

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/apr/23/sold-a-dream-the-international-students-lured-to-australia-with-false-promises>

## **Australian education**

### **‘Sold a dream’: the international students lured to Australia with false promises**

Students tell of being directed into substandard and unsuitable courses as attention turns to the unregulated world of foreign agents



‘I’ve lost every shot I can have at a career’: Muhammad Ihsan who came to Australia for a masters in biotech and bioinformatics now drives an Uber. Photograph: Sarah Rhodes/The Guardian

Muhammad Ihsan thought his Australian student visa was a ticket to a world-class education at a prestigious institution and, ultimately, a six-figure job.

Instead, the Pakistani national found himself sitting in an almost-empty room in Melbourne, where his teacher barely spoke English.

Nearly a decade after he arrived in Australia, Ihsan lives in Launceston, Tasmania, driving Ubers and filling short-term jobs, still hoping to secure permanent residency. He says he has paid more than \$100,000 in upfront fees at Australian institutions, convinced into courses by agents promising great job outcomes.

“I’ve lost every shot I can have at a career, and more will be exploited in the same way,” Ihsan says.

Ihsan is one of a number of international students caught up in the unregulated world of foreign agents – people who are paid huge bonuses by private providers to lure international students into substandard courses with assurances of full-time work and a path to permanent residency.

Foreign agents have been used by **Australian universities** for decades to drive enrolments and assist students offshore with application processes and accommodation. But some are accused of bribing international students with laptops, easy course models and false promises about what could happen after they graduate.

The issue was back in the spotlight this week at a parliamentary inquiry into the international student sector, where the chief executive of the International Education Association of Australia, Phil Honeywood, alleged Australia's **international education system** had become a "Ponzi scheme" in which onshore and overseas agents were paid up to 50% commission by independent institutions to funnel south Asian students into courses with poor credentials that didn't suit their talents or skills.

"These agents need to be regulated," Honeywood told Guardian Australia. "It's not hard to do but they've been getting away with it for two decades."

### **'It's all fake'**

Ihsan arrived in Australia in 2013 on a student visa to complete a masters in biotech and bioinformatics at a university in Melbourne. He had graduated top of his course with a bachelors in medical genetics.

The agents who enrolled him in his initial course in Australia had travelled to Pakistan, he says.

When he arrived in Australia, he found that of about 90 students in his course, just two were Australian. The vast majority were Indian students.

Ihsan says agents often enrol students in courses and then funnel them to different institutions in order to gain additional commission.

In one instance, he was advised by an agent to enrol in what Ihsan calls an independent "scam college" in Tasmania where there was "no education [standards] whatsoever". Ihsan paid \$20,000 in upfront fees to study there.

After paying the agent, he was unable to contact them with queries about the course.



'I was sitting there in an empty room. It's all fake' ... Muhammad Ihsan in Launceston, Tasmania. Photograph: Sarah Rhodes/The Guardian

Another course Ihsan took at an independent institute in Melbourne cost \$56,000 for two semesters.

“You can’t even label it as a course, it had no use,” he says. “Teachers were teaching masters level courses and you can’t comprehend a single thing they’re saying.”

Ihsan says more than 100 people turned up for the first session, but he believes they still passed with degrees, although many of them stopped coming to class.

“I was sitting there in an empty room,” he says. “It’s all fake.”

### **‘A race to the bottom’**

In 2012, the government tried to reform the foreign agents sector with a public voluntary register, aimed at placing greater accountability on what agents the institutions were using.

But the International Education Association of Australia’s Honeywood says it hasn’t worked – instead, he says it’s become a “race to the bottom” in an increasingly competitive, and lucrative, market.

He told the inquiry this week that sometimes money was being “handed in an envelope under the table” to agents who directed young people into courses.

Independent Higher Education Australia was approached for comment. In its submission to the Australian Universities Accord, the body called for the mandatory registration of international agents.

In the public university sector, Honeywood says agents are offered a maximum of around 15% commission from institutions for the services they provide to applicants.

But among the private sector, the figure is closer to 30%, jumping to 50% during the pandemic when border closures disrupted the market.

The [latest data](#) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found while international student arrivals were still 22.5% lower than pre-Covid levels, there had been a surge in enrolments at independent institutions.

Some 6,270 internationals arrived on student visas at independent institutions in February, a sixfold increase on the same time last year (1,020).

Social media apps including TikTok are rife with agents offering courses with “pathways to permanent residency” like nursing and carpentry, selling the false promise of long-term visas to prospective students.

Under Australian law, eligible students who live, study and work in regional areas are offered one or two years of work rights after studying. From July, international students

will be eligible to apply for two-year temporary graduate visas in “select degrees” in “areas of verified skills shortage”.

The agents also promote services to assist migrants on tourist visas to switch to student visas once they arrive in Australia.

Gabriela Weiss, who works at the Intake Assessment and Referral (IAR) crisis management service for international students in New South Wales, says many students are “sold a dream” by agents in their home countries of life in Australia. There’s often “misinformation” as to how expensive it is and how many hours they can legally work on a student visa.

“They work so hard, every cent is to pay for studies, accommodation and life expenses,” she says. “And they’re completely alone and denied basic human rights.”

Weiss has been urging the federal government to consider international students as temporary migrants, which would make them eligible for emergency services including crisis accommodation.

“One student was living in rat-infested living conditions and, after raising this issue, received a retaliatory eviction,” she says.

“Another student was told they’d get a rental discount if they took on the job as building manager, but ended up working unacceptably long hours, experiencing workplace exploitation instead.”

But any changes are unlikely to help Ihsan, who wishes he hadn’t wasted a decade of his life seeking to gain a decent quality of education in Australia.

“Hundreds of thousands of people like me are at the verge of a breaking point,” he says. “I’m a broken man. I shake. [But] I can’t cry in front of my family.”