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August 2009

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Sir/Madam

RE: Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Wellington Secondary College is a multicultural coeducational government secondary college with a student population of over 1300. It is located in Mulgrave, a south eastern suburb of Melbourne. Our socioeconomic profile is at the lower end with an SFO of .6628. The College has been involved in international education for over 13 years and is well recognized by the Victorian International Education Division for its successful International Student Program and its commitment to best practice in this area.

There are currently 81 international students enrolled at the College in Years 7–12 including 9 in our intensive English language class. These students come from Vietnam, China, Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

The College has always been proactive in ensuring our international students enjoy their study experience in Victoria. The recent International Student Forum organized and facilitated this month by the College is just one example of our commitment to international students enrolled in Victorian government schools. The forum involved participants (international students from 11 schools, staff and community representatives) working cooperatively across a region to discuss ways on improving the overall study experience of international students studying at Victorian government schools.

It is with great pleasure that I use the findings of this forum to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry in the hope that this contribution can make a significant difference to the overall success of the study experience of all international students studying in Victoria.

Regards

Connie Tzelepis
Manager, International Programs



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Submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

August 2009

Wellington Secondary College (WSC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the welfare of international students. We wish to make specific comments and recommendations on the experiences of international students studying at Victorian Government Secondary Colleges.

For all enquires relating to the submission, please contact Ms Connie Tzelepis, Manager (International Programs) at tzelepis.connie.c@edumail.vic.gov.au or +61 3 9547 6822.

Introduction:

These comments and recommendations are gathered from the inaugural International Student Forum, which was held at WSC on 27th August 2009. WSC is very pleased that 21 staff and 27 international student participants from 11 secondary colleges attended this forum:

1. Wellington Secondary College (10 staff; 10 international students);
2. Wheelers Hill Secondary College (1 staff; 2 students);
3. Rowville Secondary College (1 staff; 2 students);
4. Parkdale Secondary College (1 staff; 2 students);
5. Highvale Secondary College (1 staff; 2 students);
6. Brentwood Secondary College (1 staff; 2 students);
7. Wantirna College (1 staff; 2 students);
8. Mount Waverley Secondary College (2 staff; 2 students);
9. Brighton Secondary College (1 staff);
10. Box Hill High School (1 staff);
11. Ringwood Secondary College (1 staff; 3 students)

In addition to the secondary college representatives, the forum was also attended by community representatives:

1. Ms Heather Hopcroft (Monash Network Leader) Eastern Metropolitan Region, Vic Govt.;
2. Mrs Connie Clarke (Program Development Officer); Mr Hector Bugeja (Manager, Program Planning and School Support Unit), International Education Division, Vic Govt.;
3. Ms Eugenia Grammatikakis (Community Development Officer); Mr Vijay Susaria (Councilor), Monash City Council
4. Ms Frederika Paembonan (Community Development Worker); Mr Abdi (Social Work Student), Southern Ethnic Advisory and Advocacy Council (SEAAC);
5. Mr Danny Ong (International Projects Coordinator), Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University;
6. Mr Ben Heard (Youth Outreach Project Worker), Monash Youth and Family Services;
7. Pastor Philip Kua, Church of Christ Clayton;
8. Mr Christian Morabito (Youth Leader), Monash Christian Church; and
9. Mr Pasqual Spitzbarth, (Youth Worker) Fusion Australia.

All participants were divided into eight different groups consisting of students, staff and community leaders. During the forum, discussions were categorised into the following groups:

1. Issues faced by international students
2. What do international students want? (What are the key needs to improve the study experience in the short term and long term?)
3. Teachers' perception of issues faced by international students (is there a difference?)
4. Solutions (practical, possible, realistic and viable)

Please note that many of these comments and recommendations are proactively suggested by the international students (between Years 9 and 12) themselves. WSC would like to applaud their confidence and courage to present their views in front of an audience.

Issues Faced by International Secondary College Students

1. Absence of Transport Concessions

All groups indicated that the ineligibility of international students to get transport concessions is increasingly frustrating due to the high costs of transportation. Some students indicated that since they are paying a huge amount of fees and contributing significantly financially to the Victorian economy, they should be eligible for concessions. Students also indicated that they felt unfairly treated because their domestic counterparts do enjoy the benefits of concessions.

2. Lack of Public Transport

Some students indicated that public transport is not readily available in the suburbs, especially on Sunday. This poses a safety issue when they travel outside school hours and over the weekends. This restricts their access to using facilities in the community, including public libraries. It also restricts the opportunities for them to explore Victoria. Students note that living in the suburbs prevents them visiting various amenities and places of interest due to the travel distance required.

