



Australian Federation of International Students

Background Paper on International Students Issues

Submission to the Senate Inquiry

This background paper should be read in conjunction to the joint submission between the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA) and the Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS). This paper further summarises some of the issues affecting international students.



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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.

It is noted that this background paper should be read in conjunction to the joint submission between the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council of Australia (FECCA) and the Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS). This paper further summarises some of the issues affecting international students.

The scope of issues concerning and negatively impacting international student are broad-based, inter-related and interdependent. Any review of issues has to be mindful of the potential effect one. This paper does not aim to be a compendium, but aims to highlight the complex experiences of international students that give rise to the present issues from pre-departure to graduation.

This paper is based on the individual cases that present to the Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) has been involved with in recent years. AFIS treats its cases with the strictest confidence - these cases have been de-identified and de-personalised for the purpose of this paper.

International Students data

According to Australian Education International (AEI), in 2008 there were 543,898 full fee paying international students studying in Australia. 73,485 students were from People's Republic of China, following closely by India (60,240 students)¹. There is a growing number of students from Saudi Arabia (113.2 per cent growth), Mauritius (108.8 per cent) and Colombia (34.5 per cent). AFIS notes that an increasing number of students from Mauritius and Colombia present cases to AFIS in the past year.

The higher education sector remained the strongest in attracting the highest number of students, followed very closely by the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. However, the enrolment to the VET sector has since an exponential growth of 226.9 per cent between 2002 and 2008, demonstrating an increase of 46.1 per cent between 2007 and 2008 alone.

Pre-departure

Parents of international students often determine or have the final determination over the choice of study destination. A vast number of international students identify education agents operating in their home countries as having the most influence over this decision, providing advice, and key information including marketing and promotional collaterals of the various education providers. Agents also continue to play a vital role in the provision of pre-departure and pre-arrival information to students arriving into Australia.

Unfortunately, a commonly presenting scenario to AFIS has revealed 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
- 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

¹ Australian Education International - <http://www.aei.gov.au>

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.

Pre-departure information packs are provided to students in some cases to outline some official information; however, it should be acknowledged that it is unlikely that a young person will in fact take the time to read these documents which are sometimes not presented in the most easily understood format. Parents, on the other hand, often indicate that they would like to read such documents, but several do not have the English language proficiency to adequately understand the information provided.

Arrival (early stage)

As soon as international students arrive in Australia, they will have a number of issues to deal with, including:

1. Navigating their way around and familiarising themselves with the environment.
2. Enrolment
3. Finding accommodation – discussed further below
4. Culture shock and the language barrier – discussed further below

Finding Accommodation

Finding accommodation is the first major task international students have to overcome when they arrive in Australia. The availability of affordable accommodation is an essential and very basic necessity. However, this aspect of living in Australia is in serious threat even for local residents, with a shortage of housing options and the rising costs of rental apartments.

Private rental market

The rental market, by nature, favours renters who are local residents and who possess stronger positive rental history or better credit ratings through being employed.

- The economical downturn and the predicted rise in cost-of-living also drives an increase in demand for rental apartments – international students, who by default are home renters rather than home buyers, are left stranded in an extremely competitive environment to find suitable accommodation.

- International students who are unable to afford paying higher prices for rent, especially those who have just arrived into Australia, thus appear less attractive to landlords and agents.

Both local and international students are said to be facing a poverty issue, rather than a budgeting management issue. For example:

- A conservative average of the amount to pay for renting a 1-bed roomer in South Carlton in Victoria is AUD\$300 per week.
- Some housing agents also require students to pay a monthly excess to hire a professional cleaner even when such services are not required.

The private rental normally require long leases for 12-month, which does not suit international student rental, as many return home during the summer holidays, leaving them having to pay an extra 1 month of rent.

