NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

in the City of Sydney

PROJECT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study, conducted from January 2008 to August 2008, investigated and analysed the issues and challenges facing international students in Sydney. It was conducted as part of a research based work-placement project with the City of Sydney Council's Multicultural Services. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of international students, to reveal the difficulties and challenges faced, and the current support available to them. In-depth interviews were carried out with 14 international students and 9 service providers from both government and the private sector. International students were recruited through service providers who advertised the research study within education institutions. The sample of international students was further refined according to the students' nationality, cultural background, age, education institution, and the length of time spent studying in Sydney.

The findings of the research revealed many issues and challenges in the everyday life of international students. Some of the major issues reported by both service providers and international students included:

- accommodation
- public transport
- safety
- social isolation
- financial hardship
- lack of support services

Analysis of the research findings provided insights into the main issues that needed to be addressed. These findings provide the opportunity for the City of Sydney to work collaboratively with State and Federal governments, educational service providers, and community organisations to examine their current service provision for this target group. Some key recommendations include:

- the need for a co-ordinated approach to address the identified issues
- better supporting students with the issues of accommodation
- easing financial pressure
- advocating for travel concessions
- ensuring and improving safety
- educating students about support services available
- addressing the gaps in services and information for international students
- strategies for building up a support network that would better support students

INTRODUCTION

The City of Sydney values its diverse communities and seeks to provide services and programs that cater for all groups within the city community. The growing number of international students in Australian universities has revealed the need for a continuous assessment of needs for this particular group (Jepson, et. al., 2002).

Australian Education International year-to-date April 2008 international student data shows that there were 367,218 enrolments by full-fee International students in Australia on a student visa. This represents an 18% increase on the same period in 2007 in Australia. About 180,000 International students studied in NSW. International enrolments increased by 21% in NSW, 24% in Victoria and 21% in the Northern Territory in the last year. The main areas of increase in NSW were ELICOS (English Language Intensive) and VET (Vocational Education and Training) at 35% and 41% respectively. Higher education only grew at 3%. Three major universities, namely University of Sydney, UNSW and UTS, TAFE institutes and about 30 private colleges within and surrounding the City of Sydney Local Government contribute to a significant proportion of the International Student's population in NSW.

In addition to the social implication of the growing number of international students in the City of Sydney Local Government Area, this target group contributes significantly to the City's economic development, according to the International Visitor Survey (Tourism Research Australia 2008). International students account for 5% of international visitors' spending even though they make up only 1% of all International visitors in the City of Sydney Local Government area.

International students that come to study in Sydney bring with them rich cultural knowledge and skills, and greatly contribute to the cultural diversity and economic development of the city. Some of those students have come to Sydney for the first time and are exposed to the challenges of settlement within the new culture together with meeting the academic requirements. To better support this target group the City of Sydney Multicultural Services has initiated this study. Ultimately the goal is to enhance the international student's experience and to put in place strategies that better cater for international students' needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students studying in Australia bring with them a rich cultural paradigm that not only shapes their approach to learning, but also their expectations of lecturers, administrators and support staff (Ballard, 1987, in Jepson, Turner & Calway, 2002). Upon enrolment in an Australian international education program, international students are faced with the constraints within the new and unfamiliar cultural and academic domains. The aspects of acculturation, socio cultural adaptation, adjustment, language, communication and/or learning difficulties are some of the issues that international students might be facing (Hellstén, 2002).

Very often the requirements of English language standards do little to ensure that students are prepared for the vast cultural adjustment that they must make in order to succeed in the Australian education system (Cargill, 1996, in Jepson et. al., 2002). Research findings have revealed that the problems are much more complex than just language proficiency. Academics identify more extensive areas of conflict such as

learning styles, levels of participation, collaboration versus independence, plagiarism and structured/non-structured learning (Kutieleh & Egege, 2004). Further, there seems to be little or limited mutual understanding among academic staff and the student body of the kinds of cultural and socio-adaptive challenges that a new and oftentimes alienating education setting places on students (Ramburuth, 2001, in Hellstén, 2002 and McSwiney 1993, in Orr, Slee & Evryniadis, 1999)

Recent studies indicate that many international students are struggling to find the appropriate support and services. Social isolation is an issue – being separated from family and support networks, and adapting to life in an unfamiliar country, takes a toll on the mental health of many international students. The Cambridge International College study surveyed 1155 students at three tertiary institutions based in Melbourne. It found that 70 per cent of respondents had suffered loneliness and/or depression during their time in Australia (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia, 2008.). Further, international students face day to day difficulties such as coping with a new education system, social challenges and difficulty with making friends, financial constraints and difficulties with managing a tight budget, and difficulty coping with culture shock (Ahmad, 2006).

International students often experience difficulties in gaining suitable accommodation. A recent submission on housing needs faced by international students, by The National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia, claims that: "Due to their lack of understanding of rights and responsibilities, average age and inexperience in living away from home and/or renting properties in Australia, international students [...] are often exploited, discriminated against and through this, face many diverse problems when securing adequate housing and residing in Australia" (p. 2), (Smith, 2007). The pilot study on issues of Nepalese female students revealed that searching for and finding the accommodation was the most difficult time these students ever faced as they were not aware of the places and could not work things out on their own (Regmi, 2007) Indonesian students experienced similar difficulties (Putru, 2007).

International students are also facing financial difficulties. In order to make ends meet, many students are working in low-paid casual jobs while studying. 70 per cent of respondents to a Monash University study said they'd had financial difficulties while studying in Australia (p. 3), (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2005). The financial hardship is even more complicated by the fact that in NSW, international students are not eligible for travel concessions.

Safety is another big concern for international students. The Chinese consulate in Sydney has asked authorities to provide better protection for students after receiving reports of a high number of robberies and assaults. More than 180,000 international students studied in NSW last year, and Chinese overseas students make up the largest group at most universities. The consulate conducted a survey of 100 students in June 2008. It found more than one in four had been a victim of crime, 20 had been burgled at home and six had been robbed, several at knifepoint (Levett, 2008).

