

**Monash University Submission:
Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International
Students**

**Prepared
By
The Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor
(International),
Monash University**

Introduction

Monash University appreciates the opportunity to provide input into this very timely Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students. As a Group of Eight (GO8) university, Monash University is the youngest, internationally-based, research-intensive university in Australia. Monash has the largest international student population among the GO8 universities, with almost 20,000 students (including those from our two non-Australian campuses) from 142 countries representing approximately 34% of the student population at Monash University. In Victoria we have approximately 12,000 international students at our six campuses which include metropolitan, peri-urban and regional locations. More general information about Monash can be found on the Monash Website, <http://www.monash.edu.au>.

Given its international platform, Monash takes seriously its role and responsibilities as regulated by the Education Services to Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000, and the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (2007). Through its quality cycle, Monash administers a number of general surveys and questionnaires which inform the evaluation of the international student experience. These include the:

- Monash Experience Questionnaire (MEQ) – Evaluates the student experience and is administered every two years to all students.
- Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) – Evaluates the course experience across Australian universities and all graduates are invited to participate.
- International Graduate Survey – Evaluates student experience and is conducted annually by the Health, Wellbeing and Development unit.
- Orientation Survey – Enables first-year and new-to-Monash students to provide feedback on orientation programs.
- Monash Residential Services Customer Survey – Invites student feedback on both on and off-campus accommodation and services.
- Support Services Review – Evaluates performance of each support services area at least once every five years.

This submission on the welfare of international students addresses the Terms of Reference for the Senate Inquiry from the diverse perspectives of students, and professional and academic staff across Monash University. It outlines information in relation to the welfare and support services provided to international students at pre-departure, arrival and on-going support to address issues faced by students during their initial study cycle at Monash. The submission also highlights examples of best practice by Monash for both international students and their dependents. It is hoped that this paper serves to inform the Australian Government about current issues concerning international students' welfare and the response required to enhance capacity to address these concerns.

Methodology

The Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) led the preparation of this submission by engaging key stakeholders at various levels. It followed consultation with professional and academic staff from across the University together with key student representatives from international student bodies from its Australian campuses. Input was obtained through interviews, submissions to our office, and

participation in a Senate Inquiry Forum ([See Appendix 1 for a consultations list](#)). This was welcomed as an opportunity to engage and reflect on the terms of reference through a strategic planned forum.

Key Informant Input

Professional and academic staff were asked to address three key questions in relation to the terms of reference for this document. They are:

- Describe our current practice in relation to each of these areas within Monash University?
- What should be done to address these key issues?
- Provide input to address key issues and concerns regarding international students at a national level.

The Senate Inquiry Forum

The purpose of this Forum was to conduct a strategic review and planning process. There were three discussion groups with each group assigned two key issues to consider. They also identified recommendations for each strategy suggested with an underlying rationale for change both nationally and within Monash University.

Summary

Monash considers the following to be most important for international students in our current context, in addition to specific recommendations made throughout this submission.

1. Student safety - Each university needs to consider safety issues for their students at each of their campuses as the needs may vary. This involves attention to security on and around campus especially after hours, shuttle bus services, community education programs, as well as improved access to affordable and secure accommodation.
2. Social inclusion - Education agents should be encouraged to provide students with more comprehensive information on the study destination (eg. a DVD on student life in Melbourne could be provided to each student before arrival and available on the website of each education institution). Empower international student clubs on campus to positively promote multiculturalism. English language fluency and communication was considered a major impediment to social inclusion for international students. There is a need to provide greater support in a social context to students and their dependents in the wider community.
3. Student support and advocacy - Encourage the establishment and support of an International Student Association that could advocate the needs of international students nationally.

Monash University's Response

For each section, this submission will consider the needs of international students recognising an expected increase in this cohort (AusAID, national government scholarships, international education partnerships, etc) and will outline key recommendations for each component.

