



**SUBMISSION BY THE IMPERIAL EDUCATION GROUP PTY LTD
TO THE SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION,
EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS INQUIRY INTO
THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS.**

1.0 Introduction

Imperial Education Group Pty Ltd welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Senate Standing Committee on the key issue of National Interest related to the welfare of international students studying in Australia.

The Imperial Education Group Pty Ltd is managed by the highly experienced, qualified and committed partners, and trading as Imperial College of Trades in Adelaide in South Australia. The college is headed by Lt. Col. Retd. Bikkar Singh BRAR who has had excellent experience in the industry, for over two decades, both in India and Australia.

Our motto clearly reflects our commitment to upholding the sanctity of State and Commonwealth law. It says,

**‘Australia comes first always, everywhere and every time
Our clients come next always, everywhere and every time
Our financial interests come last always, everywhere and every time’.**

We are operating in Adelaide, South Australia under NTIS 40287 and CRICOS Code 03039E, and have six courses on our scope.

We have been commended for our excellent standards by an audit team of quality directorate, DFEEST during our initial audit on 12 Nov 2008 and during our compliance audit on 11 Aug 2009.

2.0 Marketing, Education/ Migration Agents

The accurate marketing of courses by RTO, education and migration agents has to be done which complies with the National Code 2007. There should be no room for misinterpretation or misunderstanding by the education agent or the prospective student. At the same time, the dissemination of information is an issue where sometimes the prospective student may not necessarily be interested to know the exact information due to his/her craze to go to a foreign country.

The education agent is often the first point of contact for most of the international students enrolling in colleges and universities in Australia. Standard 4 of the National Code 2007 is very clear on the subject of appointing education agents and their monitoring. Despite the regulatory control placed on the RTOs, in a few instances the integrity of the system has been compromised due to the existence of two or three tiers of sub agents in some countries especially in India. The intricacy of the system existing in the host country defied every good intention of our RTOs to discipline the education agents working for them. However, there have been instances where either the RTO has not provided accurate information in marketing material or the education agent has misrepresented the information to recruit the student.

The ESOS, the National Code or any other legislation is silent on the upper limit of the rate of commission paid to overseas agents. The higher the percentage of commission paid to the education agent the lower the student welfare and support. Some of the RTOs including the big and old have been paying in the range of twenty to thirty five percent of their full tuition fee. Apparently, higher rate of commission payments leaves no room for providing quality education and welfare to the International students.

Whilst the authorities in Australia can have a limited influence over the offshore education agents, at least our home grown (onshore) education agents could have been regulated who have been operating unchecked. They are responsible to cause colossal loss to our education industry especially to the higher education. Please refer to two advertisements I am attaching with this submission.

The changing of course/provider by the international students after six months has its pluses and minuses. In our opinion, the students are always losers (loss of fee paid and the time wasted) when they are compelled to leave the providers who fail to deliver the promised services. In many cases the big providers fail to provide satisfactory services to international students and then they blame the small and well organised providers who provide better services with comparable fees.

We, at Imperial College of Trades pay a maximum of 11.22 percent commission to our offshore agents and it is the lowest rate when compared with the twenty to thirty five percent prevalent in the industry.

Recommendation 1

There should be a second IDP type establishment to enrol students for VET sector. This will help in reducing the influence of education agents as well as influencing the rate of commission payable to the offshore agents as they would be required to compete with the IDP in terms of rate of commission payable and a range of services provided to the students.

Recommendation 2

The Australian Government authorities seek to regulate off-shore Education Agents through our RTOs; a) through self regulations or b) by fixing upper limits of commission payable, and c) making declaration of commission paid to education agents on letter of offer issued to students and also displaying it on the website. Regulating education agents will definitely ensure Australia's reputation as a high quality education destination.

Recommendation 3

There should be no onshore education agents as they do not have any role to play. The students seeking to change the provider can do themselves if they have genuine reasons to do so. For migration work like extension of visa etc migration agents can provide assistance.

3.0 Post Arrival Services

The most crucial period for an international student starts from the time he/she arrives at our airport. For majority of the students, it may be the first time to travel alone and to a foreign country with a different language and culture. This is the time when newly arrived students need a great deal of support in terms of transport, accommodation and related services. Here, the student is most vulnerable to exploitation since there is nobody to provide pastoral care. Currently, most of the RTOs meet students on the day of orientation that maybe two to three weeks after his/her arrival and by now the student would have faced the worst environment of his/her life in the absence of desired level of support by the education agent, the RTO and the community. In our opinion, the big RTOs are badly failing to provide desired levels of student support during this crucial period since they have large numbers of students arriving in Australia at any given time.

Recommendation 4

The following should be made incumbent on the RTO receiving the student:

- To organise free airport meet and greet events
- Airport pick up
- Provision of free accommodation in RTO guesthouse for the first two days.

