INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS REPRESENTATIVE COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA

MEDIA RELEASE
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International student leaders set priorities for action at ISRC 2026 Conference

SYDNEY

More than 120 student representatives and sector stakeholders attended the ISRC 2026 Conference at the University of Sydney on 25–26 October, bringing together student voices from 30 education institutions across Australia.

Led by the International Students Representative Council of Australia (ISRC) and hosted by the Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) and the University of Sydney Students' Representative Council (SRC), the conference explored the theme *International Students as Partners in Australia's Education*.

Delegates came from 30 education institutions across every Australian state and territory, including metropolitan and regional areas. They represented diverse educational backgrounds, including students from universities, vocational education and English language providers, as well as elected student representatives and student leaders with experience in advocacy, research and community engagement.



Figure 1. *Group photo of participants on Day 2 of the ISRC 2026 Conference, University of Sydney, 26 October 2026.*

Direct dialogue with government

Assistant Minister for International Education the Hon Julian Hill MP addressed the conference on 25 October and joined a separate roundtable with student representatives.

Hill emphasised that Australia's future success in international education depends on both educational quality and a good student experience. He said education providers have “the primary obligation of looking after you” and encouraged student representatives to keep “politely but firmly pressuring universities and other organisations to fulfil their responsibilities under the code”.

On fair treatment and belonging, Hill said his expectation was “that there's not two classes of students in our classrooms”. He emphasised the responsibilities of institutions and state governments in helping international students participate in wider community life.

Hill also acknowledged the information challenges faced by international students and the importance of consumer protection.

“We are having a look at whether we need to do more to regulate international education agents,” he said, adding that student voices would be included in that work.

He condemned workplace exploitation and encouraged student representatives to help students understand their employment rights. Hill also acknowledged the impact of migration policy changes while explaining the government's approach to student visa integrity.

Following his address, Hill met with student representatives in a separate roundtable to discuss international student policy and concerns about recent visa changes.



Figure 2. *The Hon Julian Hill MP, Assistant Minister for International Education, addressing the ISRC 2026 Conference at the University of Sydney on 25 October 2026.*

University of Newcastle student representative Muhammad Moiz Hussain described the discussion as a conference highlight.

“I strongly believe that international students should not only be heard but also have a meaningful voice in shaping the decisions that affect their education, experiences and future,” he wrote in a post-conference reflection.

Students identify shared priorities

At the National Student Representatives Workshop, participants identified visa and policy uncertainty, rising study and living costs, barriers to employment and fragmented information as pressing concerns.

They called for earlier notice of policy changes, clearer fee information, fairer access to internships and practical support for students undertaking unpaid placements. They also proposed a national information resource covering study requirements, healthcare, employment, student rights and support services.

The workshop examined the challenges facing student organisations, including insecure funding, limited influence over institutional decisions and the loss of knowledge between successive leadership teams. Participants sought stronger independent representation and transparent processes recording universities’ responses to student recommendations.

Chair of NSW ISRC, Thet Loon Po reflected that student representation must extend beyond consultation to meaningful accountability.

“What international students need now is enforcement: clear accountability for the people making these decisions, and proof that they genuinely care about the students affected,” she wrote.



Figure 3. Student representatives participating in the National Student Representatives Workshop at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 25 October 2026.

In his conference welcome message, ISRC President Weihong Liang explained the importance of students participating in these decisions.

“International students are central to national debates on migration, housing and the future of education. Yet their role in shaping these discussions remains limited. We believe students should be recognised not simply as participants in education, but as partners in the decisions that shape it.”

Connecting policy, student rights and community support

The second day opened with an address from University of Sydney Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Students) Professor Joanne Wright.

Sarah Bendall, First Assistant Ombudsman at the National Student Ombudsman (NSO), delivered a keynote on speaking up, barriers to being heard and belonging. She encouraged student representatives to help more students become aware of the NSO and understand how to contact the independent service for advice and assistance with concerns about their higher education providers.



Figure 4. *Sarah Bendall, First Assistant Ombudsman at the National Student Ombudsman (NSO), and ISRC President Weihong Liang at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.*

Professor Kelly Matthews, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning) at the University of Wollongong, explored student representation, partnership and cultural capital, followed by a discussion with student leaders Aashish Neupane and Malakai King.

In a LinkedIn post ahead of the conference, Matthews highlighted the distinction between student representation and student partnership, writing that “Both are essential, but they serve different purposes and come with different responsibilities.” She also emphasised the distinctive cultural knowledge, experiences and perspectives international students bring to universities.



Figure 5. Professor Kelly Matthews, Pro Vice-Chancellor (Teaching & Learning) at the University of Wollongong, in a panel discussion with student leaders Aashish Neupane and Malakai King at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.

A policy panel brought together Professor Gaby Ramia, Professor of Policy and Society at the University of Sydney; Diana Cozadinos, Acting Assistant Secretary at the Australian Government Department of Education, responsible for international student policy, legislation and integrity initiatives; and Danielle Hartridge, Co-Founder and Principal of IEP Advisory and a member of the ISRC Expert Panel.

