

# NEW WAYS TO CONNECT WITH CHINA: TOURISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION NEXUS

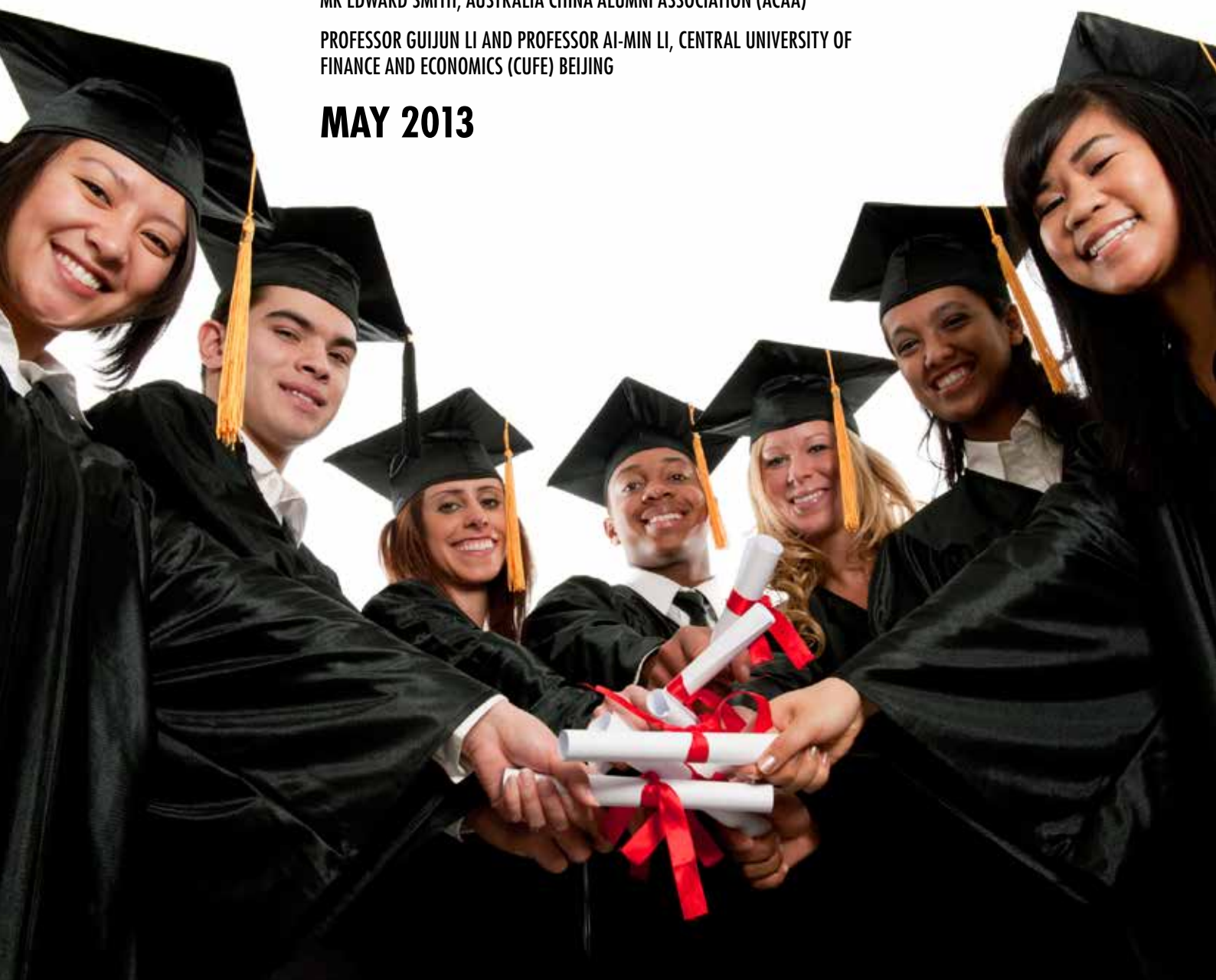
## A STRATEGIC DISCUSSION PAPER

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# CONTENTS

Introduction and background	4
Implications and opportunities	5
The Tourism industry	5
International Education	7
Alumni Relations	9
Summary and key priorities	11
Conclusions	13
Attachment 1: Think Tank Attendance	14

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The intention of this discussion paper is to highlight and detail the opportunities afforded to the tourism and international education industries through harnessing the considerable capacities of international student alumni. This paper builds on research undertaken by a research team from Victoria University (VU), the Central University of Finance and Economics (CUFE), Beijing and the Australia China Alumni Association (ACAA). Completed in 2013, the aim of the research was to explore the role and influence of China based Australian alumni on travel and tourism. The findings were powerful in suggesting that alumni are, in fact, extremely influential and make a substantial contribution to Australian tourism promotion efforts in China, and contribute to the growing numbers of Chinese visitors to Australia. At the same time, this influence is often overlooked and there are considerable opportunities for government and industry to maximise this potential.

In order to explore these strategic opportunities, the Australia China Council (ACC) supported the conduct of a 'strategic think-tank' to reflect on the research findings and to identify strategies that would further develop the China based alumni and their contribution to the tourism industry development. The think-tank included participation from senior industry leaders, government policy makers and academics from across the international education, tourism and alumni relations sectors (See Attachment 1 for program and participant details). This paper outlines the key ideas generated and to provide guidance on ways to capitalise on the potential of alumni for the mutual benefit of China/Australia engagement and tourism development. The following section gives background to the study, some of its key findings before outlining the strategic possibilities identified at the think-tank.

## WHY THE STUDY

Increasing engagement and trade with China is a major policy imperative for the Australian tourism and international education industries. For the tourism industry, outbound tourism from China is forecast to be the fastest growing market segment projected to be worth \$838bn globally by 2020 and \$9bn in Australia. A current priority is to maximise the value of this highly lucrative and rapidly developing market. International education is also Australia's third largest export industry and Chinese students currently represent 42 per cent of all international student enrolments. Attention is increasingly being focused on the value of international education and travel and tourism for both its short and long term benefits. While in Australia, international students themselves travel home regularly, engage in local tourism activities as well as receive visits by family and friends making a substantial contribution to local tourism economies. By the time many students graduate, Australia is like a second 'home'. Being comfortable in both countries, and through connections forged in Australia, alumni are a major resource for generating people-to-people links and networks, communications, trade and knowledge exchange. Governments world-wide are recognising this power but there has been little attention given to just how powerful alumni can be, and how this potential can be nurtured. The purpose of this research was to explore this potential.

