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Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
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Dear Senators

Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

The Canberra Multicultural Community Forum (CMCF) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students.

CMCF's role is to represent the needs and aspirations of Canberra's multicultural community, while celebrating its achievements and fostering a spirit of cooperation and harmony. In this role, the CMCF has a key responsibility to support ethnic communities, including students who choose to make Australia their temporary or permanent home. Given this role, CMCF is concerned about the quality of education and support services provided to international students, as well as their access to accommodation and the safety and wellbeing of these students.

CMCF notes that there are about 500,000 international students in Australia adding around \$15 billion per annum to the Australian economy. For a decade or so, Australia's foreign student education sector has been rapidly growing. Initially, international students were a growth market for the university sectors, but most recently the vocational education sector has experienced a growth in international student numbers. Last year alone, more than 70,000 Indian students paid to be educated in Australia. The welfare and wellbeing of international students is therefore vital to Australia's economy, our international reputation and community harmony.

There are over 6,500 international students in Canberra. They play an important role in the cultural, economic and intellectual vitality of the Canberra community. CMCF therefore wishes to bring to the Committee's attention issues relating to:

- overseas student visa requirements;
- student safety;
- access to accommodation;
- community participation and social inclusion; and
- regulation and support for educational institutions.

Student Visas

Often international students face additional challenges to those of their Australian counterparts, not solely due to cultural or language barriers. Some of these institutional obstacles could and should be reduced, through increased national policy effort and improved transparency requirements for educational institutions. A system, whereby the education institutions that benefit from additional payments for supplementary exams or repeating subjects, are also responsible for monitoring and reporting on international students, appears open to potential

abuse. National monitoring and reporting of educational institutions that regularly fail a high percentage of international students should be introduced. For repeat offenders, appropriate action should be taken against those educational institutions by government, such as funding sanctions.

CMCF notes that international students are required to meet higher attendance rate requirements, study full-time, and are not allowed to work for more than 20 hours a week. Failure to meet these requirements has significant consequences, such as deportation or detention. Some flexibility should be introduced to study load and attendance requirements, to provide for temporary exemptions due to poor health or other circumstances. However, the issues that CMCF is most concerned about is that unpaid and volunteer work is counted towards the 20 hours a week limit for international students. This restriction limits community participation, hinders the capacity for international students to contribute to Australian society and deprives community organisations of willing and valuable volunteers. Even participation in student representative bodies can count towards this work limit. CMCF strongly urges the Committee to review these restrictions on work hours, particularly with regards to unpaid and volunteer work.

One of the challenges faced by international students can be the disparity between student expectations and the reality of every day life in Australia. Some of this issue can be addressed at the pre-Visa and entry stages, through the information provided to prospective and newly arrived students. Information available to prospective and incoming international students needs to be significantly enhanced and updated. Guidance on what to expect in Australia, including information on available support e services, community contacts, safety and security, choosing educational institutions, accommodation and transport, needs to be collated and enhanced. Of course, this guidance should be developed in consultation with students and the broader community.

International Student Safety

CMCF supports any moves to make Australia a safer place for international students and believes that both the Federal and State Governments need to be more pro-active in tackling student safety, security and wellbeing issues. In particular, there is a need for increased resources and a concerted national approach to tackle issues of violence and international students. In the context of a heightened awareness of security, terrorism and violence issues, ensuring the safety and security of all Australians and those visiting Australia, is particularly important. In particular, increasing police engagement on this issue and improved University security resources should be a priority.

CMCF and its' members are extremely concerned by the violent assaults on Indian students, which have been reported by the media in recent months. While these incidents have been sensationalised by the media and have caused considerable community unrest, they have served to raise the profile of student safety issues. In the past, the safety, security and wellbeing of international students has been neglected and even ignored, despite previous violent assaults and even deaths. It appears that safety incidents involving international students are not just an under-reported issue, but has been an unreported and unaddressed issue for many years. Ensuring improved data collection and enhanced reporting will help change the culture of educational institutions and Government agencies, enabling more responsiveness to student safety issues. CMCF believes that national principles for reporting and responding to safety, security and wellbeing issues effecting international students should be introduced across all educational institutions.

Recent events in Melbourne, relating to potential terrorism threats also highlight that the safety and wellbeing of international students and migrants has a reciprocal element. Safety and security issues effecting international students are whole of community issues. International students are the skilled migrant workforce of tomorrow. They are potential future citizens, ambassadors and spokespersons for Australia and Australian culture. Given this role, supporting the safety and wellbeing of students is vital to prevent discontent, retaliations or backlash; encourage continued patronage, future residency and tourism; and maintain community harmony.