Moderated by ISRC Education Officer Seungbin Kang, the session connected government, research and international education practice with the priorities raised by students.



Figure 6. Professor Gaby Ramia, Diana Cozadinos and Danielle Hartridge participating in a policy panel moderated by ISRC Education Officer Seungbin Kang at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.

The community session, *What if the Community Was the Campus?*, was coordinated by Welcoming Universities and Welcoming Cities. It brought together Gary Lee OAM, Manager

of International Education at the City of Melbourne; Susana Ng, Senior Social Programs Officer at the City of Sydney; Türkan Aksoy, NSW Coordinator of Welcoming Cities; and University of Technology Sydney student Abuduhailili Xiamuxinuer. Trisnasari Fraser, Welcoming Universities Coordinator at Welcoming Australia, moderated the discussion.

The session explored the role of cities and communities in strengthening international students' connections and participation beyond campus.

Reflecting on the discussion, City of Sydney Senior Social Programs Officer Susana Ng emphasised the responsibility of communities beyond university campuses.

"One of the key messages from the panel was that belonging is not created by universities alone," she wrote, highlighting the role of local governments, community organisations, employers and neighbourhoods in helping international students build meaningful connections.

Reflecting on her first experience as a panellist, Xiamuxinuer wrote that "volunteering and taking on leadership responsibilities have helped me build confidence, connect with people and gradually develop a sense of belonging in Sydney".

In a reflection published after the conference, Student Voice Australasia emphasised that students should be involved before problems are defined and solutions developed, rather than being asked for feedback only when a final draft is already on the table.



Figure 7. *Gary Lee OAM, Susana Ng, Türkan Aksoy and Abuduhailili Xiamuxinuer participating in the What if the Community Was the Campus? panel, moderated by Trisnasari Fraser, at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.*

From discussion to practical action

Following the conference, ISRC is preparing a national storytelling campaign exploring why international students choose Australia, what they expect before arriving and how those expectations compare with their experiences of studying and living in the country.

Griffith University student and conference speaker Alexa Rose raised a related question in her post-conference reflection, arguing that international education should be understood beyond whether students enrolled, graduated or found a job.

“Maybe we should also ask: what became possible because they were here?” she wrote.

ISRC also plans to strengthen its focus on employment, advocating for wider access to internships and organising further career development activities, including career expos, to connect international students with employers and professional opportunities.

This builds on the 2026 International Student Career Expo, held at Sydney Town Hall on 8 October and led by ISRC in partnership with SUPRA and the UNSW Postgraduate Council. The event brought together around 45 employers, attracted more than 3,500 registrations and welcomed approximately 2,000 students in person.

A further priority is promoting affordable campus food models, drawing on initiatives such as the University of Sydney’s $5 student canteen and encouraging their adaptation to other campuses.

Building cooperation beyond the conference

SUPRA President Yiman Wu reflected on more than six months of preparation by the hosting team.

“What started as an idea has brought together student representatives from across Australia, and I’m very proud of what our team has achieved,” she said in her welcome address.



Figure 8. Ada Choi, Yiman Wu, Anumanth Ram, Fitri Ani, Jixuan Xia, Ziyi Zhou and Daehyeok Lee participating in a closing panel discussion moderated by ISRC President Weihong Liang at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.

Conference attendee Channing Liao also reflected that the experience had strengthened their motivation to contribute to the international student community and continue the connections developed during the event.

The conference marked ISRC's first anniversary as a national organisation. Liang's welcome message emphasised the importance of sustaining the work beyond individual events.

"More importantly, we seek to build the relationships and representative capacity needed to sustain this work beyond the conference."

The Pearson Leadership Scholarship provided travel grants for 17 international student representatives, supporting participation from every state and territory, including regional New South Wales. Pearson Business Development Manager Jon Dixon also addressed the conference.

ISRC plans to hold its next national conference in Melbourne in 2027.



Figure 9. Cheryl Johanna, Ojaswi Shrestha, Gilbertofer Tanoto and Aryendu Singh participating in a panel discussion moderated by Qixiu (Jack) Li at the ISRC 2026 Conference, 26 October 2026.

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About ISRC

The International Students Representative Council of Australia (ISRC) is Australia's independent, democratic national peak body representing international students across all education sectors.

Established by student representative organisations from across Australia, ISRC is a membership-based, not-for-profit organisation governed by an elected National Council. It

brings together student organisations and representatives to strengthen independent student representation, coordinate national advocacy and build the capacity of student leaders.

Through policy research, advocacy, national campaigns and direct engagement with governments, education regulators, education providers and community organisations, ISRC works to protect international students' rights, improve education quality, wellbeing and employment opportunities, and ensure students have a meaningful role in decisions affecting them.



Figure 10. *Group photo of participants on Day 1 of the ISRC 2026 Conference, University of Sydney, 25 October 2026.*

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