

IMMIGRATION NEWS

(Volume 141)



"So where the bloody hell are they?"

Like a seriously ill emergency patient, our vocational education and training (VET) system is bleeding from multiple accusations of corruption, fraud and over enrolments. There is hardly a week that doesn't go by now that we hear of students being disadvantaged due to a school collapsing. I'm afraid that our VET patient is lying flat out on the stretcher and unbelievably there are no doctors to be found to save it. It's enough to send the hapless helpers screaming into the street **"so where the bloody hell are they?"**

Infamously used by Tourism Australia in 2006 the Urban Dictionary describes this phrase as a British idiom used to express anger, shock or surprise. All well meaning Australians should be outraged that part of our biggest export industry lies dying on the table there is not one government minister, state or federal, to be found to express concern or supply leadership.

The SBS Insight program recently sent multiple invitations to the Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), the Department of Immigration (DIAC) and the NSW State government, to appear on their program to discuss the problems regarding international students and private education providers. Not one of them demonstrated enough courage to appear and answer the difficult questions.

In fact media outlets around the country have been searching for government officials for weeks now seeking any response to multitude of unanswered questions. At the moment they would have better luck hunting for a recent photographic shot of a Tasmanian Tiger. The ABC's 4 Corners and the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) face a wall of silence from all government sectors. A reporter from the SMH remarked that even the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions) has nothing to say about foreign students being used as economic slaves. Very strange, they normally love to get their name in the paper about anything.

However last week this rare species of government officials came out of hiding. They were located at the Migration Institute Australia (MIA) professional development seminar in Sydney. Understandably they were as nervous as a group of pigeons who inadvertently flew through an open window of a cat show.

First up in this MIA seminar last week was a senior DIAC Assistant Secretary who was in charge of policy of the skilled migration section. He was asked if he was aware of the mass fraud of enrolments and documentation within the private vocational colleges of Australia. His reply;

"We are aware of the problem but it's difficult to make changes to a large

export industry whilst the government has a large budget deficit. We don't want to go in heavy handed and have students put out on the street. I can assure you that change is coming and there is currently a robust debate on the issue".

Pressed on when that change was going to eventuate, *"we are currently having that robust debate."*

There is no doubt that the government is sensitive on an issue which brings so much money into this country however does that justify inaction simply because we are running a budget deficit? I don't believe so. Simply having a robust debate is not sufficient we need some leadership and we need it now.

Recently the Immigration Minister, Senator Evans, has been conveniently offshore chatting to Indian politicians assuring them that our education industry is first class. Mean while, back on the ranch, this same industry he is spruiking it's looking very sick. Without some immediate stitches and penicillin, an amputation might be next, worse still the VET sector may just wither and die a slow death. It won't be pretty.

The Assistant Director of DEEWR's ESOS Policy and Government Liaison International Quality Branch was next on the podium. She whizzed through her slide presentation perhaps hoping she could escape out the door afterwards at the same pace. She was asked "How does a 21 year old become the approved director of a RTO with hundreds of students handling million of dollars (referring to the recent closure in Melbourne)? She replied;

"Well how old was Mozart? As long as they meet the company law provisions we don't have a problem with that."

I'm afraid I do. Last year Global College which was run by a 25 year old was caught falsifying records and forced to close its doors. Hundreds of international students found themselves on the street. Recently Melbourne International College run by a 21 year old was forced into administration leaving hundreds of international students out on the street.

The Victorian Institute of Training and Learning (VITAL) run by a 29 year old has recently had its registration suspended for breaching the regulations. The Victorian International College has a chief executive who is 25 years old who in a recent report by The Age newspaper, just happens to be the girlfriend of the owner of VITAL. I fear if I dig deeper into the backgrounds of the owners of other VET colleges which have struck trouble I will find a similar age group at the helm.

No one has a problem with young people running their own business making millions of dollars; this is capitalism, so good luck to them. However what does bother me is the fact that such young people have responsibility of upholding the precious standard of our AQF (Australian Qualification Framework) system. As far as I am concerned this benchmark of education standard is priceless having been built by generations of Australians determination for the highest possible standard for our children.

Another point in question is that our Australian company laws allow virtually any temporary resident in Australia open a 2 dollar share Pty Ltd Company. Is this what's happening here? Are non Australian citizens allowed to run education institutions into the ground and then escape offshore with their fistful of dollars?

Back in the beginning of 2007 a NSW registered training organisation (RTO) called the Information Technology Training Institute (ITTI) in Surry Hills; Sydney closed its doors to its students. The owners of the school were South Korean nationals and they simply took all the money out of the company accounts and went back to their homeland. All the students were left stranded on the street. Sounds familiar? TAFE NSW was persuaded to come to rescue of some students upon the request of ACPET (Australian Council for Private Education and Training) but many of them just gave up and went home with a very negative experience. Most had paid their course fees in advance and left Australia with nothing. Off the record I was told by one ACPET manager that he made written complaints to ASIC (Australian Securities and Investment Commission) that Australian company law had been breached when they closed the school and disappeared. ASIC subsequently informed him they could do nothing since the directors had moved offshore.

Furthermore are twenty something COE's in a position of maturity necessary for these roles? How can we expect these young people to be immune from the allure of millions of dollars and the very real issues of corruption which exist out there? We can't.

However DEEWR does not seem concerned by this pattern. Well they should be. It's well and good to be holding discussions about the other big issues facing one of our biggest export industries but if they can't even read the writing on the wall what hope do we have?

Our international education reputation is in free fall and unfortunately our good universities are being tarnished with the same brush. Soon we'll need to pay for TV advertising around the globe where the Honourable Julia Gillard MP sings on the steps of the Sydney Opera House "**international students where the bloody hell are you**"!

ABC 4 Corners this Monday at 8.30 pm

Go to their website for the promotional video of this show or if you miss it on TV you can also watch it online later.

Link: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/>

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Kind regards

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