



June 15 2020

Hon. Dr Geoff Lee
Minister for Skills and Tertiary Education
NSW Government

Dear Minister,

RE: Crisis support for international students

We write to thank you for the opportunity to meet with your senior advisers Marsha Mannot and Tricia Mullins last Thursday June 4 to discuss Covid-19 induced hardship for many international students in Sydney and the NSW Government's response.

At the University of Sydney we would normally have around 30,000 international students each year. Due to Covid-19 we think there may be around 20,000 who actually made it to Sydney for semester one. The NSW Government has acknowledged the financial hardship experienced by many students whose situations are impacted by Covid-19. The University of Sydney has provided some emergency relief in the form of bursaries, travel ban hardship funds, interest free loans, and rebates on tuition fees for eligible international students. This has been very welcome but is of course very limited since our university itself is facing a significant funding shortfall.

Hardship Funds

The most valued initiative has been the bursaries and travel ban hardship funds. These are small amounts of cash but provided students who were distressed with flexibility to spend the funds on anything from groceries to electricity and phone bills. Most of all students who received the funds expressed a sense of relief and felt care by the university. Although not included in the crisis package announced in May we still urge you to consider an emergency relief funding scheme, similar to that offered by the University, but would be quite small in scale and target the most severely impacted.

We have consulted with students and our casework teams and offer the following suggestions to maximise the value of your crisis package:

Short term emergency accommodation

We request a relaxation to the eligibility to benefit international students who can demonstrate genuine need, for example, by: removing requirement of recent job loss; increasing the savings balance total; and reconsidering 'no other avenues of support'. We



do not believe many students who would meet those criteria and yet we can assure you these students are still at risk of eviction because their rent and living expenses and paying off debts are very high.

We would like to see the state government work with university owned student accommodation to assist at risk students with short term emergency accommodation. Due to Covid-19 the student accommodation beds are running at half capacity, at best.

NSW Government hotline

We request expansion of this initiative to include some level of casework assistance instead of just information. Perhaps this can be aligned with the International Student Welfare Services Hub run by Study NSW? We know international students would really value someone who not only listens to their issues but can also assist with a phone call or an email to properly refer the student to the appropriate service or source of information. This extra level of service would elevate both initiatives to something of significant value to students, even if for a short time.

Free legal advice

This is very welcome for a longstanding helpful service, Redfern Legal Service, and we urge the government and RLS to fast track this extended legal service program as students require immediate assistance. The SRC and SUPRA Legal Services have seen double the usual number of clients this year.

Emergency relief packages

We request expansion of eligibility to all International students who can demonstrate hardship and not just those in forced isolation. Furthermore we request direct funding or in kind support by the NSW Government to the existing food hamper initiative being delivered by the University of Sydney's Student Representative Council. This has been in high demand to impacted students and is made possible in collaboration with community organisations with equally limited resources. Your government's support would expand this service to more needy international students.

Energy Accounts Payment Assistance (EAPA) Scheme

We really like this initiative but the fine print around this proved disappointing. For example, many international students in hardship would benefit from this scheme but the registration process is too complicated and the time for processing of at least 8 weeks puts this initiative out of reach for most of our students. The EAPA is already highly subscribed and again, many students will not be eligible due to group share rental arrangements, or will require time and assistance to work out how the head tenant could apply, and so on. Utility expenses is a typical cost that students in hardship could really do with some assistance and we feel a small cash payment would more readily benefit those international students who are doing it tough.



Other initiatives you announced as part of the crisis package for international students are not in our opinion of significant help. The My Legal app may have utility later on for students but it is hard to see how an app will be able to provide immediate help to students who are currently in urgent need of material support. Access to mental health services and having costs for some health procedures waived is welcome (and we might argue only fair) but for the majority of international students in the current crisis these are probably of limited value.

Travel concessions

We would like to take this opportunity to support the bill introduced by the Greens last week, to provide public transport concessions to international students. This is only fair and would bring NSW into accord with other states and finally sends a message to all that this state treats all students as students.

Representations to the Federal Government

We also request the NSW Government to consider endorsing the following recommendations at National Education Council and the National Cabinet. We fully support the report and recommendations which were submitted by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations to the Senate Inquiry to Covid-19:

1. That government provide one-off payments to universities to support PhD scholarship extensions to 4.5 years for all HDR students at all universities
2. That free visa extensions and ongoing financial support be made available for international postgraduate students to allow greater flexibility for them to convert their degrees to equivalent part-time student load (EPTSL) (Currently cost ~\$1300 to apply for a new visa)
3. That all domestic self-funded postgraduate students be eligible to receive Austudy, subject to means-testing.

SUPRA and the SRC welcome your support for our students and we look forward to your response.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Minran Liu'.

Minran Liu
President, SUPRA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Liam Donohoe'.

Liam Donohoe
President, SRC