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Monday, 12 December 2022

## **Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's Tourism and International Education Sectors**

**December 2022**

**Compiled by Sharon Cook, ISANA National President, on behalf of ISANA members in Australia.**

ISANA International Education Association has represented professionals employed in international student support across the international education sector since 1989

ISANA has over 400 members in a large range of professional roles, including but not limited to, student advisors, student counsellors, admissions and compliance staff, careers staff, teaching and academic staff, accommodation provision, health care, and OSHC representatives, state government and local government international education staff, education agents from over 50 organisations in Australia.

ISANA is in a unique position to detail the work undertaken throughout Australian international education providers from 2020 to 2022 to address the impact of the global covid-19 pandemic on the support provided to international students during this time.

ISANA has gathered feedback from our membership consultations to outline how students have been supported over the past 2 1/2 years, what the key challenges were, and as students have begun returning to Australia in 2022, with many more expected to return to face-to-face learning in 2023, what this now means for the sector.

In addition, this submission will outline how ISANA responded to the 2020-2022 disruptions by providing support to members, through pivoting to online professional development and networking programs. We are grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this parliamentary inquiry.

[www.isana.org.au](http://www.isana.org.au)



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## **1. Challenges associated with the loss of international student numbers as a result of the significant disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and effective measures to attract and retain students to Australia**

Alongside most industries around the world, 2020 forced Australian education providers to develop new delivery methods in response to the reduced number of new students and the large number of continuing students who could not return to Australia and had to continue their studies offshore.

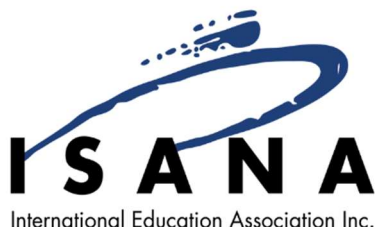
### **Impact on educational providers and staff**

The switch to online course delivery is the more publicly discussed change that most education providers were able to implement in 2020 to deliver their educational products to allow students to continue their studies. However, what is not as widely discussed is how education providers were also extremely busy creating new ways to support students, both those who remained in Australia and those who were continuing their studies while living in their home countries.

This change brought additional challenges to providers because alongside developing ways to deliver business as usual for support services in a virtual environment, there were many new and more complex challenges being experienced by international students, required staff agility and creativity, alongside an increase in workload.

The mental health impact on staff mostly caused by burnout was noticeable towards the end of 2020 and continued into 2021, due to the large increase in workload, with staff working from home, often contributing many hours of overtime. There was continuous additional work involved in pivoting, redesigning systems and programs and supporting increased numbers of distressed and isolated students, this was exacerbated by the reduced number of staff following significant restructures throughout the sector, with some institutions undergoing up to 3 restructures over 18 months from June 2020 to December 2021 and other providers having to lay off most of their workforce eg. English Language providers.

In short, the borders closing led to difficult decisions being made due to the sudden loss of income generated by the international student industry. Lost revenue caused many institutions to undertake redundancy programs without thorough planning or consultation, particularly in the area of student support services. The emerging impact after two years of the loss of these specialised staff who were responsible



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for services and institutional compliance is highlighting the essential role they held. Many providers are now experiencing a substantial impact financially when recruiting staff due to the costs of onboarding, training and upskilling.

To be prepared for another possible pandemic or similar disruption, the entire sector needs to consider what could be done differently to prevent such an impact. Following substantial restructures and loss of critical markets, staff in institutions are working harder than ever due to financial constraints and the time involved in training new colleagues. The sector has lost significant knowledge and experience that despite providers being willing to commit additional resources, cannot be quickly rebuilt.

### **Challenges impacting students' mental health**

Many international students studying either onshore or offshore were isolated throughout 2020 and 2021. A major contributing isolation factor was the online delivery to students of their education and support services. With the closure of the Australian borders in 2020 and 2021, orientation and ongoing study delivery had ceased in the face-to-face mode, with classes and services being moved to an online delivery. Some providers were well equipped to offer online studies, but many moved face-to-face courses online without reviewing or understanding the changes required to ensure a satisfactory study experience. At the same time new students did not have the opportunity to build friendships to connect with fellow students during their first critical weeks. It has been anecdotally reported that the inability to make connections contributed to the isolation students experienced, and in some cases this additional stress-point led to students being less engaged in their studies or failing to continue.

