

Cookery classes won't dish up your Aussie residency dream

By Neha Tara Mehta & Kunal Doley

AUSTRALIAN immigration minister Chris Evans's statement that his country would prefer 'higher skilled' migrants to those who are studying hairdressing and cookery has led to panic and confusion among Indian students who have spent large sums of money on these courses in the hope of securing permanent residency (PR) status. Australia rejected 20,000 migrant applications sometime ago to favour higher skilled professionals over hairdressers and cooks. Before this move, Australia had listed hairdressing and cookery on the Migration Occupations in Demand List, which was why these courses were popular among Indian students looking for a fast track to a PR.

Victoria, the Australian state whose capital Melbourne has been in the news for racist attacks on Indian students, has the highest number of colleges offering such courses to international students — 134 in hairdressing and 109 in cookery. These will be the worst hit by the new immigration rules. On average, an international student enrolled in these courses pays between A\$8,000 (Rs 3.2 lakh) and A\$12,000 (Rs 4.9 lakh) a year. Most Indian students dip into their family funds, or take bank loans, to pay up the amount in the hope of getting the magical PR status.

Some of these colleges, which were branded as 'shonky' by Australia's deputy prime minister Julia Gillard, were shut down after an investigation into their antecedents by the Victoria state government. International students enrolled in these courses had tripled between 2004 and 2006, says Monash University. Melbourne, demographer Bob Birrell. A sizeable number of these students were Indian.



Australia's new rules for permanent residency do not give any advantage to students with cookery and hairstyling diplomas

The revision of immigration rules in Australia will significantly affect the businesses of overseas education consultants based in India, especially those catering to smaller towns and cities, according to Naresh Gulati, CEO, Oceanic Consultants. He said the changes would result in an immediate 40-50 per cent decline in the number of students going to Australia.

But Gulati sees a silver lining. Evans's announcement, he said, would promote quality education and help the system get rid of Australian colleges that mushroomed in the last few years to cash in on the PR craze by lowering entrance requirements. "These changes will ensure better employment opportunities for students both in Australia and elsewhere as they would have the genuine skill sets required to be job-ready anywhere in the world," Gulati said.

Students, though, are planning for life without PR. "I must have been daydreaming when I joined a hairdressing course," said Ali Khan, who is from Hyderabad and works as a supervisor at a nightclub in Melbourne. "I'm no longer dreaming big."

In Australia for a year, Khan will finish his course from the Australian Institute of Technical Training this summer. He said he would head back to his home city if his efforts to secure PR proved futile. "It's their country. We can't do anything," he said, his sense of resignation apparent in his tone. "I have told my friends not to consider Australia as a job-

friendly study destination."

Australians sympathetic to Indian students fear for the worst. Tim Singh, a councillor from the La Trobe ward of the City of Darebin, a Melbourne suburb, said he feared students would resort to dire measures to cope with Evans's announcement. "Indian students are saying their lives have been wrecked by this decision," said the councillor, whose ward has a high concentration of Indian cabbies, many of whom are students enrolled in 'shonky' colleges.

The announcement, according to Gautam Gupta, spokesperson

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Singh, who also runs his own immigration firm, is getting calls from even Indian parents settled in the US and Canada.

But he points out that the announcement makes life easier for students who cleared their initial assessment before January 1, 2010, because they can skip the 'trade test' and avoid expenses incurred to take it — sometimes, this amount is higher than their course fees.

The Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET), which represents most of the private operators offering courses popular with Indian students, has been working round the clock to support colleges and students to be affected by the altered immigration policy.

A source said ACPET was concerned the government had not released the skills occupation list, "leaving students currently in Australia and those considering going there in a very unclear position." The list will be released in April, and ACPET officials have been given to understand it will include about half of the existing list of occupations.

Students who don't attend classes and work illegally as taxi drivers or dishwashers will face trouble, pointed out Kuljinder Singh Kullar, or 'Jimmy', who came to Melbourne from Jalandhar last year to do a bakery course at the Sunshine College of Management.

"The authorities have been changing rules frequently," he said. "But I'll concentrate on my studies, get my work experience and work on my IELTS (the English-language proficiency test which is a must for a PR application)."

It's on this sliver of hope that thousands of Indian students are continuing to pursue their ambition of settling down in Australia. With PR becoming the new green card, they are not ready to let go of the Great Australian Dream. At least not yet.

for the Federation of the Indian Students of Australia, comes at a time when Indian students haven't yet recovered from the shock of street violence aimed at them. "Indian students are now feeling they're victims of fraud. After all, they came here to get PR because they were led to believe Australia needs chefs and hairdressers," Gupta said.

In the days that have elapsed since Evans's announcement, migration lawyers have been overwhelmed by calls from worried parents and students from India. "I have been getting calls every few minutes from people trying to understand the changes that will affect them and those that won't," Melbourne-based immigration lawyer Dinesh Iriya-golle Weerakkody said in a telephone interview.

An active member of the Victorian Sikh Association, Gurbinder