



Submission to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Committee Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

1. The Chinese Community Council of Australia (CCCA) is the peak national body which advocates and represents the interests of the Australian Chinese community and fosters a spirit of cooperation and unity among Australians of Chinese descent. CCCA supports a multicultural and socially inclusive Australia and has established successful working relationships with all levels of Government to deliver accessible and equitable services to the Australian Chinese community.
2. CCCA welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students and discuss issues that are affecting international students in general and students originating from China. The welfare of our international students are significant to their general well-being and experience while living and studying in Australia so we would like to express our sincere appreciation to the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Committee for conducting this important inquiry.
3. According to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC), there are approximately 120,000 Chinese students studying in Australia. Overseas students from India also have sizeable numbers and similar to students from China, are increasing on an annual basis. CCCA believes that it is vital to break down misconceptions and strengthen cross-cultural ties between the wider community and international students. Our local students are in fact not missing out but greatly appreciate the diversity and energy international students bring. Life long friendships between local and international students are made in the classroom, social and sporting arenas. Having international students in Australian classrooms allows us to develop an understanding of other countries and cultures, which in turn contributes to the rich tapestry of our increasingly rich multicultural society.
4. All international students must demonstrate they have sufficient funds to meet living and education expenses before a visa is granted. However, circumstances may change once they arrive and a sizeable number of students are currently struggling to make ends meet. For these students, they need to work to cover their expenses; hence there is less time to focus on their studies. In consultation with a number of students from the PRC, CCCA has found that the financial

- burden could extend from their immediate family to include their extended families back home.
5. According to a report entitled *University and Beyond 2007* released by Graduate Careers Australia, 65 per cent of international students intend to apply for Australian permanent residency status either during or following completion of their course. A high level of interest from graduate students remaining in Australia presents an increase in skills and qualifications including the ability and knowledge of a second language, which will ultimately assist to strengthen our workplace and overall competitiveness. Therefore, CCCA strongly supports the Federal Government to develop and invest in mechanisms to further improve the welfare of international students.
 6. At a time of unprecedented discussion about the cost and availability of suitable housing in many parts of Australia. It is important to remember that students are among the most disadvantaged when it comes to accessing safe and affordable accommodation to meet their most basic needs. A general lack of understanding of the housing industry and of tenancy laws is also highly problematic, along with a lack of references and rental history. Financial circumstances and the shortage of available housing are forcing students into living conditions with inadequate space and amenities for the number of occupants.
 7. Particularly in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria, housing in areas near a university or other major vocational education provider are costly and not affordable, and many international students are finding themselves moving farther away from their place of study. The issue of safety comes into play, and with many international students working in jobs which require night shifts, a number of them have found themselves victims of night assaults and robberies. Many are reluctant to report due to fear of being attacked again, and their lack of understanding of the Australian law enforcement system.
 8. A limited amount of space relative to the number of occupants often presents serious impacts on social cohesion and development. Many may suffer from breakdowns and poor health as a result of overcrowding. Insufficient space can impact negatively on the educational performance of students, as there is a lack of personal and quiet space for study and homework.
 9. As tenancy laws vary from state to state, tenant protective measures are highly ambiguous. This is a major obstacle to tenants of all backgrounds, but doubly more confusing for international students who are often already unclear about their rights and responsibilities. This situation leaves new and existing international students susceptible to incidents of discrimination and exploitation. Exploitation not only occurs while international students are in private rental housing but also when they are ending a lease. For example, it is not unusual for an international student to spend a lot of time looking for accommodation. The high demand for rental property in capital cities and because the applicant is a student, they often end up on the bottom of the waiting list. CCCA have received feedback that some rental properties have up to 30 applicants on the list.