For students remaining in Australia, the isolation of ongoing lockdowns was detrimental to their education journeys, as they had no family support networks and many had very few friends to connect with in their Australian city or town. This contributed to a rise in mental health issues among international students across Australia.

The forced home school delivery of secondary school education, with students being kept home during covid impacted on their mental health, and there were increased issues in homestay environments.



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Students experiencing stress, isolation and other mental health challenges are normally referred to the provider's mental health or counselling support services. The instances of need in this regard increased, however, services that were normally offered to students were not able to be provided to students living and studying offshore. Students offshore were only able to be referred to social workers, which often couldn't provide the level of treatment required.

### **Financial stress**

The early advice under the Morrison Government to international students that they should go home together with these students not being included in the Job keeper income support program during 2020 resulted in students unable to leave Australia when urged to, feeling unwelcome in Australia and experiencing increased mental and financial stress.

To assist students undergoing financial hardship many institutions changed fee payment requirements or provided financial assistance to help students pay fees, as many students families at home were experiencing financial difficulties due to job losses.

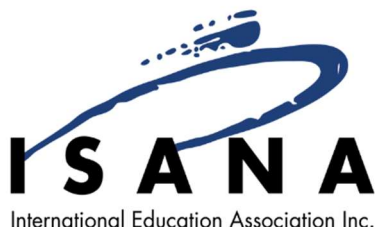
Although education providers put funding aside to support students, the community was primarily the leader in supporting students who had lost income, and who's family could not provide them adequate financial support. For example, student associations worked with hospitality departments in education providers to support students with meals. Cafes on campus became food preparation and distribution centres, and international student emergency relief was provided by the Red Cross hardship support, Foodbank, as well as some state government Covid19 test isolation and support payments.

Students were not always happy receiving food and meal handouts, and some preferred to receive vouchers to buy their own food and goods to enable them to access culturally appropriate options, demonstrating to the sector that one size fits all approaches were not always suitable.

In comparison, countries such as Canada and the UK included international students in the government COVID-19 payments.

## **2. Online innovations in education delivery and potential opportunities to strengthen the sector's resilience**

### **Bouncing back in 2022**



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The late opening of Australia's borders and the long visa processing wait times, has caused education provider additional challenges. There were many late starters in 2022, so student support teams had to introduce 'just in time' orientation programs for latecomers, to stagger and personalise support to comply with legislated requirements under the ESOS Act. There have been ongoing operational and academic administrative challenges because of the new or renewed programs required to meet the needs of students arriving throughout teaching periods. Some institutions introduced changed semester intakes to create new teaching periods because of visa processing delays.

In the VET sector, the market for onshore students changed, it became a more attractive market and student visa changes became attractive.

With the online delivery remaining to cater for students who were unable to return to Australia in 2022, a two-tier system has emerged. Offshore online students versus students onshore paying high costs to live and study in Australia. Onshore students initially wanted face to face classes reinstated and reportedly didn't want to study hybrid. This however did not hold for all students as many are now letting their providers know they would prefer a hybrid model. Offshore students have a completely different experience, they are often paying same fees without the additional support, access and campus experience.

### **Supporting legislative frameworks**

The ESOS Act underwent a review in 2022 and still needs finalising. The Act currently doesn't provide the flexibility desired or required in the 'new normal' of education delivery. There have been temporary changes to regulations introduced by TEQSA and ASQA, that will cease in June 2023 which allowed students to commence or continue their studies from their home country. However, post June 2023, with the removal of the relaxation of legislation except in cases not '...safe and practical to do so', full time online learning will no longer be available for those holding a student visa. As students have become accustomed to online study, education providers are finding it difficult in some cases, to attract students who still want to study online, either in their home country or in Australia.

The micro learning and teaching ecology in the VET sector demonstrates how the sector was forced to adjust to online delivery to address the large reduction in students. The sector changed programs to intensive schedules from trimesters, to



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make the programs more attractive to international students. This was challenging as the course structures and components of courses needed to fulfil current course requirements.

Lastly, both orientation and graduations became online events with a much smaller uptake by international students in their home countries.

### **3. Initiatives to ensure positive international student experience and support pathways to build their skills and contribute to Australia's prosperity**

#### **Professional development for student support staff is required**

As noted above, many specialist staff were made redundant through restructures in education institutions, and expertise has been lost across the entire education sector - all education sectors have been impacted, and as student numbers increase, and new staff are engaged, there is now the opportunity to standardise and rebuild the training and expertise for international education support staff throughout Australia. With a standardise approach, there will be a consistently high-quality student support workforce in Australia and therefore increasingly high-quality education experiences for all international students.

