



Study Vision's Submission To The References Senate Standing Committee on Education, Employment and Workplace Relations

Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

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Introduction

Study Vision (SV) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry.

Study Vision is a business of Consteam (Australia) Asia Pacific Pty Ltd. Consteam is a specialist consulting firm with such diverse client base that includes private companies, government authorities and ministries in Australia and SE Asian countries, and the United Nations. Study Vision is a business that specialises in Homestay placement and care-giving (guardianship) for international students in Australia. Our earliest Homestay activities date back to 1996. Today, we have a pool of over 2000 Homestay host families spread mainly in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. We place in on average about 4000 international students each year to these host families. These students enrol in major universities, colleges, TAFE's and schools. We work with overseas agents as well as with universities and schools.

Study vision also provides care-giving (guardianship) to international students in select schools and universities.

The great success story of the Australian International Education is now jealously monitored and will eventually be copied by many countries in Europe, USA, Canada, and even Asia. Competition is the best driver for improvement. Therefore, we have to shape up our management and planning efforts with respect to this "golden goose" or be ready to ship out those students who were once destined to our shores. Already the tide is beginning to work against us in more ways. The USA and Britain are snatching from us many of the brightest and wealthiest students by expediting their visa processes and giving them many incentives not to come to Australia. German and French and more European universities are offering free tuition, and the list goes on. It is time to be watchful to protect our recent achievement in this industry.

The four engines of the Australian economy today are: the Mine, the Farm, the Education, and Tourism. The welfare of international students is the oil of the Education engine. It needs constant monitoring to safeguard its quality and consistency; thus maintaining the health of the entire Education engine.

Study Vision's submission to this inquiry will focus on the core areas of our own activities.

Our "Vision" and recommendations for certain relevant issues in the bigger welfare issue of international students shall be presented here, in a simple language, totally unbiased and with no commercial interest.

Issue # 1: STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

The exponential growth of numbers of international students coming to Australia is outstripping the current infrastructure and has caught most people and systems unprepared. A commercial frenzy to exploit this situation coupled with poor planning has led to over 4200 private colleges to be registered since 2001. Most of these colleges are highly centralised in the CBD areas of the major cities. And many more of these colleges are in the pipeline. Even overseas agents are dipping into establishing colleges for themselves together with local partners.

The housing crisis and in particular the rental crisis in major Australian cities coupled with lack of investment in housing in general, and student accommodation in particular is escalating the accommodation challenge facing international students in Australia. This problem will be here for many years to come if current conditions persist, or inaction is the only action taken by government.

This frenzied growth and high concentration of new colleges in already heavily congested city areas has created two crises:

- a- Excessive and at times bursting loads on transport infrastructures to/from CBD areas.
- b- Coupled with an already housing crisis for locals, a nightmare for international students to find cheap but decent accommodation within proximity to their colleges in CBD areas.

For all international students, accommodation is the biggest challenge that they face after arrival. And who is there to guide and help them. Absolutely no one!

And, we are talking about people who cannot easily adjust to our environment and do not have time or energy to try to learn and assimilate. They are on a learning mission, and long study hours and exams are just around the corner. Most of them come from cultures totally different from ours. Together with different housing and tenancy rules, different ways of thinking, etc make finding appropriate accommodation in Australian cities a real nightmare for most if not for all. This reputation of scarce and often expensive student accommodation is already leading overseas students to look carefully at their destination options.

No single body will come up with a panacea to this challenge overnight. But, we need short-cut solutions as time is definitely not on our side.

The majority of international students would demand accommodation to be:

- a- Cheap
- b- Safe and clean
- c- Within 30 minutes by direct transport routes (preferably within walking distant)
- d- Flexible renting arrangement
- e- Single rooms (size doesn't matter)
- f- Live with other similar students and not with older adults or very young children
- g- Have internet access

Forget about Homestay, why?

- a- It is very expensive
- b- No freedom living with owners constantly putting rules on them (please do not scratch my floor.....)
- c- Most Homestays are too far from city centres where colleges are concentrated.
- d- Forget about cultural interaction, the students hardly have time to chat and the families are too tired after work to spend time with their own children, let alone foreign students. Any quality time left is not seen in international student's eyes as worth the money paid which currently ranges from \$230 to \$350 per week (including meals except lunches during week days).

- e- Food offered in Australian Homestays is a controversial issue. Most international students come from cultures that see our food exotic in the first week, but hardly beyond that. They cannot live on our typical cooked food for too long. Of course unless, say, you place a Chinese student from Sichuan Province with a Sichuanese family.

In reality, most colleges and universities promote Homestay to newly arrived students as a soft landing place until students find their bearings and identify ways to rent in shared housing with other students. Students under 18 must stay in Homestay. No choices given to this group. Thus, almost 100% of this group flee from the Homestay on sunrise of their 18th birthday. What does this tell us about the Homestay option.

