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## **Factors affecting the social and economic security of international students in Australia: A study of 200 student cases**

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### **The social and economic security of international students**

There were 210,000 international students enrolled in Australian universities, more than 22% of all students, with 155,000 on-shore in Australian institutions. These students are involved in a recognised form of temporary migration and subject to specific visas. However unlike citizen students these international students do not enjoy full social and economic security. Nor are they fully supported by the nations they have left, precisely because they are no longer resident. They have limited access to their own citizen rights. As a globally mobile population they fall between the borders of the two national citizenship regimes, the nation of origin and the nation of education. There is no bilateral or multilateral framework whereby these national regimes are reconciled. Nor do the international agencies take up questions of student security. For example the ILO is concerned about 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 Mazarol, et al. 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.

In relation to the rights of international students, as we see it 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 – 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. Another gap arises in the universities. In our fragmented system of student security, the universities de facto carry the main institutional responsibility for pastoral care – in fact much depends on the willingness of staff to ‘go the extra mile’ for international students - but the limits of the pastoral role are voluntary, and it can break down completely in the face of problems that originate within the university itself.

### **The study**

We are investigating these problems in a program of 200 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, except that older students are over-represented in the study group. This program of interviews is now almost complete. The data that follows contains results from the first 134 interviews, two thirds of the total group.

### **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?’ 46 (35%) said ‘yes’.
- *Finances*: Students were asked ‘Are you experiencing or have you ever experienced financial difficulties?’ while studying in Australia. 56 (42%) said ‘yes’, 77 (57%) said ‘no’.
- *Work*: Students were asked ‘Are you working or have you worked while in Australia?’ A majority, 89 (66%), 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, 17 (19%) said ‘yes’, they had experienced problems.
- *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. A majority, 69 (51%) said ‘yes’, 65 (49%) said ‘no’.

- *Safety and security*: Students were asked ‘Are you safe and secure in Australia?’ The great majority said ‘yes’, but 14 (10%) said ‘no’ outright and another three (2%) expressed a qualified ‘yes’.
- *Loneliness*: Students were asked ‘Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation while in Australia?’ More than two thirds, 92 (69%) said ‘yes’.
- *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, 104 (78%) said ‘yes’.

### Language issues and problems

39% of female students reported problems with academic English, compared to 29% of males. There are major variations by national origin. Few students from South Asia had problems – none of the 20 from India, none from Pakistan or Sri Lanka; and also none from Singapore. But 13 (65%) of the 20 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..

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 (41%) and about average among the students from Malaysia (36%).

### Self-reported problems with academic English, by nation

nation of origin	number of students interviewed	number reporting problems with English	% of all interviewees reporting problems
China	20	13	65
other East Asia	11	8	73
Indonesia	22	9	41
Malaysia	11	4	36
other Southeast Asia	5	2	40
India	20	0	0
other South Asia	15	4	27
all others	30	6	20
total	134	46	35

### Financial issues and work problems

There was a clear correlation between having children and experiencing financial difficulties. Of the 21 students with children, 14 (67%) acknowledged financial difficulties and some of the others also discussed particular financial problems.

Financial problems were also more severe for the 10% of 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 - 24% of females interviewed reported problems, but 15% of men. In terms of national origin, 35% of Chinese students had faced problems at work. This was higher than other national groups.

### **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 62% of the female students reported instances of discrimination, the rate among males was 40%. Among the larger national groupings the incidence of problems was greater for the Muslim nations of Malaysia (64%), Indonesia (64%) and for China (55%) than for students from India. A high proportion of students living outside Melbourne and Sydney had such experiences.

## Safety and personal security

A small but significant 10% 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 27% answered 'no'. Only 3% of Melbourne-based students did so. The three who qualified their 'yes' responses were from Melbourne or Ballarat.

Of those in Sydney who said they did not feel safe and secure, all were either female Muslim students from Indonesia or Malaysia, males from India (or were sometimes confused with Pakistani or Middle eastern students), or males and females from East Asia. No Europeans 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

## Dealing with isolation

A much larger proportion of students, more than two thirds in total, were affected by more mundane but often heartfelt problems of loneliness and isolation.

*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 Indonesia (82%) and Malaysians (73%) were more likely than most to have experienced periods of loneliness or isolation. Students from China (55%) may have benefited from stronger networks. 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

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.

### **Improving social and economic security of international students**

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**

These analyses are incomplete, and based on only two thirds of the interviews. However, it is already apparent that 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.

The data also reveal that certain categories of international students are more likely than others to face difficulties. First, women students are more likely to face difficulties at work, and much more likely than male students to experience problems of racism and discrimination. They are less likely to report problems of loneliness, but are more likely to report problems with academic English.

### **Gender differences in student responses**

<b>proportion answering ‘yes’ to the question</b>	<b>women</b>	<b>men</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
‘Have you ever experienced problems at work?’	24	15
‘Have you experienced discrimination or bad treatment in Australia?’	62	40
‘Have you experienced periods of loneliness or isolation while in Australia?’	67	72
‘Does English create difficulties for you in your academic work?’	39	29

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 main national groupings. Indian students are less liable than the other three groups to instances of discrimination and bad treatment, and reported no problems with academic English. They are less prone to problems of loneliness and isolation than students from Indonesia and Malaysia; and they had a lower rate of financial difficulties than the other three major groups.

Very many students from China, and other East Asians, face difficulties with academic English. Chinese students also face significant problems at work; though they less instances of discrimination and bad treatment than for Indonesians and Malaysians. They have a slightly above average rate of financial difficulties.

The patterns for Indonesians and Malaysians are similar – a very frequent recording of instances of discrimination and bad treatment; problems of loneliness and isolation are rife; but less problems with English than for Chinese students. More Malaysian than Indonesian students experience financial difficulties.

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

	<b>India (n=20)</b>	<b>China (n=20)</b>	<b>Indonesia (n=22)</b>	<b>Malaysia (n=11)</b>	<b>all students (n=134)</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
financial difficulties	35	45	41	57	42
problems at work (% those working)	17	35	7	9	20
discrimination or bad treatment	40	55	64	64	51
do not feel fully safe	20	15	14	9	13
periods of isolation/loneliness	60	55	82	73	69
problems with academic English	0	65	41	36	35

#### **Further data**

In the next few months the research team will complete the program of 200 interviews and analyse the 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 will be 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 is well entrenched in public discussion.

### **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. We will undertake this research in a 2005-2007 ARC Discovery grant project (CIs 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.