Government stalls on visa changes

Exclusive

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The Gillard government has angered the international education industry by backing away from a commitment to extend streamlined processing of student visas beyond the university sector.

At a meeting on Friday with the offices of Tertiary Education Minister Craig Emerson, international education peak bodies were told that streamlined visa processing would not be extended to non-university education providers in the near future.

This effectively puts the decision beyond the September 14 election and in the hands of the incoming government. "It seems very unlikely that streamlined visas will be implemented between now and the election. It's in the too-hard basket," said Phil Honeywood, executive director of the International Education Association of Australia, who attended the meeting in Canberra.

Access to streamlined visa processing is a key issue for private providers of education and TAFEs.

Currently only international students attending universities are able to have their visa applications streamlined.

This gives universities a major advantage over other education providers such as private colleges and TAFE institutions.

Under streamlined visa processing, students from countries with high immigration risk – such as China and India which are both major student source countries – are treated as if they come from a low-risk country, which means reduced delays and less onerous visa conditions.

However the government has indicated since last year that it would extend streamlined visa processing to other "low-risk" education providers.

In February this year the former tertiary education minister Chris Bowen said the extension of streamlined visa processing was "well advanced" and further announcements would be made "in the near future".

The government's refusal to act on the issue follows another decision last week that shocked international education providers.

Students applying for a subsequent temporary stay visa while they were in Australia are set to be charged an extra $700. The fee will affect students who decide to do another course and need a new visa, or who want to apply for work visas or a holiday visa after completing their study.

"This decision adds insult to injury for the sector and its future," said Claire Field, chief executive of the Australian Council for Private Education and Training.

Given the Gillard government's low standing in the polls, international education lobbyists now assume they need to take up the streamlined visa processing issue with the Coalition.

Extending streamlined visa processing is potentially controversial because, under the government's now-stalled proposal, it would be extended only to education institutions whose students are proven to be low immigration risk. Other institutions would miss out.

A spokesperson for Mr. Emerson confirmed the Friday meeting with peak bodies from international education but declined to comment.