

The Social and Economic Security of International Students in Australia: Study of 202 student cases

Summary report

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The social and economic security of international students

In 2004 there were 228,555 international students enrolled in Australian universities, 24.2% of all students – an extraordinary one student in every four, much the highest level of any nation in the OECD. There were 164,535 international students on-shore in Australian institutions (DEST 2005). This large group of people is important in an instrumental sense to Australia and Australian universities – international education is a \$6 billion industry and at last count provided 15% of university revenues (DEST 2005) – but they are also important as cultural contributors and human beings in Australian higher education; as well being important to their own nations and families.

International students are involved in a recognised form of temporary migration and subject to specific visas. However unlike students who are Australian citizens (though like other temporary migrants) international students do not enjoy complete social and economic security. Nor is their security fully catered for by the nations they have left, where they are citizens, precisely because they are not resident at home. As a globally mobile population they fall between the borders of two national citizenship regimes, that of the nation of origin and that of the nation of education. There is no bilateral or multilateral framework whereby these national regimes are reconciled and their rights to social and economic security thereby fully catered for. Nor do the international agencies take up questions of student security. For example the International Labour Agency (ILO) has a longstanding concern about the rights of migrants but it specifically excludes students from its definition of ‘migrants’.

Student security includes health care, welfare, housing, financial welfare and freedoms, legal and civil rights, including mobility, consumer protection, freedom from abuse and discrimination, and freedom from exploitation at work. Our research on student security starts from three premises:

- globally mobile international students are rights-bearing subjects, with multiple rights
- student security is provided via a student security regime a fragmented complex of institutions, agencies and support networks

- this regime is one factor shaping global student markets and student choices in those markets

The economic importance of student security within this market, especially in Australia, has been established by previous research. For example a logistic regression analysis of choice-making by Chinese students by Mazzarol, et al. (2001; 2002) demonstrated that a safe environment was the most significant predictor ($p < .001$) of intentions to choose Australia over competitor nations. Similarly, focus groups in Indonesia and Taiwan found that many parents sent their children to Australia not the USA because Australia was deemed safer. More generally, Polanyi (1944) argues that social protection always has a hostile yet interdependent relationship with the market, especially one providing personal services such as education. Social protection checks the untrammelled forces of supply and demand .It also sustains the social and economic reproduction of the market by regulating labour practices, financial flows, provider licensing, etc.

International students have rights not simply as consumers – which is the sense in which their rights are recognised in Australian law – but in four main areas: (1) as human beings (which includes legal, civil, social, political and economic rights); (2) as students in formal education, which includes rights to pastoral care; (3) as consumers; and (4) as employees, given that the majority of international students work while in Australia.

Student security is provided by three largely uncoordinated domains: the domain of government/state, the semi-governmental education sector, and informal sectors and networks (family, friends, student networks, sports clubs, NGOs, religious institutions, etc.). These three domains overlap in some areas but there are significant gaps in other areas, and more so for students who lack access to strong informal networks. In our fragmented system of student security, the universities de facto carry the main institutional responsibility for pastoral care, but this responsibility not mandated and is exercised informally. Much depends on the willingness of university staff to ‘go the extra mile’ for international students. But a pastoral role that expands to meet needs cannot be guaranteed, given the resource constraints in higher education; the commercial, efficiency maximising character of the industry; and the size and rate of expansion of international education. The willingness of staff to ‘go the extra mile’ is essentially voluntary, and can break down completely in the face of problems that originate within the university itself, where staff may be inhibited in action.

The study

We investigated these problems in a program of 200 (actually 202) semi-structured interviews with international students enrolled in nine Australian institutions. The research was funded by the Monash Institute for the Study of Global Movements, Monash University.

The students, from 34 nationalities, were broadly representative of the target population in terms of gender. Older students and PhD students were over-represented. Students from Indonesia and South Asia were over-represented; students from Singapore and Hong Kong were under-represented (see Table 1).

