

# **The role of the International Student Adviser – how we have changed (GREAT EXPECTATIONS, HOW TO MANAGE, SURVIVE AND STAY AHEAD)**

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## Introduction

The role of the international student adviser was once largely confined to orientation activities, the odd critical incident and welfare and counselling during the student's stay in Australia. Progressively over the years, the role has changed. Federal government legislation, increasing competition amongst universities for the international student market and increasing numbers which have in some part being influenced by the incentives in the Migration Act have all contributed in their way to the demands and role of the International Student Adviser.

The international student adviser must form a network across the institution feeding vital information into policy development, teaching and support strategies, marketing and crisis management. In order to be effective, international student support services are being asked to be pro-active, have in place early intervention strategies, and meet the ad hoc demands of the institution and the student, as well as monitor compliance.

There are a number of factors which influence the work of the international student adviser. The main factors are:

1. Legislative requirements
2. Numbers of students and changing profiles
3. Working environment
4. Institution and student expectations

### 1. Legislative requirements

An International student adviser must be aware of many Federal and State legislations. The Education Services for Overseas Student Act (2000)(ESOS) and the accompanying National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (2001) along with the Migration Act 1958 and Migration Regulation 1994 are the main pillars of legislation that all international student support staff must be aware. These legislations are specific to international students and the education provider.

The ESOS Act and the National Code are there primarily to protect the international student and the lucrative market that it has become in Australia. The Migration Act imposes obligations on the students for the privilege of a visa to study in Australia. Education providers are not absolved of responsibilities. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA) has made education providers responsible for monitoring compliance. Students are monitored for enrolment, health coverage as well as academic performance. All these legislations have been reviewed in 2005/6 and it is anticipated that there will be amendments in 2007.

Knowledge of the other legislation is important. While an intimate knowledge is not paramount to the successful conduct of the role, it is nevertheless vital that an international student adviser knows of the existence of the laws and the agencies that advise and monitor their adherence. An international student is more than just a student with a foreign passport. They are also tenants, employees, neighbours and customers with all the rights accorded to an Australian. Therefore, when an international student is in distress because a landlord or employer is exploiting them or they are inappropriately treated at restaurant or shop, the

international student adviser must know where they can seek advice, information and recourse if necessary. Some of the legislations are:

- Commonwealth Racial Discrimination Act 1975
- Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act 1984
- Commonwealth Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Act 1986
- Trade Practices Act 1974
- Residential Tenancies Act 1995
- Residential Tenancies (Rooming House) Regulations 1999
- Residential Tenancies (General) Regulations 1995
- Residential Tenancies (Water Rates) Regulations 1995

It is not enough to only have knowledge of Federal and State legislations. It is also important to be fully aware of the institution's academic policies and procedures and accompanying financial rules. The institution's policies and procedures will dictate internal processes; they must also take into consideration the requirements imposed on institutions and international students.

International students do not necessarily progress through their studies without detours, changes, leave and the occasional failures. When these happen, the best laid plans go awry and an adviser needs to be well-informed of the institution's procedures in order to advise the student on their study options. The Migration Act rules and regulations on full-time study can complicate and influence options. There have been many occasions in structured programs where a student is unable to progress through to the next study period because they have failed pre-requisites. These students have had no option except to take a leave of absence from their studies and temporarily return home.

## 2. Numbers of students and a changing profile

The increased numbers of international students during the nineties and since 2000 has had a significant impact on the role and demands of international student advisers. The number of international students enrolled with Australian education providers during 2000 was 188,277, an increase of 16% over the revised 1999 figure of 162,865. The number of international student enrolments with Australian education providers during 2001 was 233,408, an increase of 24%.

The latest Australia Education International (AEI) full year data for 2005 shows continuing steady growth in Australia's international education market overall. During 2005 there were a total of 344,815 enrolments by full-fee overseas students in Australia. This represents an increase of 7.0% from 2004 and shows slightly stronger growth than the 5.9% recorded between 2003 and 2004.

At the University of South Australia international student numbers have increased substantially over the period 2001-2005. The University of South Australia currently has over 4000 international students studying onshore in a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

Increasing numbers immediately impact on the quality of service provision. It becomes difficult verging on the impossible to have a near 1:1 relationship with every student. Activities during orientation are large scale events with the advisers adding event management to their portfolio of skills.

In the nineties the demographic profile of the international student in the tertiary sector consisted mainly of young undergraduates undertaking full programs and a smaller group of older postgraduate research degree students. This was the case at the University of South Australia. This meant that orientation activities were standard information sessions and activities related to familiarisation to Australia and the institution with the knowledge that all

the students were commencing with similar needs of information about Australia and the institution.

