West missing out on international education’s $20bn boom

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CANBERRA: Australia’s ascendant $20 billion international education sector is bypassing Western Australia, which has witnessed a decline in the proportion of students attracted to its capital city over the past 15 years. A new report for the Committee for Perth says the state has failed to capitalise on the booming international education market while high salaries for non-university educated workers during the mining boom essentially sapped Western Australia of essential graduate level skills. It says not only does WA have a lower than expected number of international students, half of them are enrolled in offshore campuses. “The international education and training sector is estimated to have contributed (about $1.4bn) in total export revenue in 2015 (about 8 per cent of the national total),” says the report by Gemma Davis, an honorary research fellow with the University of Western Australia. Marion Fulker, chief executive of the Committee for Perth, said while $1.4bn was “a significant amount of money”, WA was - underperforming compared with the rest of Australia, apart from the Northern Territory. “There is no doubt we’re currently missing out on a significant income stream,” Ms Fulker said.

Western Australia attracted just 5 per cent of the total number of international students studying in Australia, resulting in fewer associated jobs, she said. “The international education sector directly and indirectly generates 128,385 full-time jobs; while half of these are in NSW, only 4 per cent are in WA,” Ms Fulker said. Iain Watt, pro vice-chancellor (international) at the University of Western Australia, said the factors feeding into WA’s underperformance were manifold but closely linked to complacency because of the riches flowing from the mining boom. He said restrictive rules that stopped schools from benefiting from revenues of international students was one factor, which also prevented the flow-on of Year 12 students into pathway and undergraduate programs. Study Perth was underfunded compared with its equivalent organisations, and the previous state government had failed to diversify state revenues beyond resources and agriculture, he said. Mr Watt said perceptions of Perth as being an expensive city to live lingered, despite a reversal since the end of the mining boom. Also, there were no direct flights to northern Asia beyond Hong Kong, adding to time in transit and cost.
per cent of students each year, just 13.8 per cent of WA’s students were from China. The report notes that half of all WA’s international enrolments are in offshore campuses run by Curtin and Murdoch universities, which added revenue to the institutions but not to the state. “Education and training is a critical industry for the economy ... delivering significant revenue, export revenue, employment and human capital, which is central to economic resilience, knowledge and innovation,” the report concludes.

Ms Fulker admitted Perth had to overcome a number of challenges in its bid to attract more overseas students. These included increasing competition between host and source countries and the fact Perth was seen as “suburban” while being second only to Sydney for cost. “We need to broaden our offering to attract more international students,” Ms Fulker said. “The local economy benefits to the tune of $15.5 million every year when family and friends come to visit.”

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