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SUBMISSION TO:  
SENATE EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
FOR THE INQUIRY INTO  
THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BY

**ISANA: International Education Association Inc.**

## **Industry History**

ISANA: International Education Association inc. is a voluntary organisation that has provided services to international students and the professional staff who work with them since 1989. It is an organisation which is well known as a peak representative body, and plays a key role in the field of International Education in Australia.

ISANA is a membership-driven association with affiliations across a number of institutions and with student associations. Our members work in universities, colleges and schools as well as government and private organisations, in administration, support, compliance, policy, teaching and teaching support, in industry driven specialist areas, in management and some are international students themselves.

ISANA has productive relationships across all education sectors, educational groups, relevant government departments and long-standing relationships of support and cooperation with student organizations.

It has worked in collaboration with international education associations internationally to improve the capacities of professionals working in the field, and has contributed to a range of government and other consultative and advisory groups. One of our key functions is providing professional development and ISANA further supports its members with Special Interest Groups (SIG's), encouraging collaboration of professionals performing the same roles to identify best-practice and to develop initiatives such as the National Exchange Fair Circuit which promotes student mobility to Australian students and presents a united and professional front to partner institutions around the world placing Australia among the frontrunners in student mobility. ISANA has identified an increase in education agents and agencies joining the association and attending conferences and professional development activities with a view to provide a better and more responsible and informed service to their clients. ISANA has encouraged their displayed willingness to collaborate and contribute to the industry by earmarking an Agents Special Interest Group for 2009.

ISANA has had great success in recent years utilising the vast and varied experience and knowledge of its membership, developing products funded by Government grants which enhance the professional standing of members and

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BY

ISANA: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION Inc.

non-members such as The National Code Transition Support Program; developing and enhancing the National Code Online Tutorial with the support of DEST funding in 2007 and more recently in 2008 with DEST/DEEWR funding to produce ESOS consumer protection awareness products developing the Student Education Project; Orientation Guidelines Template (Rainbow Guide) for institutions; and suite of animations to raise student awareness of their rights and responsibilities under the National Code 2007.

ISANA saw these projects as an opportunity to develop products that enhance industry standards and promote best-practice principals with Government support, and as a significant incentive to increase our services to members including the wider international education community across all sectors and importantly the students who drive the industry.

The Online Tutorial has become a vehicle for information dissemination, professional development and for supporting the implementation of the National Code Standards. Since the project's implementation in May 2007, we consider that the online tutorial project has proven coverage in reaching individuals and groups beyond the life of the National Code Transition Support Program.

The "Rainbow Guide" and Animations have been received gratefully and enthusiastically by education providers, students and agents across all sectors. It also provided an opportunity for ISANA to work with other agencies such as the Metropolitan Fire Brigade and through them the National Fire Authority on raising awareness of safety issues to international students. Other bodies such as Policing have also collaborated with ISANA State Branch memberships on arising and evident student safety concerns as and when they arise, and a significant amount of the Rainbow Guide is dedicated to student safety information.

In the short time since its official ISANA launch in December 2008, the products have been downloaded for use in international student orientation and information sessions, and interest and congratulations have been received from institutions, Australian State education agencies and overseas governments. ISANA is rightfully proud of its contributions to positioning Australia among leaders in global education.

### **International students in Australia**

The education of international students studying in Australia takes a variety of forms and the students themselves are a diverse group. Some students begin their studies in Australia at a very young age and undertake their education in primary or secondary schools. Some arrive to undertake their secondary education and continue with tertiary education in Australia (with or without accompanying family support); some students arrive after completing their tertiary education in their home countries for postgraduate studies; some students come for only one semester as part of a Study Abroad or Exchange program; some students come for short periods to study the English language; or to study vocational courses and return home; and some students come to study here as a route to permanent residence. Each of these students and their avenues of engagement with Australian education and life have their own welfare and support needs and the current over-arching principles and standards do not always include the specific needs of each particular group of students or the diverse range of incidents which may arise or impact on them during their time as international students in Australia.

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
BY  
ISANA: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION Inc.

As ISANA members work 'at the coal face' in these areas and represent all education sectors and all aspects of student welfare and support, we are well placed to consult and contribute to the growths required in the industry to support the needs of students as our customers, welcome visitors and potential Australian citizens.

