

The Senate Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students
Personal Submission by: Danny Ong

As an ex-international student, I am very proud of my Australian education and was provided with numerous opportunities in the country – notably, I was recently awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award Scholarship to pursue my PhD studies. In addition, I was a respected international student leader at Monash University (see attached reference letter). Due to my passion to help international students and desire to contribute back to the Australian education sector; it is no surprise that my PhD topic is on the international student experience in Australia.

Therefore, I would like to contribute to the inquiry in the areas of:

- Social inclusion;
- Adequate and affordable accommodation; and
- Adequate international student supports and advocacy
- Other issues: Need for a separate Federal Government Body

Submitted by:

Danny (Ming Kiat) Ong

PhD Student at Monash University; and

Author of *“The International Students’ Handbook – Living and Studying in Australia”* (See attached brochure)

Terms of Reference of the Inquiry:

(a) Social Inclusion:

Like the term ‘student experience’, the term ‘social inclusion’ has been used on numerous occasions by the Australian Federal and State Governments, and education institutions without any official forms of definitions. Prior to 2009, this term had been used sparingly on a few occasions within the international education sector, notably during the Australian International Education Conference (AIEC) 2008 in Brisbane where representatives from Australia Education International (AEI), the Victorian Police and the research community were asked to present on the term (the session was titled *‘Social Inclusion of International Students’*). I was selected as the international student representative for this session.

After the Hon Julia Gillard’s address to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) International Roundtable on 16th March 2009, where she indicated that *‘the quality of the international student experience both on and off-campus matches the quality of the learning they receive’*, there was a sudden boom in the usage of the term ‘social inclusion’. But many international students (including myself, as an ex-international student and researcher in international student experience) are asking:

‘What does social inclusion mean for international students?’

To my utmost knowledge, there has been no attempt to appropriately define this term in relation to international students. The only official definition about ‘social inclusion’ is found in the Department of Social Inclusion website, which is headed by the Hon Julia Gillard (source: www.socialinclusion.gov.au). The Federal Government’s vision is ‘a socially inclusive society is one in which all Australians feel valued and have the opportunity to participate fully in the life of our society. In addition, to achieve this, ‘all Australians must be given the opportunity to: secure a

job; access services; connect with family, friends, personal interest and local community; deal with personal crisis; and have their voices heard.'

Although international students are termed as 'temporary migrants', they are often classified as Australians in national ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) statistics (e.g. the Census) if they are living in Australia for more than a year; or as Australian Residents for tax purposes if they lived continuously in Australia for six months or more (as defined by the Australian Taxation Office). However, due to policies and loose categorisation of international students within Australia, it has been institutionalised that these students are not given the same opportunities as *Australians*:

- Not eligible for transport concessions in the States of New South Wales and Victoria
- Not able to access economic assistance schemes for their studies
- Limited access to financial loans for education and assets like cars
- Need to maintain Overseas Student Health Cover and yet being forced to pay Medicare Levy if they are working part-time during their studies and reach a specific taxable income threshold (although they are not eligible for any Medicare benefits, and the need to pay more for medical services and medicine). International students get the same rebates under OSHC as Australians do under Medicare.
- Being unable to decide their study load (as compared to their domestic counterparts) due to their visa condition (which specifies the period that they must complete their Australian education). This imposes great difficulty for them to engage with the wider community because education is their top priority. To a certain extent, this contradicts the Australian Government's encouragement for international students to engage with the community.

Therefore, what can international students expect from the Australian Government for social inclusion if there are persistent policies that impede them from being included in the wider Australian society in the first place?

Recommendations:

- Prior to any changes to policies relating to international students, the Australian Government should first clarify the position on international students within Australia. Are they *Australians*, *residents* or *temporary migrants*?
- If the Australian Governments and education institutions intend to continue using the term 'social inclusion' for international students, adequate policy changes and support must be provided for international students to enjoy the *values* and *opportunities to participate fully in the life of the Australian society*. There is a need to ensure that such policies are consistent among all the different Australian states.
- If the Government is unwilling to do so, there is a need to seek an alternate term for international students. This is to prevent further confusion among international students and other members of the Australian community.

