



Submission to Refreshing Victoria's Strategy for International Education

Migrant Workers Centre

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Contents

1	Introduction	3
2	Summary of recommendations.....	4
3	Prioritising fair and decent work	5
4	Investing in specialist support for international students.....	8
5	Conclusion and recommendations	11
6	Endnotes	12

About

The Migrant Workers Centre (MWC) is a community legal service that empowers migrant workers in Victoria to understand and enforce their workplace rights. Our activities include free employment law services, education programs to raise awareness of workplace rights, and an advocacy program to amplify and support migrant workers' voices through research and policy development. Since we were established in 2018, we have been working closely with government, unions, and civil society organisations to advance the rights of migrant workers in Australia.

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1 Introduction

- 1.1. The Migrant Workers Centre (MWC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions to inform the refresh of Victoria's Strategy for International Education (hereafter 'the Strategy').
- 1.2. International education is a mainstay of Victoria's social, economic, and cultural landscape, contributing significantly to the state's prosperity and diversity. However, the past five years have been a challenging time for the sector. Post-pandemic recovery efforts, together with substantial reforms to visa settings and regulations, have reshaped the operating environment for providers, employers, and students.¹ These developments sit within longer-term shifts in the sector, including the marketisation of education, which has driven cost-cutting and increased reliance on international student revenue, often without commensurate investment in student wellbeing.² In addition to that, increasingly divisive anti-immigration rhetoric has further diminished the sense of welcome and belonging that is critical to Victoria's success as a global education destination.
- 1.3. These broader shifts have had real consequences for students' day-to-day lives. International students are also workers, and like other workers in Australia, they face challenges related to cost-of-living pressures and housing insecurity. They also experience what can be described as *double precarity*, shaped by their temporary visa status, position in the labour market, nationality, and socioeconomic background.³ These intersecting pressures create an added layer of precarity that constrains their participation in the labour market and increases exposure to workplace exploitation.
- 1.4. Amidst these challenges, it is essential that the rights and wellbeing of international students remain at the forefront of the Strategy. Maintaining Victoria's position as a destination of choice will require a strong focus on the lived experiences of those who choose to study and work in our state, and who may go on to build their lives here as members of our communities.
- 1.5. The existing vision of the Strategy continues to reflect many of Victoria's core strengths. Its holistic framing recognises the broader conditions that enable students to thrive. This is an important foundation on which the refreshed Strategy can build. However, it approaches employment largely through the technocratic lens of 'graduate outcomes' and 'industry engagement'. It does not directly acknowledge that fair, safe, and decent work is a fundamental determinant of student wellbeing and educational success. For many students, paid work is essential to meeting basic living costs, career development, and participating fully in their studies. The quality and safety of that work is therefore inseparable from their overall experience in Victoria.
- 1.6. Accordingly, this submission responds to the key areas outlined in the Discussion Paper, with a focus on better operationalising **Pillars One, Two, and Three** of the current Strategy. In particular, our recommendations seek to:
 - 1.6.1. Strongly embed international student rights, safety, and access to fair and decent work within the overall vision and goals of the Strategy; and

- 1.6.2. Prioritise greater investment in specialist, place-based support services as a key opportunity to improve the student experience, address exploitation, and strengthen employability.
- 1.7. The long-term sustainability of the sector hinges not only on attracting students, but also on ensuring that they feel valued and empowered during their time in Victoria. To do this, a refreshed Strategy must make a clear, practical commitment to international student rights, backed by specialist supports that are attuned to the realities of their daily lives.

2 **Summary of recommendations**

Recommendation 1. Explicitly recognise fair, safe, and decent work as a core goal of the refreshed Strategy, and embed this objective across all action plans, partnerships, and performance indicators.

Recommendation 2. Adopt the outcomes that international students feel safe at work, understand their rights, and are empowered to exercise those rights as key metrics of success.

Recommendation 3. Provide increased and sustained investment in integrated, place-based, and culturally appropriate student support services, ensuring they are adequately resourced to advance fair, safe, and decent work and to respond effectively to students' needs.