Vision #1: for Student Accommodation

Our vision for student accommodation crisis focuses on the following:

- a- Government should not permit new colleges to open campuses in CBD areas.
- b- Government should give incentives for all educational institutions to open new campuses outside city centres.
- c- The government to require from each educational institute a percentage of at least 30% of any institute's international student number to have an equivalent number in beds (preferably in single rooms) in well-managed student-share accommodation facilities dedicated only to each institution and located within say 30 minutes by direct transport routes to each campus. It be budget accommodation or with a rent ceiling to avoid greedy operators from exploiting the situation.
- d- An Ombudsman in each state and territory in Australia to cater for international students needs, with special attention to student housing issues.
- e- Never regulate mums and dad's business at home (i.e. Homestays) as it will lead to many families deciding not to host students. However, the government should look at creating additional incentives, for example, rather than giving tax free income for Homestay fees from the first two students hosted (as per current ATO ruling), a specific sum of money collected from Homestay fees within one household per week should be stated , and revised annually. Such incentive should motivate families to reduce the rent demanded from each student.
- f- Tax incentive schemes need to be introduced to the market to encourage the general market to build and/or operate quality and well-managed student-share accommodation, particularly around educational centres. (please refer to the article "Tapping the student market" in the periodical: Your Investment Property, July 2009)
- g- Raising awareness of international students, at visa application stage, about finding accommodation and their rights and obligations in going into a lease arrangement should be a government responsibility together with the educational institute they are enrolling in.
- h- Crack down on rouge exploiters of the student accommodation crisis (please refer to the article "Room with a Few: Slums of Sydney", in The Sun-Herald on 27 April 2008, pp46-47). Establishing a Local Council Register of dedicated Student Accommodation places should eliminate many of the current problems in the market place. International students should be made aware that unless a place has current registration certificates, it may not be a safe place.
- i- Under the age of 18 students, who mostly arrive with very little or no English at all, could be allowed, in fact should be encouraged, to stay in Homestay families of similar background or ethnicity as their own parents back home. This will avoid the excessive cultural shock and psychological stresses that these children often go through and would allow them a softer landing into our Australian way of life. Many educational institutions do not allow this placement in the false belief that these children need to adapt fast to our way of life.

Issue # 2: Care-Giving (Guardianship)

For student under the age of 18, an approved care-giver or guardian is appointed to supervise the student's welfare. Among the guardian duties are the following:

1. The guardian routinely inspects the student's Homestay accommodation arrangement to ensure that it provides a safe, caring and supportive environment. The guardian is responsible that the child is living with a screened Homestay family by sighting their screening documents.
2. The guardian assists a student to open a bank account and may assist the student with weekly budgeting if requested by the parents. The guardian is not financially responsible for the student.
3. The guardian must be attentive to the student's attendance history and performance at school. The guardian liaises with school and the student's teachers regarding the child's progress and reports problems to parents and sometimes to the agent.
4. The guardian contacts the parents in any emergency and takes student to the hospital/doctor if required. The guardian advises the parent if their child has any physical or emotional issue.
5. The guardian offers the student some support in coping with everyday life in a new culture. That is the reason the guardian should preferably be from the same ethnicity and cultural background as the child in care. Speaking the same language is indispensable of course.
6. The guardian helps the student keep religious observance and together with the Homestay hosts may attend to the student's needs in areas such as special shopping and personal counselling.
7. The guardian establishes routine communication channel with the student and host family to keep track of the student's progress and wellbeing.
8. The guardian provides a gift and/or cake on the child's birthdays and encourages the Homestay host to arrange a suitable celebration.
9. The guardian provides feedback or a full copy of the academic report to the parents and translate the summary if necessary
10. The guardian meets and greets student's families if and when they visit Australia
11. The guardian assists the student to move out from the current Homestay if there is any discontent or dissatisfaction. This is only done after confirmation and approval from the parents overseas and in liaison with the student's school.
12. All guardianship duties cease on the student's 18th birthday or if the student leaves the country permanently.

Homestay families who host in their home an international student under the age of 18 must as a prerequisite pass a character screening, much like school principals, teachers, or workers in child-care need to pass before they are employed. Each state has its own legislation for conducting this screening which makes it an absolute headache for companies like Study Vision, which operates this service nationally.

The following is a summary of the requirements and contact details for having screenings done to Homestay host families of students under 18, in each state or territory

State/Territory	Legal Requirements
Australian Capital Territory	<p>There are no legal requirements for people working with children to undertake a police check in the Australian Capital Territory. However, organisations which require employees and/or volunteers to work with children may have their own policies in this regard. The ACT Department of Education & Training has a Working with Children and Young People – Volunteering Policy http://www.det.act.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/19519/pol_WwChYP1.pdf</p> <p>Also see: http://www.afp.gov.au/services/operational/criminal_history_checks/national_police_checks.html</p> <p>Cost: \$43 (current for 3 months only – it is recommended by Federal Police that the check is repeated after a two year period)</p>
New South Wales	<p>The NSW Commission for Children and Young People is responsible for the Working with Children Background Check, which helps determine whether people are suitable to work in child related employment.</p> <p>This checklist aims to create workplaces where children are safe and protected, and where the people who work with children are appropriately screened. http://www.kids.nsw.gov.au/director/check.cfm</p> <p>Cost: Free Service (2 years)</p>
Northern Territory	<p>There are no legal requirements for people working with children to undertake a police check in the Northern Territory. However, organisations which require employees and/or volunteers to work with children may have their own policies.</p> <p>In addition, the Northern Territory Government has released draft legislation for the creation of a screening scheme which outlines minimum standards for child-related occupations and activities. http://www.afp.gov.au/services/operational/criminal_history_checks/national_police_checks.html</p> <p>Cost: \$43 (current for 3 months only – it is recommended by Federal Police that the check is repeated after a two year period)</p>
Queensland	<p>In Queensland people working or volunteering with children need to hold a Blue Card.</p> <p>The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian is responsible for administering and conducting criminal history checks on people who want to work with children to determine whether or not they are eligible to hold a Blue Card. http://www.ccypcg.qld.gov.au/index.html</p> <p>Cost: Volunteer – free, Paid Employees: \$60 (2 years)</p>

