

MEDIA RELEASE

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New consumer guide released: common problems in private colleges and training institutions

Common themes emerging in consumer complaints about some private colleges and training institutions has prompted the Consumer Action Law Centre to publish a guide about common problems, how to avoid them and where to get help if you have a complaint.

Private education and training: avoiding common problems identifies some of the most complained about issues including poor standards of teaching and unfair contracts.

Catriona Lowe, co-CEO of Consumer Action, said her centre had received a steady stream of complaints and queries about some private colleges. 'In our experience a stream of complaints and common themes emerging tends to add up to a broader problem. We are concerned that there may be other students experiencing difficulties but unaware of their rights or where to get help.'

'Many students don't know that they have consumer rights—sometimes it's because they're international students who are unfamiliar with Australia's consumer protections. Other times it's simply because people think that when they signed a contract, they've signed away their rights to complain.

'We hope that, as well as providing practical advice to people experiencing problems, putting out this guide will give people looking to sign up for private colleges some food for thought. This certainly isn't about demonising these institutions, education is a wonderful thing and many providers offer quality education - we just want people to go into these courses with their eyes open and asking the right questions,' said Ms Lowe.

Complaints seen by Consumer Action include:

- Colleges not having enough teachers for the number of students enrolled;
- Poor quality teaching meaning students have had to undertake extra training, at their own cost, just to pass the course;
- Unfair treatment, especially in relation to contracts, payments and refunds; and
- High pressure selling.

Ms Lowe said Consumer Action was concerned that colleges or training institutions were entering into contracts with students, which tip the balance of power heavily in favour of the institution, especially with regard to cancelling courses and seeking a refund.

'We've seen cases where students have tried to cancel their courses early in the semester, because of illness or some other unavoidable reason, but have been refused a refund or told they're locked into attending the classes. Refusing a refund in certain circumstances is a breach of the Australian Consumer Law, regardless of what the contract says, so we'd encourage students in this situation to get expert advice.

Ms Lowe said the most important advice offered in the booklet, which can help stop these problems from ever arising, was to read and understand a contract before signing it. 'Try not to let yourself be rushed into signing something – of course you can always challenge the fairness of a contract, but it's preferable to avoid disputes in the first place.'

Private education and training: Avoiding common problems is available at:
www.consumeraction.org.au

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