



SRI LANKA ASSOCIATION OF NSW INC

PO Box 3120,
Sydney, 2001

ABN:76 983 916 417

<https://www.slansw.online/>

24 April 2020

Appeal to Australian Universities and the Australian Government on behalf of International Students in Australia

Sri Lanka Association of NSW Inc (SLA)¹ in collaboration with other professional and social Sri Lankan societies in NSW and Victoria would like to make an appeal on behalf of international students studying in Australia.

We make this submission to advocate on behalf of the international students, particularly from Sri Lanka, who are facing unanticipated hardship due to the salutary and timely restrictions in place to manage the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the data available from the Consul General of Sri Lanka for Sydney, over 35,000 Sri Lankan international students were living in Australia as of December 2019. This represents about 10 percent of the international student population in Australia. Since 2016 the number of Sri Lankan international student arrivals has increased by about 20 percent significantly enhancing Australia's position and reputation as a regional hub for higher education. The Australian newspaper has reported that international education is the nation's fourth largest revenue earner in Australia.

Over the past decade Australian higher education has experienced an unprecedented growth in international student enrolments valued at \$34.8 billion in 2020.

We greatly appreciate the range of measures adopted by the universities, such as online learning, postponing course start dates, delaying assessments/offering deferrals. It is also our understanding that individual universities have offered to waive university accommodation fee for first year students and certain credit facilities for essential food items.

However, our submission is to seek further assistance for the students until normalcy returns.

Students currently in Australia

We submit that it is important to consider the particular vulnerabilities faced by international students who are presently residing and pursuing their education in Australia.

The students face three major issues regarding the remittance of funds from Sri Lanka.

- their parents are facing financial hardship due to reduction of their income,
- Sri Lankan government has placed curbs on the transfer of funds out of Sri Lanka, and
- stage 3 lockdown imposed in Australia has seen the students who often rely on part-time work to fund their livelihoods, lose employment.

¹ SLA was incorporated in 1973 as an organisation for all Sri Lankan's living in NSW regardless of their ethnic and religious backgrounds, with specifically designated multi focused objectives to be an inclusive organisation that provide a common meeting ground for all Sri Lankan's living in NSW.

Nalika Padmasena
President
0424960800
president@slansw.org.au

Rizan Rizvi
Public Officer/Secretary
0430090020
publicofficer@slansw.org.au

Asha Hewafonsekage
Treasurer
0403805683
treasurer@slansw.org.au

Dinesh Ranasinghe
Editor
0412818590
editor@slansw.org.au



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Without access to any government extended welfare support including the job keeper payment, these students are facing unprecedented hardship.

The flight embargoes placed by Australia and Sri Lanka are preventing these students from returning to Sri Lanka and 'sit out' the crisis and return to resume their studies.

We submit that the Australian tertiary education providers act as a group and adopt a three-pronged approach.

First a flexible tuition fee payment option

International students are required to pay their tuition fees upfront and are ineligible to access commonwealth supported studentship. Some universities permit their students to pay their tuition fees in two instalments over a semester period. For those students who elected to pay their fees in instalments the second instalment for Semester 1, 2020 is likely to be due on 31 May 2020.

The non-payment of tuition fees leads to the education provider cancelling the students Confirmation of Enrolment via the PRISM system, which leads to the student's visa cancellation process being initiated by the Department of Home Affairs. Such a cancellation would result in the student receiving an adverse visa record.

It is our submission that the Universities consider developing a framework to support students by accepting the fee on an instalment basis. In designing such a formula, it would be relevant to take cognizance of the fact that the COVID -19 crisis has denied students who are presently in their 2nd year and above, the opportunity of funding their education and their living expenses with part time employment.

We propose that Universities defer all payments of Semester 1, 2020 until Semester 1 2021 for those students who are engaging in a payment plan. This will significantly reduce the mental stress on these students and allow them to use any reserve funds to survive the immediate 6 months. We believe under social justice principles; all higher education institutions will be able to extend this to international students in this time of crisis. We also request the Australian government to take a proactive step in protecting the future investment in the higher education industry.

