

Say hello to our new economic slaves: foreign students



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The cat is finally out of the bag. It will be hard for state and federal governments to deny that many unscrupulous and, perhaps, corrupt operators have hijacked a portion of the country's vocational education system and turned it into a mini organised-crime network.

An undercover co-operative network exists between some education agents, education providers, migration agents and small businesses, all making substantial profits by supplying false documentation for potential visa applicants.

When you combine this fact with the horror stories of mistreatment of many international students in this country, we all need to hang our heads in shame. How could this happen in a society that once took such pride in the standard of education we gave to our children, and then shared openly with the international community?

Many students arrive carrying the dreams of a new life for their whole

family. They are often burdened with the fact their parents have mortgaged their house to give them a chance for a better life. On their first day at some vocational colleges, the reality does not match the shiny brochures of their home-town smooth-talking education agent.

They stare in disbelief at the facade of a ramshackle vocational school into which they have spent thousands of dollars enrolling. Packed into classrooms like sardines, most of the equipment either does not work properly or does not exist and, worse still, the teachers often do not turn up to the

go home to humiliation and failure. The creation of such an environment can make them vulnerable to corrupt operators offering false education certificates and work experience letters.

Open your eyes, Australia, to our new economic slave trade.

International students face a major dilemma. Who can they turn to for help? Can they trust the in-house student counsellors who are on the provider's payroll? Will the Immigration Department, which often cancels their visas, lock them in detention? What about the NSW Vocational Education and Training

written report and send it by mail, but who can do that properly when they are emotionally traumatised?

For most of these students English is their second language. Even if they have the presence of mind and the strength to write a complaint to the Education Department or the Vocational Education and Training Accreditation board they have to wait weeks for a reply - if they are lucky enough to get one at all. One of these replies I saw recently had the hallmarks of an investigation carried out by a high-school student on schoolies' week.

As an example of a corrupt network in action, look no further than the alleged scam two years ago against the National Australia Bank between an allegedly corrupt bank employee and a finance broker, who "assisted" vulnerable foreign students who needed to demonstrate a \$100,000 deposit for their residency visas, by investing the bank's money in Treasury bonds.

The Federal Court heard those behind the alleged scam received \$4 million in commissions from students, for arranging the purchase of nearly \$23 million in bonds. If you believe our education system is immune from such corruption, it's time to take your head out of the sand.

There is an enormous demand for migration to this country. In the past, governments have been lax in supervising the vocational education sector and the documents provided by visa

applicants, despite the warnings. They are now doing too little, too late. When it comes to gaining a residency visa, most Australians don't realise the incredible amount of money some people will pay to cut corners.

Nearly 15 years ago, as a young police constable, I wrote a long report on police corruption to the Victorian ombudsman, Barry Perry. That report sparked one of the biggest investigations into police corruption ever seen in this country. I went to the ombudsman because I couldn't trust the police or the government of the day. They both had something to lose if the truth came out. Never underestimate the power of a good ombudsman.

Students also need an ombudsman independent of state and federal governments. Proper investigations can get to the bottom of mistreatment or, at worst, outright corruption. Students must be assured the Immigration Department will take no action to deport them. Instead, if necessary, they should be placed out of harm's way into an alternative reputable education provider at no cost to themselves where they can continue pursuing their dreams.

No one is saying all foreign students have negative experiences here. But now the cat is out let's keep it out and shake this system free of corruption.

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classes and students spend the day watching television. And this is just the beginning. They then discover the staff and owners of such schools treat them with disrespect. If they are brave enough to complain, they are threatened with having their visa cancelled and being deported.

Like thousands of fellow students, they need to find jobs to meet their residency dreams, but there is too much competition. And if they do find a job, they can risk long hours and exploitation. They will do anything rather than

Accreditation Board, which has its own vested interest in keeping the schools operational? Indubitably there's the federal Department of Employment, Education and Workplace Relations, but it keeps investigations so guarded it surely is administered by ASIO.

The disturbing truth is that students will gain little assistance from any of these sources.

If a student wishes to complain about the behaviour of an education provider, there is no one who wants to listen. Sure, they are encouraged to make a