

The Case for an International Education unit within TasTAFE

Introduction

The current restructure of TasTAFE provides an opportunity to review our strengths, weaknesses and where we can best allocate resources for continuous improvement. Since beginning my role [REDACTED], I have found the absence of an international education unit at TasTAFE has placed us at a huge disadvantage in several key areas. I have an excellent relationship with our colleagues at GETI, but the work experiences and dynamic between TasTAFE and GETI has much to be desired due to several key challenges of sharing information/procedures/policies for our international students between two separate organisations; these are often at odds with each other.

Prior to joining TasTAFE, I have had the opportunity of working at the University of Tasmania in the international admissions department, study tours team and English Language Centre, which also included liaising frequently with the international compliance department. This has given me a unique holistic insight into the international student recruitment/enrolment lifecycle, in turn leading me to conclude that there is a huge potential for TasTAFE within the international education market. We possess all the necessary infrastructure and human resources to effectively carry out all the tasks required for international education marketing/recruitment and international student enrolment. However, it will require a collective effort and willingness from key teams to successfully implement, which is entirely possible given the experience, attitude, and skills of the current staff at TasTAFE.

This submission has been put forward to stimulate conversation and consideration over the importance of VET international education in Tasmania, TasTAFE's role in this space and how we can ensure that future industries of growth are appropriately supported with skilled workers.

Vital to Industry Growth in Tasmania

TasTAFE is the primary vocational education training provider in Tasmania with a focus on providing the technical knowledge and skills that form the foundation of several key industries in Tasmania. A fact that cannot be ignored is that international students and migrants have started to fill these employment gaps in industries of growth, but are often unaware of the existence of TasTAFE due to the lack of marketing, education agency connections, offerings and overall high cost of training. State Growth Tasmania and other stakeholders should be concerned because of the 7500 VET international students enrolled in Tasmania in 2019, TasTAFE claimed less than 500 of those students, which means the training received/delivered to the other 7000 plus international students should be called into question.

Anecdotally, among the international student and migrant community, private RTOs are well-known for providing substandard training and facilities (i.e. cookery programs offered without commercial kitchens, individual support/community services qualifications delivered without placement organised, 'flexible' timetables with faux classes and predominately online delivery). It is too much for TasTAFE to expect ASQA – the regulator – to manage these infractions, as it is time-consuming, ineffective, and eventually does not help with the skills shortages in Tasmania. This ultimately creates a problem for Tasmania, as more and more international student/potential migrants, are given state nomination spots for skills that they show to have on paper, but, have very little adequate training and practical education. Thus, leading to a stigma that international

students/migrants are not capable of filling the skills shortages of critical sectors or are at best temporary solutions.

TasTAFE should take the initiative to register all our courses for international students, increasing our enrolments while providing high quality training in critical sectors that will see industry growth into the future in Tasmania.

Qualifications in demand but not CRICOS registered at TasTAFE

Currently, as we do not have an international education unit at TasTAFE, often prospective international student enquiries are referred to GETI or the International Student Advisors. Over the 5 years of my employment, I have anecdotally noted some frequently mentioned areas of study that we unfortunately do not have CRICOS registered or in regions that courses are not offered. Ideally, as a state-wide organisation, we would be able to offer all our programs across each campus

- Automotive
- Building Design/Construction
- Agriculture and related industries
- Electrical/Plumbing related trades
- Patisserie at higher levels of training (i.e. Certificate IV or pathways into Commercial Cookery)
- Individual Support (Aged Care/Disability Support) at higher levels of training (i.e. Certificate IV or 1 year pathways)
- Project Management
- Additional accredited programs that would lead to direct migration outcomes

There are likely other qualifications that would capture international students, and the main focus is that TasTAFE develop a reputation as being open for business to international education. Unfortunately, right now in mainstream education channels and informally in social media (i.e. facebook, wechat, kakao talk, whatsapp) TasTAFE has gained the reputation as: inaccessible, strict entry requirements, expensive and focused on domestic student training. The truth however is that those international student who end up enrolling at TasTAFE have a much better experience and higher quality of training than their counterparts; particularly in the areas of facilities, practical training and student support services.

We currently have some very popular programs with quota/location limitations, such as Nursing, Community Services, Individual Support and Early Childhood Education and Care. I would like to think if TasTAFE was pushing to grow international student enrolments internally, there would be a overall culture shift, as opposed to relying on our friends at GETI to meet the demand of a limited supply.

Current challenges with the GETI partnership

As GETI is an organisation operating externally to TasTAFE, there are often challenges and unavoidable conflicts/confusion that international students encounter due differences of practice. Listed below are some examples that would be avoidable, which would provide international students with a more streamline and positive experience. These are problems that we currently work around to find solutions, but the most effective workaround would be to not create these

obstacles in the first place. As international student advisors, we are often in the middle of all these discussions and trying to find solutions for a better experience for stakeholders involved.

