



The University of Sydney

Committee Secretary
Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee
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Parliament House
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By email: eewr.sen@aph.gov.au

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Dear Committee Secretary

The University of Sydney is grateful for the opportunity to make some supplementary comments and to provide some additional information to the Senate Inquiry into the welfare of international students, further to the more extensive submissions made on our behalf by the Group of Eight and Universities Australia.

The internationalisation of Australian higher education has brought enormous benefits to Australia. By welcoming international students, we have not only strengthened our fine education institutions but provided for Australia a unique opportunity to build relationships and a real engagement with the future leaders of our neighbouring countries and beyond.

This was true on a very small scale under the original Colombo Plan, which was driven primarily by a development assistance objective, but proved of enormous benefit to Australia's links to Asia. In those days, student welfare was a question of ensuring that a small number of guests to our country were made welcome and provided opportunities to make Australian friends and get to know our way of life.

Today, our people-to-people links with the outside world are so much greater, as a result of the decision a quarter of a century ago to allow education institutions to attract fee-paying international students. That policy has proved a great success because of Australia's reputation as a provider of high quality education and a safe, welcoming environment in which to live.

An unfortunate by-product of our success is that international education is now perceived in the media and elsewhere as an "industry" and enrolments by international visitors and the contribution they make to the Australian economy is considered an "export." As if the people investing in their own futures and helping our future with leading edge research were simply commodities.

It is true that international education is of considerable value to the Australian economy and should continue to be so, if we invest as a nation in maintaining high quality education and research.

But it is also true that this phenomenon is much more than an industry or an export sector. It is about real people and people's needs, perceptions and aspirations.

To sustain international education for the benefit of Australia and the world, we have two challenges. We must live up to our promises: quality education and a safe, welcoming environment. Almost all in the sector strive for quality and those that are not driven by a quality mission need to be dealt with by much more effective regulation.

What about the environment we provide for these valuable visitors to our country? International education is now on such a scale that, while student welfare is no less a responsibility of each education institution, we depend also upon appropriate policy frameworks from government, active support from government agencies charged with planning and policing safe neighbourhoods, and community support.

From day one for an international student visitor, we at the University of Sydney provide a welcome and a wide range of advice and support, recently reviewed and strengthened (see the attached report on a recent review of international student support).

An immediate problem, though, is finding affordable and appropriate accommodation. Like other institutions, the University of Sydney has a limited amount of student accommodation that does not meet the needs of enough international (or domestic) students. We are committed to investing in more, but need access to land and appropriate planning policy. An affordable student housing policy at State Government level would help, with appropriate minimum standards. Even better would be access to at least the interest Government is earning on affordable housing levies on developers.

The interest currently being earned on millions of dollars collected from developers could help kick-start student housing projects that, in turn, will relieve pressure on the private rental market for low income rental properties. There is no reason why such support could not be tied to student housing projects incorporating some adjacent key worker housing either. Indeed, the safe, cohesive communities that we need to build for students might benefit from some better designed integration with, rather than isolation from, the broader community.

Near the city and in the precinct the University of Sydney shares with a number of other education institutions, businesses and residents, are underutilised and derelict sites that would be ideal for urban renewal. These could be home to new communities of Australian and international students, together with key workers for the important industries of the district, such as healthcare. They could also host a mix of community infrastructure for culture, recreation, learning and research that would add life and activity to Sydney.

The safe and welcoming environment we need to provide for international students can therefore be an improved environment for all.

In addition to affordable student housing in safe communities, students need access to affordable transport. The current distinction made between domestic and international students in the provision of concession cards is a symptom of treating international students as commodities rather than, well, as students.

There are other measures that the education sector might take, in partnership with government and the community, such as a welcome festival each year for international students and a centrally-located, 24 hour drop-in facility with advice for visiting students on safety, housing and other services.

Most important of all, the Australian community must value international education. We are, after all, bringing large numbers of people to Australia, who make a huge economic and cultural contribution. Leadership in government, business and most importantly in the education sector should invest in explaining – and demonstrating - the benefits of international education more than we have done.

I am confident that we can live up to our promise and address the remaining areas of international student welfare that require attention. We will do so much more effectively if we focus on the fact that we are talking about people and not commodities; the internationalisation of our fine education and research and not just an export industry.

Yours sincerely

Michael Spence