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★ Southern Cross
★ UNIVERSITY

Office of the Vice-Chancellor

Thursday, 13 August 2009

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

eewr.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary

Re: Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Please find attached a submission from Southern Cross University in relation to the above Inquiry.

The Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Professor Bill MacGillivray, or the Director of the University's International Office, Ms Jo Asquith, are the relevant officers within the University if the Committee wishes to discuss any of the issues raised in the submission.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important Inquiry and look forward to the Committee's Report.

Yours sincerely


Paul Clark

Professor Paul Clark Vice-Chancellor

Submission to Senate Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Overview of Southern Cross University

Southern Cross University (SCU) is a regional University, with three campuses across northern New South Wales: the largest campus is in Lismore, and there are two smaller and growing campuses in Coffs Harbour and Tweed Heads. A new campus is under construction in the southern end of the Gold Coast and will have its first intake of students in 2010. Currently, around 15,500 students study at SCU, either on campus, at one of the four learning sites around Australia, through distance education or through one of our offshore collaborations. Around 1,620 international students study at one of SCU's regional campuses or onshore collaborations.

This submission primarily focuses on issues facing international students attending campuses in regional Australia. SCU recognises the important contribution international students make to regional communities – both economically and socially – and seeks to promote a greater level of diversity of international student destinations within Australia.

Terms of Reference

(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, with particular reference to:

(i) Student safety

Student safety and welfare is of paramount importance for tertiary institutions in Australia and often dominates discussion groups within institutions and at university forums.

Developing community-level responses as a means to help address student safety concerns is one strategy, particularly for students studying at regional campuses. Regional universities, when looking to develop strategies to enhance student safety, need to be proactive in engaging with relevant stakeholders at the community level, including local government, police, and student, business and other community representatives. In turn, these organisations need to be encouraged to work with universities to develop effective local-specific strategies.

International student surveys at SCU reflect that “transport” is one issue which impacts the students’ perception of safety during their studies.

Suitable transport arrangements must be available to the cohort of students whom we actively discourage from purchasing a car on arrival due to the high level of overseas

visitors who are involved in road accidents in Australia. From SCU's perspective, having suitable and safe transport options available around the campus, and to and from the campus, (particularly at night and on weekends) is important for all students. Obviously, the resourcing of these types of services can be an issue for smaller campuses if other transport alternatives are not available.

Recommendation: Transport concession cards should include all international students regardless of visa type.

(ii) Adequate and affordable accommodation,

Suitable accommodation is the cornerstone to an international student's experience during their stay in Australia. More often than not, a student's initial contact with life in Australia begins with their accommodation arrangements.

Provision of appropriate accommodation, which suits the diverse needs of international students, is critical. The world of real estate agents, lease agreements, house sharing, and securing housing in close proximity to the student's campus create an enormous level of stress to a newly arrived student if not effectively guided.

For a regional university, off campus accommodation may be sparse and present transport challenges. It may also contribute to further isolation of the newly arrived student if they have not been sufficiently counselled prior to arrival.

Furthermore, suitable university accommodation can be limited or there can be substantial variations in demand for university accommodation by international students over the course of the year. For example, Study Abroad numbers at SCU's Lismore campus fluctuate significantly between the different teaching sessions. Places are hard to secure for international students who may be awaiting a lengthy visa process and only secure their arrival date close to course commencement. This creates further stress on accommodation management and students alike and may result in prolonged sojourns in expensive, inadequate, temporary accommodation.

The mandatory 10-week home stay placement for newly arrived English language students at Southern Cross University campuses creates a supportive transition into Australian life and culture and has been an effective method of orientation for our students. Again, places may be limited at peak times.

Recommendation: Government incentives to encourage landlords, homestay families and real estate agents create better opportunities for international students must consider the needs of regional areas in Australia where accommodation may be more limited but far more affordable and by definition reduces the financial pressure on international students who are wishing to fund their living expenses through part time work.

Furthermore, in order to diversify student study destinations across Australia, there needs to be recognition that students outside of metropolitan areas, specifically Sydney and Melbourne, may not have the benefit of extended networks to house them. Communities need to be encouraged to provide a broad range of housing options to meet the demand of international students.

(iii) Social inclusion,

Southern Cross University has found that its smaller number of on-campus international students means that, as far as possible, these students are able to be housed and in classes with Australian students as well as a diversity of other international students. The benefit such integration affords ensures students have constant English language immersion and are exposed to domestic student culture both in the education setting and socially. Frequently, this leads to a pseudo “fostering” of international students within the families of their Australian student friends.

