



Independent Schools
Council of Australia

SCHOOL SECTOR STRATEGY: MEETING THE WORLD HALFWAY

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The Independent Schools Council of Australia is the peak national body representing Australia's 1069 independent schools and nearly half a million students.

Overseas students in the schools sector YTD July 2006

- 22,866 overseas students (total schools sector)
- 8618 overseas students or 38% (government sector)
- 14,248 overseas students or 62% (non-government sector)
- 50% independent and 12% Catholic sector



According to the 2005 Non-Government Schools census, approximately 365 independent schools had at least one overseas student. So roughly one third of schools in the independent schools sector are involved in the provision of education to overseas students.

According to AEI PRISMS data for the year to July 2006 there are nearly 23,000 overseas students currently enrolled in the schools sector, and just over 14,000 or 62 per cent are in the non-government schools sector. This equates to roughly 50 per cent of overseas students in the independent sector and 12 per cent in the Catholic sector.

It is worth noting that the number of students in each school varies widely, with at least 50 per cent of schools having less than 10 overseas students.

ISCA represents the interests of the independent school sector on national policy issues. For international education this entails consulting with the DEST and the DIMA on broad policy issues such as the student visa program and the ESOS Act. ISCA also represents the Catholic sector on matters of international education policy.

Why a school sector action plan?

Overseas Student Enrolments in the Schools Sector

From 2003 to 2004

- Enrolments increased by 1%
- Commencements decreased by 10%

From 2004 to 2005

- Enrolments decreased by 8%
- Commencements decreased by 8%



The impetus to create a schools sector action plan was that from 2004 to 2005 overseas student enrolments and commencements in the school sector both declined by roughly 8.0 per cent. Both the government and non-government sectors of schooling sectors fell by about the same percentage, but in real numbers the impact on the non-government sector was greater because it has the larger number of students.

This trend had begun in 2003-04 with an overall increase in enrolments but a decrease in commencements over the year.

Until this time school sector enrolments had been pretty much steadily growing, both in the non-government sector and, more noticeably, in the government sector as more government systems became involved in the provision of education to overseas students. The drop also came at a time when most other sectors were doing well.

Possible causes for declining enrolments

- Improved quality of education provision offshore
- Emergence of new education hubs
- Rising value of the Australian dollar
- IELTS testing for school level applicants in China



There are several theories about the reasons for the downturn. These include the rising Australian dollar, increased provision of quality education in countries which have traditionally sent us more students and the emergence of new education hubs in South East Asia. Anecdotally there is also some feeling that in China the introduction of IELTS testing and confusion around the waiver arrangements also contributed to the downturn. There are also some other domestic contributors that are referred to below.

AEI School Sector Consultancy

- Policies and practices for Australia's engagement at the school level
- Full fee-paying overseas students
- Other facets of international education
 - teacher exchanges
 - student exchanges
 - participation in international projects



Late in 2005 AEI announced they were engaging consultants, Malcolm Skilbeck and Helen Connell, to produce a report on the schools sector which would go towards the creation of a schools sector strategy. ISCA was involved in the Steering Committee for the project as well as participating in the process. The consultants met with a wide range of stakeholders and held a sector roundtable meeting as well as doing research overseas.

The aim of the project was to look at policies and practices relating to Australia's engagement in international education at the school level. The main focus of the report was fee-paying students in Australian schools but the consultants also looked at the broader context of international

education, which includes student and teacher exchanges, participation in international projects, sale of services, materials etc, offshore professional development of teachers, and the promotion of international understanding among Australian school students, their teachers and families.

Skilbeck/Connell Report

Some conclusions of the report

- Perceived imbalance in relationships with source countries
- Lack of a unified “sector voice”
- Need for strategic direction



The consultants’ report, *Meeting the World Half Way: Towards an Australian School Sector Strategy* was completed in May this year.

Some of the concerns included in the report are the perceived imbalance in the Australian school sector’s relationship with many of our source countries. Traffic was seen as one way and not enough Australian young people are going offshore to learn. The issue of a sector voice was raised also, that is, the need for a cohesive approach for the sector. The report also said that clear and strategic directions need to be set, with AEI playing a more visible as well as supportive and creative role.

The proposed strategic vision of meeting the world halfway refers to a more balanced approach to international education and internationalisation for Australian schools.

The report reiterated the very firm foundations that international education has in the Australian school sector, including a long history of participation and a tradition of engagement, but it also looked at what barriers there are to further growth in the sector.

Barriers to growth

Domestic barriers to growth in the schools sector

- Varying level of participation in the non-government schools sector
- High domestic growth in the sector
- Costs associated with the provision of education to overseas students
- Complex regulatory framework



There is a varying level of involvement in international education in Australia's non-government schools sector. Two thirds of independent schools do not enrol overseas students and participation in the Catholic sector is even lower.

The sector is growing domestically and there is high internal demand for places, particularly in independent schools. There are many costs associated with the provision of education to overseas students, including homestay arrangements, specialist teachers, and the costs of marketing and promotion. There are complex sets of requirements and regulations for new providers to comply with. These can all act as disincentives to schools to become involved in education provision to overseas students. And also for some schools this type of activity simply is not a priority.

In terms of external barriers, a large part of the Skilbeck/Connell report deals with Australia's competitor countries and emerging education hubs.

In order to build Australian school sector involvement in international education the report calls for, among other things, a stronger whole of government approach, trying to bring the different sectors of schooling together through leadership within them, engagement at a local level in school communities, and strong AEI leadership.

