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Education next phase of Australia's economic development: expert

SHANE RODGERS THE AUSTRALIAN MAY 05, 2015 6:10PM

Australia has an opportunity to become the educational epicentre for the next generation of professionals across the Asia Pacific, according to one of the world's leading city economists.

Dr Greg Clark, an adviser, advocate, and mentor for dozens of global cities, said Australia needed to play to its strengths and understand its place in the emerging world as it planned the next phase of its economic development.

This included capitalising on its significant educational capacity, the growing demand for food and agricultural technology, its stability as an investment destination and its enduring appeal to tourists.

Dr Clark was speaking during a visit to Brisbane where he was taking part in discussions about what the city should do to drive its next wave of economic development, including capitalising on the success and global profile created around last year's G20 leaders summit.

He said Australia's big opportunity in the Asia Pacific was as a source of knowledge education and advanced services.

"I would anticipate all Australian cities growing their share of international students coming there but also to extend professional education for people in banking and law, in infrastructure design and in engineering," Dr Clark said.

"I expect Australia to train many of the professions across the whole of Asia over the next period of time — to be the university for Asia if I could put it that way."

Dr Clark said Australia also should not underestimate its appeal for the growing middle class of Asia as a safe, stable democratic location where they could send investment capital, live and holiday.

"The country also has an important role to play in the southern hemisphere and the broader Pacific," he said. "There is a desire for the 'south' to be a centre of innovation on issues like climate change.

"In this Australia has capacity and expertise that others in the hemisphere don't have so you have the opportunity to play a leadership role in mending and caring for the planet."

Dr Clark said Brisbane was part of a band of emerging "new world" cities like Abu Dhabi, Auckland, Barcelona, Cape Town, Copenhagen and San Diego that were riding waves of economic change but had very different attributes to the traditional "world cities".

This included medium density, quality lifestyles, good infrastructure, comfortable commutes, emerging world class specialist sectors in areas like digital, life science and "clean tech", and a strong creative, arts and cultural base.

"These cities play on the notion that you can have a world class career in a newly globalising

sector but you can live in a place that has this amazing quality of life and livability assets,” Dr Clark said. “That’s the successful model.”

The challenge for these cities was how to accommodate growth without forfeiting quality of life and applying “urban surgery” to develop at a pace that preserved natural attributes but encouraged business growth.

Dr Clark said cities would evolve in coming decades to reconcile growth and human aspirations. Corporations would become “flatter” in terms of hierarchy and many firms would abandon office towers.

“Instead they will look more like university campuses with amenities and facilities in them as well as places for people to cooperate,” he said.

“I think for future cities the preferred transport will be light rail systems and (driverless) guided bus systems but also a strong emphasis on walking and cycling. Cities will reduce their dependence on cars and those that do this first will get a competitive advantage.”

Dr Clark said cities would increasingly “neighbour” and “agglomerate” with surrounding cities and regions, with some areas of China forming “region states” of up to 120 million people.

“In Queensland, Brisbane, the Gold Coast the Sunshine Coast and the broader SEQ will become part of a continuous space with Brisbane at heart of a region that has lots of other things as well,” he said.

“We should always think beyond boundaries to the functional space.”

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