

# Education could offer

The state of tourism in WA is not as dire as it seems, industry leaders tell **Kate Emery**

In the fight to improve WA's tourism fortunes, international education is seen as one of the levers that could be pulled now to reap big benefits.

But the organisation tasked with implementing a new strategic plan to encourage more international students to the State receives barely a tenth of the funding of its Eastern States counterparts and employs the equivalent of just 6% people. This was one example of a roadblock preventing WA from capitalising on its tourism potential raised at the Australian Institute of Management WA and *The West Australian* CEO Voice round table this week.

Phoenix Academy principal Robynne Walsh said Perth's current crop of 51,000 international students was projected to hit 90,000 by 2020 "if we can turn it around". She said those students not only spent money on a day to day basis but were visited by friends and family, who also had tourist dollars to spend.

As an example of how the international student population could better be tapped as a resource she said industry could work with property development.

"Because every one of those affluent international students has a very wealthy father and he wants to invest and he wants to participate in our economy and I think that's where we have to use that leverage," she said.

She said students chose where to study based on where their friends and family were and employability. "That was the No.1: Can I get a part-time job, can I get an internship, can I get a start, can I get a professional placement?" she said.

Study Perth executive director Phil Payne said last year's creation of the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innova-



One of the great opportunities is to engage with the Aboriginal communities.



**Michelle Reynolds**, Rottneist Island Authority executive director



We shouldn't be working in silos.



**Robynne Walsh**, Phoenix Academy principal



That last quarter... has probably been the best quarter in Perth in more than a decade.



**Adam Barnard**, ADAMS managing director



I've always been full to the brim with hope for Aboriginal tourism.



**Noel Nannup**, Noongar elder



We've got to have tourist assets.



**Ross Dowling**, Edith Cowan University tourism professor



We're our own worst enemy.



**Anneke Brown**, Como The Treasury general manager



There's now 2000 purpose-built student accommodation beds under construction in the CBD.



**Gaye McMath**, City of Perth deputy chair commissioner



The sentiment in the industry is that this current calendar year has actually had quite a strong performance.



**Nathan Harding**, Tourism WA chairman



We have to make sure that we have the must-haves that any grown-up city should have... but we do need to have the distinctive.



**Marion Fulker**, Committee for Perth CEO



I think more formal integration between international tourism and international education is a no brainer.



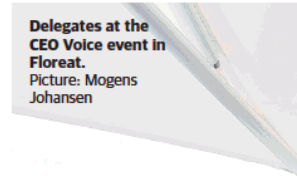
**Philip Payne**, Study Perth executive director



We've seen an extraordinary number of hotels either under construction or recently approved.



**Brad Pettit**, City of Fremantle mayor



tion, which includes international education, was "the big opportunity in tourism education".

A new strategic plan for international education in WA — eight years in the making — would be "absolutely vital". But while Study Perth has been identified as the vehicle to implement it, the group had less than \$2 million in funding.

By comparison, he said, the equivalent body in South Australia had "about ten times" the funding and in Victoria and

## THE CEO VOICE SERIES

Queensland "it's a factor of many tens more".

"At its last meeting the Study Perth board did identify this as an impediment to progress... and there are moves to obtain alternative funding sources," he said.

Regardless of where tourists come from, consensus was that

most of them wanted a "cultural experience" in WA but few got it.

Anecdotal evidence was supported by a recent WA Indigenous Tourism Operators Council research showing that while 78 per cent of visitors expressed an interest in Aboriginal tourism just 21 per cent participated in it.

Como The Treasury general manager Anneke Brown said her experience was that most guests wanted a cultural experience but she did not know where to send them.

# Quokkas, tennis stars and direct international flights but

**Gary Martin**



Is WA's tourism salvation about pitting the value of quokka selfies against Perth hosting the next Commonwealth Games in Australia or becoming the country's go-to destination for international students?

Yes, the quokka statement may sound glib.

But not when you think back to the Hopman Cup at the start of this year and the global attention Roger Federer drew to Perth and WA — first with his quokka selfie on

Rottneist, then a Hopman Cup-winning acceptance speech that was full of praise for WA as a tourist destination.

Federer's quokka selfie got 540,000 likes on Instagram and 419 online articles were written about it in 45 countries.

The old advertising adage says: money can't buy that sort of publicity. Or to quote the Mastercard commercial of years past, it was priceless.

Fast forward five months and we find ourselves questioning WA's approach to tourism.

Gone is the excitement generated by the Federer selfie.

International visitor numbers to the State are down, international

student numbers are greatly lagging those of east coast cities and Perth's flood of new hotels is opening up to visitor appetite that is significantly below that assumed in feasibility studies.

Not that international tourism is the only tourism dollar we are chasing — domestic tourism is also vital — but it is seen as a key barometer of the health of the State's tourism sector.

And last year, international tourists spent only \$2.2 billion in WA, or about \$100 million less than in 2016.