3. Visa Application Delays

Students indicated that it may take a significant amount of time for their visa to be processed and approved and sometimes results in arrival after the course start date. Some felt that this acts as a detriment for them to study in Australia due to the waiting period and long application process. Some students also felt that the visa application process can be quite confusing and necessitates the need for an education agent to be used adding to the costs.

4. Lack of Sensitivity by Teachers

Teachers need to be more aware of international student issues – culturally as well as their unique needs as compared to domestic students. Some students find it a great challenge to interact with their teachers due to a lack of sensitivity of their needs and cultural differences, especially in monocultural schools. In some cases, teachers often become impatient with international students and this severely affects the students' learning experience.

5. Lack of Social Integration Programs between Schools

Although social integration programs exist in all secondary colleges, there is a continual lack of cross-colleges programs. Students felt that cross-colleges programs will provide more opportunities for international students to interact with other students (both domestic and international). This will greatly assist international students from colleges that do not have a large international student population. One student indicated that this will help to prevent international students from grouping with students from similar cultures.

6. Language Proficiency Problems

Students indicated that the Australian accent poses a significant challenge for them to make friends and become familiar with the local culture. Most students have not been exposed to the Australian accent prior to arrival as their English language instruction in their home country has been from American or British speakers. One student bluntly put it as: "*No language, no friends*". In addition, during English language courses, the Australian accent becomes a barrier to assist international students' English language development. Another student indicated: "*English language is hard to understand and use due to the Australian accent.*" Due to their low English proficiency, students find it a challenge to maintain deep friendships which will better help them in their secondary education.

7. Value of some intensive English Language Courses

International students are required to attend intensive English language courses as part of their secondary education. Some students questioned the value of some such courses because of: (a) the difficulties to understand their teachers; (b) students do not use English during their day-to-day lifestyle; and (c) they do not see significant improvements in their language proficiency.

8. Homestay Issues

Some students find great difficulties relating to their homestay due to cultural difference (e.g. food) and strict restrictions that are imposed for their safety (international students do not want so many restrictions placed upon them). Most students also do not have the opportunity to establish an initial relationship with their host family prior to their arrival. Some students also indicated that it is a great challenge for them to interact with the children in their homestay.

Students also find that it is relatively expensive to stay in a homestay and it is difficult for them to change homestay if there are any problems. There are also issues about host families fulfilling their agreements (e.g. food [especially for religious purposes], freedom and internet usage etc). Some students find food as one of the biggest challenges because they felt that it is very difficult to adjust to eating Australian style food (e.g. high volume of dairy products and bread, bland food and limited variety).

Some homestays accept international students for their money and not a genuine interest to assist them to adapt to the Australian lifestyle.

9. Learning to be Independent

International secondary students are forced to become independent at a very young age; especially when they do not have any support from their immediate family and an increased reliance on homestays or relatives. Students are also required to be financially independent and there is no proper guidance for them to do so.

10. General Safety, Security and Health Concerns

Some students indicated that they are concerned about their safety and security due to the recent unrest in Melbourne. In addition, they find it difficult to adapt to the provision of health services in Australia (e.g. the high costs of medicine; need to make appointments to see a doctor even when they are very sick – especially if they are only able to see the doctor one or two days later). Also needing to find time to seek refunds from Medibank (hours are not always convenient and on Saturday students attend language school).

11. Cost of Further Studies

Students are generally concerned about the costs of their university studies in the near future. They indicated that some students are facing financial difficulties due to the high costs of secondary education (tuition fees, text books, etc – and their situation may deteriorate further in the future due to higher university fees and the need for greater financial independency. International students are concerned that they may not be able to afford further studies in Australia despite graduating from an Australian secondary college. (This is sometimes also adversely affected because of exchange rates). In addition, they are not eligible for any forms of government education support.

12. A General Sense of Disconnectedness

This is an area of grave concern by education institutions because it significantly reduces the students' confidence to interact with schools (e.g. seek help; raise issues; and foster a better student experience). Due to the above issues, some students indicated that they felt a general sense of disconnectedness from Australia, their schools and domestic students. One student indicated that due to their ineligibility of transport concessions, she was quite sceptical about how the Victorian Government values international students.