These findings, taken from a range of studies, suggest there are a number of needs for international students. One effective way to ascertain this is by conducting a needs analysis which involves both students and education and community service providers. In this way, a balanced view may be obtained, which may help in more accurately addressing the needs of international students when planning future support systems (Dooey, 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods were chosen for this research, using in-depth interviews to interview a sample of 14 students and 9 service providers. Qualitative research was deemed most suitable, as it tends to focus on exploring the 'depth' rather than the 'breadth' of the issues (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 2006). In addition, face-to-face interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to use the research questions to guide the direction of the interview, and to ensure respondents clearly understood the wording and purpose of each question. This was necessary for the reason that language and cultural barriers could have come in the way of communicating information. To avoid any language and/or cultural barriers, interpreter services were also offered to students during the interview process. The interviews were semi-structured and the questionnaire (see Appendix 3 & 4) consisted mainly of open-ended questions in order to gain as many details of the participants' situation and views on relevant issues as possible. Issues analysed during the study included settlement, accommodation, social isolation, financial hardship, lack of English language skills, issues regarding public transport, and lack of a support network to name a few.

Social research should never injure the people being studied, notes Babbie (2004). In this project the ethical issues involved protecting confidentiality and privacy of the participants and addressing potential harm that could have arisen during the process. The participants were given the option to choose the premises where the interview was going to take place (at the premises of the City of Sydney Pitt Street Office or their Education Institution). Attention was placed on ensuring that participants were aware of their confidentiality and privacy rights. A consent form was used to inform respondents that the response gathered would be used for the data analysis and their recorded conversation during the process of interview would be kept confidential (see Appendix).

THE SAMPLE

Participants were recruited from tertiary education institutions from both the public and private sector in Sydney. The students and service providers selected for this study were from University of Sydney, University of New South Wales, University of Technology, TAFE Sydney Institute, Australian Pacific College, Korean Working Holiday Support Centre, and a psychologist in a private practice also working in one of the Sydney's community centres.

The service providers were selected according to their roles - Head of International Student Support Unit, Coordinator of international student services, Head of University Counselling Service, Associate Director for International Students, International Student Coordinator, and Psychologist.

The service providers were contacted by phone and the aims and objectives of the research project were explained. A letter explaining the purpose of the study in more detail was sent out together with the consent form (Appendix 1 & 2). 11 private service providers were contacted and asked to participate, 3 agreed to participate.

Through service providers, international students were contacted via email and were invited to participate in the research. A free movie ticket was offered to thank them for their participation. Due to a large response from students willing to participate, selection criteria were devised which aimed to include students from different

nationalities, cultural background, age, education institutions, and the length of time spent studying in Sydney. Tables 1 and 2 below provide a profile of both the service provider and student samples.

English language proficiency
It is important to note students' English language proficiency as it greatly impacts on the quality of their life as international students. The majority, 10 out of 14 students interviewed, spoke fluent English. Students are considered to have fluent English if they are admitted to one of Australia's universities, which means they have met the English language requirements, and have passed the IELTS exam at the academic level. The remaining 4 students have basic English skills, and are studying in some of the Sydney's private colleges. Their aim is to learn English and prepare to sit for the IELTS exam.

Accommodation type
Eight students live in shared accommodation facilities. Four students live with their relatives or families, and two students reported living alone.

Duration of study
One student commenced the study in Sydney in 2002, two students in 2006, six students in 2007, five students in 2008, and six out of 14 students are enrolled into a course of 6 months duration, and those students are in Sydney on an exchange course studying for one semester only. Four students are enrolled into a course of 18 months duration; two students are doing a 2 year course and two students a 4-year course.

Reason for studying abroad and in Sydney
The reasons students chose to study in Sydney varied. Six students chose Sydney as a destination because the course was offered at one of the Sydney's universities. Four students said they wanted to experience city life in Australia. Three students chose Sydney because they have relatives living here. For the rest of the students, the reasons for coming to Sydney included love for animals, nature and beaches, the affordability of tuition fees (lower than in the UK), and the recommendations from a referral agency.

Plans for the future
For some of the students, studying in Australia is directly associated with the wish to obtain permanent residence and live in Australia, as they believe it offers a good and secure life to them and for future generations. Seven students expressed their wish to stay and work in Australia, and six students expressed their wish to apply for permanent residence and live in Australia. Three students wish to pursue their study in Australia and six students said they would be returning to their home country.

Initial expectation and experience of students
Most students reported having high expectations about living and studying in Sydney, especially the lifestyle. Some of those expectations are :

- Meeting people within the local community. One student commented: *"I wanted to experience my life as an exchange student to the fullest. I was most focused on the university and student life instead of the academic study. I wanted to integrate into local community and get to know a lot of international friends. I wanted to experience the life style here".*

- Australia and Australians being environmentally friendly. One student commented: *"I thought people in Australia were very concerned about the*

environmental protection.....when I have my meals in food courts of a shopping mall the containers are made of plastic and not recycled".

- Expectations about accommodation: One student said: *"I have been told that it was easy to find somewhere to live. (It) was difficult and my whole first semester was messed up by that and I ended up feeling that I actually wanted to leave".*

- Lifestyle expectations. One student stated: *"Before I came to Australia I thought it would be exciting, but when we came here we struggled with a lot of things.....I imagined that I would be staying with my friends having a good life and I will probably enjoy a lot and see a lot of places, but because of the financial constraints I stayed with my relatives".*

- Learning and speaking English. One student stated *"I wanted to learn English and I thought by coming here I would have to use English all the time".*

When asked about their experience, the issues and challenges reported involved social isolation, finding accommodation, financial hardship, public transport, employment, and concerns about their safety. Other difficulties reported were dealing with government/public services (immigration), lack of support, expensive or non-existent university facilities, culture shock, lack of information available, and general and mental health. These issues are discussed individually and in more depth in the following paragraphs.

