



CABRAMATTA COMMUNITY CENTRE

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Submission to the Senate Inquiry on the Welfare of International Students

Cabramatta Community Centre welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Welfare of International Students.

Cabramatta Community Centre (CCC) is a large non-profit community based organisation employing 250 staff which has provided a wide range of welfare services to the aged, young people, women, ethnic communities, newly arrived migrants and refugees and children since 1979. Cabramatta Community Centre includes Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, Cabramatta Youth Team, Multicultural Community Care Services (which provide in home care to frail, elderly people with disabilities and carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds), Cabramatta Neighbourhood Centre and The Heights Community Services which runs neighbourhood centres in Mount Pritchard and Canley Heights.

Like so many others in the community, the staff and management of CCC are greatly concerned about the exploitation of some international students that is occurring in Australia. We can see that this situation has come about as a result of successive government's failures to properly regulate both the education and immigration components of the international student experience. We recognise that there are several aspects of the sector that need to be regulated properly. These include the operations of migration and education agents overseas and in Australia, the private institutions offering courses, work experience and placements and the process of transitioning from studying to permanent residency. We congratulate the Senate on initiating this inquiry and we hope that it will result in the legislative and other changes needed in the education and immigration arenas to stop the exploitation of international students and dramatically improve their experience here in Australia.

Education

In relation to education, it is evident that the deregulation of the higher education sector and the proliferation of private higher education providers, particularly in relation to vocational education, have lead to the situation that international students are currently experiencing. Greatly increased regulation of higher education providers would reduce the instances of exploitation of international students and improve the quality of higher education in Australia.

We note that recent media reports of the most excessive exploitation of international students has focussed on private vocational education and training providers. We also note the explanation of the regulatory environment for vocational education and training outlined by Bob Birrell, Ernest Healy and Bob Kinnaird in their article 'The Cooking-Immigration Nexus'. Based on this analysis, which is the clearest explanation of the regulatory framework that we have found, we recommend that legislation be changed so that Trades Recognition Australia does not assume that students who have completed an Australian Certificate III level training package from a Registered Training Organisation have reached trade level standards. We also support the proposal in the paper that an independent

agency be tasked with assessing the competency of people who complete institutional pathway training. We recognise that any agency tasked with this responsibility needs to be resourced to a level that enables it to carry out this task comprehensively.

Although the recent media focus has been on international students studying vocational education and training with private providers, Cabramatta Community Centre has some concerns about the relationship between international students and universities. We have observed with concern the reduction of government funding to universities that has led to an increasing reliance by universities on the income provided by international students. We note the comments of Professor Simon Marginson on ABC's Rear Vision programme on 5th August 2009 that the highest growth of international students studying in Australian universities has occurred in years when the government has most dramatically reduced public funding to universities.

We note the acknowledgment in the Bradley Review of Higher Education that Australia has the highest proportion of international students in higher education tertiary type A programs in the OECD and that some universities receive up to 44% of their revenue from international students. We acknowledge the obvious concern about sustainability for any organisation that relies on international student income to this extent, let alone private colleges that rely entirely on revenue from international students. We are also aware of the pressure that academics at Australian universities have experienced in relation to how they mark the work of international students and what type of examinations they set for students. We recommend that the federal government substantially increases its funding to Australian universities so that they do not need to rely on international students to the extent that they currently do.

Student visa requirements

Cabramatta Community Centre is of the view that it is unreasonable to limit international students to only working for 20 hours a week as a condition of their work visa. To afford the living expenses associated with studying in Australia, especially living in capital cities near the location of universities and private providers of education, students need to be able to work for more than 20 hours. The current restriction on working hours can be, and we understand is, used by unscrupulous employers as leverage in their exploitation of international students. Therefore the lifting of this restriction to only work for 20 hours a week will create opportunities for international students to improve their living conditions and reduce the likelihood of their exploitation in the workplace.

Support and Advocacy

One area that we are particularly concerned about is the lack of support for international students once they are in Australia. We believe that not only should the government regulate the education providers properly to reduce the likelihood of exploitation of students but they should also fund an independent body to provide support to international students who wish to lodge complaints about those who have treated them unfairly. We recognise that some universities have support organisations for international students and some international students have ethno-specific organisations or diplomatic missions that are able to support them but this is not always the case so the government needs to fund an organisation that can provide support for all international students regardless of where they study and where they come from. We have noted the calls for an ombudsman to protect international students and are supportive of such a proposal. But, we are

keen to ensure that any support that is provided for international students helps the students to resolve their situation not simply make recommendations that private operators can choose to ignore. Migrant Resource Centres could be funded to provide such support but we can see the benefit of having an organisation that is clearly identified as providing support for international students and is able to specialise in providing the type of support that international students need to resolve the multitude of problems they may experience.

