

UTS Students Association Submission to the 2009 Senate Inquiry on International Students Welfare

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The following submission outlines strategies and recommendations for a number of different issues related to international students' welfare, as identified by the Senate Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

(a) the roles and responsibilities of education providers, migration and education agents, state and federal governments, and relevant departments and embassies, in ensuring the quality and adequacy in information, advice, service delivery and support, with particular reference to:

(i) student safety

a. Safe, Public Space Portals (PSP's) as meeting and gathering points

Open space forum infrastructure that highlights cultural and ethnic diversity of International students

Creation of a dedicated International student web portal. Currently Higher Education (HE) International students are a sub-print of other websites; for example:

- http://www.business.nsw.gov.au/aboutnsw/labour/C13_highereducation_intlstudents.htm
- http://nursing.sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au/Students_And_Graduates/international.asp

Recommendation 1: A dedicated International student portal may bring together all of the relevant Government and private links for all schooling levels – Primary, Secondary (High) and HE. This portal should also identify safe open public spaces which are particularly created to engage international students: including information in the top 10 languages across universities, TAFEs and private colleges.

Recommendation 2: Capital cities in particular should commit a portion of their public space to creating meeting & gathering points for international students, where social events and information session can be held for students.

b. Assaults-Robbery – night time transport and lighting safety; frequency of police patrols (foot and vehicle), and cultural awareness of police and other emergency personnel with regards to specific issues and fears of international students, for example, non-reporting of issues due to visa concerns or lack of trust in police due to experiences of law enforcement in own countries.

There needs to be increased demographics analysis; incorporate strategic lighting infrastructure in dark zones; increase CCTV points; increase foot and/or vehicle police patrols; multi-lingual warning notices with emergency (000)

Recommendation 3: Identify zones that have relative high frequency assault attacks, robberies, and implement structural reforms including more specifically targeted police patrols. Increased density of strategically placed multi-lingual warning notices against attack, theft, etc and reinforcing the emergency call number 000.

Recommendation 4: Increased cultural competency training for police and other emergency services, and creation of specific emergency hotline for international students staffed by multi-lingual officers, advertised through different community and university websites, including the languages spoken.

(ii) adequate and affordable accommodation,

International students seek secure, safe, habitable accommodation. Housing dislocation impacts on study and leads to increased mental health issues.

Recommendation 4: Creation of a dedicated International student web portal. Currently Higher Education (HE) International students are a sub-print of other websites. Aside from a range of relevant information student housing, accommodation, rights and get-help links would be found in one web space. Provide and promote a reputable accommodation register through the Office of Fair Trading and linked to a dedicated Int Student web portal ;

b. International students are vulnerable to accommodation scams that include extortiate rents; lack of privacy rights and other rights associated with 'tenant' status as opposed to boarders & lodgers. There needs to be Increased complaints investigation of sub-standard housing via local council inspectors;

Recommendation 5: Establish key partnerships with University, Office of Fair Trading and accommodation listings to establish a one-stop accommodation register that may be the first point of call by International students looking for accommodation in preparation of travel to NSW for study and for those students already here looking to change their accommodation.

Recommendation 6: That all states conduct an audit of student accommodation providers ensuring that the current tenancy law is adequately being adhered to at all times, with adequate penalties that will prevent student accommodation providers from disregarding their obligations under the relevant Acts.

c. Organise and advertise a reputable one-stop accommodation register for capital cities and regional centres to be promoted to potential international students in their home countries. There needs to be increased funding for promotion of accommodation rights awareness campaigns.

Recommendation 7: Provide on-going and increased support to newly established and existing advocacy organisations such as University students' associations who assist international students with tenancy and accommodation disputes, including the Student Tenancy and Accommodation Rights (STAR) project part-funded by City of Sydney Council

d. International students' choices for accommodation and employment once in Sydney and Melbourne are limited due to prohibitive travel costs. There must be support funding for low-cost student housing for local and International students – including short-term accommodation reserved for international students so they are able to secure longer-term accommodation once in Australia rather than whilst overseas (this leads to increased vulnerability to exploitation). For example, after lobbying from the UTS Students Association, the University of Technology, Sydney has secured twenty spaces for short-term accommodation for international and regional students to access whilst they search for safe affordable longer-term accommodation. There must also be national public travel concessions for all international students in Australia regardless of which state or territory.