Rooming houses / 'hot-bedding'

Rooming houses are less expensive. However, there also lie a number of issues in the sector:

- A large number of rooming housing providers are unregistered and do not meet the necessary standards. Some home owners transform their property into rooming house, unaware of the definition of a rooming house and the required standard as defined by the law. Local City Councils are therefore not aware of their existence.
- There are other providers who are only in the market to exploit international students and charging excessive rent.
- An approximate figure for rooming house would be AUD\$100-\$150 per week for one room. Some may include utilities, but will restrict its use, others have to pay extra for utilities.
- The law for rooming houses are also unclear

Some students who fail to secure housing resort to living in sub-par accommodation with poor living conditions, inviting a host of other complimentary problems.

- There is also new trend of 'hot-bedding', seeing students taking shifts between working, studying, and sleeping on the same bed, with very poor living conditions, including minimal cooking facilities and bathroom facilities, poor heating (often none), lack of adequate lighting, and poor hygiene.

Home stay

Homestay is a good option for international students, especially to those who are very young, and it is also often at an affordable rate (approximately AUD\$220 per week including food). It can also provide an excellent way for international students to engage with the local community, and hence enhance their experience as an international student.

The current homestay industry is under regulated, for example:

- It is mandated for homestay hosts to provide food to students, however, some hosts restrict the amount of food they provide to the students, leaving many students to go hungry.
- Some hosts will restrict the use of utilities, and ban students from using the heater.

Students who cannot find appropriate housing sometimes are forced to stay in the backpackers or hotels.

There is also an increasing number of international students are left homeless on the streets. AFIS has stepped in these few months to support a few, but due to our lack of resources and the increasing number of cases, some students do not have the support. There needs to be an increase of support to assist international students in finding appropriate accommodation.

The housing problem is also strongly linked to the unrealistic guideline of AUD\$12K for living expense as a requirement of the student visa.

Cultural shock and language barrier

Cultural shock is experienced by all international students, including those from English-speaking countries. Students from non-English speaking countries will have a language barrier on top of cultural shock.

If cultural shock is not handled properly or not recognised by students, it can lead to isolation, and eventually depression and potentially other adverse mental conditions.

It is worth noting that culture and background determines the behaviour and the perception of a person. How a person behaves will also affect how others respond, and could change the experience of an international student entirely. Sometimes, this can potentially put students at risk of being victims of crime due to the lack of understanding what is publically appropriate in Australia.

There has been many English language programs, but no programs to help students understand Australian culture. AFIS has developed a short presentation about Australian culture and how to deal with cultural shock. The presentation is delivered during orientations programs and at some private colleges and TAFEs. We acknowledge that there is a need for wider delivery. However, due to its limited resources AFIS is unable to fulfil this need.

Arrival (later stage)

After students have settled into Australia, begun their course, students will start experiencing life outside the academic setting.

Employment

As part of the student visa, students are only permitted to work up to 20 hours per week during the study period. When the decision was made, there may have been well intentions from the Government to protect international students, but there is an increasing problem with the 20 hour per week rule, including:

- The majority of the students who require working in order to fund living expenses are working more than 20 hours despite the visa requirement.

- This will force international students to accept 'cash in hand' payments and be open to exploitation by employers. Many students are being threatened by employers that if students do not accept, they will both lose the job and report to the immigration department they are in breach of their student visa.
- No protection of employment rights to international students if they are accepted 'cash in hand' payments.
- Reduce the employability of local students, because local students will not accept work that is paid \$5 per hour. This creates a perception to local students that international students are taking over their jobs. What they do not understand is the fact that international students are being under paid, which increases the profit margin for a company, and hence are highly favourable to employ.
- International students are unfavourable to companies who pay students legally, because they are not permitted to work more than 20 hours.
- Students miss classes in order to work long hours and jeopardise their studies

The 20 hour rule forces international students to be living in poor conditions, exploited by employers, and increase the likelihood of them travelling at home hence at the potential risk of being a victim of crime. International students who are unaware that the living expenses in Australia is at least \$20K and forced to work to sustain a living in Australia are also often forced to work longer hours and therefore travel home late at night and make themselves vulnerable to opportunistic crime.

