

SUBMISSION RELATING TO ESOS REVIEW ISSUES PAPER

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Supporting Students' Interests

- i. How can the quality and accessibility of reliable information be improved?

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Comments

International students receive two types of important information before they leave their home countries to come study in Australia and they can receive this information in a variety of ways.

The first set of information is that which they use to make a decision about which education provider they would like to study at. Very significant here are realistic assessments of the cost of living in areas near to the education provider and the difficulty or otherwise of obtaining part-time employment. As indicated in the Issues Paper, the information used in this way often comes from a variety of sources – websites of the providers, family and friends and agents. Although it highly valued in the cultures from which many potential students come, information from family and friends cannot be controlled in any way. The information held on a provider's website should always be completely accurate and checking this should be part of the compliance process. Many agents do provide accurate and helpful information but some do not. Encouraging, or even requiring agents, to have undertake training and/or professional develop can help to distinguish between these two groups of agents. PIER has developed and is running such a training program. ISANA runs Special Interest Groups in a variety of areas at our annual conference and throughout the year and in our up-coming conference in December we are hoping to establish a Special Interest Group for agents.

The second set of information is that which is used by the student between the time of them accepting their offer of enrollment and their leaving their home country. In this period of time they make decisions about a number of issues such as what type of accommodation they will use that can affect seriously their well-being during their time of study in Australia. It is at this point that information about such matters as Australian customs regulations and possible methods of transport from the airport should also be provided. The ESOS Act and the National Code make no reference to information provided to students at this point in time. Information at this stage is again provided by three sources – the education provider, family and friends, and agents. Some education providers have developed very innovative ways such as DVDs and pre-departure sessions in the student's home country to provide this information. ISANA has developed and placed on its website a template, that contains the areas and information that should be covered at this and other stages, for use by any education provider. It is called *Orientation and Pre-Arrival Handbook – The Rainbow Guide*. The dissemination of information in this period is one of the areas being studied in a project being undertaken by ISANA and researchers from RMIT on good practice among providers in the higher education and VET sectors in relation to international students' experiences on and off campus. Some of the results

of this project were presented at the recent AIEC in Sydney and the report from the project will be available in early November.

Recommendations

1. That the accuracy of information contained on the website of an education provider should always be checked as part of any check for compliance by that institution. This should include the accuracy of information about the cost of living in areas close to the education provider, the availability of suitable accommodation in that and nearby areas and the difficulty or otherwise of obtaining part-time employment in the area.
2. That all agents, both local and overseas be required to show that they have had some training or professional development relevant to the area and that education providers be required to use only agents who have undertaken such training or professional development.
3. That the requirements of the National Code be expanded to include the information that should be provided to international students in the period between their acceptance of their offers of enrollment and their leaving to come to Australia.

ii. No Comment

- iii. Are different mechanisms needed to support international students to resolve complaints effectively? ...

Comments

Where the institution employs sufficient support staff specifically for international students i.e. International Student Advisors, International Student Officers, Dean of International Students etc and these staff are well trained, these staff members will support students in resolving their problems which could lead to complaints and advocate for them when a complaint needs to be made. Many complaints often arise because of a lack of appropriate knowledge, cultural misunderstandings, and the inability of students to concentrate on their studies because of other problems such as those that relate to accommodation and employment. Members of the ISANA International Education Association fill the roles where information is supplied to international students and support is provided to deal with problems that they experience. With good support in this way, students can overcome the problems and return to concentrating on their studies and the number of complaints is reduced. ISANA members will also accompany and/or support students when they need to undertake appeals processes within their provider or with DIAC. However, not all institutions employ sufficient workers in these roles. In this case, it is important that there be some external person such as Ombudsman for International Students to whom the students can speak.

Recommendations

4. That, within Standard 6 in the National Code, some definition of what is meant by “sufficient” support staff for international students be included. This definition may need to be derived through consultation with various sections of the industry but could refer to the fraction of income spent on staffing these positions e.g. 10% of the total income from these students or be in terms of a

5. That an Ombudsman for International Students be appointed in each state and territory. International students should be encouraged to consult first with the student advisors provided by their education provider. This ombudsman should be regarded only as a point of last resort.

iv. No Comment

Delivering quality of the cornerstone of Australian education

- v. How can the intersection between ESOS and the underpinning quality assurance frameworks be improved?

Comments

The aspect of providing sufficient and appropriate support staff for international students needs to be both more fully defined and more successfully enforced. Much of the ESOS Act and the National Code provides adequate standards but these standards are not being adhered too by some providers and this is not always being detected and the standards enforced.

Recommendations

See Recommendations 1 – 5 above.

- vi. Where do the needs of international students differ from those of other students ...?