## AIMS AND FINDINGS

The aim of the study was to explore the extent to which alumni do in fact maintain ties with Australia, why and how they do this, and to identify the barriers to travel. Data on alumni tourism behavior, intentions, motivations and influence on the travel of others was gathered through a survey of 1,154 China based alumni and a series of in-depth interviews. Findings highlight a number of opportunities and challenges if the considerable potential of alumni, as a tourism market segment, is to be maximized. These opportunities and challenges have relevance for both the tourism and international education sectors.

The full report of the study is available at [The role and influence of China based alumni on travel and tourism](#). The following key findings are summarised below.

### *Do alumni travel back to Australia?*

First, the survey findings suggest that alumni do travel frequently and 64 per cent of respondents had travelled back to Australia in the last five years with the majority having travelled twice or more frequently. A large group (18% or 205 people) had travelled back five or more times. Almost all (93%) say that they intend to travel to Australia with 21 per cent intending to travel five or more times in the next five years. During their most recent trip to Australia, the majority (53%) travelled alone but the remainder travelled with at least one other person.

### *What do alumni do in Australia?*

The majority (63%) stayed in Australia for more than two weeks with 38 per cent staying for more than four weeks. Very few alumni (16%) have visited anywhere outside of the main Australian cities. The large majority of respondents say they have visited Sydney (85%), Melbourne (83%), Brisbane (57.94%) and Canberra (51%).

The main forms of transport used in Australia includes: public transport (78%); private transport with family and friends (56%); air travel (45%) and car hire (45%). Only 15% say they travelled with a tour company. Alumni combined many activities when in Australia with the main ones being: going to the beach (72%); shopping for pleasure (69%); and, visiting friends and relatives (68%). A large proportion was also involved in a business or professional activity (31%) or an educational activity (43%).

The majority said that they stayed with friends (44%) or family members (28%) but they also stayed in hotels (28%), serviced apartments (20%) and rental accommodation (28%). Aside from airfares, the majority (69%) spent more than \$2,000 while in Australia with a sizeable group of 14 per cent who spent more than \$10,000.

## Why do alumni travel?

The findings show multiple reasons for return travel. For a large number of alumni, the main purpose was to have a holiday and to go to places that they hadn't seen while studying in Australia. Most alumni, however, combined a number of activities. They came to visit friends and relatives, undertake further education or professional activities, conduct business and engage in a range of leisure activities such as shopping for pleasure and going to the beach.

The majority of alumni enjoy Australia and appreciate the clean environment, natural beauty and relaxed lifestyle. A clear theme in the comments made by alumni was in relation to 'friendly people' and feeling comfortable because Australia is accepting of different cultures.

Alumni value their Australian friendships very highly and 80 per cent say that their friends in Australia are very important or important. They communicate often and a key reason for returning to Australia was to visit friends and family (68%). A theme in the responses was that coming to Australia '...is like a homecoming.' At the same time, the main contacts made by alumni in Australia are 'other international students from China'. Approximately one third of alumni kept in touch with local students (37%) and one third kept in touch with academics and teachers (35%). Many (38%) also kept in touch with other international (non-Chinese) students and some 29% kept in touch with business / professional contacts.

## What influence do alumni have?

Alumni play an important and often overlooked role in influencing others through word of mouth promotion of Australian education and tourism, receiving visitors from Australia and through return travel. For example, the large majority say that their educational experience in Australia was helpful on a range of measures and the majority (70%) have or intend to recommend Australia as a place to study. A further 13 per cent said 'maybe' they would recommend Australia education.

Alumni maintain friendships and contacts in Australia and approximately 50 per cent said that they communicate via email, Skype and other social media 'more than several times a month'. When travelling back to Australia, approximately 48 per cent travel with family members or friends. Alumni also said that they actively promote Australia to friends and colleagues as a destination.

While studying in Australia, 436 respondents (38%) received visitors from China. The majority (74%) also returned back to China for a visit. A majority (60%) have also played host in China to visitors from Australia and have 'helped them out'.

## What are the barriers to travel?

Key barriers to travel include a lack of direct, convenient and affordable flights, the cost of travel in Australia and a lack of holidays or time to travel. Obtaining a tourist visa is also a deterrent to travel due to the expense, the time and the paper work involved in having a visa processed. This was particularly a barrier for alumni who want to travel with friends or family members requiring an extensive and expensive application process with no guarantee of success.

These barriers mean that other competing destinations, such as Europe, the US or closer Asian destinations were often considered over Australia as a holiday destination or a destination for professional or business activities.

Further barriers included a lack of information about how to organise independent travel in Australia and particular mention was made of the desire to have 'self drive' holidays in Australia. This also included the desire for trustworthy

information and information relevant to young people. A suggestion made was the need for tourism and travel authorities and businesses to communicate through social media platforms such as Weibo that is commonly used by Chinese young people.

These gaps in information and lack of confidence in available information sources, is compounded by the limited experience of alumni in travelling in Australia while studying. Very few had ventured beyond the major cities while resident in Australia.

Another theme was that, for some Chinese young people, Australia didn't seem 'dynamic' enough. To be attractive, they want to know about the full range of experiences that are possible and how they can access these.

## IMPLICATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The findings from the research highlighted a range of implications and opportunities for tourism industry development, the international education industry, the alumni relations sector and migration policy. It was these implications that were presented at the think-tank for consideration and a series of questions were posed about how barriers might be addressed, and opportunities generated to enhance the strength of alumni networks, to promote return travel to Australia and to expand the positive influence of alumni in growing both the tourism and international education industries. In short, and in the context of the research findings, the questions were applied to the tourism, international education and alumni relations sectors. Each sector considered:

- What are the challenges and barriers that limit alumni travel to Australia?
- What opportunities are there to maximize alumni travel and influence on travel?
- What actions could be undertaken to harness the potential of alumni?

The following section outlines the key implications raised by both the research findings and the think-tank discussion as they were explored in separate workshop groups. This is followed by a series of integrated actions that follow from the discussion.