(b) Adequate and affordable accommodation

On-campus accommodation:

As an ex-resident of on-campus accommodation, I see the benefits of living in a safe and socially conducive environment. However, it is a great disappointment to see there is a lack of new constructions of on-campus accommodation, other than those constructed by private providers. For example, when I was staying in Monash University South East Flats in 2003, there were discussions about expanding the on-campus accommodation and a model of new flats were shown. I remembered being very excited about the prospects of having more on-campus student accommodation because I was being 'kick-out' of the flats because there were too many applicants. Six years latter, it remains an empty plot of land. The majority of on-campus accommodation was built in the 1950s to 1960s when the student population remained relatively small. But despite the boom in student population and excessive rentals (sometimes) there is still

a lack of new on-campus accommodation in sight. Therefore many international students are being forced out to rent off-campus accommodation because of:

- Insufficient on-campus accommodation: I was recently made aware that normally the ratio of applicants to available on-campus housing are about 10:1
- Unaffordable on-campus accommodation: students are often charged excessive rentals for dilapidated rooms as compared to off-campus accommodation. For example, based on rates in an Australian university, a student is charged about \$624 per month (including utilities) for a small room. In addition, he/she must pay \$285.00 (\$142.50 per semester) for an internet/telephone point (excluding costs and regardless whether it is activated; and noting that any internet usage are charged to their student account). In addition, an additional \$315.00 must be paid for Building & Amenities Fee when they first started their residence. Finally, they must pay an addition \$105 as levy for orientation activities. Therefore when an international student starts his/her stay in this on-campus accommodation; he/she must first pay about \$1186.50 for the first month.

This is compared to a student who paid about \$450 for a room per month (shared with another four students) in a 3 year old and well-maintained house (with a large kitchen and living area). All bills (electricity, water, gas, telephone, Internet) are about \$150 per month. As required by legislation, students are required to pay one month rental bond. Thus when an international student starts his/her stay in this on-campus accommodation, he/she must first pay about \$1,000 for the first month (noting that \$450 is refundable based on the condition of the house when they move out).

Senate members, as parents, which option will you choose for your children? This is noting the fact that parents are often the main decision-makers for international students and in some cases; their decisions are made based on monetary reasons.

- Inadequate information – e.g. they miss the application deadline; agents did not inform them of on-campus accommodation opportunities
- Private education institutions do not offer any forms of on-campus accommodation.

Off-campus accommodation:

Currently, most student accommodations are developed by private developers. Although most of the developers exhibit some forms of concerns targeting the needs of international students, as businesses, they are primarily motivated by profit and this may come into conflict with provision of services and care. In addition, such accommodations are only available to international students on a first-come-first serve basis or the ability to afford the rental costs. By doing so, some of the student accommodations may be over-occupied by students from specific countries or cultural groups (i.e. especially those who are more affluent). In addition, there is also a low uptake by domestic students in these accommodations – thus this greatly limits students the opportunities to engage with their domestic counterparts.

Instead of highlighting the negative aspects of off-campus accommodation (which I believe many other contributors will do so), I would like to raise the direct opposite. I had a positive experience with my landlord, who owned some 20 properties near my university. Although they did not utilise a property agent, they provided timely repairs and advice to their tenants (noting majority of them are international students). In addition, they often took the extra steps of ensuring that we were being looked after and the house was in top condition and maintenance.

In Australia, it is common to see bad landlords and property agents being punished (e.g. paying a hefty fine). But there are no attempts to recognise the law-binding landlords and those who are willing to take an extra step for their tenants.