AFIS understands that the possible intention of the 20 hour rule was to ensure students are coming to Australia to study, rather than working full time. There may be provisions, however, to allow students to further apply for longer working hours if they can provide evidence their studies are not jeopardised.

The 20 hour per week employment rule also applies to voluntary work. Voluntary work used in this document is as defined in the Social Security Act. It is a publicly accepted view that volunteering is a great way for international students to engage with the wider community. The Australian Government is highly supportive of volunteering and is an intrinsic part of Australian life. We see a very successful Commonwealth Games in Melbourne 2006 with enthusiastic volunteers helping during that period, the inclusion of voluntary work in the 20 hour visa requirement suggests that the Australian Government is not supportive of voluntary work from international students. Voluntary work has direct link to student's community engagement and social inclusion aspect of international students.

As discussed previously, the misleading information provided by education agents overseas mean that students have expectations before they arrive that it is very easy to find employment in Australia. When reality does not meet these expectations, there results a high level of dissatisfaction.

There is also systemic discrimination towards international students in the workplace, where some employers (in particular larger firms) prioritise students with citizenship or permanent residency. This is particularly pertinent during internship intakes, and poses a concern where international students are deprived of the opportunity to engage with local Australians in the workplace or gain appropriate (or oftentimes required, as part of their course requirements) work experience.

Social inclusion / Community engagement

As discussed previously, volunteering is a great way for international students to engage with the Australian community, however, this is limited by the employment restriction on international students. The Australian Government should review its current policy on this issue.

Currently, there is minimal opportunity for interaction between international students and local students, international students do not feel like they are actively contributing to the community, and hence international students are not integrating well into the wider Australian community. There are also some perceptions that international students are not interested in engaging the wider community, which is totally the opposite. The majority of international students would like to engage with the wider community, but do not have the opportunity to do so. This is especially true to students studying at private colleges with a high make-up of international students, resulting in absolutely no opportunity for international students to engage with the local community. There needs to be greater effort into developing and delivering programs that allows for such interactions.

I draw your attention to a number of programs offered at AFIS that provides this opportunity and the uptake to these programs has been overwhelming. There needs to be greater resources to deliver such programs.

- Water and safety project in partnership with the Bill Waters Rover Crew (part of Scouts Association Australia), taking a group of international students on a camp to the bush by the Rover Crew, and teaching students survival skills and outdoor safety knowledge. The project also provided the opportunity for students to engage with young Australians who are part of the Rover Crew.
- GloBall project in partnership with Essendon Football Club. The project aims to increase student's knowledge in Australian Football, breakdown cultural barriers and misconception and hence increase bonds between international students and the wider community.

There is currently a lack of knowledge by the wider community about international student issues. It must be acknowledge cultural barrier is a 2 way street, two parties must come together to break cultural barrier, this means that the Australian community also need to participate in order for programs to be successful. It is intended that through engagement programs for both for international students about Australians and local students about international students, this will help break down cultural barrier.

Safety

Safety is an important issue for all international students, but it should be acknowledged that safety is an end product and not the cause of the issues surrounding international students.

Marketing pamphlets say Melbourne is the safest city for international students. Although this could be true, international students perceive Melbourne as a place of no danger. It is our knowledge that in every city, crime do exist, therefore correct information about crime rates must be provided to students.

Contradictions to safety is a result of:

- Students being forced to work late then travelling on public transport at night, putting international students at risk
- International students constantly putting themselves in danger due to the lack of awareness of where danger is.

- There may sometimes be misunderstanding of social norms by both international students and Australians, this may potentially trigger violence to some individuals leading to assault.

International students are not aware of the services available to them, and even if they are aware of Government support, they are unwilling to contact the relevant departments for help. A high number of international students have expressed to AFIS that they would not approach a Government Authority for help, fearing they could potentially put their student visa at risk. This is because sometimes students perceive government departments will report incidents to the Immigration Department directly and they will hence somehow risk having their student visas being revoked.