## THE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The research findings show that alumni provide a network for the promotion of Australian products, services and news that is potentially powerful in its reach through China. The findings also indicate a demand for a range of tourism related products, information and opportunities. Drawing on both the research findings and the think-tank discussion, this section highlights the barriers and constraints that serve to limit alumni tourism to Australia, discusses the opportunities and priorities for tourism development and identifies specific actions that could be implemented to realise this potential.

## BARRIERS

The think-tank discussion noted the barriers identified by the research which in general, were considered as consistent with broader industry research that also highlights inconvenient flights, the high Australian dollar, and a lack of time as being barriers to travel to Australia. These and other barriers identified by the research were acknowledged.

One focus of the think-tank discussion was that international students, while resident in Australia, have limited travel experience outside of the major cities. As a result, post-graduation, they have little travel experience in Australia and so are



tentative about how to plan broader travel experiences in Australia if they intend to return. A related challenge is that the research identifies that the primary contacts made in Australia are with 'other Chinese students'. As identified by the research, Australian based contacts provide much of the motivation for return travel for multiple reasons and for many, these contacts are not as strong as they could be. In addition, alumni networks with Australian universities are relatively weak compared to those generated by Chinese universities where it is a common experience that graduates remain connected to their alumni cohorts over the course of their lives.

The broader issue, however, was that there appears to be a series of 'disconnects' between Chinese international students, tourism experiences and fulsome engagement with the domestic opportunities and experiences. For example, one of the issues facing international students generally is accessing professional employment opportunities. At the same time, a current priority of the Australian tourism industry is to employ Mandarin speaking tourism staff to fill roles across the tourism, hospitality and events industries in multiple roles such as tour guides and in positions that require product development, planning and liaising with Chinese visitors. There is a need to link international students to tourism employment opportunities.

## **OPPORTUNITIES AND PRIORITIES FOR TOURISM**

Following from these challenges, a range of opportunities were identified. These included the need to:

### ***Enhance international student tourism experience while in Australia***

For multiple reasons, Chinese students tend to socialise primarily with other Chinese students and don't travel far from the major cities. If they do travel, it is primarily to major attractions such as the Gold Coast or Uluru. The research findings suggest that there is an interest in exploring Australian domestic tourism opportunities and regional Australia, yet students do not generally have these experiences while resident in Australia. There is a need to encourage, promote and facilitate Chinese students to engage in a wider range of experiences. This would yield multiple benefits beyond enriching the student experience while in Australia. Students would be better placed to 'show around' visiting friends and relatives, would contribute to the tourism industries goals of achieving greater 'dispersal' of international visitors, boost regional tourism objectives as well as support word of mouth promotion of Australia to China based friends and relatives. It might also have the longer term impact of increasing return travel in the long term as alumni will have the experience and confidence to explore a wider range of destinations independently.

### ***Link international students to employment opportunities in the hospitality, tourism and events industries***

There would be multiple benefits in encouraging international student employment in the tourism and related industries. Students would be positioned to develop a wider range of professional contacts, gain exposure to the tourism industry as well as receive financial reward and valuable professional experience. At the same time, the tourism industry would be better placed to cater to the growing numbers of Chinese visitors, have a source of cross-cultural advice for the delivery and development of services and products as well as be facilitated in meeting skill shortages. Together, this would encourage return travel by alumni over the long term.

### ***Provide communication platforms and mediums***

The research identified that alumni believe that there is a gap in information about the full range of experiences available in Australia and that existing information 'doesn't tell them what they want to know' about travelling in Australia. By the development and use of a wider range of social media platforms, international students could be facilitated to 'tell their story' to friends and family at home about their Australian experience in order to strengthen their emotional attachment to Australia as well as to facilitate word of mouth promotion.

### ***Encourage international students to be advocates for Australia***

Following from above and the research findings that the majority of alumni do recommend Australia as a place to study, an opportunity exists to encourage international students and alumni to be proactive in their promotion. This requires the use of social media platforms but could also involve programs such as awarding alumni the title of Australian 'ambassadors' and creating roles and functions where they might facilitate Australian promotion. This could be achieved through inviting alumni participation in Australian trade fairs, education expos or other such events where Australia education and tourism products are being showcased. Essentially, consideration needs to be given to how international education and tourism might tap the enthusiasm of alumni for mutual benefit.

### ***Capitalise on alumni networks***

There is little recognition in Australia of the strong value placed on alumni networks by Chinese students that are valued for the capacity to generate both business and social opportunities. It is common in China that alumni networks are maintained over a life-time. These networks are the vehicle for the staging of regular events, services and activities that extend, in some instances to care networks. These are practices that could be replicated in Australia through the staging of reunions or other events that might draw alumni back and provide a reason to visit. The potential benefits of such strategies are very long term. Chinese alumni, in their desire to stay attached to alumni networks, are very open to sending their children to the same university that they attended. Strategies to sustain these ties are potentially a long term and lucrative investment in future international education enrolments from China.

### ***Develop integrated promotion of education and tourism***

The research highlights that China based alumni visit Australia for multiple reasons and combine holidays with a range of activities including education, business and professional activities along with leisure travel activities. Promotion of Australian education and tourism, however, is currently not well connected. The opportunity exists to promote Australia as both – a destination for education, business as well as leisure. This opportunity applies both to broader tourism marketing campaigns which could integrate education as an attraction as well as to government international education campaigns as well as marketing undertaken by individual universities. One of the examples identified as being proactive on this level was Wollongong University which promotes Wollongong internationally for its attractions such as proximity to Sydney, beautiful beaches, national parks as well as its multi-faith infrastructure. In this instance, the Nan Tien Temple in Wollongong is acclaimed as the biggest in the Southern Hemisphere and promoting this attraction features strongly in the University's marketing. Such strategies, where the international education/tourism nexus was identified, were seen as an important opportunity for the tourism and international education industries to promote Australia as a destination to China.

## Recognise alumni as potential business travellers

As highlighted by the research, alumni are by definition, highly qualified, global in orientation and are professionally employed. Given the relatively recent history of Chinese enrolments in Australian universities, they are also predominantly young and in their early to mid-phases of their career. As such, they offer a ripe market for the promotion of business travel products such as conference venues, educational tours or small group packages that combine business and leisure travel and other products that could be fruitfully explored by the tourism industry for both short and long term business potential.

