



Violence Against International Students – Newcastle Says No

Main Committee

25 May 2009

Sharon Grierson MP

Ms Grierson: (Newcastle) (09:54 PM) — I wish to draw attention to the importance and worth of international students studying in Australia and to raise some concerns about their experiences while they are here. I think we in this House understand that international students play an important part in our economy and in our multicultural society. In 2007, 455,000 students from more than 190 countries were enrolled across the nation, including 5,000 studying under Australian government scholarships. More than 75 per cent were from Asia, and enrolments from Africa, the Middle East and South America were growing strongly. They represent Australia's largest services export, contributing almost \$12 billion to the national economy in 2006-07.

When MPs travel around the world, particularly in our own region, we find it a source of great pride when members of parliament and important people from other countries tell us how wonderful their experience of studying in Australia was. They speak very highly of their own studies, or the studies of their children, in Australia. And, Mr Speaker, I know that you have had that experience many times. This is important because it is the experience of current students that dictates the views about studying in Australia in many countries.

It certainly influences enrolment levels and, in particular, tourism. Generally, regional cities like Newcastle, which I represent, are seen very favourably because they have a distinct safety and security advantage over the capital cities. While our academic and research standards are highly respected, it is also important that we are seen as a welcoming and tolerant country. Unfortunately, that is something we constantly have to work on.

There are currently 6,000 international students enrolled at the University of Newcastle. They represent more than 22 per cent of the student population and they contribute about \$46.5 million to the University of Newcastle. For every four international students, one job is created. That means about 24,000 jobs in my region. So you can see why it is a terribly important sector.

Unfortunately, international students have recently been the target of violent attacks and thefts in Newcastle. Just this month, four international students were

robbed at knifepoint by a gang of thugs that had members as young as 12. We have certainly been reporting those incidents in the media. It is always regrettable to see them on national television but, at this stage, pleasingly, five young people have been arrested. As I said, one of them was a 12-year-old boy, and the others were aged 13, 14 and 16. The police suspect that this is a gang that live close to the university campus and are targeting international students, who they see as soft targets. It is regrettable that international students are seen as soft targets, but I congratulate the local media on dealing with this issue very responsibly.

The National Liaison Committee have been in contact with me about their international student campaign. The NLC is advocate body for international students in Australia, and they have taken up a multicultural issues approach. On 1 May last year they launched their cross-campus safety campaign. Following the attacks in Newcastle and other incidents around the country, they tell me they have stepped up their campaign. I give my support to the campaign and expect to see progress—and delivery—from the initiative.

The Newcastle University Students' Association, or NUSA, take an active interest in the welfare and safety of international students and have certainly been part of this support campaign. They are having a meeting on 29 May to discuss these issues and I look forward to hearing their suggestions.

International students often live in low-cost areas around the campus and travel on foot. They are generally less confident in confrontations and less capable of communicating any problems to the police and I am pleased to see that the university has reinstated a 'safety shuttle' and essential services and that some members of the New South Wales parliament are taking up the cause of giving international students access to travel concession cards so that they are not walking around the suburbs late at night.

I want to give particular praise to Terry Lovett for his work with Muslim students at the university and, in particular, to Chaplain Tom Jones, champion of tolerance and compassion, who I know has been ill. They have done some wonderful work together specifically in assisting Muslim students and overcoming racism. But I think it is time that all leaders in my community supported our international students.