10. Unfortunately, the fact that many students find accessing housing incredibly difficult means victims of unfair or unlawful practices are often reluctant to report their experiences, and will go to great lengths to ensure they do not get a negative reference. However, issues such as discrimination and misunderstanding still remain. As part of the Rudd Government's social inclusion agenda, the investment and funding into key community education and engagement programs such as providing new international students with a greater knowledge of the housing sector and cultural awareness training sessions for real estate agents should be encouraged and supported.
11. International students are experiencing great difficulties in finding reasonable rental accommodation for their needs in major capital cities in Australia. In NSW and Victoria, the problem is more acute. For example, despite being one of the biggest universities in Australia, students studying at Monash University are having great difficulty finding affordable and accessible housing. Clayton and its surrounding suburbs are experiencing the lowest rental vacancy rates in 40 years, and rent for houses and apartments has gone up a staggering 20 per cent. Another example, for an international student studying at the University of Melbourne's Parkville campus, the estimated total cost of rent of one-bedroom with a shared bathroom and kitchen ranges from \$16,900 to \$22,600 per year. Other cost of living estimates other than rent include \$45 a week on bills and \$50 a week on food and other utilities. For students who travel on public transport, they are required to pay \$104.40 a month for a zone one ticket, compared to local students with concession entitlements, who are only required to pay \$52.20 a month. The cost of living in Sydney is greater than Melbourne hence the financial expenditure is higher.
12. CCCA is also disappointed to know that Victoria and NSW are the only two remaining states to not grant overseas students concession entitlements to travel on public transport. This practice not only gives international students a sense of unfairness when their fellow students in other Australian states enjoy this concession entitlement. It also increases the student's financial expenditure unnecessarily. The education industry brings to Australia more than \$15 billion in revenue annually. If the NSW and Victorian Governments are unwilling to subsidize overseas student travel, CCCA recommends for the Federal Government to intervene by allocating some of the student revenues to the states.
13. CCCA is aware of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship's work regulations governing students, which allows a maximum of 20 hours per week during session time and unlimited working hours during non-session times. CCCA believes that international students are here to study in Australia and should not be working on a full-time basis. However, CCCA strongly recommends that the Department consider extending the allowed working hours for a short period when there are extenuating circumstances in the students' financial status (for example an unexpected death of a financial supporter or insolvency of the supporter). CCCA further believes a better way to improve student finances is to stop employers' from exploiting students as cheap labor.
14. CCCA proposes for the inquiry to fund and support programs to provide cultural

- awareness education and training to employers to avoid discrimination and exploitation. Education to overseas students on their rights and responsibilities in Australian workplaces is equally important. CCCA suggests that the Federal Government partner up with international student organisations and universities to deliver and present information to new and existing students.
15. International students often encounter numerous barriers when negotiating Australia's immigration system. Serious concerns regarding exploitation by migration agents enticing overseas students to study in Australia have been raised by CCCA members. International students may be deceived by unscrupulous migration agents and associated persons in relation to the amount of money paid for migration assistance to study in Australia. Tougher regulations for migration agencies and practicing agents may be necessary.
 16. CCCA would like to highlight the important role non-profit and community organisations such as the Australian Federation of International Students play in assisting international students settle in our society. After settlement they assist greatly in providing social connectedness, which assists in the overall health and well being of students. More importantly, they develop a sense of trust as well as established networks and relationships with the international student community. As such, it is important that the Federal Government provides some assistance in keeping these organisations going whenever possible.
 17. In response of the recent violence against international students, CCCA recommends a national approach to the safety and well-being of international students living and studying in Australia. CCCA also proposes the inclusion of international student and education bodies such as universities and the Australian Federation of International Students in any established committees or reference group which deals with international student welfare and safety.
 18. CCCA believes that local governments have a vital role to play in providing international students with improved access to services. Some local governments in Victoria such as City of Darebin have taken the lead by acting swiftly to address the issue of student accommodation and safety. This involves consistent consultation and liaison with international student organisations as well as housing and accommodation agencies in an effort to help students living and studying in the local region. Furthermore, the City of Glen Eira and Stonnington have developed comprehensive student housing policies to assist the growing numbers of local and international students in their municipalities with the City of Monash shortly joining this group. The City of Melbourne should also be praised for its investment into funding an international students youth worker to organise engagement activities and events.
 19. International students often experience disorientation to services available when in need. CCCA would like to commend the establishment of the 24 hour one-stop International Care Service by the Victorian Government, and support a similar model to be adopted nationally. The service has the ability to provide strong support to international students in need and assist them navigate our system, which at times could be complex.

20. CCCA believes that sport and recreational activities have an important role to play in the overall social inclusion of Australia's multicultural and diverse society. For example, CCCA would like to bring to the Committee's attention to the Essendon Football Club's newly established GLoBALL Program. The program aims to assist Victoria's international student community to develop relationships with more established communities and organisations through Australian Football and various leadership and engagement programs and football workshops. The program aims to break down misconceptions and strengthen cross-cultural ties between international students and the wider community.¹
21. CCCA believes the scope of this program is an opportunity to provide a positive experience while studying in Australia. Interactive and engagement programs such as this creates a sense of belonging and understanding for newly arrived international students to encourage them to experience Australia as their new home to a greater extent. Essendon has developed interactive activities such as a buddy mentoring system between students and club members, football activities and career seminars. CCCA strongly supports, in other Australian states and territories, funding and investing in initiatives such as the above as sport and recreation promotes social inclusion and has the ability to communicate across cultures, which makes it a powerful tool to support the development of a more stronger and unified society.
22. In conclusion, CCCA supports the inquiry's aim to strengthen and improve the welfare of international students studying and living in Australia. CCCA hopes that the Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Committee will give full consideration to CCCA's highlighted issues, objectives and strategies to address the needs of Australia's growing international student community.

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¹ Essendon Football Club, *GLoBALL Program*, Retrieved on August 9 2009, <http://www.essendonfc.com.au/community/multicultural.asp>