South Australia	<p>Dept Education and Children's Services requires a Criminal history screening for people working with (including hosting) children to establish child safe environments in which adults do not present a threat to the health and well being of children and students. The amendments to the Children's Protection Act 1993 provide the legislative base for the implementation of screening programs and criminal history screening standards from the Department For Families & Communities have specified a maximum validity period of three years.</p> <p>http://www.decs.sa.gov.au/recruit/pages/supportadmin/crimHistCheck/</p> <p>Cost: \$48 (2 years)</p>
Tasmania	<p>There are no legal requirements for people working with children to undertake a police check in Tasmania, however, organisations which require employees and/or volunteers to work with children may have their own policies in this regard.</p> <p>In 2005 the Commissioner for Children Tasmania released a consultation paper discussing proposals for the Government to introduce screening procedures for Tasmanian organisations who want to employ people to work with children.</p> <p>http://www.afp.gov.au/services/operational/criminal_history_checks/national_police_checks.html</p> <p>Cost: \$43 (current for 3 months only – it is recommended by Federal Police that the check is repeated after a two year period)</p>
Victoria	<p>The Victorian Government has introduced the Working with Children Check, which is compulsory for people who wish to work with or volunteer with children.</p> <p>The check seeks to protect children from harm by requiring people to undertake a criminal history check before they start work in an organisation.</p> <p>http://www.justice.vic.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/Working+With+Children/Home/</p> <p>Cost: Volunteer: Free, Paid Employees: \$70 plus cost of photographs (5 years)</p>
Western Australia	<p>For Western Australia a Working with Children Check is compulsory for people who carry out child-related work in Western Australia.</p> <p>The check aims to protect children by deterring people from working with children when they have criminal records that indicate they may harm children; and by preventing people with such records from gaining positions of trust in paid and voluntary work with children.</p> <p>http://www.checkwwc.wa.gov.au/default.htm</p> <p>Cost: Volunteer: \$10, Paid Employees: \$50 (3 years)</p>

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The guardian or care-giver normally charges about \$35-\$50 per week to conduct the supervisory welfare duties for each international student. And in recent years, it became common that some teachers and even school principals are appointed as care-givers and keep this money for their efforts. However, in TAFE NSW and NSW Public School system, only the Homestay hosts are appointed as the care-givers (guardians) and receive \$35 per week for their efforts. Parents overseas often resent having the Homestay hosts as guardians, particularly when an issue arises between the student and the family; who is there to help? Parents often prefer to see an independent guardian from both the school and from the hosts.

With so many inefficiencies in the guardianship industry, industry practitioners are yearning for an immediate review and overhaul of the guardianship/care-giving arrangement.

Vision #2: for Care-giving (Guardianship)

Our vision for Care-giving (Guardianship) focuses on the following:

- a- Establish a licensing and state registration scheme for Care-givers (Guardians) of International Students. An on-line web page, much like MARA's for migration agents, must be established. Education Institutions should allow parents of students to freely select any of the listed Care-Giver they wish to appoint to their own child, as long as they are local in the same city, of course. The current monopoly of this service by care givers employed by colleges, and who just take the money with little service delivered must be stopped. Unqualified people should be prohibited from acting as Care-givers and should not be on the national or state list.
- b- Homestay families should be limited to provide accommodation/boarding, and not combine it with Care-giving (guardianship) as the public school system currently allows. We understand this conflict-o-interest is a debatable issue, but we do need to bring this debate NOW. It is not right to keep this debate withheld any longer.
- c- We beg the government to streamline the procedure and establish one and only national centre for Screening all the mums and dads, Australia-wide, who open their homes and host international students under 18 years of age. In fact, the industry of Homestay has reached over the last 20 years a level of maturity where all Homestay companies, like Study Vision, insist on screening all families, whether they are hosting under 18 or over 18 students.

Study Vision has accumulated a lot of experience in the fields of Student accommodation and care-giving (guardianship) in Australia over the past 15 years. It is important that both government and private operators work together with Educational institutions to improve the status quo and demonstrate to the world that Australia is not only welcoming the international students on our shores, but we will work tirelessly to make them feel at home, away from home.

Study Vision shall certainly avail all its resources and personnel to attend any future public hearings or discussions in any of the issues or visions shared above.

Thank you for this opportunity.