- Information on course availability, offerings, quotas, dates and demand go through a labyrinth of channels before TasTAFE/GETI staff are able to make decisions.
- A time difference between Admission/Acceptance via GETI and enrolment into TasTAFE systems. i.e. students may pay for their place at TasTAFE in August 2021 for Cookery in Feb 2022, but not be in our system until Jan 2022.
- Completion Letters for immigration purposes are issued via GETI, while Testamurs and Academic Transcripts are issued via TasTAFE; this entire process is extremely confusing for students.
- International Students enrolling through GETI are charged tuition fees per qualification, so will be issued with CTs on the academic record but not any financial discount/consideration for their previous credit.
- GETI's Compliance/Financial/Refund policies and procedures differ completely from TasTAFE's. Although the ISAs have worked hard to ensure the international student participation and progress compliance procedure works well with GETI's, it in turn has a minor difference to what applies to all other students at TasTAFE.
- Finance Debtor status in TasTAFE – currently it is GETI's practice to place a debtor flag on all international student enrolments at TasTAFE – this pauses any issuance of Testamurs by default. Often it is the case that we need to request a manual review, as there is no official/automatic 'trigger' that changes this status.
- TasTAFE's withdrawal policy differs from GETI's withdrawal policy, i.e. refund consideration, last date to withdraw etc.
- Operationally, there is not much oversight of marketing strategies, client services toward students, and overall representation of TasTAFE in the international education marketplace. In situations where GETI are slow to respond or do not, or at times when multiple requests are put through. This understandable as they are a team conducting tasks on behalf of DOE as well.
- The National Code is a blueprint with several grey areas, which are open to interpretation, and on the occasions where there is a disagreement of understanding, it is often our international student that suffer the consequences of awaiting a decision to be made or an unfavourable interpretation.
- Finally, the decision-making authority for many of the international student related issues have to reach a consensus between both TasTAFE and GETI management, which can be a huge challenge at times. This can cause frustration among teachers who are awaiting decisions to be finalised in relation to compliance.

Benefits of an International Education unit within TasTAFE

It can be assumed that the majority of inefficiencies listed above would be ameliorated or rendered non-existent should TasTAFE decide to develop its own in-house international education unit. This would also pave the way for a new cultural direction from the managerial to teaching level, where forward-thinking plans would need to be in place so that qualifications were up-to-date well in advance of course offerings. Current internal TasTAFE issues, such as, timetables, key dates, registrations, teaching loads and even the lack of on campus/virtual events, would very likely be addressed. Overall leading to consistency across all programs TasTAFE, which unfortunately is currently not happening. I hold a unique position where I work across a number of teams, with

various processes or approaches to the above issues, yet we are all part of the same training organisation – TasTAFE. The internationalisation of our programs does offer several areas of consistency: understanding of participation and progress, teacher learning support for students, and promptness in reporting concerns to support staff. I strongly believe that the sole reason why international student provide positive feedback over the student support services is due to the very fact most of their challenges can be managed within TasTAFE in a prompt and complete manner.

Key staffing areas

Based on the updated model of TasTAFE’s organisational structure the following positions would need to be considered or maintain their current position in the structure in a capacity focusing on the international education strategy.

Under the Director of Future Students and Industry:

- Manager of International Education (Focus on increasing CRICOS offerings and international student enrolments at TasTAFE to meet industry demands)

Within their respective structures but under the direction of the Manager of International Education

- Quality: International Compliance Officers (CRICOS registration, international student visa compliance);
- Marketing: Marketing and Recruitment Officers (Marketing of international offerings on social media, engagement, vetting and recruitment of education agencies, organising tours of facilities and qualifications of interest);
- Client Services: International Admissions Officers (Assess international student applications, issue Offer Letters, Collect Acceptance Fees, issue COEs, OSHC if required, and enrolment into courses on EBS);
- Student Support: International Student Advisors and English Language and Learning Support (already in place)

In my humble view, there are ways to minimise current workflow within these established team yet optimise the enactment of this strategy moving forward. For example, we currently have Client Services staff who have marketing background, speak more than one language and could be excellent marketing and recruitment officers.

Final Considerations

Change is always an endeavour into the unknown, but there is opportunity among the areas of uncertainty. COVID-19 and the restructure of TasTAFE provides us with one such opportunity to take advantage of the stellar reputation of safety and smart management of the health system, while allowing our local economy to push forward. Speaking on behalf of current students and graduates, they have noted COVID-19 may altered their learning and training experience at TasTAFE but the quality of training was far superior to that provided to their friends at private RTOs. The problem is, however, that TasTAFE largely remains unknown as open for business to international students within their networks. TasTAFE can easily change that by proactively engaging with education agents, word of mouth referrals and social media marketing. There is an abundance of prospective international students that approach TasTAFE directly for enrolment information, often the international student advisors will capture and provide targeted discussions with them, which



leads to a positive enrolment outcome. That said, there are likely a large number who are simply referred to GETI or their website (who have no physical presence in the North/Northwest) that are likely lost unless they are firm with their decision to study at TasTAFE. The late Steve Jobs and Apple's 3-Click Rule should be adopted by TasTAFE, where we make it as easy as possible for potential international students to 'discover, learn and apply' for studies at TasTAFE. Finally, bringing this back full circle to the growth of Tasmania's skilled workforce, it is absolutely in the best interests of State Growth's population growth aspirations, skills development strategy and employment targets in critical sectors for TasTAFE to develop it's own International Education unit. Thus ensuring that the quality of future migrants provided with skilled nominations by Tasmania are indeed well-resourced, trained and prepared for a committed life here in Tasmania.