The majority of crimes against international students are opportunistic, but there are some that are racially motivated. This should not be tolerated in Australia.

Welfare support for students

When there is a population, there will always be a proportion of international students who require assistance. Currently there is no welfare support for international students when they run into problems. International students contribute AUD15 billion per annum to Australia's economy, it is only logical to use a proportion of this money to provide welfare support for students. However, due to the commercialisation of the industry, even Universities only provide minimal support to international students, and many international student departments operate with minimal funding.

It should also be noted that international students are fearful in approaching authorities (sometimes even representatives from the Universities) due to their fear that a complaint will somehow affect their student. It is therefore important to have a community based organisation to assist international students. AFIS currently provides such support, but not adequately resourced to assist every student in need as it would otherwise like to. In the past, there was approximately 5 cases per week, in recent months, this has jumped to 20 cases per week. AFIS' part time staff and volunteers do not have a capacity to provide adequate support. In fact, there is currently no government funding at all to provide this highly valued service to international students. There is growing need for international students.

AFIS commends the Victorian Government in its recent announcement of the International Student Care Service, a one-stop, 24-hours available service for international students. AFIS believes that the International Student Care Service represents a good model for adoption by other States to ensure that its benefits will be extended to international students nationally.

There is also a strong need to establish an international students ombudsman that can handle all complaints, including quality of education and the treatment of students by Government Departments.

Exploitation and Understanding of rights

Like all visitors to a new country, international students are unaware of their rights and obligations. They are therefore highly vulnerable to exploitation in all sectors, the most prominent on is exploitation by landlords. There is a high proportion of international students who are exploited by landlords and threatened.

International students are often exploited by some private colleges. AFIS has had reports by students, where when students were 5 minutes late to class, their teachers threatened to seek a payment from students, otherwise they will be marked absent. It is noted that there is an 80% attendance regulation on their student visa, where if they are absent for more than 20% of their classes, they will be in breach of the visa.

Although AFIS is in support of the 80% attendance rule, students are often exploited by private colleges. There needs to be a comprehensive audit of colleges – including a process of interviewing students rather than basing audits on documentation and paperwork, and heavy penalties should apply if private colleges are in breach.

It should be noted that it is evident that there is some level of an exploitation of the system by international students themselves. Due to their eagerness to gain permanent residency, there are also students attempting to bribe lecturers or teachers to award them with high grades. Although, AFIS agrees with the immigration policy of attracting the brightest of international students to remain and contribute to Australian society, the direct link currently offered from education to permanent residency has a number of issues. There needs to be a clearer delineation between the international education industry and immigration policy.

Transport Concession

It is acknowledged that transportation is not under the direct responsibility of the Federal Government, however, for students studying in Victoria and NSW, there is a perception that the Government is discriminating against them.

The Victorian Government in a conference organised by ISANA in Victoria openly indicated that the reason why transport concession was not provided to international students was that, since the number students studying in NSW and Victoria continues to be the highest amongst the states and territories in Australia, therefore there is no reason to provide students with concession cards. Furthermore the comment from the Victorian Government that money needs to be invested in order to provide transport concession appears to disregard the contribution international students make to the economy.

It is also noted that the lack of transport concession is not clearly indicated in marketing materials, nor does it addressed clearly on the official Government websites. Educational agents often do not address this either – leading to students not making an informed choice. An informal poll on the AFIS website suggests that a high number of students would choose to study in another state if they were informed of such information.

Students are also uninformed after they have arrived, and some students had been issued fines due to the lack of clear information regarding the denial of transport concession. If the Australian Government is serious about welcoming international students to Australia, AFIS argues that transport concession that applies uniformly across the states and territories is a must.

Quality of education

It has been brought to our attention that Education providers, including well-known Universities, lower their standards for international students to ensure students obtain their education awards. The decision is due to the fact that Universities are so dependent on the income generated by international students.

