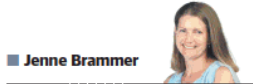


'Closed sign' keeps State



Jenne Brammer

WA punches below its weight in attracting international students because of unhelpful policies and ineffective international marketing, education experts say.

Speaking at an Australian Institute of Management WA and *The West Australian* CEO Voice roundtable this week, Curtin University Vice-Chancellor Deborah Terry said WA had 11 per cent of Australia's population but just 6 per cent of its international students.

"Going back 10 years, this was sitting at 10 per cent when WA had 10 per cent of Australia's population," she said.

"The universities are working as much as we possibly can in collaboration in this area, but there are some policy settings working against us. Those issues are understood by the State Government, it's whether we can see any changes."

WA Private Education and Training Industry Association chairman Malcolm Baigent said WA had a "closed sign" up in terms of international perception.

"WA institutions are working more closely than they ever have before, making joint investment into strategies to try to bring more students into WA," he said.

"Study Perth and the State don't have the level of investment required, then the WA Government makes changes to skilled migration and to the skilled occupation list and unfortunately WA now has a closed sign on it, according to agents and people we talk to."

He said a broader challenge was that international education was a mature market.

"It's not like you can go out to China or other parts of the world and find untapped pockets of international students," Mr Baigent said.

Stanley College chief executive Alberto Tassone said a further challenge, particularly regarding China, was that Perth was seen as a mining town.

"In China, mining is the lowest level of achievement one can have," he said. "It's considered dirty and dusty and nothing to do with the future and technol-

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We need the whole education sector from school to university and beyond to be delivering in a common framework.
Arshad Omari

The Perth proposition should be around technology rather than mining.
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ogy. We need to work on the reputation of Perth as something but a mining town."

Phoenix Academy principal Robynne Walsh suggested the Perth proposition should be around technology. "If mining is something considered in China as dirty and an undesirable profession, then the focus should be on the technology behind the success of mining," she said.

Ms Walsh said she also wanted to see the term "tradies" abol-

ished. Germany and Switzerland used the term "professional diplomas" instead.

"I really hate that term. We have to stop using it," she said.

On domestic and international students, University of WA deputy vice-chancellor David Sadler said expectations were changing. "If we look at the whole retraining, upskilling and the fact jobs of the future will be fundamentally different, we need to think much more about

other types of education, including micro credentials and short courses, as well as the traditional structure," he said.

Study Perth executive director Phil Payne noted a recent Queensland research trip where it was clear international education was well integrated with workforce planning, migration, tourism, trade, investment, TAFE and schools, as well as local authorities.

"They clearly knew each other

very well, knew each other's business and were working in harmony to the advantage of the international education sector," he said.

"Only the State Government can co-ordinate those players but they have to identify international education as a priority.

"All the successful States have international education in trade or economic development, because of its significant status as an export revenue generator.

For education providers, it's all about winning



Gary Martin

WA is finally emerging from one of the most significant economic downturns this State has ever experienced.

This, of course, after one of — if not the — most extraordinary boom WA has witnessed.

Recovery appears under way. But alarms bells are already

ringing just as unemployment levels in this State are receding.

Despite the positive backdrop, tertiary education providers are facing arguably the toughest conditions they have encountered in some time.

Federal and State governments are reining in spending and the higher education and vocational education and training sectors have not escaped cuts. And students themselves

have become more selective and demanding in what courses they want and how and when they want to study.

The most pressing funding issue has, of course, been Canberra's decision to cap student place funding for universities, which effectively ends a demand-driven funding system.

Funding for TAFE is faring no better and it is clear that it is becoming increasingly difficult to attract the funding support at State and Federal

level that was afforded to vocational education and training in the past.

This, in turn, has created scenarios in some segments of the education sector where the course focus is driven by availability of funding, rather than suitability and relevance to the next generation of Australia's workforce.

The end result may be lots of graduates but many of them with newly acquired skills that do not enhance their employability.

And as is so often the case with education in a State such as WA where the economy follows the peak-and-trough cycle, course trends can lag the world of employment opportunities.

Which is why the higher education sector frequently experiences a surge in enrolments in particular courses during an economic uptick, only for students to graduate into an economy that is past its peak and heading south again. Think geologists,

lagging in luring students

VOICE

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Eeva Leinonen
Vocational training and universities are joined up but not as joined up as we should be.