## Connect with the Australian based Chinese communities

Australia is home to a very large and well established Chinese population which is an important source of support for international students and for the maintenance of China/Australia people-to-people links. Stronger connections between these communities and the international education and tourism industries could be utilised in multiple ways. First, they can be engaged more overtly in tourism promotion campaigns following from the research that identifies that many prospective Chinese travellers would be reassured to know that they can access Chinese food and people who speak Mandarin while they are in Australia. These communities could also potentially provide a bridge for international education promotion and for supporting international students in Australia. These and other opportunities could be fruitfully explored as part of building transnational links to underpin long term alumni engagement and exchange.

## Need to recognise the 'good record' of alumni and make them feel special

Following from the above and the need to enhance international student experience while they are here, an over-arching priority is to strengthen the connections of alumni to Australia and to facilitate the sense that Australia is a 'second home'. This could be achieved in multiple ways by strengthening the ways in which international students are welcomed in the first instance, enhancing the experience while they are here and giving them as many reasons as possible to return to Australia. One of the very practical ways to facilitate return travel is to minimise visa processing through the granting of long-term multi-entry visas to alumni as a 'special' category of return visitor who have demonstrated their good record. Such measures could be an important investment in minimising the barriers to travel and maintaining alumni attachment to Australia as a repeat destination.

## CONCLUSION - GIVE CHINA BASED ALUMNI A REASON TO COME BACK

Overall, all of the priorities identified by the tourism focussed discussion at the think-tank centred around how to build, strengthen and sustain the connections of Chinese international students with Australia. This requires making students feel welcome, providing information and communication platforms so that they can tell their stories, looking after them while they are in Australia and effectively saying 'stay in touch' rather than 'goodbye' when students return to China. It requires addressing the 'disconnections' between the tourism and the international education industries and realising that international students are future professional, government and business leaders whose interests are linked to Australia through their qualifications and experience. Maintaining these links requires long term engagement so that alumni might choose Australia as a destination over the many competing alternatives.

## INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The findings of the research were also considered by the representatives engaged in various capacities within the international education industry and international student services (See Attachment 1 for organisations represented). Similarly, there was discussion focussed on identifying the challenges and opportunities for international education and the promotion of alumni connections with Australia and Australian tourism. A particular focus for this group was to consider how international student engagement might be strengthened in order that Australia feels like a 'second home'.

## CHALLENGES

### *Differences between Australian and domestic students:*

One of the key barriers to international students making strong connections with domestic students was the considerable differences between groups in how they participate in education in Australia. Multiple developments in higher education such as on-line delivery, larger class sizes, remote access to learning materials, and flexible program delivery modes mean that it is less necessary to be physically 'on campus' at all times. The rising cost of education is a further disincentive to spending time on campus and the idea of a 'full-time' student is a changing concept with students combining work and study to a greater extent than in the past. Domestic students, in particular, are less likely to attend lectures and tutorials and are less reliant on campus services and activities given they have their established family, friendship, community and employment networks that shape their lives in addition to their lives as a student. International students, in contrast, are more focussed on their education and their institutions, due to their considerable financial investment — often made as a family investment, the strong cultural value placed in education, limited time frame to complete their studies and the absence of their homeland networks. These differences mean that international students often participate in the classroom only with other international students. While they may be keen to form friendships with domestic students, there are relatively few opportunities to do so. As one participant and former international student put it, '...I couldn't find a place to meet locals.'

These barriers to connecting are compounded by language and cultural differences as well as different approaches to learning. For example, there is an 'alcohol culture' that features heavily in Australian student activities. This is alienating to those from many Asian cultures as well as for many Chinese students. A further issue was that domestic students are often fearful that international students will make demands on their knowledge of the language and system, particularly where international students outnumber domestics. Again this applies to Chinese students, who have been educated in a considerably different culture of learning and are less likely to make demands on teaching staff. Domestic students fear that international students will seek help if they are having trouble with course content or delivery. At the same time, international students often lack confidence being in a new country and can appear and feel 'shy' in the Australian context. Overall, one of the issues identified is that current trends in education delivery generate distance between international students and domestic students in ways that are structural in nature and difficult to resolve.

## *Fragmentation of government responsibility*

A key issue in making links between tourism and international education is that the two sectors are rarely linked at a government level – at Federal, State and local. While the links between the industries are being recognised, coordination at a policy and planning level is difficult to coordinate.

## *Employability*

A further barrier identified was in relation to international students forming professional connections as international students face particular barriers in finding employment relevant to their field of study. A number of factors contribute to this. One is that international students commonly have few skills in applying for jobs in the Australian employment market and they are ill equipped to identify and secure professional jobs. Another problem is that employers are reluctant to employ students who don't have permanent residency status. These barriers exist despite recent changes implemented to allow international students a two year extension of their visa to work on completion of studies<sup>1</sup>. Students who have not had work experience in Australia are limited in the extent to which they can forge the business and professional connections for longer term engagement with Australia.

## *Precarious programs*

The think-tank group identified a range of initiatives that had been implemented across Australia targeted at welcoming and engaging international students in community life. Such programs included the 'culture card' initiative in Melbourne, the 'Welcome Desk' at Melbourne Airport, Ambassador programs initiated in Brisbane and in Adelaide as well as others that were discussed as having various levels of success and continuity. There were a number of problems identified in relation to the sustainability and quality of such programs. These included:

- Commonly, those initiating programs through government agencies or other services were disconnected from international students and failed to plan programs in ways that were relevant, appropriate and/or appealing to international students. Those programs that are successful were identified as having skilled and knowledgeable leadership with a close familiarity with international students, their needs and circumstances;
- A lack of continuity of funding and ambiguity around the responsibility for coordinating and implementing programs. For example, a number of initiatives have been implemented by State Governments for limited periods but this funding had been withdrawn in part, due to questions about the extent to which universities should be making a financial contribution to these initiatives;
- Fragmented communications channels mean that awareness of initiatives is limited to particular 'silos' within international student services. There are multiple layers of government, institutions and professional networks who have a stake in supporting the international student experience which are commonly not well linked. For example, there is often poor communication between academic staff and student services within and across education institutions. Similarly, there is poor communications between local, state and commonwealth government initiatives. The outcome is low awareness of programs and a limited capacity to 'spread the word' or promote opportunities available to international students.

