



**Australian Federation of International Students**

---

**Suicide in Australia**

Submission to the Senate Inquiry

Prepared by Wesa Chau, Honorary President of AFIS



## Australian Federation of International Students

---

### **Introduction**

AFIS welcomes the opportunity to present a submission to the inquiry.

Mental health issues among international students often go unnoticed due to stigma associated with mental health in their home country, and students do not seek help until it is too late. There is currently no known research on mental health problems among international students in Australia, hence this paper is based on the individual cases that present to the Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) and to pastoral care support service at private colleges. AFIS treats its cases with the strictest confidence - these cases have been de-identified and de-personalised for the purpose of this paper.

Due to the inadequate information we have around mental health issues in the international student community, this paper only highlights the issues AFIS is aware of. There is an urgent call for the Government to research into mental health issues among international students in Australia.

### **Mental Health Issues among international students**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that there are high proportions of international students with mental health problems due to:

- Cultural shock when arriving in Australia leading to social isolation of international students
- Lack of social support for international students – international students come with no family and friends network
- Lack of appropriate mental health support services available to international students
- High pressures from parents to study hard and get high grades in Australia

Suicide, and mental health issues are highly stigmatised topics in the cultures where students come from, and hence it is not widely discussed among students. For this reason, the issues are vastly under-reported. Hence it is not likely that students seek help early until it is too late, often after they have committed suicide. Other reasons for under-reporting include students not aware that their problem is a mental health issue, that they feel there is no where for them to express their issues, and that it may impact negatively on their student visa.

In interviewing some education providers, it is apparent that some providers have pastoral care service in place to support students who present symptoms of mental health providers, however it is also to AFIS knowledge that many providers do not have such system in place.

Of those that has care systems in place, the majority of students do not approach the service directly, the referrals are mainly through teachers. In the case of AFIS, serious issues are more likely to be referred to by others, rather than self referral.

It is also to AFIS knowledge that some students has returned home due to severe depression, anxiety and other mental health issues.

### **Suicide rate among international students**

Whilst AFIS do not have research data on the percentage of students who have attempted suicide, anecdotal evidence suggests that the numbers are quite high. It also suggests that in one of the well-known international student accommodation complex, there has been at least one per year. Community leaders have also raised the concern of student attempt suicides with AFIS, having seen 2 attempted suicides.

Education providers have also claimed that some students expressed that they 'do not want to live anymore, because there is no reason to live'. This is a reason of concern that some students who are highly stressed and depressed living in Australia, who are so isolated that they do not want to live anymore.

### **Services for international students**

There is currently a lack of services provided to international students. Some education providers has welfare service systems in place, however all student welfare departments have expressed the inadequate resourcing provided to assist the number of students who require support.

There is also inadequate resourcing to services provided to international students in the community. AFIS service 8,000 students annually, with some serious cases, but has to rely largely on the goodwill of volunteers in the organisation to assist fellow students.

Mental health providers on the other hand, have expressed the need to assist international students, however their funding do not allow for this, and hence they could only assist those in crisis. Clearly, there is a lack of support to international students

International students rarely approach counsellors, psychologist or psychiatrist for support, however, when they do, reports to us have indicated that they charge a high rates for international students who require the service.

### **Recommendations**

It is noted at AFIS that supporting international students could not come from the Government alone, but it is also the responsibility of the education providers, as well as the community.

Referrals for services may come from a number of sources:

- Students themselves (not likely)
- Friends
- General Practitioners (GPs)
- Teachers, lecturers and tutors
- Others (from the community who know the student)

It is therefore recommended that:

- there needs to be research into mental health issues among international students and their access to services in Australia
- compulsory of education providers to provide health services to international students
- provide access to appropriate mental health services (non-crisis) to international students when required
- education to GPs (especially those who service international students) to refer students presenting symptoms of mental health to appropriate services
- education to international students, and develop projects to help international students to keep mentally healthy
- mental health services to provide culturally appropriate services

### **About Australian Federation of International Students**

The Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) is a national non-profit, community-oriented and community-run organisation aimed at assisting international students maximise the scope and potential of their experience living and studying in Australia. AFIS intends is to work with the government bodies, institutions, student clubs and community organisations to enhance and enrich the experience of international students by addressing their interests and needs, and enhanced by the provision accurate and timely information and services.

AFIS' vision is to involve international students in Australia's multicultural community through events and programs designed to assist our members interact and engage with confidence and security in Australia's culture and community.

Our direction for the future is to become the "one stop shop" for all international student issues and concerns, and to be recognised as a leader in the international students issues debate – a credible voice to government, community services and student groups.

AFIS currently provides a number of services including:

- One-to-one support for international students
- Delivery of culturally appropriate orientation programs to international students at TAFEs and private colleges
- Education programs to international students
- Social engagement programs
- Seminars and forums appropriate to international students