Recommendation: Encourage, through visa incentives, a broader spread of international students across metropolitan and regional areas. The lower cost of living and immersion with the local culture can greatly benefit international students.

The additional 5 bonus points awarded to students studying in regional areas was negated with the recent work placement requirement for 18 months after the completion of study for those student seeking viable migration outcomes. This could be revised to ensure a genuine benefit for choosing a regional destination to live and study in.

(iv) Student visa requirements,

The change of assessment level for higher education Indian students to assessment level 4 may not have prevented the very practices DIAC set to eliminate. It would appear the “packaged” programs were the issue, when institutions were packaging disparate discipline areas on consecutive CoEs.

Recommendation: That packaged programs from the VET sector to Higher Education be within relevant discipline areas to ensure more authentic course progression.

(v) Adequate international student supports and advocacy,

It is the university staff, specifically those within the International Office, which takes the place of “family” when students need emotional support and counselling. This may range from homesickness to major critical incidents involving the student. SCU’s smaller size means that it is able to take a more ‘personalised’ approach when dealing with problems experienced by international students. Adequate support services, that take into account

the range of cultural diversity and backgrounds of students, needs to be factored into any enterprise whose aim is to encourage students from overseas to Australia.

Welfare support stretches well beyond academic needs and is clearly identified in the National Code 2007. Support must be established first, and recruitment of students follows at an appropriate pace.

Staff training is often costly and takes place in metropolitan areas, therefore increasing the cost for regional university staff to participate.

Recommendation: Government funding to valuable training bodies such as ISANA, AEI, PIER-online and AIEC would assist to ensure all staff who interact with international students receive adequate training, particularly in regional areas where subsidies would assist in the ability for staff to attend such programs.

An international student support helpline addressing standards within the National Code could assist in providing students of their rights and responsibilities within the ESOS Act. Similarly, greater outreach by DIAC to address students' immigration concerns could circumvent the reliance on immigration agents, not all of whom provide appropriate information.

(vi) Employment rights and protections from exploitation

Unlike domestic students, many international students progress from high school to undergraduate degrees and then postgraduate degrees without a break for authentic work experience. Therefore, many well qualified international student graduates still lack valuable "experience" in their chosen field keeping them at a disadvantage when seeking work.

Recommendation: Industry should be encouraged to employ international students on internships (paid or unpaid) and to provide those students with industry experience, regardless of whether the student wishes to remain in Australia or return home upon graduation.

(vii) Appropriate pathways to permanency;

A number of SCU's international students have expressed that their greatest frustration is the reluctance of employers to take them on after graduation with no work experience. Often these clearly, highly skilled graduates are prepared to be placed in rural Australia; places where Australian graduates are reluctant to move to. Many graduates are even finding volunteering for placements difficult to find.

To further compound the difficulties for international student graduates seeking employment to satisfy temporary residency (TR) requirements, most employers are reluctant to take on a new employee and invest in their training when they are only on a 2-year TR visa with no guarantee of permanent residency.

Recommendation: If studying in Australia remains a viable migration pathway the current MODL needs to be revised to ensure the most skilled and valuable students are identified and then a more straightforward pathway to permanency created.

Incentives should be developed that encourage industry to develop traineeships for international graduates in order to gain experience in their chosen field of study and therefore enhance the graduate's ability to gain meaningful employment.

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

Greater research needs to be conducted regarding the English level of student prior to commencement of study, the correlation between language level and GPA and the language level upon exit of programs. This would guide institutions towards best practice and benefit students and program development.

Further research is needed into successful programs of intervention strategies for students who are "at risk" in order that identified "at risk" students are given the best possible chance for success.

Also, longitudinal studies tracking graduates who have successfully achieved permanent residency need to be undertaken to more fully understand if skilled migration objectives have been met as well as regular student surveys to ensure students' perceptions of studying in Australia and the reality of the experience are closely matched.

(c) any other related matters.

High public school tuition fees for dependents of international students are often beyond an international student's financial ability. For international students, having their families accompany them to Australia and stay to support their education is a key determinant to a student's success and fundamentally impacts their welfare during their stay in Australia.

To attract high quality international students to Australia consideration should be given to waiving, or greatly reducing, school fees for dependents of international research students, or other target student cohorts, who are not recipients of scholarship awards.

CONTACT DETAILS

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