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SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association Inc. (GSA) is the student representative body for graduate students at the University of Melbourne. The GSA has over 13,000 members including all Graduate Diploma, Postgrad Diploma, Masters, PhD and other doctoral students. The GSA speaks up within the University and in the wider community to help graduate students and to improve graduate education, research and welfare.

The GSA is an incorporated association, fully independent of the University, and is governed by a Council of 19 students, elected by the graduate student body.

The GSA welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Senate's inquiry into the welfare of international students. In relation to international graduate students at the University of Melbourne, the GSA makes the following recommendations:

- increasing funding for scholarships and for student support services in order to meet the increasing demand of a growing international student cohort;
- reducing international student visa costs, to make it comparable with other countries;
- revising international student visa conditions to allow for more leniency for students whose visas are revoked or those who wish to have their visa extended;

- granting transport concessions to all international students, regardless of which state they reside in, or which course they are studying.

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Yours sincerely,

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Introduction

International students are an increasingly important source of revenue and knowledge capital for Australian Universities (NLC 2006: 4; Vamvakinou et al 2008: 97), with fees at many Universities increasing between 2 and 20 per cent each year (NLC 2006: 5). The number of international students enrolling in Australian universities also continues to rise (Slattery 2009). In 2002, education was the country's eighth largest export earner and its third largest service export, generating an estimated \$4.2 billion (NLC 2009: 10). This figure is clearly increasing each year — in 2006–2007, its 100,000 international students generated \$3.5 billion in export revenue for Victoria alone (Marginson 2008: 13).

Student Support Services

Approximately half of the students utilising the GSA's Advocacy Service are international students, yet these students typically take up more of each Advocate's time. The most common issues facing these students are financial hardship, language barriers, and high stress about visa-related issues. Frequently these concerns are enmeshed in both the source of academic difficulties, or act as obstacles to satisfactory resolution of such problems. Each of these contributes to the greater difficulties international students face in terms of successfully completing their degree in Australia.

International student finances

Research into student poverty clearly shows that many students live in impoverished conditions (Bessant 2002, in Broadbent 2002: 25), with more than forty per cent of tertiary students estimated to live below the poverty line (Price 2008). Financially, graduate students fare worse than undergraduates, as few are eligible for government financial student support, such as Youth Allowance or Austudy (CAPA 2009). One survey published by the University of Melbourne's Centre for the Study of Higher Education (2007) found that a significant number of graduate students (52.5 percent of full-time research students and 60.5 per cent of full-time coursework students) report significant worries about their financial situation.

It is a concern of the GSA that international students may be under even greater economic pressure. International students pay full fees and are not subsidised by the government unless they are on an individual scholarship. International students and their working spouses (as visa dependants) also pay taxes, though are ineligible in any way for government subsidies, the tax-free threshold or claims for self-education expenses (NLC 2009: 8–9).

Currently, the IPRS scholarships available to international students are estimated to cover between 60 and 69 per cent of tuition costs, before even considering the costs involved in living in Australia. In 2008, the House of Representatives' Committee on Science, Industry and Innovation's inquiry into research training and issues in Australian Universities recommended that the number of IPRS awards be doubled, as well as increased to cover the full tuition costs for each course (Vamvakinou et al 2008: 100 – Recommendations 27 & 28). The GSA endorses this recommendation.

Associated family costs

For international students with dependants (children and/or a spouse) additional financial hardship is faced. First, with regard to those international students with school-aged children, most international students report that they have to pay tuition fees that range between \$6,790 - \$10,053 annually for each child (DEECD, 2009). The establishment costs to enter a school can be as high as \$300 per child, which barely covers the costs of school uniforms, stationery, books, and other minimum requirements. Since dependants of international students are also ineligible for any concession rates, higher fees for them to participate in extra curricular activities outside school can be further anticipated.

Second, for those international students with pre-school aged children, the cost of daycare is beyond what most international students state that they can afford. On average, the cost is about \$70 per day for each child to be cared for while the student parents have to attend courses, meet supervisors or research participants or partake in other academia-related work. The stress of making sure that their children are in a safe environment, the anxiety of separation, as well as

financial constraints all accumulate and negatively affect the students' academic and social wellbeing.