Key Needs Identified by International Secondary College Students:

In response to the above issues, the below needs are identified by student participants during the forum:

1. Ability to achieve success in their Australian studies (high ENTER scores)
2. Ability to establish achievable and realistic goals prior coming to Australia
3. Make friends with local students and others in the community
4. Transport concessions for all international students in Victoria
5. Comfortable stay with homestay families and the ability to openly communicate with them. There should be more opportunities to go out with homestay families and other friends.
6. International students just pay a single fee to cover all associated school expenses where possible (e.g. camps, textbooks and uniform). Students are currently confused by the different required expenses.
7. International students should not be charged VCAA Administrative fees (noting that domestic students do not need to pay these fees)
8. Guidance, advice and counselling to educate international students on how to be independent.
9. Gain greater confidence in their overseas life (e.g. ability to interact with locals). This will greatly contribute to the wider life experience – e.g. the ability to learn from difficulties; development of life skills (e.g. public speaking).
10. Have more peer group tutoring and support groups within schools and the wider community; the provision of more in-class support for classes.

11. Have an orientation program before school starts (like universities) so that every student can participate without the fear of missing out classes.
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Teachers' perception of issues

1. Possible Student Segregation within Schools

There is often poor interaction between local and international students within the school environment due to various factors. For example, a teacher noted that some schools are in fact isolating their international students by providing them with their own "lunch room" – thus restricting the opportunities for local students to interact with their international counterparts in an informal setting.

In addition, some international students have the habit of undertaking extended vacation time (leaving and returning back to school outside of official term dates) to return to their home countries etc.

2. International Students are not Proactive

Students are not proactive enough in engaging in different social activities with the school and wider community. There is a general lack of interest by international students to become involved in extra curricular activities, especially those held after school (e.g. homework support clubs, sport, music etc). This may be attributed to: (a) a lack of confidence by students; (b) preoccupation with other social activities (e.g. computer games); (c) lack of information/knowledge of the available activities; (d) time and cost of transport to get to venue, and (e) cultural differences – some activities may not be of interest to specific international students.

3. Isolation at Homestay

Teachers believed that one of the reasons why international students felt disconnected/have poor relationships with their homestay is due to students' personal isolation. Some students have prolonged use of the Internet at home without much interaction with their homestay families (i.e. when they reach home, they will just confine themselves to their rooms).

4. Unwillingness of International Students to Communicate with their Schools

Due to the disconnectedness from their schools, it was observed that some students are less likely to inform or discuss with appropriate staff at their school their problems, especially those relating to homestay issues.

5. Academic issues

Students are unaccustomed to Australian teaching/learning styles (group work, peer assessment, problem solving, self assessment, taking responsibility for own learning, oral presentations, report writing, practicals). This presents a shift from their traditional passive learning environment to a more active learning one. In addition, they find it hard to understand the concept of plagiarism by not acknowledging all sources). Teachers believed that there is a need to have more apathy when introducing international students to activities that are not familiar to them or which requires extra time/work.

Some international students feel uncomfortable working in groups with local students due to cultural differences, lack of self confidence and language barriers. They are also less assertive in putting forward their ideas.

Recommendations / Proposed Solutions

Based on the above discussions, the following recommendations are made to the Senate Inquiry:

1. More forums of this nature should be organised between all secondary colleges to encourage discussion among students and staff. Subsequently, a state-wide conference can be held annually for schools to exchange views and provide a unique opportunity for students to interact with their fellow peers. Such conferences/forums can involve local students as well – to provide them with opportunities to understand the lives of international students.
2. Concessions are made available to all international students in Victoria.
3. All associated fees for secondary college students are compiled into one initial amount. Subsequently, students are allowed to choose whether they want to pay in one lump sum or mutually agreed instalments.
4. All teachers should be provided with adequate training relating to the education of international students.
5. Interaction between international students and their host families prior to their arrival must be made compulsory to facilitate better relationship building.
6. Introduce community/voluntary work as part of the formal curriculum to ensure that international students have the opportunities to engage with the wider community without the fear of disrupting their studies. This will also provide them with a safe and policed environment (by schools) for them to volunteer.
7. International students should be provided with the necessary guidance (either by schools or community groups) on learning independency in Australia.

8. All secondary schools should have after-school study centres where students (both domestic and international) have a safe and secure environment for studies and other extracurricular activities – rather than having the students loitering in public areas.
 9. Schools should consider employing bilingual aides/tutors/teachers to facilitate the learning and integration process of international students.
 10. Extracurricular activities like debating, drama and music should be introduced to ESL students to improve their level of English proficiency.
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