The data that follow provide an overview of the study results, and the first public release of data from all 202 interviews. Further, more specialised papers on aspects of the data – particularly the detail revealed in interviews - are in preparation

Main findings

Students were asked a number of yes/no questions, which enabled issues and problems to be identified more closely:

- *Language*: Students were asked ‘Does English create difficulties for you in your academic work?’ 60 (30%) said ‘yes’.
- *Finances*: Students were asked ‘Are you experiencing or have you ever experienced financial difficulties?’ while studying in Australia. 70 (35%) said ‘yes’.
- *Work*: Students were asked ‘Are you working or have you worked while in Australia?’ About two thirds 129 (64%), said ‘yes’. Students were also asked ‘Have you ever experienced problems at work?’ such as abuse, exploitation, demands to perform specialised functions without training, etc. Of those who had worked, 27 (13%) said ‘yes’, they had experienced problems.
- *Loneliness*: Students were asked ‘Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation while in Australia?’ Three students in five, 131 (65%) said ‘yes’.
- *Discrimination*: Students were asked ‘Have you experienced discrimination or bad treatment while in Australia?’ The preamble to the question tied ‘bad treatment’ to discrimination and racism. Exactly half the students interviewed, 101 (50%) said ‘yes’.
- *Safety and security*: Students were asked ‘Are you safe and secure in Australia?’ The great majority said ‘yes’, but 19 (9%) said ‘no’.
- *Information provided to students before arrival*: Students were asked ‘Should better or different information be provided to prospective students?’ More than three quarters of all interviewees, 156 (77%) said ‘yes’.
- *Backup student security systems*: Students were asked ‘Should better backup systems be provided to students while they are studying in Australia?’ 151 (75%) said ‘yes’.

Language issues and problems

An overall 30% had problems with academic English but there are major variations by national origin. Few students from South Asia had problems – none of the 21 from India, few from the rest of South Asia and none from Singapore. But 17 (61%) of the 28 students from China reported having such problems; and there were also higher than average rates of problems among the students from other East Asian nations, including Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan; from other Southeast nations such as Thailand, and from PNG.

I don't know about the other students but for me I always think in Chinese first, in Mandarin, and then translate it into English. There is a delay in time... I don't know that is very difficult for us to write essays in English, because you can find a lot of resources and you can refer to the resources and then you can write in the academic format. I think my difficulty is just oral communication, daily language.

-- female, 29, Masters, Sydney, from Taiwan

The incidence of problems with academic English was a little above average among Indonesian students (39%) but below average among the students from Malaysia (17%). For more details see Table 2.

Financial issues and work problems

There was a clear correlation between having children and experiencing financial difficulties. Of the 41 students with children, 22 (54%) acknowledged financial difficulties and some of the others also discussed particular financial problems; while just 30% of those without children acknowledged financial problems. Not surprisingly, given the influence of family factors, financial problems were much more likely to affect older students. Students with scholarships were just as likely to be affected by financial difficulties as students without scholarships; though the latter were more likely to be in paid work (68%, as against 56% for scholarship holders).

Financial problems were more severe for students from Africa and the Middle East than for other students; and also more severe than average for students in regional cities, outside Melbourne and Sydney, where jobs were hard to get.

Finding a job here especially in Ballarat ... I'm finding it a bit different. I don't know, maybe the reason may be that there are not enough jobs. One of the reasons may be cultural problems.
-- female, 34 years, PhD, regional city, from Sri Lanka

Problems at work included such factors as exploitative practices due to rates of pay, excessive hours or other unreasonable demands by employers, difficulties in performing the expected functions without proper training, and/ or instances of sexual or other forms of harassment in the workplace. Women students had more problems at work than men - 27% of females interviewed reported problems, but 21% of men. In terms of national origin, 42% of Chinese students had faced problems at work, and 40% of students from Indochina. This was higher than other national groups.

Dealing with isolation

As noted above a large proportion of students, 65%, were affected by mundane but often heartfelt problems of loneliness and isolation. Women (68%) were more likely to be affected than men (63%).

Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation while in Australia?

