



Australian Federation of International Students

**Inquiry into the Services for Overseas Students Amendment (Re-
registration of Providers and Other Measures) Bill 2009**

Submission to the Senate Inquiry



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About Australian Federation of International Students

The Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) is a national non-profit, community-oriented and community-run organisation aimed at assisting international students maximise the scope and potential of their experience living and studying in Australia. AFIS intends to work with the government bodies, institutions, student clubs and community organisations to enhance and enrich the experience of international students by addressing their interests and needs, and enhanced by the provision accurate and timely information and services.

AFIS' vision is to involve international students in Australia's multicultural community through events and programs designed to assist our members interact and engage with confidence and security in Australia's culture and community.

Our direction for the future is to become the "one stop shop" for all international student issues and concerns, and to be recognised as a leader in the international students issues debate – a credible voice to government, community services and student groups.

AFIS currently provides a number of services including:

- One-to-one support for international students
- Delivery of culturally appropriate orientation programs to international students at TAFEs and private colleges
- Education programs to international students
- Social engagement programs
- Seminars and forums appropriate to international students

Scope

AFIS welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the inquiry looking into the services for overseas students. AFIS believes that the registration of the education providers is a good start to ensure quality education to international students.

This paper is based on the feedback AFIS receives from students, as well as some tafes and private colleges we provide orientation presentation to.

International Students data

According to Australian Education International (AEI), in 2008 there were 543,898 full fee paying international students studying in Australia. There were 182,770 enrolments to the higher education sector, follow closely by the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector with 175,461 enrolments.

There are currently 5 sectors for international education, this includes Higher Education, VET, ELICOS, Schools, Other. The VET sector is the second highest sector for international students behind higher education (182,770 students). This is by far the fastest growing sector of all sectors. Enrolments grew by 226.9 per cent between 2002 and 2008, and by 46.4 per cent between 2007 and 2008¹.

Education Providers

Education providers have a huge role to play in the recruitment of students. Well resourced education providers such as Universities have marketing departments to handle all marketing to potential students. On the other hand, smaller education providers such as private colleges heavily rely on education agents overseas to promote for them.

AFIS believes that re-registering of education providers is definitely a good start to the process of ensuring high quality education in Australia, however, any move in that nature must be complemented with support systems in place, in the case where many providers do not meet the standard and hence facing de-registration. International students must be provided with adequate support during the unstable period.

AFIS has also received reports that when the few colleges there were closed down in recent months, some students were still paying fees up until 2 weeks of closure, but yet, students were not given any indications prior, nor were they entitled to a refund. Students were distress as a result of it. However, AFIS do commend the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) for alerting our committee to the situation on the day of closure.

It is also not enough to only auditing, but policing education providers on an ongoing basis is also very important.

Auditing of the education providers must also be thorough and holistic, including:

- Standard documentation audit
- Feedback from students – conducted by a Government representative, and not via the education provider.
- Find out from student bodies, such as AFIS, if there are any cases in the college that is of an unethical nature, was it resolved and how was it resolved.

AFIS has received reports from students whereby colleges refuse to provide transcript for a transfer to another college, until a lawyer or AFIS were approached. This is unethical, and will not be picked up through the standard audit, because it is likely that the incident was not recorded in their documentations.

Education Agents

Education agents overseas are definitely by in large the foundation of many problems. AFIS would like to acknowledge that there are some responsible agents, however, there are evidence of the existence of unscrupulous agents who misled and convinced some students into forming a set of unrealistic expectations about life in Australia, including the following:

- Australia is a great country and securing a job is very easy

¹ AEI - <http://aei.gov.au/AEI/MIP/Statistics/StudentEnrolmentAndVisaStatistics/2008/Default.htm>

- All Australians draw high wages – in one case, an agent told an international student that Australians can be paid up to AUD300 a day
- Australia is “100% safe” and has low to no crime
- A specific private college being promoted is the finest in the fields, when it is a college that has offered the agent the highest commission rates
- Photographs of private colleges suggest great gardens, but in reality they only operate in office buildings with no public space to facilitate social interaction
- Courses are a guaranteed pathway to permanent residency. This leads to another realm of issues, where students aim to secure permanent residency with no intention to study. Students will also be open to exploitation due to their eagerness to get permanent residency. It is also noted that numerous students raised the fact that if they were warned prior coming to Australia that a permanent resident visa will depend on immigration policy at any one time, they will be more likely to choose a course they would enjoy.
- AUD12,000 is all that you will require to live in Australia for one year, when in fact a more conservative estimate would amount to double that amount, if not more. Given that it is an official figure from the Australian Government, people make incorrect assumptions and education agents exploit this confusion. In addition, there is no official documentation from the Australian Government to suggest otherwise. However, it must be noted that some responsible education providers do provide the actual figures in their school’s information brochures, but this is not common practice.

A registry of education agents is a good start, but may not be enough to tackle the problem. Although agents are not (legally) representatives of Australia, however, to international students and their parents, agents are the representative of Australia. The reputation of Australia, is therefore strongly linked to the practices of education agents. Malpractices of education agents will damage Australia’s reputation.

Some education agents are also linked to migration agents, who receive commission from education providers. This is a total conflict of interest. In the case where a student is unhappy from the education provider, agents will often encourage students to stay in their education provider because they are receiving the highest commission rate. Some also threaten that if they do not stay in an education provider, they will be removed from the country or will not be successful in obtaining permanent residency.

Conflict of Interest

AEI is a marketing department for international education, as well as research/advice to the government. The duo role creates a potential conflict because there is a tendency to focus research agendas that produces positive result for marketing purposes. AEI may be reluctant to develop research evidence to highlight problems international students are facing (both on and off campus).

It is also evident, due to cultural tendencies, students will only fill in surveys if they are happy with service, and will ignore surveys if they are unhappy, or unable to fill in surveys (due to inaccessibility).

Student organisations, such as AFIS, find it challenging to find research as evidence, and unable to perform large scale research due to the lack of resources, and hence could not produce accurate evidence base to inform government policy.

Recommendations

1. Ensure strong support is in place for students prior to seeking re-registration of education providers.
2. Holistic and thorough audit is required in the process of re-registering education providers, and should include:
 - Standard documentation audit
 - Feedback from students – conducted by a Government representative, and not via the education provider.
 - Find out from student bodies, such as AFIS, if there are any cases in the college that is of an unethical nature, was it resolved and how was it resolved.
3. It is acknowledged that the list requested by education providers is a good start to tackle the issue, however, education agents must be registered with the Australian Government to prevent Australia's reputation to be further damaged.
4. There needs to be further investigation as to whether AEI is required to separate department looking after research and marketing. The current structure could potentially be a conflict of interest.
5. More large scale research is needed that aims to look at the welfare, experience and outcome of international students studying in Australia.

Submission by

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