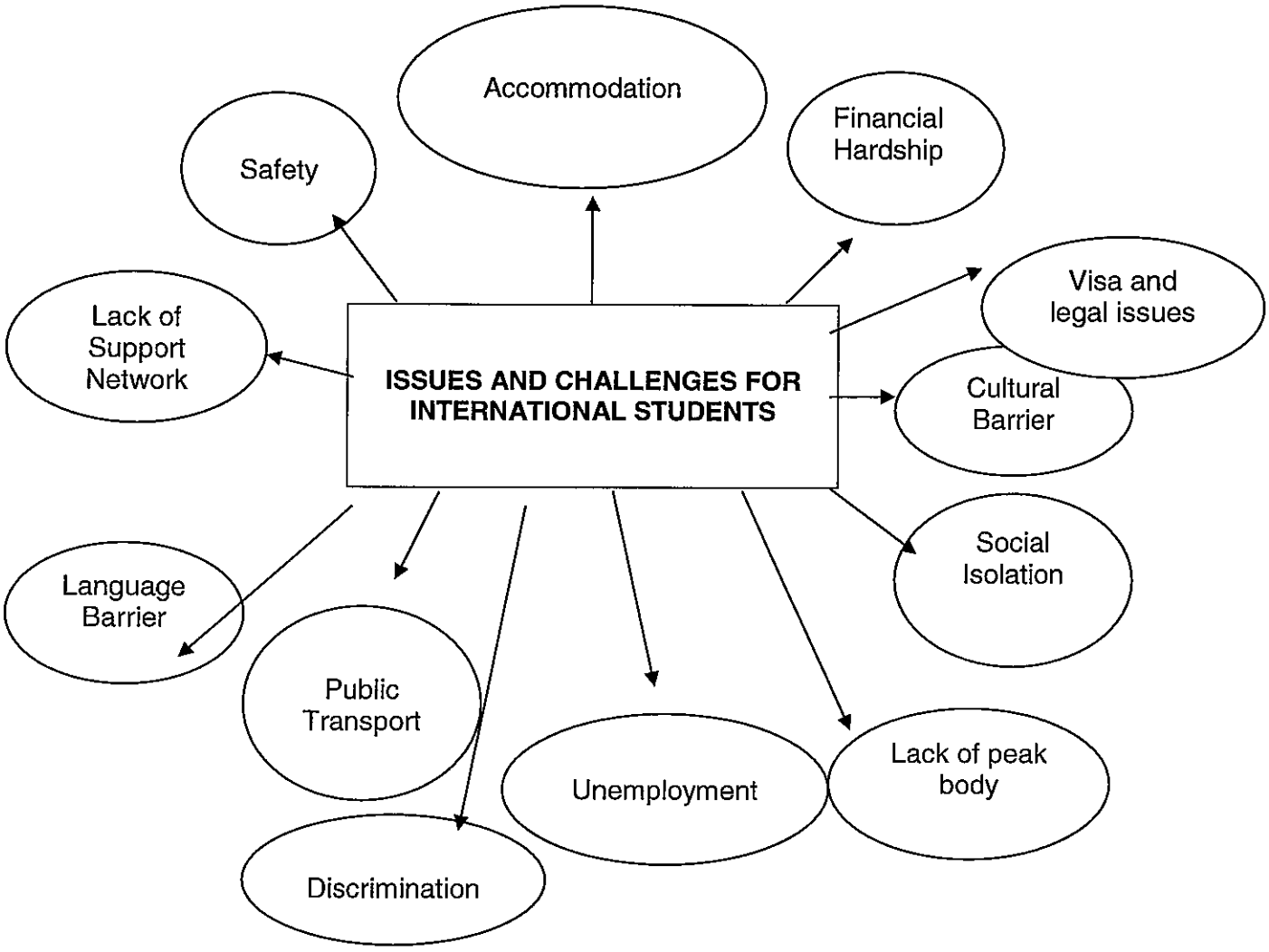
TABLE 1: SERVICE PROVIDERS PROFILE

Name of the organisation	Position / Role	Length of time in the current role
The University of Sydney	Head - International Student Support Unit	12 years
The University of Technology - International	Coordinator of international student services	5.5 years
The University of Technology - Student Services Unit	Head, University Counselling Service	9 years
The University of New South Wales	Associate Director, International Students	18 years
TAFE	Senior counsellor International student coordinator	Over 30 years Close to 30 years
TAFE – International student centre	Coordinator - customer service	1 year
D&H Psychological Service	Psychologist (in private practice and community centre)	3 years
The Korean Working Holiday Support Centre	Coordinator	1.5 months
Australian Pacific College	Student Services receptionist	14 months 1 year

TABLE 2: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS PROFILE

Age range	Countries of Origin	Languages spoken	Educational Institution	Suburbs of residence	Areas of study in Australia	Level of study
18-29 years Female – 8 students Male – 6 students	Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of China), Macao, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Germany, Kenya, France, Sweden	English, Korean, Cantonese, Mandarin, Urdu, Hindi, Swahili, French, Punjabi, Spanish, German, Latin, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Vietnamese and Telugu	The University of New South Wales, The University of Sydney, University of Technology, TAFE Randwick, Australian College for Languages, Australian Hair and Beauty College	Sydney (CBD), Pyrmont, Coogee, Altamont, Chatswood, Kingsford, Kensington, Randwick, Redfern, Hurstville, Northmead, Hornsby.	English language courses, Business courses, Health Sciences, Social work, International Law, Geology, Computer sciences, Journalism, communication and management, Dental Technology, Hairdressing.	Trade qualification, Bachelor's degree, Master's degree, PhD

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS – RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



"When they come to counselling what stands out is social isolation, cultural transition difficulties, deficit in their own ability, problems in the family background, English language proficiency, and lack of support network.
For some people they are able to take the initiative
but a lot of them become very disoriented"

- *Comment by service provider*

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation was reported by both international students and service providers as one of the main difficulties for international students. On arrival, some students are booked into a motel or a home stay. After that, students initially look for accommodation near their education institution, but because of accommodation shortages or high cost of accommodation, they are forced to move further into the suburbs.

"Trying to find accommodation was difficult and my whole first semester was messed up by that. It's a problem when you come here and you have left all your family and friends at the other side of the planet, you are all alone and you are supposed to go straight into study, and a completely different way of studying, it took a lot of getting use to. And doing that while I was still out house hunting was horrible. I ended up feeling that I actually wanted to leave".

"Don't even get me started on accommodation.
It was a big issue when I came here."

- *comments by international students*

Students who did find accommodation refer to themselves as being lucky, and some of them acknowledged the help of the relatives or friends already living in Sydney.

Service providers also saw accommodation to be a big issue for international students:

"Accommodation is one of the major issues. Every 2-3 months someone is changing address because of the prices or location, or sometimes actually the low quality of accommodation. As an international student if you want to find accommodation... you go through some of the furnished apartments, they are paying $180 a week for something that is minimum."

Most students would like to live closer to university and they would prefer to live walking distance to the university, saves time and money for
public transport. So they look for something to rent that's close to the
university, and in the areas around here there is a lot of old terrace houses
they are not in very good condition, there are landlords who are simply
renting out places to make whatever money
they can they are not really willing to do a place up so its decent for living,
so that's a really big issue."