Comments

Two differences between international and local student are mentioned in the Issues Paper – the distance the international students are from family and friends and other support networks and the pressures they experience from parents both for cultural reasons where they come from a culture that values education very highly and the very large expenditure many of their parents are making on their tuition, travel and living expenses. They are two further ways in which international students differ from local students.

- a. The need for Acculturation and the effects of Culture Shock.

There is a great deal of variety among international students due to their home countries and cultural backgrounds, age differences, whether they are accompanied by dependents or other family members, their length of stay in Australia, and how often they return home during their period of study in Australia. How much acculturation is desirable and how much needs to take place so that they can function well in their studies varies with all these different situations. However, all international students need to undergo some acculturation and all of them will experience Culture Shock to some degree. There is a considerable body of research literature in this area. In 2002 I conducted an analysis of attendance patterns and reasons for absences among the international students with whom I was working. This research, the results of which were presented at the ISANA conference in 2002, confirmed the “W”-curve for cultural adjustment and the existence of Culture Shock. International students need special support and assistance as they go through these processes of Culture Shock and acculturation, often when they are a long way away from their usual support

networks. They need familiar faces to whom they can turn for help and these faces need to belong to people who have the time to help them, have undertaken some training or professional development in this area and are easily accessible by the international students.

b. Cultural differences in Help-seeking behaviour.

Different cultures, because of their different value systems (see Hofstede's Value Dimensions), have different attitudes to help-seeking behaviour. In Collectivist cultures such as those in Asia and the Middle East, help is always sought first from extended family members (in Asia) or tribal connections (in the Middle East). Problems are not shared with strangers or anyone outside the inner circle. This means that international students from these areas often will not use the services in counselling and support that are provided by the education provider. Where a student from Asia does not have immediate family members in Australia they will often gather around them a group of friends from their own culture who are as a substitute family. It is very important therefore that these international students have opportunities to form these friendship groups to support them. Such students also often phone their parents, and other family and friends in their home countries for advice when they have a problem. I conducted research which confirmed these things about the help-seeking behaviour of students with a Confucian-heritage background which I presented to the ISANA conference in 2006.

Both these sources of advice – family and friends in their home country and friends among other international students – will not necessarily have good knowledge of local conditions, services and regulations. It is important therefore that international students have an opportunity to make friends with local students or people from the local community who can provide them with such advice if they cannot or will not seek help from the services at their education provider. This is not easy to do and you cannot force people to be friends so creative ways must be found of doing this. Many international students come from cultures that view mental illness differently to the way it is viewed in Australia. Because of this, international students who experience mental illness must be treated carefully and specialized counseling services should be provided for them.

Recommendations

6. That the special needs of international students must be recognized in the provision of sufficient specialized personnel – see Recommendation 4. These personnel must be available in places where they are easily visible and accessible to international students. Specialized counseling services should be provided for international students with mental illnesses.
7. That it be a requirement in the National Code that education providers have activities for students that both allow them to make friends from their own culture and allow them to make Australian friends.
8. That it be a requirement of the National Code that all who work with international students, both in and outside of the classroom have training about cultural differences and cross-cultural communication.

vii, Is ESOS compliance and enforcement adequate?

Comments

No. See previous comments.

- viii. Can risk be better addressed through strengthening registration requirements and/or better targeting of compliance and enforcement action? ...

Comments

The National Code needs some expansion as discussed above but greater enforcement of compliance with the National Code is the main issue.

- ix. What should be the balance between a focus on inputs and prescription versus outcomes?

Comments

Outcomes are notoriously difficult to define well in the area of education in general. The situation becomes even more complex when dealing with international students who do not start from a level playing field either among themselves or in relation to local students. Talking about outcomes is particularly difficult when dealing with welfare issues. Often we are not aware of the reality of a situation or of the situation at all when a welfare system does not work well and students drop through the net. Therefore inputs and prescription are a more realistic option.

- x. How can ESOS better support Australia's visa program.

Comments

It is the other way round. The visa program must be changed to stop so many students simply using study in Australia as a route to Permanent Residence. It is this abuse of the system that is making ESOS difficult to enforce in many cases and has created the problems we have experienced recently in the industry. See Comments on next section.

Recommendation

9. That the Immigration Act be reviewed in relation to the ease of movement from a Student Visa to Permanent Residence.

Sustainability of the international education sector.

- xi. What role should ESOS have in supporting the ongoing sustainability of the international education sector ...?

Comments

If we don't do it well, students will go to other countries. While there are still things that we could do better in relation to the support and welfare of international students in Australia, we have in the past been world leaders in this area. Unfortunately, the industry has been allowed to grow too quickly and for the wrong reason (being a route to migration rather than being a source of education) and there are now a considerable number of providers who do not do things well. This is damaging the more long established providers who have done things well. Enforcement of compliance with the National Code is the answer.

Big is not always better and a smaller more uniformly high quality industry may give better prospects for long term sustainability.