Violence effecting international students also affects other Australians. It is therefore vital to have a proactive community-based approach to tackling issues of culture, safety and violence, regardless of whether those issues involve international students or other groups within the community. Severe criminal penalties for racially or religiously motivated attacks should be introduced across Australia. This approach should be supported by community awareness and support services, and other measures to support and promote the rights of individuals. For example, all States and Territories should follow the lead of the ACT Government and introduce a Bill of Rights, supported by a Human Rights Commissioner, to ensure that the rights of both citizens and visitors are protected.

Access to Accommodation

International students face a crisis in accessing appropriate and affordable accommodation. Educational institutions and State Governments should address the lack of investment and infrastructure devoted to student accommodation services. Investment in affordable, on-campus student accommodation should be a priority for governments and educational institutions. This is by far the best accommodation option for international students, while assisting to reduce security and safety issues and provide improved access to support services. Developments could be supported through money provided via the national Infrastructure funds and through incentives for private investment.

International students can be disadvantaged in the accommodation market, due to language, cultural awareness, documentation and often financial issues. A consistent approach across the country is needed to support students from when they first enter the country through to the time they choose to leave or are able to stay. International students should be provided with clear culturally-appropriate information on tenancy rights and rental arrangements at the pre-arrival and visa approval stage rather than after an incident has occurred. Advocacy and consumer protections services need to become more proactive in supporting international students in this area. Tenancy tribunals and related organisation need to be provided with further information and support to assist them in decision-making regarding student disputes with landlords.

Community Participation and Social Inclusion

Australia is one of the best places in the world to study and international students should be able to participate in all that Australia offers, during their student experience. International students provide an opportunity for improved cross-cultural understanding. However, additional services and support are required to ensure that international students can fully participate in the Australian community. In addition to relaxing the work hour restrictions mentioned above, the government should encourage educational institutions to increase their efforts to ensure greater social and cultural interaction between local students and international students.

Transport and access to transport concessions are barriers that could readily be addressed by State governments to enhance community participation and social inclusion for international students. We agree with other organisations, such as FECCA, that the New South Wales and Victoria Governments should immediately allow international students to have access to student travel concessions, as is the case in other States. International students being denied travel concessions is discriminatory and reduces the ability of students to fully contribute to the community and experience what Australia has to offer.

International student support and advocacy services, as well as, representational and consultative bodies need to be established (where they are non-existent), developed and supported. While some institutions, particularly Universities, provide resources and support for services catered towards addressing the needs of international students, national benchmarks and guidelines are required. For example, any educational institution, with more than 1,000 international students should be required to provide access to qualified multilingual counsellors or ensure international student representation in decision making. The development of these benchmarks should be through a student and community led process, rather than being developed through a top-down approach from educational institutions or government entities.

Education Institutions and Education Agents

There is a need for an improved regulatory framework to ensure greater accountability of educational institutions, and migration and education agents providing services to international students. The recent ABC Four Corners Program on 27 July 2009 reinforced the need for greater transparency, accountability and regulation in these areas. CMCF was particularly concerned by the documented cases of misleading conduct towards international students and the ongoing fraudulent behaviour of some education institutions and education agents.

Improved legislation and governance in this area is overdue. Both private and public institutions should be subject to the same standards. All levels of Government should be empowered to take action against institutions that are misleading, have poor financial management, inadequate education standards, and sub-standard facilities. In addition, migration agents, education brokers and other entities targeting international students should be regulated. Given the growth in international students accessing the vocational sector, there is the greatest need for a nationally consistent approach in this area first.

Improved regulatory frameworks for education institutions and education agents should be based on a focus on self-reporting and self-management, but supported by government audit and sanction powers, as well as the establishment of a national commissioner or advocate on this issue. We strongly suggest that community, student and educational institution be fully consulted, as the first step for developing new standards for education institutions and education agents.

On a final note, the Federal Government should consider establishing a scheme for all students, including international students, similar to the General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS). This scheme was established to assist employees who have lost their employment due to the insolvency of their employer, and who are owed certain employee entitlements. Likewise, a scheme established through levying education institutions and education agents, could provide some support or partial refunds for students, due to the insolvency of their education institution.

Conclusion

These issues aside, Australia is still one of the best places in the world to study, for both Australians and international students. CMCF recommends that the Senate Committee continue to build on this position. We hope that the Committee proposes:

- flexibility in student visa requirements;
- an enhance regulatory framework for educational institutions;
- the introduction of national best practice standards for educational institutions, regarding their dealings with international students; and
- additional resources to improve the safety, security and the wellbeing of international students across the country.

Once again, CMCF thanks you for the opportunity to input into the Inquiry and eagerly awaits further opportunities to appear before the Committee or comment on the results of the Inquiry. For further information, please contact Sam Wong on chair@cmcf.org.au

Yours sincerely

Sam Wong AM
Chair
Canberra Multicultural Community Forum Inc
24 August 2009