Overall, despite strong interest across the international student services sector in enhancing international student community engagement, there are substantial structural issues that inhibit the success and sustainability of these initiatives.

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

While there are considerable barriers to international student engagement, there were also considerable opportunities for strengthening international student engagement and in forging connections between the international education and tourism sectors. These include building on the recent reforms and policy initiatives, building the role of local and state governments in supporting international student engagement, highlighting the role of peak associations in promoting partnerships with tourism services, building on successful models of program provision as well as learning from international approaches to tourism/international education models of practice particularly from the US and from China.

### *Policy developments in international education and international relations*

Current national priorities include the need for the future development of a sustainable international education sector and enhanced engagement with Asia. These priorities have been encapsulated in recent policy efforts that encompass aims complementary to enhancing international student connections. These policies provide the strategic 'space' for planning for increased alumni connections and links with the tourism industry.

### *Greater role for local and state government*

Participants identified several examples of the important role that can be played by local and state governments in making the connections between international education and the tourism industry. The City of Melbourne and the City of Brisbane, for example, have both implemented 'welcome' and 'engagement' initiatives, such as ambassador programs, volunteer programs and an airport 'welcome desk', that serve the mutual interests of improving international student experience as well as supporting the visitor economy in both cities. These initiatives have emerged in recognition that international students commonly live in the CBD (for example, 20% of City of Melbourne residents are estimated to be international students) and that a positive experience can have a significant multiplier effect for both the tourism and international education industries through positive word of mouth promotion through the networks of students. Such programs could be replicated nationally, and strengthened as a core role of CBD local governments.

### *Build on successes*

Throughout the workshop discussion, multiple programs that were successful in promoting student engagement in local cultural activities were provided yet the awareness of such programs was patchy due to fragmented communications across the sector as discussed above. There is a need for 'mapping' these initiatives, communicating their benefits, as well as greater attention to evaluation in order to improve quality nationally.

<sup>1</sup>The Knight Review of international student visas includes provision for issuing post completion visas for post-graduate students. See <http://www.immi.gov.au/students/knight/table-of-recommendations.htm>



## *Tourism/international education partnerships*

Several opportunities for enhancing tourism and international education partnerships were identified. One model is implemented by 'English Australia', the national peak body for the English language sector of international education in Australia. This initiative involves English Australia acting as a 'broker' between tourism operators and member colleges. Tourism operators promote products through English Australia and offer discounts and 'deals' for international students. These products are distributed to all colleges across Australia who then promote to their students. Through this arrangement, English Australia plays the role of advising tourism operators on culturally relevant products as well as advocating the benefits of encouraging international students to engage in tourism experiences. Benefits include word of mouth promotion to their family and friendship networks and the possibility of repeat business over the long term. This initiative and others that were identified, highlights the potential role of peak bodies in liaising with the tourism industry in ways that could be replicated through other international education associations and networks.

## *Regional dispersal*

Following from above, the formation of closer links between the two sectors has the potential for making progress on a number of strategic priorities for tourism industry development. One of these is the goal of enhancing regional tourism particularly by Chinese visitors. The development of regional tourism opportunities, targeted specifically at international students, may be successful in generating increased regional visitation by Chinese visitors.

## *Capitalise on and develop education events*

One of the opportunities identified was the need to recognise and build on graduation ceremonies and other educational events as an attraction for visiting friends and relatives. This was raised in light of the research findings and also in recognition of the great value placed on graduation ceremonies by Chinese families. There were opportunities to work with the tourism industry in the development of tourism products that would link with key educational dates so that visitors could incorporate a number of tourism related experiences in the one trip.

## *Learn from international practice*

Participants highlighted a number of examples from international practice that could be usefully borrowed in the Australian context. For example, a strong emphasis on alumni relations in the US means that there are consistent and on-going efforts to retain connections with international students and give them reasons to return to the US for events such as reunions and other university celebrations. Similarly, there was greater coordination of international student support with a greater level of welfare services, support and provision of employment opportunities and greater efforts made to include students in to collegiate activities and networks. By contrast, Australian international student support services and alumni relations are not as well resourced, to the detriment of long term alumni engagement.

## *Overall*

Building on the research, participants identified many structural barriers to international student engagement in local community, cultural and tourism opportunities. There is currently limited connection between the tourism industry and international students who, during their time of residence in Australia are likely to make limited friendships and professional contacts beyond their network of co-national students. There are many opportunities however, to build on recent initiatives that aim to make international students feel more welcome, engaged and connected to local communities and opportunities. There are also many models of practice that can be observed and adopted from other models of student engagement and alumni relations. In order to build a more sustainable and effective climate of international student engagement, however, priorities include better coordination across government departments, a greater role for peak international education associations in acting as 'brokers' with the tourism industry, stronger and wider platforms for communication across international education 'silos' and the development of tourism products that are relevant to international student circumstances and preferences.

## **ALUMNI RELATIONS**

Alumni relations with China based alumni was the third group to consider challenges and opportunities in maintaining engagement with alumni in the interests of promoting two-way tourism and travel over the long term. Overall, the discussion of this group was premised by the understanding that, despite recent efforts by both the ACAA, individual universities and other government policy efforts, the extent to which Australian institutions remains connected with China-based alumni remains very limited. The 'guesstimate' of participants was that sustained contact is maintained with only a very small percentage of the total numbers based in China. This was due to a range of conditions that operate to limit sustained contact.

## **CHALLENGES**

### *Language, geography, cultural differences and regulatory environment*

While maintaining international alumni connections is a challenging task in general, China presents particular issues due to differences in language, the sheer size and diversity of the population and cultural differences. Maintaining current data bases of alumni contact information is a major challenge not only because alumni are in transition post-graduation, but also due to the difficulties in maintaining accurate records that contain Mandarin characters. There are also limitations imposed by the Chinese Government on communication platforms and so social media options of staying in touch, such as Facebook, is not an option for communication with China. These difficulties are compounded by the sheer size and diversity of China as well as the tendency for Chinese students to change their 'English' names that they commonly adopt when in Australia or other English speaking countries. So someone who calls themselves 'John', may decide they prefer 'Frank' in another stage of transition. Such changes present some clear complications to communications by an Australian alumni relations system that is primarily monolingual.

