

**University Colleges Australia Conference 2012**

**Hyatt Hotel Canberra**

**Dr Helen Szoke, Race Discrimination Commissioner**

**Australian Human Rights Commission**

**Introduction**

I would like to thank the University Colleges Australia for inviting me to speak to you and to share with you what the Commission has been doing in our work with international students.

**International Students**

* You all know about the increase in international student enrolments over recent years, and no doubt you know – given that residential colleges and halls are a significant part of many international students’ lives during their time here – that leaving behind their family and friends, to study, work and live here.
* Given the high standard of living and opportunities in Australia, it is understandable that international students and their families expect that they will be treated with respect and dignity when they arrive. And rightfully so.
* We are a nation that has made strong commitments to ensure the human rights of those in this country. However, we know that international students experience many challenges once they arrive here.
* Australia is culturally diverse. In 2011, the Census revealed that over a quarter (26%) of Australia’s population was born overseas and a further one fifth (20%) had at least one overseas born parent. International students significantly contribute to that diversity.
* In 2011, there were over 550,000 international student enrolments, and they reside in every state and territory. They are a diverse group, representing countries from Asia, North and South America, Europe and Africa.
* When they leave their familiar surroundings, their family and friends, they find themselves in an environment here in Australia that is often very different to their country of origin. They also communicate in English, a language which is not their first, but perhaps their second or third language.
* The cultural, language and financial barriers they face can leave them very vulnerable to discrimination and exploitation in a number of areas, including employment, accessing health services and housing.
* We know that some international students do not feel safe, have experienced or been exposed to hate crime, assault and theft. International students are entitled to the protections available in Australian laws. And yet, many do not know what these protections are. We also know that where their rights are breached, international students often do not report these breaches or seek redress.

**Overview of the Commission’s work**

* The mission of the Australian Human Rights Commission is to lead the promotion and protection of human rights in Australia by making human rights values part of everyday life and language, and empowering all people to understand and exercise their human rights.
* Our statutory responsibilities include:
* investigating and conciliating complaints of alleged discrimination and breaches of human rights recognised under international conventions to which Australia is a party, and
* promoting and protecting these human rights generally.
* The Commission has also been working on a project relating to international students. This arose around late 2009, when members of the Australian and New Zealand Race Relations Roundtable met with race experts and international students and their representatives to explore existing issues and identify ways forward. At that time, as many of you may remember, there were a number of crimes affecting international students, particularly Indian students.
* We have been working with stakeholders, including some representatives from law enforcement, the international education sector, government and international students and their representative bodies to develop a set of principles that aim to promote and protect the human rights of international students living in Australia.
* These high-level Principles aim to reflect how the human rights of international students can be better protected by all those working with international students, whether they are governments, education providers, businesses or the general community.

Some of these rights – rights that belong to all of us by virtue of being human – include:

* having an adequate standard of living
* personal safety and security
* safe and fair employment, and
* privacy
* As many of you may know, a number of international students are taken advantage of – or discriminated against – by health providers, employers and real estate agents for example, because of their race, colour or their ethnicity, their sex or their age, and sometimes because of a combination of these factors.
* As representatives of university colleges, I believe you can play an important role in ensuring the safety and well-being of international students. Through your ongoing work with them, you are uniquely placed to empower them, bring about a better understanding of the issues and challenges they face, and include them in important decisions. You can improve provision of information for international students, and encourage leadership opportunities and intercultural exchange amongst the wider student body – increasing the respect with which all students are treated, as well as their willingness to speak up about concerns.
* I plan to launch these Principles next week at the Australian International Education Conference, and I encourage you to take the time to look through the Principles and to see how your respective organisations and groups can ensure international student safety and well-being and help to promote their human rights, by identifying what you can do to support the Principles.
* In the work that we’ve done, we have identified human rights-based principles that aim to promote and protect the human rights of international students – through enhancing these rights, ensuring they are aware of their human rights and freedom from discrimination protections, understanding their needs and empowering them during their time in Australia.
* Implementing these Principles will require that:
* international students have adequate information about how to make complaints about potential and actual breaches of their rights
* information resources are provided on an ongoing basis, in plain English, and in appropriate languages – whether through translations or the appropriate use of interpreters
* there is adequate data about their experiences of racism and racially motivated crime which can inform policy and service delivery
* we work with international students and their representative bodies to improve outcomes for international students
* they have ongoing opportunities to learn about local and relevant issues, such as the role of local law enforcement agencies – this is important in challenging any previous experience they may have with police from overseas, and
* we take steps to increase cultural competency and proficiency, by assessing practices, reviewing policies and consulting more with international students, so that we engage more effectively with them!
* I believe that these are some important ways that we can ensure that their experience in Australia is a more positive and productive time. There is so much we can gain through achieving this. We will be able to better encourage an exchange of experiences and ideas locally and globally.

I wish you all the best for the rest of the today, and in your future work to support and assist international students.