

Submission by the Tasmanian Government

Senate Education, Employment and Workplace Relations Committee

Inquiry into the Welfare of International
Students



Tasmania
Explore the possibilities

Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students

**The Tasmanian Government's Submission to the Senate Education,
Employment and Workplace Relations Committee**

August 2009

1 Introduction

Overseas students are welcome in Tasmania and Australia. They provide diversity and richness to our education and training institutions and enrich the communities in which they live. In addition to receiving a high quality education, overseas students' experiences of living and studying in Australia should positively shape their future relationship with our country, whether through the business and industry networks they will establish, shared cultural understandings they foster, or skilled migration pathways they may pursue.

Tasmania has a comparatively small but significant international student sector, contributing an estimated \$130 million to the State's economy in 2008.¹ As at June 2009 there were 3,883 overseas students enrolled across the higher education, schools, vocational education and training, and English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sectors in the State. There are 18 registered providers of education services to overseas students in Tasmania. The largest providers of education services are the University of Tasmania (UTAS) and the Tasmanian Polytechnic (a statutory authority).

Chinese students account for 30 per cent of Tasmania's overseas student population with students from Malaysia comprising another 17 per cent. Other significant source countries making up Tasmania's overseas student population include South Korea, Saudi Arabia, India, Singapore, Thailand, Japan, Vietnam, Hong Kong and the United States of America.²

Government Education and Training International (GETI), based within the Tasmanian Polytechnic, provides administrative and marketing services to Tasmanian Government providers of international education services. These providers include the Department of Education for schools from Kindergarten to Year 10, senior secondary colleges, the Tasmanian Academy, Tasmanian Polytechnic and the Tasmanian Skills Institute. GETI also administers and/or facilitates welfare services for international students across these agencies.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 5368.0.55.004 International Trade in Services by Country, by State and by Detailed Services Category, Calendar Year, 2008.

² Australian Education International, (AEI) Year to Date Enrolments by Sector for Tasmania as at June 2009. <http://www.aei.gov.au/AEI/MIP/Statistics/StudentEnrolmentAndVisaStatistics/2009/Default.htm>

2 Response to the Inquiry Terms of Reference

Tasmania offers high quality education services in a very safe and affordable environment for local and international students. Recent experiences such as the tragic death of a Chinese student based in Hobart have demonstrated that there is more that governments, education providers and communities can do to improve the safety and wellbeing of international students as well as to enhance their experience of living and studying in Tasmania and Australia.

The following response to the terms of reference identifies potential problems encountered by international students based in Tasmania and suggests possible approaches to addressing these problems.

(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

The recent murder of Chinese student Zhang Yu based in Hobart and reports from the Tasmanian international student community of incidents of harassment, racial vilification and assaults against overseas students, together with the experience of other jurisdictions, demonstrate a need to enhance the safety and wellbeing of international students.

Many international students are reluctant to report incidents to the police for a variety of reasons including cultural differences in their perception of police, cultural and religious barriers to reporting crimes (eg sexual assault of women), fear of recriminations by perpetrators and the fear it could lead to the cancellation of their visa.

Police and education providers need to be working together to encourage all students to report incidents to the police and to address the barriers to reporting incidents. Raising students' awareness and confidence in the willingness and ability of police to deal with instances of assault or harassment is also important.

Following the murder of Chinese student Zhang Yu, Tasmania Police and UTAS have taken steps to improve international student safety. These actions have included Tasmania Police attending all international student orientation days and providing an increased police presence on the UTAS campus. UTAS will also deliver targeted presentations to all international students that specifically address personal safety with the assistance of Tasmania Police.

A Safer Community Partnership is also being developed by Tasmania Police with the Hobart City Council to address the issue of racism within the broader community.

The safety of international students more broadly would be enhanced by providing more information about potentially risky behaviours, activities and geographic locations that take into account the local context and culture of the communities in which the students will live. While some of this information may be provided during a student's orientation there is a need for education providers to reinforce and update safety messages on an ongoing basis as part of a pastoral care service and support for international students. Improved pre-departure briefings are also required in-country by reputable education agents.

(ii) adequate and affordable accommodation

There is limited affordable accommodation for international students that is in close proximity to education providers and places of employment. This makes travelling to and from places of study and work more difficult, particularly late at night and on weekends when public transport frequency is limited.

In the face of low rental vacancies and growing international student numbers it will be necessary to increase the accommodation available to international students. This could be achieved through incentives to encourage private investment in student accommodation facilities that are in close proximity to education providers or exploring the utilisation of government owned buildings for accommodation.

