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## Australia's Student Surge May Weaken Standards

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Australia's planned increase of 25,000 international students in 2026 has sparked concerns about declining academic standards and rising abuse of the student visa system, according to warnings from a leading economist.

The Albanese government announced what it called a "sustainable" expansion of international student numbers, expected to begin in early 2026. Officials say the move is

aimed at boosting the economy, supporting universities, and enhancing multicultural engagement. However, critics argue the policy may unintentionally create loopholes for migration misuse while compromising educational quality.

Economist Leith van Onselen of MacroBusiness raised alarm bells, stating the system is already under strain. “The student visa system is being used as a backdoor to permanent residency,” he warned. “By increasing the intake without enforcing higher standards, the government risks turning higher education into a transactional gateway rather than a genuine academic pursuit.”

Van Onselen pointed to widespread reports of academic dishonesty and “ghost colleges” that allegedly issue qualifications without proper instruction. He argued that adding tens of thousands of new students into the mix could increase cheating, overwhelm educational institutions, and undermine Australia’s international reputation.

Australia is already one of the world’s top destinations for international students, with roughly 600,000 enrolled across its universities and colleges. Many students use the education route to gain work visas or permanent residency, prompting questions over whether immigration policy is being shaped by education providers rather than government planning.

In response to mounting criticism, the Australian government has pledged to tighten visa controls and increase scrutiny of education providers. The Department of Home Affairs said it will work with the education sector to ensure the integrity of the system remains intact.

Despite these assurances, van Onselen remains skeptical. “Universities are financially dependent on international enrolments. There’s a risk that quantity is being prioritised over quality.”

Stakeholders in the higher education sector have voiced mixed reactions. Some university officials welcome the policy as a financial lifeline following years of revenue shortfalls, while others worry about insufficient infrastructure and staff support to handle the increase.

Critics of the policy have also warned that the influx may strain local housing markets, particularly in cities like Melbourne and Sydney, where international students tend to cluster.

As the 2026 intake looms, calls are growing for the Australian government to balance its immigration goals with the need to maintain rigorous academic standards and protect the

value of Australian qualifications.