

Department of Home Affairs Opening Statement

As outlined in the Department's submission to the Committee, the Department of Home Affairs supports the sustainable growth of Australia's international education sector by facilitating the lawful entry and temporary stay of genuine international students. Student visa settings are designed to ensure that Australia's education sector remains internationally competitive while preserving high levels of immigration integrity.

As outlined in the Bill's explanatory memorandum, 'there is evidence of exploitation of overseas students and of actors in the sector who seek to subvert Australia's migration and education systems to enable the entry of people into Australia for purposes other than study. This exploitation can range from providing poor quality education products, to high student fees, and false promises of pathways to permanent migration. The problem extends to grave instances of sex trafficking, bonded labour and slavery-like conditions for people entering the country on a student visa. Such activity is funding and supporting networks of criminal activity inside and outside of Australia.'

In response to these integrity concerns, Government has taken a number of policy decisions to increase the integrity of the student visa program. These measures include increasing English language requirements, increasing financial capacity requirements, updating Genuine Student requirements and issuing warning letters to education providers under s97 of the ESOS Act.

Data on the student visa program makes clear that the integrity concerns that we have been facing have occurred in the context of record student visa application volume growth. Between 2015-16 and 2022-23 the number of Student visa applications lodged grew from 360,000 to 590,000 per year.

In acknowledgment of this, in 2023 Minister O'Neil made Ministerial Direction 107 to publicly outline how our student visa processing resources would be allocated, and therefore how visa applications would be prioritised.

The Department has worked with the sector to support the extensive changes of the last year, running 60 sessions (approximately 1223 attendees) between April and June 2024.

While the Department of Home Affairs remains committed to ensuring the integrity of the Student visa program, we acknowledge the student visa program and the international education program are interconnected.

Should the Bill pass, and Government implements planning limits, the Department will work with the Department of Education and the International Student sector to ensure Australia continues to offer a high quality and sustainable International Education sector.