Since 2000 UniSA has established partnership agreements, both trans-national and onshore. At the same time, there was an increase in the number and range of postgraduate coursework degree programs. These developments led to changes in the student profile. Undergraduate students commenced their studies at different stages of the undergraduate program having received recognition for prior learning. Postgraduate students enrolled in structured programs increased tenfold. The age profile shifted from 18- 24 years to 20 -35 years. There were now students with families. Sprinkled in the midst of this cohort was a growing number of Study Abroad and Exchange students with their specific short term needs.

### 3. Working Environment

The University of South Australia is a multi-campus metropolitan university with four divisions spread across four campuses – Magill, City East, City West and Mawson Lakes.

International students are predominantly at the City West campus with the Division of Business and Mawson Lakes campus with the Division of Information Technology and Engineering. There are increasing numbers at City East campus with the Division of Health Services and at Magill campus with the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences.

International student support is provided within Learning Connection. Learning Connection provides student advisory services on each of the four metropolitan campuses. The services available to all students include: learning advice, disability services, counselling and international student advice. A student can go to any Learning Connection and receive advice and assistance. An international student adviser must be familiar with all programs across the Divisions and the various staff they need to contact in order to assist students. Staff are also expected to rotate and cover absent colleagues.

### 4. Institution and student expectations

Most institutions expect their international student advisers to fulfil the following responsibilities:

- Be informed of and provide advice on the ESOS Act and the National Code to staff
- Inform senior decision makers of the issues and concerns relating to their international students
- Case-manage student cases including critical incidents efficiently
- Provide assistance, information and advice to international students in a timely manner
- Monitor student compliance to visa requirements

Students at the same time expect the advisers to:

- Provide sympathetic and efficient assistance and advice
- ‘fix’ things when there are differences with the institution, Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA), landlords, employers, housemates, service providers, etc
- Provide assistance in finding long term accommodation, part-time employment, applying for permanent residency and advice on enrolment choice.

### Managing the Challenges and Expectations

Increasingly, international student advisers are expected to do more than conduct orientation programs, assist in transition and provide information related to visa conditions. With increasing numbers, it is no longer possible to provide 1:1 counsel to students. Staff need to be strategic and proactive with limited resources. Legislative requirements impose conditions

which must be complied with. How do you manage this? There are a number of ways to manage expectations, challenges and time. At the University of South Australia, the workload and role of the international student adviser is facilitated by the following:

1. Networking and representation
2. Access to information
3. Strategic management of activities and projects
4. Managing student contact
5. Professional development
6. Medium term planning

1. Networking and representation

All staff who teach, advise or counsel international students need to collaborate to provide the necessary support. International student advisers play a pivotal role because they are usually the first and main point of contact for international students. The role of the adviser is therefore also to inform and advise staff. Developing and maintaining strategic relationships with key staff across the institution is critical.

Collaboration begins within the team and across professional teams in Learning Connection. Sometimes a student who is primarily studying at one campus will seek assistance from an adviser at another campus, closer to their residence. The international student advisers cross-reference with each other to ensure consistency of advice as well as in managing the matter. Learning Connection staff also work collaboratively managing student cases. In critical situations, it is not unusual for a counsellor and international student adviser to work with a student. In some cases the team could also include a disability adviser and a learning adviser.

International student advisers should be represented on strategic decision-making committees across the institution and not confined to orientation and student support committees. They should be on enrolment, international recruitment, academic policy, international planning and student services committees. These are committees that decide on critical areas of what they study, the agreements that underpin the recognition of credit, the policies and procedures that govern teaching, learning, assessment, appeals and the services and resources that the student will experience. The issues and concerns and conditions by which the international student is in country must be heard at these committees. In the area of marketing and recruitment, international student advisers need to be aware of the targeted cohorts so that appropriate resources can be developed. At the University of South Australia, the issues and concerns of international students are heard at all these levels through the representation of an International Student Adviser.

Within the Unit that Learning Connection is located – the Flexible Learning Centre (FLC), all projects and activities relating to international students or internationalisation of the curriculum are reviewed by a small group of staff. The group called the International Review and Advisory Group is chaired by the overall manager of Learning Connection services and has as its members, a senior lecturer with responsibility for internationalisation of the curriculum across the University of South Australia and the team leader for the international student advisory services. Collectively, the group oversees and advises on both the academic and student side of international education services provided by all Learning Connection staff. The group represents the Learning Connection in liaising with external stakeholders regarding information and advice on legislative changes relevant to international students. It also provides recommendations to professional development staff relating to international projects, staffing and infrastructure and reviews and reports on projects conducted as part of the FLC and Divisional Service Agreements that impact on international students or the internationalisation of the curriculum. Service agreements are discussed later in this paper.

