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SENATE INQUIRY INTO THE WELFARE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

I am writing this submission at a time of intense media interest in international education, with reports of regrettable, and at times, appalling, incidents and practices in relation to numbers of international students.

In my submission I would like to signal that large parts of the international education sector are not concerned only with the income which can be generated through international education. While international students need to pay full costs (it would not be appropriate for the Australian Government to be paying for the education of international students, other than through aid programs), the experience offered, the education provided and the qualifications attained by international students coming to Australia are, in many places, of high quality.

Within higher education, and private companies such as ANU College which provides education pathways into higher education, regulation is already comprehensive, and is conscientiously administered.

In this submission I will refer to the terms of reference of the inquiry.

ANU College

The ANU College is an education provider to international students. ANU College is the trading name of ANU Enterprise Pty Ltd, a wholly owned company of The Australian National University. Started in 1993, ANU College now teaches English language courses and foundation pathway courses for international students who have been conditionally admitted to The ANU. Around 300 students per year study in 3 major programs run by ANU College. This submission has been prepared by the Principal and General Manager of ANU College, with contributions from the teaching and administrative staff of the College.

Roles and Responsibilities of Education Providers

The roles and responsibilities of education providers are regulated through the Education Services to Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000, and the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007.

These regulations provide adequate directions for institutions such as ANU College to provide a quality educational experience. Our experience is that the regulators, including the state government Departments of Education and the Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations are in regular contact with us informing us about, and checking our compliance with, various aspects of the regulation. We do not feel that additional regulation will solve problems that have been raised recently in the media.

We would like to note however, two things:

1. The importance of orientation information for international students once they arrive in Australia.

We are fortunate that Canberra is a safe and peaceful environment. The presence in Canberra of many embassies means that international students, particularly those from countries whose representation amongst our student body is small, can connect with fellow students and embassy programs to assist their adjustment to Australian life.

We, however, are particularly aware of a few areas in which international students do need additional support in terms of information. These include:

- That our cities in Australia have many less people 'out and about' on the streets after dark. For that reason they can be more dangerous than those of countries that international students come from. The students therefore need to be advised to take care if walking after dark in some areas (for example, where some jobs, such as waiters, or shelf packers might cease), or if approached by groups in those unpopulated areas.
- What appropriate expressions of wealth might be and the consequences of exhibiting too much wealth in public situations (seen in some countries simply as a mark of prestige)
- The actual cost of some specific services in Australia, particularly internet and mobile phone. Some students expect these to be as cheap as their home country and can experience financial stress as a result (see also the point under 'other matters')

In Christchurch in New Zealand, there are some useful initiatives to allow students to contact police (see <http://www.ccc.govt.nz/Christchurch/Migrants/SaferStudentsCampaign/>). This level of support might be useful in Australia and could help with information offered to students during our orientation sessions (we currently have the local police attend to meet incoming students and talk with them about simple safety and security precautions they can take).

2. There is one issue relating to social inclusion that we would like to draw to the Committee's attention.

This relates to mental health and behavioural problems of international students. Although many of our international students are highly capable and aspirational individuals whose families have made a commitment to funding the education of their child, those teaching international students find that some students are sent overseas to study because there have been behavioural issues with which their families are not able to cope, or, on occasions, mental health issues, including eating disorders and depression. These issues come quickly to the fore in the disciplined and rigorous educational environment.

Provision of some behavioural assessments of international students may assist in avoiding some of these problems, which can become problematic not only for our staff but for the other students in the classes.

Identification of Quality Benchmarks and Controls

At ANU College the quality of our provision is assured by a student's progression to The ANU and their subsequent performance, as well as retention rates and/or students' progression to institutions other than The ANU. These sorts of indicators could be used in quality benchmarking.

More generally, for higher education programs, on completion of domestic higher education award programs, the Government collects data on graduate destinations as well as course quality through the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). This data is not collected for non award programs, such as English language courses or pathways courses. As courses undertaken by international students are known through their CRICOS Code, collection of student responses about their subsequent course destination, and the course quality, through the use of a modified GDS or the 'student support', 'learning community' and 'learning resources scales' of the CEQ might be possible. The advantage of this approach is that results can be compared with other data collected, for benchmarking purposes. I attach questions from these scales at the end of this submission, for information.

Other related matters

Social Inclusion and the internet

The internet provides social contact for many Australians, particularly younger people who use social networking sites and other computer based connection technologies into the early hours of the morning. What we have found at ANU College is that students are often tired during the day, and when asked about this, explain that they stay awake much of the night using their computers to connect socially with those from their home countries. This new technology exacerbates a problem that would exist without it, but enables international students to maintain a socially isolated existence here in Australia. Australian internet sites for support of international students could be encouraged to provide assistance in a form which these students could readily access.

Conclusion

International education is important for Australia's future. While the list of activities and topics under the terms of reference of the committee can lead to a range of individual issues and descriptions, international students, their experiences and expectations, are as different from each other as any of our domestic students. Within higher education provision, services and experiences are reputable and enhance Australia's educational status internationally.

We take our responsibilities to our students very seriously.

I hope that the Committee gets a sense of the quality of the education offered in my organization, and the commitment and professionalism of my staff.

Dr Linda Hort
Principal and General Manager

CEQ Items (Learning Community, Learning Resources and Student Support Scales)

Scale

18. I felt part of a group of students and staff committed to learning.	Learning Community
20. Students' ideas and suggestions were used during the course.	Learning Community
22. I learned to explore ideas confidently with other people.	Learning Community
31. I felt I belonged to the university community.	Learning Community
45. I was able to explore academic interests with staff and students.	Learning Community
12. The library resources were appropriate for my needs	Learning Resources
33. The study materials were clear and concise.	Learning Resources
38. It was made clear what resources were available to help me learn.	Learning Resources
41. Course materials were relevant and up to date.	Learning Resources
47. Where it was used, the information technology in teaching and learning was effective.	Learning Resources
21. I was able to access information technology resources when I needed them.	Student Support
24. Relevant learning resources were accessible when I needed them.	Student Support
25. Health, welfare and counselling services met my requirements.	Student Support
34. The library services were readily accessible.	Student Support
37. I was satisfied with the course and careers advice provided.	Student Support
49. Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this course.	Overall Satisfaction