

## **Submission to Senate Inquiry**

### **A Fair Go in Quality and Adequacy of Education Services and Outcomes for International Students**

**Submission by Overseas Students' Support Network Australia (OSSNA)**

**Friday 14 August 2009**

**By email: [eevr.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:eevr.sen@aph.gov.au)**

**Mr. Robert Palmer [Executive Director OSSNA]**

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## **Overview**

### ***Who is OSSNA and What We Do***

Overseas Students' Support Network Australia (OSSNA) was created to help ensure that people, both local and international, who study in our Australian education precincts and communities, receive a fair go and value for their money and effort. It is a non-for-profit organisation with an Advisory Board constituted by experts in quality standards, vocational, academic, industry and international student education. OSSNA charges the students an annual fee to provide on-going support services. It receives no government funding assistance.

The OSSNA Advisory Board includes education experts who volunteer their time because they are so concerned about the lack of effective quality standards in the delivery of educational services and outcomes to international students. The Advisory Board has been developing a Quality Standard matrix of all necessary services for international students learning, living and working in Australia.

OSSNA's current work has identified and validated several issues of immediate concern for the welfare of international students and their families and communities. We believe that all education and training providers must work smarter and fairer to achieve a fair go for our international clients.

### ***Scope of OSSNA's Work***

Since OSSNA opened its Melbourne office in Feb 2009 over 1500 students, predominantly international students have visited OSSNA's conveniently located Melbourne office for advice in how to solve their problems and issues associated with studying, living and working in Australia. Most of these issues were addressed in face to face interviews of individuals or groups of students.

Students from as far away as Perth and Northern Queensland have physically attended the OSSNA office in Melbourne because they believed that they could not get any reliable practical and co-ordinated advice elsewhere.

## **Our service approach**

### **Individual Students**

OSSNA consults with every student to facilitate and investigate the concern or complaint. It then acts as the student's advisor and advocate to offer advice and support accordingly. OSSNA has done little advertising – its work comes predominantly from word of mouth recommendations.

### **Registered Training Organisations (RTOs)**

RTOs have asked OSSNA to advise on compliance issues and to work on innovative educational programs, including on-line delivery.

### **Community Groups**

Church groups including the Uniting Church, Salvation Army and the Catholic Church have asked for assistance in setting up support services including dinners to welcome international students into their communities

### **Business and Industry Stakeholders**

Businesses (travel, homestay and accommodation, insurance, unions, builders, professional advisors) have also consulted with OSSNA so as to enhance students' services.

## **The evidence**

Of the 1500 students OSSNA has seen in 2009 only 2.5% had problems that OSSNA felt it could not deal with. The vast majority of complaints were valid and needed resolution. Subject to privacy issues OSSNA can provide details about the nature and extent of these student issues and complaints. The type of issues have included:

### **Education Services**

- Non compliance of education providers
- Administrative non-compliance
- Ignorance or disregard of the ESOS Act
- Bullying practices
- Overseas education agents misrepresentation of fact
- Colleges refusing to accept responsibility for their education actions
- Fair trading issues and possible breaches of Australian corporate and immigration laws
- 9 B Building Regulations includes lifts, access, ventilation and overcrowded classrooms and classroom requirements
- Non provision of work placement experience

- Distance of available accommodation from study and work places – lack of thoughtfulness about the impact of large distances, travelling over distance, increases risk of being on public transport after hours, increase cost and loss of study time
- Timetabling issues

#### **Visa Issues**

- An example is a person came to consult OSSNA from Bordertown, South Australia - Australian citizen whose wife wants to come in and join him but had been kept waiting for 15 months by the Dubai embassy.
- Transfer/release reporting and compliance.

#### **Accommodation, Health and even suicide attempts**

- Mental health issues
- Physical health issues.

### **OSSNA Media Engagement**

As the extent of the urgent needs and frustrations of international students have surfaced OSSNA has been thrust into the media spotlight as the media has chosen to investigate these issues. The Media have sought assistance, information and interviews from Mr. Robert Palmer, the Executive Director of OSSNA, who is an expert in identifying, investigating, mediating and resolving international students' problems. In fact he has had to refuse several media engagements to ensure a quality service to his clients is maintained. For example 650 phone calls to OSSNA arose from one Age article.