(a) Ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support, with particular reference to:

(i) Student safety

Universities have an obligation and responsibility to ensure students have a safe learning environment. They also have an obligation to promote student safety in the community. As part of its core business and responsibilities for its students Monash University offers a range of student safety support services.

Existing services

Campus safety is recognised as a key responsibility. University security services are available 24 hours a day on all campuses for immediate response to threatening situations.

Monash University also recognises that the safety of international students in the broader community needs to be addressed. Consequently, as part of its current practice Monash makes a concerted effort to provide information about personal safety in the community. The aim is to inform students about where and who they can approach if they are concerned.

At the beginning of each semester members of the Victoria Police Multicultural Liaison Unit address international students on safety within the community. In addition, at our Clayton campus earlier this year, a Victorian Police Crime Prevention unit operated a booth during 'Club' week, which enabled students to talk to police and gather written material on safety in the community.

Other established services include our Safer Community Programs (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/safercommunity/index.html>), which outline key resources, advisory services and education programs. These strategies encourage the university community to seek assistance in managing situations where their wellbeing is affected by events or inappropriate, threatening or concerning behaviour. Staff and students can speak with Safer Community staff by calling the Community Care Program. This is a central point of contact for information, advice and support for managing and responding to complex situations affecting their own or others' wellbeing. There are also Campus Community Drop-ins at each Australian campus for in person information and advice.

Monash University also has robust Discrimination and Harassment policies and procedures supported by a team of trained and experienced Discrimination and Harassment Advisers who are readily available to the campus community.

Special response

In light of the recent attacks on Indian students in May 2009, Monash University has been proactive in its response through its partnership with Victoria Police and ongoing communication with staff and students. A number of initiatives were undertaken to address the student safety issues for our students. For example:

- Monash University worked with Victoria Police to provide general and protective behaviour advice to our Indian students. This was followed by a forum with the University's Crime Prevention coordinator and Victoria Police at its Clayton and Caulfield campuses. Indian students were directly informed of the sessions via email.
- The Monash Call Centre team and recruitment managers were provided with detailed information in order to properly brief any concerned parties. In addition, the Monash Website was updated with details on Student Personal Safety approaches, using current safety advice from Victoria Police.

Recommendation

1. *Universities should address the safety of all students both at the university and within the broader community by providing safety measures while ensuring responses commensurate to the needs of each university campus across Australia.*

(ii) Adequate and affordable accommodation

Monash University offers a range of accommodation services, including:

- Temporary accommodation on arrival;
- Homestay accommodation through the Monash University English Language Centre / Monash College;
- On-campus accommodation options at almost all campuses; and,
- Assistance with finding off-campus accommodation, including through the provision and maintenance of a database.

Monash University also has a variety of on-campus accommodation options at most campuses and this is scheduled to expand in 2010. However, at this stage there is not enough on-campus accommodation to house all international students due to high occupancy rates. There is also a shortage of off-campus accommodation due to extremely low rental property vacancy rates. Melbourne's vacancy rate was the lowest on record when it fell below 1% in 2008. The vacancy rate in East Gippsland at the time was 1.2%.¹ This has adverse affects on international students finding accommodation at both metropolitan and regional campuses.

International students may be forced to find accommodation further from campus due to more affordable rental costs and increased availability or in some cases a safer suburb. This increases travel distance to the university. International students are

¹ <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2008/03/19/1205602482946.html>, accessed 24/08/09

unable to get concession on public transport in Victoria or NSW, which can act as a disincentive to live further from campus and impacts negatively on affordability.²

Adequate (including secure) and affordable accommodation can be a challenge to find for all students and international students can face a number of extra difficulties in negotiating permanent accommodation. In a survey undertaken by Monash Residential Services (MRS), international students were asked to evaluate the benefits of living on campus. Approximately 80 percent of students reported that living in on-campus accommodation enhanced their ability to study effectively. Other significant benefits included the ability to meet people easily, improve levels of cultural understanding, and greatly enhance their overall student experience at the University. From an academic performance perspective, an analysis of the pass rate of students living in MRS supported on-site accommodation between 2001 and 2008, showed a consistently higher pass rate for both local and international students³. These results are particularly useful in understanding the benefits of living on-campus, and warrant moves to further enhance Monash's ability to house our students on campus.

