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Please follow up the articles by Guy Healy in The Australian about the 299 international students who were in immigration detention in the last three years and the IDAG's members' knowledge of their incarceration. Did they express concern to the Minister about the unholy mix in Villawood etc of criminal deportees, students and asylum seekers?

When I asked the IDAG members about 12 months ago about students in detention, they seemed to be of the view that there may have been some in the past, but not then. I was a community rep on a consultative committee in Brisbane.

On 28 August I spoke with and emailed Guy Healy the following:

Guy

Further to our discussion and your article today:

Australian Universities, TAFEs and colleges which have profited significantly from income generated by international students should be called to account for the inadequate student services which failed to protect them from the excesses of the Immigration Department.

Detaining students in the dreaded Villawood Detention Centre is absolute overkill and disastrous when all they have failed to do is renew their student visa or advise Immigration of their change of address or worked 25 hours instead of the 20 they are entitled to work. Arrested and in effect jailed, sensitive and intelligent youngsters put into detention with criminal deportees, illegal workers and asylum seekers are traumatised and damaged. It should never happen.

Why are Universities not providing on campus help and advocacy to young people away from home and family, often with inadequate English and unfamiliar with our society and its visa rules? Is it not part and parcel of the enrolment responsibilities and duty of care which accompany hefty fees? Did tertiary authorities get involved with the 299 students who disappeared from their classes and were locked up in detention?

If employers bringing in temporary skilled workers (457) have obligations and conditions to ensure fair treatment and award wages, why are tertiary institutions not similarly tasked and monitored to ensure a positive academic experience and protect a student from an abuse of their civil liberties?

Unbelievable damage has been done to all fee paying visiting students who have been detained – young adults who are the pride and joy of their parents, among the brightest in their country. What a way to treat invited guests in our country. What has this done to the reputation of our country?

The punitive regulations and compliance practices affecting international students must be overhauled. Unless they have committed crimes, the Minister for Immigration should declare international students off limits for Immigration compliance and have set in place in their places of study, appropriate support and advocacy for these valued temporary guests among us so they will always be well disposed towards Australians and Australia.

More hands on opinions :

Ngareta Rossell

Marion Le - Canberra

Pamela Curr Melbourne

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My letter to the Editor - below- was not published

Editor
The Australian

No invited, fee paying international student should ever be held in immigration detention for relatively trivial matters like forgetting to extend their visa, forgetting to notify their change of address or working more than the 20 hours per week permitted. What a punitive and stupid punishment of intelligent young people whose friendship we crave for a peaceful and better world. What an insult and aversion for their sacrificing families. Where was the duty of care of the education businesses which took their fees?

Frederika E. Steen

THE AUSTRALIAN

Overseas students held like terrorists

Guy Healy, Higher education writer | *August 28, 2008*

NEARLY 300 overseas students have been thrown into detention centres in Sydney and Melbourne in the past three years after falling foul of Australia's immigration laws.

Documents obtained by The Australian under Freedom of Information laws reveal that in the three years to the end of March, 299 overseas students were put into the Villawood detention centre in Sydney or the Maribyrnong centre in Melbourne. Most were deported and five are still in detention.

University, TAFE and secondary school students from 24 countries were detained. Most came from China, India, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.

Of the detainees, 207 were held for overstaying their visas, 30 for attendance breaches, 14 for failing their courses, seven for not starting their courses, four for withdrawing from their courses, one for a work breach and 36 for other reasons.

University of Sydney senior psychology lecturer Christopher Lennings said overseas students could be easily overwhelmed by conditions in Australia, leaving them vulnerable to breaches of migration law. "People's English is not as good, they get overwhelmed, have financial problems or illness. They get depressed and fail their studies, and next thing they know they are on a rollercoaster and have lost control of their lives," he said.

"The trauma period is within a few to 10 days, especially if they don't know how long they would be incarcerated for."

Students who have their visas cancelled -- often for working more than 20 hours a week, for attending less than 80 per cent of scheduled contact hours, for unsatisfactory academic results, for completing a course early, deferring study or transferring to another provider -- become unlawful non-citizens.

Once located, they are usually detained pending removal from Australia, granted a bridging visa or made to arrange their own departure.

Motahar Hussein, a 34-year-old former Charles Sturt University IT student, said he spent almost three years in Villawood after missing an official immigration notice because of a mix-up over access to his postbox.

"I was dealt with very harshly," he told The Australian. "I am not a criminal. I am a student and want to study electrical engineering. People arrested me and put me in a cell like I am a terrorist. My hair still rises on my body thinking about Villawood."

The Australian has learned that a former Bangladeshi university student has been detained for almost three years and one of the 27 Chinese nationals was detained 371 days.

Universities Australia chief executive Glenn Withers said that while illegal residency should be dealt with by deportation, these processes "should minimise the need for detention and ensure a proper allowance for associated refugee claims".

National Liaison Committee president for the country's 250,000 international students, Eric Pang, said it was "shocking to know that it's such a big export industry for Australia, where students are treated as cash cows, yet others are receiving such harsh treatment in detention ... If they overstay they should be deported."

Student detainee advocate Milchaela Rost said she was appalled by the figures and Australia was the only country in the world to detain some full-fee-paying international students.

Immigration Minister Chris Evans recently announced that mandatory detention for overstayers and unlawful non-citizens would only apply in certain circumstances, such as where a person presents a risk to the community, or where there is repeated non-compliance.

Frederika E. Steen