Accommodation

Regarding accommodation for international students, we support the National Union of Students recommendation that every education provider be required to make available affordable accommodation to all new international students for the first 12 months of their education in Australia. We recognise that legislative and regulative requirement such as this on education providers can help to limit the number of private educational providers to those who are able to provide a more comprehensive and sustainable service to international students. If, following a comprehensive investigation of this option, the government found that such a recommendation was not achievable, it would be important for the government to make a concrete commitment about how it would work with universities and state governments to ensure that appropriate student accommodation was made available to international students within a reasonable distance of their place of study. It is also important that accurate information about the rights and responsibilities that tenants have in the Australian rental market is made available to all international students. The Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre at Cabramatta Community Centre has had significant experience in helping newly arrived migrants to navigate their way through the Australian private rental market and understands how difficult this process can be for people who are unfamiliar with the Australian rental market and therefore the amount of time and resources that need to be committed to the project. Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre produced a DVD about tenant's rights funded by the NSW Office of Fair Trading for newly arrived African migrants.

Travel concessions

Cabramatta Community Centre believes that the current failure of the NSW and Victorian governments to give international students travel concession cards is discriminatory. International students like local students must travel to study and are surviving on low incomes. This situation must be rectified.

Employment rights

It is important that international students are made aware of their rights as employees working in the Australian community. International students unfamiliar with their rights in an Australian workplace will often not know when they are being exploited. Even if they are aware of their rights as employees, they are unlikely to be familiar with what mechanisms are available to them to resolve the situation. Cabramatta Community Centre believes that it is the duty of the government to ensure that international students are provided with this information.

International students are often scared to complain about their employment conditions because they fear the impact that making a complaint will have on their visa status. It is therefore important that the information provided to international students addresses this issue explicitly and provides

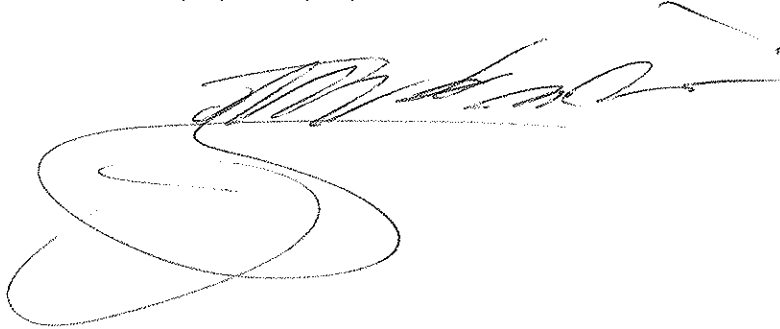
clear information about possible consequences of making a complaint for a student's visa. We recommend that the government ensure that all this information relating to employees rights, various avenues of redress and the impact on visa status of complaining is provided to all international students.

It is necessary that the government ensures that international students are paid properly for the work that they do in Australia. Cabramatta Community Centre notes the comments by Bob Birrell, Ernest Healy and Bob Kinnaird in their article 'The Cooking-Immigration Nexus' that international students on a visa subclass 485 are more attractive for employers to hire than people on subclass 457 because there are not the same minimum salary and other requirements. We are also aware of the media and other reports about international students receiving no pay for work that they do and in some circumstances having to pay to do work experience. We believe it is necessary that the government ensures that students are paid properly for the work that they do in Australia. We recommend that legislation be changed to require employers of people on visa subclass 485 to pay a salary equivalent to that required when employing people on visa subclass 457 and meet the other requirements of employers of people on visa subclass 457. International students have indicated a desire to have more opportunities for interaction with the broader Australian community. Ensuring that international students are paid properly for the work that they do will mean that they do not need to work as much and will therefore have time available to engage more with the broader Australian community.

Recommendations

1. Regulate the education and immigration systems so that international students are not exploited
2. That legislation be changed so that Trades Recognition Australia does not assume that students who have completed Certificate III from an Registered Training Organisation have reached trade level standard
3. That an independent agency be tasked with assessing the competency of people who complete institutional pathway training
4. That the federal government substantially increases its funding to Australian universities so that universities do not need to rely on the funds provided by international students to the extent that they currently do.
5. Remove the restriction that international students can only work for 20 hours a week
6. That the federal government fund an independent body to support international students and help them resolve problems that they have experienced
7. That every education provider be required to make available affordable accommodation to all new international students for the first 12 months of their education in Australia within a reasonable distance of their place of study
8. That information about tenants rights be made available to all international students
9. That international students across Australia be provided with travel concession cards

10. That the government ensures that information about their rights as employees in the Australian workplace including information about where complaints can be made and what impact making a complaint will have on a student's visa status is made available to all international students.
11. That legislation be changed to require employers of people on visa subclass 485 to pay a salary equivalent to that required when employing people on visa subclass 457 and meet the other requirements of employers of people on visa subclass 457

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julio Gruttulini', with a large, stylized flourish underneath.

Julio Gruttulini

President of Cabramatta Community Centre