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System exposes visa rorts as students 'jump ship'

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SOME Indian students are using the university-only streamlined visa system to get to Australia, and are then jumping ship to cheaper private providers, education agents have said.

Two well-regarded Indian agents, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the abuse appeared to be on a small scale now but was bound to increase as student arrivals gain momentum under the new system. "I think it is going to escalate in July because the intake will be bigger," said a Melbourne-based agent.

Another agent, based in the Indian state of Punjab, blamed the Australian visa system's new bias against the vocational education and training courses desired by, and more suited to, many genuine students. "I doubt that even 50 per cent (of this year's streamlined intake at universities) will complete their three-year bachelor with the same provider," he said.

However, many institutions are yet to experience the problem and say the new system appears to be working well.

"In fact, we have seen a reduction in the number of requests from new commencing international students for early release from a packaged offer," said Jeffrey Smart, international vice-president at Swinburne University of Technology.

A centrepiece of the Knight reforms following a migration-driven boom in private colleges, the streamlined visa system favours higher education at public universities because they are regarded as less prone to immigration and labour market rorts.

Growth in the Indian market has shifted, with a 47 per cent increase in new university students in the year to March, and a 25 per cent decline in the number of new VET students.

News of a VET loophole in the streamlined visa system comes at a delicate time because "quality" private providers and TAFEs have been waiting months for a promised announcement that they too can join the system, which allows institutions to bring in students more easily but holds them accountable for any immigration problems.

Ingeborg Loon, international engagement manager for the Australian Council for Private Education and Training, will raise the issue at Friday's meeting of the Education Visa Consultative Committee in Canberra.

"What's important is that we as peak bodies work together with (the Department of Immigration and Citizenship) to make sure that (this loophole) doesn't become an issue," Ms Loon said.

A DIAC spokeswoman said the streamlined visa system was in its early days and "working well for universities" but authorities were carrying out regular reviews to detect and head off problems.

Sydney migration agent Jonathan Granger said it was difficult to stop students exercising a consumer's right to switch providers, assuming they did not break migration rules by moving to a

diploma program on a higher education visa. "It's a very grey area and to spot it in the first place would be a resource headache for DIAC," he said.

The Melbourne agent said she knew of three or four cases in which students withdrew from their university courses before this year's census date, got a refund, and enrolled in cheaper private colleges, some of which were offering a "spotter's fee" of \$1000-\$1500 per student.

Some misinformed students believed that a cheaper two-year diploma course would still entitle them to post-study work rights, the agent said.

Agents stood to lose their commission and universities would be rated as riskier by DIAC if these students failed at a private college, had visas cancelled or went into black market employment.

The Punjab-based agent said three of the six students he had enrolled this year at Australian universities had switched to private colleges, sometimes because it would have been too hard to secure a VET visa offshore.

He said some universities were too willing to give students the release letter needed to go to another provider.

Agents agreed that one solution would be to extend streamlined visa processing to quality private colleges.