There are variable standards of accommodation for international students, many of whom are unsure about their rights and obligations as tenants. Again, improving the quality of information available to international students about accommodation options and legal matters would be beneficial. It would also be worth exploring the potential costs and benefits of introducing a nationally recognised grading/rating for international student accommodation.

(iii) social inclusion

Tasmania recognises the benefits of cultural diversity and aims to strengthen the cohesiveness, inclusiveness and harmony of our society. International students make an important contribution to cultural diversity within our community and to developing a greater shared understanding of different cultures.

There are no international student only class groups in Tasmanian Government schools or the vocational education and training sector (VET), however students still tend to cluster together with other international students. Governments and education providers can explore opportunities to promote the engagement of international students with other members of the community by:

- promoting the need for mixing local and international students in education programs,
- promoting the provision of common student areas rather than segregated, and
- ensuring the timetabling of classes promotes interaction with local students (daytime classes may promote safety as well with less night time travel).

Education providers could also draw on approaches used in the school sector to inform the more disconnected student experience in the VET sector, particularly through greater pastoral care support to students.

Multicultural Tasmania, within the Department of Premier and Cabinet, aims to foster and support a culturally and linguistically diverse Tasmanian community. Multicultural Tasmania has a cooperative working relationship with the UTAS International Services Office and supports events organised by the Tasmanian University Union International Students Committee. There may be further opportunities for Multicultural Tasmania, and similar multicultural offices that exist in each jurisdiction, to facilitate greater interaction between established migrant communities and international students and the broader community as one possible way of promoting greater social inclusion and support for international students and greater social cohesion.

(iv) student visa requirements

There is a need to develop higher regulatory requirements for agents to ensure quality and reputable services, including through the encouragement of in-country registration of agents to complement Australian Government regulation.

To obtain a visa, students are required to provide evidence that they meet the English language requirements of the courses in which they are enrolled. Tightening the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) assessment centre regulation is necessary to reduce the risk of students fraudulently submitting higher English language scores than they actually possess.

Before receiving their visa, students are also required to provide evidence of adequate funds to support themselves. The financial requirements for high assessment level countries should be more rigorously enforced to promote better accommodation, safety and social inclusion outcomes for international students.

(v) adequate international student supports and advocacy

International students can access a range of supports that are available to domestic students and Australian citizens in general. International students are provided with extensive information about services that are available but need a

simple way to navigate this information and access these services. The international student hotline established by the Federal Minister for Education, the Hon Julia Gillard MP to provide a mechanism for students to anonymously report concerns, could be expanded to provide a referral mechanism to appropriate existing services for international students.

There is no organisation currently providing independent advocacy services for international students. Such a role could be developed by expanding the function of an existing Australian Government ombudsman.

There is also a role for Australian Education International to assist providers with ensuring their student support is culturally appropriate through use of its offshore network.

(vi) employment rights and protections from exploitation

International students generally have a low understanding of the legal basis for employment rights, industrial awards and conditions and mechanisms for review. Students are often not aware of what to do about abusive work practices and may fear that reporting such practices could result in their visa being cancelled. There is a need to build awareness among international students of their employment rights and obligations. This information should be provided prior to departure by education agents and reinforced once they are studying and living in Australia.

(vii) appropriate pathways to permanency

Many students are targeting the easiest eligible course pathway rather than pathways that best match their work and qualification history in-country. Agents appear to be supporting, and perhaps encouraging, these moves by students.

Australian Government changes to permanent residency rules and eligibility impact on students who have already begun a course pathway which is no longer eligible or which has changed requirements like hours of paid work or English language outcomes.

Students are also often unsure about where and how to get reliable legal immigration advice.

(b) the identification of quality benchmarks and controls for service, advice and support for international students studying at an Australian education institution

Tasmania is fortunate not to have any high risk providers operating in the State, although the Tasmanian Government is aware of the issues associated with high risk operators experienced in some other jurisdictions.

Tasmanian providers of education services to overseas students have a low ratio of international students to domestic students. Where providers rely on overseas

students there is a higher risk of lower quality training. For instance if the training is not used by learners – with the qualification being primarily sought for immigration purposes – and hence not used by employers, there is no external oversight of a return on investment in the training.

Similarly, students will not complain if they are exploited in the workforce or receive poor quality training as they fear cancellation of their visa if their enrolment is cancelled. Workforce exploitation is particularly relevant to VET courses that expect significant levels of work placement.

The Tasmania Government wants to ensure that these issues do not emerge in Tasmania and the State's high quality education services continue and are enhanced into the future.