

Supporting the interests of Students

Question i. answer

Education Agents

Education Agents recruiting for Australia play a major role in the information provided to prospective students and are a key driver behind the growth of the Australian International Industry over the last 30 years. The importance of agent activity to its on-going health cannot be over-stated.

Surveys indicate between 60% and 70% of all international students come to Australia using the services of an agent. Yet, agents have no peak body to speak for them and are often the target of negative media stories around unscrupulous agents regardless of the exemplary contribution that the vast majority make. We consider them to be invaluable members of our industry.

PIER, in partnership with the Australian government departments DEEWR and DIAC, and with substantive input from all education peak bodies, developed the Education Agent Training Course (EATC) in 2006.

The EATC is an-online training program which, when successfully completed, provides education agents with an accredited Australian VET qualification. Over 9000 agents are currently enrolled and 1266 from 45 countries have successfully completed formal assessment to become Qualified Education Agent Counsellors (QEAC). Qualified agents are publicly listed on the PIER website and form a network of professional agent practitioners around the world recruiting for all education sectors.

The EATC and the public listing of the QEAC has been a major success story and is an exemplary demonstration of a public-private partnership, working for the benefit of the industry as a whole.

PIER also trains agents in face-to face workshops and, contracted by AEI, delivered workshops and focus groups to 1,140 education agents across 13 cities and 6 major source countries during May-August this year.

There is currently a provision within the National Code that requires providers to take responsibility for their agents, and while this is a wholly appropriate mechanism, it could be strengthened by the engagement of providers with their agents through their training.

Recommendation

We recommend that the ESOS Act be modified to require all providers to demonstrate that the education agents who recruit on their behalf have appropriately qualified staff, for example by requiring their counsellors to undertake the EATC. If a provider insists on working with unqualified agents, they should be required to demonstrate a comprehensive annual, on-going training program for all such agents.

In order to allow providers who have not currently supported education agent training to instigate such a measure and to cause as little disruption to the industry as possible, it would be wise to provide an appropriate period of time, say 12 months for them to demonstrate

their compliance.

Effective Regulation

Question viii answer

Definitely through better targeting of compliance and enforcement. There is no point in spending much time on enforcement activities on proven institutions who have operated their courses for many years without incident.

These institutions should be audited on receipt of a substantial complaint only, but otherwise receive "light-touch" treatment that enables them to focus on their activities.

Effort should be spent to audit new providers each year, for up to three years to ensure compliance and provide training. Very few established providers have failed.

Recommendation

We recommend that providers who have had no history of complaint in the first period of their registration should be promoted to a low-risk status and thus not be audited unless a complaint so requires.

All new providers should be audited on an annual basis for the first three years to ensure the State authorities have a clear understanding of their operations and can help them arrive at sustainable practices.

Sustainability of International Education Sector

Question xi answer

Sustainability is linked to quality of delivery of services. The quality of delivery of services to international students is in turn linked to the staff within institutions having the required skills to undertake their respective roles.

We believe that the Government could do much more to encourage institutions to professionally develop their staff who work with international students, especially those at the coal-face e.g. enrolment officers, accommodation officers, and student advisors. The issues these staff deal with directly impact on the quality provision of services to students.

However, at present only a few education providers have committed to providing systematic professional development and training for such staff regarding issues specific to international education. The sustainability of the industry depends on the skills of this workforce.

The irony is that the necessary AQF qualifications exist to support and advance the expertise of this workforce but only PIER delivers a qualification, a Diploma of International Education Services. This qualification is available to any RTO to deliver. We would welcome competition but this is unlikely to occur until the ESOS Act requires education providers to properly train and qualify the staff that deal with international students.

Submission received from: International Education Services Ltd

By way of comparison, tourism is our 4th largest export industry. Tourism Training Australia estimates that 268,000 people a year undertake full or part-time training. 281 RTOs offer tourism qualifications.

We are of the view that requiring professional development of staff in international education would produce a huge improvement in quality outcomes. Education providers should be required to train staff and provide study leave to staff where appropriate to complete such training.

We note that the requirement for providers to "have appropriately trained staff" was included in the initial National Code but was excised after the first ESOS review process for no good reason.

Recommendation

We recommend that the ESOS regulations be amended to require each education provider to demonstrate an on-going formal professional development program of its international education staff including providing them with the opportunity to gain formal qualifications.

General Comments

We hope that this review will provide for improvement of the standard of delivery throughout the industry. While recently much public comment has focused on issues surrounding closure of a few private colleges, for IES the most important improvement needs to arise through a more professionalised workforce (including education agents engaged by providers).