Reduction of tuition fees

International students pay a tuition fee several multiples that of local students in the expectation of receiving a superior educational experience. The fee paid is not reflective of merely the academic knowledge garnered through the attendance at lectures and by access to Library content. The fee paid is in exchange of a superior academic lifestyle often inaccessible in their home countries where adequate facilities may not be available.

The fee paid typically around \$30,000 for an undergraduate level program is rather reflective of the expectation of receiving a holistic education. Where the student attends in the hopes of immersing themselves in the multicultural lifestyle promulgated within a campus environment and also to participate in the various extracurricular activities on offer amongst Australian universities.

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0424960800
president@slansw.org.au

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Public Officer/Secretary
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The present situation has created a need for education to move online towards a distant and remote education model. This has confined students to accessing education via the internet limiting the access they have to all the Products and services promised to them upon enrolment. Given the present situation it is acceptable to conclude that the agreement over which the students were recruited is only partially performed. Therefore, under the circumstances continuing to invoice the students for the full fee payment upfront represents an unfair bargain. It is conceivable that even if restrictions are relaxed it will be at least a full semester before University Campuses are operating at full capacity with the ability for students to access the full range of services promised to them in the University Product Disclosure statement.

We believe this can be rectified by discounting fees for the second semester of 2020.

Conclusion

In our view, an industry wide failure to recognise the impact to the higher education industry and the economy is a serious setback. International students who are currently living in Australia are incredibly vulnerable individuals and is a dangerous precedent to set by the Australian government. Students in their late teens to early 20s are still in the cycle of maturity and are unable to bear the burden of navigating the present situation. Universities have a duty of care as custodians of these students' education to proactively recognise this particular vulnerability and put in adequate safeguards for temporary reprieve while economic and social situations improve.

Our appeal:

1. Introduce a flexible tuition fee payment, waiving the payment until semester 1 2021, allowing students to stay in Australia without breaching their visa conditions.
2. Consider a reduced fee structure to match the variation in current performance in University delivery.
3. Issue a ministerial direction relaxing Standard 13 of the National Code 2017 under the ESOS Act, whereby Students are allowed to defer their courses and remain in Australia for the duration of the restrictions.
4. Consequently, extend Student Visas until June 2021 allowing students to complete their studies.

We look forward to your urgent consideration and action in this matter.

We thank you for your favorable consideration in advance. If required, we are happy to discuss this matter further with you and arrange a meeting time convenient to you. I can be contacted on president@slansw.org.au or 0424 960 800.

Yours faithfully,

Nalika Padmasena
President
Sri Lanka Association of NSW

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0424960800
president@slansw.org.au

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Public Officer/Secretary
0430090020
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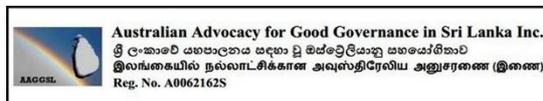
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Collaborating Sri Lankan societies in NSW and Victoria:

1. Austra-Lanka Muslim Association Inc (ALMA)
2. The Sinhalese Cultural Forum of NSW Inc (the SCF)
3. Australian Advocacy for Good Governance in Sri Lanka Inc. (AAGGSL)
4. Bridging Lanka
5. Darebin Ethnic Communities Council (DECC)
6. Malima Forum
7. Movement for Equal Rights (MER)
8. People for Human Rights and Equality Inc. (PHRE)
9. Sri Lanka Architects in Australia (SLAIA)
10. Sri Lanka Society of Australia Inc.
11. Sri Lankan Agriculture and Veterinary Graduates Association in Australia (SLAVGAA)
12. Sri Lankan Engineering Diplomates Association of Australia Inc. (SLEDAA)
13. United Sri Lankan Muslim Association of Australia Inc. (USMAA),
14. Young Sri Lankan Professionals (YSLP)
15. MJ Legal (Vic)



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