Michelle Hoad
The whole lifelong learning situation is not about one career. It is about reskilling to fuel economic development.

Jim Walker
You are seeing industry come back in and put money where its mouth is.

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We need to work on the reputation of Perth as something but a mining town.

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North Metropolitan College managing director **Michelle Hoad** said there was great opportunity to collaborate for the best outcomes.

"The speed of change in the economy, effects of automation, AI, the gig economy, the rate at which jobs are changing is incredible," she said.

"The whole lifelong learning situation is not about one career. It is about reskilling to fuel economic development. So some of the characteristics of the VET sector are really suited to come into their own."

Edith Cowan University senior deputy vice-chancellor **Arshad Omari** said providers were playing in each other's patch yet didn't understand each others patch.

"I sit on North Metro TAFE board and it's quite a different world (from ECU) in the way the students enrol and the way the courses are delivered," he said.

"We need the whole education sector from school to university and beyond to be delivering in a common framework."

State Training Board chairman **Jim Walker** said collaboration was necessary given education was not just about getting a skill today, but adding to it as the nature of jobs changed.

He said Rio Tinto had put in \$1 million for South Metro TAFE to develop automation technology.

"So you are seeing industry come back in and put money where its mouth is, which is a change we haven't seen for some time," he said.

Committee for Perth chief executive **Marion Fulker** cited her group's Perth Perceptions Survey released this week, which found people over 65 expected to have continuing employment and a transition between full-time employment and retirement.

"Therefore, a lot of the target market could be older people who want something quite different to the young," she said.

Curtin University guild president **Liam O'Neill** said although there was demand for short courses there were a lot of undergraduates who still viewed the traditional semester model as ideal. He said students faced challenges, with many needing to work and study full time.

"But international education also needs to be closely aligned with tourism. It's early days as international education has only been in the Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation for just over a year, so I am hopeful."

Sheridan College principal **Natalie Leitao** said there needed to be a sensitivity and understanding of the sacrifices being made by international students, to help them navigate the chal-

lenges. "As a provider we need to know how to assist them to settle into a Western style of living and education," she said.

AIM WA chief executive **Gary Martin** said on international students there may be relief in sight with the WA Government to release an international education strategy in coming weeks.

Professor **Terry** cited funding challenges for universities. Commonwealth support for do-

mestic students is capped at \$228 million, irrespective of the number of enrolled students.

Murdoch University Vice-Chancellor **Eeva Leinonen** said the funding challenge presented opportunities, including the need for universities to look closely at themselves.

"We need to look at what we do, how we do it, and how we can perhaps do things a bit differently," she said.

"That's not just in teaching

and learnings but of course cooperating as institutions and in our interactions with external organisations.

"In our new strategic plan we talk about wanting to identify the 'front door' of the university. What we really mean is ways the external world can come into the university and understand its benefit. Vocational training is part of that.

"My sense is the vocational training and universities are

the battle for hearts, minds — and relevance

engineers, architects, to name but a few professions.

The same, though for different reasons, is true in the vocational education and training sector.

Look no further than the economic reality that during the resources sector downturn the first casualties in many businesses were apprentices.

This of course had an impact on participation in both TAFE and private vocational education and training institutions.

Of most concern here was that the business community felt compelled to reduce the budgets for educating the next generation of workers.

Now that economic growth is back on the agenda, business is scrambling to find the qualified workers it needs, and is belatedly trying to fast-track these education processes.

There is no easy solution. Access to plentiful funding has a massive impact on student numbers, whether in the higher education or

vocational education and training sectors.

But the student population itself is increasingly demanding a different approach to what and how courses are delivered.

I like to call it the anywhere, any time model where the students as consumers or customers have greater sway over how courses are delivered.

This is likely to extend to more virtual lectures and tutorials, less time at a bricks-and-mortar campus and

a more personalised offering.

In a vocational education and training sense, maybe it is time to rethink the apprenticeship structure and shorten the theoretical learning aspects. Or maybe offer more course diversity within apprenticeship training.

And students will want to know about their employment prospects post-graduation.

This is all about winning the relevance contest.

The pendulum of influence is swinging firmly in favour of

the student or prospective student. So in this era of tightened financial resources and more choice of education than ever, if you do not offer the educational experience that delivers the outcome the student wants you may face an uphill battle.

Arguably, technology has changed the attitudes of the next generation of the workforce.

Professor Gary Martin is chief executive of the Australian Institute of Management WA