Recommendation 8: That all universities, TAFEs, and private colleges which enrol international students must provide short-term accommodation options and up-to-date, accurate information about accommodation in their own areas for international students.

Recommendation 9: Lobby relevant State government to introduce travel concessions for international students; in NSW in particular, must overturn the discriminatory legislation passed in September 2006 which allows the Government to levy full-price travel costs on international students while local students are allowed concessions. This arrangement was deemed discriminatory by the Administrative Decisions Tribunal:

<http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/adtjudgments/2006nswadt.nsf/f1a6baff573a075dca256862002912ec/017f7566faa46ad6ca2571df001ddb82?OpenDocument>

International students are often forced into precarious accommodation due to lack of adequate local references, as required when applying for accommodation. Local accommodation providers must be educated about the need to accept references and forms of identification from overseas and not discriminate against international students who are unable to produce local references.

Recommendation 10: That State governments, in conjunction with Universities and private education providers, work with the peak real Estate organisations in each state to educate real estate agents about the acceptable documentation required for identification checks from overseas, including passports, references from past landlords in student's own country, and references from past employers in student's country; validity of references can be checked against the provision of a phone number, web and e-mail address.

(iii) social inclusion,

Despite the requirement to demonstrate certain English language aptitudes before being offered a place in an Australian course, many international students continue to struggle with English language competencies throughout their studies and require better support than is currently provided. Lack of language skills leads to segregation of international students from all other students and also contributes to a high failure rate in subjects which are English language-based. Increased fluency in English language skills will assist international students to feel less isolated and to succeed in their studies.

There needs to be better English language support for international students, and cooperative funding of specialist English language services provided free to students.

Recommendation 10: Direct funding from State and Federal to support increased services by University language centres (eg: at UTS ELSSA) and other private or public (colleges-TAFE) for short English intensive and area-of-study focused courses.

(v) adequate international student supports and advocacy

The increase in international students has increased the advocacy and support work undertaken by university student organisations; these organisations assist international students in invaluable ways and also assist the Universities to adhere to the Education Services for Overseas Students legislative requirements

Recommendation 11: Increased funding by universities and private education providers to students' associations and organisations specifically for the advocacy and welfare support of international students; governments should provide annual grants to worthy projects assisting international students.

(vi) employment rights and protections from exploitation

International students are often forced into precarious, low-paid or cash-in-hand jobs where their industrial entitlements are not recognised; due to visa restrictions international students are only legally allowed to work 20 hours a week while studying – this limitation can make securing stable, well-paid, skilled, study-related employment difficult. International students also find that a lack of local references limits the types of jobs they are successful in securing and so are often forced into precarious employment.

Recommendation 12: Establish an employment register for international students which will also provide information on industrial rights and responsibilities, and suggestions for how to secure stable, decent work; include a 'hotline' for international students to report unsafe, exploitative worksites and employers

Recommendation 13: Establish key partnerships with Universities, student organisations, labour rights organisations to provide international students with relevant advice and support regarding employment; establish employment portal with

links to job vacancies and to short certification courses, such as Responsible Service of Alcohol (RSA), Responsible Conduct for Gambling (RCG) and Food Handling and Safety, which will assist international students to secure stable, legal, worthwhile employment.

Recommendation 14: That State governments, in conjunction with Universities and private education providers, work with the peak Business organisations in each state to educate business-owners and employers about the acceptable documentation required for identification checks from overseas, including passports, references from past landlords in student's own country, and references from past employers in student's country; validity of references can be checked against the provision of a phone number, web and e-mail address.