INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

To the Committee Secretariat,
Education and Employment Legislation Committee
Parliament of Australia

Please find attached the submission of the International Students Representative Council of Australia (ISRC) regarding the *Education Legislation Amendment (Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2025*.

The ISRC is an independent, student-led national body established by university- and state-level student organisations across Australia. Comprised of current international students, the ISRC represents student interests in policy, governance and public discourse, and works to promote a fair, transparent and student-centred international education system.

In this submission, the ISRC identifies four structural issues that must be addressed to achieve meaningful integrity reform in international education: the sector's over-reliance on international tuition fees; the university–agent recruitment model; systemic gaps in student support capacity; and the absence of institutionalised international student representation in governance. The submission proposes reforms aimed at restoring the public mission of universities, rebalancing institutional incentives, strengthening student support systems, and embedding independent international student voice at national, state and institutional levels.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this legislative process and would welcome the chance to provide further information or appear before the Committee if required.

Yours sincerely,

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Submission on the Education Legislation Amendment (Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2025

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1) Re-centering the Public, Not-for-Profit Mission: Resetting University Funding to Resolve the Structural Contradiction

The ISRC welcomes the recognition of the contributions international students make to Australia, particularly their significant support to the national economy. At the same time, students emphasise that policy discussions must clearly distinguish between education and trade, and should engage in an open and honest conversation about the proper role of Australia's public universities.

From a global perspective, public universities are institutions of education and research that are primarily funded through public resources and are accountable to society. In Australia, the vast majority of universities are regulated by TEQSA and registered as not-for-profit entities. Under the current legal framework, public universities—as not-for-profit bodies corporate—exist to provide public education and generate knowledge, rather than to engage in commercial activity or pursue profit. Accordingly, whether viewed from the standpoint of legal status or institutional mission, Australia's public universities should not be defined, governed or evaluated as an "export industry".

The institutional legitimacy of public universities, and the trust they hold within society, rests on their ability to fulfil their educational and research missions—not on their capacity to generate revenue from international tuition fees. For international students, choosing to study at an Australian public university is fundamentally an act of trust: trust in world-class academic standards and educational integrity; trust that they are entering a higher education system built on rigour and excellence; and trust significant enough to justify paying high tuition fees. When students gradually discover that admissions or recruitment decisions in some institutions or programs are driven primarily by financial considerations, their confidence in universities' commitment to academic excellence is deeply undermined.

The ISRC notes that some universities are expanding international enrolments without adequately assessing their teaching and student-support capacity, while others—though smaller in scale—are attempting to follow this expansionary trend even before the necessary resources are available. When a university's financial stability depends heavily on enrolment numbers, management is structurally incentivised to prioritise growth in scale over academic quality and capability building. We also observe that recent government debates regarding caps on international student numbers have largely focused on "volume control", without addressing the underlying drivers of continual expansion. Heavy reliance on international tuition fees is not a sign of institutional success; it is evidence of a

structurally imbalanced funding model. The use of international student fees to cross-subsidise routine operations and research reveals deeper flaws in the current funding design and governance architecture.

For these reasons, reform should not entrench this dependence under the banners of "integrity", "quality" or "sustainability". Instead, it should dismantle and correct it through structural change. The ISRC firmly maintains that degrees at public universities should not be treated as commodities for sale. Australia must reaffirm the public character of its universities and substantively decouple the educational mission from revenue logic, ensuring that core operating expenditure is funded primarily through domestic public investment rather than continued reliance on overseas tuition to fill structural funding gaps.

On this basis, the ISRC calls for international tuition fee revenue to be managed with transparency, accountability and strict ring-fencing—used solely to enhance teaching quality, student wellbeing and campus life, and, within a limited and publicly disclosed scope, to support essential shared services or necessary transitional arrangements. Such revenue should not be treated as discretionary funding for broad cross-subsidisation. Government, universities and students must work together to build a funding model that is financially resilient, academically grounded and publicly accountable. Reform should actively reduce non-educational, revenue-driven incentives, reaffirm the public mission of universities, and rebuild trust based on learning and educational quality—rather than income or scale—so that such trust becomes a foundational pillar for international cooperation and the social legitimacy of Australian higher education.

2) Structural Issues in the University–Agent Recruitment System

The ISRC welcomes stronger regulation of agencies involved in international student recruitment and services, particularly measures aimed at addressing dishonest or non-compliant operators. Such reforms are essential for enhancing transparency and integrity across the sector. However, we believe that current public debate overlooks a critical issue: the deeply intertwined with universities' recruitment practices and underlying funding structures. It is therefore a systemic issue rather than an isolated problem.

Data indicate that more than 70 per cent of international students come to Australia through an education agent. A common explanation attributes this high proportion to strong student demand for agent services. The ISRC remains cautious about this interpretation. We urge policymakers to recognise that such a high level of agent involvement cannot simply be understood as a matter of "individual student choice". Instead, it must be examined within

the broader institutional relationship between education providers and agents. In other words, the question is not only whether students need agents, but also the extent to which institutions rely on agents to meet their enrolment targets.