- *comments by service providers*

Due to high cost in accommodation there are many cases where students share accommodation with too many people. A lot of students especially from Asian countries end up living together. This is viewed as unfortunate by students who want to integrate into the local community, improve their English language skills and meet Australian people and also has detrimental effects on study habits and privacy. International students also experience discrimination in the rental market owing to lack of a rental record and the questioning of their financial stability. As one student commented:

"We looked through property agencies, but our applications were ignored, because we did not have any reference letters, no credibility".

International students are often subject to exploitation in their search for accommodation: One service provider commented that:

"There are lots of people that are taking advantage of this group of students. Some people are renting really low standard housing and charging high above market rates. We have heard of people converting a garage with no windows and put students in, just basically exploiting them. I read about in the City for instance, one of the city apartments that ends up having about 10 students living in."

Language and cultural barriers, a lack of knowledge about the rental market and how it works plus unfamiliarity with tenancy regulations creates additional difficulties for students. Students also reported a lack of assistance in finding accommodation, with their expectations being that their education provider would assist them with finding suitable accommodation.

"From Hong Kong I sent a lot of emails to the University, but I either got no reply or they asked me to go through the website myself and find accommodation".

"People at the student support office were busy and they just showed me the board where I needed to look and find it myself".

- comments by international students

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Challenges with public transport remain mainly around its cost and accessibility. These views were shared by students and service providers alike. International students found the cost of public transport too high and were disappointed that they were not eligible for student travel concessions.

"They really have to provide travel concession for international students. It is crazy expensive. Just to come to the city I have to think twice if I am really going to spend $6 on one trip.

"I am a student and why do I not count as a student? We are paying more to the university than the domestic students and we are not even entitled to a little bit of benefit when it comes to travelling. That is ridiculous, and it is so unfair. You feel a bit discriminated as well. It's very unfair."

- comments by international students

Service providers shared the same view:

"For many years another big issue for international students has been that there is no transport concession and that's been a huge issue and we tried to persuade the state government for longer than I have been here.....this is a big issue for the students because it adds a lot to the cost of living, because public transport is quite expensive. You can get cheaper accommodation of you are further away from the city centre but what you saving on rental costs you are paying on travel costs...(The students) are bringing a lot of money into

the country and they are paying taxes (GST), they are working and paying income tax, so really they've been treated as second class people where they is no justification. There is a very strong sense of injustice about it."

"More and more our international students are aware of how much they are contributing to the Australian economy and feeling that they are not really getting very much in return for it. I've had students who had quite openly said to me that they feel they are just a cash card for big university and the country. They are bringing in a lot of money, they are spending a lot of money here, they are paying taxes here but they are not really treated as well for the contribution they are making."

In addition to the cost, some students reported difficulties in understanding the Sydney bus and rail systems:

"The instructions such as notice boards, announcements, and signs on the bus stops are not being very clear. The announcement system here is not clear either so it's hard to understand when they announce the following stop in the train. Here there are many different lines, so it is a bit confusing."

"My stay-at-home mum told me about the public transport and which ticket to buy, but a lot of students have difficulty with that."

- *comments by international students*

In relation to difficulties experienced by students in understanding the Sydney public transport system, service providers stated that there have been incidents with ticket inspectors on Sydney buses and trains which have been very distressing for international students.

"In general their experiences are often quite distressing. They find the regulations abut public transport and ticketing confusing. Information should be available in other languages. Anecdotally it seems as if young people and those from a CALD background are often targeted. The inspectors are intimidating and heavy-handed, often operating in twos or threes. In one instance recently a young PhD. student from the US was actually taken off the bus because she had a student ticket but was not a local student – although the bus driver had sold her a concession ticket..... there were 2 inspectors and they actually looked through her purse to find ID!"

- comment by service provider

SAFETY

The issue of safety is very present in minds of international students with 12 of the 14 students interviewed stating they had concerns about their safety. Some have an awareness of unsafe areas in Sydney prior to arriving to Australia having heard from friends who had studied or visited Sydney. A few students reported that they had heard Redfern was an unsafe area. Students expressed their concern regarding safety issues from what they see themselves or hear from the news.

"I saw lots of robberies in Hornsby and here in the city".

"It was scary to hear on the news that some people were getting murdered on the street. I was concerned about the safety issue when I went to uni by myself"

- *comments by international students*

Safety concerns escalated following the murder of Korean student on George Street in 2008. This was disturbing particularly within the Korean community and amongst international students. Many students and service providers commented on safety concerns or related experiences in which they had felt unsafe:

"I had a very negative experience. The trains got very late and some buses were not running. I had my baby and my wife with me. I am from subcontinent and I was getting some very negative treatment there at the bus stop. I was waiting for the bus, but it didn't come. I was calling the taxi, but the taxi did not come. All the taxis were full and the taxis refused to take us, because we had a baby and they did not have any baby seats. We stood there at Central Station, I was so afraid. If I were alone I could have walked from Central Station to Hyde Park, or any other place to catch a bus. But with my wife and a child I was reluctant to leave Central Station because I felt that it was more secure to stay there. We stood there from 11:30 until 1 am in the morning until one taxi driver agreed to take us. Security is an issue at late hours, so my rule of thumb is don't get out at late hours".

- *comment by international student*

"We had a few incidents with students where they'll come in and say that on the weekend they got robbed. So we refer them to police station. Students think that the whole investigation takes a little bit too long, and a lot of the time they don't get stuff back anyway."

"There are safety issues. People get robbed, on the street, or where they live, but the police don't attend to international students' complaints, or they don't seem to be as vigilant as they could."

- *comments by service providers*

Language difficulties also compound safety issues:

"I have difficulty when I talk to Police because I can't speak English very well".

- *comment by international student*

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The majority of students reported issues of social isolation. Factors leading to their social isolation included:

- not having any support network
- having to live far away from their place of study
- difficulty integrating into their local community
- not going out because of the high public transport cost.

Disappointment was expressed by international students in not being able to integrate into a local community, with 12 out of 14 students reporting difficulties meeting local people. As a result, they end up socialising with people from their own cultural background and they do not get to practise their English skills and get the exposure to Australian culture and the way of life that they wanted to learn about.

"Before I came here I considered myself quite talkative and outgoing and I thought I could meet a lot of friends.....I wanted to meet more western friends, but when I came here I found that other students they come in the groups with a similar nationalities. I wanted to meet more Australian people, but my peer group now is mainly from Asian counties. I think (local people) already have their group of friends. I don't get a lot of chance to meet local people".