- Provision of post arrival counselling covering information on Australian history and culture, visit to shopping centres, transport centres, library etc.
- Assist student in opening bank accounts, tax file number applications, applying for accommodation, applying for telephone connections and purchasing of used car and information on road codes and signs etc.

Recommendation 5

- The RTO should always demonstrate availability of five beds per hundred students enrolled in the guesthouse.
- The real estate agent should lease accommodation to international students without making the evidence of stable employment as a prerequisite (currently the real estate agents ask students to provide evidence of employment for renting accommodation. This practice compels students to seek employment immediately on arrival in Australia rather than encouraging them to take course of study seriously. Moreover, the international students are required to show funds for tuition fees and living expenses and there should be no reason for the real estate agent to ask evidence of employment for renting out accommodation). This will provide much needed access to accommodation to international students and help them in easy settling down.

Recommendation 6

- The State Governments and Local Government should organise some sort of cluster student accommodation in the state capital preferably near the education institution.

4.0 Transport Facilities

Transport has always been a sore issue for the international student as many of the states do not provide subsidised transport facilities as given to the Australian students. To remain competitive with other nations, we need to have uniform policy across the board to ensure that subsidised transport facilities are provided at par to international students with Australian students.

The situation becomes complex when the students have to change two to three times to reach his/her school. It is time consuming as well as expensive and causes genuine resentment among international students. When the students are making positive contributions to our economic growth through payment of fees, working part time and payment of taxes the demand for provision of subsidised transport is quite genuine.

Recommendation 7

The Commonwealth can ensure uniform provision of public transport to students at par with our Australian students across Australia and for that matter; the state government should share the responsibility.

5.0 Course Delivery

This is another serious issue which has been repeatedly debated in the national and international media. The delivery of substandard courses is not limited to public or private RTOs nor is the size of the RTO is relevant in many instances. Since the RTO is delivering the course and also assessing its outcome, there is a strong possibility of some RTOs compromising with the course outcome due to obvious reasons.

Recommendation 8

It would be appropriate if the role of the RTO is limited to teaching the curriculum and the assessment can be conducted by a centralised agency to achieve uniform outcome. Further, it will put pressure on the RTO as well as the student to take their responsibility seriously as there would be no scope for compromising with the quality of course delivery and assessing of outcomes.

6.0 Practical Placement and Mandatory 900 hours of Work Experience for Trade Courses

There has been irregular practices in the industry where students were compelled to complete certain numbers of hours as practical placement as part of the curriculum. In some instances, the RTOs have charged extra fees to provide practical placement and also 900 hours mandated work experience. This practice is not limited to big or small RTOs. For instance, many employers in collaboration with migration agents have 'ripped off' students for providing them employment to complete practical placement or 900 hours of work experience. One wonders how an RTO can provide 900 hours of work experience in a commercial environment to hundreds of students for fees ranging from \$4000 - \$7000.

In other scenarios, the independent contractors provide employment to the students in the occupation related to their course of study. Even if the student has worked in the occupation related to his/her course still the assessing authorities will not accept the experience gained.

There are high numbers of incidences of student exploitation due to the provision of practical placement and mandated 900 hours of work experience.

Unless the student demonstrates completion of 900 hours work experience he/she is not considered skilled in the nominated occupation. It means the qualification

awarded by the RTO without 900 hours of genuine work experience is of no use to students when it is not even recognised in Australia in terms of skills recognition.

Recommendation 9

- The RTOs be made responsible to provide nominal hours of practical placement.
- The requirement of mandated 900 hours be done away with and a job ready test to be introduced to check the skill level of students completing the trade course.

7.0 Pastoral Care

The quality of pastoral care is central to the quality of education provided by RTOs both in public and private sectors. At Imperial College of Trades, we ensure the following:

- Pre-departure assistance that includes travel arrangement, travel insurance, currency transfer, baggage rules, quarantine and customs clearance, compulsory documents etc.
- Post-arrival assistance includes meet and greet at the airport, free telephone call to parents, free airport pick up, free two days' boarding and lodging at the guesthouse.
- Information on safety that includes safety on beaches, safety on streets, safety during bushfire and safe driving. We are making them to write an essay on Australian history and culture by searching the internet with the aim of making students understand Australian lifestyle and integration into the community.
- Visit to college and providing assistance in opening bank accounts and making an application for tax file number, assisting and applying for accommodation with real estate agents, application for telephone connection and familiarisation with college layout and a visit to nearby shopping centres.
- Counselling on various aspects related to living in Adelaide with specific emphasis on points given in our college book titled, 'Living in Adelaide'.
- A full orientation program for international students prior to commencing their courses of study.
- Access to student support services being provided by professionally qualified staff to provide culturally relevant support.
- Celebration of students' birthdays free of cost by our college.
- Provision of free access to student kitchen with facilities like tea, coffee, crockery and cutlery, food heating facilities and cold water.
- Free transport facility in our college buses for excursions, going to city for shopping and for practical training.
- A free barbeque (separate for vegetarians) once a month that includes cultural show, debate competitions and group presentations.

