



Submission to the Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

On behalf of

**The Darebin Overseas Student
Advisory Council**

and the

City of Darebin

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Introduction

The City of Darebin is aware of the rapid increase in the numbers of overseas students to Melbourne in a relatively brief period of time.

The City of Darebin is one of the most culturally, religious and linguistically diverse cities in Victoria and has become home to a significant number of international students from over seventy five countries with the largest groups coming from India, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Sri Lanka.

International students represent approximately four percent of Darebin's residents or over five thousand young people who live and study in Darebin, with numbers expected to increase dramatically in the next five years.

In the last six months, media coverage of tensions involving overseas students has brought to public attention not only the difficult plight of these students but also the negative perceptions and behaviour from some longer term residents, landlords and businesses toward them.

The figures below exemplify the increase in overseas student numbers in recent years, the difficulties they face as well as the monetary benefit that they contribute to the Australian economy:

- Students from 187 different countries studied in Victoria in 2007 with students from India being the largest nationality representing 25% of all international students, followed by China with 23%. The number of student enrolments from Vietnam increased by 43% and those from Sri Lanka increased by 38% in 2007
- International student enrolments in Victoria between 2002 and 2007 have grown from 74,433 to 133, 454, with almost half this growth occurring in 2007 (AEI:2007)
- Although international students on the whole report positive experiences, nevertheless many are affected by key issues including affordable accommodation, student welfare and safety, employment, social inclusion and information provision (Overseas Student Education Experience Taskforce, 2008)
- International students represented approximately 30% of all students at Victorian universities (AEI:2007)
- The value of international education to Victoria was \$3.5 billion and \$14.2 billion to the Australian economy, the third highest export for Australia

- The growth in the international student market has coincided with historic decrease in rental vacancy rates to 1% (Victorian Department of Human Services:2008)
- Some students face waiting periods of several months before finding housing, often at a distance from their place of study

Systems Failures

Over a hundred international students, through face to face interviews conducted by the City of Darebin, lend support to a commonly held view that international student education and related industries, both private and public, are characterised by a series of system failures, with international students themselves having to bear the brunt of these failures in terms of financial, educational and mental and physical health-related costs.

A number of students particularly those attending private colleges see themselves as victims of 'dodgy operators' conducting 'shonky operations' in an education market with questionable regulation and reputation, and with little opportunity for redress.

The failure of systems is evident across the chain of operations:

- Misinformation peddled by overseas education agents promising students permanent residency rather than a quality education
- Regularly changing visa environment and regulations
- Under-regulation of the private education industry which often fails to deliver on contractual obligations or close operations
- Unsustainable growth in numbers of international students in vocational training
- Increase in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) points without notice, with retrospective consequences for visas and permanent residency applications
- Scams in which students lose thousands of dollars for guaranteed results in the IELTS exam
- Inadequate safeguards for student safety
- Unscrupulous small to large scale employers who offer below award wages and conditions
- Inadequate monitoring of rooming house operators
- Overall lack of coordination between the state and federal governments in the management and regulation of the international students sector.

Students went on to say that the International students education sector, significant to the 'wellbeing' of not only the Australian economy but to the survival of many tertiary educational institutions, appeared to be focused on quick profit with little regard for 'value for money' or basic human rights.

More recently, due to these failures particularly with regards to issues of safety and quality of education, the Indian student market has shown early signs of collapse with an 80 percent reduction in appointments by students at its Indian offices (The Australian, 2009).

A Model of Response

In response to the issues experienced by international students, the City of Darebin seeks to demonstrate its commitment to the wellbeing of its most recent new and emerging community, international students, through the implementation of policy and program responses as outlined below.

The 'Fair Go for International Students' model was the result of interviews and surveys conducted with international students during a four month period. The underlying assumption of the model is that students are unique and diverse and find themselves located somewhere on three continuums - between feeling uprooted and being grounded on a personal level, between being marginalised and included at a community level, and between feeling disenfranchised and empowered to deal with the systems.



The model of response, under the headings of *grounded*, *included* and *empowered*, frames various actions by the City of Darebin to address the complex and multidimensional nature of international student issues.