## *Alumni relations – a low priority*

In contrast to comparable countries such as the US and the UK who compete for international student enrolments with Australia, the priority given to alumni relations in Australia is relatively meagre. As a result, there are few resources allocated to alumni relations and so each educational institution, in general, has few dedicated staff, who serve both a domestic and international alumni body. For most institutions, the capacity to stay connected with all country groups is relatively limited and heavily reliant on volunteers to drive 'chapters' of alumni networks in different regions and countries. Therefore, international efforts are necessarily targeted and focussed, and rarely extend beyond sustaining links beyond the major cities of each country. In China, this means that the reach of each institution might extend to only one city, such as Beijing, which represents only a small proportion of the total alumni population. As such, the scope and success of international alumni relations is patchy.

## *Alumni relations professional capacity*

As one consequence of the low priority given to alumni relations, compared to other countries, the status of alumni relations as a professional field remains emergent and loosely linked to other fields including fund-raising, student services, events management and marketing. One consequence, there is little critical examination or capacity to advocate for the development of alumni relations as a field of professional practice. And there is limited capacity to respond to the demands of managing an increasingly international alumni body and the cross-cultural considerations that arise with that. This is particularly an issue in relation to connections with China where the need for cross-cultural understanding is critical in the maintenance of long-term relationships. At a very basic level, few offices have the capacity to employ bi-lingual staff who would be better placed to manage communications as well as data bases containing Chinese language.

## *Fragmentation of responsibility*

One of the issues raised by the think-tank was that building a long-term connection with alumni rests on a 'whole of life cycle' approach commencing at the pre-enrolment phase. In Australia, alumni relations practice is often highly fragmented with alumni connections only commencing post-graduation and managed by a separate unit within universities. This was identified as a loss of opportunity given that a high priority is given to marketing and recruitment, yet few resources are dedicated to sustaining that relationship. The ideal model of alumni relations was identified as one that was devolved throughout university operations to ensure that at each phase of the student journey, the systems were in place to capture contact information, encourage engagement and the expectation of long term connections. This approach requires integrated action across the university undertaken by academic, administrative, student services and managerial staff.

## *Alumni relations evaluation and monitoring*

Following from above, there are some clear limitations in the extent to which alumni networks can be a vehicle for evaluation and monitoring over time. The capacity to undertake the alumni tourism research was only made possible due to the growth of the ACAA. Generally, longer term evaluation or evaluation of alumni outcomes is limited due to the relatively weak capacity to 'stay in touch'. Similarly, alumni relations is a relatively emergent form of professional practice in Australia and there is little critical evaluation of alumni relations at a state or national level. There is limited understanding of the real scope of alumni relations across the international education sector and the actual capacity of the sector can

only be guessed at. Overall, alumni relations in Australia are generally neglected and a potential resource that is largely overlooked and under-valued.

## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALUMNI RELATIONS**

While the general assessment was that there is major room for the expansion of alumni relations efforts, a number of opportunities and developments were also canvassed and identified as follows.

### *Developments in ICT*

While until relatively recently, the limits to communications with Chinese alumni were a major barrier, developments in ICT have meant that wide-scale communications is now possible. First, there is an increasingly wide range of social media platforms that are not restricted in China and can be utilised for communications. Similarly, while alumni relations administrators may not be able to read Chinese script, it is now possible to copy Chinese characters into data bases. It remains the case that the actual Chinese names need to be collected and recorded, as opposed to names commonly written in Pinyin<sup>2</sup> or that use the 'English' names adopted by students which they may or may not continue to use in China. While this remains a major task, it is now possible. Further, strategies such as allocating students an 'email address for life' is also a strategy that could enable longer term communication. Again, this is increasingly possible with the common use of smart phones and other devices that enable easy access to, and use of, multiple email addresses over the long-term. Overall, developments in ICT meant that there is considerable capacity for sustaining longer-term alumni contact.

### *Need for cross-sector communications*

Following from the barriers identified above, and the relatively low priority given to alumni relations, there is a need for greater communication across the diverse stake-holders who drive the total alumni relations context. This includes stake-holders within each institution including teaching and academic staff, international student services, senior management and administrators. Beyond institutions, there are a wide range of stakeholders including peak associations, industry bodies and government agencies and authorities at all levels of government. Across all of these stakeholders, the perception was that the potential of alumni networks are overlooked and undervalued. There is a need for advocacy around the value of alumni, cross-sector communications – through conferences and other planning mechanisms, greater status given to alumni relations as a profession and, the development of international alumni relations as a key strategy to form stronger people-to-people links with China.

### *Development of ambassadorial programs*

One strategy identified as relatively simple, low-cost and effective was the development of alumni ambassador programs. This is a strategy that has been applied effectively by the ACAA in careers fairs that promote Australian education and alumni have played an important role in speaking about their educational experience and promoting the Australian product. Such a strategy could be similarly employed by the tourism industry – where alumni could be employed as advocates of Australian tourism based on their experience. These and other programs could be explored as a means to tap the considerable good will of alumni in the interests of industry development.

<sup>2</sup>Pinyin is a system of Romanization for reading and writing Mandarin without Chinese characters.

## Evaluation, monitoring and tracking

Given the power of alumni in facilitating multiple objectives for China/Australia connections, one of the priorities should be to conduct more extensive research and evaluation of both the practice of alumni relations and the outcomes and experiences of alumni themselves. In order to guide Australian alumni relations capacity development, such research could usefully include:

- An evaluation of the Australian alumni relations capacity, its practices and models of successful practice;
- Comparative studies with other countries that lead in alumni relations practice in order to inform the development of an Australian model of practice that is has greater relevance to the Australian context and a diverse international alumni body;
- Critical evaluation of international student alumni expectations and preferences to inform alumni practice;
- Long term tracking of alumni to identify patterns of engagement, employment outcomes and connections with Australia.

## Increased capacity of alumni relations

Following from above, and in light of the potential powers of alumni, there is a need to increase resources available to alumni relations for industry development and diplomatic purposes. Consideration needs to be given, at a national, state and institutional level of government as to how to capitalise on the considerable potential of alumni and how this can be strategically harnessed.

Overall, the international alumni relations efforts of the Australian education system has only 'scratched the surface' of its potential as a vehicle for forging stronger people-to-people links between Australia and China. Multiple interests would be served by maintaining strong and sustained alumni links over time.