In all other States, international tourism spend was up sharply.

And just take the very public debate around the most appropriate

way the State should address the rising incidence of shark attacks.

I am not taking sides in the debate over how best to deal with this issue.

But I need to point out that at one level, one of the world's leading professional surf events is at risk and with it a lucrative tourism market.

At a broader level, shark attacks are horror stories for the tourism sector because they nullify the global appeal of the State's magnificent coastline.

So where to from here?

Does WA need to nail its flag of tourism success to the mast of the next Commonwealth Games to be held in Australia?

After all, we now have a world-class stadium. Or are these massive but short-lived tourism boosts best left to other States while we pursue smaller but widespread and tactically savvy strategies to attract sustainable tourism dollars?

Think about the benefits WA expects from Qantas' direct flights to London — you can now see Perth on the departure boards at Heathrow, which surely has tourism marketing value.

What about upgrading and expanding our port capacity across the State to attract more cruise ships.

Why is the expansion of Busselton airport — to turn it into

# a boost for WA tourism



proposed the establishment of geoparks — tourist attractions established around areas of geological significance — as a way of tying together indigenous tourism and ecotourism. Geoparks are widespread in Europe, Asia and the US.

“A geopark starts with geology but then looks for and uses that to tell a holistic story about how the geology and the climate have affected the plant and animals that grow there,” Professor Dowling said.

Despite recent figures show-

ing a drop in the number of both interstate and international tourists last year, many in the industry were upbeat on the back of what they said was a much better start to 2018.

Tourism WA chairman Nathan Harding said in the past tourism had been constrained by a lack of funding flexibility and budget uncertainty but he believed that had changed.

“The sentiment in the industry is that this current calendar year has actually had quite a strong performance,” he said.

“All of the hotels that I’ve spoken to had quite a strong start and others, I gather, spoke about Chinese New Year being the best it’s ever been.

“If you look at more leading indicators like the numbers for Rottneet, for example, they are very strong.”

Adam Barnard, managing director of ADAMS Coachlines, also struck a bullish note.

“That last quarter has probably been the best quarter in Perth in more than a decade,” he said.



**We’ve now got the world’s third largest fringe festival, we’ve got a magnificent arts festival and we should be selling that more to the world.**



**Marcus Canning, Fringe World CEO**



**It’s all very well to talk about accessibility . . . we’ve got to have an asset that keeps people here.**



**Alec Coles, WA Museum CEO**

## what’s the key to making WA a must-see tourist destination?

the international gateway to our famous South West — on hold?

Do we need a glitzy, big ticket tourist attraction in Perth such as the London Eye or a Guggenheim Museum? Or just a cable car to Kings Park?

Or is Perth already receiving too much attention at the expense of regional opportunities?

And what is our tourism message? Are we still the State of excitement? Are we more than just beautiful long, white sandy beaches?

Are the outback and indigenous cultural experiences the tourism calling card WA should focus on?

Should we take our lead from the past Kennett government in Victoria

and buy ourselves to sporting tourism premiership?

Or should we accept that we will always be little more than a stopover for tourists on the way east and make the most of that?

The only thing we will all agree on is that WA — for all its tourism potential — is not gaining maximum bang for its buck.

Maybe our collective efforts are misplaced or misdirected. Maybe the policy settings are wrong.

What appears certain is that the McGowan Government has realised that it might need to revisit its tourism strategy to deliver the desired results.

Much has been said and written about WA’s reliance on the

resources sector — particularly iron ore, oil and gas, and gold — and therefore our exposure to the vagaries of global commodity price cycles and the booms and busts they bring.

Equally, we often talk about turning WA into Asia’s food bowl — a somewhat over-exaggerated ambition given so much of our State is unsuitable to high-yielding agricultural pursuits.

That does not mean we should give up on expanding and upgrading our agricultural sector and make the most of our sought-after status as a clean place to produce food.

Neither should we ignore the massive benefits that come from a well thought-out and executed

international education industry. And think of the super tourists — those who come to WA from overseas to visit family members or friends studying here.

It is the ultimate multiplier effect — send your daughter or son from Indonesia, China or India to Perth to study, then visit them on a regular basis.

This is tourism dollar gold. We all know how valuable and important a healthy tourism sector is to WA, to diversify away from the twin planks of resources and agriculture. But how do we get there?

As we sit here today, tourism makes up about 2 per cent of WA’s gross state product and employs

about 5 per cent of our workforce. It is a low base from which, surely, improvements can be made. But the WA Government statistics for last year make for sober reading.

Overnight visitor numbers fell one per cent to 10.6 million compared with an annual average growth of 4 per cent over the past 10 years.

As mentioned earlier, spending by international visitors in WA was down almost 6 per cent to \$2.2 billion, even though the number of international visitors fell just one per cent to 946,100.

Domestic visitor numbers were also down one per cent to 9.6 million and their aggregate spending down 7 per cent to \$5.3 billion.