

The Senate Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Contribution from Victoria University towards a Universities Australia submission

Terms of Reference:

(a) the roles and responsibilities of education providers, migration and education agents, state and federal governments, and relevant departments and embassies, in ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support, with particular reference to:

Victoria University encourages the federal and state governments to recognise the importance of this industry, through a greater investment of resources into continuing to improve the industry, including greater allocation of resources to ensure quality assurance and a more comprehensive and thorough registration process for education providers.

VU seeks greater nationwide and statewide collaboration between authorities such as the Victoria Police, Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB), Life Saving Victoria and Real Estate Institute of Victoria to ensure that there is consistency across the industry in the level of information and service provided to the students. We support the delivery of information in-country, prior to the students' arrivals in Australia, however an interactive means of delivering the critical information needs to be developed. Presenting students with large amounts of written material prior to their departure is ineffective.

The challenge with many issues faced by international students is not the lack of information made available. Students generally do not read all materials presented to them, so putting out another guide or brochure is not the answer. It is important to create innovative and creative solutions to deliver key messages to make students aware of important issues. These messages need to be delivered regularly throughout the enquiry to application to enrolment process.

(i) student safety,

The enquiry should be multidimensional in the review of student safety and the roles and responsibilities of organisations in providing advice. Student safety should incorporate water safety, fire safety, road safety and personal safety.

As part of the CRICOS registration process, institutions should be required to demonstrate their ability to deliver safety information to their student cohorts.

VU believes that institutions should be required to implement student safety committees to discuss issues around safety, both on and off campus.

We also feel that student safety should be considered by institutions when setting class timetables to minimise the vulnerability of students commuting to and from campus late at night.

(ii) adequate and affordable accommodation,

The enquiry, where possible, should also incorporate investigations (perhaps through focus groups) into the conditions in which students live. The news media have reported on cases where up to 15 students share a house, yet there is insufficient information available to determine how common this may be. Greater understanding of the issues facing international students in their search for accommodation should be a key element of this inquiry. Anecdotally we hear that study abroad students who are in Melbourne for 3-6 months struggle with housing and may be forced into expensive accommodation due to the short-term nature of their stay. Additionally, stories of exorbitant deposits/bonds being charged are also reported. Educating students about

their rights as tenants under the appropriate government frameworks is important. Consideration should also be given to possible auditing processes of landlords.

Affordability is paramount. Many institutions offer accommodation but it is not affordable. Generally, students do not have a lot of money and therefore, cannot pay market rates. To a very large extent the accommodation built in recent times tends to self-contained studio apartments. We believe greater consideration should be given to the old style halls of residence, single or even shared rooms with shared facilities. Such accommodation engenders collegiality, inclusion and social cohesion. The additional interaction between the students would lead to a reduced sense of isolation that many international students initially experience and would reduce the tendency for accommodation ghettos to form.

(iii) social inclusion,

This is a fundamental and complex issue that goes right to the heart of student success. An isolated, alienated student is not able to fully explore the rich dynamic that an international education experience provides.

Students require the psychological preparation and readiness before they even come to Australia. Institutions and agents need to look at all their activities to ensure there are a range of opportunities to encourage social inclusion. Students will develop relationships when they have a common interest. Some will happen naturally, whilst some of the interaction needs to be facilitated and students may need a little encouragement to get them out of their comfort zone.

Active programs of orientation and integration with local students and staff are of great importance. Sporting programs are a valuable vehicle for engendering inclusion.

It is also important for institutions to work with local communities and government authorities to encourage social inclusion within the community.

Institutions should be required to look at on-campus activities and these can create a sense of community, not just for international students but for all students.

Victoria University's introduction of Learning in the Workplace and the Community (LiWC) will assist students in assimilating into the community and/or the workplace. (additional text will be added to this)

(iv) student visa requirements,

Whilst some organisations are calling for a revision of the 20 hour per week limit, Victoria University believes that students should not be allowed to work more than 20 hours per week during semester as they are required to study full-time. The main purpose of students coming to Australia is not to work, but to study. Students are obviously working around the requirements to demonstrate they have enough money to pay tuition fees and support themselves while they are here.

Victoria University encourages the Australian Government to work with foreign governments to introduce a registration system for agents offshore, such as that being proposed in India. Greater onus should be placed on both institutions and agents in ensuring that prospective students are informed of the educational experience which they are registering. The system should require agents to declare the range of services they provide for students and whether there are charges/fees involved for each service. Agents should be required to be transparent regarding any financial arrangements they have with third parties or in relation to any of the services e.g. the ownership of student accommodation facilities, as well as their practices with respect to student recruitment.