An example of such an approach is the National Code Tutorial, a resource created and delivered by ISANA through funding support from the Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment via an Enabling Growth and Innovation project fund. The National Code Tutorial (NCT) is an online training course designed for professionals working in the international education sector to gain knowledge and understanding of the ESOS Act and National Code 2018. The NCT has been developed to be utilised as an ongoing resource for all registered participants. The NCT is a resource that is essential for a skilled workforce ensuring international students are scaffolded for a positive experience. Along with supporting pathways to build their skills and contribute to Australia's prosperity.

#### **ISANA is well placed to provide the bulk of the professional development required, with support from the Federal government.**

ISANA provided high-quality, relevant and affordable online professional development throughout 2020-2022 to student support staff in Australian education institutions. Record numbers of members and non-member attended ISANA professional development over the past two years, consisting of online fortnightly





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webinars and networking events attracting members from all over Australia. Attendance has not slowed, and members are continually calling for more sessions, information, and training as they rebuild sector and institutional knowledge.

ISANA professional development enabled sharing of ideas, firstly in relation to supporting students throughout the pandemic - both physical and mental health support, how to keep them safe, E-safety, how they can be supported through meals and financial support, academic and learning.

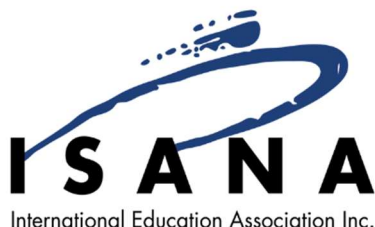
ISANA strove to provide members with a large range of opportunities to share how they were coping, how their institutions were providing support to staff, again sharing best practice examples. ISANA national conferences were delivered online at the end of each 2020 and 2021. Covid 19 practices were showcased, and in 2020, the theme was best practice in supporting students, the 2021 was how to recover and rebuild the sector.

Under 18s were a key focus, particularly in relation to accommodation and lockdown issues, sessions focussed on how we could welcome students back to Australia, what support they would need to get back into face-to-face study, and how this can be delivered in the hybrid education environment.

### **Student visa conditions impacting work-study balance**

In 2020 the Federal government changed the student visa condition, previously limiting students to 40 hours of paid work per fortnight, to allow unlimited work rights. Many ISANA members have reported that since this change, there have been increased issues with non-compliance, non-completion and failing of courses, due to students who had previously faced severe financial stress, prioritising paid work over study. Prior to Covid19, many students were known to be working over 40 hours per fortnight, which has indicated that the 40-hour limit may be too restrictive, however, unlimited work rights leave many students vulnerable to failing and not completing their courses on time. A revision of the appropriate number of hours of paid work per week is overdue and timely given the current temporary arrangement ceasing in June 2023.

From an industry perspective, with any changes to student visa work rights conditions, consideration should be given to the impact on the education sector, in relation to successful education outcomes, alongside the employment outcomes of international students as a key attraction for students to study in Australia, and Australia's economic prosperity and workforce demand. One key change that could



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be easily incorporated is to remove any student work placements or industry experiences from counting towards the current 40 hours per fortnight in the restricted work limits, thereby opening opportunities for many students whose courses do not mandatorily require work placements as part of the qualification.

To assist ensure future sustainability and prosperity, there is a need to implement an improved streamlined process, along with appropriate cultural intelligence, which will reduce conscious or unconscious bias.

### **Employment in students' fields of study is increasing**

Prior to 2022, international students have been very fortunate to be able to experience employment in their field of study Australia. Graduate employers often won't consider temporary visa holders and the graduate employment cycle is systematically set up to disadvantage student visa holders because they are normally unable to secure permanent residency status prior to making graduate program applications.

The shortage in skilled workers and increase workforce demand in Australia in has created more opportunities for international students. Over the past 12 months, there has been a reported increase in the number of companies willing to employ students in entry-level roles and train them in their chosen field of study. Companies are reportedly paying induction and ongoing professional development; this is reported by members to be across many fields and roles. In the 2022 upcoming summer semester, there is an increase in the number of students opting to work in roles related to their study, rather than previously when they would be undertaking additional study during this time to speed up the completion of their education or use that time to make up for units they may have failed.