Yes, yes, oh, especially right at the beginning when I first got here. I didn't have anyone to talk to, that was the thing. Initially I came all by myself, so exactly who to approach, who to talk to, I had no clue. I used to be on the phone everyday with my Dad 'I wanna go home'. It's like every single day, I'll cry and cry on the phone ... there was a lot of loneliness.

-- female, 22, Masters, provincial city, from Zimbabwe

Students in regional cities were more likely to be affected than others. Among the national groupings, students from Singapore (92%), Malaysia (72%), East Asia outside China (78%), the Middle East and North Africa (75%) and other Africa (86%) were more likely than most to have experienced periods of loneliness or isolation. Most of the students from the smaller national groupings reported having problems of loneliness and/or isolation, including all of the students except one from Africa. The rate dropped to 40% among students from Canada, the USA and the UK

Many students testified to the importance of 'bonding' networks: family, friends, and other affinity groups. Friendships with international students from cultures other than their own were often important, though a number referred to an apparent segmentation of the international student population, with a barrier between Asians on one hand and Europeans and Americans on the other. Friendships with locals were often less frequent, and some expressed disappointment about this.

Discrimination and other inter-cultural issues

Work, along with student experiences when trying to obtain accommodation in the private rental market, was one of the two most significant sources of instances of racism and discrimination. There was less discrimination on campus itself. A typical difficulty at work was that experienced by a Sikh student from India

I have no job now. I did work part-time before, but that was because my friend had already created the job... otherwise, you know, people are not very willing to give me a job because of my appearance. I can't do most of the jobs, I can't be an accountant, they don't want me there, they don't want me to be anywhere where I'm visible. And as for some other jobs, I'm not too comfortable doing them.

--male, 30, Masters, Sydney, from India

Some problems of discrimination take the form of more institutionalised disadvantage. Cross-border students do not enjoy citizenship rights. This can affect not only day-to-day living – for example difficulties in opening a bank account or securing subsidised medicine or children's education – but students' academic programs as well:

I don't know if you can consider it discrimination as such, or bad treatment either. But when you apply for things like internships or something, I found it is a problem. I'm doing my Masters in Banking and Finance. After my studies I intend to go back to my country, when the visa expires. But when I try to get an internship, which adds a lot to your degree - real hands on experience in banking and finance - they simply say that it is not open for people who have no permanent residence. I don't want to apply for PR, because I intend to go back to my own country, but this means I'm not getting with my degree what other people are getting, either when they get back at home, or in the States or Canada. I have no opportunities at all to do an internship. All the places that I applied to, said they are looking for people with PR or citizenship.

-- female, 22, Masters, Sydney, from India

A major finding of the study so far is that women students are more likely to have such experiences than men. Whereas 57% of the female students reported instances of discrimination, the rate among males was 43%. Among the larger national groupings the incidence of problems was well above average (50%) for students from Malaysia (67%), Singapore (75%) and Africa south of the Sahara (71%); and slightly above average for students from China (54%), Hong Kong (60%) and India (52%). More details are provided in Table 3.

Safety and personal security

A small but significant 19 (9%) of students answered 'no' to the question about whether they felt safe in Australia. These students were largely concentrated in the city of Sydney, where 13 students out of 57 in the study (23%) said that they did not feel safe and secure. In Melbourne the number of students who did not feel safe was 6 out of 134 students in the study (4%).

All those who felt unsafe were aged 30 years or less. 12% of women said that they did not feel safe and secure, 7% of men.

The proportion saying that they did not feel safe and secure was higher than average for students from India (19%), China (14%) and Indochina (two out of six, i.e. one third of the group). No Europeans were affected and no students from English-speaking nations were affected.

I got bashed twice here. I got robbed twice, it was really a horrible experience. I was walking home after work, eight guys were there. They saw me and started hitting me all over my head. Everything ... They took everything, my wallet, they even took my shirts, I had two shirts in my bag, they took them as well. My digicam, my wallet, my mobile phone, my watch... everything. I put everything in my hand, I saw them and I was pretty sure I knew what they wanted to do with me. So I said, ok, take whatever you want, just take it, let me go. But still, even though I give them everything, they start hitting me. The worse part is they start hitting me on my face and the head, not even on the body. I was just on the ground, try to protect my head. I had a really bad headache... so I called the police and they took me to hospital. They put me there for the whole night, just to make sure I didn't have any head injury.

