

ENGAGING ACROSS SECTORS AND WITH THE COMMUNITY TO MANAGE THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

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INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, the value of the international education sector has been cited as being the third largest export earner after coal and iron ore extraction and surpassing tourism. It is the largest service industry and value-added export earner in Australia. In Victoria, it is the largest export earner. International students bring to the education providers a real global perspective. If this is garnered through effective internationalisation of the curriculum, all students benefit in their education experience. This is increasingly important in a global economy. Australia gains much from the international education sector. There is also much to lose if things go wrong.

The international education sector for practitioners can be complex. International students are not just students in the education institution; they are also tenants, consumers, employees and tourists. Their lives intersect with other members of the community; they have friends across the sector and they live amongst us. The student experience is therefore not an exclusive domain of responsibility for the education provider. International students are guests in Australia and their overall experience is affected by interactions with every aspect of the community.

The health, well being and safety of international students in Australia are important factors in the overall student experience. In 2009 it became evident to Australia that these factors were as critical as the academic integrity of providers in the image of Australia as a quality destination for international students.

The aftermath of incidents involving international students in Melbourne and Sydney in 2009 would suggest that many of the students who were assaulted may not have received adequate support and assistance. The effect of the apparent lack of support was evident in the vocal protests and ongoing repercussions to international education recruitment in Australia. A response to the fallout onto the international student education sector is the Commonwealth of Australian Governments (COAG) recently released National International Student Strategy which requires education providers to develop safety plans.

The repercussions in 2009 clearly indicated the effect of the assaults on the wider community and across the international education sector. It is sensible to collaborate and engage across the sector to manage critical incidents and the overall student experience. Incidents involving international students affect student communities, university staff and the broader community.

Practitioners must carefully manage incidents involving international students. Any incident managed poorly has the potential to adversely affect the care and support of the student. It also has the potential to escalate and cause negative attention onto the institution. While practitioners in the field will be able to call upon the advice and assistance from colleagues in the institution, this limited field may not be enough. Yet, teachers, advisers and

counsellors need not feel that they need do everything nor do they need to re-invent the protocols every time something new comes across their desk.

For many large education providers student support services are comprehensive and in-house. Smaller education providers do not necessarily have the range of services or the experience in managing complex cases. For many smaller providers, student support services are managed by a few staff who may also have additional responsibilities such as recruitment and accommodation. Regardless of the size of the provider and the number of staff resources, managing incidents require resources, time and coordination.

MANAGING CRITICAL INCIDENTS

When a provider has to manage an incident involving an international student, it is important from the outset that a clear set of principles and processes are in place. Every provider benefits from a clear strategy, detailed plans, good communication channels and resources. The strategy should also take in to consideration the impact of any incident on the wider student body within the institution, across the sector as well as in the broader community.

ISANA has in place a comprehensive Critical Incident Management Manual which can be adapted to suit the various providers. The Manual considers many important aspects of managing incidents such as identifying every possible stakeholder and providing a checklist of actions in dealing with them.

In 2009, the South Australia-Northern Territory Branch of ISANA ran a series of workshops on incident management where the principle aim was the shared development of a resource. This resource was developed to assist staff to manage a range of situations from the simplest to more complex critical incidents. The resource provided participants with a range of services and professional expertise across the community and the international education sector. Participants in the workshop series represented the School, VET and Tertiary sector. Participants also included representatives who managed sponsored students and staff on behalf of the Australian government.

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL INCIDENT STRATEGY

The workshop series were divided into four stages. The four stages were:

1. Prevention – develop participant knowledge of initiatives to promote early intervention and appropriate referral;
2. Preparedness – develop understanding of guidelines and policies
3. Response – review of best practice in service delivery, referral and resources in the community and industry
4. Recovery – risk management and strategies on staff recovery

At each stage, the aims were to:

- Create an understanding of the issues involved when working with international students
- Create greater confidence and competence in the area
- Develop practical skills for proactive approaches to identify threats and avoid critical incidents

- Identify and collect resources to help manage critical incidents in the workplace.

In each stage, participants were asked to consider the following questions:

1. Does your institution have a culture of care and concern? How do you demonstrate this?
2. Can you provide examples of a commitment to strong community and reduction of isolation?
3. How do you foster, promote and encourage individual and peer responsibility for safety and early help-seeking at your institution?
4. What access to advice and help do you have to assist you manage critical incidents? Who are they and how do they help?
5. How do you share information regarding concerning incidents or behavior at your institution?
6. Can you provide examples of services you have access to help you manage critical incidents?

Stage One - Prevention

The Prevention Stage is one where an early identification of behavior can prevent escalation of problems. At the Prevention Stage, participants developed an adaptation of the Social and Academic Functioning Scale (Trembath and Drake, 2008). The Social and Academic Functioning Scale promotes early identification of students having difficulties to minimise disruption to their studies and provides clear and common language around observable behaviours. The scale guides appropriate response of staff by increasing awareness of behaviours requiring containment.

