

Indian students, agents game visa system

[Julie Hare](#) Apr 14, 2023 – 6.00pm



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Thousands of [newly arrived Indian students](#) are using loopholes in the visa system to abandon their courses at established universities to enrol at cheaper private colleges, stoking fears of widespread rorting of the temporary migration scheme.

Universities are reporting sharp increases in the number of Indian students who either arrive in Australia but never step foot in their institution or abandon their course shortly after. One university says around 500 of its expected 1200 new enrolments from India for semester two last year either didn't front up or jumped ship in the

first six months.



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While the problem is coalescing around master's programs, which are shorter and therefore cheaper than undergraduate degrees, experts say the main concern is students jumping to private vocational colleges.

Once in Australia, they can access the jobs market and, ultimately, a path to permanent residency.

Education department data seen by *AFR Weekend* reveals that 77 per cent of Indian students who entered a vocational program in 2021 – before the current trend was in full swing – were previously in a higher education course. That figure is up from 51 per cent in 2019 and 67 per cent in 2020.

As at March 31, there were [83,333 student visa holders](#) who are Indian nationals in Australia.

Concerns are rising that on current trends there will be a repeat of the so-called “cooks and hairdressers” saga of the late 2000s, when tens of thousands of students knowingly played migration rules to enrol in dodgy courses as a means of getting permanent residence.

Rod Jones, chair of Study Perth, and Pankaj Pathak, from Western Australia’s Private Education and Training Industry Association, wrote to members on Thursday that “large numbers of in-coming students ... are switching to lower-level [vocational] courses within days of arrival”.

“These students are being ‘advised’ to stop attending their primary course or, in many cases, not even beginning their primary course, putting the principal provider at risk of non-compliance,” the pair wrote.

Loopholes in legislation

Their concern is that colleges exploiting a loophole in the legislation allowing for two concurrent certificates of enrolment will have “serious consequences for the international education industry”.

Sarah Todd, vice-president (global) at Brisbane’s Griffith University, said the problem was increasing as certain groups of Indian students were motivated by migration and [employment opportunities](#).

Under Australian rules, international students are not allowed to switch provider in the first six months without a

compelling reason and a letter of release from their initial institution. They can't change from a higher education course to vocational education. However, both rules are being widely flouted.

Peter Coaldrake, chief commissioner with the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, said the regulator was aware of instances of abuse of the visa system that appeared to echo how similar unethical practices are affecting overseas markets, such as Canada.

Professor Coaldrake said the regulator was only aware of four instances of unethical transfer practices involving two colleges.

"TEQSA is mindful that this is an area that can change rapidly," Professor Coaldrake said.

"We expect the next few months will be important in establishing the extent of the issue, and we will continue to work with other government agencies to monitor and respond as needed."

The vocational regulator, the Australian Skills Quality Authority, said it "does not have any systematic evidence" of such behaviour and said it had not been contacted about such practices by any universities.

AFR Weekend has been told otherwise.

Unethical transfers and poaching are an open secret, with

everyone from student representative groups, the peak body, individual agents and university leaders all agreeing the problem exists and is of growing concern.

“We have seen an increase in poaching and transferring to other institutions. We’ve had issues in the past, but not to this extent. In the cohort who commenced last July for semester two, 40 per cent had gone elsewhere before the end of that semester,” said one head of international student recruitment from a mid-tier university, who asked not to be identified.

She said the problem was so bad her university had started doing a video interview with each of the 400 applicants a week that come from India as a way of initially screening out non-genuine students.

Normally, universities would expect a churn of less than 10 per cent of international students within any given semester. Now that figure is anywhere between 40 and 70 per cent at some institutions.

However, experts say it is important not to tar all Indian students with the same brush, and that the problem was mostly isolated to the states of Punjab and Haryana.

Onshore agents the issue

While some say students and unethical agents based in India are gaming the system by enrolling students in low-risk, respected universities to make visa approvals easier

and quicker with the full intention of jumping ship once in the country, others claim the problem rests entirely with agents in Australia.

Ravi Lochan Singh, managing director of Global Reach, a respected Indian student recruitment firm, said offshore education agents "have zero influence on students once they are in Australia".

"It is the onshore migration agents doubling as education agents who get into the act. The movement is often from higher providers to low cost private institutions, who pay higher commission to the onshore migration agents even when no new visa assistance has to be offered," Mr Singh said.

One university director of international students said there were a number of steps the government could take to "nip this in the bud".

"Applying the relevant legislation to the institutions that are receiving students would be a start," she said.

"If more than 10 per cent of students who commence at that college come from another education system, then they should be scrutinised."

While the evidence, both anecdotal and data-driven, indicates that students are jumping from universities to vocational colleges, the Department of Home Affairs would not comment on the matter.

However, *AFR Weekend* understands it has been alerted to the problem by numerous concerned groups and individuals.