The ISRC notes that many education providers—particularly public universities—have deliberately supported and built extensive and complex agent networks over the past decade as a primary channel for international recruitment. Students have expressed concerns regarding this model for several reasons. First, institutions pay substantial commissions to agents. In the context of public universities, students reasonably expect that these funds should primarily be used to improve teaching quality, student support and research capacity, rather than being channelled off-campus through large-scale commission payments. For a higher education system founded on a public mission, the direction of such financial flows warrants careful scrutiny.

Second, the widespread use of "per-head commissions" and percentage-based commission structures tied directly to tuition fees creates strong incentives for volume-driven recruitment. Agents are only paid when a student enrols and completes registration, encouraging them to prioritise conversion and numbers over academic suitability, student preparedness or ensuring that students receive accurate and comprehensive information about their program and institution. Even without intentional misconduct, such incentive structures can generate systemic risks for students, including misleading advice, information asymmetry and poor course fit.

Third, under current practices, some universities have effectively outsourced significant portions of their core responsibilities in information provision and initial student engagement to non-university actors. For many prospective students, the first information they receive—and the first impression they form—comes from agents rather than from the institution itself. This means universities lose crucial opportunities to communicate directly with students, understand their needs and backgrounds, and build trust from the outset. Such outsourcing weakens institutional accountability and creates systemic risks of expectation mismatches and misinformation in subsequent stages of the student journey.

Based on these observations, the ISRC submits that reforms relating to agents must go beyond removing a small number of dishonest operators or improving student awareness in agent selection. Instead, a comprehensive review and restructuring of the university–agent recruitment system is required. In particular, the degree of institutional reliance on agent networks, the structure and source of commission payments, the delineation of responsibility for information provision and recruitment activities, and the incentive mechanisms embedded in the system must all be central considerations in this legislative review and reform process. Only by addressing these structural issues can the sector genuinely respond to student concerns about integrity, fairness and educational quality, and

ensure the long-term legitimacy and sustainability of Australia's international education system.

We emphasise the importance of distinguishing between the use of agents by public universities and their use by private education providers. Public universities operate under a public mission and are subject to public policy and public funding obligations. Their reliance on agent networks therefore carries fundamentally different policy implications. For this reason, the recruitment practices and incentive structures through which public universities engage agents should be a primary focus of review in this reform process.

3) From Symbolic Provision to Universal Access: Structural Gaps in Student Support for International Students

In international practice, providing high-quality education that genuinely reaches all students is an intrinsically high-cost undertaking and is rarely able to generate financial surpluses from tuition alone without compromising the scope or depth of student support. When an institution continues to expand enrolments while still producing substantial surpluses, this typically indicates that its support systems have not been scaled in line with actual student numbers, resulting in structural gaps in teaching capacity, wellbeing provision and student services. The ISRC therefore calls on the Government and universities to assess these potential gaps against international standards, to ensure that the integrity of Australia's university system is genuinely upheld.

The ISRC identifies a critical structural issue in the current provision of international student support: many services are not designed or resourced to reach all students who may need them. Instead, they operate on a model of symbolic provision, where services can be showcased as existing, yet their actual accessibility and capacity fall far short of the scale required. This gap between nominal availability and effective access significantly undermines the integrity and equity of the international education system.

Orientation activities provide a clear illustration. In institutions where thousands of international students commence each semester, orientation venues often accommodate only a fraction of this cohort. If 5,000 students arrive but the venue holds only 1,000, participation naturally skews towards those who are most proactive or well informed. Universities can legitimately report that such activities were delivered; however, the majority of students were never reached, and the system is not designed to accommodate them. The underlying issue is not the quality of the event itself, but that its capacity is based

on the expectation that most students will not attend. This represents a structural, not incidental, shortfall.

Similar capacity constraints appear across key support areas including wellbeing services, career development and academic consultation. Although these services are formally available, their design and resource levels mean they effectively serve only a subset of the student population. The reliance on limited workshops, restricted appointment slots, or "first-come, first-served" models results in inequitable access—especially for students who may be less informed, face language barriers or require more structured support.

Wellbeing support is particularly affected. International students face unique and intersecting challenges, including cultural transition, financial pressure, visa uncertainty and social isolation. Yet wellbeing and mental health services often experience long wait times, insufficient staffing and gaps in cultural competence and multilingual support. These limitations do not necessarily reflect institutional intent, but rather a structural mismatch between student needs and the capacity of existing systems. If larger numbers of students were to seek assistance at the same time, current wellbeing infrastructure would be unable to respond appropriately. This indicates that wellbeing support is operating on a scarcity model that is fundamentally misaligned with the realities of international student life.

Career development services show similar patterns. Advising sessions, employer events and skill workshops frequently reach capacity quickly, and opportunities tailored to the realities of international student employment are limited. Students describe an environment where information is abundant but practical opportunities remain scarce. In this context, the presence of services alone cannot be considered adequate; meaningful accessibility must be a key evaluative criterion.