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**Terms of Reference**

**1. Executive Summary**

**2. Recommendations**

(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:

**2.i Student Safety**

**2.ii Adequate and Affordable Accommodation**

**2.iii Social Inclusion**

**2.iv Student Visa Requirements**

**2.v Adequate International Student Supports and Advocacy**

**2.vi Employment Rights and Protection from Exploitation**

**2.vii Appropriate Pathways to Permanency Residency**

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

(c) any other related matters.

## 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The diversity that exists among international students studying in Australia and in the course they undertake means this is a very complex industry and different responses will be required in different situations. Laws and guidelines associated with the industry need to take this variety into account and address particulars rather than expecting generalized standards to meet all situations.

This submission addresses all sections of the enquiry except "Appropriate pathways to permanency" and makes a total of 26 recommendations.

In the area of Student Safety, the provision of information, dealing with critical incidents and dealing with mental illness are discussed. Recommendations are made about the provision of information about safety matters at pre-departure and orientation stage and throughout a student's time in Australia, the definition of the term "critical incident", support for staff who support students during critical incidents, a system for dealing with critical incidents that occur interstate, research into mental illness among international students and the provision of preventative measures in relation to mental illness.

In the area of Adequate and Affordable Accommodation, the complexity of the existing situation is discussed and recommendations are made for developing standards for accommodation providers, the regulation of homestay providers, and greater clarification of the term "guardian".

In the area of Social Inclusion, the issues of the different requirements of different types of international students, the complications of intercultural interaction, and education providers working with community groups are discussed. Recommendations are made about training in intercultural competency, the funding of research, and the financial support of community groups working with international students.

Greater clarity around the funds required for visa grant as opposed to the amount required for students to support themselves in Australia is addressed in a recommendation in the area of Visa Requirements.

The results of a small survey are given in the section on Adequate International Student Support and Advocacy. These show the different levels of support provided in different educational sectors at present. Recommendations are made about appropriate minimum levels of support, the need for monitoring and enforcing these minimum levels, the need for appropriate qualifications and professional development for International Student Advisors, the need to limit the roles undertaken by International Student Advisors, and the need for independent advocacy agents. It is important that benchmarks be developed in this area.

In the area of Employment Rights and Protection from Exploitation, factors that make international students particularly vulnerable are discussed. Recommendations are made about the provision of material about the rights and responsibilities of employees in appropriate and easily accessible forms and the role of education providers in the provision of such information to international students.

## **2.i Student Safety**

### ***Provision of information***

Whatever age or level of education, a move from one culture to another, presents the challenges of a new environment which might not be readily understood and which can place a person in danger in various ways. These things might include a lack of knowledge of local laws and customs; a lack of knowledge of unsafe places in a city; a lack of knowledge about issues specific to a particular country or area such as beach safety in Australia; a lack of knowledge of where to seek help if problems arise; a lack of awareness of the vulnerability of your own actions or reactions when moving through and adapting to an unfamiliar environment.

It is important that some elements of safety information are provided to the student prior to their arrival in Australia (at the pre-departure stage) to cover a potential gap in advice available between arrival and the commencement of orientation programs, when these students may be particularly vulnerable.

Many education providers already handle this provision of information at the pre-departure stage very well, and in several ways. Some send staff overseas to home countries to provide pre-departure sessions for incoming students and their parents. At least one education provider has produced a DVD which is sent to students in their home country to prepare them for arrival in Australia. The National Code 2007 suggests some welfare related materials and information to be provided to students in their home country such as;

'Information on living in Australia and indicative costs of living';

'Accommodation options'

'Information on student services'

Many send pre-departure packages and guides to students which contain the required information including some safety information.

The 'Rainbow Guide' developed by ISANA as part of the DEEWR funded products to raise awareness of students rights and responsibilities, includes a template of best-practice examples of information provided to students during pre-departure and orientation programs. Providers who have limited resources and staff can access this publicly available information to source ideas and text appropriate in the provision of information. A large proportion of the guide is dedicated to student safety in many situations. <http://www.isana.org.au/consumer-protection-project.html>

ISANA has also worked collaboratively with the Metropolitan Fire Brigade in Victoria on workshops to provide information to those accommodation providers, and consulted with Fire, Police and other services on the safety content of the Rainbow Guide during development.