According to MRS' statistics, international students constitute the main student group inquiring about off-campus accommodation.⁴ In 2008, MRS worked with Consumer Affairs Victoria to produce a multi-lingual DVD - "Renting in Victoria, a guide for students". The DVD is listed on their website (<http://www.mrs.monash.edu.au/off-campus-accommodation/index.html>) and is promoted in our correspondence with international students. MRS has also established good working relationships with a number of real estate agents who in the past would not consider applications from students and staff (due to stereotypes and other misinformation). For example, at Monash's Caulfield campus, past success of such efforts lead to three real estate agents becoming student-friendly, resulting in more than 50% of their rental clients being Monash students and staff. The real estate agents are aware of the legal support available to Monash students if they are not treated fairly in accordance with Victorian Tenancy legislation. Feedback from the agents suggested that new international students were well briefed on how to be a good tenant, which enhanced the success of new applications.

Recommendations

These recommendations are also directly linked with social inclusion and safety.

2. *To increase access to on-campus accommodation for international students, Government should work in partnership with universities to develop student accommodation.*
3. *International students should be provided with access to public transport concessions which will remove the disincentive of transport costs in the selection of residential accommodation in safer suburbs and the use of public transport.*

² This point is noted in National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia: *Submission to Residential Accommodation Issues Paper, Consumer Affairs Victoria*, 6 September 2007, 2.

³ MRS on-site residential students vs non-residential student pass rate comparison between 2001 and 2008.

⁴ *MRS Off Campus Housing Services Report (2008)*. For each month from January-April 2008, international students formed the largest group of the MRS client base across all campuses (when compared to local students and staff).

(iii) Social inclusion

According to Monash University's Health, Wellbeing and Development unit⁵, social inclusion is a complex issue that relates to the rights, integration and participation of international students in the community, both within education institutions and the broader community. Activities to encourage social inclusion should take place within the classroom environment. However, they should also be provided through supplementary programs in education institutions and local communities with government support. The degree of social inclusion experienced by international students and their families can have a significant impact on their learning outcomes and their overall experience in Australia.

It is recognised that the success of international students, including higher degree research students, and their ability to adapt, is linked to the university's capability to assist candidates in areas of critical need such as improving English competency and building social networks with Australian students, including with those from their own cultures.⁶

Monash University has developed a range of programs and policies to enhance social inclusion and the engagement of international students. An integrated Orientation Program is provided for all commencing students upon arrival to encourage friendship and cross cultural interaction. Special sessions introduce new international students to our diverse culture and provide them with some skills to enable them to engage confidently with their fellow students and in the community. In addition, mentoring programs embedded within Faculties and the Peer Mentoring Program provides opportunities for engagement and assists students to settle into their new environment.

To facilitate interactions between local and international students outside the classroom, 'Campus Connect' program (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/globalfriendshipnight/index.html>) has been introduced. The program involves a series of regular community events on all Australian campuses. It comprises a variety of social and educational interactive activities that seek to promote cross cultural interest and friendships among local and international students. Many international students would like to engage with the wider community, get involved in community activities, and be invited into an Australian home but are often unsure how to do this. Education providers together with government and community organisations need to take a proactive approach to encourage social inclusion.

The International Student Friendship Program (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/family/friendship-program.html>) at Monash University has been developed to assist international students with their transition to university life through community networks that provide social and practical support. The program matches international students with trained (and police-checked) local volunteers, some of whom are Monash staff but many are from

⁵ Blastock, W. & Jacob, S. (2009). Social inclusion report submitted to ODVCI, Monash University for the Senate Inquiry on Welfare of International Students.

