

NEWS

THINKSTOCK



STAYING AWAY: *Students are choosing other countries for study*

Reform fatigue affects student numbers

Thirty per cent decline puts industry at risk.

International education providers claim constant reform in the sector is contributing to a severe decline in student numbers, threatening Australia's second largest service export industry.

Student numbers have fallen sharply in recent years, especially from key markets such as India and China.

Concerns about security have previously been highlighted as a major factor in the downturn, following a string of high profile attacks on Indian students in Melbourne in 2009 and 2010.

However Sue Blundell, director of English language learning school English Australia, said recent reforms to requirements for education providers and students are also having a major impact on student numbers.

While the reforms to the Education Services for Overseas Students Act were designed to protect international students, Ms Blundell told a parliamentary roundtable on international education they have actually acted as a disincentive.

"Have the reforms had an impact on addressing our competitiveness? They are making us less competitive," Ms Blundell said. "Our zeal for regulatory reform is putting up compliance costs for our providers, so they see revenue going down and costs going up."

She said the main issue is not the content of the reforms, but the fact that a number of changes to both provider and student requirements have happened close together, confusing prospective students and international education sales agents.

"Whereas Australia is becoming more and more complicated and difficult to understand – with change every six months sometimes – other countries are becoming simpler to understand and are opening up their borders," she said. "Agents and students are losing interest because it is just too hard."

Other experts agreed that many prospective students are deciding against studying in Australia due to a perception that it is too difficult to obtain an appropriate visa.

Dr Helen Forbes-Mewett from Monash University told the roundtable concerns about visa requirements and the ability to work in Australia are often the underlying factor which prevents parents from sending their children to study in Australia.

"About three years ago I was interviewing parents of Chinese students in Beijing, and the parents indicated that safety was very important – because I think they knew that was the focus of my study – but, when questioned, actually it turned out that visa access and the status of education were incredibly important," Dr Forbes-Mewett said.

"The UK and the US were seen as being above Australia, but students came to Australia because they could get easier visa access, and they were prepared to give away some of that perceived status, in their view. That has changed now, because Australia does not hold quite that status that it had before in providing an education.

"That is something that really needs to be regained."

The federal government announced changes to international student visa requirements earlier this year, opening up assessment standards in a bid to attract more applicants.

A new class of student visa is also being introduced, which will give more international students the ability to work in Australia after they have completed their studies.

While Ms Blundell said the changes were appropriate, she indicated better communication of requirements to key stakeholders and a period of stability are needed to help the industry get back on track.

"We have now been in decline for two and a half years, and in fact our student numbers over that two and a half year period have declined by 30 per cent," Ms Blundell said.

"Our industry is in danger of disappearing. We are in danger, I believe, of having the best consumer protection system in the world but no consumers to enjoy that protection." •

LINKS

www.aph.gov.au/ee
ee.reps@aph.gov.au
 (02) 6277 4573