

SENATE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE; INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The Australian International education industry is in crisis. Recent incidents involving Indian students are the end result of a combination of factors, including;

- **The Australian Education brand is tainted:** the role once played by IDP Education Australia and to a lesser extent Australian Education International, as a promoter of Australian Education as a whole, and Australia as a quality education destination has not been happening effectively for years. Consequently the market is full of competing forces: institutions, States, cities, agents etc all promoting their own, selfish brand at the expense of the overall brand.
- **Confused agendas between the main government stake holders: DEEWR and DIAC:** the two key government departments involved in the international education industry occasionally seem to work against one another. It is imperative given the importance of the sector to the economy that it is given the same respect politically as other major export income earners: Mining and Primary Industries.
- **Unrealistic Visa Assessment levels:** all countries in South Asia, with the exception of Nepal, are classed as Visa Assessment Level 4 which places unrealistic demands on students and their families and forces them to 'cheat' the system. Nepal is currently in danger of being 'demoted' to ASS Level 4.
- **The Permanent Residency factor:** a majority of international students from South Asia do not come here for education - but to obtain Permanent Residency. This has distorted perceptions of the success of the market.
- **Competition:** There is extreme competitiveness in the international education market place. Not only do Australian institutions compete against one another all over India (and elsewhere), but so do the different sectors within the industry. Some of the tactics used place Australia in a very poor light. Australians are seen as the 'carpetbaggers' of the education industry.
- **Private Providers and the VET sector:** all the increase and most of the 'dodgy' practices come from this sector – and unlike the University sector, which at least has AUQA, it is largely unregulated.

- **Unregulated agents:** In South Asia there is no regulation of agents either by Australia, or by the foreign countries where they operate.
- **Value for money:** there is an increasing perception that Australian institutions keep increasing the 'price' without adding any value.
- **Lack of reasonably-priced accommodation in the major cities:** students are compelled to live in remote suburbs and use public transport at night because accommodation close to campuses is extremely expensive.
- **Lack of consultation with the operational level of the industry:** decisions that affect the operational level are taken without consultation with those most affected who work on the frontline of the industry and who are usually aware of the problems long before those who make decisions.

Some possible solutions:

- **The establishment of a credible 'shop front' in the international market place which represents the whole Australian Education sector.** The most obvious way to do this would be by the Australian Government buying out the Seek Ltd share of IDP, and in concert with the other shareholder, the 37 Australian publically-funded universities, use the existing global office network as the 'shop front'. This would also mean changing the role of IDP back to one that was not dominated by commercial imperatives, but that was genuinely about the promotion of quality education options in Australia. (cf: The positive role played by the British Council).
- **The creation of a Federal Ministry of International Education** that has oversight of all the critical aspects of the industry: including regulation of providers, regulation of education agents; student visa assessment levels; enforcement of the ESOS Act and international student welfare generally.
- **Change the Student Visa Assessment Level system:** a system that encourages people to 'cheat' and that is culturally insensitive must be changed. Australia should take note of the recent changes made by the UK in this area. Student visa assessment should start from a point of trust rather than distrust. As long as India – and other emerging or Third world countries - are classed as Assessment Level 4 we will continue to lose market share to other countries, but more especially to the UK.

- **Regulation of Agents:** introduce a system of regulation of education agents that insists on certain standards of training and operation (and that is not 'self-regulated') to apply in all countries where agents are involved in helping students get visas to study in Australia (including those agents who operate in Australia itself).
- **Regulation of Private Providers:** a regulatory system must be set up aimed at setting and enforcing national standards of promotion, delivery and service and reducing the negative impact on the public sector providers. This system must be backed by a quality control mechanism similar to the AUQA audit that applies to universities.
- **Accommodation and services:** capital city institutions must realize that they have an obligation to ensure that students whom they attract have adequate, reasonably-priced accommodation. An erroneous assumption is often made is that if students have enough money to pay high tuition fees then they can afford good accommodation. Institutions must therefore, as part of their duty of care, assist students to find suitable accommodation. Anomalies such as the lack of Travel concessions for international students in some States (where they exist for 'local' students) must also end, and all institutions, public and private, that offer courses to international students must be regularly audited to ensure they comply with the ESOS Act.
- **Consultation:** a mechanism must be established that allows people at the operational level of the industry to be heard. This may involve ensuring that there is operational level (and student) representation on key committees and key decision-making bodies.

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