Participation with key networks in the international education area external to the institution is also important. All the international student advisers at the University of South Australia are members of the State branch of ISANA. In South Australia, education providers and representation from the State education departments have formed an ESOS Network. The ISAS team is represented on this Network. The network meets regularly to discuss issues relating to the ESOS Act, National Code and Migration Act and student visa requirements. It provides an informal forum for the exchange of information, strategies and concerns.

## 2. Access to information

All professional staff at Learning Connection, who advise students share information about the students who contact them. Staff share a common reporting system – Learning Connection Reporting. All student contact including the date, mode of contact and outcome is recorded and accessible to staff. This information tool assists staff in identifying the following:

- Main reasons for contact
- Peak contact periods
- Main areas of study

The reporting system also assists staff to:

- Case manage specific students with shared advisers
- Manage compliance

In the case of compliance monitoring of individual students, staff are able to ascertain when the student made contact with staff at Learning Connection, who they had contact with and the nature of their issue. This is particularly important in cases where a student may be appealing against a preclusion or visa cancellation. Academic appeal committees and Immigration officers often ask for this information.

At the University of South Australia, compliance monitoring is a labour intensive activity which coincides with the peak orientation and enrolment periods. Continuing students' enrolment records are checked against their completion status, and their load. At the same time, reports are checked for their academic performance. Students who do not reach the Grade Point Average requirement for the preceding study period are contacted and counselled.

The only way to manage the monitoring of compliance is to work collaboratively across the institution. Compliance monitoring is conducted in association with the compliance staff, Student and Academic services, the Finance unit and academic and school administration staff and the preferred health insurance provider. Information about the ESOS Act and National Code is available to all staff through the University of South Australia's web. All new sessional, contract and permanent academic staff receive an induction program. Included in this program is information about the ESOS Act and National Code.

Regular reports are generated on a biannual basis from the Students Information System. These reports identify international students who are admitted but not enrolled, under-enrolled and/or in bad financial standing. Students are contacted and advised on their non-compliant status. In serious cases, school or student administration staff will refer students direct to the international student adviser on their campuses for immediate assistance.

The International Student Advisory Services (ISAS) team also undertakes early academic monitoring of international students. The Grade Point Average (GPA) of all continuing international students for the preceding six month study periods is assessed. Students with a GPA of 3.5 and below which translates to failing one course are contacted and invited in for counselling and advice. This early intervention strategy has assisted in identifying students

who at risk early in their academic program. This early intervention also allows ISAS staff to provide advice on where students can receive learning support, information on the University of South Australia's academic review policies and also the opportunity to remind them of their visa requirement of maintaining satisfactory academic progress.

In order to facilitate orientation activities and work collaboratively with the Schools and Divisions, at the University of South Australia, the International Student Advisory Services (ISAS) team has access to the International Admissions database. Every step of the offer-admission-acceptance process is recorded. This system allows staff to ascertain the numbers of students commencing in each program, the level of credit for prior learning and the institution of prior learning. This information has been invaluable in the planning process and allows the team to adjust orientation programs according to the cohort. The information is shared with the Schools and Divisions who are also prepared for their commencing students.

From this database, the ISAS team who are responsible for the administration of Overseas Student Health Cover are able to obtain financial information on their cover, type and period of cover.

### 3. Strategic management of activities and projects

It is important that all activities and projects related to international students are managed and prioritised.

Proactive strategies are managed at the University of South Australia through a process called Service Agreements. Learning Connection staff are expected to facilitate the teaching and learning priorities of the University of South Australia and work towards the goal of retention and success of our students. At the University of South Australia, activities, projects and strategies are all linked to the priorities of the University. Through Service Agreements, Learning Connection and the Schools and Divisions have identified areas that require attention. The information provided through the LC Reporting tool assists in the identification of these areas.

Some examples of projects for 2006 are:

- **The first year transition project**

This project will establish a co-ordinated approach to improving the first year experience of students in the major undergraduate programs in the Schools of Computer and Information Science and Electrical and Information Engineering.

- **Improving the First Year Experience in Business**

This project will involve a range of coordinated proactive strategies implemented across all schools to support targeted groups of undergraduate students in their first year of study at UniSA. Identified student groups include students from equity groups, those entering with credit via TAFE and those entering with TERs below 70.

- **Network Mawson Lakes**

This continuing project assists international students to make links with local students and local community in the Mawson Lakes area.

The Service Agreement projects are negotiated late in the year for the subsequent year. Projects can involve all of Learning Connection service in collaboration with academic and administrative staff from the Schools and Divisions. The projects and activities must be related to the University's priorities for the year. All activities are agreed and signed off before the commencement of the year and listed are timelines, staffing resources and planned outcomes. Service agreements commit staff to manageable and realistic projects.