Recommendations:

- The Federal and State Governments should play an increased role in building more on-campus accommodation – not just for the benefit of international students but regional domestic students as well. Suggestions include provision of government subsidies to build on-campus accommodation

- A government agency can be established as a reliable body to provide and manage safe and affordable off-campus accommodation. This may be similar to Defence Housing Authority but with a focus on international and regional students.
- The relevant authority should investigate and provide exemplary landlords/agents with the appropriate recognition. This will set a baseline for quality provision of accommodation as well as encouraging landlords/agents to do the right thing.
- Student tenants should also be encouraged to give their feedback and landlords/agents will be rated against this feedback. This can be achieved through a compulsory survey at the end of their tenure or a website hotline to report any bad landlords/agents.
- Private institutions must identify reputable landlords/agents as partners for the provision of suitable accommodation for their students. Although some international students may not utilise this service, it provides an alternative for students who are unfamiliar with the Australian environment.

(c) Adequate international student supports and advocacy

For this section, I would like to contribute in terms of international student representation. This is an essential area to aid Governments and educational institutions to formulate better student and advocacy services for international students. As highlighted by research, international students are more likely to relate to other students, rather to the Government or their education institution. Thus these student representatives are an important medium to translate any problems/issues to the appropriate authorities before it escalates to a more serious problem (e.g. suicide) – provided that these authorities take these problems and issues seriously; and act on it accordingly.

As an ex-international student leader, it is almost depressing to see that there is a lack of adequate and strong international student representation at a campus and national level. In some cases, international student representation was being utilised for personal agenda/glory rather than helping the international students or the Governments (and institutions) to develop relevant policies. Although some leaders were able to represent students' interest, often their efforts were wasted because there was no appropriate successor – thus almost anybody (even those without any prior experience) can be an international student representative. This problem can be attributed to:

- As international students' main priority is their education and the excessive time required to be a student leader, they became disinterested in running for the position (this is often a series problem even at a campus level).
- There is no support for the student leaders' efforts or activities – e.g. lack of financial support; lack of timely and accurate advice; and high level of accountability.
- Inadequate recognition for their efforts – this it is not worthwhile to take up such huge responsibilities.
- Any individuals can establish an organisation and claim to represent international students (or students from specific countries) due to an absence of regulations for the operation of such organisations. Note: you do not see as a potential problem for domestic students, which are represented by the National Union of Students (NUS).

Recommendations:

- Student leaders should be provided with adequate recognition for their services to the sector and Australia (e.g. a medal/certificate or even a simple meeting with the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister).
- In order to encourage these leaders to commit the appropriate level of time/effort for their work, they should either be provided with the appropriate credit points or allowed to take a lesser work load (e.g. three modules) without placing them at risk of failing their studies.
- Any international student representative bodies should be solely operated by international students (in line with the nomination process for the International Student Roundtable in

September). Non-international students are not allowed to hold any executive positions within these organisations and their roles should be clearly listed in the constitution.

- International student representative bodies in Australia should be protected by Federal and State legislation and conform to a set of rules and regulations – the Roundtable will be an excellent platform to discuss these issues.
- A national international student representative body should be established by the Federal Government. This body will be recognised as the peak and sole representative body which will be consulted by the Government on a regular basis. This body will be supported by an advisory body chaired by the Federal Minister for Education and made up of a range of individuals from different relevant organisations. The students selected for the International Student Roundtable will be excellent candidates to be first considered for this peak body. The advisory body will also decide on any monetary rewards based on the contribution of these student leaders (instead of drawing a monthly salary).

(d) Other issues: Need for a new Federal Government Body

In my honest opinion and based on my experience, there are generally two schools of thoughts within the international education sector: (1) Marketing; and (2) Student welfare. For example, a significant difference between these two schools of thoughts lies in the question of *'What drive the sector?'*

- Marketing – promotion of positive student experiences and minimise the impact of any negative experiences. It is essential that prospective students are not aware of these negative experiences, which may threaten the reputation of the sector.
- Student welfare – ensure that students have sufficient platforms to enhance their student experience and the need to address all negative experiences. Prospective students should be made aware of these negative experiences so that they could undertake appropriate steps to resolve their problems. A proactive approach must be undertaken to identify any problems during their infant stage.

These views/responsibilities can easily come into conflict. For example: (1) the Marketing school of thoughts may be less likely to fund research that looks at negative student experiences; or (2) the student welfare school will not spend much money on marketing – because they would rather invest in better student support services. Thus there is an increasing need for these two separate departments to undertake a distinct role.