## SUMMARY AND KEY PRIORITIES

As discussed in the background to this paper, the purpose of conducting a 'think-tank' on the role and influence of China based alumni was to build on recent research undertaken and to make the important links across three industry sectors necessary to harness the development capacity of China based alumni. The findings of the think-tank are presented separately by industry above and each sector identified key barriers and opportunities in developing the capacity of international alumni relations for the benefit of two way travel and tourism. This paper concludes by drawing the links across the three sectors and highlighting priorities for future cross-sector consideration by government, industry and education system strategic planning.

## STRENGTHENING OF ALUMNI RELATIONS CAPACITY

A major message of the think tank is that international alumni networks generally, and alumni networks with China, are powerful in their capacity to generate significant economic, social and political benefits for both Australia and China. In relation to tourism development, the potential multiplier effect of each alumnus is enormous and there is much that could be done to harness this capacity. The extent to which Australian alumni relations is effective in maintaining long-term connections with alumni, however, is unknown. In comparison with countries such as the US and the UK, who compete with Australia for both international visitors and for international students, there has generally been a lack of attention to alumni relations and the potential of alumni for international trade and engagement has been largely overlooked and undervalued. There are also considerable limitations in the extent to which education institutions can maintain long term connections with China based alumni specifically, but international alumni generally. Individual universities have particular limitations and the alumni relations capacity of other education providers in the VET system and private education operators is almost non-existent. This is identified as a major waste of opportunity and a loss in terms of long term capacity for international trade and engagement. Priorities identified by the think tank include to:

- Through comparisons with international models, map and evaluate the alumni relations capacity of the Australian education system at a national level
- Identify models of good practice and investigate how this might be replicated more broadly
- Explore the design and implementation of policy and planning settings necessary for strengthening the capacity of the Australian education system to sustain strong alumni networks
- Identify options for building partnerships between the tourism and international education industries in sustaining strong international alumni networks

While strong alumni relations is a central pre-condition for building the potential of alumni tourism, a series of other priorities, in order to make the links between sectors, were also identified as follows.

## CROSS-SECTOR PLANNING AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The tourism and international education industries both have well developed plans and targets for growing both visitors from China and for student enrolments. For the tourism industry, this is encapsulated by the Tourism 2020<sup>3</sup> plans at a Commonwealth level, and the recent Chaney report<sup>4</sup> proposes priorities and a five year strategic plan for the development of international education. Each state has similarly developed plans for both sectors. There is also a number of recent policy and program developments in relation to strengthening alumni relations which are currently being implemented through the Australian Trade Commission (AusTrade) and through the Australia Awards program. Responsibility for alumni relations lies primarily with individual education institutions, however, and there is no equivalent national plan. There is also little cross-referencing between the three sectors despite the reliance of each sector on the other. International education is heavily supported by the tourism and travel industries. In turn, international students, visiting friends and relatives and return travel by alumni represent a major proportion of international visitors. Given these links, there is a need for this inter-dependence to be reflected in planning and policy development processes undertaken by various levels of government and industry as well as by the many professional bodies that represent the diverse sectors of each industry. Alumni relations are also an important part of this planning but the alumni relations sector as a whole is under-developed and under-valued as a professional field of practice. In 'joining the dots' at a policy level, there is a need to consider how alumni relations practice in Australia can be strengthened, and how the considerable potential of international alumni can be harnessed as part of a whole strategy to increase the value of education tourism and travel. There was general agreement by the think-tank that cross-sector planning was a key priority. Consideration needs to be given to how to construct the mechanisms by which cross-sector planning and co-ordination between the international education, tourism and alumni relations sectors can be realized.

## CONNECTING INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES

Following from the need for better co-ordination across industries was the recognition of the links between industry priorities and the potential for each industry to contribute to the industry development goals of the other. For the tourism industry, there are multiple industry priorities that relate specifically to maximizing the potential of tourism from China. These include priorities such as the need for more Mandarin speaking staff, the development of cross-cultural knowledge by tourism services, tourism product development relevant to the expectations of Chinese visitors, the need for increased dispersal of visitors to regional Australia and the need for fine tuning of communications and marketing to prospective Chinese markets. There is also a demand for greater knowledge of a rapidly changing and increasingly sophisticated and independent Chinese market. At the same time, international education is grappling with how to improve the international student experience, facilitate students to access quality employment

experiences, expand international student engagement with Australian community and cultural life and overall, to maximize the quality and satisfaction with an Australian educational experience. In turn, the alumni relations sector struggles to maintain long term contact with China based alumni and facilitate meaningful, long-term engagement in the face of language, cultural and geographic barriers and with scarce resources.

The think-tank identified a number of potential opportunities to address the 'disconnects' across the sectors for 'win/win' outcomes. For example, there are strong potential synergies between international students and employment opportunities in the tourism sector. Recent changes to student visa arrangements also make the possibilities for graduate employment a greater option which is where closer ties between tourism and alumni relations might be act as an important vehicle for graduate recruitment. Regional tourism products might be profitably developed for students and visiting friends and relatives and in turn, international students might advise the industry on what these products might be. These and many other opportunities could be harnessed through greater cross-sector collaboration. There is also a need to specifically identify what the synergies are, the strategies necessary to make the synergies happen and how these strategies can be implemented.

## PROGRAM AND PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

An overlapping priority identified and discussed was that international students, visiting friends and relatives and alumni represent a number of opportunities for tourism product and service development. For example, graduation ceremonies are highly valued by Chinese families and it is not uncommon for Chinese students, and family members, to return to Australia especially for an event. This is an opportunity for tourism services and operators to cater for this visitation and to potentially develop 'packages' that would assist visitors to make the most of their time in Australia beyond and around the ceremony.

Another example, informed by the alumni tourism research, is the extent to which China based alumni combine multiple activities on return trips to Australia including business and professional activities. As a network, they represent a major opportunity for the development and promotion of business tourism services and products such as conference facilities and services, hotels, study tours, hire cars and the large range of associated services.

It was also acknowledged that access to alumni and international student networks would necessarily need to be mediated and models were also identified of how this might occur through peak associations such as the ACAA, the IEAA and English Australia. As discussed earlier, English Australia effectively acts as a 'broker' for tourism operators who promote discounted tourism products through their college networks for distribution through student information systems. Such a model provides a level of protection for students as well as providing a vehicle to advise the tourism industry on products development and to influence the costing of tourism products.