- comment by international student

The language barrier was given as one of the reasons for the problems they experience in meeting local people. Another student acknowledged the cultural barrier and the different style of socializing.

"Perhaps it is because cultural difference or different language.....local students here like to go clubbing, but this is not our culture. In Hong Kong we would go to café. We have a special café culture in Hong Kong with nicely decorated rooms where youngsters gather and social. We can hang out there until 3am. It is not about drinking it's more about socialising and talking, getting to know each other. The music in these places is relaxing also, not loud".

- comment by international student

The window of opportunity for international students to meet other students comes from their university where they have international students support services who develop various programs for international students. International students use these services as a source of meeting other students, however they tend to end up meeting other international students, not the local students. Some students turn to churches in order to integrate into the local community.

Service providers' comments on the issue of social isolation reveal much the same view:

"I think a lot of international students will want to have Australian experience but I don't think the Australian community is terribly welcoming. Even on this campus, we tried for years. From one side I hear the criticism that international students are living with other international students, they are not using their English, which is why their English is not good. But international students want that interaction. But where are the locals, are the locals willing to befriend them? I think local students are very busy. You don't see many around. A lot of local students have jobs so in a way they come on campus and after the lectures they leave. From 5-7 o'clock the queue for a bus is huge, they have to wait for the bus and some of them a train, so a lot of local students don't get time to stay around and mingle. They also have their previous networks (high school friends) or they meet people who do the same program as them and they make friends that way. Unless they have another interest (i.e. lived in Thailand or have learned the language) otherwise why would they want to do that?"

"There is some sticking together of nationalities where people live in share accommodation, that can happen quite a lot, where people share like 3 to a room around the CBD, and that can be an issue where their social networks are pretty good but their engagement with the Australian community isn't very good and their language skills don't develop as quickly as they would if they were having more contact with people speaking English all the time."

- comments by service providers

The situation is even more difficult for international students who are enrolled into a research program. This is because the research program can start at any time of the year, which means they do not start with other students, but individually, which

makes them even more isolated and not part of the group. This does not only relate to lectures but getting involved in other activities that university life offers. Other reasons for students having difficulties building up their social network and meeting other people come from having to deal with other challenges, the major one being accommodation.

Regardless of the reason, the experience of social isolation by international students can be extremely unsettling:

"I'm feeling very, very lonely a the moment, its been 2 weeks. What I realised after I came, is that after your class everyone goes their separate ways, so I don't really have a lot of friends. The people are very nice, in the uni they will smile and talk to you, but I think that is where they draw the line, they don't want anything more they don't want to hang out. I do find myself feeling lonely and friendless..... sometimes I really find myself feeling very, very low, very down I just want to cry. It is a new place I have to adjust all over again to a whole new environment. But if you have a friend that would help, but I don't have anyone like that so I just feel a bit lonely".

- *comment by international student*

Social isolation can also impact upon international students' study outcomes:

Social connections affect academic work so much because if you don't have anyone else that you can say 'do you understand that the same way I understood it", and if you don't have anyone to ring up and say 'I missed first half of the lecture, can you give me the notes', if you don't have anybody that you can study with before an exam you are at disadvantage."

- *comment by service provider*

Service providers also commented on the effect of racism as experienced by some international students:

"One of the things that I do hear from students, not all that often,(and I suspect I don't hear it that often, not because it's not happening that often, but because students don't come and talk about it because they realise there is not much we can do about it in university) is some quite blatant racism. Not on campus, the campus is actually the place where there are a lot of nationalities and diversity is not an issue and generally there is no racist stuff that goes on. The campus is a very safe place in that way, but I've had students talked to me about their experience out in the community where quite recently, we had some African students, quite black, and one of them was travelling by bus, and no spare seats in the bus apart from the one next to him and nobody would sit down next to him. On that occasion he was travelling with a group of other African students. He was sitting down and some fellow got on the bus and the student stood up and offered his seat to his man who then turned around and abused him and said: 'why don't you people go home, we don't want your type here". The Asian students reported similar things. So I think that out in the community is quite overt racism happening and that is quite unpleasant."

"Racism they experience on the streets more than on the campus. We haven't had too much trouble but yes it exists."

- *comments by service providers*

FINANCIAL HARDSHIP AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Not earning money and having a lot of expenses living in an expensive city affects all areas of student life and does not leave many opportunities for them to enjoy their student experience. For many international students, having an income would relieve some of their financial hardship. Also, they would gain experience working in Australia which would add to their professional development and complement their study and experience working and living in a different culture.

"I have been looking out of the window all the time and would love to go around and explore. I have been here 3 months now and I still didn't even see and walk around the Opera House, because I find I cannot afford it".

- comment by international student

Visa regulations complicate the matter further.

"Students try to earn money, but they can only work 20 hours a week, and because of the study restraints they try to slot the work in semester break. I see people working a full week without any break at all. They work at few jobs to get the money, so it's tough".

- comment by international student

Many employers do not look favourably upon employing international students knowing they are only allowed to work 20 hours per week. Because of that, international students are viewed by employers as unstable and unreliable.

"I think that there is a discrimination in employing international students, based on ethnicity, that may be on the basis that some employers know that overseas students can only work 20 hours a week so they don't want to get so many overseas students who, as soon as the semester starts would actually leave. So they rely on people who are citizens or permanent residents".

- comment by international student

With some international students the issue in employment becomes their lack of English language skills. Another student shared her concern about being refused a job position, and the reason for that she thinks has to do with her religious background and the fact that she wears a hijab (scarf).

International students look on their previous work experience as another asset they could take with them together with their degree. Many expressed their disappointment for not being able to utilise their skills. The contradiction begins when they cannot get a job because they lack work experience in Australia, and they cannot get work experience when nobody is wiling to employ them. Another contradiction and constraint lies in the 20-hour a week work limit, which makes them unemployable for some of the jobs.

VISA ISSUES

The issues regarding student visas were also raised by students and service providers.

"For overseas students is all a chain of events. You get your visa late, you come here late, you can't find any accommodation, and you live far away from the university. It's one thing leading to another".