The Social and Academic Functioning (SAF) scale is a non-clinical tool and was utilised as a reference for appropriate referral, identification of resources to assist staff in supporting students and as a framework for threat assessment. It acts as a useful addition to the comprehensive ISANA Critical Incident Manual.

The SAF scale was first presented to the OSHC Worldcare Annual Conference in 2008. This was adapted from the Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) Scale in Diagnostic Statistical Manual, Fourth Edition of the American Psychological Association by Sally Trembath who is the Manager of the Mental Health & Safer Community Programs at Monash University. The SAF scale is a useful proactive tool when utilised to develop a framework in the identification and prevention of potential critical incidents, whilst also acknowledging that supporting functioning students has the potential to reduce future events.

In South Australia, the SAF scale was collapsed into 3 categories to assist staff working at non-clinical levels with students. The Social and Academic Functioning Scale categorized student behavior according to the severity of the behavior. The three categories are:

1. Category One
 - Superior to good functioning in a wide range of activities
 - May experience slight temporary impairment
 - Symptoms are short lived and understandable in the circumstances
 - Capable student experiencing minor problems
 - Temporary setback due to cultural adjustment issue

- May have temporary setback due to challenge of unfamiliar academic task
 - Slight temporary impairment
 - Symptoms are short lived and understandable in the circumstances
2. Category Two
- Some mild symptoms or difficulty in social or academic functioning.
 - Slightly diminished self-management in some areas and may seem less organised
 - Generally functioning adequately
 - Moderate symptoms, moderate difficulty in social or academic functioning
 - May appear disorganised and unreliable
 - May be denying any problems and/or responsibility for difficult behaviour
 - Unlikely that issue will resolve without intervention.
 - Action required to prevent serious deterioration prevent serious deterioration
3. Category Three
- Serious impairment in a number of areas of functioning. May be avoiding reality of situation. Student may have high investment in staying a student and gaining degree despite reduced capacity, issues will not resolve without intervention. Action required to prevent further serious deterioration.
 - Major impairment in several areas of functioning. May have high investment in staying a student and gaining degree despite reduced capacity
 - Significant impairment in reality testing and communication. Some bizarre behaviour. Action required preventing further serious deterioration.
 - Delusional or impaired judgement. Inability to function in most areas. May have high investment in staying a student and gaining degree despite reduced capacity. Action required to prevent further serious deterioration.
 - Danger of hurting self or others. Gross impairment in communication and interaction.
 - Persistent danger of severely hurting self or others. Persistent inability to maintain hygiene. Serious suicidal act with clear expectation of death

Participants discussed and explored the behaviours in each category. A series of information sources and possible referral options were identified by participants to assist staff working in direct contact with students. This was an essential part of the workshop with participants from across the international education sector sharing information on reliable services, resources and recommended actions. Referral sources identified include direct referral to services, resource identification and sources of information for staff/advisors/welfare officers.

The scale was localised to the Adelaide community by identifying community resources are available to assist in the support of and management of the cases. It also provided many internet based tools that could be used in problem solving and developing strategies.

Community resources included the following:

- Study Adelaide Student Ambassadors
- Volunteering SA/NT
- Second Storey (Youth support service)
- Assessment and Crisis Intervention Service (ACIS)
- Community Mental Health Service in SA

Stage Two Preparedness

At this stage, participants were introduced to the various guidelines and policies that are important in international education as well as the State policies that also influence policy and process. The policies include the following:

- Education Services for Overseas Student Act 2000 (ESOS Act)
- National Code of Practice 2007
- Children's Protection Act 1993
- Privacy Act
- Occupational Health Safety and Welfare 1986
- Migration Act

Most professionals in international education are aware of the ESOS Act and the National Code; it is equally important to be familiar with State and Territory legislations that education providers. The ESOS legislation and National Code state the student service requirements of education providers. Other legislations complement the many responsibilities laid out in the ESOS Act and National Code, e.g. Children's Protection Act applies to care and reporting responsibilities for under-18 students.

Stage Three – Response

In Stage Three, participants studied responses to incidents such as the following:

- Monash University shootings in 2002
- Virginia Tech Massacre in 2007
- Assaults on Indian students in South Australia in 2006
- Critical incidents at Adelaide University and UniSA between 2002 and 2008

It was important to explore these cases so that participants could understand the complexities and many parties involved in major critical incidents. In the South Australian cases, participants heard how working with colleagues across the sector and the community was critical in the management of the incidents.

An important principle for managing an incident involving international students is to take into consideration all affected parties.