This interest has resulted in numerous articles in the international and local media including:

#### **International**

- Reuters
- India's largest monthly magazine
- Chinese newspapers
- Internet, at least 20 internet education sites concerned with education quality

#### **Australia**

- The Australian
- The Age
- SBS Television
- ABC Television
- Talk back radio in several states.

One example of these articles in provided in Appendix A.

## **Terms of Reference: OSSNA Submission addressing International Students Welfare**

***(a) The roles and responsibilities of education providers, migration and education agents, state and federal governments, and relevant departments and embassies, in ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support***

### **(i) student safety**

OSSNA believes that student safety is an issue related to the lack of effective quality standards for the provision of education, welfare and community services in Australia.

### **(ii) adequate and affordable accommodation**

OSSNA is currently working on a *Campus and Community Model* which will integrate the delivery of a best practice learning and living experience for international students. This model is nearing completion.

### **(iii) social inclusion**

International students (and their families) should feel part of the Australian community whilst studying in our country. They require support and encouragement while they learn, live and work in our various communities.

### **(iv) student visa requirements**

OSSNA has been involved in advising and advocating for international students with visa issues particularly relating to false and incorrect advice provided by international education agents.

### **(v) adequate international student support and advocacy**

OSSNA was established to provide a support and agency service to international students independent of any commercial agreements with education agents, educational institutes or accommodation providers. In the course of this day to day work OSSNA is identifying organizations with a commitment to quality service. It is developing productive relationships with these organizations to prioritise the delivery of a quality learning and living experience rather than simply exploiting the commercial opportunities.

**(vi) employment rights and protections from exploitation**

OSSNA has been involved in advising many students and advocating with their educational providers to ensure that work placement components of vocational educational courses are meaningful educative experiences and above board.

**(vii) appropriate pathways to permanency**

This is not an OSSNA priority. When advice is sought OSSNA uses its extensive networks. It has extensive expertise in the vocational education field and in advising international students and education providers in these matters.

***(b) The identification of quality benchmarks and controls for service, advice and support for international students studying at an Australian education institution***

The OSSNA Advisory Board includes academic, industry and vocational education experts. We are currently working on specifying a Quality Standards matrix comprising service delivery and outcome components. These quality standards will be benchmarked to best practice quality standards to incorporate both education and business quality frameworks.

***(c) Related matters.***

**More Effective Co-ordination between Government Departments, Education bodies and Compliance bodies required regarding suspicious activity**

OSSNA has been invited to contribute confidential information about suspicious activity to various Federal and State Department including DIAC, DEEWR, Australian Crime Commission and Victoria Police. OSSNA has established trust and effective working relationships with DEEWR and DIAC. This has led to OSSNA having meetings with various Education and Training peak bodies

Given all of the above, especially the extent of the problems being faced by international students, and the level of concerns, (over 1500 in 6 months of operation), the need to develop a new service delivery model which includes benchmarks for individual providers, co-ordination and sharing of experiences across the industry and consistency of stud experience while in Australia.

These insights and experiences led Mr Robert Palmer to establish an OSSNA Advisory Board of education experts to work with him to design and develop a *Campus and Community International Student Service Model* to address the issues brought to light in the 1500 complaints serviced by OSSNA. It is envisaged that our Campus and Community International Student Service Model will be scalable. OSSNA is currently seeking to identify interested parties to establish the Pilot Program to demonstrate and access our approach. The Board has spent three months designing and developing the conceptual framework.

## **OSSNA Campus and Community Model**

OSSNA believes that it is imperative to improve the overall quality of education services and living experiences for international students choosing to study in Australia. To this end we have created an innovative delivery model which is underpinned by an Australian culture induction program whose key components are a purpose built English language support program and integrated student support services.

OSSNA has been advising various interested parties in the design and development of enhanced student living and studying facilities and services model. This Campus and Community Model could address all of the key issues facing our students and ensure that Australia is seen internationally as providing a fair go and specifically value for students' (and their families) money and effort

The Community and Campus Co-operative Model has developed an integrated approach highlighting 'safe, smart and successful' education and training opportunities for Australia's local and international students.

Recent media coverage, both national and international, has highlighted concerns regarding Australia's third highest export earner – international education and training. This proposal addresses many of the issues raised in socially-cohesive ways to ensure everybody wins: students, student families, education and training providers, infrastructure developers, and most importantly also local communities.