- comment by international student

Many international students are unfamiliar with visa regulations. Service providers expressed their views on this issue:

Many of the students who are coming here as international students are coming here with the aim to apply for permanent residency afterwards. As an education provider we can't counsel them on that, as all that falls under the Department of Immigration. But with the two separated bodies, students get stuck in the middle and they often have problems working out what they need to do in order to reach the goals that they are trying to get to. That's kind of the main issue that we have with problems with the students. So we do have some confrontational kind of situations with students when students have been given the conflicting information by immigration as well as the education provider.

"It's misinformation in the initial stages. There are situations where students have applied for the course, come over, realised that something in the course would be against their religious beliefs (for example to commercial cookery courses, students get here and realise that because of their religious beliefs they cannot touch certain meats). So then the situation arises that we have to get the student into something else, which may cause problems with their visa because of change of courses, which will clash with the immigration requirements."

- comments by service providers

International students might also be discriminated in tenancy rights, as the landlords are aware that on their student's visa they are only allowed to work only 20 hours per week.

SETTLEMENT ISSUES AND 'CULTURE SHOCK'

"International students are particularly vulnerable group. International students are leaving their country and their family; they are leaving all their cultural underpinnings and assumptions, they often are leaving their language, all of the references that they had and all sorts of assistance that they had, all sources of assistance that they had thorough relatives or doctors, religious people, all of it is gone. They land here often on their own incredibly vulnerable. Then they are confronted with a whole range of issues, just getting used to a whole new country, a new way a new language."

- comment by service provider

Many international students experience culture shock but some more than others. It is observed that the students from Asian countries are more vulnerable to culture shock then students coming from Europe. This may be due to cultural and religious backgrounds being different to what they experience in Australia.

"Yes I feel comfortable. The culture is not very different from Germany. Also in Germany I met a lot of different cultures so this doesn't come as a culture shock to me"

"In Korea the family gathers for meals together, and here everybody eats individually. Social life is different too – in Korea everything is open until late, and here in Australia shops close very early".

I have to mention also food has been an issue for me. I have been eating junk. Around the area where I live it is hard to find something Halal to eat. I have difficulty finding halal meat. There is nothing at university or outside to buy".

- comments by international students

Service providers reported that the ability to settle and cope with cultural differences varies between individuals and groups:

"I don't think there is any formula that applies to every individual. There are things that make it easier for some students to make that transition. For example, students that come from a country where they are not struggling with the language. Students who have lived away from home find it easier particularly if they actually lived away from home and in another country. Students that come from countries where the culture is more like our of course find it easier".

Some struggle with the cultural shock. Like the PNG students for example have said that they have find it quite difficult and isolating experience in terms of cultural and emotional difference between what its like at home and what it is like here. For US students its probably relatively similar to what it is back home but their expectations are different again and they expect services to be very spot on and they are customer focused, they see themselves as customers whereas students from some other places see themselves more as students and see a status differential.

"Depending of where they come from, if they see people kissing on the street is a major thing. In some countries like India, men hold hands walking around in India. They stopped doing that when they come here, because they realise that there is a different connotation."

- comments by service providers

English language proficiency can also add to the stresses of cultural adjustment and settlement. The problems arise in the areas of social life, employment and academic life.

"The barriers are cultural and language. Even though if you passed the English test if you don't actually use the language at home being able to communicate listening to people speaking on the topic you may or may not be familiar with it is actually very different. And reading, writing an essay, if you haven't done it before or even if you are from English speaking country it can be different as well.
For example, in some European countries, their examination is very different from the way that we have here."

"Disregarding which country the students are from, English language proficiency is the biggest challenge. The better equipped the students are with English proficiency, the more successful they will be."

- comments by service providers

Pressures with settling into the new cultural environment, lack of support during the difficulties with accommodation, social isolation and financial hardship have an effect on student well being.

"Another thing for international students is the potential for homesickness, whether or not they start to develop new networks, because of course they are separated from those who they've been living with, whether it be parents or significant relationships, even pets. So that can be quite difficult for international students and it's something that they have to adjust to because there isn't really a way around it."

- comment by service provider

Many international students also experience considerable pressure from their families to succeed at their studies in Australia:

"There is an incredible amount of pressure because the family might have mortgaged the home or sold some property as an investment in their education, so if they are failing then they are failing their family. And in some families that has sort of been trumpeted around the community that our son or daughter is studying in Australia, and consequently there is a pressure via the community through the family to the student that the reputation of the family is somehow attached to it as well".

Students will not tell their parents when they have failed some subjects, and they will take part time work to try and generate the money to pay for the subjects that they have to replace, which increases the pressure".

"Another thing that is more subtle is that sometimes they struggle with their parents. Maybe they didn't want to come to Australia in the first place, but their parents wanted them to come. Some families don't consider children's wishes, so there is the problem before they even come here."

- comments by service providers

MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

The effects of social isolation, homesickness, accommodation difficulties, unfamiliarity with the culture and language and pressure to achieve can lead to mental health problems for international students.

"I think I was depressed for some time when I arrived. Feeling homesick contributed to my depression."

"Many times I was really depressed and felt lonely
It was so stressful for me that something happened in my brain, I was trying to read but couldn't register what I was reading. I got worried that something was going wrong with me but I was obviously so highly stressed that I needed help. I went to the counsellors at my university and started seeing a counsellor and I saw a doctor who prescribed me some medications".

- comments by international students

"Mental health issue is quite severe; depression, anxiety, isolation. The issues presented are non-attendance at the college, but the reason for that is mainly some mental issue in the background."

"They know very little about counselling so the majority, when they have a problem, they are in the crisis situation. When asked why didn't they come and see a psychologist earlier, they responded (Chinese students) that they don't have much idea about counselling. The university counsellors they don't wish to see because they don't speak Chinese (Mandarin), or they do not know (their) cultural background.

"International students tend to present more often with physical issues rather than psychological and emotional issues. They will talk about headaches, stomach problems, so through talking about these presented issues, they take you from a physical symptom to an emotional problem."

- comments by service providers

Service providers reported several other issues and challenges that international students face:

"Loss of focus. Students get here with a pile of money for their fees. They get here, they are young, without parental control and some of them go a little crazy, lose focus on the fact they need to study, and end up down the casino getting into all sorts of trouble. The combination of being away from all the usual restraints and having a big sum of money on their hands, and in a stressful situation."

"When they come to Australia they have lot of expectations but they get into trouble and they get disappointed. They start going into pubs, casinos and start drinking. We would like to pull them from the wrong places and put them on the right way, but we cannot do that as we can afford only basics."

