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Scandals Lead to Promises of Reform in Australian International Education



By Shailaja Neelakantan

New Delhi

Little has gone right for Australia's higher-education system this year.

This spring a series of brutal attacks on Indian students enrolled in Australian higher-education institutions made international headlines, fraying the once vibrant relationship between the two countries.

REUTERS/Mick Tsikas

Indians living in Australia stage a protest in Melbourne in May, demanding that the Australian government and police do more to protect Indian students against violence.

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Then last month, an investigation by an Australian television station claimed foreign students have been ripped off to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars by hundreds of allegedly shady vocational institutions collaborating with independent migration and education agents.

The country, which relies heavily on international students to fill seats at its universities and vocational schools, felt an immediate impact from the bad publicity. IDP Education, which recruits one of every five international students who studies in Australia, told Australian universities last month that visits by prospective students to its 14 offices in India have fallen 80 percent compared with last year.

Anthony Pollock, chief executive of the company, which is partially owned by Australia's 38 public universities, said last week that the decline would not necessarily lead to an equally steep drop in the number of Indians going to Australia for higher education.

"A softening is possible, but it is very difficult to predict these things because we are looking at eight months ahead of when the students would actually start courses, so late October will be the real indicator," Mr. Pollock told *The Chronicle*. He noted that a late-July survey of 2,000 foreign students in Australia that IDP conducted showed a very high level of satisfaction.

Still, Australian institutions and the government are keenly aware that they have both an image and a regulatory problem. Some academics fear that the troubles in the vocational sector could end up hurting the reputation of the country's best universities.

"There is a huge global demand for good Ph.D. students," said Christopher Nyland, a professor of international business at Monash University, in Melbourne. "I currently have nine, and all are from India or China. Now, if a good prospective student has a choice to do a Ph.D. in a lower-level American University or a top Australian university, he or she may choose the former."

Hitting Where it Hurts

The two problems—attacks on Indian students and trouble within the vocational-education sector—are particularly damaging because they affect the source of much of the higher-education system's recent growth.

The vocational-education industry began growing rapidly in 2005, when the government made it easier for foreign students in certain fields where there were shortages of skilled workers, such as cooking and hairdressing, to attain permanent-residence status after graduation. The government had linked international-student programs with labor needs four years earlier, but these particular trades opened the door wider for more dubious operators, observers say.

Within three years, the number of private vocational schools offering degrees in these fields shot up to 4,000 from 1,000, said Karl Konrad, who is now managing director for Australian Immigration Law Services, a private law firm.

Of the 96,500 Indian students enrolled in Australian institutions of higher education in the first 11 months of 2008, IDP Education said, 68,000 were seeking certificates and diplomas in courses like cooking and hairdressing.

Mr. Nyland, who has studied the problem for the last three years, notes that Australians who want to learn a trade typically enroll in public vocational institutions, not private ones. The latter are commonly known as "PR factories," he said, because they have been set up solely for the purpose of enabling students to secure permanent-residence status.

Julia Gillard, Australia's education minister, acknowledged to ABC Radio in late July that some of Australia's international-education providers are substandard.

"But I don't accept the premise ... that somehow this is a broad brush across all of the international-education industry. It's not," she said.

Dennis Murray, executive director of the International Education Association of Australia, a group of education professionals, noted that private vocational schools are regulated by federal legislation that is supposed to be enforced by the states. The problem, he said, is that states have been unable to keep up with the rapid growth of the industry.

"We have a strong consumer-protection act, but there's been a failure to regulate at the level of states particularly because of the lack of resources to carry out the number of audits needed," he said. But, he added, "it will change, and more resources will be put in to investigate private trade schools."

Victoria's education officials, along with the federal government, are auditing several private trade colleges, said Quentin Stevenson-Perks, head of the New Delhi branch of Australian Education International, the international-higher-education arm of the Australian government.

"This is simply a case of making sure colleges are doing the right thing, and a vast majority of them are. Just the couple that aren't have to be weeded out," he said.

The Council of Australian Governments, which includes state leaders, and Skills Australia, an independent advisory body to the federal government, have both encouraged the creation of a national framework for regulation of the vocational-education sector, to bring more rigor, consistency, and coordination to the oversight of the higher-education system.

Mr. Pollock, of IDP, said the 2005 immigration policy was well intentioned but had "unintended consequences."

"It raised student expectations and distorted the way Australian providers looked at attracting students," he said.

As for accusations that migration agents and independent recruiters were promising prospective students that permanent residency was guaranteed, Mr. Stevenson-Perks noted that Australia has legislation to deal with shady migration agents operating within the country, or hired by Australian universities to work abroad, but it has no control over independent agents who operate outside the country.

Putting Out Fires

In the meantime, government officials have been working to put out the fires. Of particular concern is Australia's relationship with India, which sends the second-highest number of students to the country, after China. In 2008, Indian students brought \$2 billion into the country, according to Mr. Stevenson-Perks, or 15 percent of all revenue from foreign students.

Recent attacks against foreign students seemed focused specifically on Indians. Australian police, mainly in the city of Melbourne, have registered more than 500 verbal and physical assaults on Indian students this year, according to several Australian newspapers.

The attacks—which put one student, repeatedly stabbed by a screwdriver, into a coma and caused another, hit by a petrol bomb, to suffer burns over 30 percent of his body—started coming to light in March, even though they have been happening for over two years, said Amit Menghani, president of the Federation of Indian Students of Australia.

In what many Australian academics and Indian students describe as a public-relations fiasco, Australian government and police officials initially responded by saying there were not as many attacks as were being reported, nor were they racially motivated.

"With so much at stake, policy makers and exporters have been caught without a strategic response, aside from denial," Simon Marginson, a professor of higher education at the University of Melbourne, has written in an article to be published in *The Australian Financial Review*, a copy of which he made available to *The Chronicle*. "Nor is it wise, in the face of repeated stories about students being bashed, to talk about the damage to industry reputation and export revenues, not the damage to the students."

Mr. Murray, of the International Education Association of Australia, said attacks had dropped significantly in recent months as government officials stepped up security measures.

Police presence has been increased outside the suburban train stations where most of the attacks happened. And the state of Victoria, of which Melbourne is the capital, plans to introduce laws in which judges would have to take into account "hatred for or a prejudice against a particular group of people" as an aggravating factor when sentencing offenders, with tougher sentences for hate crimes, Australian newspapers have reported.

Administrators from the University of Victoria and police officers from the state arrived in India in early June for a six-city tour to speak with Indian students about the country and its culture, and to assure them that it was a safe place to study.

Australia's education minister, Ms. Gillard, plans to visit India in September. And Mr. Stevenson-Perks said it was likely that the Indian and Australian governments would develop a policy to deal with fraudulent agents operating in India.

Even before the television investigation aired, the national government had begun to reform its immigration policy, after the labor market was flooded with an oversupply of certain workers who had been given priority.

In January, Australia's Department of Immigration and Citizenship struck cooking and hairdressing from the list of desired occupations. Construction and information-technology skills have now been given priority for students seeking permanent-residency status after graduation. That may help stem the flow of students coming to Australia just for work purposes. These more rigorous fields are less likely to attract fly-by-night institutions.

Mr. Pollock notes that better industry oversight and stricter immigration rules could lead to a drop in international-student enrollments.

But, he said, "the short-term fall in volume might be the necessary step to get the house in order, and as a sector we'd be better off doing that and accepting the short-term downturn."

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