



23rd March 2020

The Hon Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health
PO Box 6022, House of Representatives
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Senator the Hon Anne Ruston
Minister for Families and Social Services
PO Box 6100, Senate
Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600

Reference: Request to Include International Students and the Holders of Temporary Residence Visa, Parental Visa and Visitor Visa in the Medicare and Social Security System during the COVID-19 Crisis Period

Dear Hon Ministers,

On behalf of the Federation of Nepalese Community Associations of Australia (FeNCAA), we would like to request you to include international students and the holders of temporary residence visa, parental visa and visitor visa in the Medicare and Social Security System during the COVID-19 crisis period.

FeNCAA is a federal coordinating body of the Nepalese community organisations in Australia and established to advocate and promote issues of the Nepalese community to federal, state and local governments, businesses and to broader communities in Australia, and work closely with the Australian Government to strengthen multiculturalism in Australia. There are around 150 Nepalese community organisations operating for the wellbeing of the people of Nepalese origin in Australia, including Australian citizens and permanent residents.

In recent years, the Nepalese community has become one of the fastest growing populations in Australia. According to the ABS population estimation release, the number of Australian residents born in Nepal has increased 67 folds over the last 22 years, from 1,400 in 1996 to 94,500 in 2018. Around 24,500 Nepalese have arrived in Australia as short-term visitors in the last eight months ending in January 2020, and 52,000 Nepalese were studying in Australia in October 2019.

The unprecedented situation created by our collective effort to contain transmission of COVID-19 has caused a widespread impact in everyday life of almost everyone residing within Australia. FeNCAA congratulates the Federal and State/Territory Governments for providing effective and generous support packages to minimise the impact on COVID-19 on individuals and businesses. However, there is a large number of individuals currently residing in Australia who have not be covered by the Medicare and social security system. They include international students and the holders of temporary resident visa, parental visa and visitor visa.

Thousands of international students studying in Australia come from low socioeconomic countries. While they would have demonstrated that they have the financial capacity to study in Australia, they depend on their jobs for a day to day living. Most of them work in the hospitality business and a majority of them have casual work. They contribute to the Australian economy in various ways including paying tax. As per the federal education department, the Nepalese students contributed \$2.6 billion to the Australian economy in



FeNCAA

Federation of Nepalese Community
Associations of Australia

(Association Number: A05974 Date of Incorporation: 2nd August, 2018 ABN: 19 921 485 119)

2018-19, \$1.6 billion more than that in the previous year. However, on the day to day basis, they live from paycheque to paycheque and do not generally have savings. Without a regular income, they are at risk of losing their accommodation as well. Their Australian citizen and permanent resident counterparts are also on the same boat. However, they are covered by the Medicare and social security system, and are eligible for allowances from the Centrelink. It is a welcome step by the Government that they may receive further benefits as well. The Centrelink benefit, as well as stimulus packages, require individuals and families to be registered with the Centrelink. International students and the holders of temporary resident visa, parental visa and visitor visa are not eligible for registration at Centrelink. Such individuals also generally do not have their close family members in Australia to support them. The current situation has made this group of people more vulnerable.

An equally important situation is regarding their access to healthcare. While it is the condition of the student visas and the temporary residence visas to have valid private health insurance, accessibility to private health insurance, as compared to an Australian citizen or permanent resident accessing the Medicare, is not hassle-free. While having a valid Medicare number guarantees free access to most of the public hospital services and other bulk billing outpatient services, the service providers including hospitals put the onus of payment of the health services directly on the sick person. This frequently requires several two ways communication between the sick person and the private health funds and at times a significant amount of paperwork. Demand by the health services provider of upfront full fee in many situations, even on the services fully bulk billed to rest of the Australians and permanent residents cause significant financial hardships to this group of individuals. While they would have duly paid their health insurance fees, the need to pay fees upfront is something which is beyond the reach of many such individuals even during normal time. Financial limitation due to reduces income or lack of income and ineligibility to social security benefits, including Centrelink benefit or accessibility to stimulus/support package may push these individuals to the brink. This may lead to situations where they may be pushed to take risks and when they develop symptoms, they may not seek help in a timely manner, further increasing risk to themselves and to the larger community.

Although the parental visa holders are advised to take health insurance before they arrive in Australia, they are less likely to do so as this is not a required condition of parental visa holders who arrive Australia as visitors for three months or less. Recent data on the impact of corona virus show that the virus is more dangerous for elderly people and children. Young people can fight against the virus and recover, but elderly people and children are more vulnerable. There are thousands of elderly parents whose came to Australia to visit their children who are either citizens or permanent residents of Australia but do not have health insurance and social security while their children do. Hence, these elderly parents are also vulnerable due to the COVID-19.

Hence, FeNCAA requests the Federal Government to extend the Medicare and social security benefits to all the international students and the holders of temporary residence visa, parental visa and visitor visa on humanitarian grounds during this COVID-19 crisis period.

FeNCAA is very supportive of community-oriented policies and programs, including the initiatives recently announced to minimise the impact of COVID-19 on health and wellbeing of people currently living Australia. It will continue to help the Federal and State/Territory Governments in disseminating all the government information on controlling the Coronavirus to our community members through the Nepalese community organisations.



FeNCAA

Federation of Nepalese Community
Associations of Australia

(Association Number: A05974 Date of Incorporation: 2nd August, 2018 ABN: 19 921 485 119)

Lastly, we thank you for your kind consideration to our request and look forward to hearing from you. If you need more information and clarification on this request letter, please do not hesitate to call the General Secretary on 0422 342 655 or by email at gs@fencaa.org.au.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Raju Adhikari
President

Dr Krishna Hamal
General Secretary