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Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Ref: - Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Dear Senators,

Federation of Indian Students of Australia (FISA) is a national non-profit organisation constituted in 2002 with an aim to provide a common platform to all Indian societies across universities. FISA attempts to provide support and counselling services to students in distress. In recent years the number of students enrolling into Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutes has grown exponentially. Students enrolled in these institutions are increasingly voicing their concerns to our volunteers across the nation. Inadequate infrastructure, little or no student support services are some of the issues faced by students. FISA is overwhelmed by the alarming increase in cases of harassment and rip offs by VET institutes. Due to severe lack of funding and support¹ we find ourselves struggling to survive and fight cash rich institutes. We urge this committee to instigate remedial action and policy changes before it destroys lives of innocent students.

¹Except for \$5000 received from Victorian Multicultural Commission during the past two years.

We plead to the committee for support and action. In this letter we attempt to draw much needed attention to the plight of international students in Australia.

FISA has observed a gradual deterioration in the standards of education provided to international students. Government apathy and denial makes it hard for Australians to comprehend this new state of affairs. Visuals of Indian students protesting loudly on the streets superimposed and altered with festive ethnic music blaring in the background are streamed across TV sets in Australia without any adequate explanation or background to the issue. Objectivity of media is also questionable in this instance. The failure of government to educate and inform its citizens on handling cultural differences will have far reaching consequences on racial harmony. There is a risk of a large group of vulnerable students being cornered and traumatised. The government needs to urgently formulate a proactive policy of educating Australians in dealing with multi-cultural differences and its need to do more than an occasional event or fund an obscure authority with no powers and initiatives.

In past few years we have observed an unprecedented level of students living in fear. Fear not only of criminals but also of authorities. If a student is found working more than 20 hours they will be deported but the business employing the student is not fined or the fine is too little. This loophole is exploited by employers to threaten students into slavery like conditions.

We know cases where employers have forced people to work full-time for one week, hence ensuring breach of visa and then threatening them into working at their whims or else they will report these students to DIAC. There are plenty of reports corroborating this behaviour of employers but no action has been taken to protect these student workers.

A rhetoric is announced by the government whenever an unfortunate incident captures public attention. No concrete steps are taken to address the root cause of problem.

There are far too many forums, meetings and round-tables. The government must realize that there is a real threat and racial harmony is imminent if situations and resentments are left unresolved. Most student organisations such as CAPA, NUS are run on shoe-string budget and in case of FISA no budget at all. Attending one too many meeting is frustrating for volunteers as they have to scramble, leave their jobs and study to attend and repeat the same issues and to be reassured.

This will prove counter-productive as the resentment will build away from the government and may result in revolting. Denying the existence of wide spread racial discrimination is perilous. Racism has a cost and we pay the price as society and as individuals.

There are well known groups promoting racism, white supremacy, Nazism etc. we have not seen any public trials of such groups. Australian National University researchers have provided solid evidence of workplace racial discrimination in getting employment².

Student workers, being at the lowest rank in society are paying the heaviest price for this institutionalized racial discrimination.

There are widely publicised agencies such as Equal Opportunity Commission, but they have hardly brought any credible deterrence to the forefront.

Denying funding, support or credibility to organisation such as FISA is tantamount to suppressing the freedom of speech which is denial of fundamental right in a democracy. It is essential that funding and support is provided to FISA to create proactive representation to revolve issues before students decide to go onto the street to voice their concerns.

We believe that international education sector in Australia has reached a state of crisis but is not beyond repair. We must not allow the misery to grip the innocent and the vulnerable. Education should be able to get people out of economic depression not to put them in one.

We must guard ourselves from the deliberate attempt by some devious elements to force people into destitution and third world living conditions. It is Un-Australian to bash people to pulp for \$10, to subject them to abject poverty, to then blame them for their living condition.

² Leigh A, Booth A, Varganova E (2009) *‘Does Racial and Ethnic Discrimination Vary Across Minority Groups? Evidence From Three Experiments.’* <http://econrssh.anu.edu.au/~aleigh/>

The attached report is a detailed analysis based on research done in the state of Victoria in 2007. Some issues still remain unresolved but Good Samaritan Australians are working hard at making this lucky country of ours equitable, fair, multicultural and harmonious and ever more beautiful. We at FISA dream of one day fulfilling our mandate and relieving ourselves of our concerns in the right hands. We will welcome the opportunity to present our viewpoints to the committee in person if it deems so required.

Sincerely,

Gautam Gupta

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“In truth, by the act of migration the country was made: by that voluntary act and by the emigrants' ambitions it was built.”

--Hon. Paul Keating

In his address to the Dáil Éireann, the lower house of parliament of the Republic of Ireland,
20 September, 1993.