



**Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board
456 Albert Street,
East Melbourne, Victoria**

**Submission to the Senate:
Education, Employment and Workplace Relations committee
into the Welfare of International Students**



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The role of the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board

The Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board (MFB) has a dual role in relation to community safety. This includes responding to fire and other emergencies and engaging with the Victorian community in relation to community safety and fire prevention.

The metropolitan fire district comprises an area of more than 1,000 square kilometres covering 25 municipalities. Our population includes more than two million people, a third of whom were born overseas and speak over 250 languages. MFB works with the community to build resilience and capacity and ensure people have the knowledge to prevent, prepare, respond and recover from fire and other emergencies.

Background

Over the last five years two separate preventable residential fires have occurred which resulted in the deaths of four international students. In addition to these fatalities MFB can advise that international students regularly feature in fire related incidents. In fact fires in student accommodation in the private rental market have increased by 20% over the same period.

These fires commonly reveal a lack of knowledge and/or awareness of:

- Smoke alarms and their role in providing early warning of a fire.
- Installation, maintenance and testing of a working smoke alarm.
- Their rights as tenants in relation to the installation, maintenance and testing of working smoke alarm.
- Basic home fire safety.
- Safe working of common domestic appliances such as portable heating.
- Unsafe and/or inappropriate use of power boards, portable cooking devices.
- Current fire services recommendations in relation to home escape plans.
- How to contact fire services in an emergency through 000.

As a result of its' emergency response role and engagement with the international education sector MFB is aware that many students live in sub standard, inappropriate or overcrowded accommodation. In some instances property owners had failed to inform and gain permission from the relevant council (Planning, Building or Health Departments) of their intention to operate the building as a multi tenanted/sub let premise.



Fires in these circumstances commonly featured:

- Overcrowding of bedrooms with multiple tenants in individual rooms.
- Multiples of electrical items including computers, televisions, heaters etc in individual rooms.
- Dead locks and other locks on internal doors.
- Use of portable cooking devices in rooms other than the kitchen.
- Impaired egress requires for escape in an emergency due to altered constructions, overcrowding and locked doors.
- Lack of smoke alarms.
- Failure to develop and display fire emergency and evacuation plans as required for buildings registered for similar use.

Current MFB engagement activities to improve the safety of international students

To address the identified gaps in the knowledge of international students in relation to home fire safety MFB have developed and a range of initiatives and partnerships that include:

- Identification and scoping of the fire safety issues experienced by international students via two International Student Housing Forums held at MFB Training College. These events specifically targeted educational institutions, student accommodation services, student associations, local government and other stakeholders.
- Co host with Australasian Fire Authorities Council (AFAC) to Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Massachusetts USA) students for the research project, 'An Assessment of Fire Safety in Australia's International Student Housing' to identify current gaps by international students in their level of awareness of fire safety issues with respect to their housing in Australia. (See attachment 1).
- Survey of international students to: identify types of housing current utilised, potential fire hazards that might exist in these dwellings, knowledge of home fire safety information and how and when this information was received, (See attachment 2).
- Representation and participation in Victoria University Pre-Departure Program, India 2009. The pilot program initiated by Victoria University in partnership with Victoria Police and MFB. Aim was to prepare prospective students in their home country prior to departure. Key messages of this multiagency approach included personal safety and fire safety information.
- Development fire safety component for ISANA's 'Rainbow Guide' which is a template of pre departure and orientation information made available to all education providers to disseminate to students.



- Development of a fire safety presentations to address the current gap in knowledge of home fire safety of international students.
- Participation in Orientation Programs at various universities and tertiary institutions, TAFE and private colleges to disseminate home fire safety information specifically targeting international students.
- Development and participation with Victoria Police in Victoria University's Safety Ambassador Program. The program trains selected Victoria University students as peer leaders to promote fire safety and personal safety, and act as a point of contact to assist students with their safety questions and concerns.
- Engagement and participation in cultural events across the Metropolitan Fire District which are attended by international students such as 'Diwali in the West' Festival and the Melbourne City Council International Student Welcome.

Other MFB activities to improve the safety of international students

- Developed an information protocol between local government and MFB to identify illegal rooming houses. This protocol facilitates MFB emergency response preplanning to such premises and local government with sufficient information to commence enforcement to ensure the life safety of residents.
- Enhancement to MFB Enforcement Powers:

The MFB is recognised by the Victorian Parliament as having a role in upholding safety standards in the built environment in the Metropolitan Fire District. The MFB's current enforcement powers are limited under the Building Act, Building Regulations, MFB Act and Infringements Act and Regulations.

The MFB are endeavouring to set out a proposal to amend the MFB Act to establish enforcement powers and processes which are specific to the MFB and fire safety matters. The establishment of such powers would remove the need for the MFB to rely on other Acts to enforce issues relative to fire safety and the head of power would be contained to one set of legislation namely the MFB Act. The inclusion of such enforcement powers is relevant to the MFB due to the impact of unsafe buildings. These types of buildings have a significant impact on occupant safety and on fire fighting operations and include rooming houses / budget accommodation / night clubs etc, that international students and the broader community use and frequent.



Proposals in relation to the safety of international students

MFB recognises the substantial economic contribution made by overseas students to the state and national economy and to our culture by their diversity. MFB is committed to improving the safety of international students.

MFB have previously developed and led national initiatives to address the high fire risk groups via the Australasian Fire Authorities Council, which is the national peak body for fire services. Through active participation of AFAC's Community Education Sub Group, MFB has achieved sustainable community safety outcomes in all states and territories.

As a result, MFB has capacity to engage fire services nationally and work effectively with stakeholders from emergency services, education and government at a local, state and Commonwealth level to address the safety needs of international students.

MFB is recommending

- Identify an appropriate national forum of education and government stakeholders including emergency services, to address a range of welfare issues experienced by international students including fire safety, personal safety, and water safety.
- Scoping of the safety issues to address the welfare of international students.
- Identification of a sustainable multi agency strategy to address international student safety.
- Development of a communication delivery pathway which ensures that appropriate safety information is delivered in a manner which maximises the welfare outcomes to improve the experience of international students in Australia.