Recommendation 4. Expand funding for social and economic supports, such as subsidised public transport, for ELICOS and VET students to help them manage cost-of-living pressures and participate fully in education and work.

Recommendation 5. Ensure the refreshed Strategy complements and reinforces Commonwealth efforts to tackle migrant worker exploitation, including through coordinated prevention, enforcement, and support measures.

3 Prioritising fair and decent work

3.1 Decent work is widely recognised as a key determinant of wellbeing, underpinning people's dignity, security, and ability to participate fully in social and community life.⁴ The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines 'decent work' as "*productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity*".⁵ It forms a core component of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, which Australia adopted in 2015.⁶ Work is considered decent when it:

- 3.1.1 *pays a fair income*
- 3.1.2 *guarantees a secure form of employment and safe working conditions*
- 3.1.3 *ensures equal opportunities and treatment for all*
- 3.1.4 *includes social protection for the workers and their families*
- 3.1.5 *offers prospects for personal development and encourages social integration*
- 3.1.6 *allows workers to freely express their concerns and to organise*⁷

3.2 'Fair' and 'decent' work are interrelated and reflect that principle that all workers, regardless of visa status, are entitled to safe, secure, and dignified employment.⁸ Although international standards and national law recognise this,⁹ migrant worker exploitation and under-employment remain widespread in Australia. Many students report facing significant barriers to fair and decent work, including visa-related discrimination, barriers to having their skills recognised, and pressure to undertake additional study to meet the requirements of the skilled migration program.¹⁰ These barriers often push students into insecure work, which heightens their exposure to exploitation.¹¹

3.3 Employment that is unsafe or exploitative can have significant downstream impacts. It can undermine students' academic performance, mental health, and sense of belonging.¹² As we discuss in the following sections, students' temporary visa status and their structural position in the labour market often interact to produce a form of *double precarity*, where insecurity in one domain reinforces vulnerability in the other. These vulnerabilities are further intensified by rising tuition and living costs, insecure housing, acculturative stress, and the absence of family networks to turn to for advice or support.¹³

3.4 A refreshed Strategy must explicitly acknowledge these realities and strengthen the services that can empower international students to assert their rights. In recent years, the evidence base on international students as a distinct cohort of workers has expanded considerably. This growing body of data offers a clearer picture of the needs of students and can inform more targeted policy and service responses. Case studies from our own work provide further qualitative insights into students' experiences and the structural conditions shaping them.

Evidence base and case studies

3.5 Research has consistently shown that international students face heightened exposure to workplace exploitation. A range of structural factors contribute to this, including

restrictive visa settings, gaps in enforcement, and the acute power imbalance between workers and employers – which can give them significant leverage over workers' agency and working conditions. ABN abuse and sham contracting are particularly prevalent forms of exploitation, whereby employers seeking to avoid paying entitlements require students to operate under an ABN as a condition of engagement (see **Case Study 1**).¹⁴ Fears of jeopardising visa status, losing employment or facing other forms of retaliation often deter students from reporting or seeking help, particularly if they aspire to permanent residency or other visa pathways.¹⁵ These pressures are compounded by misconceptions and knowledge gaps about workplace rights, which further inhibit help-seeking and allow exploitation to persist unchecked.¹⁶

3.6 Large-scale studies highlight the scale and persistence of exploitation. The *National Temporary Migrant Work Survey* (2019), which included more than 5,000 international students, found that 77% were paid below the minimum casual hourly wage, and 26% earned half the minimum casual wage or less – a figure unchanged since the 2016 survey.¹⁷ Although most underpaid students knew the minimum hourly wage (84%), 62% believed they were at fault for the underpayment and had broken the law by accepting wages below the legal minimum.¹⁸ Further, 38% reported that they did not seek information or help for a problem at work because they did not want 'problems that might affect my visa'.¹⁹ These findings point to a pervasive belief in a 'parallel' labour market, operating under different rules and expectations for temporary migrants, where speaking up carries significant personal and immigration risks (see **Case study 1**).²⁰

3.7 The MWC's own research aligns with these findings. Our Report, *Visa on Arrival and Migrant Worker Exploitation* (2024, n=959) examined how exposure to exploitation differs according to a worker's visa on arrival, specifically whether that visa provided a pathway to permanent residency.²¹ The report confirmed that the absence of a pathway on arrival is itself a key marker of precarity. While high rates of abuse (62%) and workplace injury (34%) were reported across the entire sample, non-pathway arrivals – whose demographic profile closely mirrors that of international students – were significantly more likely to experience underpayment (44%) compared to pathway arrivals (34%). Although 40% of participants attempted to recover unpaid wages, non-pathway arrivals were markedly less successful (35%) than pathway arrivals (47%).