AEI School Sector Action Plan

AEI School Sector Action Plan

- Roundtable meetings for the schools sector and communication strategy
- Research and analysis
- Promotion and marketing
- Raising the profile of Australian schooling
- Good practice guides
- Supporting the schools sector



A draft of the Action Plan was made available so that we could speak about it today.

The Action Plan addresses a number of the issues raised by the sector and in the Skilbeck/Connell report and sets out a number of ways for AEI to assist the sector as a strategic partner. It has a number of elements, and I will focus today on only a few of the proposed initiatives which I feel are important to the sector.

First, AEI proposes to continue to hold sector roundtable meetings. The participants of this meeting have found it a very useful forum for broad discussion across a range of issues. It is also probably the only national forum where the non-government and government sectors of schooling have been able to meet and discuss many of these issues together.

AEI also proposes to develop a communication strategy to better facilitate information sharing on a range of activities like generic promotion, marketing and research for the entire school sector.

There are a number of issues involved in addressing the current downward trend in full fee-paying overseas students coming to Australian schools. As has been noted, there seem to be both domestic and external reasons for the downturn. As well, the decline has not been across the board or consistent across either the states or territories or across the government and non-government sectors.

For example, for the period to July this year, commencements were up 6.0 per cent in non-government schools in Victoria but down 10 per cent in the government sector. Both government and non-government schools in Queensland have seen an increase in commencements over the same period while the opposite is true in Tasmania. Overall the period to July this year shows a further decline in total enrolments of 4.0 per cent but an increase in commencements of 5.0 per cent. This is good news but, again, it's not across the board.

Given the changes in the global provision of international education and continued growth in domestic demand, it is not clear to what degree we can expect enrolments in the non-government sector to recover in some of our traditional markets.

As the Action Plan notes, it may be time for the school sector to start actively looking at new markets and also to consider the full range of international activities going on at schools. As both the consultants' report and the Action Plan acknowledge, international education goes beyond just bringing full fee paying overseas students to Australia, and encompasses a range of activities which include study tours, teacher exchange and offshore provision (although to a much smaller degree than in other sectors).

There is a welcome emphasis on research and analysis in the Action Plan. One notable feature of the roundtable meeting was the number of research proposals that emerged. Questions around why numbers were declining, how to reengage, future trends in student mobility and barriers to studying abroad were all raised. Specific research for specific markets was also mentioned as well as ways to raise the international profile of Australian schooling.

A number of the research questions raised at that meeting should be covered by the International Student Survey conducted by AEI this year. Hopefully the ISS will provide further research direction for AEI, specifically for the schools sector.

AEI will also be looking at ways to collect data on other international education activities apart from FFPOS such as study tours and student and teacher exchanges. This should enable stakeholders to look at a significant area which we are currently unable to measure.

In terms of promotion and marketing, the Action Plan refers to the review of the *Study In Australia* brand. ISCA took part in the review and at the time we discovered only 43 ISCA member schools were registered as a SIA logo licence holder. Hopefully the brand evaluation will provide recommendations for improvement of the brand and ways for schools to build on the existing brand recognition.

The Action Plan also acknowledges that for some time school education has had a relatively lower profile than other sectors of education in Australia and that AEI can work on a government to government level and with generic promotion to address that as well as by more targeted promotion for different source countries. Opportunities should also continue for schools to participate in school sector only events as well as cross sectoral events off-shore.

Other areas of generic activity that AEI will undertake on behalf of the school sector are projects such as good practice guides for homestay. The difficulty in finding good homestay families for overseas students was identified in the consultants' report as a barrier to increasing the number of students to Australia and AEI has identified this as an area where they can do some work. Hopefully there will be other areas for similar "guides" to be developed to assist providers. This would be especially valuable for new providers who wish to get involved in international education but who may find the process daunting.

In terms of redressing the perceived imbalance in our relationships with source countries, it is worth noting that while there is a section on scholarships in the Action Plan, currently the Australian Government does not provide scholarships for the schools sector – they are all for Australian higher education and VET students.

Challenges for the independent sector

Challenges for the independent sector

- Costs to individual schools can be high
 - infrastructure
 - market intelligence
 - promotional activities
- Competition can be a barrier to cooperation



There are unique challenges facing the independent school sector in its engagement in international education due to its non-systemic nature. The Action Plan notes that there are issues of cost facing many smaller schools in activities such as accessing AEI subscriber marketing information and participating in offshore education events.

For a long time the non-government sector has had the bulk of the overseas students in the school sector and this has been built up by individual schools, sometimes over decades. There has been no sector-wide approach or “action plan” per se that has all these schools working towards a goal or even a shared vision of international education. It has been based solely on what each individual school, and sometimes on individuals working within them, has seen in the value of pursuing international education.

There are some very good examples of non-government school groups working collegially in international education, for example, VISION in Victoria. Some state and territory governments are also including the non-government sector in promotional activities to create a truly cross-sectoral approach to marketing.

However the non-systemic nature of individual schools, and the fact that they are distinct corporate entities and diverse in structure and goals, can act as a restraint on cooperative endeavour. Not only are non-government schools competing with the state systems for students, but with each other. The fact that state governments are not only competitors but regulators as well is a further source of tension.

ISCA commends AEI for its work on the Action Plan so far. ISCA believes the plan has the potential to bring great benefits to the schools sector and encourages schools to offer comment when the Action Plan is released. The degree to which all schools and sectors engage in the plan will be one measure of its success.

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