⁶ Broader discussion in Sawir, E., Marginson, M., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., and Ramia, G, 2008, "Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study". *Journal of Studies in International Education*. Vol 12, No.2, Summer, 148-180. See also Leder G. and Forgasz H. 2004, "Australian and international mature students: the daily challenges ". *Higher Education Research & Development*, Vol 23, No 2 May, 183-198.

the surrounding community. Participation in the program promises an experience of Australian family life, local friendship and cultural exchange.

There are many examples of binding friendships and meaningful interactions between Monash's international students and local community members. These have been enabled through the programs described above and also through work placements, volunteering opportunities, student organisations, clubs, sporting activities, living in on-campus accommodation, and through links with community and religious organisations. The provision of adequate social spaces and facilities to enable social, sporting and cultural activities is important to facilitate social interaction.

Access to cultural competency training is important for academic and administrative staff. For those involved in programs for international students, it assists in the understanding of cultural interactions and the differing needs of individuals within the diverse international student cohort and the need for a range of activities and approaches to this issue. To encourage international students to actively engage with the community, connect with people and utilise community resources, public transport concession should be available to international students, as discussed above.

Recommendations

4. *Education agents should be encouraged to provide students with more comprehensive information on the study destination (eg. a DVD on student life in Melbourne could be provided to each student before arrival and available on the website of each education institution).*
5. *Empower international student clubs across Australian universities to positively promote multiculturalism.*
6. *Encourage Australian universities to provide greater support for English language communication in a **social context** for international students.*

(iv) Student visa requirements

Monash University's experience with student visa requirements has led to concerns that many international students do not come to Australia with adequate funds to support their study. During discussion at the Monash University Senate Inquiry Forum, participants informed us that many international students fulfill the financial requirements for obtaining a visa by borrowing the funds and returning them once the financial requirements are met for obtaining their student visa. In addition, students also do not renew their health insurance after the first year due to financial constraints.

The funds provided as evidence are not available for their study and daily living expenses in Australia. Consequently, this results in students traveling to Australia without adequate financial support. In order to cover costs, students rely on income from employment opportunities while they study in Australia. Student visas enable international students to work a maximum of 20 hours per week, which is often insufficient to cover their daily living expenses. Alternative income sources are often attractive to these students not as a result of the financial gain but provide an avenue to survive as an international student in Australia. The impact of additional hours

often results in poor working conditions and exploitation which are discussed under employment rights and protections from exploitation.

Recommendation

7. DIAC should review and address the financial requirements for student visas which ensure international students come to Australia with enough funds to cover their daily living expenses and course fees.

(v) Adequate international student supports and advocacy

Monash University provides high-level support and advocacy to its international students. International students receive comprehensive information regarding accommodation, transport, employment, course work, etc. through various mediums including the website, email, career fairs, workshops, and information sessions etc. Monash University's Health, Wellbeing and Development (HWD) unit provides support to all students, including international students. HWD provides excellent service to international students, for example, they arrange free airport pick up for all students commencing at Victorian campuses. However, some services are not well utilised by international students. Please refer to [Appendix 2](#) for details of best practice support services currently provided at Monash University.

Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2008)⁷ in their study of Monash University international students raised a number of concerns and the need for support of international students, academic, health and well being not just on campus but in the community. They highlighted that international students encounter difficulties including adaptation to a foreign education system, language and culture. According to Sebastian and Leske (2008)⁸, a review of welfare and support services found that higher degree research international students were unique when compared to their counterparts in the undergraduate programs. They differ from undergraduate international students because a high proportion of international HDRs tend to be mature-aged (30-39 years old), mid-career professionals with permanent jobs to which they can return, or must return, and they tend to be accompanied by spouse/dependants⁹. Consequently, at Monash University we recognise the intrinsic link between successful home and study life, and the importance of supporting not just the student but also spouses and families through a number initiatives and support services highlighted in [Appendix 2](#). Spouses and dependants also face the same challenges of living abroad. Cultural and religious differences and isolation from support and social networks can make it more difficult for spouses of international students to settle in Australia (Sebastian and Leske, 2008).