Case study 1. Daniela's Story (ELICOS)

Daniela (not her real name) arrived in Melbourne in November 2025 on a student visa to learn English, expecting many job opportunities in a big city. Instead, she struggled to find work, as many employers are reluctant to hire students due to the 48-hour fortnightly work limit. Desperate to cover rent and groceries, Daniela eventually found a job at a beauty and hair salon.

Daniela soon realised that the salon wasn't "fully delivering on what they told me in the interview". The salon forced her to work under an ABN rather than a TFN, offering \$26 per hour for general duties and \$36 per hour for client services. This arrangement means that she is paid as an independent contractor and denied basic entitlements.

The insecurity of this arrangement quickly became apparent. During one Sunday shift, Daniela was sent home at 2:00pm without pay for the remainder of her rostered hours. Knowing she

lived nearby, the salon called her back for a last-minute booking. Daniela is experiencing significant financial strain as her hours are inconsistent and dependent on client bookings, which are usually made the same day or the day before. This makes it impossible for her to predict how much work she will receive or what her weekly income will be.

The arrangement also limits her ability to find additional work. Expected to be available every day for last-minute bookings, she cannot commit to another job or plan ahead. Daniela is reluctant to “*speak about these problems with her employer*” because she’s “*afraid that If I complain, I won’t be called anymore.*”

Case study 2. Aaron’s story (tertiary education)

Aaron (not his real name) first arrived in Melbourne on a student visa to undertake a master’s degree. During his studies, he found that the university failed to provide fair and reasonable internship opportunities for international students. Despite the program running for an entire year, only two internship placements were offered to the entire cohort. With limited professional networks, Aaron was unable to compete with local students for these positions.

Aaron was later informed that he could secure an internship through the university curriculum by paying \$8,000. Unable to afford the fee, he instead sought work experience independently, applying wherever possible. However, he was repeatedly rejected once employers became aware of his visa status and the associated cap on working hours.

Through conversations with classmates, Aaron learned that many international students invested significant time and energy, working beyond their permitted hours, or work without pay, to gain work experience. Although university offered career fair and employability programs, Aaron felt that the support was limited and largely symbolic, providing very little practical support in obtaining employment relevant to his field of study.

Aaron also expressed his concern over his future path. Even if he were to obtain a Temporary Graduate (subclass 485) visa after graduating, his chances of securing employment in his field of study would remain minimal without relevant or local work experience.

3.8 Findings from our research reports, *Carrot or Stick* (2024) and *Unlocking Talent* (2023, with Unions NSW), further highlight how insecure work, visa precarity, and discrimination shape international students’ employment experiences. International student participants described relying on low-paid, unstable jobs to meet basic living costs, feeling unable to report exploitation due to fears of visa repercussions, and experiencing a persistent sense of precarity that affected their academic engagement and wellbeing (see **Case study 2**).²² ELICOS and VET students are particularly affected; with fewer supports available to them, they are among the most vulnerable to exploitation and face some of the greatest challenges in securing fair and decent work.²³ *Unlocking Talent*, based on a survey of more than 1,200 migrant workers, reinforced these patterns at scale. The report found that:

- 3.8.1 39% were denied job opportunities because of their visa type;
- 3.8.2 37% had been paid or offered a lower salary due to their visa type;
- 3.8.3 21% were paid or offered a lower salary because of their nationality; and
- 3.8.4 56% were required to undertake additional study to practise their occupation in Australia.²⁴

3.9 Taken together, the evidence shows that fair and decent work is a fundamental part of the international student experience, and to their satisfaction as both **learners and workers** in Victoria.

