Slumping education sector petitions Gillard

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Universities, TAFEs and private colleges have sought an urgent meeting with Prime Minister Julia Gillard over a severe slump in international student applications they say has been driven by the government's visa crackdown.

Universities Australia, TAFE Directors Australia, the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET), English Australia and the International Education Association of Australia warned they faced a crisis from plummeting student numbers that could wipe $3.8 billion off export earnings.

In a letter to Ms Gillard, the groups call for government assistance to tackle "the parlous state of the international education sector".

They warn of the risk of a "sudden collapse in parts of the sector", already reeling from the impact of the global financial crisis, the strength of the Australian dollar and negative publicity about immigration ports and attacks on Indian students.

"This will have serious ramifications for Australia's reputation as a study destination, with the likelihood of serious adverse financial impact on students, institutions and Australian government finances," the letter says.

The groups want at least a parliamentary secretary with responsibility for the sector — currently overseen by the Education and Immigration departments and Austrade. They also want the federal government to fund a foreign student recruitment drive, pointing out that similar assistance has been given to the tourism sector.

Universities Australia chief executive Glenn Withers said foreign student enrolments were expected to fall 20 per cent to 30 per cent next year, which could have a flow-on impact of about 20,000 job losses across the economy.

ACPET forecasts enrolments will drop by 132,000 by March 2012 and cost 33,000 jobs.

Enrolments in English language courses, which are often packaged with diploma or degree courses, dropped 30 per cent in April.

Dr Withers said the removal of pathways from student visas to permanent residency and the possibility of further changes to the government's skilled occupations list for priority migration were creating uncertainty among students.

He called for permanent residency guarantees for students who begin their courses when their fields of occupation are in demand.

ACPET chief executive Andrew Smith said: "Australia's reputation as a study destination has been undermined by a series of issues, the latest of which is a loss of confidence in the student visa regime arising from uncertainty created by ongoing shifts in policy."

Tougher assessments of foreign students' ability to fund their studies in Australia was also hurting the sector, he said.

Ms Gillard's spokeswoman said she was keen to meet any stakeholders if her diary allowed.