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International student movement rising, paper warns

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A new discussion paper says international student disquiet in Australia is generating a growing movement. By Susan Woodward.

Government failure to address racism and the basic human rights of international students in Australia is fuelling a rising social movement and could collapse the nation's \$18 billion export education industry.

This thinly veiled warning is contained in a research paper released last week by the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia.

In the paper, the academy outlines the conditions of racism, violent attacks, sexual harassment, workplace exploitation and overcrowded, expensive accommodation that are causing international student unrest.

"[The student movement] is going to definitely become stronger and stronger, because these human rights issues are unanswered, because the various, really difficult problems are not being addressed effectively by government - in fact, government is resisting addressing them," said Professor Andrew Jakubowicz, who wrote the paper with Dr Devaki Monani, both from the University of Technology, Sydney.

No longer a marginalised minority, the sheer force of international student numbers would force policy change, or Australia's \$18 billion export education industry faced "catastrophic collapse", Jakubowicz told Campus Review.

The paper is the second to result from a series of roundtables held last year involving the academy, the Australian Human Rights Commission and Universities Australia.

Titled International Student Futures in Australia, it examines the nation's policies regarding international students and finds them to be shallow and unco-ordinated.

The paper calls on government to co-ordinate its policies and emphasises the need for social planning based on rigorous research.

"Poorly researched policy, under-theorised analyses, disconnected responses and unco-ordinated strategic perspectives have produced a somewhat chaotic approach," the authors write.

The paper notes an overwhelming majority of international students have reported positive experiences and satisfaction with education quality.

Yet it also says the fight for international student rights in Australia is growing into a global social movement of "some significance" and representing three million students.

The Council of International Students Australia, which contributed to the roundtables, used the paper's publication to pressure government to convene high-level meetings with peak representatives.

Council president Robert Atcheson called on the government to construct an instrument, such as a charter of human rights for international students, to align international students with their domestic counterparts.

“International students are in an extremely vulnerable position when they come to Australia to study and one of the reasons is because they lack basic human rights due to their temporary status within the Australian society,” Atcheson said.

The paper’s researchers also advocate for political rights. As taxpayers, international students “should be provided with access to some political influence, perhaps through being given the right to vote in local elections after 12 months’ residence, lasting for the period of their enrolment and recognised work experience,” they argue.

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans, whose international student strategy was tepidly received by the sector when released last October, did not respond to requests for comment for this story from Campus Review.

However, international student dissatisfaction is well known to the government. In a Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) briefing released to the media, the department informs incoming immigration minister Chris Bowen about the effects of migration policy on hundreds of thousands of international students.

“Many are aggrieved and they are beginning to mobilise,” the briefing warns.

Race discrimination commissioner Graeme Innes agreed government failure on human rights threatened the whole international student industry.

He said he was not confident the government would be able to prevent the industry’s collapse.

“All the figures and all the trends suggest otherwise. It’s been trending up at around 12 per cent per annum since the ‘90s, but all the forecasts suggest within the second half of this year there will be a 22 per cent drop in international students and that will move to 30 to 40 per cent,” Innes said.

“It’s going to hit the VET sector first and the higher education sector a bit later, but there will be a number of universities that [receive] a great deal of their budget from international students that will be seriously affected.”

Innes said economic damage wrought by recent flooding had already cast doubt on whether the Australian government could achieve its budget surplus goal for 2012-13.

“The last thing the government would want is a decline in the fourth-largest export industry,” he said.

He said it was “picking and choosing” which parts of the international student crisis to address and not facing up to the major ones.

“If you look at some of the surveys that [higher education researchers] Chris Nyland and Simon Marginson have done, rape and abuse and threatened violence against international students is the most serious issue, as viewed by international students, and that issue’s not really being addressed,” he said.

“We don’t have a multicultural policy and we don’t have an anti-racism strategy and we don’t really have a recognition that race is a factor in these problems.”

There were signs, however, that the government would recognise Australia’s lingering problems with racism and begin to develop such policies in the near future, Innes said.

The human rights commission is developing its own policies for international students in Australia in a “minimum standards” document it intends to take to government by mid-year.

Innes said growing international student advocacy was understandable.

“[International students] either address these issues in an organised way and advocate on their own behalf, or they tolerate some of the very concerning things going on, or they [will] go home,” Innes said.

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