We would like to see greater analysis and auditing by the Government of agent behaviour, in terms of their practices in relation to visa applications.

VU would like consideration to be given to requiring international students to deposit some funds into accounts which can only be accessed during their studies, to assist in alleviating financial hardships which they may experience during their studies.

(v) adequate international student support and advocacy,

Clearly there is insufficient support and advocacy for international students. More resources need to be made available to support students at all levels. Support and advocacy should not be limited to that provided by institutions but should also be provided by federal and state governments, as well as other key agencies and organisations. Students also need to have confidence and trust in the people they seek support and advocacy from.

Governments should be working with key stakeholders that resources are used efficiently to provide central support services, decreasing the ad hoc provision of services which is occurring currently across the industry. Consideration should be given to the establishment of a national helpline by the Australian Government for students to register concerns they have in terms of safety and educational experiences.

While VU is pleased to see initiatives introduced such as the welcome desk at Melbourne International Airport or the welcome booth in the CBD, we are concerned that they only reach a limited number of students due either to the timing of the service or the location. We believe that these services need to be expanded considerably.

(vi) employment rights and protections from exploitation, and

Students are often exploited because of the need to work and in many cases more than the allowed 20 hours. Employers know this and that is why it happens. If students were not desperate to work and in some cases breaching their visa conditions, then they would not be so vulnerable. It will not matter how much knowledge they have of their rights or what protection they have from exploitation, if they are still desperate to work exploitation will occur. Therefore, there needs to be mechanisms in place to make sure students have sufficient funds to support themselves whilst studying. We also recognise that these problems affect many migrant groups and are not just restricted to those on student visas.

(vii) appropriate pathways to permanency;

Many of the problems we are facing today are a result of students wanting the quickest and cheapest route to permanent residency (PR). Regrettably this route has been encouraged and promoted by some offshore education agents and institutions in both the private and public sectors.

This has resulted in damaging the perception of the quality of Australian education. Education should therefore not be seen as an easy route PR. The Government should be concentrating efforts on ensuring that the quality of the Australian education system is maintained, if not enhanced, if we are to continue enjoying the success the international education industry has enjoyed to date.

VU would support greater research into the connection between the drivers for student destination/institution/course and the importance of PR on these decisions. Furthermore, analysis of whether a conflict of interest exists between business objectives when organisations

act as both recruitment agents and migration agents and consideration to be given to organisations being able to act in only one capacity.

The Australian Government needs to take a stronger lead on developing and implementing more stringent quality assurance mechanisms which institutions need to adhere to, if they are to retain their registration. This would hopefully reduce the number of institutions who are established purely for providing pathways to permanent residency and are not necessarily operating with the students' educational interests in mind. If Australia is to improve its international standing as a provider of quality education, then we need to reduce the association between education and permanent residency. We also need to be able to demonstrate the quality assurance systems we have in place.

(b) the identification of quality benchmarks and controls for service, advice and support for international students studying at an Australian education institution;

Improved coordination and collaboration across the industry needs to be achieved. The roles and responsibilities of federal, state and local governments, education providers and other organisations needs to be clearly differentiated. There are currently too many groups initiating and implementing studies, taskforces etc which overlap with what other areas are undertaking. This causes inefficiency across the industry.

International students correctly assume that if an education provider has a CRICOS registration, that they meet the Australian Government's education provider standards and are therefore endorsed by the Government. We need to ensure that students' expectations can be met and that the educational experience that international students are receiving will benefit Australia in the long term. To achieve this, we feel that a more comprehensive and rigorous registration process should be implemented.

We support a greater commitment of resources by the Government into research into the international education industry to gain a greater understanding of the services and support international students require. These findings should then be collated to form a set of standards which all institutions must comply with.

(c) any other related matters.

The lack of concessional fares on public transport is an issue of vital importance to international students. This current highly visible discrimination (in some states) between local and international students is often perceived as a racist money-grabbing exercise by state governments and certainly does not engender a sense of welcome and inclusiveness across the entire student cohort.

Organisations actively promoting the opportunity for students to transfer between providers, such as those distributing flyers at Flinders St station in Melbourne, should be actively discouraged.