Submission to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission

regarding the

UniProjects Application for Authorisation Regarding the Return of International Students to NSW and ACT

Presented by NUS National President Zoe Ranganathan
Prepared by NUS Research Officer Grace Sixsmith

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The National Union of Students

The National Union of Students (NUS) was founded in 1987 to represent all post school students in Australia. We are a peak representative and advocacy body for almost 1 million students. The NUS is established on the principles of student unionism and its primary objectives include working on the interests of students in quality of education, academic freedom, access to education, social security, health and welfare.

The NUS broadly supports the program proposed by UniProjects Australia. In 2019, there were over 756,000 International students in Australia, however, that number has dropped to just over 512,000 in 2021.[1] Education is Australia's 4th largest export.[2] International students are crucial to Australian universities' social and economic wellbeing. The proposed program ensures that International students are welcomed back to their institutions. There are several recommendations the NUS is making to ensure that International Students are supported by the government and universities if the program is approved.

Welfare and Economic Burden

Despite the commitment from the NSW and ACT universities to provide cheaper and competitively priced flights to Australia, the cost to pay for quarantine and their flights will not be accessible for all students. As seen in the Northern Territory Pilot Program, students had to pay $2,500 to Charles Darwin University to cover the cost of their flights and quarantine.[3] This is more than it would normally cost to fly to Australia. The NUS recommends that the Federal Government and NSW/ACT universities support students who need financial help with the costs of quarantine and flights so they can complete their degrees.

Supporting Mental Health of Students in Quarantine

Quarantine often places people into situations where they are faced with poor mental health. Lack of social stimulation, exercise capabilities, human connection, control and normality, coupled with the risk of contracting COVID-19 while in quarantine as we have seen occur throughout this pandemic in Australian Hotel Quarantine facilities.[4] Hotel quarantine stints are also associated with suicide, anger issues, anxiety and stress disorders, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder.[5]

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[1] Department of Education, Skills and Employment, *Student Numbers* (Web Page) <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/datavisualisations/Pages/Student-number.aspx>.
[2] Phillip Grozinger and Stephanie Parsons, *The COVID-19 Outbreak and Australia's Education and Tourism Exports,* (Bulletin, December 2020) 38.
[3] Bang Xiao, 'International Students to Arrive in Australia for First Time in Nine Months under Pilot Program' *ABC News* (29 November 2020).
[4] Department of Health, *Advice on mental health screening, assessment and support during COVID-19 quarantine* (Be Covid Safe, 3 November 2020) 2.
[5] Marc Jurblum, Chee H Ng and David J Castle, 'Psychological consequences of social isolation and quarantine: Issues related to COVID-19 restrictions' (2020) 49(12) *Australian Journal of Medical Practice* 778, 782.

Of all emergency room presentations from people in Hotel quarantine, one-fifth were for mental health emergencies, including severe anxiety, suicide ideation and psychosis.[6]

These are serious issues that international students will face once they arrive in Australia through the proposed program. The NUS recommends that the program implements support for students who are in quarantine, so they can manage their mental health in a situation where regular mental health protective measures are not available.

The proposal for students to be quarantined in a purpose built facility is supported, as this allows for programs to be run to balance students mental health and for them to receive the support they need while in quarantine, specifically tailored to the needs of International students.

Supporting Students after Quarantine

International students also need assurances that they will have suitable accommodation once they are able to leave quarantine. International students who have been away from Australia for the last 16 months will not have a place to come home to. They must have residences waiting for them, which the universities could reserve for students who are involved in the pilot program. Alternatively, providing temporary accommodation within university housing is also an option, until students are able to find places to rent on their own accord. Having accommodation at least for a month after they arrive in Australia will take some of the burden off international students.

Further, students must also be supported in finding jobs. As the Federal Government recently removed the cap on hours that International students can work, this opens up areas for International students to be able to contribute to the Australian economy and also to be able to support themselves.[7] However, as the job availability in Australia is low and the NSW and ACT Governments must implement support for International students until they are able to get a job, as is currently being rolled out in South Australia.[8]

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[6]Michael Dinh et Al., 'Emergency department presentations by residents of Sydney quarantine hotels during the COVID‑19 outbreak' (2021) 214(10) *The Medical Journal of Australia* 473, 473-474.
[7] Department of Home Affairs 'Immigration and Citizenship' *Temporary relaxation of working hours for student visas* (Web Page, 15 June 2021) <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/visas/getting-a-visa/visa-listing/student-500/temporary-relaxation-of-working-hours-for-student-visa-holders>.
[8] Jitarth Jai Bharadwaj 'South Australia Announces $13.8 Million International Student Support Package' *SBS News* (21 April 2021).