, Australian universities are developing new opportunities for students, which are being included in business plans for the next 12 months; these include partnership expansions, varied study options and increased communication through publicity and marketing. All of these efforts have translated into proven positive results for the outbound mobility of Australian students.

¹ Australia 2020 Summit – Final Report, 2008. <http://www.australia2020.gov.au/>.

Growth in outbound mobility

Globally, student mobility has grown considerably over the past 25 years. In the 2004 UK International Student Mobility report,² the author states, '1.8 million students were studying outside their country of origin in 2000. This figure is projected to rise to 7.2 million by 2025'. The number of Australian students included in those statistics has been growing steadily in recent years; this statement is supported by the findings of benchmarking studies recently undertaken.

The 2007 AUIDF study³ found that nearly six percent of undergraduates in 37 participating Australian universities undertake an international experience by the time they complete their degrees and in 2007, of the 230,295 completing students, a total of 10,718, at all levels, undertook an international study experience. Of that total, 8,354 were undergraduate students, suggesting that 5.8 percent of completing undergraduate students have some form of outbound mobility experience. In a similar study compiled with 2005 data⁴, 33 universities reported a total of 5,577 international study experiences undertaken by undergraduates in Australian universities and 117,315 undergraduate completions, suggesting that 4.8 percent of completing undergraduate students undertook international study experiences in 2005.

By comparison, the United States has uptake of outbound mobility activities of approximately 11 percent⁵. In 2006, Canada reported that a total of 2.2 percent of their tertiary students studied abroad⁶. Although exact international comparisons are difficult given the vast differences in data collection, methodology and reporting it is evident that Australia is experiencing year on year growth in outbound mobility and that even our current level of overseas study is strong. This is particularly the case when you consider that some researchers estimate that the Australian data on outbound mobility may be understated by as much as 15 percent.

The VET sector is also increasing its focus on outbound mobility to address the low rate of participation. While there are some innovative programs and partnerships being undertaken, the sector and government is working through the approaches best suited to the VET environment and how to facilitate the wider adoption and sustainability of outbound mobility programs. A recent report⁷ prepared by the Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts on behalf of the Australian Government noted the following benefits of outbound mobility to vocational education and training providers:

- enhanced bilateral and multilateral networks and partnerships;
- enhanced institutional positioning and demand for programs;
- increased organisational awareness of international activities and opportunities;
- professional development for educational staff;
- globally aware graduates trained with up to date international trends and practices; and
- well rounded professional and sustainable internationalised education programs.

The growing trend within tertiary institutions to develop new and innovative outbound mobility opportunities, customised to their students' needs, is indicative of an increased awareness of the value and benefits obtained through outbound mobility.

Challenges to expanding outbound mobility

Despite the recent growth in students participating in overseas study experiences there are still challenges to expanding programs further. The common barriers identified throughout the research include:

- cost;
- a lack of awareness on behalf of students of the opportunities available;
- language and cultural barriers; and
- insufficient data collection.

In order to address the lack of awareness for Australian tertiary students, their parents and educators in the higher education and VET sectors, the Australian Government developed the study overseas web portal (www.studyoverseas.gov.au). The portal consolidates information about overseas study opportunities for Australian students into one easy-to-access site. Visitors to the portal will find a range of information on topics such as: the value and benefits of studying overseas; financial assistance and scholarship opportunities; and general tips and information on travelling overseas. Visitors to the portal can also read the personal experiences of Australian students who have had the opportunity to study overseas.

²International Student Mobility, 2004, Report by the University of Sussex and the University of Dundee. British Council.

³AUIDF Abstract, 2007, *Outgoing International Mobility of Australian University Students*.

⁴Olsen, A 2008, 'International Mobility of Australian University Students: 2005', *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Apr 2008; vol. 0: pp. 1028315308314939v1.

⁵Open Doors, 2007, US Students Studying Abroad. www.opendoors.iienetwork.org.

⁶Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007, *Canadian universities and international student mobility*.

⁷DEEWR, 2008, *Progressing Outbound Mobility in the Vocational Education and Training Sector*, unpublished.

The second phase of the Study Overseas portal, expected early 2009, will incorporate: specific information on destination countries; targeted Australian provider information and more detailed information on overseas study opportunities for students in the VET sector.

To assist the sector to respond effectively to other identified challenges and facilitate greater student mobility by Australians the Australian Government has initiated and/or sponsored a wide range of additional activities such as:

- Participation in the National Forum on Outbound Mobility roundtables in 2006/07, the roundtables were a series of industry lead discussions held to examine the major issues impacting the mobility of Australian students. One of the major issues identified was the absence of consistent, research-based information regarding attitudes towards student mobility in Australian universities.
- The EU/Australia Cooperation in Higher Education and VET projects, which began in 2003, offers the opportunity for Australian students in higher education and VET to undertake a period of study at a partner institution in the European Union. The project aims to promote understanding between the peoples of the EU and Australia and improve the quality of human resource development. In 2007, The EU and Australia signed a Joint Declaration on cooperation in education and training which sought to further develop this key bilateral relationship for Australia.
- The Australian Government with funding through the Strategic National Initiatives program, allocated \$60,000 towards the VET Outbound Mobility Pilot Projects. These projects aimed to encourage greater awareness of the opportunities available in the VET sector for outbound mobility and increase participation in student mobility in the VET sector.
- Australian Education International is currently developing the program guidelines for a new category under the Endeavour Awards, the Endeavour VET Outbound Mobility Program. The aim of the program is to increase the number of Australian VET students undertaking an international study opportunity and increase the level of partnership activity between Australian education and training providers and/or industry and their international counterparts.

The Australian Government also contributes approximately \$5.5 million per year in financial support for three International Student Exchange Programs: the Australian University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Program (UMAP); the Endeavour Student Exchange Program; and the Endeavour Cheung Kong Student Exchange Program. These programs support the Government's objective of building international linkages between Australian and overseas institutions and enriches the experience of students.

The introduction of the OS-HELP Commonwealth loan scheme in 2005 has also encouraged eligible undergraduate students to undertake some of their course of study overseas.

Conclusion

The outbound mobility of Australian students has a positive impact on the individual, their tertiary institutions and the economy. Outbound mobility can: help address skill shortages through improved global skills and knowledge; ensure that Australia keeps pace with global industry trends and competitiveness; and can help to build human capital and capacity to contribute to productivity gains for Australia.

Recognising the numerous benefits of an overseas study experience the Australian Government supports outbound mobility because as the cohort of Australian graduates with an international study experience grows so too does Australia's economic prosperity.

Recent benchmarking demonstrates that the outbound mobility of Australian students is gathering momentum. The Australian Government, along with tertiary institutions and Australian business' are working together to build on this momentum and expand outbound mobility opportunities further to ensure Australia remains internationally competitive.