



# NEW ZEALAND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

## MEDIA RELEASE

*For external release*

### **Milking international students until their mental health becomes a liability**

*A recent NZ Herald article has highlighted the problems that NZISA sees around mental health support for international students, and the continued impacts profit and growth seeking in the export education sector has on international student wellbeing.*

**Issued by NZISA on January 10, 2020**

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 the NZ Herald published a story about an international students' wrongful termination due to her struggles with mental health. The New Zealand International Students' Association ("NZISA") has been helping the University of Auckland ("UoA") student for several month now and supported her in her recovery and battle with UoA. NZQA has been informed and letters were written to the Minister of Education, and Minister of Immigration in December 2019. Over that time period the university has dragged out the re-enrolment process and failed to take any concrete action until the student had finished her final exams. All that time the student was promised she would be allowed to re-enrol for 2020, asked to develop a plan for 2020, and asked to pick her subjects for her final year. The only requirement was that she meet with the UoA International Office. At that meeting, she was handed her termination letter.

It is our understanding that the university had access to the student's full medical record and access to any new medical notes. We view this as an extreme invasion of the student's privacy, and we are highly doubtful that UoA explained the full significance of this kind of access to the student.

UoA in their press-release and internal staff emails claimed that the student's enrolment was terminated "because of explicit advice from her own medical team", yet in the termination

letter it is clearly stated that “you did not promptly inform the International Office about this change as you were required to do under your Enrolment Conditions”. Naturally, NZISA finds both these quotes are inconsistent and cast doubt on to UoA’s real position. Several letters from GPs, including the University Health Services have stated that “allowing [the student] to continue to study at Auckland University and completing her degree is likely to be the most favourable option for her mental health”. It is our opinion that UoA’s delay in processing the enrolment for the student placed further enormous pressure on the student and her mental health.

The termination letter itself was written and worded in an adversarial format. UoA claims in its press-release that it was a mere formality, however, in such a delicate situation dismissing the letter as formality is ludicrous. The formatting blames the student, and there is not acknowledgment at all by UoA as to how they have acted towards the student. If UoA truly cared about the students, as opposed to reducing their liability and responsibility, then the letter would have been worded differently.

If UoA had the student’s best interest at heart, UoA would have offered the student to have her studies temporarily suspended while she returns home and recovers. NZISA has seen this approach work extremely well in the past, and other institutions have used this approach to ensure a student would be able to complete their degree in the future. This approach gives hope to a student and does not place undue pressure on them for spending an extreme amount of money on their education.

### **International students as cash cows**

This case highlights the issues that exist around higher education and mental health in New Zealand. Over 2019, several stories broke in the media about the lack of pastoral care for students at university halls. Several students were found dead, and the recently published report by former High Court judge Kit Toogood QC revealed an extensive amount of failures in the hall management practices. In 2018, several students were kicked out of their halls due to mental health problems at a time when they needed the support the most. How can these stories be part of our education sector? New Zealand positions itself as a world leader in education, yet the pastoral care provided to students does not match these claims.

These issues present themselves both in our domestic and international student population. The amount of care provided is simply not enough. The export education sector was valued at over \$5 billion dollars by ENZ in 2018. \$4.8 billion of that was from fees paid by international students. Yet, despite this massive industry the support for students is lacking. Growth and profit are sought over sustainability and wellbeing.

Weltec Student Connection President Kamilla Korokhova states that “it is likely similar situations have occurred and are occurring all over New Zealand right now, but they are simply not spoken about because international students are discouraged to speak up”. As with this case, institutions may use delaying tactics or intimidate students. “International students are trying to be good for everyone and yet we are constantly intimidated with expulsion or worse - deportation, not to mention the devastating waste of funds as a result”.

How can we expect students to talk about their mental health, if they face a possibility of expulsion and revocation of their student visa.

NZISA National President Elect Sabrina Alhady that “Termination of student enrolment should not be decided on the basis of the student’s mental health, especially when the student is in distress and has faced a significant amount of trauma. Such decisions simply prove that changes are due where mental health and support services, as well as code of practice are concerned. To simply relieve students in the middle of their degrees creates further tension, higher levels of stress and simply relieves an institution of ‘collateral’”. Often in these scenarios the cultural impact on the student is not considered. Many of our international students come from countries in which mental health is a taboo, hence any decision to terminate enrolment must involve an assessment of further impact on a student’s health should they return home.

NZISA welcomes the opportunity to further work together with the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health, and NZQA on assessing whether the current International Student Pastoral Care Code is sufficient to protect students. NZISA further acknowledges the crucial need of establishing a recognised, nationwide interventional system and framework that addresses these and similar matters for international students.

NZISA notes that if a similar situation had arisen in Australia, the Overseas Students Ombudsman would have supported the affected student and provided guidance on how to handle appeals. In New Zealand no such ombudsman exists. This results in students having to fight against their institutions who are most often more resourced, experienced, and knowledgeable on New Zealand law. Outside of volunteer organisation there is no support for international students on these matters.

NZISA would like to thank AUSA, NZISA representatives, and volunteers for their help, and all those who have offered words of sentiment to the affected student.

### **Where to find help and support**

Shine (domestic violence) - 0508 744 633

Women's Refuge - 0800 733 843 (0800 REFUGE)

Need to Talk? - Call or text 1737

Youthline - 0800 376 633, text 234, email [talk@youthline.co.nz](mailto:talk@youthline.co.nz) or online chat

Samaritans - 0800 726 666

Depression Helpline - 0800 111 757

Suicide Crisis Helpline - 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO)

### **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. Stay connected with NZISA on our Facebook page @NZISA2018 and email us at [info@nzisa.co.nz](mailto:info@nzisa.co.nz).

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