

Submission

No 59

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCOMMODATION IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Council of International Students

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Position: President

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16th October 2011

Dear Mr Chairman,

The Council of International Students Australia (CISA) is the peak representative body for international students studying in Australia.

We have prepared a submission, responding to the terms of reference set by the Social Policy Committee of the Legislative Assembly for the inquiry into international student accommodation.

Accommodation is a key issue to international students and we have tried to take a broad view of the issues in this submission.

Our submission contains a number of proposals which we believe would improve accommodation for international students studying in NSW.

Yours sincerely,

Arfa Noor

CISA President



INQUIRY INTO INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCOMMODATION

COUNCIL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AUSTRALIA (CISA)

Response to Terms of Reference

16th October 2011

Prepared by Arfa Noor (President) and Heather Richards (Vice-President)

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Term of Reference:	2
<i>Factors affecting the supply of and demand for affordable student accommodation and other accommodation used by students, particularly in relation to international students and implications for the export education industry.</i>	

Transport concessions

International student accommodation and transport concessions are inextricably linked.

- i. Students seek accommodation close to their institution.
- ii. Students must take into account the cost of transport which leads them to live in cheaper accommodation, often in overcrowded premises.

The cost of public transport varies significantly across the state. For students studying in Coffs Harbour without transport concessions, a single bus trip can cost \$5.20. As there is a lack of accommodation near the institutions, students tend to live far from campus which increases the cost of transport. For these students, travelling between home and their educational institution every day, Monday to Friday, can cost them upwards of \$52.

International students studying at the University of Newcastle tend to live close to the Callaghan campus to avoid using public transport. Unfortunately, there have been a number of attacks on international students living in these areas.

Many international students have to work and if they cannot live near a town or city's hub, they are often forced to travel to get to work. Many international students choose to walk, often at night and through dangerous areas, because they cannot afford public transport.

CISA proposes:	International students be given access to student transport concessions to ensure their safety and to give them access to better quality accommodation.
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Lack of affordable accommodation

The international education industry exploded in the late 2000s, with over 235000 international students in NSW in 2009, a growth of 11.4% from 2008. However, the development of infrastructure needed to support these student numbers did not explode during this period. As such, there is a severe lack of affordable student accommodation. This is a state-wide problem, with regional areas like Coffs Harbour facing similar problems to cities like Newcastle and Sydney.

International students enrolled at Universities may be able to secure accommodation at an institutional accommodation unit. However, the demand for places in such accommodation is high, and for some students, prohibitively expensive.

There are many benefits to this type of accommodation:

- i. Offers a degree of safety and security to students
- ii. International students can obtain such accommodation without an Australian reference letter
- iii. The premises are maintained, repairs are made, they are fire safety compliant, etc.
- iv. Overcrowding is avoided.
- v. Provides a social community for international students, potentially aiding domestic and international student integration.

CISA proposes:	Units be developed for students accommodation by local councils, with international and domestic students enrolled in tertiary education able to rent.
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Term of Reference:	3
<i>The appropriateness of existing standards for affordable student and other accommodation used by students.</i>	

Boarders, lodgers or tenants?

International students often reside in share houses. Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether they enter these residencies as boarders, lodgers or tenants.

The rights of boarders, lodgers and tenants differ significantly which affects all students in share houses. Many students are under the impression that they are tenants, but technically they are boarders or lodgers. As boarders and lodgers are excluded from the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 (NSW), this means that students do not have access to the following:

- i. Tenancy tribunal
- ii. An obligation for the bond to be lodged
- iii. Reasonable notice of termination

International students are not aware that bonds need to be lodged with the Office of Fair Trading, and are not always in possession of a receipt.

CISA proposes:	Boarders and lodgers be given similar rights as tenants, particularly in regard to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Notice of termination ii. Lodging of bonds iii. Access to tenancy tribunal
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Appropriateness of student accommodation standards

Most international students are not aware of the standards and are not familiar with the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 (NSW).

Students enter into informal arrangements which are not documented and leave the students open to exploitation.

Overcrowding is an issue but some students are forced into this type of accommodation because they cannot afford single-room accommodation. Regulations which restrict the number of students living in one-room may impact negatively on these students and essentially make them homeless.

CISA proposes:	NSW Fair Trading publishes, in collaboration with the NSW higher education sector, including student representatives, a student guide to accommodation.
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Term of Reference:	4
<i>Appropriate or minimum standards for student accommodation, and the adequacy of current legislation in ensuring that such standards are achieved.</i>	

Health and Safety Standards

CISA is concerned that health and safety standards, particularly fire safety standards, are not met in all share houses.

Independent Regulation of Rent

The rental market is fiercely competitive but there are currently no benchmarks or measures to protect international students when entering this market. In order to address the problems of overcrowding and sub-standard accommodation, there needs to be accessible and affordable accommodation suitable for students.

Share houses and tenancy

Any student who rents a room within a share house should be considered a tenant.

CISA proposes:	Any student who rents a room in a share house be considered a tenant under the Residential Tenancies Act 2010 (NSW).
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Term of Reference:	5
<i>The current extent of unauthorised student accommodation operations in NSW.</i>	

Overcrowding, Fire Safety and Health

International students are not aware of Australian fire safety regulations and may never have been exposed to any fire safety training.

International students living in overcrowded residencies are particularly vulnerable to fire safety problems. Electrical systems are overloaded, belongings and furniture block or impede evacuation and smoke alarms are not always installed correctly, or are deactivated by students who are not aware of their importance, or because they are placed too close to kitchen or bathroom facilities.

Overcrowding is potentially detrimental to the health of the residents. It increases the spread of infections and does not provide private space for individuals, which can impact negatively on their mental health. It should be noted that, mental health claims for international students constitute the third highest cost on international student health cover.

Students live in overcrowded accommodation because it is all they can afford. In the event that they are evicted because of overcrowding, it is likely they will be forced to live in similarly overcrowded accommodation or they may find themselves homeless.

There are homeless international students living in Sydney.

CISA proposes:	International students be exposed to fire safety training exercises and information.
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CISA proposes:	A confidential accommodation hotline be established for concerned students and their representatives to contact regarding suspected overcrowding, fire safety issues, health issues or problematic landlords.
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Rental Scams

International students are the victims of rental scams. Normally these scams operate by requiring a deposit be placed on a premise which ultimately does not exist or is not for rent.

International students are particularly vulnerable to rental scams because they need accommodation, are not familiar with the local laws or customs, do not have time or the means to fully investigate the offer.

Term of Reference:	6
<i>The appropriate framework for an on-going operation of affordable student accommodation and other accommodation used by students, including the adequacy of local government powers to identify unauthorised operations and enforce compliance with the relevant laws.</i>	

CISA proposes:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Boarders and lodgers be given similar rights to tenants. 2. Student specific and affordable accommodation units be developed, particularly in metropolitan areas. 3. NSW Fair Trading, the higher education sector and student representatives, establish an education program for students with particular emphasis on fire safety, health and safety, and minimum accommodation standards. 4. A confidential accommodation hotline be established for concerned students to ring for advice, and potentially to report incidents of sub-standard accommodation. 5. International students be given access to student transport concessions.
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