The benefits are both direct and indirect, measurable and sustainable.

The Community and Campus Co-operative philosophies encourage:

- Co-operation rather than Competition.
- Responsibilities as well as Rights.
- Diversity rather than Division.



- Inclusion instead of Exclusion.
- Cultural Celebrations rather than Conflict.
- Long-term Gains coupled with Short-term Satisfaction

## **Call for Action OSSNA Recommendations**

### ***Pilot Program to enhance Quality of Education Experience***

We want students to have positive feelings and experiences about Australia and the Australian way of life. If the students have positive experiences their families at home will feel more relaxed about them studying overseas. Hopefully, the students will build lifelong experiences and contacts.

Furthermore they need to know that Australia appreciates the richness of contributions made by our international students in so many ways. Whilst Australia will be enhanced by the involvement of international students in our communities we hope that in return we have given them the "Australian fair go".

OSSNA would like to take a leading position in the design and delivery of a funded pilot program which is scalable in communities throughout Australia and potentially globally. A Community Education incubator would help fine tune the key features and harvest feedback from all key stakeholders.

The OSSNA Advisory Board is currently setting up *Practica Global* to create a global network of productive and supportive enterprises to promote and develop learning earning and living in countries through the world.

## **The Global Challenge**

We are all accountable as global citizens for the well-being of the next generation of students who are our collective future. OSSNA wishes to contribute to the articulation and implementation of the solutions for our current and future international students and their families and local communities.

**Mr Robert Palmer**

TPTC  
Certificate A and B Education  
B Ed  
Author of 400 publications

*Executive Director*  
*OSSNA*

**Dr. Deborah Hann**

Ph D – Education (Melbourne)  
B Juris/LLB  
Diploma Frontline Management  
Diploma Training and Assessment Systems.  
Admitted to Practise as Barrister & Solicitor  
AIFM

*Chairperson*  
*OSSNA Advisory Board*

14 August 2009  
Melbourne

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## Appendix A

*When 'The Age' Senior Writer Sushi Das broke the stories "Pressure to rein in 'corrupt' colleges" on April 14th. and "State won't reveal high-risk colleges" on April 17th. there were some who under-estimated how the Australian public would react.*

*650+ survey responses in one day, 30+ lengthy 'blogs' and a substantial number of e-mails from within Australia and from overseas showed just how much interest there was in the plight of international students.*

*Sushi's "Helping hand for foreign students" on April 29th. was the first time that the work of OSSNA had been presented in the media, and the OSSNA phones ran hot. Within the next 12 hours websites and newspapers in China and India were also telling the OSSNA story.*

### Helping hand for foreign students

Sushi

Das April 29, 2009

A NEW Melbourne support service has been set up to help foreign students who are exploited by unscrupulous colleges, employers and landlords.

Overseas Student Support Network Australia (OSSNA) is liaising with the Federal Government to deal with students' complaints, amid growing concern that students' negative experiences in Australia could harm the nation's \$13.7 billion international education industry.

Executive director Robert Palmer said OSSNA had been inundated with requests for help since it was established in February, with up to 20 students a day seeking help, advice or information.

Mr Palmer said foreign students were vulnerable because they were young, inexperienced, isolated and often homesick.

A combination of their lack of local knowledge, unfamiliarity with Australian culture and limited English meant they sometimes did not know who to turn to in difficult times.

A significant number came from countries run by oppressive regimes or had cultures that fostered a fear of government.

Such students did not feel comfortable seeking assistance from official agencies or providing them with evidence against unscrupulous operators for fear that it could harm their opportunity to study and eventually live in Australia, he said.

Mr. Palmer, an education expert who blew the whistle on a corrupt private college that was eventually closed in 2007, said he has established OSSNA to stop students "falling through the cracks".

Complaints that students had raised about private training colleges included bullying by teachers, overcrowded classes, constant timetable changes, threats of deportation, non-existent or scaled-back courses, exorbitant charges for obtaining subject results and certificates and poor-quality education.

A representative from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations will meet Mr. Palmer this week to discuss how students may be helped.

OSSNA charges students a one-off membership fee of \$250 and also charges colleges for providing them with students.

**\*\* INCORRECT \*\***

OSSNA does NOT charge colleges for providing them with students. It does NOT OPERATE as an education agent. OSSNA does however charge a one-off membership fee of \$250.