



Education minister vows to reduce support for orphanage tourism

Australian students can be 'unwittingly signed up for scam volunteer programs and orphanage tourism', Birmingham says

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The federal government will seek to cut off support to overseas orphanages from Australian schools and universities, as it responds to concerns over widespread exploitation and abuse.

Child rights groups, including the United Nations children's fund (Unicef), have consistently called on western governments to reduce their financial support for orphanages in developing nations.

The orphanages often house "paper orphans", or children who still have living parents but are lured with the promise of education and a better life.

Many institutions are run as businesses for the profit of their owners, sustained by so-called "orphanage tourism" from well-intentioned westerners who visit, donate or volunteer.

Children can be subject to abuse and violence and forced to work in slave-like conditions.

Australians are among the top financial supporters of orphanages in many south-east Asian countries, including Cambodia, according to Unicef. That support comes largely from churches, travel agencies, universities and schools.

On Monday the education minister, Simon Birmingham, vowed to reduce the involvement of Australian schools and universities in orphanage tourism.

“It disgusts me that well-meaning students seeking to help vulnerable children overseas might be unwittingly signed up for scam volunteer programs and orphanage tourism that risks further child exploitation,” Birmingham said.

“My colleague [the West Australian senator] Linda Reynolds has been a passionate advocate for tackling this issue, getting it onto the national agenda and bringing it to my attention, alongside various groups in the aid and volunteering space,” he said.

Kate van Doore, a law and human trafficking expert at Griffith University found that last year 57.5% of Australian universities were advertising orphanage placements through international volunteering programs.

Between 4% and 16% of public schools raised funds for or took trips to orphanages.

Birmingham’s announcement was welcomed by child rights campaigners, many of whom gave evidence to an ongoing Senate inquiry into orphanage tourism this year.

Van Doore said Australia should be applauded for leading the world in taking action on orphanage tourism.

She said banning orphanage tourism would be a “very significant step in ending the exploitation of children in orphanages overseas”.

But she also cautioned against an immediate cut of funding to orphanages.

“We are advocating for a transitional process to be considered. Right now, schools and universities that are funding or supporting orphanages should be asking questions about whether the orphanage they are supporting has a reintegration program,” van Doore told Guardian Australia.

“Our key message is that no child should be spending their childhood in an orphanage,” she said.

“Schools and universities should focus their support on initiatives where children can grow up in their families and communities.”

The managing director of the Cambodian Children’s Trust, Tara Winkler, said it was a huge relief that her message had finally been heard. Winkler has been campaigning to raise awareness about the systemic cruelty of orphanages in developing nations for the past decade.

“After 10 long years doing this work and trying desperately to get this message out to the Australian public, I can’t tell you what a relief it was to finally be heard and have hope that real change is on the horizon,” Winkler told Guardian Australia.

“I think it’s incredible that Australia might become the first country in the world to ban orphanage tourism and lead the way globally in defending some of the world’s most vulnerable children,” she said.

Officials in the departments of education, foreign affairs and social services have been asked to develop policies to combat orphanage tourism.

The minister would then take the policies to the states and territories, through the Council of Australian Governments education council.

“The national government has a leadership role to play in setting education policy but I hope that we will enjoy cooperation from states and territories, non-government school authorities and universities to ensure that due diligence occurs before groups take off,” Birmingham said.

“I’m looking forward to working with states and territories and universities so we can ensure students aren’t unwittingly visiting or volunteering in programs that exploit children,” he said.

The government has not expressed any intent to reduce church support for foreign orphanages. Last month, Guardian Australia revealed 51% of all church attendees in Australia are contributing funding to institutional care overseas.

That finding, contained in an as-yet unpublished report by the Christian charity ACCI, was made in a study of 20 Christian denominations, 3,000 local churches, 270,000 adult and child attendees and 6,000 laypeople and clergy.

A 2009 report by Save the Children found 98% of children in residential care in central and eastern Europe, 94% of those in Indonesia and 90% of children in Ghana were not actually orphans. The numbers in Liberia and Sri Lanka were 88% and 80% respectively.

In Cambodia, where Australian financial support is significant, 80% of the estimated 16,500 children living in 406 residential care institutions in Cambodia still had a parent, according to a survey released in April by the Cambodian government and Unicef.

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