

# **The Overseas Students Ombudsman: connecting and collaborating with other overseas student complaint handlers to provide a positive student experience**

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## Abstract

The National Strategy for International Education notes that a positive student experience is crucial to the success of Australia's international education sector. One aspect of this is maintaining strong consumer protections for international students.

The Overseas Students Ombudsman (OSO) is a key part of Australia's consumer protection framework for international students. The OSO:

- investigates individual complaints about the actions or decisions of a *private* registered education provider in connection with an intending, current or former overseas student
- works with *private* registered education providers to promote best-practice handling of overseas students' complaints, and
- reports on trends and broader issues that arise from complaint investigations.

The OSO is independent and impartial. We do not represent private education providers, overseas students or the State and Territory Ombudsman that deal with complaints from overseas students about *public* education providers. However, we do collaborate with other Ombudsman's offices and complaint handlers to promote a positive student experience.

In 2013, we established an 'overseas student complaint-handlers network', which includes the State and Territory Ombudsman's offices, the South Australian Training Advocate and the Western Australian International Education Conciliator. We meet quarterly to share information, discuss common issues and promote consistency amongst complaint handlers. We aim to ensure that overseas students with a complaint about their education provider can receive consistent outcomes and advice, regardless of which ombudsman or complaint handler they contact.

In 2014, we held our inaugural Overseas Students Complaint Handlers Forum, which brought together the overseas student complaint-handlers network, the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO), the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), Study Melbourne and the key international education policy departments (Department of Education and Training; Department of Immigration and Border Protection) as well as the national, state and territory regulators. This was a great opportunity to learn more about each other's roles and discuss key complaint issues and trends. We held a second forum in July 2015 due to the positive feedback we received from participants.

In 2014, we also organised a complaint-handlers panel at the Council for International Students Australia (CISA) conference including our complaint-handlers network. The panel advised international students that they have the right to complain about problems they encounter while living, studying and working in Australia. The panel showed students that there is a complaint handling body for most kinds of issues they may encounter in Australia and gave students the opportunity to ask questions directly of those bodies. The OSO ran a second panel at the 2015 CISA conference.

We also liaise with other complaint handlers, such as the Redfern Legal Centre International Student Legal Advice Clinic and the Victorian Consumer Action Law Centre, to discuss systemic issues relating to international student complaints.

Therefore, our role goes beyond resolving individual complaints and extends to working with other complaint handlers to promote consistency in complaints handling services provided to overseas students. The result is a well-connected consumer protection community that is active in identifying and addressing systemic issues, for the benefit of international students and the broader Australian international education sector.