- comments by service providers

SUPPORT SERVICES AVAILABLE

This section sets out the findings in terms of support services for international students mentioned in the research by the service providers and international students.

THE GOVERNMENT SECTOR

The 3 universities and 1 TAFE Institute interviewed indicated that they offer a range of services to assist and support international students. Examples of such services highlighted by the service providers and students during the interviews were:

- Housing Assistance Service – listings of available accommodation, student assistance to drive new students to inspect accommodation
- Campus Accommodation – on a 'first come, first served' basis
- Peer mentor programs
- Student counselling service
- Pre-departure material including the booklets "Your Road to Success" and "Things to do before you leave home"
- International Student Support Unit
- Orientation and Official Welcome
- "Buddy" programs
- Monthly newsletter for international students
- Student medical service
- Support from community mental health teams
- Sporting and social clubs including "Uni Mates"
- "Returning Home" information/support
- Focus groups and feedback mechanisms for international students
- E-newsletter for international students
- Academic support services including "U-Pass"
- Multi-faith Chaplaincy Service
- Legal Service
- Student Association
- Connection with Transcultural Mental Health Service
- Job Placement Office
- Guest Speaker from Department of Immigration
- Campus security and safety information
- Staff development on international student issues

PRIVATE EDUCATION PROVIDERS

- English language skills support (Free English classes)
- Social activities including day trips and sporting activities
- Connecting students to volunteering opportunities
- Sexual health counselling and support
- Accommodation advice
- Employment advice
- Counselling service
- Information from recruitment agencies eg. Manpower

CITY OF SYDNEY'S CURRENT INITIATIVES

The City currently has a number of initiatives to address the needs of the international students, particularly in the areas of community safety, social isolation, information provision, and providing other support for local service providers to address their needs, they are:

Lord Mayor's reception for international students

The Lord Mayor of Sydney hosts an annual welcome reception for international students from the University of New South Wales, University of Sydney and University of Technology Sydney.

Community Safety

Safe City works with the Police and international student colleges in providing safety and security advice and translated information sheets. Police present the material to students who are newly arrived in the country and provide advice about ways of protecting both themselves and their property. Safe City staff also attend student orientation days on various campuses in partnership with the Police as another means of disseminating safety and security advice, specific initiatives include:

- Translated Student Safety Fact Sheet developed in 8 languages and distributed to International colleges and Universities in the City of Sydney
- Attendance and information at University and TAFE O-weeks
- Safety assessments of pedestrian corridors used by students when travelling from public transport and to campuses
- Steal From Person Campaign targeting International colleges
- BizSafe workshop for Chinese speaking business community

Social isolation

The Super V Multicultural Volunteer Program supports volunteers from diverse cultural backgrounds to contribute to the community and to provide volunteers with opportunities to meet new friends and establish new support networks. There are a number of International students registered as volunteers in the program and the co-ordinator of this program has started to promote it to TAFE, University and colleges. The City participated in the Volunteer Expo to promote the volunteer program last year.

Information Provision

The City has produced multilingual information for people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds including a community directory in 10 languages, Telephone Interpreter service information cards in 16 languages and Multilingual Welcome posters. The information has been widely promoted to community organisations and services. More promotion targeting international students is underway.

Other support for service providers to address the needs of international students:

Through the City's Local Community Grant program in late 2008, UTS and Sydney Multicultural community services have been granted funding on projects to address the lack of tenancy information and accommodation issues experienced by the

international students. Earlier this year the City supported the Indonesian welfare centre to organise information sessions for the Indonesian community on tenancy right issues and there is another one planned for November in partnership with the City's Custom House Library.

SERVICE GAPS AND INFORMATION GAPS

The sample from the **university** students indicated that there is considerable support for international students available and offered at their universities:

"The university does assist students getting new students their work rights, and extension of visas, and maybe holding some seminars regarding the immigration rules and regulations and how to get Permanent Residence and where. But mostly the international student support at the university is concerned about the welfare, counselling taking people on trips, organising activities.
I think they do a very good job".

- comment by international student

The situation is very different with **private education** providers who offer considerably less. There are also concerns that many of the existing services and resources have been over stretched or lack continuity.

" People at the student support office were busy and they just showed me the board where I needed to look and find it myself."
- comments by international students

"I assume most of them do and people who do not settle we may not be aware of it, they may just withdraw from the university and then go home. It's not that we would know about every single case because we are dealing with about 7000 – 8000 students. Sometimes if they are not coping, they can just put in a form saying they are returning home, before we even know."
- comments by service provider

"They have a lot of problems every day, with domestic violence, pregnancy, and they don't know how to fix their problem. In Sydney there are lots of young people from foreign countries, they mix together and without speaking English properly, the problems occur. Every day they are asking for help so we are starting work from 10am or 11am until 6pm or 7pm and sometimes even 8pm, because it is never the end of story."
- comments by service provider

The abolishment of the compulsory student union membership has also made the services offered to the students less affordable and available.

"At the university you can only use the facilities only if you are a member and membership fees are not very cheap.."
- comments by international students

Also, there is a general lack of support and services to address the safety, social and support needs of the students once they are outside the school campus.

Interviews with international students revealed that the great majority of students tend to use only services provided by their educational institution. It was evident that students have no or very little knowledge about the support services available to them in the community. Some students reported using services that are specific and tailored to their cultural background, for example Korean Support Centre and the Islamic Centre. Few students knew about services like Centrelink, Neighbourhood Centres and Legal Aid. Therefore, a more targeted approach in providing services and disseminating information to international students at private colleges in particular and a more coordinated approach are needed to address the often complex issues faced by international students.

Some of the service gaps and information needs identified by both students and service providers include:

- Greater support in finding suitable accommodation
- Affordable social and leisure activities at universities (many require a membership fee)
- More information about where to seek medical assistance and how to obtain private medical insurance
- More information about employee rights and correct rates of pay
- More information about tenancy issues and complaints procedures
- Increased 'buddy' or mentor support in their learning environments
- A more proactive approach by universities, colleges and other stakeholders in helping students build social networks with members of local communities
- Greater awareness of community mental health services
- An orientation to the public transport system in Sydney
- More information about accessing children's services, for international students with children
- Greater promotion by the City of Sydney Council in relation to the services they provide that may assist international students

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study show that the life of an international student in Sydney can be very challenging. Specifically, accommodation seems to be very difficult to find, especially around the campus where students prefer to reside. All students interviewed commented on their struggle with the cost of public transport and their disappointment at not being eligible for a NSW government travel concession, and the lack of opportunities to interact with the local community and learn more about the local cultures. Some of these challenges can be met by the local government, but more often it requires different levels of government, private and public education service providers, NGOs and the communities working together to help to improve the experience of international students in the City of Sydney and wider community. Here are some of the key issues identified and key recommendations arising from this research, which would serve as a basis for the formation of strategies and actions.