Third, the financial burden on international students with dependants often necessitates their spouse to find work in the host country. International students have pleaded to the GSA to seek the eradication of all forms of work restrictions on their spouses. International students argue that a special rate of tax should apply to these workers, as they are not beneficiaries of the tax system.

Language barriers

Many international students requiring the GSA's Advocacy Service present with an allegation of Unsatisfactory Progress made by their Faculty. Often this is a direct result of a lack of language support for students for whom English is not their first language. It is interesting to note that although these students have met the University's IELTS requirements, once relocating to Australia and commencing their degree they then discover that their language skills are not proficient enough. It is inherently unfair to admit international students to a degree, based partly on their English proficiency, accept their quite sizeable fees and then claim that their English is not really up to standard. The GSA contends that more funding should be allocated to language support for international students at every stage of their degree and that it is the responsibility of the University to provide this support.

Visa issues

International students coming to Australia to study pay the highest costs for student visas, compared with any other of our international competitors (CAPA 2009; NLC 2006: 7). It is little wonder then that Australia is lagging behind other countries when it comes to the proportion of international students enrolling in higher degrees by research. Compared to the UK (40.2 per cent) and the US (33.3 per cent), international students in Australia make up only 18 to 22 per cent of students enrolled in higher degrees by research (Vamvakinou et al 2008: 97–98).

Further, it has been noted by international students with dependants that the Australian Government's fixed application fee for each visa is not as family-friendly as the US and other countries, which charge for visas on a per family basis.

It is also a concern of the GSA that students who make unsatisfactory progress in their degree have only 28 days after the cancellation of a student visa in order to leave the country. From an Advocacy perspective, this results not only in extreme financial hardship, but also forces students to make very quick decisions about whether or not to appeal the University's decision. This high-stress situation, combined with the uncertainty of their living and travel arrangements pending an appeal outcome, places them at a much greater disadvantage than domestic students in a comparable academic situation.

Visa extensions are also an area of interest and concern for international students. Many have reported to the GSA the comparative ease that they had securing an extension of their student visa for academic requirements in such countries as the US and Canada. The extended period is a time often fraught with stress and hardship. Scholarships and paid study leave have expired and students often rely on charitable support.

Transport concessions

University of Melbourne graduate students currently endure the lower rung of a two-tiered system of public transport concessions: most being ineligible. International graduate students, despite citing transport concessions as their priority concern, have been overlooked by the State Government, who, it would appear, has steadfastly refused to alter its policy. International student concessions were removed in Victoria in 1989 (NLC 2006: 7). Since then, transport concessions have not been either regulated or subsidised by the Federal government (NLC 2006: 6) and decisions about who is entitled to a transport concession are left up to the state or territory government (NLC 2006: 6). Victoria is currently one of only two states, along with New South Wales, that does not grant travel concessions to international graduate students. This is despite the fact that Victoria and NSW have

the largest intake of international University students (NLC 2006: 6). It is clear that Victoria is lagging behind other states and territories where student travel concessions are concerned. The GSA supports the House of Representatives' Committee on Science, Industry and Innovation (2008) recommendation that transport concessions should be made available to all full-time tertiary students (Vamvakinou et al. 2008: xix). Where State and Territory governments are unwilling to make financial provision for such concessions, the GSA contends that the Commonwealth ought to provide financial compensation to States to mandate this. The GSA recommends the Commonwealth also consider the introduction of a national tertiary student concession card which would be available to all students, regardless of enrolment type. The Commonwealth should negotiate with State governments to ensure that a card would be redeemable on public transport and other key public services, whether publicly operated or privatised.

Recommendations

The GSA recommends that:

- funding for scholarships and for student support services be increased in order to meet the increasing demand of a growing international student cohort;
- international student visa costs be reduced to make them comparable with other countries;
- international student visa conditions be revised in order to allow for more leniency for students whose visas are revoked or those who wish to have their visa extended;
- public transport concessions be granted to all international students, regardless of which state they reside in, or which course they are studying.

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