- Further, we provide 10 weeks' free English coaching to the accompanying spouse of the student enrolled in our college.

Our college staffs with multi-lingual skills are always available to assist with international students at the initial stage of studies.

Furthermore, we have introduced a bursary of \$1000 for students with 5 bands who can pass IELTS in 7 or more bands. Similarly, a student with 6 bands passing IELTS at 7 bands or more are entitled to claim the bursary of \$500.

To make students participate in day-to-day functioning of our college, we have appointed student group leaders and deputy group leaders for each class. The selection for group leader and deputy group leader is made by the students themselves to provide better representation.

It is apparent that the length, breadth and depth of student support services are not limited to big or small RTOs and also to public and private RTOs. It depends upon the quality and commitment of management who keep student interests before their business interests. It is not the size of the RTO that matters; it is the will of the RTO to do something good to uphold the sanctity of law and to uphold the good name of our great country.

Recommendation 10

- There is a requirement of fixing minimum standards of student support services and strictly monitoring its compliance.
- The RTO found proactive should be suitably acknowledged and rewarded.

7.0 Registration of RTO and Regulatory Frameworks

Currently, there exist a wide range of options for the RTO to operate in single jurisdiction and multi-jurisdiction. Similarly, there is a wide gap on registration parameters between one state and the others. States such as South Australia have stringent procedures in place for pre-registration and post-registration, auditing and monitoring of RTOs. Further, the Office of the Training Advocate plays a positive role in ensuring proper compliance by the RTOs especially in terms of student course delivery and support services etc.

We believe that there should be a level playing field for big or small RTOs and for public and private RTOs. We have at times seen that there are no consistencies among the auditors and also at times, the attitude of auditors is influenced by the size of the RTO.

Recommendation 11

- We also believe that the periodical audit is a must for ensuring compliance with regulatory requirements and the RTOs irrespective of their size should not shy away from demonstrating their best practices to the auditing team.
- Doing away with audits for big RTOs will be against the provision of natural justice and make big RTOs complacent after a period of time.

8.0 ACPET's enhanced role

Appreciating its excellent performance over the years, ACPET may be assigned the additional role of monitoring finance management of private RTOs. Currently the students are able to seek student visa after paying one term or one semester fee ranging from \$ 4000 to \$8000. Obviously, many students with temporary loans from the banks are able to demonstrate evidence of funds for seeking student visa. Once students arrive in Australia they do not have sufficient funds to pay their tuition fee and pay for living expenses. They have to perforce work beyond the permitted work limit to earn for living expenses and tuition fees. Besides, the current system encourages many students to change the provider after six months since they have no fees locked in with the provider.

Recommendation 12

- ACPET can play very vital role to regulate the system of financial management of private RTOs and it will also address the issue of OSTAS.
- To ensure enrolment of genuine students, they be asked to deposit full course fees in the student trust account held by a third party or bank and controlled by the ACPET. This system will discourage students from changing providers after six months on the one hand and ensure availability of fees to the providers on the other hand. However, students with genuine reasons may be allowed to change providers provided the change is in their best interests.
- The RTO can draw fees from the trust account as the course progresses, on term or semester basis as the case may be, after seeking authorisation from ACPET.

9.0 Media role

We believe the media in Australia and overseas, especially in India have been quite irresponsible while reporting on the education industry be it on the street violence or on the performance of our colleges and universities. During my recent trip to India in the month of July, 2009, I found that the media was competing with each others' in breaking news on Australia especially on street violence against Indian students and also on poor performance of our RTOs.

We believe that the stories were being planted by agents of our competing countries such as UK, Canada, US and New Zealand etc, and I am attaching one recent news item with cooked up story on cookery, hair dressing and community welfare occupation, please refer to news item and the advertisement below it at Appx 1. These occupations were still on the MODL or SOL at the time of this news item. I had the opportunity to interact with the media and gave two TV interviews (One live and answered questions on student violence) and over 6 newspapers covering wide range of issues being debated in the media. We believe as the Industry expands we will have many rivals who will do everything possible to let us down and certainly the media can be exploited to any extent.

Recommendation 13

- ACPET or a cell in the DEEWR is made responsible to continuously monitor and respond to reporting in the Australian and overseas media.
- Success stories are regularly reported in the media.
- RTOs can make a positive contribution by using their current students as ambassadors to promote our industry.

Conclusion

Imperial College of Trades would sincerely appreciate any feedback or further requests for any information relating to the issues we have raised in our above submission. Should the Senate Committee feel it appropriate to hear our view, we would take it as our honoured privilege to put across our views.

Please find below details of our contact persons for any further correspondence.

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