Grounded Feel a sense of worth, belonging and support	Included Have a valued social status, identity and role	Empowered Have a voice, basic needs met and gain a sense of achievement
Student issues are heard and acknowledged <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online survey of international students • Focus group interviews and discussions • Students supported to resolve individual issues 	Communities realise the benefits and obligations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civic Reception for International Students, with information booths from Police, Connex, Consumer Affairs, Spectrum Migrant Services, Darebin CC • Neighbourhood Awareness Campaign re the benefits and plight of overseas students with suggestions of how to welcome them 	Students address their own issues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overseas Student Advisory Committee – awareness raising and advocacy initiatives to Council, other government and service providers • Student run forums eg the closure of private educational institutions and the impact on students
Social support systems are developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Support Triads comprising a domestic student, an experienced overseas student and a recently arrived overseas student • International Students and Interfaith Leaders Forum identifies a role for faith communities in the support of overseas students 	Neighbourhoods reach out to relate and interact <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Peace Train' initiative from Preston to join Walk for Harmony • Community Hospitality Guide outlines ways that residents can make overseas students feel welcome • Living Library of overseas students – local residents 'borrow' students, ask questions and listen to chapters of their lives 	Systems are challenged and improved by better coordination <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council's Strategy for Overseas Students • Advocacy to intergovernmental committees regarding overseas student issues • Memorandum of Understanding with the Federation of Indian Students • Memorandum of Understanding with Victoria Police
Students are valued through their contributions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Council Work Experience Programs • Overseas Student Placement Programs at Council • Assistance to Council by international students to organise festivals and events and in the process interacting with the public and Council staff 	Private sector regulates its behaviour <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mayor addresses Chambers of Commerce and Traders Associations regarding exploitation of overseas students • Rooming House Standards - ensuring boarding houses are compliant with relevant regulations and conducting information workshops for boarding house operators 	Human rights of students are balanced with national benefit <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borders without Borders – to develop alternative and affordable homestay products with Australian Homestay Network (AHN), recruit local residents as homestay providers and ease accommodation shortages within a compliant operating system



RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Recommendation 1:

The City of Darebin recommends that the Commonwealth Government takes overall responsibility for the coordination, regulation and monitoring of all aspects of the international student market

Recommendation 2: Regional Coordination and Service Nodes

The City of Darebin recommends that the Commonwealth provides financial support for the promotion of the Darebin model, A Fair Go for International Students, at state government level and applies the model and associated programs to three regions in metropolitan Melbourne, in the north, south-east and west. In each jurisdiction, a cluster of municipalities would establish an International Students Advisory Council to coordinate services, supports and advocacy for international students.

The model seeks to ensure that international students are *Grounded* on a personal level, *Included* as part of the wider community, and *Empowered* to negotiate the systems to ensure human rights, personal wellbeing and value for money outcomes.

Recommendation 3: Coordinated Response

The City of Darebin recommends that the Municipal Association of Victoria in partnership with the Victorian Local Government Association bring together local, state and federal government agencies, registered training organisations, educational institutions, housing services and international student services to discuss international student issues at a local operational level with a view to the establishment of an Overseas Student Coordination Committee with formal links to the Victorian Government's Overseas Student Education Experience Taskforce.

Recommendation 4: Rooming House Taskforce

The City of Darebin recommends that local and state governments convene regional Taskforces to manage the 'fall out' from the closure of rooming houses which stand in contravention of government building and health regulations. The Taskforce would ensure that compliance and service delivery functions were coordinated to decrease the likelihood of overseas students being at risk of homelessness, and leading to the development of a memorandum of understanding among the different stakeholders.

Recommendation 5: A Plan of Recovery Following the Closure of Educational Institutions

The City of Darebin and the Justice Project Inc recommends that the Commonwealth and Victorian Governments develop a comprehensive contingency plan in the event of the closure of private educational institutions which includes the:

- Establishment, as a matter of urgency, of a taskforce or 'one-stop-shop' to facilitate all aspects of the timely re-enrolment (and if necessary, the relocation) of students displaced by such closures. Substituted courses must enjoy as good a reputation as those formerly offered by the failed institution
- Offer to students of not only an enrolment at an alternative college but the choice of a refund on fees to enable them to select the provider of their choice
- Allocation of an appropriate fund of money to be disbursed to all former students of failed institutions to help off-set the costs accruing to them because of the closure
- Provision of an amount of compensation or an ex gratia payment of, for example, \$1,000 to each student for breach of contract and unnecessary anxiety caused by closures
- Undertaking of all things necessary to begin investigations of a kind that might lead to the prosecution of those persons responsible for the failure of an educational institution for breaches of the *Trades Practices Act*, *Fair Trading Act* and the criminal law
- Application of a moratorium of any fees and charges that would otherwise accrue to students needing to change, vary or extend their visas because of the closure.

Recommendation 6: International Student Ombudsman

The City of Darebin recommends the appointment of an international student ombudsman as part of an effective regulatory regime which ensures that unethical operators who have a stake in the international education sector (educational institutions, business, housing, etc) are made accountable and prevented from practising.

14 August, 2009.

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