Actually the police took my bag. and I called them for the fingerprinting and DNA testing, and they haven't been sent to me. I called them three times and they haven't even bothered to call me back. I didn't mention anything here [at university], there was no need. They can't do anything. And the police are not cooperating so what can you expect from [the university]?. I went through the scans, the CT scans, x-rays, everything is fine. For 15 days I had a really bad headache, there was so much pain afterwards.

-- male, 24, Masters, studying in Sydney, from India

Improving social and economic security of international students

Altogether 77% said that better or more information should be provided to prospective students, with particularly high proportions among the students from India (95%), other South Asia (89%), Middle East/North Africa (88%) and Africa South of the Sahara (86%). Chinese students (57%) were less critical than others.

Among the 75% who said that there should be better backup systems, the proportion was particularly high among students from Singapore and Africa South of the Sahara (both 100%) and Malaysia (89%); and higher than average among students from China (82%) and Indochina (83%).

The interviewees had many suggestions on how to improve student security. Most of these boiled down to one of three strategies: (1) better pastoral care by the university; (2) the use of mentors, many stressed the indispensable role played by family members or friends already in Australia when they arrived; (3) the provision of better information, especially by the universities and their agents, prior to enrolment.

In summary

Two sets of issues of daily importance dominate much of the data - financial preoccupations, and problems with English, especially in course work. Visa problems also affect many students. There were perhaps less data concerning problems related to work, than were expected by the researchers. A majority of students, perhaps more than expected, reported problems of discrimination and bad treatment, including identifiable racism; and a small but significant minority feel unsafe living in Australia, most of them attending universities in Sydney.

The data also reveal that certain categories of international students are more likely than others to face difficulties (or perhaps are more willing to acknowledge those difficulties in interview).

First, women students are more likely to face difficulties at work, more likely to be lonely, more likely than male students to experience problems of racism and discrimination, and more likely to feel unsafe.

Gender differences in student responses

proportion answering 'yes' to the question	women	men
	%	%
'Have you ever experienced problems at work?'	17	10
'Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation while in Australia?'	68	63
'Have you experienced discrimination or bad treatment in Australia?'	58	43
'Are you safe and secure in Australia?'	88	93

Women in regional centres face particular difficulties, and more so if they are from certain national categories. One Muslim student from Brunei said that:

I wear my headscarf back in Brunei, but now... when I first came here last year, I stayed at this bed and breakfast. I walked with my headscarf to school, and everybody was staring at me. I wore that headscarf for three days, and then I started telling myself that it's not safe. I didn't feel safe with people staring at me. I decided not to wear it. And then when I came back here this year, I decided I want to wear my headscarf again, until... well, we were in the class, and somebody threw some stones, to the window... It happened again three more times... So I told my teacher that I didn't feel safe. 'Is it because I'm wearing my scarf?' And my teacher said 'yes'. Well actually, the first time when they threw the stones, my teacher realised that was happening, and he was trying to catch those kids, but they ran off.

Q. It's not the students?

Yes, it's some of the students there. The teacher even asked the security to make [special arrangements].because we have a night class until 7 o'clock.

There are also important differences between the experiences of the four largest main national groupings, Indonesia, India, China and Malaysia (see Table below).

- Indian and Indonesian students are less affected than students from China and (especially) Malaysia by instances of discrimination and bad treatment;
- However students from India and China are more likely than the others to feel unsafe in Australia
- No students from India reported problems with academic English, and relatively few (17%) from Malaysia; but students from Indonesia (39%) had above average rates of difficulty, and students from China (62%) a very high incidence of difficulty;
- Students from China are less likely than the other three groups to experience periods of loneliness;
- Students from China are less likely to experience financial difficulties, but more likely to experience problems at work.