During the forum, it was recognised that international students have specific needs and were often confused about how to access some services or the best point of contact for particular issues. It was also reiterated that the current model of mainstreaming services needs to be revisited. It was proposed that a there should

⁷ Forbes-Mewett, H. & Nyland, C. (2008). Cultural diversity, relocation and the security of international students at an internationalised university. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2), 181-203.

⁸ Sebastian, E. & Leske, B. (2008). Welfare and support services for newly arrived international higher degree research candidates. ODVCI, Monash University.

⁹ See Harman, G, 2003, International PhD students in Australian universities: financial support, course experience and career plans, *International Journal of Educational Development*, No. 23, pp.339-351

be greater specialisation within the Student Support Service to address the specific issues of international students at Monash University.

The forum also highlighted the potential benefits of having a single International Student Association with representatives on all campuses, instead of individual associations. A central Association would foster open communication, coordination of services, and social inclusion through networks and joint activities. It would also enhance knowledge and publication of available services. The International Student Association would further benefit from a central association for international students at the national level. A national association would provide a vast network and opportunities for collaboration across universities.

Recommendations

8. *Government should encourage Australian universities to maintain a designated support service for international students.*
9. *Encourage the establishment and support of an International Student Association who could advocate the needs of international students at a national level.*

(vi) Employment rights and protections from exploitation

Employment rights and protections are a major concern to our students, partly because this area of concern overlaps with several of the others raised by this inquiry. For instance, without adequate funding beyond the requisite amount to secure a visa, many students rely on funds obtained from work. While regulations stipulate 20 hours as the maximum amount that students can work each week, our experience has shown that students often work extra hours to support themselves. It is in this situation that students become vulnerable to exploitation.

This is often a result of students being unaware of their employment rights. Monash has made a concerted effort to inform students of their employment rights, but a more comprehensive national education initiative is needed in this regard.

Monash's other concern is that students who work extra hours, might not only be subject to exploitation. Faculty and staff present at the forum explained that based on their experience students who work more than 20-hours per week are more likely to present at Faculty Board for poor performance. This is particularly true for the younger demographic of undergraduate students. Participants explored possibilities of a national policy response to this issue. While many of our students are willing to work more than 20 hours, our consultations suggest that it might be wise to maintain the 20-hour limit on students who are new to tertiary study (undergraduates) while pursuing a more flexible approach to graduate students and their spouses.

Recommendations

10. *Universities should actively promote employment rights and ensure international students have access to up-to-date information and legal advice and support services.*
11. *DIAC should consider increasing the number of work hours permitted under a student visa, by level of study.*

(vii) Appropriate pathways to permanency

As discussed in the Monash University Senate Inquiry Forum, there is a perception that many international students expect study in Australia to be a pathway to permanent residency (PR). However, this perception is somewhat misleading. We learned that international students in higher education may decide from the very beginning (before commencing study) that their education is a pathway to PR status in Australia. We also learned that students in higher education have decided to pursue PR status as result of their positive student experience at university and within the community.

Permanent Residency rules and requirements change regularly and decisions can have unintentional, negative consequences on students who have already commenced study in Australia. It is essential that international students have access to the most up-to-date information on PR requirements through institutions and government departments.

When the primary objective of study for international students in Australia is a pathway to PR in Australia, higher education institutions can feel pressured to change courses to match PR requirements, rather than educational needs, capacity building and future workforce development. Also, conflict of interest often exists between some education agents who are also migration agents. This has led to issues of exploitation of students, academic concerns and reduced the reputation of Australia as a quality international education provider.

Recommendations

- 12. The Australian Government should strictly enforce the law when unethical practice occurs by education institutions, migration agents, or education agents.*
- 13. The Australian Government should clearly differentiate the roles and responsibilities of migration agents versus education agents.*
- 14. DIAC to ensure that international students have access to the most up-to-date information on permanent residency requirements through institutions, government departments and migration agents.*

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

All education institutions are required to follow Standard 6 of the National Code 2007 which ensures appropriate support and services are provided to international students. Monash strongly supports benchmarking and auditing of international student support services. Such measures are crucial to ensure our students are receiving adequate support.