4 **Investing in specialist support for international students**

4.1. As the evidence discussed above establishes, exploitation is not an isolated workplace issue, but a symptom of broader systemic challenges.²⁵ International education represents a significant financial commitment for students and their families. When these investments do not translate into fair and decent work opportunities or secure visa pathways, students can experience heightened risks to exploitation, alongside significant emotional and financial strain. Although many of the conditions that produce these risks sit outside the direct scope of the Strategy, there are opportunities to pivot by strengthening the services that enable international students to pursue their goals as both learners and workers.

4.2. In light of the rapid changes to the education sector, it is critical that support services and systems remain anchored in the realities of students' lives. While we acknowledge that sector-wide reforms have placed increased market-driven pressures on institutions and providers, this must not come at the expense of the quality and responsiveness of support services for international students. A growing body of research has cautioned that the neoliberalisation of the education sector, driven by the "*imperative to maximise revenue and secure financial surpluses at any expense*", has contributed to the unfair treatment of international students, and to a decline in the quality of services.²⁶

4.3. Scholars note that, to be effective, services must "fit within a student's life".²⁷ Services that are generic or depersonalised do not "automatically improve the experience" of students or effectively meet their needs.²⁸ By contrast, place-based services are inherently student-focused, as they are anchored in the locations in which students live, work, and study, and are designed to flexibly respond to the local needs of that community. Such services are less fragmented and far more accessible, particularly for new arrivals who may face significant challenges navigating unfamiliar systems and environments. A 2025 survey by the International Student branch of the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU) affirms the effectiveness of personalised, high-touch support, such as drop-in career and job readiness services. It found that such services significantly improve international students' employment outcomes compared to models that provide limited pipelines for follow-up.²⁹

4.4. It is vital that such services are sustainably resourced so that they can plan effectively and continue delivering high-quality support. Services such as the **Study Melbourne Hub** (see **Case Study 3**) are particularly critical for ELICOS and VET students, many of whom have minimal support through their providers, if any at all. Outreach activities delivered in trusted priority settings, such as Consulates (see **Case Study 4**), further demonstrate the value of accessible, place-based models that meet students where they are.

Case study 3. Place-based support in action: Study Melbourne Hub

The Study Melbourne Hub exemplifies a best practice, place-based model of support for international students. Centrally located in the CBD, the Hub provides a welcoming, student-focused environment where students can access practical assistance, specialist services, and community connection in one dedicated space.

At the Hub, students receive tailored support from trained caseworkers who assist with issues including workplace rights, tenancy, financial stress, and wellbeing. The space also offers quiet study areas, communal spaces for peer connection, and access to targeted programs. Community-based partners, such as the Migrant Workers Centre, routinely provide job readiness workshops, work rights education, legal assistance, and multilingual resources at the Hub.

Importantly, the Hub's integrated model means that students can seek help early, before issues escalate, and are connected seamlessly to specialist providers when more complex assistance is required. One client, James (not his real name), explained how these services helped him find decent work that is aligned with his career goals:

"I was afraid [to ask my employer about my rights] because it was hard for me to get a job and while I could get other pick packer jobs, the conditions wouldn't be like the one I had, plus it is not in the IT field as well. I thought if I had spoken up, I would be defiling my employers and that is a bad thing."

"I have used Study Melbourne and the Migrant Worker Centre's services to support in getting the current job I want. This includes going to jobs-related events, resume checking, interview and job search preparations ... I couldn't be grateful of their support enough"

Case study 4. Prevention in practice: Post-Arrival Orientation Seminar (PAOS)

The Post-Arrival Orientation Seminar (PAOS), delivered by the Philippine Consulate General in Melbourne, demonstrates how early engagement can connect newly arrived international students with essential support services. The Seminar invites recently arrived students to the Consulate, where they receive practical information about living, studying, and working in Victoria.

As part of the PAOS, the Consulate regularly invites the Migrant Workers Centre to provide in-language education on employment rights, workplace standards, and how to seek assistance if problems arise. Students are also briefed on the role of consular support and the services available. This ensures that students are introduced to trusted support networks at the earliest possible opportunity, before issues escalate or become entrenched. This model can be scaled up to other major consulates.