There are many other practical ways of keeping students informed and safe and setting up safe patterns of behaviour during the period between a student's arrival in Australia and the formal Orientation Program run by the education provider. Some universities organize a "buddy" system using local students or experienced international students. Some providers use Facebook to connect incoming students so they can meet and support each other, or with current students for answering questions before arrival. Where students live with a homestay family, the family provides this type of support. Some student hostels

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BY

ISANA: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION Inc.

and student apartment blocks or on-campus colleges provide similar support at this time through their reception staff or information programs specifically to look after the welfare of their resident students. Some students spend their early days in this country with relatives or family friends. For those who do not have the benefit of any of these support measures this can be a difficult time.

By ensuring some important elements of safety information are included in pre-departure packages students can be assisted to feel more confident upon arrival and settling in to their immediate surrounds prior to further advice and assistance given throughout the orientation programs.

Student Support Staff are aware when developing orientation programs and materials that students move into information overload very quickly and their ability to sometimes absorb the most pertinent information may be impaired at any point during the provision of such information. The Rainbow Guide for example derives its name from the use of colour coding throughout the document to prioritise the need to know basis of the information in it. For example red colour coding indicates 'I need to know this immediately', yellow, 'I need to know by week 1', through to purple representing, 'I need to go back and remind myself of this as I move through my studies'. Some providers have developed similar inventive ways of prioritizing information for quick recognition by students, and many of the larger institutions provide rolling orientations where smaller chunks of important and essential information is repeated over the first few weeks of class.

It is important that best-practice ideas are encouraged. DEEWR is to be applauded for their support of a collation of best-practice guidelines and template materials, and the promotion of those products by way of the Student Education Project incorporating the Rainbow Guide. The other element of that project, 6 DVD's highlighting consumer protection mechanisms built into the ESOS legislation have been used to introduce elements of students rights and responsibilities during orientation sessions such as introducing student support, and to raise awareness of the National Code 2007 among groups other than providers, eg: agents. They have also been used as background vision interspersed with tourism views of Australian States in registration and enrolment auditoriums where large groups of students need to patiently wait in line on arrival at the institution.

Safety information must be revisited and other appropriate information given with Pre-Departure packages and during the student's Orientation Program. While there are some parts of orientation programs that are common to local and international students, there many important ones that are not, safety in a new environment and culture being one. Areas relating to local laws and customs, issues such as beach safety and where to seek help in an emergency are particularly important to international students and must be dealt with in special sessions that take into account their different cultural backgrounds and therefore different understandings of the most important issues. Many of these students come from countries where police and other authority figures are corrupt, use unnecessary force, or are unhelpful. These students need to gain an understanding that the police and emergency workers in this country can be trusted and that they should contact them in an emergency. Emergency authorities currently work extremely cooperatively with providers during orientation programs to attend in uniform and inform students of their role in the

community. Many international students need to have the functioning of the medical system in Australia explained to them. It may be very different in the country from which they come e.g. the roles of hospitals and doctors. Some international students need to have issues such as drink-driving and Australia's understanding of rape explained to them as attitudes to these things are different in their home countries. Lack of understanding of these things can place a student in difficult and unsafe situations.

Other best-practice principals as suggested in the Rainbow Guide are to provide seasonal or topical reminders around student's safety such as, surf safety during summer, or avoiding scams at times when they are identified in the community. Specialist staff experienced in working with international students recognize this need and provide these things continually.

ISANA is concerned about recent unqualified mainstreaming of staff and programs, some of those concerns highlighted by the examples above. Smaller or new providers should also be able to access ideas, or defined benchmarks to work towards, especially as limited resources of support staff hours may impact on their ability to develop their own to the best standards. ISANA members share best-practice principals, ideas and research of their own or from around the world during conferences and professional development seminars.

