

Council of International Student Australia's Productivity Commission Recommendations

The productivity commission has acknowledged some of the challenges that international students face in accessing mental health support whilst also acknowledging that they face higher levels of distress than non-international students.

CISA acknowledges that some international student prior to arrival in Australia may have mental health issues they may not have been aware about. However, upon arrival in Australia, All international students undergo significant changes such as change of culture, distance from community networks including family and friends. Furthermore, international students often face a situation of overnight transition from being dependent on family to a life of independent living when they arrive in Australia. This is coupled with the pressure of fitting into a new environment, establishing a new community of network, finding a whole new support system, pressure to participate in both financial employment and meet requirements of study.

INFORMATION REQUEST 18.3 — INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

1. Tertiary institutions should be required to take responsibility for ensuring their international students have sufficient private healthcare cover
 - a. Institutions are the primary point of contact for international students in Australia and students depend on the guidance on institutions to provide them with all the necessary information to have a successful education journey in Australia.
2. Increase number of counselling sessions covered by OSCHC
 - a. Often OSHC only cover a certain number of counselling sessions for international students
 - i. A Mental Health Care Plan will cover up to 10 sessions with a psychologist over a 12-month period
 - ii. Some of the cost may be covered by your OSHC but this is subjected to approval from the insurance company and dependent on the MBS number provided by the medical practice that the student visits.
 - b. There needs to be more investigation done into this area to understand if the OSHC coverage for international students is sufficient in providing sustainable mental health support throughout the duration of their stay in Australia.

- c. Based on CISA's interaction with international students, those who have attended and sought help have reported that the current OSHC coverage does not provide nearly enough support for students – 10 subsidised sessions or maybe 10 paid sessions dependent on the MBS number per calendar year.
 - d. This requires international students to pay out of pocket for any further help that they would require which only adds on to their negative mental state and financial costs.
 - e. The commission report findings state that international students may be a vulnerable group due to the many psychosocial and cultural stressors they face. This only add to the fact that more support is needed in terms of OSHC coverage for mental health related issues for international students.
3. Implement specific reporting framework/protocol for institutions in dealing with international students' suicides
- a. There is currently no clear number of international students' suicide rates in Australia and according to the Coroners Prevention Unit the estimate number of 27 suicides between 2009-2015 is an underestimate.
 - b. This exemplifies that not enough attention is currently put into addressing and understanding suicide amongst international students.
 - c. It also reflects that there is currently no proper framework or protocol in reporting and documenting international student suicides.
 - d. Given the situation it is hard for anyone to fully understand the gravity of mental health issues and its impact on international students
 - i. An understanding if these were high risks students would better inform interventions to reduce suicides amongst international students
4. Mental Health support made simple. An illustrative breakdown of mental health care system in Australia and how it operates - clarity for international students on what to expect
- a. Being an international student in Australia requires students to develop an understanding of Australia's healthcare system. However, students that are already vulnerable and are attempting to seek help often find it hard to navigate through the system in understanding the following:
 - i. Am I covered by OSHC? If so, how much is covered?
 - ii. Where do I seek help? Who do I speak to?

- b. Depending on who they approach students may be bounced from one person to another to get clarity around their OSCHC coverage or where's the best place for them to get help. Going through this process only adds to the stress the student is currently facing. Therefore, an easy to understand breakdown of the mental health care system that is specific to international students would be highly useful in giving students some confidence in the system and in themselves to get help. The systems may vary slightly between states so that should be reflected for students.
- 5. Each year institutions increase recruitment of international students - are the student support systems keeping up to date with the rising number of students? Need for institutions to do more to support students.
 - a. With the number of international students on the rise in Australia, there is a need to ensure that the ratio of mental health service providers within the institution or that work in conjunction with the institution is able to keep up with the rising number of students.
 - b. This is to avoid long waiting lists for students attempting to seek help as they might lose the motivation in seeking help while waiting or their mental health might severely deteriorate whilst being on the waiting list.
 - c. There needs to be some sort of student to student wellbeing team members ratio established as a guideline for institutions to adhere to.
- 6. Full study load visa requirement
 - a. Whilst CISA understands the reasoning behind the full study load visa requirement, CISA is also aware that this could potentially be a deterrent for international student in seeking mental health support.
 - b. Some international students struggle in keeping up with the full study load and inadvertently place more pressure on themselves to keep up. This negative cycle affects their mental health drastically however because of the visa stipulation they are afraid to seek help to perhaps underload, so they are able to better manage their time, studies and build a more positive mental health.
 - c. Special circumstances allow for international students to underload and mental health issues does constitute as a special circumstance dependent on the severity of the case. This needs to be communicated to international students to build the understanding that by seeking help they are not breaching their visa.