- 4.5. As workers, international students must also be empowered to exercise their workplace rights. From our experience as a migrant-focused organisation, an empowerment model to service provision is essential to promoting fair and decent work. These models equip workers with the knowledge, confidence, and support needed to understand and assert their rights at the earliest opportunity. They are most effective when delivered through multi-pronged, integrated services that combine prevention, early intervention, and clear referral pathways. Such models (see **Case Study 5**) incorporate capacity-building

sessions, multilingual resources, outreach activities, and legal support with responsive service capabilities. They are effective because they are grounded in an understanding of the intersecting issues that international students face, such as language barriers and visa-related constraints, which shape their ability to exercise their rights.

4.6. To sustain these services, long-term and coordinated funding is critical. Many of them operate in tandem, forming an ecosystem of support that students rely on at different stages of their journey – from orientation and early settlement to job-seeking and resolving workplace issues. The MWC sees strong value in sustaining and expanding these services, particularly the Study Melbourne Hub and its associated grant programs (see **Case Study 5**). To maximise their impact and ensure continuity for students, funding should have a long-term horizon, extending beyond June 2027. Stable investment will allow this ecosystem to mature, deepening its reach and impact. This, in turn, will help maintain Victoria’s standing as a premier destination for international students.

Case study 5. Integrated service delivery: the Migrant Workers Centre

Since May 2024, the Migrant Workers Centre (MWC), in collaboration with the League of Latin American Migrants Australia (LLAMA), has delivered employment and workplace rights support at the Study Melbourne Hub, with the support of the **Study Melbourne Inclusion Program (SMIP)**. This initiative offers international students one-on-one consultations on workplace rights, job readiness, and navigating employment issues.

As of November 2025, the service is delivered by an International Student Support Worker and a team of trained international student volunteers at the **Study Melbourne Hub**. Now in its second iteration, the project has provided one-on-one consultations with 527 students and delivered 102 education and outreach activities in total, reaching 13,951 students. The volunteers also benefit by gaining valuable work experience and expanding their professional networks, with several going on to secure paid work.

Building on this engagement, monthly legal consultations were added to MWC’s services at the Study Melbourne Hub from August 2025. These sessions operate as a drop-in service, enabling students to receive timely advice and early intervention for more complex workplace issues.

Student testimonials

“I had visited you at the Melbourne Study Hub almost 2 months ago ... seeking advice about applying for a job and what I could do to improve my resume. I am glad to let you know that I finally managed to secure a job yesterday ... after a very exhausting three-month search. Thank you for your assistance with my job search. Your help was greatly appreciated.”

“I am very happy to inform you that the [job interview] has approved me for the next stage and I have already started the onboarding process. I am extremely thankful to you for helping me both with the interview process and the tips ... Thank you again for everything you have done for me so far for helping me out here. I will surely reach out to you if I have any questions or encounter any doubts.”

5 Conclusion and recommendations

- 5.1. The quality and safety of the work that international students can access is inseparable from their overall experience Victoria. It is not only essential for meeting tuition and living costs, but also for enabling academic success, maintaining wellbeing, and supporting long-term career development. Yet many international students continue to face structural barriers that undermine their employability, increase their exposure to exploitation, and diminish the return on their educational investment.
- 5.2. Ensuring that international students can access fair and decent work, exercise their workplace rights, and seek support through accessible and culturally appropriate channels is fundamentally a matter of student wellbeing. It is also a strategic priority, as these conditions directly influence Victoria’s reputation as a premier global destination for study and work.
- 5.3. To move beyond a technocratic approach to employment, the refreshed Strategy must explicitly centre labour rights as a core objective and recognise fair, safe, and decent work as a central metric of student success. This requires a clear and actionable plan that both complements the Migration Strategy 2023, including its recommendations to better utilise international students’ skills,³⁰ and supports the Federal Government’s broader efforts to address the structural drivers of migrant worker exploitation.

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6 Endnotes

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