

Redfern Legal Centre



31 March 2020

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

By email: [redacted]

Dear Prime Minister,

Re: COVID-19 pandemic and NSW's international student community

We write in relation to the significant impact COVID-19 is having on Australia's international student community, seeking urgent measures to avoid a humanitarian crisis and address the serious and urgent issues arising in this vulnerable community.

Redfern Legal Centre (RLC)'s International Student Legal Service NSW (ISLS) has seen a steady increase in international students facing financial crisis, evictions and accommodation disputes, health issues, problems with their education providers, homelessness, visa problems and psychological trauma since the Covid-19 pandemic began.

ISLS has been operating since 2011 and is the only free, specialist, state-wide legal service for the 266,000 international students enrolled to study in NSW. Funded by StudyNSW and the Fair Work Ombudsman, ISLS provides free legal advice, advocacy and casework relating to the complex socio-legal problems that impact international students, alongside law reform and education work.

73 Pitt Street Redfern NSW 2016 ACN: 31 001 442 039 ph: (02) 9698 7277 fax: (02) 9310 3586 web: www.rlc.org.au

General enquiries: Monday to Thursday 9am – 9pm, Friday 9am – 6pm

Interviews by appointment: Monday to Thursday 6.30pm – 8pm

As the primary, frontline service provider in NSW, ISLS has significant concerns over the vulnerability of NSW's international student cohort during this period. The already-existing vulnerabilities well-known to international students in normal times has been compounded and exacerbated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions being implemented by federal and state governments.

While we acknowledge that these measures are necessary, our concerns are that this group of people appear to have been overlooked at a federal and state level, with no specific support measures being put in place for this community.

Many international students now face not having any income stream, leaving them unable to pay for essential living costs, including food, rent and education fees. We are fearful this will result in a humanitarian crisis.

Further compounding the problem for international students are the travel restrictions of many countries, making it significantly difficult for them to return to their home country, with many national airline carriers grounding or reducing international routes to and from Australia.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from August 2018 show Australia's international education export industry was worth \$31.9 billion in the 2018-19 financial year. As noted by the Audit Office of NSW in their *Universities 2018 Audits* report released on 31 May 2019, "in 2018, overseas students contributed 14.1 billion in course fees to the NSW university sector" alone. Failure to adequately address the needs of international students could cause lasting reputational damage to Australia's \$32 billion educational export industry.

We understand that government has taken some preliminary steps to assist international students. Those already employed by supermarket chains can be offered hours over their 40-hour fortnightly limit, and international students enrolled to study nursing can undertake work to help and support the health effort against COVID-19 as directed by health officials.¹ We also understand that the NSW Government will implement Regulations to prohibit evictions, the details of which are yet to be announced. Some universities are providing financial assistance to international students, however this is not the case for all education providers. These measures will provide some assistance to the international student community during this crisis. However,

¹ <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/news-media/current-alerts/novel-coronavirus>

we remain concerned about students who may find themselves unable to pay for the bare essentials needed to survive.

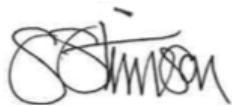
At the time of writing, there are no crisis payments which can be accessed by international students facing financial hardship due to the COVID-19 pandemic, unlike their domestic counterparts who can access Youth Allowance, Austudy or AbStudy, all of which now include the coronavirus supplement.

We implore you to consider the urgent needs of international students for financial support during this emerging crisis.

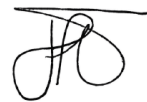
Please do not hesitate to contact Sean Stimson on [\[redacted\]](#) regarding the above.

Yours faithfully

REDFERN LEGAL CENTRE



Sean Stimson
Solicitor
International Student Legal Service NSW



Joanna Shulman
CEO
Redfern Legal Centre