#### ***Recommendation 1***

*That the government supports consideration of specific requirements for the support of international students from pre-departure through to orientation and ongoing welfare, according to National Code guidelines but more particularly according to defined benchmarks which use established and current research and professional practice.*

#### ***Recommendation 2***

*That student support benchmarks be set appropriate to student cohorts and education sectors, and provider services be required to meet these benchmarks. Benchmarks should include definitions and examples of best practice relating to welfare services, orientation advice, employment advice, advocacy, student safety and security and information provided to prospective and enrolled students about Australia as a study destination.*

#### ***Dealing with Critical Incidents***

The *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to overseas Students 2007* states that each education provider must have a "documented critical incident policy, required follow-up to the incident, and records of the incident and actions taken" (Standard 6.4).

In a sample Critical Incident Kit ISANA available on our website, the definition there of a critical incident is;

"a tragic or traumatic event or situation affecting a student or staff member which has the potential to cause unusually strong emotional reactions in the school/campus community".

It can include death (including the death of a dependent residing in Australia) which is accidental, suicide, the result of an injury or terminal illness or murder.

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

BY

ISANA: INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION Inc.

There are many more complex definitions, but apart from some major well-publicised incidents in the past, experience has shown those who work in the industry that where an international student's safety is compromised it can result in or quickly escalate into a critical incident.

It can also include serious illness which causes the deterioration of the student's health over time and serious injury which affects the student's ability to continue with or complete their course. Serious illness or injury would probably not constitute a critical incident in the broader campus community. However, considering the relatively 'close-knit' nature of most international student communities and their physical isolation from the familiar support mechanisms of family, critical incidents of this nature can have a wide reaching, sometimes devastating and often long lasting effect on a student's ability to cope with their studies.

Many critical incident policies have been derived or adapted from established occupational health and safety procedures which have been developed over many years and have excellent application to a workplace. These procedures often do not adequately address the individual elements of injuries which have been seen among the international student population, as critical incidents involving these visitors to Australia rarely unfold in the "workplace", that is, at the educational institution. These visitors are employees, students, tourists, transport users, and adventurers, and find themselves in many experiences which cannot be controlled by an institution's workplace occupational health and safety guidelines.

Staff service a Duty of Care to international students, and when an incident occurs with a student away from the institution, (especially in the case of under 18 students) determining accurate information as quickly as possible is critical to having the best choices, decisions and assistances in place for the best possible outcome. At workshops over several years ISANA delegates have discussed the value having a network around Australia, whereby an International Student Adviser who is notified of a student of theirs being injured while interstate can contact their colleague at another provider in closer proximity to the incident, and that ISA would operate on a 'first-response' style system to firstly make contact with the student or authorities, or visiting a hospital if necessary, determine the condition of the student, and the seriousness of the incident and report back to the student's provider so that good decisions can be made quickly. The benefits being that the student is not left without support systems while their provider puts actions into place, if the student's education provider deems conditions serious enough they may wish to send a staff member, however, that can be determined more efficiently with reports from experienced staff providing in-situ local information rather than a stressed 'friend'. The student also is provided with some comfort in unfamiliar surrounds as quickly as possible.

This suggestion arose again at the National Conference in December 2008 in the Study Abroad & Exchange Special Interest Group meeting. Study Abroad and Exchange students by definition almost are more adventurous as their time on-shore is one or two semesters at its maximum and they often come intent on collecting as many tourist opportunities and experiences as they can fit into their short stay. These staff cover a particularly mobile group of visiting international



students, and their Duty of Care to incoming students also impacts on inter-institutional, and inter-country relationships. Factors of a 24 hour emergency or help-line have been discussed, and several years ago one was offered by an Overseas Student Health Cover provider. Unfortunately each time this innovative program is flown, the stumbling point becomes one around insurance cover for staff. Will the local staff member whose employer is not the student's provider be covered by workcover or their own employer if they themselves are injured while assisting the affected student? Will education providers support a staff member being called away from their workplace to assist another provider's staff and students, acknowledging that time away from the workplace will be determined by the incident and cannot be limited initially.

### ***Recommendation 3***

*That Government sanction, support and fund if required a National call out system for critical incidents supported by employers (underwritten by insurance) for the involved employee.*

*This is perceived as a "First response" system by the professional staff of education providers. National critical incident qualifications should be developed, and that each education provider must have one designated staff member trained and allocated.*

Further, it is perceived that only one staff member per institution would be needed to have such qualifications, as it is only intended as a first-response system. In the event that a larger incident might require further assistance, qualified staff can be sought from other providers in the vicinity if necessary. Therefore any provider only ever sacrifices one staff member.