In order to expand tourism/international links, these models of practice need to be identified, showcased, and communicated in order that they can be replicated more widely.

<sup>3</sup>Tourism Australia. (2012) China 2020 Strategic Plan, Australian Government, Department of Resources, Energy and Tourism, Canberra. See [http://www.tourism.australia.com/TA\\_China\\_2020\\_Strategic\\_Plan.pdf](http://www.tourism.australia.com/TA_China_2020_Strategic_Plan.pdf)

<sup>4</sup>Chaney, M. (2013). Australia - Educating Globally. Canberra: International Education Advisory Council, Retrieved from, <https://www.aei.gov.au/IEAC2/theCouncilsReport/Documents/Australia%20%E2%80%93%20Educating%20Globally%20FINAL%20REPORT.pdf>.



## MARKETING AND PROMOTION

In a related theme, the potential for combining forces for mutual benefit was highlighted in relation to the marketing and communications efforts of both sectors. This is in the context that marketing and promotion of both international education and tourism represents a major dimension of the operations of both industries. Examples are discussed earlier, but one of the themes of discussion was that marketing efforts of both industries often fail to make the close connections between tourism and education opportunities. Again there are good models of practice, where the tourism attractions associated with a particular university are highlighted as part of the education experience to potential Chinese students. Similarly, there are opportunities for links between local government and regional tourism planning to promote attractions and events through international education marketing and vice-versa. Similarly, there are educational tourism products that could be developed. It is not uncommon for family members to travel to Australia specifically to investigate educational opportunities for themselves or their children. Such 'tours' may constitute a viable product for tourism operators. These and other opportunities could be explored and promoted through cross-sector collaboration.

Most importantly, much of the power of alumni is generated through word of mouth networks. The research shows that the large majority of alumni do recommend Australia as a destination for education. The strengthening of communications networks is important to both maximize the flow of such recommendations as well as to provide a vehicle for the direct promotion of tourism and education opportunities. One of the key barriers to the development of networks, however, lay with inadequate systems for maintaining accurate data-bases of alumni contacts. There is considerable scope for the development of data bases and systems customized to alumni relations in ways that can be more intuitive and with the capability to manage Chinese script.

## RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

The research that informed the conduct of the think-tank was exploratory in nature with one objective being to identify gaps in knowledge about the potential of alumni tourism. Priorities arising from the think tank discussion include but are not limited to the following ideas and suggestions:

- Explore the potential for the development of educational/alumni tourism products and services, the capacity of the tourism industry to develop such products and identify the strategic steps necessary for tourism product development that would facilitate wider tourism experiences by Chinese students, their visiting friends and relatives and alumni;
- Identify, map, analyse and communicate successful models of tourism/education partnerships in the marketing and promotion of international education and tourism;
- Identify, map, analyse and communicate successful models of tourism/education partnerships in programs targeted at enhancing the international student experience;
- Explore the potential role of international education/tourism partnerships in promoting regional tourism development through working with regional universities, identifying models of partnerships, and how these might be further developed in the interests of regional tourism;
- Explore the potential and strategies necessary to link Chinese students and alumni to employment opportunities in the tourism industry;

- Identify how tourism/international education/alumni relations links can be forged at a government and industry planning and policy level;
- Explore the role of peak associations in becoming 'brokers' for the tourism industry in the promotion and marketing of educational tourism products and services;
- Canvass the potential for the development and promotion of business tourism products to China based alumni networks;
- Evaluate and assess the capacity of Australian alumni relations for the purposes of developing a strategic plan to strengthen long-term connections with China based alumni;
- Building on the findings of the research on the role and influence of China based alumni on tourism and travel, replicate the study on a national level with a broader scope to also investigate the influence of Chinese alumni based in Australia;
- Investigate the potential preferences of, and demand for, educational tourism products by international alumni;
- Investigate and develop platforms for communication with China based alumni as well as systems for the management of alumni data bases that facilitate long-term contact with Chinese alumni; and,
- Investigate the development of an alumni visa category allowing multiple entry over a long-term period in recognition of their special relationship with Australia and their 'good record' as temporary Australian residents.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the findings of the think-tank were that China based alumni are a powerful resource for fuelling tourism industry growth. As a group, they represent a vehicle for building long-term and meaningful people-to-people links with China in ways intended by current policy platforms implemented by commonwealth, state and local governments across Australia. Harnessing this potential, however, requires attention to long-term collaboration across the tourism and international education industries and investment in building the capacity of alumni relations in Australia.

## ATTACHMENT 1: THINK TANK ATTENDANCE

'New Ways to connect with China: tourism and the international education nexus: A Strategic Think Tank' was conducted on 5th April, 2013, at the City Campus of Victoria University at 300 Flinders St. Melbourne. Representatives from the government, educational institutions and tourism industry associations and operators were invited to participate. There were 86 people in attendance representing the following organisations. The important contribution made by participants to the development of this paper is gratefully acknowledged.

### ORGANIZATIONS

Allianz Global Assistance  
Anglia Ruskin University  
Australia China Alumni Association (ACAA)  
Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET)  
Australian Tourism Export Council (ATEC)  
Australian Trade Commission (Austrade)  
Bravo Consulting  
Breadtrip.com  
Central University of Finance and Economics (CUFE)  
Victoria University, Centre for Tourism and Services Research (CTSR)  
University of Canberra, Centre for Tourism Research  
Charles Darwin University  
China Education International  
China Section, Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE)  
City of Melbourne  
College of Business, Victoria University  
Community Relations, Carey Baptist Grammar School  
Cultural Intelligence  
Curtin Business School  
Deakin University  
Department of Business and Innovation  
Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)  
Destination Melbourne  
English Australia  
IDP Education  
i-Graduate, Australia and New Zealand  
International Australian Academy  
International Education Association Australia (IEAA)  
International Education Association Inc (ISANA)  
Itours Australia  
Marketing Communication, Australian Education Assessment Services  
Mater Christi College  
Melbourne Convention Bureau  
Museum Victoria  
Southern Cross University  
Swinburne University of Technology  
Tourism Queensland  
Tourism Research Australia (TRA)  
Tourism Victoria  
Victorian Tourism Industry Council (VTIC)