Students are required to have obtained IELTS results of 7.0 or more to qualify for a place in an Australian University and hence should have a high level of proficiency in the English language. However, in practice, some students who attend Universities still have low levels of proficiency in the language, and hence are unable to even understand classroom materials. There needs to be standardised, well-monitored and properly conducted IELTS tests to address this issue.

The lowering of standards for international students damages the reputation of Australian education, and leading to Australian degrees being undervalued in student's home country. Some human resource managers overseas have already begun to undervalue Australian degrees by removing candidates from Australian degrees first. A Human Resource Manager overseas commented that the reason for this decision was because students who could not attend a local University due to insufficient grades were still accepted into an Australian University. **This is highly damaging to Australia's reputation.**

There is also a misconception that all international students studying at private colleges in hairdressing, chef, community welfare or other 60 immigration points courses, has the sole purpose of getting permanent residency (PR). This perception is not true and is unfair to some student genuinely wanting to study the course. It is acknowledged that there is a proportion of students who are only studying the course for the sole purpose getting PR status. There are a number of issues:

- Creating an environment that students do not want to study, affecting those who are here wanting to study.
- Genuine students find it frustrating also that teachers at private college openly accepting they know some students are not here to study, and openly allow less than satisfactory standard of work to be accepted

Students studying at private colleges are required to fulfil the requirement of placements. There are a number of issues in relation to placements for international students, including:

- Students are not supported by private college to find placements. Supervisors in the community sector find difficulty working with some private colleges.
- The community sector has expressed that the sector could not accommodate the number of requests for placements, and the colleges provide no flexibility in the timing of the placements. Supervising students require time and effort in order to supervise properly. Students are generally requested to perform full time placements for a short period of 3 months, and a high number of requests at the same time. This is highly unrealistic.

The closure of private colleges who are not compliant to the legislation is welcomed, but it is also important to ensure students in these events pose minimal disruption to their study and a seamless transitionary process is established.

It is also noted that the lack of public funding to education forces Universities and education providers to rely on the income from international students.

Graduation

After graduation, some students may choose to **go back to** their home country to begin their career, or seek permanent residency in Australia.

AFIS are in support of students seeking permanent residency in Australia, due to their contribution culturally and socially to the Australian society. However, there remain some problems.

There is a long waiting time when applying for permanent residency of at least 6 months. Graduates cannot access most postgraduate programs without permanent residency, and due to the long waiting time, many graduates are not able to begin their career or postgraduate studies immediately. While appropriate and comprehensive assessment is necessary, the Government needs to develop a strategy to streamline the applications for permanent residency.

Recommendations

1. Provide funding to establish one-stop student support services to international students. The service must be run by a community organisation to ensure students feel comfortable in accessing.
2. Establishment of an international student ombudsman to handle complaints.
3. Stricter regulation and policing be applied to agents operating overseas and harsher penalties for misconduct to prevent unscrupulous agents from misleading students and their families.
4. Provision of a mandatory cultural orientation program to international students during orientation, but preferably at pre-departure.
5. Official pre-departure packs needs to be translated into a number of languages appropriate to the region for parents.
6. There needs to be mandatory obligation from education providers to secure housing for international students, with reasonable rates, for at least 6 months. The benchmark for 'reasonable pricing' should be based upon what local students can afford.
7. Audit to private colleges should include interviews with students rather than relying documentations, otherwise, it will not identify exploitation towards students.
8. Transport concession should be provided to all students, including international students.
9. Increase funding to support social engagement programs, cultural awareness programs
10. Increase regulation on the home-stay industry
11. Increase the policing of self operated rooming houses
12. Provision of information on how to recognise and handle cultural shock.
13. The 20 hour per week rule should be reassessed to allow students to work more hours to avoid exploitation.
14. The 20 hour per week rule should be reassessed to exclude voluntary work as defined by the Social Security Act.
15. Courses that require students to do placements should be supported by the education provider to find appropriate placements

16. Standard for accepting students and for assessments be lifted by all education providers
17. Tightening of standards within education providers – from Universities to private providers.

Submission by

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