Also there is often no recognition given in critical incident policies of the needs of those who deal directly with the students such as International Student Advisors. It is important that support is provided for these workers both in the form of an appropriate mechanism for debriefing and in providing other staff to take up the regular workload that must be put aside on such occasions.

### ***Recommendation 4***

*That the government supports research into critical incidents involving international students who are either onshore or involved in study abroad programs, as well as the staff capability, training and resources required to manage critical incidents.*

### ***Mental Illness***

Mental illness can create safety problems for an international student and it is especially difficult to deal with. Some international students arrive with a mental illness, sometimes in a controlled state and sometimes not. Many come from cultures where mental illness is viewed in a different way from that in which it is viewed in Australia. Parents can often deny that a problem exists and anecdotal information suggests that some students may be sent to study overseas to remove the stigma from families in their own culture. Other international students develop a mental illness while studying in Australia or the stresses associated with the move may trigger one. The 'culture shock' experienced when changing cultures is well documented (Hofstede, 2005) ; acculturation

sufficient to survive in our culture can be difficult to achieve; many of these students carry a great burden of expectation because of their parents' expectations and the money involved in their studying in Australia; and good results may be harder to achieve than they expected. Cultural difference can make it very difficult for the student to seek help from the support services provided in a way that is comfortable to them. All these things can lead to severe depression and suicide.

#### ***Recommendation 5***

*That research be funded into the special needs of international students in relation to mental illness – its prevalence, differences in the way that it manifests in international students, and the special needs of international students who require treatment for mental illness. In addition, that providers be supported in developing support programs and services for students experiencing culture shock, or mental health issues.*

#### **2.ii Adequate and affordable accommodation**

The situation with the provision of accommodation for international students is a very complex one. Some students are wealthy, value their privacy and do not want to share bathrooms and kitchens. Some students want or need their accommodation to be as cheap as possible and are comfortable sharing a bedroom and other facilities to save money. While all students can benefit from the support of a caring accommodation provider, younger students need special supervision and support. Older students, particularly those who are accompanied by their families have different needs from students in their late teens and early twenties. Students who are in Australia for only a short period, e.g. 6 weeks or one semester, have different needs from those who are here for a longer period of time.

ISANA has been active in developing some best practice information for specific cultural groups, most recently preparing workshops for host families and others involved in the provision of accommodation specifically to students from Saudi Arabia funded by AEI.

A variety of forms of accommodation for international students exists. They include homestay accommodation, student hostels and boarding houses, student apartment blocks, institutional colleges and the private rental of apartments and houses. Some international students live with relatives and family friends who are resident in Australia. Different forms of accommodation work well with different types of students.

Except for international students under 18 years of age, the obligations of the education provider to assist the student with finding accommodation and dealing with problems associated with their accommodation are unclear. Inappropriate accommodation – too crowded, too noisy, lacking the privacy needed for study, not clean or safe, too far from the education provider – and problems with relationships within an accommodation setting can interfere with a student's ability to study well and achieve the results of which they are capable which then becomes the problem of the education provider. However, education providers in most cases do not themselves own and administer the accommodation used by their international students. Some providers do own some accommodation

but places are competitive for both local and international students. The rapid growth in international student numbers studying in Australia has outstripped the suitable accommodation available for these students. Provision of new suitable accommodation takes a long time to develop and private developers also appear to have bought into the "cash cow" opportunity international students often comment they feel they are. There is no simple solution to this problem.

A tension also exists between the importance of providing suitable accommodation for international students close to their place of study and finding ways of having the students live in community with Australians. Some education providers have found creative ways of meeting these needs but there are many barriers to this happening such as the availability of land and the nature of the community that immediately surrounds the education provider. Cultural differences also impact when many providers go to great lengths to provide accommodation guides which outline a range of options from very cheap to very expensive, but also that cheaper accommodation is often much further from the provider's premises. Students when given a range will often opt for the cheapest choice, only to find that they may need to travel for an hour or more on public transport at varying times of the day to attend classes, or to work to supplement their studies. There are no easy answers to this as students often do not appreciate the issues until they have arrived and experienced them first-hand.