Key issues to emerge from this research with international students and service providers are:

- Accommodation
- Public Transport costs
- Social isolation and lack of contact with local communities
- Safety
- Availability of information for international students
- Employment

Recommendation 1: Accommodation

The struggle and mental tension that international students face due to the failure to arrange for accommodation becomes a major problem and therefore government and universities need to introduce some creative initiatives to solve this issue. International students might also be discriminated in tenancy rights, as the landlords are aware that on their student's visa they are only allowed to work only 20 hours per week. This is often a concern to landlords and impacts on their decision to consider international students as prospective tenants and issue them a lease.

- Support educational institutes and non government organisations to provide a service to help students to find accommodation and to provide accessible and translated information on the process of finding accommodation, their tenancy rights and services for legal advice

Recommendation 2: – Public Transport

Advocating for travel concessions for international students. This will greatly ease the financial pressure and alleviate the feelings of discrimination a lot of the students have reported.

- Introducing travel concessions for international students in NSW
- Making information signage at bus and train stops clearer and more visible
- Providing clearer and accessible information of fees and charges, and zoning on public transport

- Providing an accessible and affordable public transport system
- Providing cross cultural training to transit officers so they could respond to issues appropriately
- Providing legal assistance to help International students or people from CALD backgrounds to handle travel infringement issues when they believe they've been unfairly targeted.
- Reviewing the current travel infringement penalties, which are perceived to be disproportionate to the seriousness of the offences committed.

Recommendation 3: – Social Isolation and Lack of Contact with Local Communities

Introducing programs that would target international students and help them integrate into the local community. This could involve:

- Offering systems to help international students integrate into the local community
- Providing trips around the city so the students could have the opportunity to meet more local people
- Offering a service that would provide a bridge between local people and international students
- Promoting services that are already available
- Encouraging students to engage in the volunteering programs

Recommendation 4: Safety

Promoting and more importantly ensuring safety for international students is of a crucial importance.

- Implementing various crime prevention strategies and information in partnership with both public and private education institutions and Non-government organisations
- Strengthening the relationship between the police, international students and the Safe City unit in the City of Sydney through partnership initiatives such as community safety workshops and public campaigns.

Recommendation 5: Availability of information for international students

Better promotion of Council services. The research findings suggested that International students have limited information on Council services, so it is important to provide translated information about the City and Council's role and services. Promotion of information is important to help students learn about the city and the services available to them, should they want or need to engage with them.

Information needs. The City and other government departments to support development of, and promotion of translated information and education programs to improve students' awareness on accessing childcare, medical insurance, mental health and health services, community and legal services, tenancy and work rights to prevent exploitation.

Websites, chat rooms and blogs. Education institutions jointly developing a website where the information would be readily accessible would be very helpful to

students. Looking into chat rooms and blogs could be a way of finding out the needs of students. It is also important to remember that the best way to educate and inform students is to address them in their language and in a culturally sensitive way.

International Student Forum. Setting up and organising a forum with representatives of students and service providers. Through the forum, issues and challenges could be addressed and solutions offered. The benefit of having a forum is that it would serve as a bridge between the existing services that are offered in the community, but not known to everybody. A forum could be a service that could fill the gaps. It could also help in establishing what is already available in the community so that the existing services do not get duplicated.

International centre. Organising an international centre where service providers could work together in partnership to support international students in various ways. For example run seminars, run a support group, social club, promoting deeper connections between people, providing a facilitator to help people to know each other. Facilitating interactions, discussions, and interpersonal relations training sessions where they would be able to work on their communication style, and learn how to listen and understand and express themselves better. Organising reading groups for example, or organising groups that would emotionally support students, encouraging them to talk about their emotional problems they might experience. This would be very effective for students, as they would have a place they could belong to once they leave their country, and a place where they could develop support networks.

Peak body. It would be Ideal for international students to have a "home away from home". This could be organised by establishing the 'peak body' or the institution that would cater for international students needs. The "peak body" and/or international student institution would provide services specialised in the needs of international students. These would have information on services and the city, help with accommodation, financial help, help with academic difficulties, help with integrating into the local community, bilingual counselling, legal services and the like.

Recommendation 6: Employment

Services to help international students find work and protect their rights at work (i.e. fair payment, and no discrimination policies) could greatly help in improving their international student experience, and as a result ease the financial pressure that students face.

Advocating for better visa conditions: International students are more disadvantaged due to their visa status, which restricts them from full time work and as a consequence increases the financial burden. It also makes international students less desirable employees.

- Eligibility to work more than 20 hours per week
- Education institutions to provide job-searching assistance to international students.
- Offer more opportunities where international students can gain experience and build networks within the local community.

Access to a legal service: In terms of services that can be provided for international students, access to a free and/or affordable legal service, and an immigration

advisory service would be really useful. It is particularly important as many students contemplate applying for Permanent Residency

Recommendation 7: Support for organisations that support international students

Organisations that support international students are vulnerable. They are under funded and understaffed, and because of the lack of resources they cease to exist. Supporting those organizations and initiatives and working in partnership with them would be beneficial for all parties. Community organisations and education institutions are encouraged to apply for the City's Community grant programs to address the needs of international students identified in this research report.

Next steps

The City will be represented on a Ministerial taskforce convened by the Minister of Education and Training including representatives from peak bodies in education and training, as well as NSW Police Services, Tourism NSW and the Department of State and Regional Development to look at a range of issues pertinent to the international student industry.

FURTHER RESEARCH

This was an in-depth study with a small student and service provider sample. Broader research could:

- combine quantitative and qualitative research methods
- examine the practices of other States, Territories and local government areas in supporting international students
- identify models of best practice

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Introduction letter for international students
Appendix 2: Letter of consent for international students
Appendix 3: Introduction letter for service providers
Appendix 4: Letter of consent for service providers
Appendix 5: Questionnaire for international students
Appendix 6: Questionnaire for service providers for international students
Appendix 7: International Students' Profile