

Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of such an important enquiry into international education. I have worked in education in Australia for over twenty years with the past ten specifically in international education. I have worked for the past two years in India as an education agent so have witnessed first-hand the beginning and then development of many of issues now facing our industry.

Social inclusion

'The Australian Government's vision of 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.

We need to extend this vision to include our international students as they generally stay in Australia for a number of years and thus we should assist them to develop a sense of belonging and inclusiveness whilst they are here. Some of them post-study will qualify for permanent residence and become long term members of our society. From my experience working face-to-face with international students for some eight years in Melbourne and now in India, I have met large numbers of students seriously lacking in adequate English language skills, thus they struggle with studies and are unable to find suitable part-time work. They are very much at risk of becoming alienated from the mainstream community and becoming 'socially excluded', severely depressed, developing anti-social behaviours and falling into poverty, all of which we know is already happening.

As we are aware, often large numbers of international students live together in cheap housing, attend colleges populated largely (or in some cases exclusively) with students from their own home country and then work in similar environments. This means that their English levels do not improve, and in many cases actually deteriorate.

Education providers are struggling to teach these students resulting in many students resorting to cheating in order to pass their tests.

I have been researching a number of IELTS preparation centres here in India and students are actually being taught incorrectly and are paying large sums of money for the privilege. Some of the larger schools have up to 400 students per month and are charging fees of \$250 per month so are making extraordinarily large sums of money from unwitting students. Students study for at least two – three months and in some cases up to twelve months and still have poor English skills. They are coached to pass the test, and in many cases can write the required essays for their IELTS exam but in fact have very little English. They can manage to pass the Spoken section of the test because in most cases the examiners are also Indian so there is no problem with accent etc, but of course this is a totally different case when they arrive in Australia.

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Student visa requirements

When India was changed to Level 4 it meant the serious reduction in students wishing to study at Bachelor Degree level in Australia as students could not show 3 years of finances and so they headed for the much cheaper and easier diploma courses.

A more appropriate approach would be to move India back to Level 3, but put in additional requirements for students wishing to study in Australia. The most important criteria would be that all students be interviewed by the High Commission as happens with students wishing to go to New Zealand and Canada.

This interview should also be carried out in English. I have spoken to two students in India who were telephoned by the High Commission prior to their visas being granted and were asked if they wished their interview to be conducted in English or Hindi.

Such a change would mean that students with exceptionally low levels of English would not apply and we could again attract students to Bachelor degree courses which means genuine students would apply and not those simply looking for the quickest route to working in Australia or permanent residence.

Adequate international student supports and advocacy

There has been much talk about the care we provide our international students, but the changes to ESOS in 2007 regarding the requirement to appoint a 'suitably qualified person' as the international student contact officer in the VET sector have left a huge gap in student welfare. This change means that instead of a welfare, counselling or social work trained person handling welfare related problems, this role can be handed to an admin person who has no training and no knowledge of student welfare and even more frighteningly – no interest in student welfare, but finds the role included in their job description.

This change actually flies in the face of 6.3 which states that the provider must provide the opportunity for students to access welfare-related support services including external support services. How can an admin person judge the mental state of a sad, lonely and possibly depressed student and decide whether or not they should be referred to an external support service? Which international student, finding herself pregnant would be willing to discuss their case with a person (perhaps males) who has no training in this area and may actually condemn the student for her situation?

Lecturers and teachers do not necessarily have specific training in these areas and a Cert IV in Training & Assessment in no way prepares a VET sector teacher to deal with such issues.

The lack of having a suitably qualified person in each college means that some of our youngest and most vulnerable students have no one to turn to and this is a travesty. When in trouble where do they go? Standard 6 ESOS needs to be revisited and this serious omission redressed.

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The identification of quality benchmarks and controls for service, advice and support for international student studying at an Australian education institution.

We need to develop much stricter guidelines for the setting up of new colleges to deter unscrupulous operators only wishing to make money by setting up the cheapest option possible. A background check on those seeking to open colleges should also be done to determine what is their link to education and what is their motive to open a college.

A strict audit process needs to be carried out and auditors need to have the power to carry out audits on colleges without warning. For example, an audit carried on a college for the purpose of monitoring attendance would soon be able to determine whether or not there were any students actually in class and what was happening in that class. I have spoken to students in the past who attended hospitality colleges, rarely attended a class, never actually cooked a meal but graduated with a Diploma qualification and gained their permanent residency.

If DIAC have the power to randomly and without warning, check work places to see if students are breaching their student visa requirements by working illegally, then why can't auditors have the same powers to check institutions to see if similar breaches are being carried out by the providers and also the students.

Universities hold pre-departure presentations for their prospective students in-country which help to provide students with more information about Australia, the institution and what to expect post arrival. However, colleges do not hold pre-departure programs and so their students do not receive such information and advice.

Even the best agents generally only provide students with information regarding their course of study and if they provide a really exceptional service they will give students a little additional information about working and living in Australia. This is not because agents choose not to give this information, but in many cases the counsellors simply do not know.

This means that large numbers of our most vulnerable students are our most uninformed and under-prepared. Thus, they are at risk before they leave their home country.

In order to boost the reputation of our education sector abroad, we should look at holding general seminars across India initially and other countries if required, to highlight the positives of studying and living in Australia, the high standard of education and also what to expect from institutions and of what is expected of students. This should not be in the form of an education fair where institutions speak of their courses and services, but a general 'Study in Australia' theme.

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Other related matters:

Agents

One of the problems that I face as an agent is that of students who request admission to certain colleges that I know have poor reputations and as a result I don't represent them. These students want those particular colleges because they know that attendance in class is not mandatory and providing they pay the fees they can pass. When I advise them I don't have that college, the student walks out the door and as an agent I know that each time they walk out the door so does my commission. Sadly there are a large number of agents who don't have the same scruples and are happy to send the student to whatever college they request regardless of the outcome for the student.

A solution to wiping out many of the less scrupulous agents would be to cap the commission offered by colleges to agents. The colleges with the worst reputations and service to students, and poorest outcomes for students are generally those who pay the highest commissions. They in turn are putting pressure on the good education provider to increase commissions in order to recruit students.

Capping commissions would also deter some 'would be' operators from opening colleges as they would not have high commissions to offer agents, but would have to compete with good providers on a level playing field and of course would not be able to do so as quality education and positive student outcomes is not their aim.