English Australia submission

Productivity Commission's Draft Report on Mental Health

Sent to:	Australian Government Productivity Commission
Submission via:	https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/mental-health/make-submission#lodge

English Australia Comments

English Australia is the national peak body and professional association for the English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) sector of international education.

English Australia is well-placed to contribute to the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health:

- In 2017, English Australia conducted a comprehensive nation-wide Mental Health survey of ELICOS colleges that yielded 94 responses;
- Mental Health Survey responses were used, along with desk research and focus interviews, to create the English Australia publication: 'Guide to Best Practice in International Student Mental Health' (2018) collating data, case studies and research in a volume outlining best practice for ELICOS providers in supporting their students' mental health;
- In 2018, English Australia ran 'Accidental Counsellor' and Mental Health Training workshops around Australia that catered to around 600 ELICOS teachers and other frontline ELICOS staff.

Support for the Draft Report on Mental Health

As the national peak body for the ELICOS sector, we welcome the Productivity Commission's inquiry into mental health. With more than 175,000 ELICOS students studying English in Australia in 2018, it is critical that we build a network of services which support these students.

Considerations for the Review

Broadly, we support the Draft Report on Mental Health but feel that it misses opportunities to acknowledge ELICOS students and the unique situation that they are in. These include:

- Referencing international students and common issues they experience in Section 4.2 – Overcoming cultural barriers to treatment;
- Mentioning ELICOS students in Section 18.2 - Supporting people in tertiary education;
- Including international students in the list of groups which experience high rates of social exclusion and have limited social networks.

1. **Referencing International students and common issues they experience**

Concern relating to Section: 4.2 Overcoming cultural barriers to treatment (Volume 1, p.194)

In this section of the Report, there is no specific reference to International students and common issues they experience. We believe that the cultural and language difficulties being discussed in this section are directly relevant to the International student experience in Australia and specific reference to this group should be made in this section of the Report.

Furthermore, whilst we wholeheartedly support: 1) the call for more tailored services that support the needs of diverse communities and 2) the call for members of specific communities and people with lived experience to be involved in treatment to break down mental health stigma, we feel there is a need to highlight what this would look like in practice for the International student community.

2. **Referencing ELICOS students**

Concern relating to Section: 18.2 Supporting people in tertiary education (Volume 2, p.704)

This section contains information about supporting young adults who are studying at higher education or vocational education and training (VET) institutions. There is considerable reference made to International students studying in these sectors including their particular needs and aggravating circumstances.

It is our view that the ELICOS sector needs to be specifically mentioned in this section of the Report. In particular, the section: 'What needs to be done to improve support provided to tertiary students' needs to be expanded to have points that are directly related to students who are studying ELICOS courses and to ELICOS providers.

Students studying English as a stand-alone course or pathway into further study face additional pressures related to language comprehension as they orientate into study and living in Australia. This adds to the stress and issues related to social inclusion.

ELICOS students are an ideal target group for mental health support given the high proportion that pathway into further academic study in Australia.

In 2019, 19% of the international student commencement into tertiary education undertook ELICOS in Australia prior to commencing their course. This figure increases to 28% for Vocational Education and Training (VET) students.

3. **Including International students in the list of groups which experience high rates of social exclusion and have limited social networks**

Concern relating to Section: 20.1 Barriers to social participation and inclusion (Volume 2, p.791)

This section of the Report outlines the correlation of social exclusion with poor mental health and highlights particular groups within the Australian population which experience higher rates of social exclusion.

It is our view that International students should be included in the list of groups which experience high rates of social exclusion and have limited social networks. International students often lack a sense of belonging or connectedness to community and concerted effort needs to be devoted to creating a stronger sense of community for International students. This effort should be put towards building sustainable connections to study, peers, education institutions and the broader community to improve mental health outcomes. (Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik, Patience, 2019).

Information request responses

1. **Information request 18.1 — greater use of online services**

It is the view of English Australia that e-mental health initiatives could be used very effectively to support students at risk of or experiencing lower intensity mental health issues. In addition, they would be a welcome addition to the suite of tools available to college staff who work counselling students.

Given their potential for successful outcomes and additional support at little or no cost, it would be highly appropriate for ELICOS institutions to more actively promote these programs to their students.

Consideration should be given to provision of multilingual information through online services. Whilst English is the primary language of instructions for study, access to information in a student's native language will be effective at times of critical need.

2. **Information request 18.3 — international students access to mental health service**

- Most ELICOS student arrive in Australia with Standard Overseas Student Health Cover (OSHC), which has a two-month waiting period for mental health conditions. Culture shock, homesickness, and isolation are often things international experience in the first few months. Not being able to access mental health services as part of their student health cover during the first months of study has a significant impact on how students will settle into their new environment and their chances of successful outcomes for their studies in Australia.
- Many ELICOS centres employ counsellors who refer students to specialist psychological or psychiatric services which are culturally appropriate. In these situations, students can generally access a 10 session Mental Health Plan where OSHC covers the Australian government fee

component of international students' treatment, however, the students are still required to pay the gap fee. In many cases, this gap fee is unaffordable for students, who may be living on tight budgets, and so the gap becomes a deterrent to treatment.

For further information, please contact the undersigned.

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