



New Zealand International Students' Association

MEDIA RELEASE
For external release

Rising international student numbers in New Zealand

Official statistics from the Ministry of Education show that international student numbers made up 18% of university students throughout New Zealand in 2018. NZISA welcomes this increase, but warns universities that rising numbers must be matched by improved wellbeing policies to continue the sustainable growth of the export education sector.

The New Zealand International Students' Association (NZISA) welcomes the increase of international students studying at New Zealand Universities. New Zealand Universities provide excellent education and a good learning environment. However, NZISA has concerns with current policies in the university sector and their effect on current students. These problems will be exacerbated should international student numbers rise further. Current problems include:

- 1) The lack of the international student voice on university academic boards or policy committees;
- 2) The lack of accommodation for international students and inadequate education on tenancy rights;
- 3) Policies that lead to poor assimilation between domestic and international students; and
- 4) Lack of student support staff to match student numbers.

Critics of the growing number of students have highlighted a high number of students from one country exposes the New Zealand export education industry to potential shocks and financial risks; however, NZISA believes it is inappropriate to view the export education sector in isolation. In the recent RNZ article, Michael Gilchrist from Tertiary Education Union (TEU) states, "there's the risk of shocks such as the Asian crisis or a financial crisis or bird flu." These

risks would not only impact the export education sector, but **all** of New Zealand's export sector. These issues simply highlight the problems of an export country, but speak very little towards the problems that we actually have in the export education sector. If institutions focused less on marketing and rapid recruitment of students, and more on sustainable growth then the risk of a crisis would be mitigated. The issues arise out of the lack of sufficient policies aimed at international students within the sector, and are a result of the once prevailing “cash cow” attitude that was held towards international students. If universities stopped relying on international students to plug the revenue gap from decreasing domestic enrolments, then financial risks could be mitigated.

Mr Gilchrist further suggests “a limit [on international students from one region] would ensure institutions provide a high-value experience and were focused on domestic students.” A limit is a cap, a quota, a ban on future international students when intakes exceed an arbitrary number. NZISA views such statements as borderline racist and ignorant of the export education sector. A cap is extremely likely to have diplomatic repercussions for New Zealand. This attitude also highlights the sector’s current stance on international students. On the one hand, it is acceptable for institutions to charge exorbitant fees for international students, on the other, institutions are encouraged to focus on domestic students. This is the very problem we have – there is a systematic division between domestic and international students that drives a wedge between them.

A limit would be counterproductive and simply cause more issues for international students. While a limit may ensure less reliance by universities on one geographic region, it completely ignores the wellbeing of future students. NZISA, through the discussion with our representatives, and various embassies, has come to the conclusion that a limit would simply drive up immigration fraud and the use of dodgy education agents. Exploitative agents will market university placements as coveted, charge high fees and employ unethical means to secure placements in our universities. This is something that would not only harm the long-term reputation of our sector, but also our future students.

Universities cannot realistically expect to solve the problems that international students face if they do not routinely consult international student representatives during academic board meetings, policy committees, and in working groups. NZISA has noticed a worrying trend throughout New Zealand, with only a few universities actually including international students in decision making bodies. The University of Auckland and the University of Otago are leading the change on this issue, the institutions respective international student officers (who are elected by the student body) sit on multiple committees and boards. The University of Auckland has even established a sexual harassment committee. This is a topic that is often brushed under the rug by many universities, and never addressed in the open. Currently, Victoria University of Wellington, Lincoln University, and Waikato University have zero international students on relevant academic boards, committees, or working groups. Ignoring the student voice will continue to create a disconnect between policies enacted by the university management and the needs of international students.

Universities are currently grappling with accommodation shortages, especially with adequate and affordable accommodations, not only for first year students but also returning students.

International students have expressed difficulties finding accommodation during the summer period as they return to their home countries. They also face a secondary problem which is finding New Zealand referees for their tenancy applications. Many students are very alien to this process. These students are left with undesirable homes, ill-equipped with proper insulation. Victoria International Students' Association President, Denn Teo, states there are "issues of international students having the lack of understanding of their tenancy rights and being taken advantage of by landlords. This problem is still affecting current international students in Vic." International students are vulnerable to being exploited by unethical landlords due to the lack of tenancy rights awareness. Over the last 2 years, student associations around New Zealand have received multiple complaints, especially in the Auckland and Waikato regions, about students being exploited to the extremes of having their passports photocopied (and withheld), charged extremely high bonds, and blacklisted in the landlord communities when they approached the authorities. Universities that fail to provide adequate accommodation, and fail to educate on tenancy rights are vicariously contributing to this type of exploitation.

With the rise of international students' new problems become apparent within the space of student support and student health staff. Current university staff, student support staff, and health professionals lack professionalisation and culturally competencies to deal with international students. The influx of new cultures and religions in student populations requires trained staff that are culturally competent. Auckland University Students' Association International Student Officer, Afiqah Ramizi states "we're lacking in professional staff specific for international students (ie. In careers services, academic services, financial services)." Before more money is spent on marketing, universities should consider whether current students have adequate support from culturally competent staff. The NZISA Representative Council has determined that the number of frontline support staff and health staff is inadequate and that they struggle to cope with the current influx of internationals. Otago University Students' Association International Student Officer Sabrina Alhady states that "Complacency will only drag the sector down."

International students are in New Zealand for a New Zealand education. However, the policies at universities are not enough to promote assimilation between international students and domestic students. Universities do not have programmes that teach Te Reo Māori or introduce tikanga Māori to international students. Some Universities have begun remedying this issue through Noho Marae programmes, however, it would best benefit the sector if similar programmes were introduced nationwide. Another issue that student representatives have raised is that international students are segregated in university halls based on their nationality or ethnicity. This shows a clear lack of understanding of the needs and preferences of international students.

The above issues highlight that we have serious problems within the university sector, problems that must be addressed as the student numbers continue to grow. NZISA is disappointed that the TEU takes a stance purely on profit, rather than the wellbeing of students. A cap on student numbers would not "ensure institutions provided a high-value experience", as the experience is already hindered right now. What New Zealand is lacking is

innovation in the export education sector. “It's just a matter of time before [China] rise up in the rankings” states Mr Gilchrist.

Vaelyn Luo, National Vice President of NZISA, points out that, “Multiple Chinese universities, Peking, Tsing Hua and Fudan, already rank higher than New Zealand universities. It is not just about ranking that international students are after, it’s about the quality of experience!”

International education is not an academic discipline, universities should recognise value in developing international education programmes to teach their staff members about professionalization and culture competencies, and to develop new ideas for the sector that will continue to lead New Zealand towards a world leader in export education. New Zealand Universities provide excellent education and a good learning environment. However, we can be better. If we grow at a sustainable rate, with a focus on students rather than profit, then the criticism against a growing sector are negligible.

About NZISA

NZISA is the peak international student body and advocate of all international students in New Zealand. We enhance communication and cooperation between the international student communities, the government, and the education sector in New Zealand. NZISA aims to explore new standards and to review existing best practice when accommodating, educating and advocating for international students in New Zealand. Stay connected with NZISA on our Facebook page @NZISA2018 and email us at info@nzisa.co.nz.

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