Academic support, including teacher consultation time, also reflects systemic limitations. In large courses with high proportions of international students, available office hours and consultation appointments are insufficient to meet demand. Students who require additional academic guidance—particularly in their early semesters—often struggle to secure time with teaching staff. Again, services exist, but their reach is inherently constrained.

The ISRC submits that international student support must shift from demonstrating the existence of programs to ensuring that such programs are designed and resourced to be universally accessible. To achieve this, we recommend that:

- Support services—including orientation, wellbeing, career development and academic assistance—be planned on the basis of the full potential cohort, rather than the small proportion expected to participate;

- Coverage, accessibility and system capacity be embedded as core indicators in policy and regulatory frameworks, rather than relying on the presence of service types alone;

- Wellbeing services be enhanced through adequate staffing, cultural competence, multilingual accessibility and proactive outreach, recognising wellbeing as foundational to learning success; and

-Universities be structurally prepared to support all students who may need assistance, not only those who manage to access limited places or who are already well equipped to navigate the system.

Only when institutions are capable of supporting the full international student population—not just a small subset—can international education uphold its commitments to educational quality, equity and public accountability. The ISRC therefore calls for reforms that place service accessibility and system preparedness at the centre of international education quality assurance.

4) Institutionalising the International Student Voice in Governance

The ISRC considers that a fundamental structural gap exists within Australia's international education governance system: the experiences, needs and risk signals of international students are not incorporated into decision-making processes at national, state or institutional levels in a systematic, continuous and accountable way. While the ESOS Act and the National Code require providers to support international students, these obligations are implemented primarily through compliance procedures—focusing on documentation and audit—rather than by recognising international students as part of the governance architecture. When student perspectives cannot reach decision-making venues, policy design inevitably diverges from actual needs, and risks remain unidentified until late in the process.

Issues such as housing stress, transport vulnerability, unsafe workplaces, campus safety concerns and agent misconduct recur not because information is unavailable, but because no institutionalised mechanism exists to bring these issues to the attention of decision-makers before policies are developed or resources are allocated. As a result, risk signals often surface only after harm has occurred, typically through isolated complaints or media reports, rather than through a coherent and structured governance feedback loop. In

any complex system, such delays in information flow weaken governance capacity and enlarge policy blind spots.

Within universities, international student participation is largely confined to experience surveys, ad hoc consultations or complaints processes, with no stable pathway for student input to reach governing bodies such as University Councils. Consequently, decisions related to student welfare, academic quality, campus life and service planning often proceed without sufficient evidence from the student perspective. Universities lack the depth of insight required to understand the real conditions and priorities of their international cohorts, and students have limited influence over decisions that directly affect them. When voices that should be heard are structurally excluded, governance inevitably develops blind spots and misaligned priorities.

At the state and territory level, the influence of international students is further diluted. Although housing regulation, transport systems, public safety, health services and community infrastructure directly shape the everyday conditions and risk exposures of international students, most jurisdictions lack a stable, cross-departmental mechanism to incorporate student perspectives into policy development. Concerns about rental market instability, the affordability and reliability of transport, or access to health and wellbeing services rarely enter the policy process in a timely manner. Policy impacts often become evident only after implementation, reflecting a persistent mismatch between student experience and system responsiveness.

At the national level, the broader direction of international education policy, regulatory settings and cross-portfolio coordination similarly lack institutionalised input from international students. Major policy areas—including visa settings, integrity frameworks, employment rights and revisions to education standards—do not systematically incorporate student consultation as a formal prerequisite. Policymakers therefore lack structured evidence from those directly affected, and student perspectives enter national debate irregularly and reactively, creating long-term asymmetry between top-level design and lived reality.

From a governance perspective, this absence of structured listening erodes early-warning capability, weakens the system’s capacity to allocate resources effectively and creates persistent distortions in how needs are interpreted and addressed. International students constitute a large and highly diverse cohort whose contributions are significant, yet whose feedback is not embedded in the governance layers that shape the conditions of their study and life. This omission has become a material issue for the quality, legitimacy and integrity of Australia’s international education system.

The ISRC therefore argues that a coordinated and accountable consultative architecture is required across national, state and institutional levels, enabling evidence, insights and risk signals from international students to enter decision-making processes in a structured and traceable manner. As an independent, student-led national representative body, the ISRC is uniquely positioned to consolidate perspectives across institutions and regions, and to provide governments and universities with coherent, first-hand policy intelligence. We are willing to play a constructive role in the design and operation of such governance mechanisms—supporting risk identification, policy evaluation and system improvement.

We also call for formal recognition and support for the ISRC within national governance and policy frameworks, so that international student representation is not left to institutional discretion or temporary initiatives. Embedding an independent and stable student voice within Australia's higher-education governance system is essential for ensuring policy coherence, transparency and public accountability. Only when international student perspectives are institutionally integrated into governance structures can the integrity and effectiveness of Australia's international education system be properly safeguarded.