

Report by Yvonne Yun, Acting Manager Community Services

RECOMMENDATION

That Council advocate for the NSW Government to address the issues outlined in the report concerning the welfare of International Students.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

Council, at its meeting on 6 November 2012, resolved (Minute No. 184/12)

‘That following the launch of the International Education and Research Industry Action Plan on the 29th October 2012, Council’s Community Safety Advisory Committee investigate and prepare a report on the living standards and safety of International students living and studying in Strathfield.’

This matter was referred to the Community Safety Advisory Committee who endorsed the recommendation.

REPORT

Council has undertaken the following activities in connection with the issue of the welfare of International Students living within the Strathfield LGA.

1. A review of the document cited as giving rise to the motion – ‘Industry Action Plan’ prepared by International Education Research and Industry Taskforce.
2. A telephone survey of several prominent local Real Estate offices with rental properties on offer.
3. A survey of local educational institutions where overseas students are known to be enrolled.

The results of the research and review are set out below:

1. Industry Action Plan

The overall impression of this document is that it is a response to an industry’s falling market share and is driven by the NSW Government to ensure economic growth and growth of market share for NSW.

In all, the report makes 22 recommendations, the majority of which are beyond local government’s capacity to influence an outcome and pertain mainly to Federal, State and industry responsibility.

Of the total recommendations, Council would have capacity to provide assistance of some form in the following recommendations:

3. Improve the International student experience in NSW

3.1 Implement an International Student accommodation education campaign

The identified action for this recommendation requires that StudyNSW (a service yet to be established by the NSW State Government) works with education providers to develop this campaign. Council can support this process through advice and information on current local standards and requirements.

3.2 Increase international student engagement in community events

In the action directives of this plan, 3.2.2 identifies Council as a likely partner for StudyNSW and service providers to team with to realise this objective.

In terms of current practice, Council already posts the majority of local activities on its notice boards and website, as well as circulates the information to organisations listed in local directories.

In 2012, dialogue was established with ACU Community Liaison to develop volunteering and community development opportunities that might jointly be undertaken with the Council. This will be further explored and developed as a way for international students to engage more fully with the local community.

7. Remove barriers to business

7.1 Improve access to and quality of student accommodation

Amongst the identified actions, it has been identified that when accommodation providers lodge development applications, the term "boarding house" is applied to the property. This is viewed as creating a negative view of such developments and a change in their terminology and practice may be beneficial.

The responsibility for this matter rests with the NSW Government through its mandatory requirements regarding Local Environmental Plans.

There is also an action identified for Councils to be empowered to fine and close overcrowded or non-compliant student accommodation. This would need to be enacted by the NSW government and would place further pressure on Council's compliance resources.

2. Telephone survey of real estate agencies

Staff called a significant number of local licenced operators to make inquiries about lettings to international students. Most indicated that they did not retain this information or were reluctant to disclose the information. To date, no single organisation has provided any response to the query.

3. A survey of local educational institutions where international students are known to be enrolled

In order to quantify some of the issues, Council approached two local educational organisations to establish student numbers and to scope the range and degree of problems being encountered. The organisations approached were:

James An College
Australian Catholic University (ACU).

Contact was made with the James An College and the resulting data suggests that this organisation services a local coaching need for students living in the local area. It was established that each term, between 50 and 60 students from Primary School age to Year 12 standard enrol at the Flemington Campus. Approximately 70% of these students are from Asian backgrounds, with the balance of mixed origin. All reside within local family units and the objective of this service is to support accelerated learning in the general school curriculum.

The Australian Catholic University responded at length and the overall view of that institution was that there was very little evidence currently to support concerns being raised. Specifically, they advise that:

- Good language skills are a pre-requisite for admission and as a result, students are generally in a position to understand the local environment.
- The majority of students will not live locally and they tend to gravitate to settlement in areas that support their specific cultural needs and language comfort.
- International students are well supported by the ACU with advisors available to assist with day to day queries or concerns that may arise for students, particularly in the “settling in” period. The university provides other tools to support the arrival of new students which include a Pre-Departure Guide and an Orientation Guide for new students.
- The University provides a 24/7 support line for International students.
- The key objective for International Student Advisors is to empower international students to live independently in the location of their choice.

The feedback from the team supporting International Students on the ACU Campus was that there were no significant concerns for them in regard to the welfare and safety of international students and that reports of violence against their students was rare.

In conclusion, many of the concerns raised in the Industry Action Plan are beyond the scope of Council to influence; where there are opportunities for Council to support international students living locally, the NSW Government has not, as yet, finalised its planning or empowered Councils to act.

Evidence does not support a level of concern locally that would call for increased involvement by Council and indeed, it appears that through its good practice the only affected Campus is managing the orientation and support of its students without external assistance.

REFERRAL FROM OTHER DEPARTMENT

No referral was required.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Expenditure in relation to this matter will be met from funding provided in the current budget for salaries.

Report approved by:

Neale Redman
Director Corporate Services