Recommendations:

- The tasks of marketing Australian education and looking after international student welfare/experience should be separate into two separate Government Bodies. The roles and responsibilities for each of these two bodies should be clearly listed out so that appropriate correspondence could be made by international students accordingly. In addition, both departments can offer each other different ideas that may help to improve the sector accordingly.
- Any negative issues faced by international students should be publicly announced with constructive steps to resolve these problems. This will prevent any escalation of the situation (e.g. the recent Indian media backlash). Australian Governments and education institutions should adopt a proactive approach to identify these issues accordingly.

DANNY MING KIAT ONG
14th August 2009

End of Submission

Professor Richard Larkins AO
Vice-Chancellor and President
Office of the Vice-Chancellor

11th June, 2009

To whom it may concern:

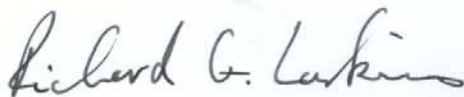
Re Mr Ming Kiat (Danny) Ong

I have known Danny for about 5 years from shortly after I became the Vice-Chancellor and President of Monash University. I first met Danny when he was President of the Monash University International Students Services. He was a very strong President of that organisation, bringing forward valid concerns of the international students, but in a reasonable and constructive way. He also brought together the international student associations from the various Monash University campuses in a highly constructive way and arranged annual forums of the groups including meetings with relevant senior Monash academic and management staff.

He retained an active interest in the experience of international students throughout his time at Monash including during his Honours year and his PhD will further explore aspects of the international student experience. He has written a book on this topic which is being published by UNSW press, quite an achievement for a predoctoral student.

Danny's enthusiasm and knowledge of international students led to his being recruited to the Office of the DVC International where he has fulfilled a number of roles in assisting the Office in its international liaison work and in acting as an interface with the international students.

Danny combines a deeply analytical mind with great passion for his work. He has matured a great deal in recent years and will now use his skills and experience to advantage in roles relating to university administration, international student liaison or advice or in a variety of other roles.



Professor Richard G. Larkins AO
Vice-Chancellor and President
Monash University

classification >

Reference / Tertiary Education

Studying abroad is an appealing prospect but involves a great deal of thought and preparation. The process can be fraught with uncertainties and a lack of knowledge in many areas. Important decisions need to be made before departure and on a daily basis throughout an international student's studies.

This practical and comprehensive book will help you evaluate your options every step of the way. Danny Ong draws from personal experience as a past international student and as President of Monash University International Student Services. His book will help international students to maximise their student experience in Australia. Useful for both prospective and current students, it will help answer some of those common confusing questions:

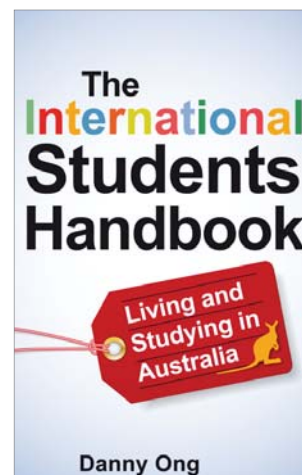
- Why should I study overseas?
- Have I got the resources to do it?
- Which university should I go to?
- What do I need to organise in advance?
- Where shall I live?
- Should I work or volunteer?
- What are my options after graduating?
- How do I succeed in my Australian Education?

The International Students' Handbook is essential reading for all those studying or wishing to study in Australia.

About the Author

Danny Ong first came to Australia in 2002 as an international student from Singapore. Currently, he is pursuing his PhD under an Australian Postgraduate Award, looking at the employment experience of international students in Australia. He completed his Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) with a thesis on Study-Work-Life Balance of International Students in Australia. He also holds a Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)/Bachelor of Business (Management) from Monash University. Prior to his degrees, Danny graduated from a pathway program at Monash College.

Danny is a former President of the Monash University International Students Services. He has consulted with governments, universities and professional organisations, and presents at conferences regarding the experience and welfare of international students.



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isbn/9781921410758.htm](http://www.unswpress.com.au/isbn/9781921410758.htm)

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