#### ***Recommendation 6***

*That standards for the quality of accommodation provided by or recommended by education providers for international students be developed.*

#### ***Homestay***

Living with a host family in a homestay is a common form of accommodation used by international students, particularly those under the age of 18 and those in English language programs. There is no regulation of this form of accommodation at present. A good homestay can work well and provide the student with strong support and a happy experience here in Australia. However, cultural difference, lack of cultural understanding, and people who exploit the system can cause real problems for the student and the family involved. Some networks have been formed and some individual education providers have developed good systems but greater regulation is required.

#### ***Recommendation 7***

*That regulation of homestay providers be a priority and incorporated into the National Code of Practice as a matter of provider compliance.*

For students under 18 years of age, the provision of adequate supervision of these students and the provision of their accommodation have become closely intertwined. The present legislation, quite correctly, requires that the education provider is ultimately responsible for ensuring that appropriate supervision and support is provided for these younger students both in and out of class time. Many education providers have attempted to pass this responsibility onto homestay parents and other "guardians".

***Recommendation 8***

*That use of the term “guardian” in relation to international students under 18 years of age be clarified and that education providers be required to have in place internal mechanisms for monitoring the general wellbeing of these underage students.*

**2.iii Social Inclusion**

This is another complex area. Making friends with Australians of all ages and being welcomed into Australian homes can be a very important part of an international student's experience while studying in Australia. It is not the main reason for most international students to come to study in Australia – these main reasons are generally to acquire a particular educational qualification or to gain permanent residence – but it is a very important addition to their time in Australia and exiting student surveys support a lack of getting to know 'real' Australians as one of the greatest disappointments.

Many incoming students also feel it very important to gather a group of other student friends from the same cultural background and/or country around them who can act as a support for them in times of difficulty and share with them their adjustment experience. This is particularly important where students come from a collectivist culture. The degree of acculturation that is necessary and appropriate varies with different types of students. For students who are intending to stay in Australia, a considerable degree of understanding of and adjustment to Australian ways would be expected. For students whose main focus is to obtain a particular academic qualification and then expect to return to their home country to apply this knowledge, a lesser degree of understanding and adjustment might be expected. Where the course is difficult and time-consuming, a lower level of interaction with the Australian community at large might be expected.

Cross-cultural interaction is itself a complex matter. Sometimes interactions between people of different cultures can have a negative effect, reinforcing stereotypes and increasing racism. Merely putting people together in situations does not mean that they will interact well and become friends. An understanding of the dynamics involved can help to make such interactions more effective and profitable. An understanding of the cultural differences that do exist through learning about areas such as Cultural Value Dimensions (Hofstede, 2005) is important as is also looking at the similarities that people in various cultures share (Richardson, 2007). All involved in such cultural interactions need a level of understanding for interactions to be successful – local students, international students, academic staff members, student advisors, accommodation providers, host families, etc. ISANA provides education in this area for its members through sessions at our annual and State conferences and through Professional Development Workshops. Some ISANA members are active researchers in cross-cultural and inter-cultural issues. We also make these Professional Development opportunities available to the wider industry community through our Training, Research and Consultancy Services (TRACS) program.

**Recommendation 9**

*That a greater commitment by government and education providers be made to intercultural and other training for all staff involved in international student services and support, developing and using established research into appropriate competencies, and skills in working with international students.*

**Recommendation 10**

*That the government provide funding for further research in the area of developing intercultural competencies, particularly as it is related to the education of international students in Australia.*

Australian culture itself is not clearly defined. People with many different lifestyles and from many different cultures reside in Australia. The friendship and welcome of people of all these different backgrounds are valid forms of social inclusion for international students. Religious groups and community organizations, including the relevant ethnic groups within our communities provide strong links for social interaction and much good work is already done in this area which should be encouraged. Local sporting groups, orchestras, choirs, and dance and drama groups are wonderful places where cultural interaction and social inclusion can take place. Some valuable work has also been done at local Government level. Welcoming activities such as those organized in Wollongong, and the City of Melbourne and in other places.