Affected parties include the following:

1. The student
2. Family of the student
3. Friends and classmates
4. University staff
5. Community
6. Diplomatic representatives
7. Media

Each stakeholder has different needs and expectations and they must be carefully managed. An organization's response to a critical incident can either prolong (or even increase) harm, or act to minimize and contain harm to its community and business operations. Strategies need to be systematic, thorough and reliable. The ISANA Critical Incident manual points out areas that need to be included in any strategy. The strategy should include:

- Identification of the critical incident
- Calling together a response team with clear lines of coordination

- Develop a communication strategy; including assurance that the incident is being managed
- Action to limit the duration of the incident
- Information gathering, synthesizing and documentation
- Capacity to mobilize staff and specialist services
- Action to ensure that normal services are still delivered at the same level
- Connecting with affected individuals and providing psychological first aid, visible leadership and referral and access to ongoing support.

Stage Three – Response -Using a Network

As the scenarios and case complexity increase, the range of resources required expands. It is important to consider all resources and services at hand.

ISANA is member of a number of consultative groups such as government reference groups, State task forces, police multicultural groups and agency reference groups. All of these groups provide valuable contacts and support. In times of crises, these contacts also provide information and support.

Through ISANA, members are able to call upon each other for information, support and advice. For example, an education provider may not have on staff an international student adviser who is fluent in the student's mother tongue. A peer member in another institution may be able to assist with translation and information. This was the case in 2001 when the University of South Australia and Flinders University collaborated to manage a critical incident.

Creating a network of peer support across the sector is important to assist the management of incidents. Peers across the sector may sometimes alert the primary provider of an incident because they have been advised through their student of an incident that has affected a friend. A good example here is a suicide or attempted suicide of a student in one institution or a traffic accident. Often a close friend or housemate will be the initial informant of the incident. Likewise, when an incident has occurred and it is important that support is given, an alert can be put out through the ISANA Members list or to selected members. This will enable support staff to provide information, advice and support to their students who may be affected or in the case of assaults warned to take safety precautions.

The ISANA workshops illustrated for participants an effective collaborative effort that occurred in 2006 in Adelaide (Seow and Ashok, 2007) when a series of assaults on international students was managed collaboratively across all sectors. Students were supported within their education provider whether they were the primary victim or a friend/ housemate. ISANA members across the State were advised of incidents so that they could extend support to their students. Where support services were not available as was the case with one institution, UniSA counselors extended support to the students. In these cases, students and their housemates who studied at the different provider came into UniSA for support. At the same time, the police and senior education provider representatives along with a key community group – the Indian Australia Association of South Australia organized a community session. The purpose of the session was to provide information on support services and updates on police investigations. This was very important in managing

community anxiety. The entire management of these incidents was coordinated through the State Minister and Study Adelaide. Communication channels were clear and regular updates were provided to all parties.

Real incidents such as these served to illustrate to participants the importance of collaboration across the sector and with the community. While there have been unfortunate incidents involving international students in Adelaide, there have been to date little if any negative repercussions. Critical incidents are collaboratively managed. Study Adelaide works with the South Australian police and the education providers to support and manage incidents. This has been effective in ensuring wherever possible, prompt support is given to the student and other stakeholders and that the various necessary actions are shared.

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Stage Four – Recovery

At the final stage, participants explored strategies to minimize risk within their institution and the various actions that can be undertaken to aid staff recovery in the aftermath of a critical incident.

There are many models of risk management. The critical points for a risk management plan are to ensure the following:

1. Identification – name the possible risks

2. Quantification – the likelihood of the event happening
3. Response – actions and strategies to manage the event
4. Control – continuous monitoring

In this part of the workshop series participants had to look closely at their individual institution and assess services, communication channels, safety plans and strategies. Participants considered the information and the strategies they had learnt from the previous sessions and applied them to the exercise. The COAG National International Student Strategy recommends a student safety plan and an institutional safety plan that considers on and off campus issues. Risk Management is an important consideration in the development of safety plans. A critical factor is ensuring that students are aware of where they need to go to seek help and how they are able to do this. Staff within an institution should also be aware of the institution safety plans and how to identify early signs of distress in their student population. Early intervention is important so that appropriate referral and support can be given to the students.

Staff recovery is an essential component of a critical incident plan. Participants heard that debriefing after an incident should not be compulsory but a recommended action for staff. Some staff prefer not to participate in a group or individual de-brief. They prefer to have the support of colleagues and management throughout the incident as their coping strategy and time off work. Others would welcome a de-brief session.

The coordinating team must ensure that there is an opportunity for all staff that played a significant role in the response to participate in a debriefing session. This is important in order to enable people to express their emotions about the incident and ensure that any needs are met. The debriefing session will also provide an opportunity for staff to talk about whether things could have been done better and what changes might need to be made to procedures for the next critical incident.

Conclusion

At the end of the workshop series, participants had a greater awareness of community services and were able to identify professional expertise in the industry that they could call upon in managing incidents and thereby the overall student experience.

REFERENCES

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