



SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

A SUBMISSION TO

THE HON PETER DUTTON MP, MINISTER OF HOME AFFAIRS

THE HON DANIEL TEHAN MP, MINISTER OF EDUCATION

AND

HIGHER EDUCATION PROVIDERS INCLUDING VET

ON BEHALF OF

PAKISTANIS IN AUSTRALIA

Pakistanis in Australia Inc. (PIAInc) is the peak body of Pakistanis living in Australia. This submission is based on wide interaction with community at large and one on one discussion with 279 Pakistani students enrolled in Australian institutions. In January 2020, there were 517, 519¹ students in Australia and we anticipate that the concerns raised and recommendations proposed apply to majority if not all the students.



Dr. Zarrin S Siddiqui

President

28th March 2020

Pakistanis In Australia Inc. is an incorporated group to facilitate integration of Pakistani students and migrants in Australia. www.piaincorporated.com @piainc
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/pakistanisinaustralia>

¹ <https://www.austrade.gov.au/Australian/Education/Education-data/Current-data/Detailed-tables>

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INTRODUCTION

Since COVID19 outbreak world has dramatically changed. This has affected every individual in one way or other and the impact is felt in every home. Pakistanis in Australia being the peak organization to advocate on behalf of Pakistanis in Australia is inundated with calls for help from Pakistani students who are enrolled in educational institutions in Australia.

Since 5th March, we have been interacting with as many students as we can during evening hours to explore how the Commonwealth of Australia can help them at a very difficult and unpredictable time.

This submission is made on behalf of those students and the recommendations can definitely be generalized to majority of students.

Some positive actions taken by the Commonwealth of Australia and other stakeholders are appreciated widely. These include;

- Extension of census date.
- Students are allowed to work more than 40 hours per fortnight.
- Department of Home Affairs will consider the visa rules on compassionate grounds where required.
- Centrelink will be providing financial support to international students stranded in Australia subjected to eligibility.
- Eviction from rental properties suspended for six months

WHAT PAKISTANI STUDENTS ARE SAYING?

Common themes explored during interactions with students are presented and all of these are contributing to well-being and mental health issues.

HELPLESSNESS

For many students, this is first time they have travelled overseas and left their family home. They have very little social interaction with anyone and are left on their own with little guidance from community and institutions.

ANTICIPATED ANXIETY ABOUT FAMILY AT HOME

Almost every country around the world is affected and there are grave concerns about the families back home with the speed that the COVID-19 is spreading. Many students have reported that they cannot sleep.

FINANCIAL ISSUES

While students have presented financial statements before arrival, there are doubts if they can now pay in the current economic uncertainty which will not only affect Pakistan but is expected to hit the whole world as businesses are shutting down and unemployment is on rise.

BC is studying full time as well as working. The plan was to return back to Pakistan at the end of fasting month of Ramadan in May to bring spouse and kids but it will not be possible now. At the same time spouse has already resigned from the job in Pakistan.

FEAR OF AFFECTED WITH COVID-19

There are fears what will happen if a student him/herself contracts COVID-19. Who will take care of them? Will they be provided same care or an Australian citizen will get preference if hospitalization is required and health system has to make a decision?

FEAR OF FAILURE

Students have enrolled in a Face to Face course which have all now transitioned to online modes of delivery. Academic support units are less efficient at this time who provide support in developing study skills. This requires great adaptability and like staff students are struggling while maintaining the full workload as per the VISA conditions. Assessment requirements and tools are modified and for many institutions they will be employing these tools for the first time while half of the semester is already gone.

Students who were unable to join before Pakistan closed its air space or have to return back are in a different time zone when classes are delivered in online synchronous mode. There are issues with internet connectivity and mobile devices among other problems encountered.

SH is currently in Pakistan due to illness which has affected his academic performance and is on probation. Earlier in March, the institution asked him to report back which he could not make in time because of high airfare followed by travel restrictions outside Pakistan.

UNCERTAINTY

With social media at its best in conveying the up to date information, myths and conspiracy theories are not behind in creating fear and if world will still exist.

Is this the right time to study if we all are going to die and if this is the time that we all just sit and spend time with our families rather than sitting on computer studying? TJ

CONSEQUENCES IF SUPPORT IS REQUESTED

A number of volunteer groups are coming forward to help. Support plus benefits from Centrelink are being considered. This is leading to another fear that when the crisis will be over will students who received these benefits will be reported to Home Affairs and their visas will be cancelled? This is the same issue where students are not reporting or seeking mental health support from institutions and government based on the fear that this will have negative consequences on their right to maintain student visa in future.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION ONE

Allow students to change their enrolment to Part time student with enrolment in a minimum of two units without any implication on their visa status.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

Extend the census date till 30th April.

Many students specially the new ones do not understand the implications of census date. This needs to be clearly explained.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Revise the fee structure.

Normally an online unit is priced as half of the face to face fee. If the institutions are not providing face to face learning experience, the course fee should be reflected as such.

It is observed that where jobs are available like super markets, preference is given to Australian citizens which is understandable. Is it time to offer international students a fee structure at par with Australian students for 2020 – 2021.

RN has just started final year and was working to support his living expenses. He has been made redundant and has a family to support while expecting first child in a couple of months. It is unlikely that he will be able to pay his fee for next semester as there are no employment opportunities currently advertised.

In February when the Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced ban on travel for Chinese students,² almost every university offered incentives to maintain the enrolments. The

² <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/updated-travel-advice-protect-australians-novel-coronavirus>

same can be extended to all international students who contribute 72% of international students.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Modify progression rules in the institutions.

A student who fails a unit may have a chance to repeat the same unit in second semester without any consequence or fee. Where the enrolment in second semester is dependent on passing the first semester units as pre-requisite, the student may have a chance to skip the second semester still maintaining their visa status.

AR arrived in late January to commence studies at a University. Within three weeks, he has to rush back due to a family emergency. He cannot return now. The unit coordinator does not understand that it is really a tough situation student is in who has never studied online, has not been able to understand how education system works.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

Extend all milestones for Higher Degree Research (HDR) students by 6 months.

HDR students have to maintain milestones ensuring their full time status which is complicated due to a number of factors beyond control as Universities are working in a virtual mode.

MS joined as a PhD student last year and is scheduled to present her research proposal this month to confirm the candidature. With the current situation in Pakistan, she is constantly worried about the wellbeing of her family back home. This has resulted in a panic attack lately. She will not be able to present her proposal.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

Ban institutions to ask for full fee for one month till other issues are sorted.

Some VET institutions are calling students to pay full fee or their offers will be withdrawn leading to deportation if the Department of Home Affairs is informed. Surprising, these conversations are happening over the phone rather written communication.

CONCLUSION

It is no doubt a tough time for anyone anywhere in the world. We also realize that there are major implications for Higher Education sector as international students are major

source of revenue. A great portion of the casual staff comprises postgraduate students who are all at risk of losing any income. We all stand together with the academics and staff at this difficult time with prayers that we can all defeat COVID-19 as soon as possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We are grateful to all students who have provided feedback. All the examples presented have been de-identified with fictitious initials to keep their anonymity.