**Recommendation 11**

*That Government provide support and financial incentives for religious, ethnic, sporting, arts and other community groups who seek to incorporate international students in their activities.*

**2.iv Student Visa Requirements**

Too many international students arrive in Australia with unrealistic expectations about the cost of living and their ability to function in Australia in a financially viable way while concentrating on their studies. It is incumbent on education providers to provide cost of living estimates relative to their area by the National Code 2007. However, international students and their families are confused by the conflicting messages given by realistic estimations in pre-departure information and the \$12,000 required to be shown as a basic amount available per year to them for visa grant. Although the wording provided by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship outlines this amount as required for visa grant, not for adequate living standards, it is unfair for Australian Education to display such an anomaly which only serves to confuse. Further the current amount of \$12,000 has been in use for more than 8 years. It is incomprehensible that the amount is not at least indexed in line with CPI each year. Even if the amount to be shown allows the opportunity of visa grant to some who would otherwise not get the opportunity, it is currently outlandishly unrealistic and grossly misleading.

**Recommendation 12**

*That DIAC review the \$12,000 cost of living currently required to meet student visa financial requirements and include a CPI indexation to the amount derived.*

**2.v Adequate international student support and advocacy**

The definition of “adequacy” of support to international students is not a simple matter. There are a number of sets of conditions and parameters that differ across education providers and types of courses and make the nature of the support provided and the need for accessibility of that support different in these different situations. Earlier this year, the ISANA International Education Association conducted a small survey among its members as to the level of specialized support provided to international students by their respective education providers. The results are contained in the table below.

**Table 1. Advisor to international student ratios.**

| Sector   | Number of responses from this sector | Range in international student numbers | Range in adviser to student ratio | Average adviser to student ratio |
|--|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| University campus (general) - >1000 int. studs.  | Australia – 7<br>NZ – 2              | 1912 to 10,700                         | 1:305.7 to 1:3200                 | 1:1191.1                         |
| University campus (general) – < 1000 int. studs. | Australia – 4                        | 4 to 300                               | 1:10 to 1:300                     | 1:122.5                          |
| Study Abroad & Exchange                          | Australia – 2                        | 113 to 150                             | 1:28.3 to 1:150                   | 1:89.2                           |
| TAFE campus                                      | Australia – 1<br>NZ – 2              | 116 to 1500                            | 1:116 to 1:500                    | 1:245.3                          |
| Private Providers                                | Australia – 4                        | 420 to 5000                            | 1:92.9 to 1:1250                  | 1:396                            |
| English Language Schools                         | Australia – 2                        | 450 to 860                             | 1:59.2 to 1:245.7                 | 1:152.5                          |
| Secondary Schools                                | Australia – 5<br>NZ – 1              | 15 to 75                               | 1:15 to 1:22                      | 1:18.3                           |

The number of respondents to this survey was small and thus the results must be treated with caution. It should also be noted that those who responded were members of the ISANA International Education Association and were thus people who were interested in keeping up to date with the latest developments in the area and supporting others in similar work so that they could all do their work well. There would have been no responses from education providers who do not employ people to do this specialized work but rather rely instead on people whose main areas of expertise is elsewhere or do not employ anyone at all in this role.

The advisor to student ratio was difficult to establish in some sectors. In the secondary schools, the specific role of supporting international students is generally undertaken on a time allowance in conjunction with a teaching load.

SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Secondary schools also have established pastoral care programs for all students and a culture of monitoring and supporting students because of the younger age of their students. Some schools have put in place specialized support programs such as "buddy" systems to help support their international students. In spite of these things, secondary schools still recognized the need to provide international students with specialized support and had the lowest advisor to international student ratio.

Study Abroad and Exchange programs had the second lowest advisor to international student ratio.

The nature of teaching in English language schools means that a limited number of teachers have fairly intensive contact with their international students. These schools sometimes therefore rely very heavily on the teachers to provide welfare support for their students. Better providers have found, however, that special session welfare-related sessions need to be scheduled if these teachers are adequately locate and understand problems being experienced by their students. Issues such as absenteeism and serious problems in the areas of accommodation, acculturation, relationships and mental illness need to be dealt with by specialized staff. The advisor to student ratio for English language schools was the fourth lowest.