Differences in the responses of four major national groups: students from Indonesia, India, China and Malaysia

	India (n=21)	China (n=28)	Indonesia (n=49)	Malaysia (n=18)	all students (n=202)
	%	%	%	%	%
problems with academic English	0	61	39	17	30
financial difficulties	33	29	24	44	35
problems at work (% those working)	18	33	16	9	13
periods of isolation/loneliness	62	50	63	72	65
discrimination or bad treatment	48	50	45	67	50
safe and secure	81	86	96	94	91

Further data

The data include extensive findings concerning students' experiences in dealing with universities and with government, the character and role of networks and backup systems, the handling of crisis situations, and student suggestions on how student security could be improved. Papers are being prepared in these areas, and in relation to specific aspects of student security such as housing, health and welfare, finances, discrimination, gender and national differences, home/ study issues, etc. A book may be prepared. It is hoped that by the end of this program of publishing the concept of student security will be well entrenched in public discussion of international education in Australia.

Further research

Evidence to hand suggests that responsibilities for social and economic security are often blurred, especially in relation to pastoral care, suggesting the need for research designed specifically to map the security regime and identify its gaps more accurately. This further research is being undertaken in a 2005-2007 ARC Discovery grant project (Chief Investigators Chris Nyland, Simon Marginson, Gaby Ramia and Mike Gallagher). In addition this ARC project will examine the situation in New Zealand, where a formal Code of Pastoral Responsibility has been developed; examine relevant legal cases in both Australia and New Zealand, and research the views about student security held by prospective international students to further consider the relationship between student security and student choices about international education.

A further research project sponsored by the Monash Institute for the Study of Global movements is conducting 80 interviews with international students in New Zealand, and also conducting interviews with those responsible for the Code of Pastoral Responsibility in that country.

Table 1 Nation of origin of foreign students interviewed, 2003/2004

nation/region of origin	students interviewed	% of total interviewees	% of foreign students 2003
Indonesia	49	24	5.6
China	28	14	12.8
India	21	10	5.3
Other South Asia ¹	19	9	3.5
Malaysia	18	9	13.0
Singapore	12	6	14.2
Other East Asia	9	4	5.8
Middle East/North Africa	8	4	2.1
Other Africa	7	3	2.7
Europe	6	3	5.4
Other South East Asia and Pacific	6	3	5.0
Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam	6	3	1.7
Canada/US/UK	5	2	6.9
Hong Kong	5	2	13.9
Latin America	3	1	1.0
Total	202	100	100

¹ Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal

Table 2. Self-reported problems with academic English, by national origin

nation/ region of origin	% of interviewees with problems
Indonesia	39
China	61
India	0
Other South Asia (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal)	21
Malaysia	17
Singapore	0
Other East Asian (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Macau)	67
Middle East/North Africa	13
Other Africa	14
Europe	0
Other South East Asia and Pacific (Brunei, Thailand, PNG)	67
Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam	50
Canada/US/UK	0
Hong Kong	60
Latin America	0
Total	30

Table 3 Self-reported problems with 'discrimination', by national origin and gender

nation/ region of origin	No of women	No of women with problems	%	No of men	No of men with problems	%	All Interviewees With problems	%
Indonesia	22	10	45	27	12	44	22	45
China	22	11	50	6	4	67	15	54
India	4	4	100	17	7	41	11	52
Other South Asia (Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal)	5	2	40	14	4	29	6	32
Malaysia	13	8	62	5	4	80	12	67
Singapore	8	7	88	4	2	50	9	75
Other East Asian (Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Macau)	3	3	100	6	1	17	4	44
Middle East/North Africa	2	1	50	6	1	17	2	25
Other Africa	3	3	100	4	2	50	5	71
Europe	2	1	50	4	3	75	4	67
Other South East Asia and Pacific (Brunei, Thailand, PNG)	5	3	60	1	1	100	4	67
Laos, Cambodia & Vietnam	3	2	67	3	1	33	3	50
Canada/US/UK	3	0	0	2	1	50	1	20
Hong Kong	5	3	60	0	0	0	3	60
Latin America	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total	102	58	57	100	43	43	101	50

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