Recommendation

- 15. Best practice models should be identified and promoted across Australian education institutions.*

Appendix 1: Acknowledgement of Key Informants

- Professor Stephanie Fahey, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Dr Tangerine Holt, Director, International Education, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Eugene Sebastian, Director, International Research, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Erica Tippett, Project Officer, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Emily Tannock, Project Officer, International Research, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Allan Mahler, Project Officer, International Research, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Niruja Thambiayah, Project Assistant, Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International)
- Cathy Barnett, Director, Academic Programs, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing & Health Sciences
- Wendy Blastock, International Student Experience Coordinator, Health, Wellbeing and Development
- Dr Helen Forbes-Mewett, Faculty of Business and Economics
- Professor Owen Hughes, Deputy Dean Education, Faculty of Business and Economics
- Samantha Jacob, Director, Health Wellbeing, and Development
- Dinesh Kumar, PhD Candidate, Monash Asia Institute
- Christoph Li, Secretary, Monash University International Students Service (Clayton)
- Danny Ong, PhD Thesis on International Student Welfare / International Projects Coordinator, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences
- Irene Png, Manager, Fees, Student Administration and Systems
- Vladimir Prpich, Director, Monash Residential Services
- Tony Thio, President, International Students Association, Gippsland Campus
- Professor Robert Willis, Pro Vice Chancellor (Student Affairs) / Campus Director, Director of Caulfield and Clayton Campuses, Administration
- Sury Wongtomo, Director, Overseas Student Services, Monash Student Union, (Caulfield)
- James Woo, President, International Students Association, Parkville Campus

Appendix 2: Best Practice Student Support Services

Monash University currently offers the following support services to international students

- 'Destination Monash' handbook for international students (<http://www.monash.edu.au/study/assets/includes/pdfs/destination-monash.pdf>).
- 'Salam Monash' handbook for Muslim students (<http://www.monash.edu/international/studentsservices/salaam.pdf>).
- Pre-departure briefings are offered in three countries: Singapore, Malaysia, and China.
- Welcome emails with key information and contact details are sent prior to students arriving in Melbourne.
- On arrival in Melbourne: free airport pick-up is available, and temporary accommodation can be arranged.
- International student orientation sessions are conducted (in addition to general/faculty orientation sessions).
- The Faculty of Medicine, Nursing, and Health Sciences employs a dedicated international Higher Degree by Research (HDR) support staff member to assist international students with academic skills building and provide a dedicated point of contact.
- International students receive newsletters from Health, Wellbeing and Development that include information about events, reminders and requirements.
- Campus Connect run events across all Victorian campuses, which are open to all students and provide a chance for international and local students to meet (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/globalfriendshipnight/index.html>).
- The Peer Mentor Program assists international students to settle into university life (<http://www.monash.edu.au/international/peermentor/>).
- The International Student Friendship Program is designed to help international students make friends with Australian community members and their families (<http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/family/friendship-program.html>).
- The Monash Postgraduate Association runs social events across all Victorian campuses (<http://mpa.monash.edu.au/seminars-&-social/social-events.html>).
- Monash Residential Services have built good relationships and networks to enable students to find and secure rental accommodation.

Monash University also offers support for families and spouses of students, including:

- Playgroups that offer parents and children social interaction, support and cultural exchange: Koonawarra Playgroup (Clayton, <http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/family/koonawarra.html>) and Bubup Playgroup (Caulfield, <http://www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/family/bubup.html>).
- The Family Support Program, which is run from Clayton and Caulfield campuses but open to all students.
- Child care facilities on campus, schooling for kids, and the Monash University School Holiday Program.
- Spouse social contact, and English language learning including community language classes.
- Professional Development courses.