The TAFE campuses had relatively small numbers of students and fairly consistent advisor to student ratios. The Private Providers had larger numbers of students and a wider range in their advisor to student ratios. University campuses were divided into those who had enrolled 1000 international students or fewer and those who had enrolled more than 1000 international students. University campuses with smaller numbers of international students generally employed only 1 student advisor, sometimes on a fractional basis, but all the advisor to student ratios were 1:300 or less.

The situation is complicated in the universities who enrolled large numbers of international students. There has been a movement in recent years to remove specialized services for international students and to expect them to seek help alongside Australian students in the general counseling and support offices of the university. Some would say that encourages their mixing with Australian students and will help them to feel included as part of the university community. Whether this is true is debatable. It also runs contrary to the well documented specialized needs of international students and their different cultural approaches to help-seeking and counseling (the ISANA website [www.isana.org.au](http://www.isana.org.au) contains many papers from our annual conferences that spell out these specialized needs and cultural differences). It should also be remembered that International Student Advisors in these universities with larger international student enrollments must deal students from a wide variety of countries, cultural backgrounds, courses, ages, and stages in their study and their lives. It is very demanding work. Some the advisor to student ratios that were recorded for these universities seem to be extremely high and would not provide a situation where all students who needed the assistance of an advisor could be seen promptly and given sufficient time for their problems to fully exposed and dealt with adequately. The monitoring of the attendance of international students in classes is required in all sectors except the higher education sector. Absence from class is a good indication that a problem might

exist and assistance might be required by the student. In other sectors, monitoring of attendance is used as a valuable tool in the support of international students. As such monitoring does not occur in universities, it is important that support offered to international students is easily accessible and readily available.

Standard 6.6 of the *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007* states that "the registered provider must have sufficient student support personnel to meet the needs of the students enrolled with the registered provider" (p.16) but no indication is given as to what constitutes "sufficient student support personnel". Minimum requirements need to be specified here which take into account the situations in the various sectors.

***Recommendation 13***

*That minimum support levels for international students need to be defined taking into account the way providers function in the various sectors. It could be defined in terms of a proportion of the income from students e.g. 10% of such income could be prescribed to go to support services.*

The role of an International Student Advisor (ISA) is a demanding one as outlined throughout many of the arguments above. ISAs need to be appropriately qualified to perform their work and not distracted by other duties. However, it is conceded that some smaller providers need to provide services and may at times find economies of scale make it more appropriate to have half-time staff who may maintain a full-time role by performing other services. It is a concern because international student issues arise often without notice and at inconvenient moments.

***Recommendation 14***

*That International Student Advisors be recognized as specialist staff with responsibilities for student support, advocacy and management of critical incidents and referral to other specialist services.*

While International Student Advisors and others in their education providers can provide advocacy for international students, there needs to be independent advocacy services (not legal) to which the students can turn. Many students have nowhere to go when they have issues with their education provider. Those working within the institution can only go so far. Community organizations could be used in this role.

***Recommendation 15***

*That independent advocacy agents for international students be established in each region.*

**2.vi Employment Rights and Protection From Exploitation**

Employment is one of the areas where a lack of local knowledge can mean that an international student is particularly vulnerable in terms of both exploitation from employers and personal safety. The rules surrounding employment in Australia may be very different from the rules surrounding employment in their



home country. Those who students believe will help them most, those from their own culture, can be the ones who place them in the worst situations with under-the-counter payments of wages which may not meet minimum Australian standards and no Workcover insurance. Students often report that they feel held in these situations because of threats of reporting to DIAC.

ISANA acknowledges that valuable information in this area is now available on the Fair Work website but this information needs to be modified and presented in ways that are accessible to international students.

***Recommendation 16***

*That the government fund the development of pamphlets and other appropriate materials such as video clips that can be easily understood by international students dealing with their rights and responsibilities during employment.*

**2.vii Appropriate pathways to permanency**

No comment

**2.vii Identification of quality benchmarks**

As indicated on recommendations above, the ISANA International Education Association supports the development of benchmarks in relation to levels of provision of support to international students via both a percentage of the income from students spent on support services and the specialist staff/ student ratios.

References

Hofstede, G. & Hostede G.J. (2005). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw-Hill. New York.

Richardson, R. (2007). *Building Bridges, Building Trust: A Model of Cultural Congruence*. A paper presented at the Australian International Education Conference. Melbourne.