All the projects are entered onto a database reporting system called the Service Agreement Manager (SAM). SAM allows the entry of relevant details for the projects – timelines, staffing, and intended outcomes.

Core business activities relating to international students include:

- Orientation
- Updating resources
- Academic monitoring
- Visa compliance monitoring
- Production of regular newsletters

All activities are also entered in the Service Agreement Manager. These activities throughout the year including Service Agreement projects are mapped onto a calendar of activities. This calendar is on shared drive accessible to all staff within Learning Connection.

Having all activities and projects recorded in the same management reporting tool enables the team to plan its activities and individual leave against its commitments.

ISAS also consults the academic year calendar of activities as this advises staff of the key dates for exams, release of results and academic review. This assists the team when they have to advise students as well as inform the team of risk points in the academic year.

The assistance provided by the ISAS team across the university particularly to staff has meant that staff are more willing to contact Learning Connection and refer students for assistance at an earlier stage, where it is hoped that timely advice and assistance will result in a resolution.

Much of the information for students is provided on line at the University of South Australia. Students are introduced to the resources during orientation and given email reminders at strategic times of the year. It is hoped that students refer to these resources throughout their learning.

#### 4. Managing student contact

It is easy to spend your whole working week in your office constantly interrupted by students coming to see you as and when they wish. This constant interruption is not conducive to managing time or the resolution of issues and concerns. Students also have a “pot luck” situation as they can never be certain the adviser is available to see them. Meetings and absences can mean that they have to return at a later stage and sometimes this may be too late to resolve their particular case. At the University of South Australia, all professional staff including the International Student Adviser sets aside a minimum of an hour a day to see students who do not need to make an appointment. These are drop-in times. Staff also set aside time for longer appointments. All drop-in times are advertised two weeks ahead and are also available on the web. The benefit of this restricted student time is that all students know when the adviser is available. Staff are not permitted to move these times once they have been advertised. Absences are covered by staff from other campuses. Managing student contact this way frees the adviser to do follow-up work, develop resources, attend meetings and do their other activities.

#### 5. Professional development

It is also necessary for advisers to be professional and at the forefront of new developments in international education and management. Advisers should be encouraged to have a scholarly and professional approach to their role. It has often been said that international student advisers have proved themselves invaluable in handling crisis and the messy situations involving international students. This image however has the potential of confining

international student advisers to being reactive, sidelined to being regarded as staff who are there to only either do the orientation or fix the “problem” students.

At the University of South Australia, all ISAS staff are encouraged to participate in ISANA Professional Development workshops and the State conference. Staff are also encouraged to participate in the national ISANA conferences. Attendance to the national conferences however is contingent upon acceptance of a presentation or paper. This encourages the ISAS team members to research, develop ideas, test them out and write about them.

Professional development through attendance at conferences such as the IDP, ISANA and ATEM and keeping abreast of information and research in the international education area mean international advisers are informed of new ideas, strategies and research in the area. A professional team of international student advisers means they are better prepared to proactively manage the many expectations, challenges and demands of the role.

## 6. Medium Term Planning

The ISAS team has its planning day towards the end of each year. At the planning, the team receives information from senior management of the FLC and the University of South Australia. The team is advised of the teaching, learning and international priorities for the University of South Australia for the forthcoming 18 months. It is at this forum that the staff can discuss the implications on their role by projected recruitment targets, university teaching priorities and any changes or developments in partnership agreements. The team’s forward plans are then developed in sync with the University of South Australia’s. Importantly, team members understand what is expected from them and can plan resources accordingly. The budget and staffing needs for the forthcoming year can also be developed and planned accordingly.

## Conclusion

There are many challenges that international student advisers face in their role. The obligations of legislations like the ESOS Act, National Code and the Migration Act and the increasing numbers of students are the main influencing factors. However, international student advisers are also required to meet the expectations of the institution and students. At the University of South Australia, international students are a shared responsibility across the university and not exclusively the domain of the international student support area. Expectations, responsibilities, reporting requirements are managed through collaboration across the institution and having an input into the decisions and planning processes. An important tool in managing resources and service delivery is access to accurate and timely information. At the University of South Australia, access to shared information on students from admission through to their graduation ensures that the ISAS team can plan, manage and deliver the quality service that is expected from them. Information is conveyed to all sectors of the University of South Australia thus ensuring the pivotal role the team plays in the retention and success of our international students. Finally, the work of the ISAS team is widely acknowledged at every level. Importantly, it has the support of senior management of the University. The acknowledgement of senior management of the role of the international student advisers translates into support with resources, funding and a role in decision-making at the university.

## REFERENCES

Australian Education International Monthly Summaries of International Student Enrolment Data

## University of South Australia Student Enrolment Data